
RIKU NANANO
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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars


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Twin Stars

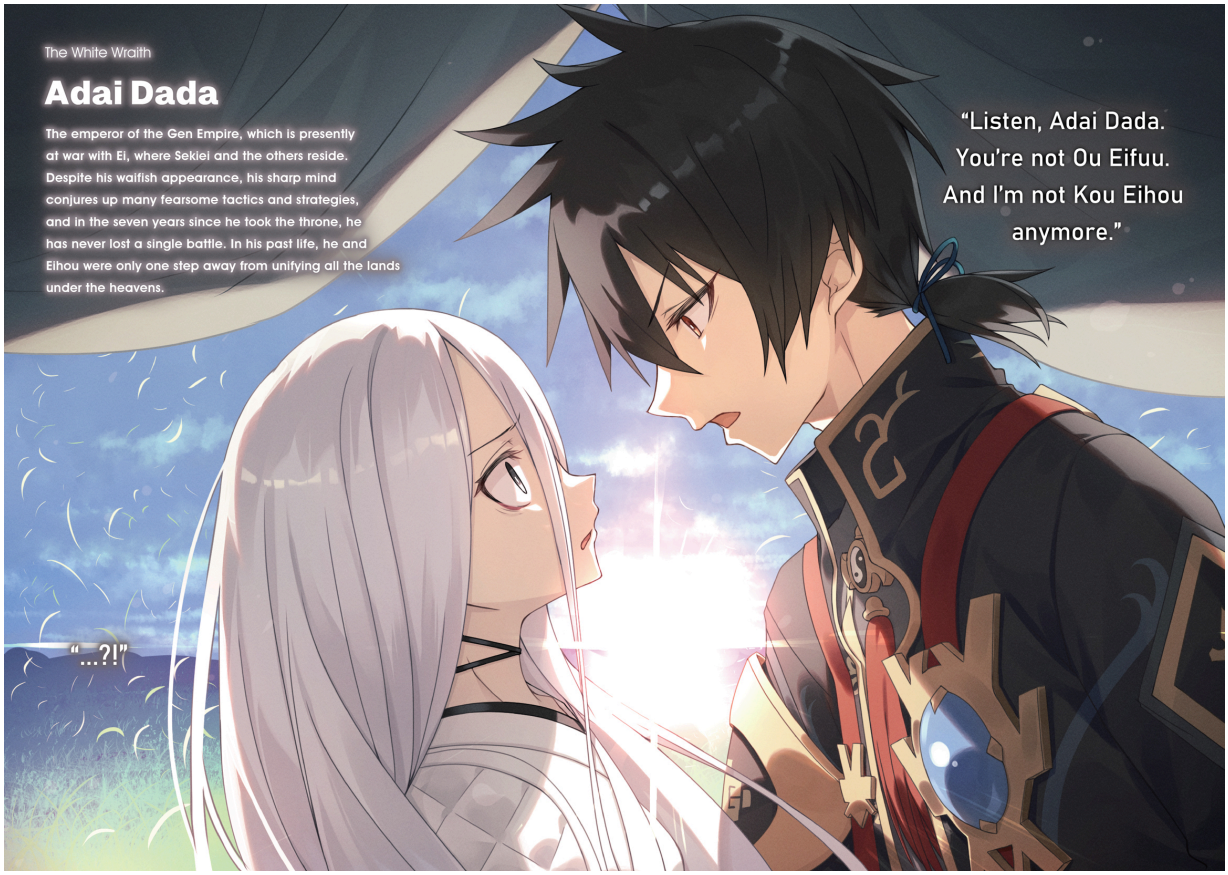


The Swords That Guide Heroes Across Time

The Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

Kou Eihou, a hero from a thousand years ago, once wielded these legendary twin swords before passing them on to Ou Eifuu. The black blade is Black Star, and the white blade is White Star. Only those the swords have chosen can draw them from their sheaths.


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.
"Uh, Miss Meirin?"
"So *you* were the culprit, Ruri!"
"..."
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.
The Merchant Prodigy
Ou Meirin
The daughter of the up-and-coming mercantile Ou family. Apart from a certain part of her anatomy, she's quite small, but her talents as a merchant are the real deal. She thinks of herself as Sekiei's "child bride," and reunites with him after a cross-country journey.


The White Wraith
Adai Dada
The emperor of the Gen Empire, which is presently at war with Ei, where Sekiei and the others reside. Despite his waifish appearance, his sharp mind conjures up many fearsome tactics and strategies, and in the seven years since he took the throne, he has never lost a single battle. In his past life, he and Eihou were only one step away from unifying all the lands under the heavens.
"Listen, Adai Dada. You're not Ou Eifuu. And I'm not Kou Eihou anymore."
"...?!"


"I love you more than anyone in this country.
No, in this whole entire world."
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.

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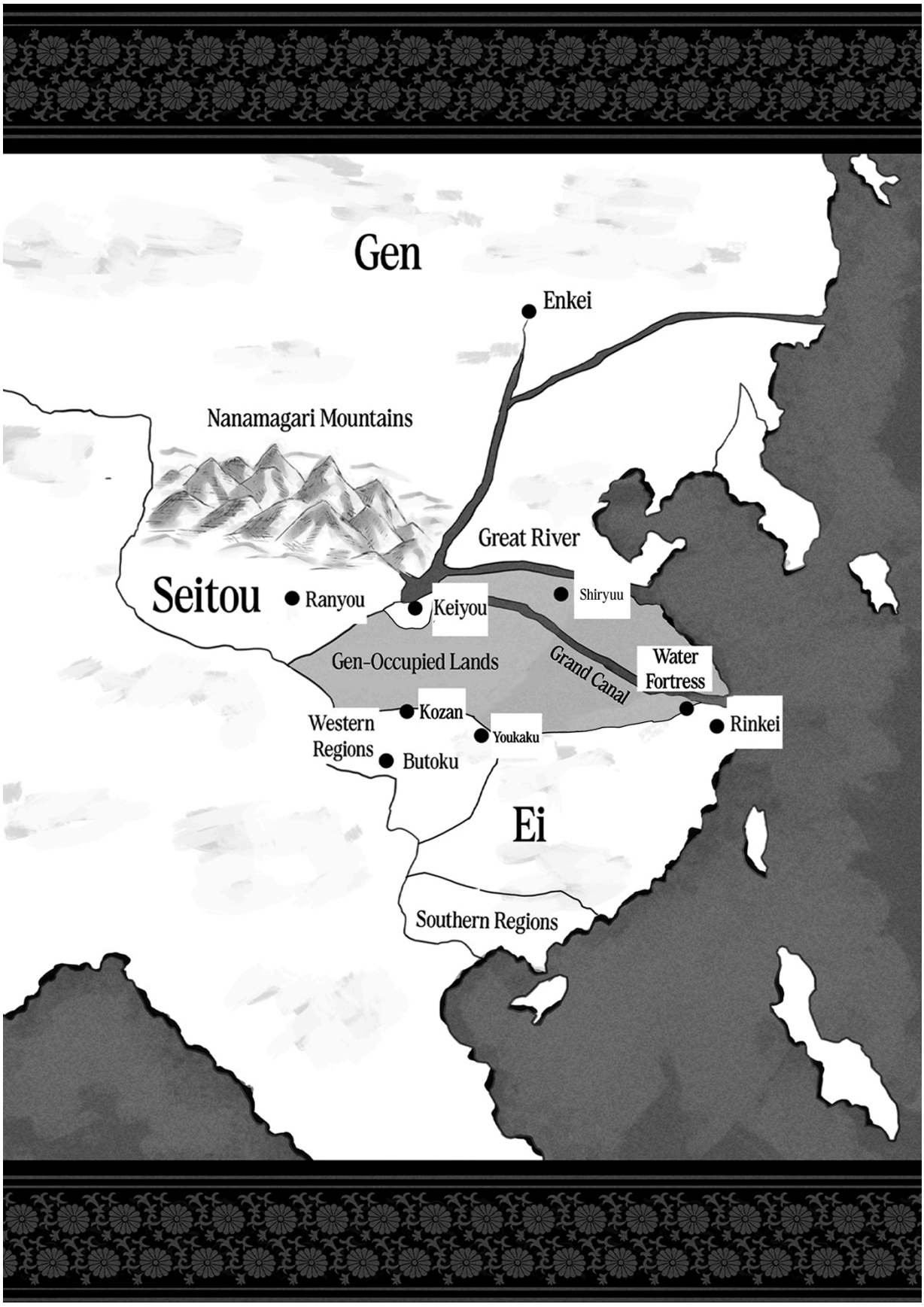
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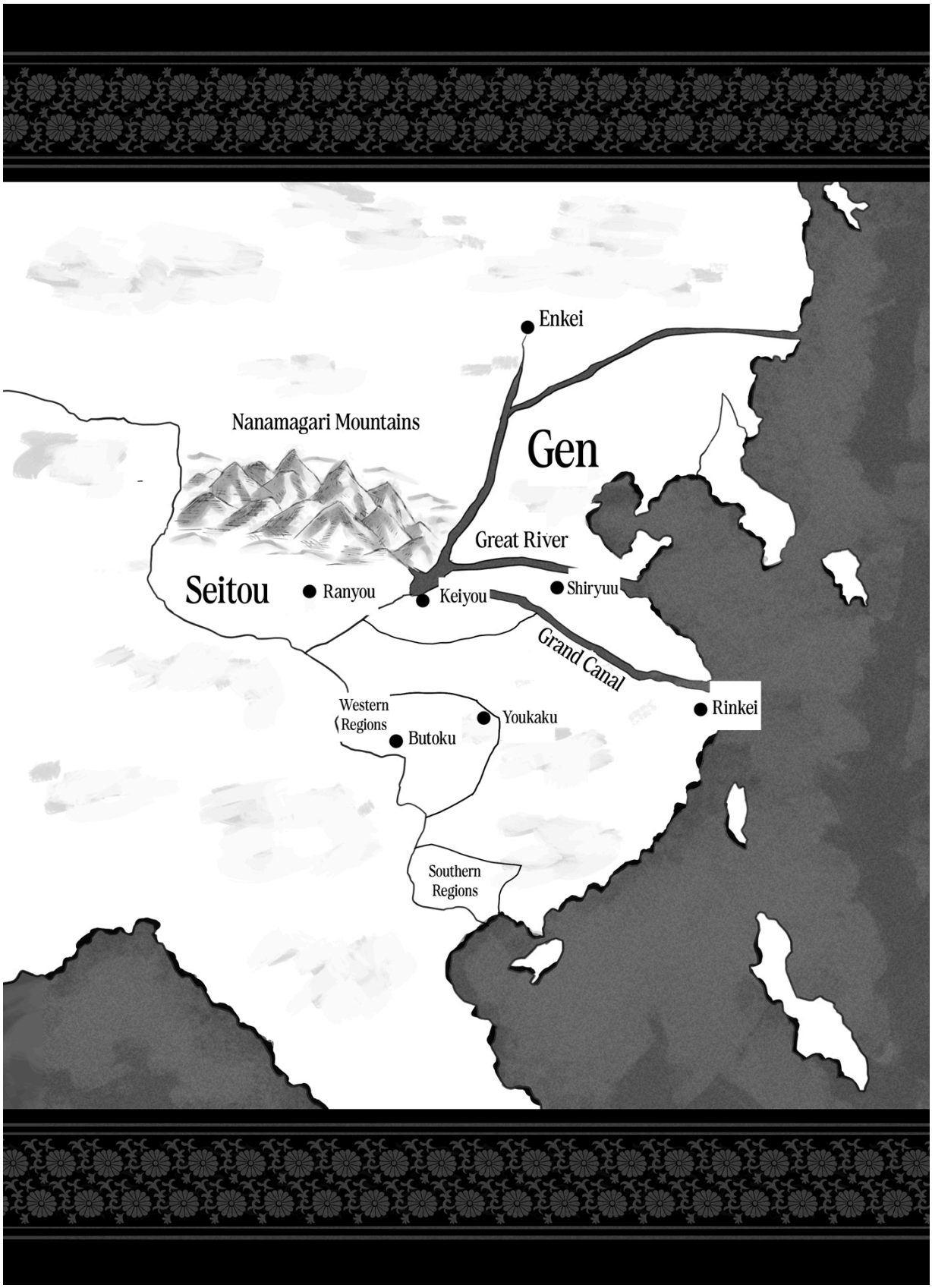
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Prologue

"Marshal Ou, the Imperial Guard is ready to depart! As per your orders, we have also sent soldiers to scout out the horsemen on their front line."

"They *must* find where the White Wraith, Adai Dada, is hiding, no matter what methods they have to resort to. Now, go."

The young messenger bowed his head to me—Ou Hokujaku, Marshal of the Imperial Guard and a patriot genuinely worried about the fate of the Ei Empire—then disappeared down the dimly lit hallways of the palace.

Under normal circumstances, soldiers were not allowed to set foot in this place, but our homeland's very existence was in jeopardy. The horsemen from the north—the Gen army, in other words—had pillaged and claimed over half of Ei's territory and were presently marching on the great water fortress that protected Ei's capital, Rinkei. In such dangerous times, military affairs had to be the priority.

Some fools still looked down on us "military types" as vulgar and crude, but I ordered my soldiers to toss the naysayers into the underground prison, and no one—aside from Jo Hiyou—had ever escaped from those cells alive. In fact, the rats were probably stripping their bones clean at that very moment.

Historically, civil officials had always held more power and influence than the military in the Ei Empire, but ironically enough, with the country on its last legs, it was brawn not brain that was proving to be the only way to get anything done. And no one in the capital or the palace could stop me. I had gone through my own share of humiliation at the Battle of Ranyou a year prior, but I would soon be my homeland's savior!

With my hand wrapped around the hilt of my sword, I paused. The nighttime breeze blowing in through the window disturbed the

candle flames that illuminated the hallway, but I couldn't hear the usual sounds of chatter and music from outside. After finding out that the Gen army was within spitting distance of Rinkei, everyone had either fled or bunkered down in their homes.

I tightened my grasp on my weapon. A few days back, I had tossed Ei's emperor, Kou Ryuuho, into one of the palace's many rooms and locked the door. He was a weak and cowardly ruler who had chosen to escape reality by losing himself in the arms of his favorite concubine, but I also owed him my job as well as my life. After all, if the emperor hadn't given me a chance, I would never have become Marshal of the Imperial Guard.

Future historians would no doubt describe me as the disloyal rebel who usurped the emperor and tore him from his throne, but that couldn't be further from the truth! My only wish was to save my homeland. Yet if we were to lose here, generations to come would only remember me as a mere insurrectionist, for history has a tendency not to record the pasts or the circumstances of the losers. So I *had* to win the upcoming battle and take the White Wraith's head! My love for my country trumped my fear of death, and with the help of Denso, one of the smartest men in the empire, it should be possible to defeat the White Wraith. No, I would do everything in my power to *make* it possible!

A soldier in a beat-up uniform rushed up to me, interrupting my thoughts on the matter. Although I couldn't recall his name, I remembered that he had helped me to lock away Kou Ryuuho. "My apologies for bothering you, Marshal, but I come bearing a message from General Gan of the great water fortress. He requests your immediate presence at the strategy meeting." He paused, then hesitantly asked, "What are your plans?"

Gan Retsurai was the guardian of the water fortress, and he had apparently served under the late National Shield, Chou Tairan, when he was younger. *Has he noticed that something's happened in the palace?* General Gan was the stubborn sort, and his loyalties lay with the emperor. If he were to decide to prioritize the emperor's safety over the war effort and barge into the palace with his soldiers, then staving off Gen would be the least of my concerns.

I closed my eyes, and in an austere tone, I told the messenger, "There's nothing more I wish to say. Tell him, 'If you would like to talk, we can do so to your heart's content *after* we have won this war.'"

Even if my reply infuriated Gan Retsurai, he would have no choice but to focus on the enemy army that was gathering around him. Although we had never gotten along, we were the only generals around Rinkei who still had a proper army to command. All of the other fighters in our forces were conscripts, and they were so useless, they barely even qualified as meat shields.

I resumed walking down the hallway, and without turning back to look at the messenger, I announced, "It's almost time. We'll march out there and become the heroes that saved the Ei Empire! Tell the soldiers that Ou Hokujaku, Marshal of the Imperial Guard, is counting on their loyalty to their homeland."

I strode into a dimly lit room in the depths of the palace to find two men waiting for me inside. One was so thin that he seemed more like a walking skeleton than a human, while the other one was a bald, middle-aged man who insisted on pacing about. Both were wearing wrinkled robes covered in dust and dirt.

"I apologize for making you wait," I said, drawing their attention.

You Saikei, the interim chancellor, leaped up from his chair with a muted noise of surprise, while Rin Koudou, the lieutenant chancellor, stammered my name with a tight expression on his face, his whole body trembling. *These two were in charge of Ei's political dealings? They're pathetic!* The promise they had made, saying they would lead their soldiers to the great water fortress to protect it from Gen, had been a bald-faced lie as well. I felt nothing but contempt as I gazed upon them.

"H-How's the situation with Gen?" You Saikei asked.

"W-We hear the approaching Gen army has destroyed all the outposts around the great water fortress," Rin Koudou added.

Fear and desperation scarred their eyes. Despite the growing threat from Gen, this pair had focused more on grabbing as much political power and authority for themselves as they could, but with the threat of death now right on their doorstep, they had finally

realized the gravity of the situation we were all in.

I sat down in an empty chair and raised a hand. "Calm down, both of you. With His Imperial Majesty taking ill, you two are in charge of the court."

You Saikei downed the cup of water that was on the table, while Rin Koudou grabbed a handful of sugar snacks and shoved them in his mouth. The pair were aware that I'd locked Kou Ryuuho away, yet they had seemingly decided to remain in the palace due to the lure of the massive amounts of wealth and influence they would gain if Ei managed to beat Gen. *Fools*, I thought, smiling at them to hide my scorn as I poured tea into a porcelain cup. They were probably the only people in the palace who had any proper tea leaves left.

"You two have nothing to worry about," I continued. "Everyone knows the Gen army is marching towards the great water fortress." Denso's advice suddenly sprang to mind. He had told me that if I exuded confidence, all would go well. I crossed my legs and tapped my fingers on the table, the sound echoing around the room. "And Gen has no hope of taking that fortress! We have over two hundred thousand soldiers inside those walls to maintain our fortifications, while the enemy's front line doesn't have a single proper siege weapon. With the narrowest part of the Grand Canal chained off to prevent them from coming up the waterways, it's only a matter of time until we find the Gen army's headquarters, and in turn, the White Wraith. And once we do..."

"It'll be the final battle," You Saikei said faintly.

"The one that decides the f-fate of the Ei Empire," Rin Koudou added.

I nodded, the quiet sizzle of the candle flames the only noise in the room. "Indeed. My army is ready to march out, and we have a plan in place."

"Do you think we'll win?" Rin Koudou asked, looking up at me and rubbing his bald head, a feature he shared with his deceased brother.

The mere sight of him disgusted me, and I had to wash down the bile that rose up in my throat with the remainder of my tea. "I'll make sure we win. That's what the Imperial Guard is here for."

"Marshal Hokujaku..." Rin Koudou breathed, while You Saikei made an impressed noise.

Their expressions were filled with hope as they gave me matching looks of approval, their greed and obsession over the extra authority they might gain after the war apparent. *These selfish fools are the patriarchs of the You and Rin families, which have supported the Ei Empire for so many generations? They should be ashamed of themselves!*

Swallowing down my anger, I unfurled a map, placed it on the table, then pointed to the great water fortress and the southern regions. "My strategist is preparing our final plan as we speak, and the Jo army led by Jo Hiyou is on its way here as well." The northern horsemen's army consisted only of elites, meaning very few members of the Imperial Guard were well trained enough to put up much of a fight against them, a fact Adai Dada was sure to be aware of. However... "The king of the horsemen is a smart one, but I doubt he has predicted the arrival of the Jo army. If the water fortress is the anvil Gen hopes to take"—I ran my finger along the map until it reached Rinkei—"then my Imperial Guard and the Jo army shall be the hammer that strikes down the enemy's base! There is no way we can lose."

Color returned to the cheeks of the two fools in front of me, and I forced a smile onto my face as my eyes met theirs. *"Be sure to wave some juicy bait before their eyes. The last thing we need is them stabbing us in the back as we make our advance into a checkmate position,"* Denso had told me.

I know that, Sir Denso, I thought, responding to the memory of his advice. *For now, we should let them wallow in fantasies of victory.* I lowered my head and adopted an air of humility. "Lords Saikei and Koudou, I am nothing more than an army commander, so please take care of this city and the palace for me."

"Of course, Sir Hokujaku," You Saikei replied, accepting my words without question and even seeming touched by the sentiment. Despite his youth and inexperience, the interim chancellor still felt a measure of responsibility in regards to his duties.

Meanwhile, Rin Koudou—who was just as power hungry as his

brother—shot me a meaningful look with his toad-like eyes. "It is safe to assume that your request will still be in effect even after the war, yes?"

Exactly as Sir Denso predicted! By accepting the demands of the others first, they would become more likely to accept ours. It was a basic negotiation tactic.

"Of course. However, we must first change the current occupant of the throne," I said. Both of their expressions grew noticeably tighter as I said it, but I pressed on in a calm voice. "We have no need of an emperor who would rather let himself be constantly distracted by a concubine than deal with the imminent threat looming over his empire."

A heavy silence descended over the room.

Rin Koudou cleared his throat, and in an attempt to salvage some of the emperor's honor, he said, "As I'm sure you already know, when the horsemen took Eikei from us over fifty years ago now, they also abducted a great swathe of the imperial family. The emperors since haven't had many heirs either."

"His Imperial Majesty and Princess Miu were the only children left behind by the previous emperor. I'm not sure if there *are* any other suitable candidates..." You Saikei added.

Everything's proceeding exactly as Sir Denso told me it would! Feeling euphoric due to the sense of omniscience my strategist's words gave me, I stroked my mustache, which was long overdue a trim. "So we should find a child the people won't object to and place them on the throne instead. Don't you agree?"

"Y-You're suggesting putting a *false* emperor in charge?!" Rin Koudou exclaimed. You Saikei spluttered behind him.

"The Kou family is one of the oldest in the Ei Empire, boasting a history that spans generations," I said, doing my level best to keep my tone as gentle as possible. "Rinkei is home to over a million people. Is it really so out of the question that one of them might have a distant Kou ancestor? If you are really uncomfortable with the idea, we can always get the new emperor to abdicate. And don't worry about me, for I have no interest in ruling this empire."

Their eyes lit up at this. "Maybe I can become the new emperor's

guardian!” was probably the thought that was running through their heads. *What a naive dream!*

Still picking at the sugar snacks, Rin Koudou asked, “But, um, what should we do if Princess Miu is still alive?”

“I see no reason to waste time even thinking about that,” I replied.

Princess Miu had volunteered to go to the U family in the western regions as an emissary with only her attendant accompanying her, her ultimate goal being to ask them to send reinforcements to Rinkei. No one in the capital knew what had happened to the girls, nor was there any way to find out, but it didn’t take a genius to surmise their fates, as unfortunate as it was to think about.

“I-In the capital...” You Saikei said slowly, breaking the brief silence he had fallen into on the mention of the princess. He looked away as the two of us focused our attention on him, curious what he was about to say. “Um, I hear the people in the capital have been singing a strange ditty lately. The lyrics go something like, ‘The children of Lord Chou Tairan, with the princess of the Kou family in tow, will come from Keiyou to save Rinkei.’ I-If that rumor is true, then, um, wouldn’t that spell bad news for us?”

Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei were the orphaned children of the National Shield, Chou Tairan, who had protected Ei for many long years, only to be rewarded for his service by being executed on suspicion of stoking a rebellion. I had heard that the pair were every bit as powerful as their father, and that they had racked up an impressive number of military distinctions despite their youth. They had also participated in that unforgettable battle at Ranyou, the capital of Seitou.

I scoffed at the rumors, ignoring my own deep-seated feelings of jealousy and inferiority. “And here I was, thinking you were worried about something of substance. That’s even *more* implausible.” *That’s right. It’ll never happen.* After the death of their father, a number of things happened: The Chou orphans went missing, the powerful Chou army disbanded, and even their home base of Keiyou fell into Gen’s hands. “Soldiers would no doubt have flocked to march under Chou Tairan’s banner, but even if his orphans did survive, what could

they do at this point? That ditty mentioned something about coming to the city with Princess Miu? That's the stuff of fairy tales." In fact, saying it out loud made it seem even more unlikely. Even if Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei had successfully managed to flee to the western regions, cooperating with Princess Miu was the last thing they'd ever do. After all, the emperor—the princess's elder brother, Kou Ryuuho—had ordered Chou Tairan's execution, purely because his continued existence stood in the way of any potential peace negotiations. "Spreading rumors and fantasizing are how foolish citizens pass the time, but we cannot afford to be idle ourselves. Isn't that right, Lords Saikei and Koudou?"

"I, um, simply wanted to bring the rumors to your attention, that's all," You Saikei said meekly.

"We sure can't! W-We're the only ones who can save the empire, after all," Rin Koudou added.

Despite the suspicious manner in which they had gone about it, they had still agreed with me. Neither of them had any real loyalty to the Ei Empire, yet I had no choice but to use them in my plans if I wanted to save my homeland.

I stood up and bowed my head to the pair. "Then, if you'll excuse me, I have to check on the preparations for the upcoming battle. When next we meet, it will be at the banquet to celebrate our victory over those horsemen. Please wait here in the palace for news of our triumph."

***

"Damn it! Where the hell is Adai Dada's base?! Why is he refusing to advance his main forces? What is he *thinking*?!" I—Denso—hissed, slamming my fist down on the map that was spread out across the table.

Ou Hokujaku had lost control of his emotions and risen up against the emperor, dragging me down with him, which meant if I wanted to survive, I now had to come up with a plan for him. I was certain the Gen army was marching on the great water fortress, but since over half of my scouts hadn't made it back, I had no detailed reports

on their formation. But if I didn't come up with something soon, I'd die alongside that idiot, Hokujaku! Neither the Gen army nor Senko—the secret organization that had planted me in the palace as a spy for the sake of its ultimate goal of unification—took kindly to traitors. The chilly nighttime air blew in through the open round window and brushed the back of my neck as I ran my hand roughly through my hair—which had gone even grayer these past few days—and took a number of deep breaths.

"Relax. Calm down, Denso," I muttered to myself. "Your talent exceeds that of Millenary Diviner Hasho, remember? You can devise a plan to get yourself out of this mess!"

In order to motivate myself, I brought the face of that handsome man I often competed against back in Senko up in my mind. Since I hadn't expected my puppet, Hokujaku, to go on the rampage he did, culminating in locking away the emperor, the initial shock of it had been too overwhelming for me to come up with a plan straightaway. But now that I thought about it, this presented the perfect opportunity.

My potential surpassed that of Ou Eifuu, the imperial chancellor who had helped the Tou Empire to unify the lands a thousand years ago. Despite that, Senko had sent me to Ei as a mere spy, while Hasho had become Gen's strategist. I couldn't and *wouldn't* take this insult lying down. I was going to make everyone—Senko and Hasho included—see my true worth. If that hardworking fool, Ou Hokujaku, could somehow—despite the odds—actually *beat* the monster of the Gen Empire, the White Wraith, Adai Dada, by following *my* advice and strategy, everyone on the continent would know my name.

I glanced over at the window and saw fathomless darkness outside, for neither the moon nor the stars were out to illuminate the night sky. My excitement faded at this sight, and I sucked in a breath as anxiety gripped my heart. I'd read numerous books on the art of war and played countless games of chess, but I had no experience of commanding a *real* army. Fear caused my right hand to start trembling, and I had to use my left hand to hold it down and suppress the tremors. *Maybe if I leave now, I'll be safe. I could flee the palace, hightail it to the nearest Gen base, and use my*

knowledge of Ei's internal affairs as a bargaining chip.

"No, Senko would never forgive me if I did that," I reminded myself.

After the previous leader stepped down due to old age, that mysterious young girl named Ren had become the head of the organization. Everything I knew about her personality told me she wasn't the type to overlook any transgressions. In fact, I was more surprised that she hadn't already shown up to execute me. "Death to traitors" was a millennium-old maxim, yet I was still breathing. As for the reason behind that...

"So this is how little they think of me, is it?" I growled. They didn't think I was even worth the effort of killing? Grinding my teeth together, I swept the map from the table in an action so violent, the flames on the candles flickered due to the sudden gust of air. "If I win, everything turns around for me! And then... And then..."

And then, I'll *be an even greater strategist than that accursed Hasho or that terrifying White Wraith! I'll no longer be one of the many rats destined to live scurrying about. No, instead, I'll be a phoenix soaring through the sky, my name immortalized in the history books. And the future of Ei? As if I give a damn about that!*

Ou Hokujaku and his followers were useless. Even if they beat Gen, they wouldn't be able to maintain stability in Ei afterwards. They could kill Adai on the battlefield, and it still wouldn't change the fact that destruction was the only future awaiting this ridiculous country. Gen had lost the Crimson Wolf, the Gray Wolf, the Golden Wolf, the Silver Wolf, and plenty of other skilled generals and commanders, but the number of useful officers among their number still rivaled the amount of stars in the sky. By comparison, Ei no longer had their National Shield. That was precisely why...

"I can do as I please and it won't change a thing. My dear sparrow, who pulled yourself free from the strings that were keeping you up in the air, I will grant you a glorious death. Fortunately, the army that will deal the final blow will arrive right on time."

From my pocket, I produced a letter I had just received from the southern regions, with Jo Hiyou's signature on it confirming that he was the sender. I'd been worried that they wouldn't arrive in time,

but the Jo army obviously boasted some fast horses, and it wouldn't be long until they were at the outskirts of Rinkei. Fancying themselves as the Ei Empire's saviors, Ou Hokujaku and his Imperial Guard were brimming with passion, and with them as bait and the Jo army—which I doubted Adai was even aware of—as the *real* attackers...

"I can win this."

Oddly enough, saying those words out loud helped to calm my nerves and absolute confidence rose up from inside me once more. *Yes, exactly! I can do anything I want with my talents!* The hawk, though young, already had experience of the battlefield, and its beak and talons were sharp enough to even kill a wraith, a task the weak and talentless sparrow had no prospect of ever accomplishing. The late-night wind gusted in again and caressed my cheek as my thoughts turned to the final battle that loomed large on the horizon.

Chapter One

"As much as it pains me to leave you, mother, it's time for me to depart," I—Jo Yuushun—said, a cloak wrapped around my body, and my head bowed to the frail woman sitting up in her bed. Anyone could tell at a glance that she was sick, just from how pale her face was.

We were in a room deep within the Jo manor, which was located in central Nansui in the Ei Empire's southern regions, and I was standing beside Lady Shion, wife of the late Phoenix Wing, Jo Shuuhou, and the woman I regarded as my mother. This was the day I was due to set out for Rinkei from Nansui as part of the logistics team, though the reason for our sortie wasn't to fight off the invaders from the north.

A rat in the imperial palace had bewitched Jo Hiyou—the man I considered my brother—with clever words, and despite not even finishing their preparations for battle, Hiyou had set off for Rinkei with the roughly ten-thousand-strong Jo army. I had to catch up to my brother before he could assassinate the emperor, whom he held a grudge against.

"Yuushun, please be careful," my mother said, a frown on her face as she listened to the sound of the pouring rain outside. She was stroking the light-brown hair of her beloved daughter, Karin, who had exhausted herself with a fit of crying and fallen asleep in her mother's lap. Karin and our guests were also scheduled to leave Nansui that day.

I may not live to ever see them again. Pushing this thought out of my head, I forced a smile onto my face. "Don't worry, mother. I swear I'll stop Hiyou!"

"Yuushun." Pain marred my mother's beautiful face, and she clutched my hand even tighter as fat tears streamed down her cheeks.

I wanted to say something to ease her worries, but I was still too young and inexperienced to think of anything appropriate. All I knew was I was willing to put my life on the line to protect her and Karin.

"Shion," a calm voice called from the doorway. I turned and saw a beautiful woman with shoulder-length black hair, wearing pearl earrings and a cloak identical to mine. She walked in without any hesitation and came to stand beside the bed, then wiped the tears from my mother's eyes. "It's inauspicious to cry when seeing off your child. And what if you wake Karin? You'll only cause her to worry unduly."

"You're right, Lady Saiun," Lady Shion replied, her sad expression brightening slightly.

The newcomer's name was Chou Saiun, elder sister of the National Shield, Chou Tairan, the only man who had ever come close to killing the White Wraith, Adai Dada, king of the northern horsemen, though as the unofficial matriarch of the Chou family, she was a powerful leader in her own right. According to my mother, back when she lived in the capital, she and Lady Saiun used to drop by each other's houses often. Even though Lady Saiun had fled to the southern regions after Lord Tairan's execution, she had volunteered to accompany me back to Rinkei, stating, "You won't be able to convince Hiyou by yourself. I'll come with you." I couldn't thank her enough.

Lady Saiun gazed out the window, her eyes narrowing at the rainy sky above. "The Chou family of Koshuu, the U family of the western regions, and the Jo family of the southern regions," she reeled off, unable to hide her anger and resignation, despite her measured tone. "In the fifty years since we lost Eikei, those three families and the You family with its chancellors have supported Ei with our loyalty. It hasn't always been easy. At times, we have spilled our own blood and that of our enemies on the battlefield or in the Grand Canal, but that was all in the name of protecting the nation. It was through our sacrifices that Rinkei grew from a desolate little village into a prosperous city without once seeing battle."

A tinge of pain stabbed me right through the chest. *That's how the city used to be! But now...*

"But that very peace caused rot to build up within the capital's walls," Lady Saiun continued. "Far from the front lines, the palace ignored the monstrous White Wraith's birth in the northern lands. Despite the constant reports they were receiving about the threat he presented to Ei, they continued to ignore him as his power and influence grew. They made the same mistakes that cost us Eikei. The emperor back then completely ignored reports on Gen's increasing military strength too." More clouds must have formed outside, for the room grew even darker. "As a result, the Phoenix Wing, Jo Shuuhou, and the Tiger Fang, U Jouko, died heroic deaths at Ranyou. You Bunshou, the chancellor who could have changed the course of this country's future, was assassinated by Hiyou after a rat tricked him into it." A gust of wind blew in through the window and whipped about Lady Saiun's black hair, pearl earrings, and cloak. She turned to look at me and flashed me a smile that didn't extend to her eyes. "As for my brother-in-law, Chou Tairan, the National Shield, he was executed for a crime he didn't commit in the capital of the very country he had vowed to protect. And all because he *might* have been an obstacle when bartering for peace with the horsemen."

Neither my mother nor I could say anything in response to Lady Saiun's pain. In the end, even after losing the lands north of the great river, the Ei Empire hadn't learned its lesson or corrected course. Instead, it continued favoring civil officials who had passed the Imperial Examination, while looking down on its own military officials. With that in mind, it felt like its present troubles were an inevitability.

Lady Saiun's gaze sharpened as her attention turned to my mother. "Shion, this country has no future. Even if it survives the upcoming battle with Gen, it will never be the same as it was before the invasion."

She delivered this statement in a firm tone that left no room for argument. My body tensed up on hearing it, then began trembling. The Ei Empire was on the verge of destruction. For the longest time, an empire's fall was the kind of thing you only studied in history books. Not once did I imagine that I would personally live through

such a momentous event.

Lady Saiun drew closer to the bed and leaned down slightly. "You're *absolutely* sure about your decision? We have enough resources for both Karin *and* you, so why don't you come with us to the west—"

"Sai," my mother interrupted her with a shake of the head. "I'm... I'm grateful for your thoughtfulness. But have you forgotten?" She straightened her back and shot Lady Saiun a solemn look. "I am the wife of Jo Shuuhou, the Phoenix Wing. I can't do something that would dishonor his memory. What would happen to the people in Nansui if I weren't here to guide them? I will never forget your kind words, nor this debt I owe you, Sai. So please, I beg you to help my sons, Hiyou and Yuushun! Please!"

She bowed her head to Lady Saiun, and I watched on in silence, for I knew if I opened my mouth to say something, I would break down sobbing.

"I see," Lady Saiun sighed before embracing my mother's small head with tears streaming from her eyes and tracing the curve of her cheeks. "Oh, what am I to do with you? Why are all of my younger sisters so *stubborn*?"

"An older sister who was a very bad influence on me once told me, 'In times of uncertainty, follow your heart.' For years, those words have illuminated my darkest hours and kept me afloat when all I really wanted to do was chase after Lord Shuuhou. Thanks to them, I'm still here."

The two women chuckled together for a moment, then Lady Saiun glanced at me and proclaimed, "I will take care of Yuushun and protect him. But Shion, unless you wish to incur my wrath, don't you *dare* die and leave me all alone. I don't want to lose any more of my sisters."

"Of course, Sai." My mother nodded, then rested her hand on Karin's back.

The pitter-patter of footsteps from the hallway heralded the entrance of Ou Meirin, a beautiful girl wearing an orange hat over chestnut-brown pigtails. She must have finished all of her preparations for our trip. Miss Meirin was the only daughter of the

Ou family, an up-and-coming mercantile family in Rinkei, and she was followed into the room by her attendant, Miss Shizuka, a beautiful woman with exquisite long black hair, and an exotic long sword that dangled from her belt. Finally, bringing up the rear was Miss Shun'en in her attendant's uniform, a foreign girl with pale gray hair and large eyes that reminded me of stars. They planned to head to the western regions to meet up with the U family, and they had promised to take Karin with them.

Miss Shun'en and I exchanged silent looks, and my heart rate quickened. Even such a brief interaction was enough to fill me with ecstasy. *W-Wait, what am I even thinking about just before I head off to a battlefield I might not return from?* I fidgeted awkwardly, while Miss Shun'en gazed down at the ground.

Miss Meirin smirked at us both before asking, "You're all done with your final farewells, I presume?"

"Yuushun," my mother called out to me.

I steadied my breathing and cleared my throat. "Yes, Miss Meirin."

"Miss Meirin, please take care of Karin for me," my mother said, bowing her head to her.

Miss Meirin pirouetted on the spot and slapped a hand to her voluptuous chest. "Leave everything to me! ♪ I swear on the name of my husband, Chou Sekiei, the Kouei of the Modern Ages, that I shall deliver Karin to the western regions, safe and sound."

I was only familiar with Nansui, but the petite girl standing before me had traveled to all four corners of the Ei Empire. If she hadn't been in the southern regions, I would never have uncovered the fact that Denso—who served the Imperial Guard's marshal, Ou Hokujaku—was the rat who had tricked my brother, Hiyou. The speed with which she had gone through all of those documents had been remarkable! If only we'd had more time, I was sure she would have been able to root out the other rat as well. *Geniuses really do exist! Though, um, I don't recall her actually being married to Lord Chou Sekiei?*

Miss Meirin turned to look at me, her smile unwavering. "Lord Yuushun, is something the matter? ☆"

"Oh, u-um..." Cold sweat beaded my brow. *Did she just read my*

mind? I looked over at my mother, Lady Saiun, and Miss Shizuka, wordlessly begging them for help, but it was no use. They were watching the pair of us as if we were performing some comedy skit. Miss Shun'en was the only one who seemed concerned. *Urk...* As my mind raced to come up with some excuse, I posed a question that had been on my mind for a little while. "Um, did the Chou army *really* take back Keiyou? I could understand the U family pushing the enemy army back, since they could've used the steep, narrow terrain to their advantage, but I just can't wrap my head around how the Chou family could have done the same thing."

"Heh heh heh! ☆" Miss Meirin chuckled like a villain, then puffed out her chest.

Seeing her breasts bouncing around made heat rush to my face. *M-Miss Shun'en is giving me such a scary look!* I noted.

While I was busy feeling super awkward, Miss Meirin started pacing around the room as she explained how it had all gone down. "You really shouldn't underestimate my intelligence network *or* Lady Saiun, who's in charge of the Chou family's internal affairs! The Seitou forces stationed in the northwest are all being pulled back to the outskirts of Koshuu, and from this, we can deduce that Lord Sekiei has reclaimed Keiyou from Gen! I'm quite sure they must have used the false flag I got Kuuen to deliver to them, just as I'm sure that right about now, Lord Sekiei is thinking to himself, 'Ah, if only Meirin, my beloved wife whom I depend on more than anyone else in this world, were here!' After all, now that I've finished looking into all of the Ei and Gen affairs that he was worried about, it's about time he thought about *me*!"

Okay, but I'm still pretty sure Lord Sekiei isn't married. But I hesitated to give voice to this particular thought, especially when I saw how Miss Meirin's body was rocking from side to side like she was having a grand old time.

Miss Shizuka placed her hands on Miss Meirin's shoulders to get her to stop, before turning to me and saying, "My apologies. It's just that she hasn't seen Lord Sekiei in months, and what's worse, he has stopped replying to her letters. Nothing can cure her of her fanatical obsession with him either."

"Oh, um, I see..."

Lord Sekiei sure has found himself a troublesome admirer. Hiyou once told me that Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei were likely to marry, but was he wrong on that? More importantly, the idea of the Chou army actually reclaiming Keiyou was still a crazy one to me. My suspicions must have shown on my face, because Miss Meirin, who still had Miss Shizuka embracing her from behind and Miss Shun'en attempting to neaten up her messy hair, waved her hand dismissively.

"Oh, there's no doubt about it. They *definitely* took back Keiyou. Lord Sekiei is unstoppable when he wields the Heavenly Swords. Which *I* found, by the way! The history books state that Kouei of the Tou Empire was as strong as a hundred thousand soldiers, but Lord Sekiei is as strong as a *million*! It's just that..."

"Lady Meirin?" Miss Shizuka said, peering down at her mistress's face after she had trailed off.

For the first time that day, something akin to worry was clouding her expression. Lady Saiun and my mother looked across at her, confused by her sudden change of mood.

With one hand pressed against her chest, Miss Meirin murmured in a grave tone, "It's just a strange feeling I have in my chest. It keeps urging me to hurry to Lord Sekiei's side, or else something terrible is going to happen. Chalk it up to my female intuition."

No one said anything in response. I'd only known this prodigy for a short amount of time, but I could say for a fact that Ou Meirin was one of the smartest and most valuable people in the whole empire. But at this minute, she wanted to risk her life going to Keiyou in the far north of the continent, all because of something as uncertain as intuition. It felt like something out of a story, though after giving it some careful reflection, her decision made sense. After all, while the world was a vast place, the Chou army led by Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei was the only force remaining in this dying empire that had ever defeated the Gen army in battle.

A flash of lightning outside momentarily illuminated the room, causing Karin to shift on the bed and open her eyes. "Mother?"

"It's all right, Karin. Everything's fine." Lady Shion held her

precious daughter in a gentle embrace, her hands still shaking.

I walked over to Miss Shun'en, who had clasped her hands together as if in prayer, and whispered to her, "I hope you get to reunite with your brother. Please take care of Karin for me."

"Thank you," she whispered back. "Don't worry about Lady Karin. I'll take good care of her. Please be careful out there, Lord Yuushun."

She's so beautiful, I thought as I gazed into her wide, teary eyes. Before I could think too hard about it, I hugged her close, and she wrapped her arms around my shoulders. Miss Meirin and the others didn't poke fun at us this time around.

The weather outside the window was growing gradually worse, with intermittent flashes of lightning interspersed with distant rumbles of thunder. It didn't look like the rain was going to let up anytime soon.

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"Master Strategist, I've got the enemy in my sights! There are about a thousand of them, all in Seitou armor!" Gan Shigou—who'd volunteered to act as our lookout—called down from the tree he had scaled with his battle-axe still strapped to his back.

"Yeah, I see them too, Shigou," I—Ruri of Kobi, strategist of the Chou army—shouted up from the safety of a bush, peering through my spyglass.

Seitou's thousand-strong (Shigou's estimate appeared correct) light cavalry and infantry were pouring off the main road and into the forest where we were waiting for them. They still held their military flag high, but in their mad scramble to escape their pursuers, they had broken their formation.

Half a month had passed since we'd taken back Keiyou, as well as defeated the Millenary Diviner, Hasho, and the Black Wolf, Gisen—the man who'd burned down my homeland—in battle, though not once in those two weeks had the Chou army taken time out to recuperate. No, instead, we split our forces and sent soldiers to the various regions in Koshuu, chasing out the Seitou invaders and freeing captured cities and villages. Despite how arduous a task this

was, not a single person complained, thanks to the high morale among the soldiers. The princess imperial Kou Miu's appeals, complete with a stamp from the Heirloom Seal of the Realm, also served as motivation for them.

"Patriots, gather under my banner! Kou Miu and the Chou army need your help!" read the entirety of the manifesto. Its effectiveness lay in the second sentence, because after all, it had been the Chou army, not the emperor, that had protected the Ei Empire from the looming Gen threat for the past fifty years.

I lowered my spyglass and adjusted my blue hat. The enemy was so disorganized and their morale so low, I doubted they could survive our ambush, though since we outnumbered them three to one, they never stood a chance anyway. No, the problem had never been defeating the Seitou soldiers, but something else entirely. My heart started beating faster in anxiety and frustration as I cursed that idiot in my head.

Shigou climbed back down, nimbly picking his way through the branches despite his massive frame, and once his feet were planted on solid ground again, he tugged at his mustache. "Their formation doesn't match up with the intel we received. For one thing, there are way fewer of them. And where's their heavy infantry? Those guys were our targets. Have they already joined up with the Millenary Diviner's soldiers on the outskirts of Koshuu?"

"There's a simple answer to that," I said. "Take a closer look at their rear."

"Huh?" He shot me a confused look, then squinted at the thousand soldiers that made up the Seitou army, his men following suit. The sharp eyes that had served them well during their bandit days easily latched onto the lone black-haired general in hot pursuit of the fleeing soldiers. As soon as he recognized the general, his expression tightened, while his subordinates muttered among themselves in shock. "You've gotta be kidding me," he blurted out.

The officer following the Seitou formation had black hair and a black military uniform, and wielded a Green Dragon Crescent Blade, a rare weapon used by very few. No one could mistake the figure of Chou Sekiei, the horrible man who had forced me to take up a

career as a strategist. The spot at his side that was normally reserved for Chou Hakurei and her white mount, Getsuei, stood empty, for she had been abducted by the White Wolf, Rus.

I slotted my spyglass back into its holder on my belt, my entire body trembling with rage. "That idiot charged the enemy formation on his own again, and of *course*, he defeated them all. They brought in more soldiers this time, and I ordered him to pretend to be overwhelmed so we could draw them in. Do you even *know* how many times I've told him not to push himself?" I chuckled darkly, and in response to my emotional state, my magic conjured up black flower petals that proceeded to flutter all around me. "Just you wait and see what I'll do to you when you get back, mister!"

Shigou and the others shuddered in fear, but I couldn't suppress my fury. Dan Kouzen and his volunteer army had performed well in the last battle, so I'd assigned him Sekiei's vice-captain, but in retrospect, perhaps I should've instead chosen Teiha, whom we'd left back in Keiyou.

When a panicking Miu had informed us that she had witnessed Hakurei being kidnapped, the rest of us were thrown into a state of chaos. Sekiei was the only one who maintained his cool. "Calm down, everyone. Until we figure out where they're holding her, we can't waste any resources on a rescue attempt. We need to focus on clearing Koshuu of Seitou and Gen soldiers. Until that's done, we can't contact the U family."

It was a valid point. Despite my reservations, I could agree with his logic on the matter, so I'd racked my brain to come up with a plan. I'd done my part, but Sekiei was a whole other issue! We put our operation to kick out the remaining enemy soldiers into motion, but on every single foray, Sekiei volunteered for the most dangerous mission. That day's transgression had been the worst of all. What had he even been thinking, charging into the enemy lines on his own like that and *still* defeating over a thousand of them without any backup? His pretense of calm only infuriated me more. Rage continued to boil away in my chest, and my grip on my feathered fan grew so tight, the handle started making sounds of protest in my hand. *I need to give him a piece of my mind if I want the lesson to*

stick.

"Um, o-oh, hey, look! Enemy incoming! Master Strategist, could you give us our orders now? Please? You're scaring everyone," Shigou said hesitantly.

His nervous words brought my mind back to the battlefield. The remnants of Seitou's army were fast approaching, and they were already close enough that I could make out their frantic expressions.

I flicked my fan and said, "As we discussed beforehand, I want the fire lances to attack first, then the archers. Shigou, I'll leave the final charge up to you and your team. Sekiei's on their tail too, so surrounding them should be child's play. But leave them a route to escape, because nothing's more dangerous than a cornered animal, and we can't risk losing anyone here. If we can scare them enough for them to flee Koshuu, we've met our objective."

"Understood, Master Strategist!" the soldiers replied in unison, then scattered off to take up their positions.

The general on the black horse was close enough by this point to see in detail without the need of my spyglass. The Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars—an obsidian-black sword and its porcelain-white twin—hung from either side of his belt, but in the ten cleanup operations we had conducted since Hakurei's abduction, Sekiei hadn't once unsheathed the legendary blades, which were said to have been wielded by Kouei, the great hero of the past. He still seemed gallant and powerful with the glaive in his right hand, but he didn't look like the Sekiei I knew.

"Dummy," I muttered under my breath. I didn't understand my own emotions. Without question, I was feeling angry, but... *Ah, whatever! Anything and everything is all his fault!* "Aim," I ordered. The female soldiers of the U and Chou armies who were under my direct command raised their fire lances from their own hiding places among the foliage and pointed the tips of the weapons at the enemy soldiers. Standing among them was Sekiei's attendant, Kuuen, who had been forced to serve as my bodyguard for this mission. As the acrid stench of gunpowder started to sting my nostrils, I lowered my fan and yelled, "Fire!"

A thunderous roar sounded across the battlefield as the enemy

vanguard fell to our stone projectiles, the soldiers raising their voices in wordless surprise as several of their number tumbled from their horses. We had managed to hit a score of them, and I watched on as blood spurted from their wounds. Considering my company was roughly a hundred soldiers in size, we hadn't hit as many targets as I had hoped, but it was still more than enough. I waved my feathered fan again, and this time, the archers that were also hiding in the forest loosed their arrows. Further panic spread through the enemy soldiers as their flag fell further and further to the side. *Now.*

"Shigou," I called out.

"You don't need to tell me twice!" he replied, already on his horse and swinging his battle-axe above his head. With a confident smirk plastered across his face, he roared, "Okay, follow me, ya bastards!"

"Yeaaaaaah!" Thanks to all of their battlefield experience, Shigou's former bandits had become a fine group of elite soldiers. Riding on horseback, they charged the enemy, yelling and whooping all the way, the surprise attack rendering the Seitou soldiers completely unable to retaliate. Without even attempting to line up in any kind of defensive formation, the enemy soldiers tried to fend off our forces in hand-to-hand combat.

Don't they have a commander to organize them? I wondered as I watched Shigou and his team expertly round up the Seitou soldiers, while still leaving them with an escape route. With another flick of my fan, I ordered the fire lancers and archers to hold their fire so that they wouldn't accidentally hit anyone on our side. *All right, we've managed to—*

"Miss Ruri, the enemy's acting oddly!" called out Kuuen, who was clad in light armor and had a bow in his hands. Thanks to Sekiei's tutelage, Kuuen was never hesitant about reporting anything he observed that was potentially of note.

My brow furrowed at his words. From this angle, I had the perfect overhead view of the battlefield and could see that our advantage was absolute. "The enemy's up to something? Wait, are they *letting* Shigou surround them on purpose?" Shigou and his men were already in formation, so willingly pouring into the circle they had made was nothing short of suicidal. What were they thinking?

Then, a second later, the answer hit me, and I bit my lip. *It's obvious, isn't it? Someone far scarier than Shigou is on their tail.* "That idiot!" I leaped up onto my horse and galloped out onto the battlefield.

"M-Miss Ruri?!" Kuuen called after me.

"Come back!" yelled another bodyguard.

Ignoring their surprise, I urged my horse to gallop faster, darting past enemy soldiers who were fleeing through the gaps in Shigou's formation. As I did so, I heard some of their remarks.

"Who's the blonde kid?"

"Wait, isn't that..."

"That's the Divine Tactician."

"You mean the Chou army's prodigious strategist?"

"Oh. Well, I guess that explains how we lost so badly."

"We never stood a chance."

Apparently, the enemy had also given me a bizarre moniker. What a nuisance. If they'd really *had* to give me a nickname, I wished they could've come up with a cuter one. While I was still ranting in my head, I reached the back of the enemy army, and as expected, I found Sekiei there atop his black mount with about ten horses milling around him, all without their riders. The blade of his glaive was stained with blood, and the soldiers who had been part of the enemy's rear guard lay dead on the ground. The only other person still standing was a man in his thirties who was panting as he held up his spear.

It's no wonder the enemy was in such disarray. Unable to withstand the pressure put on them by Sekiei's relentless pursuit, their most honorable commander and soldiers had held back and risked their lives to try to buy the others some time to escape. Behind Sekiei, I could see Dan Kouzen and his riders, who had acted as the bait in this plan. They were all staring at Sekiei in muted surprise, made too nervous by the oppressive murderous aura emanating from him to step in and help.

Sekiei raised the Green Dragon Crescent Blade again and glared at the spear-wielding enemy officer with such cold eyes, a shiver ran down my spine. *No, Sekiei, don't do this! You can't!* The Chou Sekiei

I knew was a reckless idiot who loved to spout nonsense about how he wanted to one day become a civil official, but even on the battlefield, I had never once seen him look at an enemy like that.

"Sekiei—" I started, but the enemy officer interrupted me.

"Die, Chou Sekiei!" His horse galloped forwards, fast as the wind, and he thrust his spear out ahead of him, intending to stab Sekiei through the chest as he passed him. But in the next second, the detached head of the weapon flew through the air and landed tip-first in the ground. The spearman turned his horse around and I saw blood dripping from his wryly curled lips. "A-Amazingly done... Kouei of...the Modern Ages," he said haltingly, and with that compliment serving as his last words, he fell lifeless to the ground.



Sekiei sliced off the head of the spear and *dealt the final blow to his opponent with a second strike all in the blink of an eye?* His technique really was godly. But a vague sense of unease was growing even stronger in my gut.

"Hey, don't just stand there," Sekiei called out to the soldiers behind him, his tone still as casual as always. "Help Shigou encircle them and attack the enemy's rear. But don't push yourselves too much! We just need to chase them out. And make sure they don't kill any prisoners they've taken."

"Y-Yessir!" replied Dan Kouzen, who had been frozen in shock at the sight of Sekiei's uncharacteristic behavior mere moments before. He hurried off with his riders to continue the attack, leaving me alone with Sekiei.

He let out a small sigh, then finally acknowledged my presence. "Hm? Oh, what's up, Ruri? You *do* know a strategist shouldn't go rushing out onto a battlefield without her bodyguards in tow, right?"

"Sekiei." My unease dispersed immediately on seeing him displaying his usual attitude, and my anger bubbled to the surface once again. *Why?! Why must I waste brain cells worrying about this guy?!*

"Looks like this battle is yet another victory. I knew I could count on you, my wise strategist! So long as we keep following your orders, we'll never lose— Whoa!"

I galloped right up to him and threw a punch as soon as I got close enough, holding nothing back. Unfortunately, he moved out of the way in the nick of time. *Tsk.*

He put some distance between us, a slightly frightened expression appearing on his face. "Jeez, way to scare a guy. Where did *that* come from?"

So the self-professed civil official doesn't understand why I'm mad, huh? Countless black petals fluttered all around me as I faked a smile and said, "Well, you know what? I happen to be really *mad* at someone in our army right now. Instead of following the plan I gave him, he charged at the enemy with no backup and took on their elite forces all by himself. Does that sound at all familiar to you?"

"O-Oh." He seemed to have realized who I was talking about, because I caught him looking this way and that. Resting the Green Dragon Crescent Blade on his shoulder, he gave a rushed defense of himself. "W-Well, you know, I'm sure the guy's repentant over his actions. But..."

"But?"

Sekiei was strong. I could state for a fact that he was the strongest person not only in the Chou army, but in the whole Ei Empire. After all, he had fought the Black Wolf, Gisen—the strongest soldier in the Gen army who was responsible for destroying my homeland—to a standstill three times by this point. Still, I also knew the battlefield didn't operate in absolutes. If rescuing Hakurei were to cost Sekiei his life, she would die so she could chase after him, rather than live on without him. My heart ached at the thought and I pressed a hand to my chest to try to suppress the pain.

"There's this thing called a 'window of opportunity' on the battlefield," Sekiei continued to blabber.

"So you admit you're guilty of insubordination, do you? In that case, I sentence you to death." I held up a prototype of a portable fire lance we'd received from Butoku in the western regions and pointed it at the idiot in front of me. Unlike our usual fire lances, which looked more like a stick, this portable version had a curved handle that made it easier to hold.

Sekiei planted the Green Dragon Crescent Blade in the ground and waved his hands around in front of him. "M-Miss Ruri—no, *Mistress* Ruri, the most beautiful and most intelligent strategist that has ever graced this world! I know I beat you at double six and tea-tasting contests all the time, but this isn't the time or place to take your frustrations out on me."

"How thoughtful of you to add to your own charges. I still won't be granting you clemency, though."

"Ack, I messed up!"

Seeing the panic on his face was a relief. *Good. I guess him looking like a totally different person was just my mind playing tricks on me.*

"Kouzen! Shigou! Help me!" Sekiei cried out in a pathetic voice as

our allies—who had efficiently chased off the Seitou soldiers by this point—gathered around us. Kuuen wasted no time in galloping up to Sekiei and falling in line behind him. He reminded me of a puppy.

"General Chou, I don't believe this is the time for jokes," remarked former Imperial Guard, Dan Kouzen, completely disregarding Sekiei's pleas.

"All right, medics, time to patch everyone up! Including the enemy soldiers. Chop, chop!" Shigou barked, also ignoring Sekiei.

Sekiei glared at them both, then winked at Kuuen, who in turn—due to his personality that wasn't unlike that of a loyal dog—gave me a nervous look. He paled at my expression, stammered out an apology, then hurried back to the female soldiers in my unit. *Yes, that's a good boy.*

With all avenues of assistance closed to him, Sekiei faltered momentarily, before shaking his head theatrically. "Aw, man. I *knew* I should've brought Teiha along!"

"Idiot." Brushing my blonde hair out of my face, I drew closer so that I could look him over, then breathed a sigh of relief when I saw he didn't have a scratch on him. "Things would've been the same, no matter who we'd brought. No one—not Meirin, not Oto, not even Hakurei—would say anything in your def—" I paused when I realized what I'd just said, then quickly bowed my head. "S-Sorry!"

After a moment, Sekiei huffed a soft laugh and said, "For what?" I tried raising my head to look at him, but he patted my blue hat a few times before I could. "Don't worry about it too much. Neither the White Wolf, nor the Gen emperor, Adai Dada, will do anything to Hakurei. She's the daughter of the National Shield, Chou Tairan." He withdrew his hand, and when he spoke next, his voice was quiet and trembling with suppressed rage. "And more importantly, she's bait designed to draw me out."

A cold wind blew across the battlefield, ruffling Sekiei's hair and mine too. I raised my head and saw him looking away. Even though I'd seen Sekiei's back many times before, it had never seemed more distant than it was at that moment.

"Sekiei," I murmured, my hand reaching out towards him of its own accord.

But before I could touch him, Sekiei picked up his glaive and started yelling in his usual manner. “Good work, everyone! Now we can establish a line of communication with the western regions again. We’ve done our job for today, so let’s go back home to Keiyou!”

“Yes, Lord Chou Sekiei!”

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On our return to the Chou manor in Keiyou, one of the major cities in Koshuu, I took a bath to wash off all the grime and sweat that was clinging to me. Clean once more, I returned to the office, which had been painted orange by the setting sun, and heard a girl’s weak lament.

“Ah, I can’t make this decision on my own...” the voice moaned. “Oh, I can’t decide this either. Huh? Wait, this is out of my jurisdiction too! Ah, wh-what should I do?”

The girl was sitting at the desk and looking at the mountains of paperwork around her in despair. In her right hand, she held a brush, and in her left, she held the Heirloom Seal of the Realm, which the emperor of the ancient Tou Empire had had commissioned over a thousand years ago. She was wearing a pale yellow version of the western regions’ ethnic garb, and given how often I’d seen her in these robes, I figured it must be her favorite outfit.

Using a cloth to wipe the excess moisture out of my hair, I entered the room and sat down on a bench, then placed my blue hat next to me. “Sounds like you’re having a hard time, Miu.”

“Huh?” The girl looked up, and as soon as she realized who was sitting opposite her, her eyes started sparkling. “Ruri!”

She was Kou Miu, the Ei emperor’s younger sister. She was fourteen years old, making her a year younger than me, and had long, light-brown hair. Pushing herself out of the chair, she bumped into the desk and disturbed Yui, who was having a nap in a box. The black cat raised its head and meowed in protest, though Miu didn’t pay it any mind. Since we had all gone off to clear out the remaining enemy soldiers in Koshuu, Miu had been forced to take over

paperwork duties in Keiyou, despite her inexperience.

"Welcome back!" she exclaimed, running over to the bench and practically leaping onto it to sit next to me. "Are you injured at all?"

"As you can see, I'm fine. Although, thanks to a certain aspiring civil official ignoring my strategy, I can't say I *feel* fine," I replied.

Asaka—Hakurei's attendant who was now taking care of Miu—walked in, and I raised my hand in greeting. One might have put her chestnut-brown hair losing its luster as well as the extreme paleness of her cheeks down to a trick of the light, but I knew better.

Miu rearranged herself so that she was sitting properly before asking, "So, um, is Sekiei not with you?" She almost sounded like she was trying to pry information out of me.

"Well, we came back to the manor together. I'm sure he's just in the hot springs," I replied, acting like I hadn't noticed anything wrong. "Sheesh. I'm a woman and even *I* don't take as long washing up as he does."

"Oh, I see," Miu said, smiling awkwardly at me before looking down at her toes.

By pure coincidence, Miu had witnessed the White Wolf abducting Hakurei, and had subsequently blamed herself for just letting it happen, although she really didn't need to. I looked over at Asaka, who interpreted my unspoken order correctly and started preparing some tea.

The general who had referred to herself as Rus had left behind a simple message: "We're waiting in the capital." Adai Dada was serious about targeting Chou Sekiei, which meant things were getting more troublesome. Yui padded over to us, looking to sit at our feet, so I picked it up and placed it on my lap. Then I poked Miu's small head like I'd seen Sekiei do multiple times in the past.

"Ah!" she squeaked.

"Did anything happen while we were away?" I asked her.

She blinked a few times, then took a few deep breaths to calm herself. "Yes, but it's kind of hard to explain. Asaka?"

"Lady Ruri, please take a look at this," Asaka said, pausing her tea-brewing to slide a report my way.

"No Seitou soldiers were spotted in Anshuu, just southwest of

Keiyou?" After reading the message, I racked my brain to try to figure out the implications.

The report had been written up by Teiha, who had remained in Keiyou under strict orders from Sekiei, instead of participating in the cleanup operation. Not only was his presence a soothing balm for the citizens and untrained soldiers there, but he was also gathering intel on the areas around Keiyou.

But he wasn't in Keiyou anymore. After we had returned, he set out for the ruins of Hakuhou Castle along the Grand Canal, which the Gen army had destroyed earlier in the conflict. Thanks to the training he'd received from Raigen—the late Lord Chou Tairan's right-hand man—and Sekiei, Teiha's report was filled with all the information I could ask for about Keiyou's neighbors. But the most curious piece of intel he had gathered was this: "The soldiers who were previously defending Anshuu have returned to Seitou. Details unclear."

What could that mean? I placed a finger on my chin as my mind raced. "Has something changed between Gen and Seitou? In that case, the Millenary Diviner's army on the outskirts of Koshuu and the army trying to invade Youkaku should also have retreated. Miu, has our scout returned?"

"Yes," Miu replied, but the serious look on her face gradually became more pained. "However, we still have no information on the whereabouts of the White Wolf or Miss Hakurei."

I'm not surprised to hear that. We had won our last battle against the combined forces of Gen and Seitou by the skin of our teeth, thanks to the joint efforts of Sekiei and Hakurei to repel the Black Wolf, as well as the soldiers and other officers giving their all to defend Keiyou. The trembling, slender girl next to me had played an important role in that miraculous victory too, showing up at the last minute and displaying her bravery.

The Black and White Wolves were the strongest members of the Gen army, and there was no doubt in my mind that they had assigned their most elite soldiers to transport Hakurei to wherever it was they were keeping her. No one expected finding them to be easy. For a few moments, the room lapsed into a silence that was

only broken by the sound of Asaka pouring tea for all of us. My body heat must have been unbearable to Yui, because it decided to leap from my lap and leave the room.

I was still staring after the cat when Miu slammed her little fist down on the table. "It... It was *my* fault! If only I'd been louder when I discovered them, Hakurei would be... She wouldn't have..."

"You idiot." Miu looked to be moments away from crying her eyes out, so I pulled her in for a hug and started stroking her back. Once she had calmed down again, I wiped away the tears from her eyes with a cloth and gave her a light tap on the forehead. "That purple-haired officer you saw was the White Wolf, one of the strongest fighters in the whole Gen army. You should consider yourself lucky that you're even still alive after an encounter with her. It's not your fault either. If fingers need pointing at anyone, point them at me. I was the one who'd believed the Chou manor's security was infallible."

"Ruri," Miu said quietly. Her facial expression twisted, like she was about to burst into tears, and she buried her face in my chest.

Hakurei and Meirin are so much better at this sort of stuff than I am. I sighed as surreptitiously as I could as I continued to read the report. "It looks like we've received a letter from U Hakubun. I'm impressed the messenger managed to make it through Kozan, considering all the tigers there. Apparently, they've reached an impasse at Youkaku. The enemy can't break through their defenses, but they can't chase off the enemy either."

I giggled as I recalled how the next head of the U family was always grimacing. Despite his sharp tongue, he was an honest man, and Sekiei held him in high regard, which was likely the start of Hakubun's misfortunes. I should know. I was in the same boat.

Wiping the tears from her face with her sleeve, Miu straightened up and seemed back to normal. "Mei's doing her best too. But now everyone knows I'm in Keiyou."

Miu's attendant, Mei, was currently embedded with the main U army as Kou Miu's body double. The plan had been to sow confusion among the enemy, but Miu was right in pointing out that the deception had long since lost its effectiveness.

As Asaka set cups and snacks down on the table, I shrugged. "You're right. But I want Mei to remain in Youkaku for now."

Miu blinked at this. "Why?"

The tea that Asaka poured into the cups was a beautiful jade-green. I picked up a snack that looked like a stick covered in sugar and popped it in my mouth. "The Gen army knows that 'Kou Miu' is here, but they don't yet know if you're the real deal. Some might believe the one who appeared at Keiyou was the impostor. If we can plant enough seeds of doubt in the minds of their army, it'll grow into an advantage for us down the line."

Miu swayed backwards and made an impressed noise. "Wow, Ruri. You remind me of that famous strategist in the history books!"

"Oh, didn't you know? I'm the strategist of the Chou army," I teased as I folded up the report in my hands. Seeing the open respect in her bright eyes was embarrassing. Miu's earnest personality was difficult to dislike.

Asaka bowed to us and said in a quiet voice, "Lady Miu, Lady Ruri, your tea is ready. Please drink up while it's still hot."

We thanked her—though Miu professed her gratitude with notably more etiquette than I did—and picked up our cups. Although the Gen army had occupied Keiyou, out of respect for Lord Tairan, the soldiers had done very little plundering of the city. As a result, when it came to supplies, Keiyou still had an abundance.

After taking a sip of the warm, fragrant tea, I calmly informed the pair of the current state of affairs. "We have reclaimed Koshuu for the time being, and if our intel is accurate, we have also secured Anshuu. Though unfortunately, we aren't capable of marching out with our entire army just yet." Volunteers from all around the continent had gathered in Keiyou, thanks to the existence of Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei, as well as the manifestos that had been stamped with the Heirloom Seal. If we'd had another year—no, if we'd had just six more months, the Chou and U armies working together might have stood a chance against Gen. I placed my cup back down on the table and rubbed my forehead. "But..."

"We absolutely have to save Hakurei!" exclaimed the princess next to me.

I never imagined I would hear her say such words. Asaka, who was standing off to one side, had a hand in front of her mouth too.

My hand migrated from my forehead to the top of my blue hat and I nodded. "Yes, you're right."

"Thanks!" Miu smiled and nibbled on the sugared stick she'd picked up. She had matured quite a bit since we first met.

I looked over at Asaka, who had started giggling, and winked. "You know, Miu..."

"Hmm?" She blinked and tilted her head to one side in what was frankly an adorable gesture.

"Did you say that as the princess imperial? I thought your priority was to save Rinkei."

"O-Oh! Well, of *course* I want that too." Despite her momentary hesitation, Miu's inner strength never faded from her gaze. She was a far cry from the sheltered girl who had shown up a few months before, ignorant of reality outside of the gilded cage she called a palace. "In journeying from Rinkei to Butoku, then from Butoku to Keiyou, I had a revelation. It was something I should've realized a long time ago." I could guess what the next words out of her mouth were going to be, as I had trusted the Kou Miu who had risked her life on the battlefield and had seen the Gen army with her own eyes to eventually hit upon this understanding. "Even if Sekiei and everyone else manage to save Rinkei, the Ei Empire is on its last legs."

Asaka and I said nothing, silently prompting her to go on. Upon witnessing the dangers that were encroaching on her homeland, a member of the imperial family had finally opened her eyes and stared reality in the face. I didn't know if I should rejoice or despair that it had taken this long.

Miu looked away as she continued in a notably sadder tone, "His Imperial Majesty—my brother—isn't a bad person. On the contrary, he's a good man. Just timid. That's how he came to prioritize the honeyed words of the traitors in his court. After seeing how Sekiei and Hakurei have treated the citizens of Keiyou, as well as the loyalty they have received in return, I doubt my brother could ever stand a chance against the White Wraith."

I'd heard that when Lord Chou Tairan was still alive, he had often petitioned the capital to send reinforcements to Keiyou, only for the imperial court to turn down his requests. Kou Ryuuho, the Ei emperor, had turned his back to the rising tensions. The enemy emperor north of the great river was a hero who was praised as the second coming of Ouei. By contrast, he was simply a fainthearted idealist who knew nothing of the world outside his own palace. He must have instinctively realized that he had no chance of winning a war against Adai Dada, though none of that excused him from causing the deaths of so many soldiers and generals, nor from leading his country to ruin.

Miu set her cup down and thumped her chest—which was quite large for her age—with her hand. "That's why I want to focus all of my efforts on things I can accomplish in the here and now, plus help you all to rescue Hakurei, no matter how many times I need to use the Heirloom Seal!"

"Oh, I like the sound of that! Keep up the good work!" came a relaxed voice from the doorway in response to the princess imperial's resolute declaration. We looked in the direction the voice had come from and saw Sekiei wearing a loose robe after his bath and cradling Yui in his arms. He caught my eye and grinned. "Meirin was right, wasn't she? Asaka, could you pour me a cup of tea too?"

"Of course, Lord Sekiei," Asaka said, then started preparing some more tea with elegant movements.

In sharp contrast to Asaka's grace, Miu made an odd noise of embarrassment when she realized that Sekiei had just overheard her. She grabbed the nearest blanket and threw it over her head to hide her bright red face. While she was doing this, Sekiei picked up the report and started reading through it. Seeing him do this caused anger to boil up inside me again.

"*There* you are, you stupid aspiring civil official! Sit down here. I'm not done lecturing you yet!"

Normally, Sekiei would reply with a joke of his own. Today, however? "Hmm? Did you say something? Oh, thanks, Asaka." Although Sekiei's tone remained light, he refused to sit down as he accepted the cup from the attendant.

My vague sense of unease returned, simmering under the irritation I was feeling. Glaring at him, I crossed my arms and legs with exaggerated movements, as if batting away any uncertainty. "Why are you acting like you don't know what I'm talking about?! Now, tell me why you charged into the enemy formation without waiting for— Sekiei?"

"Sekiei?" Miu seemed just as confused as me about Sekiei's total lack of reaction.

The Kouei of the Modern Ages set Yui down on the bench and drained the tea from his cup. "Ruri, can you write a letter to the U family for me and thank them? I'm more than grateful that they're managing to keep an invading army's worth of soldiers at bay at Youkaku."

"Um, sure. I'll be sure to do that." His request made sense, and I had been planning on suggesting doing it myself at a later date, but something about it made the disquiet in my heart grow heavier.

Without another word to me, Sekiei handed the cup and the report to Asaka. He then proceeded to wave his hand around a few times. "Tomorrow, a sulking Teiha's going to return from his inspection. After that, we can hold a meeting to decide what our next move will be. That sound good to you?"

"Yes, sounds fine," I replied.

Were we going to march down to Rinkei to save it? Focus on coordinating with the U family? Or secure Anshuu while the enemies were away? Or would we prioritize rescuing Hakurei? I could already foresee the clash of opinions that would be arising at the meeting the next day.

Sekiei turned away and chirped, "All right, then. Well, I'm exhausted, so I'm gonna go hit the hay. Thanks for the tea, Asaka. It was delicious."

"I-It was my pleasure," Asaka replied. She must also have noticed that something was off about Sekiei's behavior, if the perplexity apparent in her tone was anything to go by.

Yui seemed disgruntled too, meowing with dissatisfaction before jumping down to the ground and following Sekiei out of the room.

With the cloth still over her head, Miu tugged at my sleeve. "Um,

Ruri? Is Sekiei...” She hesitated. “Is he perhaps worried about Ha—”

“I know what you’re going to ask, and you don’t have to say anything more,” I said. Yes, I knew perfectly well what was going on in Chou Sekiei’s mind. After all, I was the strategist of his army, and the last thing I’d ever do was let him do whatever he pleased. I’d put an immediate stop to that! I clenched my fist tight as the setting sun continued to cast orange streaks of light in through the window and across the room.

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“Well, good night then, Lady Miu, Lady Ruri. I shall return to guard duty now,” Asaka said.

“Thank you and good night,” I said. Miu, who looked like she was on the verge of drifting off, echoed my words.

Asaka gave us an elegant bow before leaving the room, candle in hand. As soon as she had closed the door behind her, I heard her voice again, issuing orders to the attendants who were standing guard outside our room. Ever since Hakurei’s abduction, security had been ramped up in the Chou manor at Sekiei’s insistence. That said, I had given the exact same order, though I hadn’t told him that.

It was a new moon that night, and without the celestial orb illuminating everything outside the window, the room seemed darker than usual, though I could still make out the princess imperial curled up in her bed, her breathing slow and even as she slumbered peacefully.

“Seriously, this girl...” I sighed, a small smile spreading across my face. Only a few minutes earlier, she had been going on about how she was wanting to stay up because she was worried about Sekiei. I patted her on the head and murmured, “This is the best night to sneak out of the manor.”

Chou Sekiei had a keen eye for openings, so I doubted he would let this particular one slip past him. He was sure to do *something*—

“Sis! Sis!” came the hissed whisper of a man from the inner courtyard. It was Shigou. I had secretly asked him to keep an eye on Sekiei for me. I shrugged on a cardigan and moved to the window,

where Shigou delivered his report to me. “Just as you suspected, Sekiei has made his move. He’s got his jacket and a bag with him.”

“I see. Thank you,” I replied, my voice sounding much colder than I expected it to. *That idiot! That big stupid idiot!* Yui must have sensed something in the air because the black cat jumped up onto my left shoulder, though I ignored it. “Have you notified the team we put together beforehand?” I asked Shigou.

“You mean the most experienced veterans Teiha lent us and my handpicked subordinates? If so, yeah, I did exactly as you ordered. Kouzen’s in charge of them.”

Teiha must also have noticed that Sekiei had been acting weird. It seemed he wasn’t the vice-commander of the Chou army for nothing.

As I ran a hand through Yui’s fur, I issued my orders. “Guard all the gates out of Keiyou.”

“Understood.” I couldn’t see Shigou but I felt his presence disappear from the window. He was a sensible commander, despite his rough countenance.

A sliver of light fell into the room as a serious-looking Asaka opened the door and whispered, “Lady Ruri! Lord Sekiei has—”

“Asaka, look after Miu.” I approached the attendant and placed my hand on her shoulder. “Hakurei really is loved, wouldn’t you say?” I tied my hair into a loose ponytail, then handed Yui over to Asaka. “That idiot, Sekiei, plans to save Hakurei by taking on Gen all by himself, even if it costs him everything, including his life!” I didn’t even have to look at Asaka to know that she was nodding and her face was all scrunched up as she fought back tears. In short, she felt the same way I did on the matter. I clenched my fist and declared, “Tonight, I’m gonna give him a *real* piece of my mind!”

I found the “runaway” a lot easier than I thought I would. He was sitting in the manor’s garden with his coat thrown over his shoulders as he gazed up at the blossoming plum tree, his hand on the trunk. This was the site of Hakurei’s abduction.

After ordering the soldiers who had accompanied me to surround us, making sure to stay in the shadows cast by the lanterns, I called out to Sekiei in a mocking tone, “Good evening, Lord Chou Sekiei.

You've chosen an odd spot to sit and admire the flowers. There isn't even any moon tonight."

"Ruri." For a moment, Sekiei looked surprised, then a small smile appeared on his face. He turned his head to look at me, Black Star and White Star swaying somewhat with the movement. "What's up? Why are you awake this late at night?" he asked as if this were any ordinary day.

"I could ask you the very same question," I said. "Where do you think you're going?"

Instead of answering me, Sekiei merely gazed up at the white plum blossoms. "In the northern lands of Routou stands a peach tree that is in bloom all year round. That's what the rumors say, anyway. Apparently, the tree is over a thousand years old." Others might not have understood why Sekiei was bringing this particular tree up at this moment, but I knew the significance of Routou.

"The Land of the Twin Ei's Separation, huh? No normal peach tree could live for that long, nor could it grow so large that it consumes an entire cliff. According to some books I've read, experts believe it's an entirely different species of tree," I remarked. Without letting my guard down, I took a few steps forwards, crossed my arms, and continued in a more confrontational tone. "The giant boulder Kouei sliced in half with the Heavenly Swords before Ouei's eyes remains in Routou as well. But no one knows if that really happened. In any case, Routou is a holy site and has been for a long time now. Ordinary folk can only dream of visiting it."

"Oh, is that so? That's too bad," Sekiei said, crossing his arms behind his head as he started to walk away.

"Sekiei—" I called out to him, but he cut me off before I could add anything else.

"Adai won't attack Keiyou anymore," the Kouei of the Modern Ages announced without even turning to look at me. He sounded like a scholar explaining some mathematical principle, and I didn't know how to react to his uncharacteristic tone. He paused near a lantern and looked back over his shoulder at me, our eyes meeting. "The western regions, aside from Youkaku, are difficult for cavalry to traverse. I doubt the Gen Empire will bother with them any longer. If

they swear fealty to Gen and let them use the Grand Canal, Adai will give the western regions fair treatment. For better or worse, the Gen Empire only cares about strength, so if someone useful can be found, they can survive. That goes for both the western regions and the Jo family."

I could practically hear him saying: *I'm sure you of all people know what I'm driving at, right?* Although I was happy to see absolute trust in his eyes, it also stoked the rage that was boiling inside me. According to the rumors, the White Wraith liked to collect skilled individuals for his empire, and Gen had lost plenty of soldiers and officers in this war. Sekiei was right to say there was a high chance of Adai trying to recruit members of the Chou and U families, for there was already a precedent in Teiha, to whom he'd extended a direct invitation, prior to him reuniting with us.

But you *won't be in the Gen army!* Unable to contain my growing irritation any longer, I pushed my bangs out of my face and said, "Why don't you suggest that *before* Rinkei falls and the Ei Empire is destroyed?"

"We should, before Gen wipes out everyone who's pushing for battle even though they all lack a proper plan," Sekiei agreed, a deep sadness in his tone. The young hero, whose name was now known by everyone under the heavens, raised his hand towards the sky. "Shigou's dad—Gan Retsurai—is the general in charge of the water fortress. I hear he's a loyal and experienced soldier, which means he'll fight until the bitter end. That's great and all, but we're up against the Gen Empire here."

A cold gust of wind whipped my blonde hair about and made the flames in the lanterns flicker. Sekiei slowly turned to face me with an odd expression on his face, as if he were simultaneously enjoying and lamenting the difficult situation we found ourselves in.

"Ei can't win against the White Wraith. Even if we make it to the capital in time, all we'll be able to do is prolong the defeat," he stated.

Sekiei had once described Adai Dada as a monster whose talent surpassed even that of Ouei. If Adai really was leading his main forces into a final showdown between Gen and Ei, it was obvious

who the victor would be.

The man in front of me shrugged his shoulders theatrically. "In exchange for protecting Gen's borders, they'll let the Chou, U, and Jo families keep their original territories. Then, they'll ask Miu to hand over the Heirloom Seal and crown her as queen, reigning from some small city or other to keep her away from the capital. That's my guess for what will ultimately happen to Ei. Though when Adai eventually dies, the Gen Empire might then see fit to slaughter us all."

For years, the Chou family had proven to be a thorn in Gen's side, their soldiers even paying their respects to General Chou Tairan for all the trouble he had put them through. The U family had also displayed its might in the most recent battle, showing that even without generals or elite soldiers, it was still a force to be reckoned with. Depending on how our negotiations with them went, we might even get what Sekiei was suggesting. *But...*

Thinking he'd convinced me, Sekiei's expression turned apologetic. "I'll leave all of that stuff to you. You're the only one I can count on. But don't worry. Even if it costs me my life, I'll save Ha — Whoa!"

Before he could finish his sentence, I aimed a kick right at his head with all my strength, but thanks to his ridiculous athleticism, he managed to dodge it by bending backwards. I angrily clicked my tongue.

"Uh, M-Miss Ruri? That was a serious kick just then, wasn't it?" Sekiei said, his voice trembling.

"Ha! Of *course* it was!" I strode up to him, then stood on tiptoes and jabbed my finger into his face. "I let you have the floor, and all you did was blabber on about things you would've never talked about before! Sit down."

"Huh?" Sekiei blinked.

I treated him to my sweetest smile. "Sit. Down. *Now*."

"A-All right."

Sekiei obeyed and was soon sitting on his knees, looking frightened. Shigou and his men watching from the shadows seemed just as terrified, but I ignored them and glared at Sekiei with my

hands on my hips.

"Listen. I'm sure you *can* fight your way into the enemy's base and save Hakurei all by yourself. You're the great Kouei of the Modern Ages, after all."

"I-I didn't give myself that name," Sekiei muttered defensively.

I shot him a frosty look. "Did you say something?"

"N-No, nothing at all! I mean it! Chou Sekiei never lies."

I heaved a sigh. *Ugh, is every wielder of the Heavenly Swords like this?* I brushed my hair out of my eyes again, grabbed Sekiei by the collar of his shirt, and glared into his eyes. With genuine anger in my voice, I said, "I know you can do the impossible, which means I'm sure you can rescue Hakurei. But what does any of that matter if you go and die yourself? I *thought* you wanted to become a civil official? How is it that such a simple answer eludes you?"

"Father told me to take care of Hakurei. I have to save her."

Yes, I knew you'd say that. I knew that would be Chou Sekiei's answer. I looked down at him and asked softly, "Is that why you want to go alone?"

"Yeah. I know I'm putting a lot on your and Meirin's shoulders, but I want you two to take care of everyone when the war ends."

I was unable to stop my rage from consuming me, and in the next second, I dragged Sekiei towards me and screamed in his face, "Don't be ridiculous!" My magic was out of control, manifesting white and black petals in the air around us while the self-sacrificial idiot just stared at me with his mouth agape. "Chou Sekiei, did you forget that *I'm* your strategist?!" I bawled at him. "Instead of using your own pathetic excuse of a brain, put your faith in Ruri of Kobi's wisdom! Especially in situations like *this*!"

No longer able to hold back the wave of emotion that washed over me, tears started streaming down my face. I was all alone in this world. Sekiei and Hakurei were the closest people I had to a family. But the man in front of me always...

Sekiei was far too kind for his own good. His face fell as he wiped away tears from my eyes. "We might really die in the coming battle," he pointed out.

"Everyone dies sometime. It's just a case of when and where," I

said, forcing myself to release his shirt and pressing my face against Sekiei's chest, causing my tears to soak into the fabric of his clothes. "If you surrender your life trying to rescue Hakurei, you'll leave her all alone and she'll cry herself to sleep every night, I can guarantee you that. And it won't be long until she also..." I trailed off. "Can you accept that? I sure as hell can't. Absolutely not. I don't want that to happen. I reject it!" I paused, then in a softer voice, I admitted, "If I lost you, I'd cry until my tears ran dry too."

After blurting out my true feelings in this way, silence reigned supreme in the garden. I didn't know what I'd do if he still refused to back down after that display.

"Jeez." I felt a warm hand rest itself on top of my head, and looked up again to see Sekiei smiling at me, like it was a normal day. "My strategist is as merciless as ever."

"Oh, what's this? If you wanted me to pat you on the head, you only had to ask."

"Fine, I give up. You win." He raised his hands in a dramatic show of surrender, then grabbed my hand, and letting out a small grunt of effort, hauled himself to his feet. "Will you lend me your brain, my master strategist?"

"Only if you want me to, Wielder of the Heavenly Swords," I replied. "Or should I refer to you as an 'aspiring civil official' instead?"

We nodded and bumped fists. *Don't worry, Hakurei. We'll save you, no matter what lengths we have to go to.* Shigou and the others were still watching the scene with bated breath, so I raised my hand to signal that everything was fine now.

Sekiei stretched noisily. "Aw, man. I'm wide awake now. Hey, come have a drink with me."

"It's your fault for staying up until this hour. You'd better bring out the good stuff. I want some of your mountain peach wine!"

"Fine, but don't tell Hakurei or Meirin. All right, back to your rooms, all of you!"

Shigou and the others jumped in surprise at this sudden command, then scattered. *So he'd known they were there all along*, I realized, slightly annoyed. My gaze was focused on where the

soldiers had been hiding, but in my peripheral vision, I saw Sekiei's arm move and a thought hit me. *Oh, that's right!*

"I bet they started enjoying themselves halfway through that—Hm?" Sekiei paused because I'd reached out and grabbed his left sleeve. I ignored his confused gaze on my hand and tightened my grip. "What's up?" he asked.

"Well, *someone* has to stop you from running away, right?"

"I-I'm not going to!"

Despite his complaints, Sekiei didn't once try to shake off my hand as we made our way back into the manor. He really *was* soft on those he considered friends and family. I giggled at this thought, still clutching the kind general's left arm in a loose embrace.

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The Gen army had set up a base in a nameless region in the province of Eishuu, within spitting distance of the front line. I—Adai Dada—sat on my throne in the spacious tent we had pitched there as a steady stream of messengers poured in, their faces covered in blood and sweat.

"Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf, I come bearing a report! The marshal and his soldiers have seized the final enemy outpost outside of the water fortress. Our casualties were minimal!"

"The enemy's reserve troops remain in Rinkei. They haven't made a move yet. More and more citizens flee the capital by the day."

"Our navy's attempt to attack the capital via the Grand Canal has unfortunately ended in failure. They have blocked the narrowest part of the waterway with steel chains."

As soon as the messengers had relayed their reports, they quickly rushed out again, and whenever they lifted the tent flap to depart, I caught sight of the night sky outside. The war map that was laid out on the table before me, illuminated by candles, contained all of the information we had gathered on the enemy army. Every so often, the civil officials around me would move some of the pawns around or mark down changes according to the reports brought by the

messengers.

I only wished that Ukuna Dada could have been here to see this. Like Orid, Ukuna was one of the Dada clan's finest. He had pushed for a blitz attack on the Ei water fortress and Rinkei, so I'd ordered him to defend Shiryuu while calling Gi Heian back to base. If Ukuna were here, he would surely agree with me that Ei no longer had a future, and that it wouldn't be long until the Gen Empire unified the lands under the heavens, a feat no one had accomplished in a thousand years.

Although our enemies had done their best to protect their lands from us, Gen's advance wasn't halted even once, and we had also already surrounded their last bastion, the great water fortress. It no longer mattered if Ei's remaining soldiers and officers fought until their dying breaths for their ridiculous country, and it was also irrelevant what tricks the sparrow or the turncoat rat had up their sleeves. None could stand against me. That included the foolish fledgling of the Jo family, who was still marching northwards to the capital.

What a bore this all is. Feeling irritated by the whole situation, I flicked my white hair out of my face and drained the last of the lukewarm water from my cup. *Chou Sekiei—no, Eihou. Now that Chou Tairan is dead, you are the only person who even stands a chance against me on the battlefield. After all, you've taken back Keiyou, cut us off from our Grand Canal supply route, and fended off both Hasho and Gisen. Now you must come to me! I will defeat you in hand-to-hand combat, fair and square, and then we shall quaff alcohol while discussing our plans for the future. We weren't able to fulfill the promise we made at Routou a thousand years ago, but in this life, we can govern the unified lands together. That's the reason—in fact, the* only *reason—I ordered Rus the White Wolf to abduct that vile woman with silver hair and blue eyes, Hakurei!*

My mind was occupied with fantasies of the upcoming battle with my best friend from my past life, as well as the bright future we would carve out together after the war ended, though my attention was soon drawn by my temporary masked bodyguard, Ren—who was a member of Senko—shifting around on the spot. I looked up in

her direction to see what the matter was, and at almost the same time, a young general with dark brown hair and eyes strode into my tent. Under his armor, I could see toned muscles and tanned skin, and two swords hung from his belt, one at each hip. He was also carrying a bunch of scrolls and letters in his arms. This was Orid Dada, and he was quickly followed into the tent by his vice-commander, the former Ei citizen, Gi Heian.

My brave cousin had crossed the Sengai Valley—a land that no one had ever even set foot in before—to launch an invasion on the western regions. However, Sekiei had been waiting for him and defeated his battalion at Ten Knights Bridge. The fierce battle had cost us Orid's former vice-commander, Berig, as well as many of his subordinates. On his return, Orid joined Ukuna in petitioning for a more aggressive approach, so that Chou Sekiei could be struck down before amassing an army.

Like Ukuna, Orid was an asset to the Dada clan, and he had never been shy about his stated ambition to become the Kouei of the Modern Ages. Yet his bravery bordered on recklessness, and I was forced to summon him back from the front lines with the intention of keeping him here in the main camp. To that end, I even called back the cautious Gi Heian from Shiryuu in order to assign him the position of Orid's vice-commander. Besides, *I* was the one who would fight Eihou on the battlefield. I wouldn't let anyone else get between us.

Ignorant of my resolution on that matter, Orid handed all of the papers to a tray-bearing attendant, and dropped to one knee before me. A few steps behind him, Gi Heian also bowed his head.

"Your Imperial Majesty!" Orid began. "We have received gifts from the major mercantile families of Ei. I have catalogued and recorded everything in these documents."

"I'll leave sorting all of them to you, cousin," I replied. "My marshal has been quite enthusiastic up on the front lines, so make sure he receives his fair share. Oh, and don't forget to reward his soldiers as well."

"Yessir!" Orid replied after a pause, his expression stiff.

I glanced at him, then turned my attention to the scrolls the

attendant had brought over to me. Old Berig—who had perished protecting Orid—had been my marshal's younger brother. The people of Gen were wolves, viewing death on the battlefield as an honor, and while I doubted my marshal needed the reminder, considering my postwar plans, I felt I should probably let Orid and my marshal have a chat with each other. After all, I planned to give these two reliable officers the lands south of Rinkei once Ei had met its end, and Gi Heian—who would be able to empathize with the Ei people—would govern alongside them.

I unfurled a scroll and cast my eye down it, but the scribe opened with such clumsily written flattery and excessive promises of loyalty that I had trouble even focusing on the individual words. After somehow making it through the prelude, the promise of a vast donation of silver sycees followed, which the wealthy merchants of Ei were offering to Gen of their own will. *They had this much in their coffers? Still, I shouldn't really have expected anything less from the families that have been ruling over Rinkei. Chou Tairan and You Bunshou must be rolling in their graves.*

Suppressing my disgust, I continued reading. According to the scroll, the families were also offering us gold, jewels, food, clean water, feed for the horses, plus peat and wood we could use as fuel. They were even willing to give us valuable resources they could only have stolen from their military, such as horses, and arrows (something one could never have enough of). They even went as far as throwing beautiful male and female slaves into the bargain. I didn't have to finish the last paragraph of the scroll to know what they wanted in return: a guarantee of safety as well as business rights after Ei's destruction. The new world I wished to create had no use for these parasites.

But on opening the final correspondence from the mercantile families, my eyebrow raised. *Oh? It appears this "Ou Jin" fellow might actually be competent.* His letter started with a simple greeting rather than words of flattery or vows of fealty. He wasn't offering me any money or supplies either.

"I am familiar with the stories of your greatness, Emperor Adai, yet while the Ei Empire still stands, we remain her citizens. We will

be happy to fulfill your orders once the war has ended, however. Please accept our family treasure, which we offer to you as proof of our promise." That was the totality of Ou Jin's letter.

What a brave merchant, writing this despite knowing his homeland is doomed. Yet he still remembered to include the bare minimum of insurance. A low chuckle escaped my throat.

"Is something the matter, Your Imperial Majesty?" Orid asked, confused by the sound.

I covered my eyes with a hand. "Oh, it's nothing. I simply found an interesting man on this boring battlefield." I paused briefly, then said, "Orid."

"Yessir!"

I could tell from the movement of the air that he had bowed his head again. I peeked through my fingers and my eyes fell on his muscular frame. "Check on this family treasure that has been sent to us by a merchant named Ou Jin," I ordered. "I'm assuming it's far more valuable than the treasures from the other merchants, and it might come in especially handy as we gear up to overrun the water fortress. I'd also like you to take stock of the rations and horse feed we've received. Now that we've lost Keiyou, I need to know how many months we can hold out if we are forced to lay siege to Rinkei. Remember to include the supplies from Shiryuu when you're counting up."

"Yessir." Orid didn't look happy about his orders, but he nodded all the same. Even though he knew how useful they were, he didn't like the idea of taking resources away from people who were trying to flee their homeland.

Orid was a noble man, but at the same time, his strong sense of virtue was something of a weak point. National division had no bearing on grain or rice. If we wanted to win this war, we needed to use everything we had at our disposal. In retrospect, perhaps I should have kept the talented Kou family member at the base instead of assigning her to Shiryuu as the new logistics officer, a move I'd only made due to a strong recommendation from my marshal. Though there wasn't a great deal to complain about, because the new logistics officer was well educated and came from a

family line that had been part of the Kou family right up until about fifty years ago. Still, if that logistics officer had been here instead, Orid might have learned a thing or two, and emerged from this battle as an even stronger individual.

I ordered the attendant to tidy up all the scrolls and letters, then had another pour me a glass goblet of Sekiei's favorite mountain peach wine. In a calm tone, I told my young cousin, "I will employ anyone, not just merchants, *if* they are likely to be of some benefit to the Gen Empire. For now, at least. Investigate anyone you suspect of corruption. Oh, and if you find anyone who was involved in the National Shield's execution, then..." I trailed off and swiped my right hand through the air.

A flash of fear jolted through Orid's dark brown eyes as he pounded the ground with his fist. "As you wish, Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf."

Everyone departed from the tent, leaving me alone. Still sitting on my throne, I sipped the mountain peach wine I'd been indulging in every night lately, when all of a sudden, a young girl in a fox mask peeled out of the shadows.

"Shouldn't we eliminate that Denso rat?" she asked. "I hear he's holed himself up in a room in the palace, his mood alternating between fright and ecstasy as he plots your downfall."

"It is unnecessary," I replied.

I rested a finger on the glass pawn on the miniature war map I had placed on the desk next to my throne. At first glance, the number of pawns matched the larger version of the map, but they looked completely different. Even though we had lost many soldiers and officers—including members of the Four Wolves—in our battle with the Chou family, the Gen Empire still had a number of powerful assets I could put into play. By contrast, the Ei Empire had no one. Even Gan Retsurai, the guardian of the great water fortress, didn't really count.

As I played about with the pawn that represented the imperial palace, I stated coldly, "Denso has talent. I hear he was once Hasho's rival in Senko. If he could've tricked Ei's foolish emperor and equally foolish general, and taken control of their army, he might've

made a name for himself on the battlefield. Granted, that would have required his opponent to be your average general. Would you like a drink?”

I picked up the extra glass goblet that was on the desk, and even though Ren didn’t answer my question, she approached the desk silently and removed her hood and fox mask. Like Chou Hakurei, she had silver hair and blue eyes. For many years, people had persecuted women with these particular traits, laboring under the belief that they had come from a distant star to visit calamity on humankind, but despite this, Ren had made it to the point where she was technically the leader of Senko, a secret organization with aspirations of unifying the continent. She grabbed both the bottle and the glass from me, and without asking or waiting for my permission, poured herself a drink.

I crossed my lean legs and said, “In reality, the battlefield is nothing like a chessboard. You learn to expect the unexpected. Hasho has learned this valuable lesson at both Ranyou and Bourou Gorge, but...” I thought back to the young strategist’s report in which he had stated that, despite his best efforts, he had failed to take back Keiyou, and that the Ei emperor’s imperial flag had appeared on the battlefield. After that, the Seitou soldiers in Anshuu, who weren’t under Hasho’s command, had left their posts without anyone issuing the order.

The other Seitou units were still acting normally, but I was sure it was the work of that mysticism-obsessed witch. She must have realized the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars were in Sekiei’s possession, and made a move to take them for herself. By extension, the manifestos stamped with the Heirloom Seal that had appeared in the northern provinces must have therefore been forgeries that she had ordered made.

I knocked over the pawn representing Rinkei to put it out of its misery. “That rat knows nothing of *real* battle. Senko must have ordered him to spy in the imperial palace because they were aware of this flaw. Call Uto back if you wish. I’m sure you and your sister have plenty you’d like to catch up on.”

“Humph.” Ren tossed back her wine then refixed her fox mask

over her face before disappearing into the shadows once more. I surmised she had set off for the imperial palace to retrieve the smarter rat—no, let's call her an adorable fellow fox—who had played the part of the foolish emperor's most beloved concubine.

Listening to the guards handpicked by the overprotective Rus bustling around outside the tent, I said to myself, "The water fortress is the anvil, and the Imperial Guard's cavalry is the hammer. That's not enough to defeat us, so they'll prepare one more weapon." I turned my gaze to the pawns that lay south of the capital and sighed. "They think I haven't noticed Jo Hiyou or the rest of the Jo army? To think this war would end with such an easy, pathetic battle. No, it's more of a farce than a battle." *How infuriating*, I thought, massaging my temples with one hand and tapping the desk with the other. "This will be the second time I have unified the lands under the heavens, but it isn't enough, Eihou! I cannot accept you not being by my side!"

I hadn't been able to save my best friend a thousand years ago, and to make matters worse, in this life, we had been forced to face each other as enemies.

No longer able to hold back the emotions I had been suppressing for all of these years, I continued my monologue. "What will you do now that we have taken the daughter of your savior, Chou Tairan? Don't tell me you'll just give up. No, I'm guessing you will come right to me. And you won't be bringing your army with you."

My body trembled with joy at the thought of it. Kouei wouldn't hold anything back, but I would still defeat him on the battlefield. Nothing else in this world could have made me so exhilarated! I jubilantly picked up the letter I'd received a few days earlier from the White Wolf, Rus, who was somewhere in the northwest of the continent.

"But first, I must deal with that wench, Chou Hakurei. I know Eihou. If I hurt a single hair on her head, he won't hesitate to cut down my entire army. So what should I do?"

In the dying light, I grinned, my earlier excitement fading to make way for the dark, hateful emotion that consumed my heart like mud clouding a river.

Chapter Two

On reaching the room in the glamorous manor where we were to stay the night, the female soldiers serving under the White Wolf, Rus, bowed to their mistress. All of them wore simple metal armor that had been painted purest white.

"Lady Rus, we'll be right outside."

"Please call us if you require any assistance!"

"We hope you enjoy the rest of your evening."

My kidnapper, the White Wolf, was sitting on a bench in her nightgown. She had already had her bath and was busy brushing her long purple hair, but she paused and said, "Thank you. Be sure to all rest in shifts."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Judging from their disciplined movements and beautiful armor, I—Chou Hakurei—guessed these women were members of the White Lancers, an elite unit in the Gen army. The trio left the room, with the last one shooting me a sharp look before closing the door. At no point had any of them let their guard down around me.

I gripped the sleeves of my lavender nightgown, which was the same type as the one Rus was wearing. Thanks to the White Wolf knocking me out when she abducted me, I had no idea how many days had passed since I'd fallen into enemy hands. Whenever they moved me about, they made sure to blindfold me, so I couldn't even tell what city we were in either. The soldiers were forever on the lookout too, and I knew escape would be impossible tonight as well. Not wanting her to see my worry and anxiety, I glared at Rus, who continued to elegantly brush her hair.

A humid wind blew in through the window, disturbing the curtains and bringing with it the aroma of incense. It hadn't rained, so I guessed we must be close to a river or waterway. Perhaps we were even close to the White Wraith's base by this point, as I had heard

that he was advancing on Rinkei.

Rus paused in her grooming and picked up a porcelain cup full of steaming tea from the side table. "Don't glare at me like that, Lady Chou Hakurei. I'm just a powerless maiden. You're frightening me."

"I'm in no mood for jokes!" I snapped furiously.

Averting my gaze, I looked over at the window, but with the white curtain in the way, I couldn't see the moon outside. They had intentionally covered the window so that I couldn't get any information about my surroundings. Rus placed a second porcelain cup in front of me, drawing my attention back to her.

"Are you wondering where we are?" Rus asked, slowly pouring me a cup of jade-green tea. "Or are you worrying about your fate?"

I held my tongue. On the way here, no one had hurt me or humiliated me. Instead, they had given me food, clothes, and a place to sleep. They had even allowed me to bathe, albeit under supervision.

I had asked Rus why they were treating me so well, and she had replied, "You're a princess with silver hair and blue eyes. These are cursed traits that only appeared after a star fell from the sky in ancient times. Your very existence may bring calamity to my beloved master, Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf. However, you are also his honored guest. So as long as you are under my care, I will protect you. I swear it on my honor as the White Wolf."

A horrible premonition struck me. That terrifying White Wraith, Adai, was planning to use me to do *something* to Sekiei. Rus picked up the cup again and moved it closer to me to the sound of porcelain clinking against the table.

With a beautiful smile playing across her lips, Rus sat back down in front of me. "Oh, I must have been mistaken. You're not worried about Ei, the Chou family, or even your own life, are you?"

She smiled again knowingly, her amethyst eyes narrowing. Feeling like she was reading my thoughts, I quickly looked away, but I heard her clap her hands and cross her legs.

"All you are worried about is Lord Chou Sekiei, isn't that right?" she said.

My heart almost jumped out of my mouth. Every day since I was abducted, my mind had lingered on my childhood friend and comrade-in-arms, the man I loved more than anyone else in this world. And while my father who'd died for his homeland might have scolded me for this, Sekiei was more important to me than my own life or the fate of Ei. I knew he would come to rescue me, no matter what obstacles Gen threw in his way.

Tamping down the emotions that were threatening to bubble up to the surface, I replied in an icy voice, "Of course I—"

"There's no need to lie. I can tell. Or to be more precise, I *know*," Rus interrupted me in a cheery voice as she tied her hair into a loose ponytail. In that moment, she didn't look like the White Wolf, one of the bravest generals in the Gen Empire. She looked like a young woman in love. "It's written all over your face. I'm a woman too, remember?"

The soldier before me was my enemy. She was the one who had appeared during the first Battle of Keiyou and dealt a heavy blow to my father. If she hadn't interfered, we might have defeated Adai that day. However, after conversing with her day and night, I had come to understand her as a person, and learned that the White Wolf, Rus, was a virtuous woman, meaning I had no reason to doubt her word.

Rus must have misunderstood why I had fallen silent, because she looked a little troubled. She slid over a saucer and poured star-shaped sugar candies from a bag onto it. "No one in Gen would dare lay a finger on Emperor Adai's guest. And I highly doubt His Imperial Majesty plans on killing you, since you are the daughter of the National Shield, and he respected General Chou enough to have a mausoleum built for him in Keiyou. However..."

"However?" I repeated as I placed one of the candies in my mouth, enjoying its sweetness on my tongue. It tasted like something Miss Ruri and Meirin would enjoy.

Rus's gaze grew more serious. "This is only a hypothesis, mind. But I believe His Imperial Majesty will use you and the continued existence of the Chou family after Ei's collapse as a bargaining chip. He wishes for Lord Chou Sekiei to join Gen."

“What are you talking about?” I said, scoffing to hide my shock. Rus’s guess was the same as mine.

In retrospect, Adai had been abnormally obsessed with Sekiei ever since that first Battle of Keiyou. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have sent Orid Dada, the Millenary Diviner, or the Black Wolf—Gen’s most powerful warrior—to fight us. After all, Adai was marching on Rinkei to destroy Ei, so why else would he spare that kind of manpower?

Pretending that Rus hadn’t just caught me off guard, I ran a hand through my silver hair, the ribbon Sekiei gave me absent from it. “I’m sure you and Adai figured Sekiei would come and save me. Well, too bad, because you’re both wrong. Sekiei won’t come. He has no reason to.”

“And may I ask why you think that?” Rus queried curiously. Despite her courteous tone, there was no hint of humor in her eyes. But I’d anticipated that.

I sipped my tea, and making sure I sounded like a horrible woman, mockingly replied, “Well, as you know, Keiyou is located at the confluence on the Grand Canal, making it the perfect location to cut off Gen’s main supply route. Since Sekiei’s no idiot, he’ll wage a war of attrition on Gen after he’s taken Koshuu and gotten in contact with the U family. Without the Grand Canal, Gen will only be able to transport supplies on land via Shiryuu. How long can you support an army the size of Gen’s forces with only that single route available to you?”

Keiyou had Sekiei and our reliable strategist, Miss Ruri. If I could come up with something like this, I was sure they would be able to think up an even better tactic. Ou Meirin, who had fled to the south, might even join up with them as well.

“Heh. Ha ha ha!” Rus stood up and tossed her lavender hair over her shoulders before circling around behind me and placing a cold hand on my cheek. “You’re a terrible liar, Lady Chou Hakurei.”

“I-I’m not lyin—!” I cut myself off abruptly as Rus’s hand migrated to my neck, causing a shiver to shoot down my spine as she gently stroked it. Before I could react, she wrapped her arms around me in an embrace.

“Yes, from a tactical perspective, you are correct. If we were to

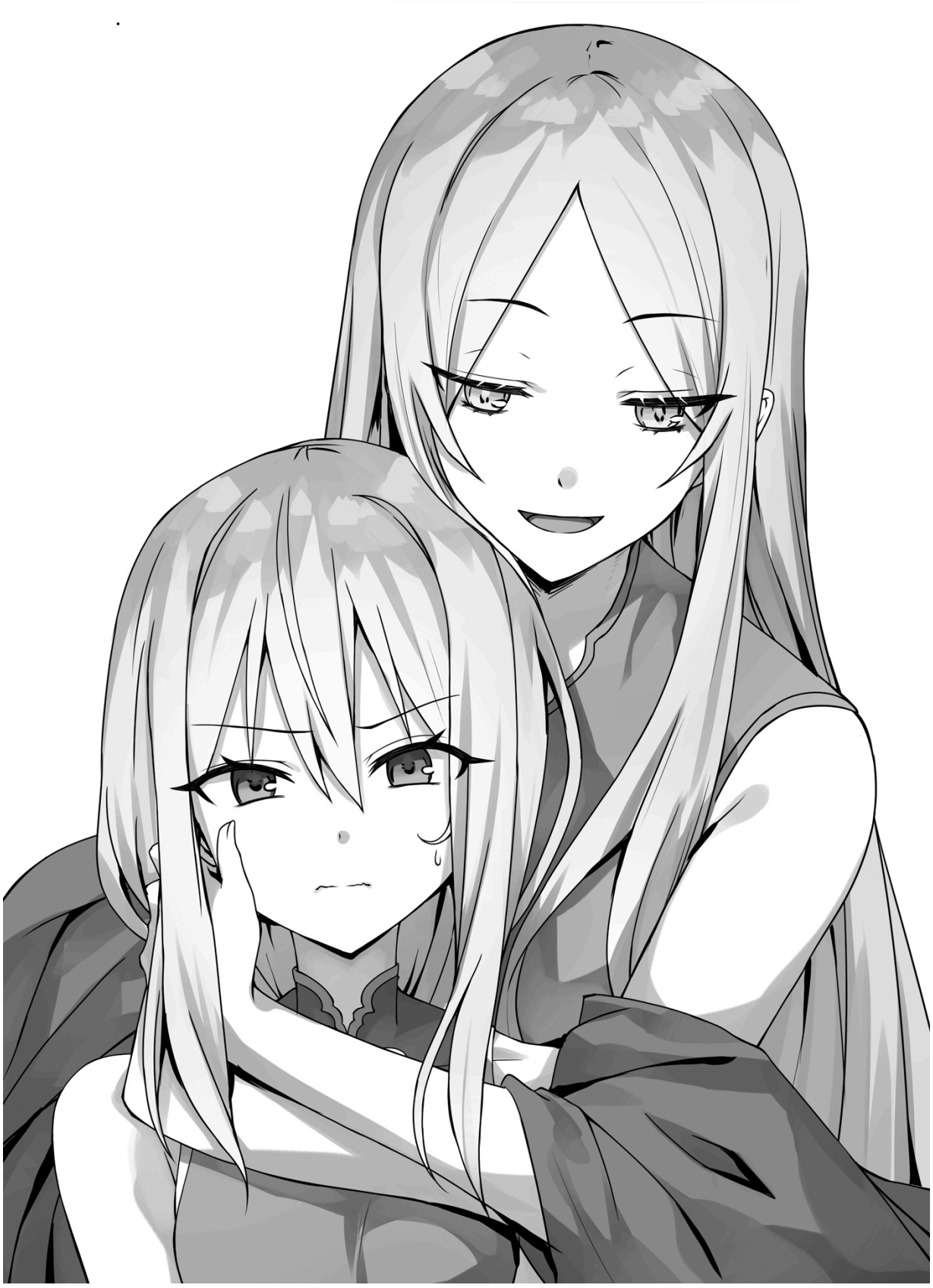
lose access to the Grand Canal, we wouldn't receive any more resources from Enkei. Everyone knows boats have a larger cargo capacity than horses or humans. Unfortunately, blinded by greed, my mother in Seitou has made her own move."

Fear seized my heart at the muted anger in Rus's tone, but my mind whirled at this new information she was giving me. Miss Ruri had ordered that brave young princess, Kou Miu, to circulate manifestos stamped with the Heirloom Seal in the northern provinces, yet someone had beaten us to the punch. I was now finding out that this "someone" was Rus's mother, the Honorable One, whose end goal was to revive mysticism that was last seen in the age of the gods. What was her game plan? Seitou and Gen were allied, after all.

Rus ran her slender fingers through my hair as she continued. "Your words make a lot of sense. However, in your heart of hearts, there's something you're absolutely *certain* of, isn't there?"

Was this some kind of magic? I couldn't even move a finger.

Rus leaned in closer and took advantage of my frozen state to whisper directly into my ear. "'Sekiei's *sure* to rescue me. He'll come. I know it.'"



My breath caught in my throat, and before I could even think about what I was doing, I shoved the White Wolf away from me. Once there was enough distance between us again, I hugged myself and trembled. *Sekiei, I... I...*

Satisfied by my frightened reaction, Rus patted the creases out of her nightgown and giggled. "As a fellow woman, I'm rather jealous of you. I'd love Emperor Adai to direct that much affection my way."

It took me a few moments to calm myself down, but I finally spat out, "Sekiei isn't coming!" *He absolutely mustn't! If Sekiei faces Adai and Rus, then...*

"Oh, he'll come, all right," Rus assured me. "No matter how perilous the battle that awaits him may be, he will still ride to your rescue. In fact, I *need* him to." Rus's beautiful expression twisted and the change was so sudden, I blinked at her in surprise. The sadistic glee that had lit up her face had gone, to be replaced by an ugly rage. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes and spat out, "Sekiei is the kind of man who can *totally* ignore trifling matters like the fate of his homeland and the unification of this continent, and instead prioritize the rescue of a single, inconsequential woman. He *has* to be, or else there would be no reason for Emperor Adai to care so much about him! From the bottom of my heart, I envy him." Rus sat back down again, her movements lacking the refined grace on display earlier. Popping a candy into her mouth, she closed her eyes and continued. "To be perfectly honest, I hate Lord Sekiei far more than I despise you, as you are nothing more than the bait to draw him in. Everyone in the Gen Empire loves Emperor Adai, and he boasts far more talent than the ancient hero, Ouei. So *why* is His Imperial Majesty so obsessed with a mere man? I just don't understand it."

"Um, so your affection for Adai is genuine?" I asked, my mind blanking.

Rus looked away as she fiddled with her bangs again. "Please keep that under your hat. I am the White Wolf, Emperor Adai's loyal servant. My job is to kill anyone who gets in His Imperial Majesty's way. Nothing more, nothing less."

I had never heard Rus speak so quickly before. She wasn't a very

good liar either.

Noticing I was still staring at her, Rus looked up and flashed me a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "If I'm allowed to be a little selfish, I really hope I don't have to kill you in battle."

"Likewise."

If we had been born in the same country, we likely could've become fast friends. However, the reality was that we were enemies. At least until the battle between Adai and Sekiei reached its conclusion.

"Lady Rus," came the stern voice of a female soldier from outside.

Rus huffed quietly, then stood up and called back, "I'm coming." Our conversation was at an end for the night. She went to leave the room, but turned back on reaching the door, her expression reminiscent of the White Wolf, the pride and joy of the Gen Empire. "You will soon have an audience with Emperor Adai. I hope you won't be foolish enough to attempt to escape before then. My soldiers are all strong, and while you may have wielded one of the Heavenly Swords, you won't survive a run-in with them."

I answered with silence. *Dying here is out of the question. I* must *survive.*

Rus closed her eyes, and in a calm voice, she reminded me, "Please stay here until Lord Sekiei arrives. Like I said earlier, you are very important to us. After all, you are the bait to lure in the Kouei of the Modern Ages."

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"That concludes my briefing on how we shall deal with the horsemen, Lord Jo Hiyou. Remember what Sir Denso said: 'The White Wraith is yet to notice the Jo army's advance, meaning you are the only ones who can save the Ei Empire!'" announced my savior's messenger, concluding his report with a courteous bow. The tree looming over him cast him in shadow, and the situation must have taken a turn for the worse, for his expression was far darker than the last time I saw him back in Nansui.

I—Jo Hiyou—brushed some dirt off my military uniform and gazed

down at the Jo base we had built on the southern outskirts of Ei's capital, Rinkei, from my vantage point on a nearby hill. Torches illuminated its tents, and since it just happened to be dinnertime, the soldiers were all taking turns eating. We had plenty of drinking water, so provisions and feed for the horses were our primary concerns.

Ten days had passed since we had come to this base at the behest of my savior, Denso, who had previously rescued me from the clutches of the old grand chancellor, You Bunshou, after he had usurped control of the imperial court. Denso was also the one who had provided me with the opportunity to execute the traitorous chancellor.

The palace hadn't sent me any official orders or requests for aid, nor had we received the essential supplies we needed, despite making the long journey here from the southern regions to save our homeland, its very existence threatened by the king of the northern horsemen—the White Wraith—and his army!

Something's wrong here. If we don't act soon... I rested my hand on the hilt of the sword hanging from my belt and addressed the man in the fox mask, who was starting to look impatient. "We will do what we can, but like I said before, our army lacks the necessary resources. I would like to meet with Sir Denso so that I might confirm the situation with him."

"I will do my best to convince him to meet with you," the man replied after a pause. "Well then. When next we meet, it shall be on the battlefield." And with that verbal promise made, the man turned and departed.

The haste with which he scurried away struck me as odd; he almost seemed deeply frightened. Even at this crucial juncture, the people in the palace were hiding something. *Don't tell me they've already carried out the grand scheme they outlined to me back in Nansui! Have they seriously gotten rid of that foolish emperor and his self-serving followers without even waiting for my arrival? And now, despite keeping me in the dark about everything, they want me to go fight the White Wraith and the main Gen force? Totally ridiculous! What is the marshal of the Imperial Guard, Ou Hokujaku,*

thinking? Without proper coordination with the forces at the water fortress, we stand no chance of winning. Does Sir Denso fail to understand just how intelligent the White Wraith, Adai Dada, emperor of the Gen Empire, is?

"Young master," an old white-haired man piped up, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. He was wearing a tattered cloak, and the sword hanging from his hip looked like it had been forged many years ago. He was one of the few survivors of the Seitou invasion, the battle where I'd lost my father, the Phoenix Wing, Jo Shuuhou. I'd asked the elderly soldier to scout out the city and figure out what was going on beyond its walls.

"How's Rinkei?" I asked curtly.

"It's terrible," the old man replied. "Every last man who was capable of moving has been conscripted and sent to the water fortress, which I can only presume was done with the ulterior motive of reducing the number of mouths to feed. Half the city has descended into lawlessness, and while the wealthy women, children, and seniors have already made their escape, the ones that couldn't..."

He trailed off, so I finished his sentence for him. "They've holed themselves up and are waiting for the danger to pass, huh?"

"Hiyou, if you're ever unsure what to do, protect the weak. That is the responsibility of the powerful." These words once spoken by my late father replayed in my mind. He had said them in an effort to teach me what it meant to be the heir of the Jo family.

Father, what should I do? I'd believed that Denso was my savior. No, the truth was, I'd *wanted* to believe it. But the conclusion I had come to on hearing this report and seeing how badly the war effort was going...

"Young master, I... I know I'm talking out of line, but I'd like to offer my opinion on the matter," the elderly soldier said, bending the knee.

I must have had a very troubled expression on my face to prompt him to say this. I sighed and closed my eyes. "Very well. Tell me what you think."

"Is it too late for us to return to Nansui?"

I gritted my teeth and rode out the stab of pain these words thrust into my heart. Jo Yuushun—whom I considered my brother despite not sharing the same blood—had worried about the logistics of this operation, yet I had brushed aside his concerns and marched my army here from the southern regions.

"While I might not have received a formal education as such," the soldier continued, "I've seen many a battle by Lord Shuuhou's side. Yet no matter how much I search through my memories, I can't recall ever seeing anything like the scene I glimpsed in Rinkei. The situation in the capital was..."

"Too terrible for words?" I suggested as he trailed off again.

The elderly soldier grimaced, then nodded weakly. "Resources such as food, medicine, and fuel aren't going to the people or the soldiers who are fighting on the front line. Instead, they're being sent to the Imperial Guard, the You and Rin families, and the major merchant families in their employment. The citizens are furious at the imperial palace for that, and I heard an odd rumor that Ou Hokujaku has imprisoned the emperor for ignoring the plight of his people in favor of spending all his time in the arms of his favorite concubine."

I knew it. Exactly why he'd done it didn't matter. Denso—the man I considered my savior—had conspired with Hokujaku to place the emperor under house arrest. Worse still, he had never even tried to excuse his actions to me. From the very beginning... *Wait, when did the trickery start? From the moment he sent that messenger in the fox mask to me? From the moment he freed me from the underground prison and placed a dagger in my hand to stab the grand chancellor with? Or was it even further back? Did he spread malicious lies about me through Rin Chuudou, back when he was a loyal servant of the emperor?*

This suspicion that Denso had been manipulating me from the very start—something I'd never even considered until this moment—flashed through my mind, and I bowed my head to the elderly soldier. "Thank you for your honesty. I'd like you to gather together all of the young soldiers in our army, plus veterans like yourself."

"Young master!" He must have guessed my intentions.

I smiled at my comrade. “Please,” I said. “And could you give me some time alone? I’d like to enjoy the breeze up on this hill for a little while.”

The elderly soldier left me alone on the hill, and various emotions—worry, unease, anger, self-disgust, resignation—came and went like waves. Ever since our arrival at this camp on the outskirts of Rinkei, I had done my best to glean as much information as I could on how the war was going, and after digesting all of it, I had reached a singular conclusion: We had no chance of winning. Or at the very least, due to my own lack of talent, I couldn’t see any way that we could defeat the Gen and Seitou armies. Back when I still believed Denso was an intellectual, I was sure he’d come up with some master stratagem that would never have occurred to me, but in light of this new information...

A presence behind me caught my attention, and I whirled around, my hand gripping the hilt of my sword. “Who’s there?”

“H-Hiyou! It’s me!” exclaimed a slender boy with pale red hair. I didn’t recognize the female attendant with chestnut-brown hair standing a few paces behind him, but that was hardly important at this particular moment.

I ran up to my brother and placed my hands on his narrow shoulders. “Yuushun?! Why are...” I was momentarily lost for words. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to deliver supplies! I figured you would be running low by now.”

“You’re such a...” Words failed me again as I stared into my brother’s beautiful face. He must have pushed himself to get here as quickly as he could, for he had dirt on his face and in his hair. Unable to contain myself any longer, I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed. “Thank you! I was just contemplating ordering the veterans and the younger soldiers back to Nansui. I’d like you to go with them and hurry back—”

“Wait, Hiyou! Please wait a moment!” yelled the normally soft-spoken Yuushun, interrupting me mid-sentence. He squirmed out of my embrace, straightened out his clothes, and produced a stack of papers that was bound together with a length of string. “There’s

something I absolutely *must* inform you about. Please look at this."

"What's all this?" I asked, nervously accepting the papers from him and spying "*In regards to the rat that sneaked into the palace"* in prominent letters on the top page. *Wait, is this about...*

My suspicions had quickly become indisputable even before Yuushun succinctly gave me the information I was after. "Denso—the man who wrote to you and got you to march your army to Rinkei in order to aid in his rebellion against His Imperial Majesty—is a Gen spy. There is no doubt about it."

"Wh-What are you..." I stammered. "What are you *saying*?" Despite anticipating it, the revelation still came as a shock, and I stumbled back a step. "Sir Denso, the man who saved me from the palace's underground prison, is a *spy*? How can you toss around such ridiculous accusations? Where is your proof?"

"If proof of his treachery is what you seek, you'll find it in the papers you are holding," called out an unfamiliar female voice. "Ou Meirin and Jo Yuushun found it in the imperial court's minutes after you'd left the southern regions, and wrote it all down in that report. The evidence is conclusive."

I looked over my shoulder and glared at the beautiful intruder: an elegant, black-haired woman with pearls dangling from her ears, wearing a black military uniform underneath a cloak.

"Who are you?" I asked. Although I didn't recognize her, I could tell from the way she carried herself that she was no ordinary citizen.

The beautiful woman grinned. "I am Saiun, Chou Tairan's sister. It's good to meet you, little Hiyou. Even though I have long since tired of the affairs that plague this world, I have taken on this final job for my adorable niece and nephew."

I stared at her, mouth agape. "So you're..." Everyone knew of Chou Saiun. Not only was she Chou Tairan's sister-in-law, but she was also the formidable woman in charge of the Chou family's internal affairs!

While I was busy staring in amazement at who was standing before me, Yuushun flipped through the report he had handed to me and pointed to a page near the back. "Here, Hiyou! Read this!"

Fighting the urge to avert my gaze, I looked down at what Yuushun was trying to show me. On the page were excerpts of Denso's history, which showed how he had only ever worked for major Ei vassals, while hiding evidence of his prior employers every time he switched to someone new. *I see now. He avoided becoming an official and maintained his position as a regular attendant so that the recorders would never write his name in their minutes. I knew he worked for that fool of a lieutenant chancellor, Rin Chuudou, before working for Ou Hokujaku, but I never guessed the one who had suggested the Seitou invasion would be...*

A hollow chuckle spilled from my lips as I dropped to my knees. *So the one who suggested the foolish invasion that killed my father and so many of our soldiers was the man I thought was my savior?!* I pounded the ground with my fists and yelled, "I was such an *idiot*! How can I ever bear to face my father and all those who perished at Seitou in the afterlife?!"

Tears streamed from my eyes and stained the ground. All of my strength left my body, and I doubted whether I could ever stand again. A shadow appeared above me and my brother reached down to take my hands in his.

"Hiyou, order a retreat," he begged me. "Unfortunately, the Ei Empire will..."

The Jo family doesn't need me anymore. It has my brother, Jo Yuushun, who possesses far more wisdom, bravery, and talent. Feeling like a weight had been lifted from my chest, I got to my feet. "No, I can't do that."

"Hiyou?!" Yuushun leaned forwards, surprised by my answer.

I took a handkerchief from my pocket and used it to wipe off some of the dirt that was still clinging to his face. At long last, I had steeled my resolve. "Right now, I'm the interim head of the Jo family, which, alongside the Chou and U families, has protected Ei and its people for the past fifty years," I said. *That's right. There's no need to overcomplicate things. The enemy army is nearing the capital, but not all of its citizens have been able to flee in time. As the son of Jo Shuuhou, I have to save them, which means...* "The fate of the Ei Empire rests on this upcoming battle. How can the Jo

family sit it out?”

“B-But—”

“There’s no need to go rushing to your death. The battle for the empire is still some way off,” said Lady Saiun, who had been silently listening to us brothers converse.

I couldn’t understand her bizarre statement, for the Gen army had already made it past all of the Ei outposts surrounding the water fortress. “Lady Saiun, what do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m talking about how only a handful of generals capable of standing up to the White Wraith remain in this world,” she replied.

I blinked at her in confusion before my mind finally realized what it was she was trying to tell me. “Ah, I see. In that case, you are correct that it’s not yet time for the final battle.” I nodded and plucked a leaf from my brother’s hair.

Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei, the wielders of the legendary Heavenly Swords, were still alive. They had saved my life during the Seitou invasion, and I had yet to repay them for the huge debt I owed.

“Order the veterans who returned from Ranyou to pick out a few soldiers,” Lady Saiun commanded, her expression suddenly growing stern. “The capital doesn’t have the resources to provide supplies to a ten-thousand-strong army—not unless they decide to pillage their own citizens. The rat in the palace hasn’t realized this, it seems.”

Yuushun and I fell silent. Even though we had gathered a massive force, our army would be severely weakened if we didn’t find a way to feed the soldiers. Was this the first time Denso had fought a real war? Lady Saiun produced a document from her inner pocket and showed it to me. *W-Wait, this is...*

“I’ll explain the plan,” she said. “It’s admittedly reckless, but not impossible to pull off. If you can accept that, then hurry to the water fortress. There’s only a limited time left in which we’ll be able to speak with Gan Retsurai in person. While you’re off doing that, I’ll sneak into the capital and negotiate for the necessary supplies with Ou Meirin’s father, the great merchant, Ou Jin. He might have disowned her, but I doubt he’d rip up and toss away a letter penned by his precious daughter.”

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I slammed my fist down on the desk in front of me and the resulting sound echoed around the military base we had set up within the water fortress. Cowed by the fury radiating from me, the messenger from the palace—a young Imperial Guard officer dressed in clean finery—paled and shuddered. The arrogance that had been on display when he'd ordered me to clear the room earlier was nowhere to be seen.

I—Gan Retsurai, the officer in charge of the water fortress that protected the capital of Rinkei—glared at the Imperial Guard soldier. "You..." I uttered. "Do you truly understand the gravity of what you just said?"

The Gen army must have been launching boulders and similar projectiles at the fortress with its Seitou-made catapults, because despite being in the middle of a swamp, the ground beneath us was shaking at regular intervals. After destroying all of the outposts we had built around this water fortress, the main Gen force was finally marching on this last stronghold.

I tapped the cracked wood of my desk to draw the messenger's attention back to me as I repeated his report back to him. "'We have come up with a plan to attack the enemy's headquarters, but we cannot divulge the details to you. You and your army must protect the water fortress at all costs, or die trying. We can spare some volunteers if you need reinforcements, but we cannot give you any provisions. The emperor has already agreed to all the above.'" *What is the marshal of the Imperial Guard, Ou Hokujaku, thinking?!* I glared at the messenger and roared, "I've had enough of his incompetence! Does he really believe we can emerge victorious against the White Wraith and the main Gen army under these conditions?!"

The messenger let out a strangled squeal, then collapsed to the floor. His faintheartedness suggested he had never experienced true combat before.

I fixed him with a sharp look and spat, "The sheer *audacity* to refuse us food! Do the marshal and the chancellors in the palace not

realize that increasing the number of soldiers will lead to a decrease in resources?"

"I-If I may..." the messenger began, shakily getting to his feet, his expression twisted into one of humiliation. *Humph! Good. He's finally gotten some dirt on that uniform of his.* "The great Ouei of the past once wrote that an army's strength is reflected by the number of soldiers it has," he continued but I let him go no further.

"Fool!" That one word silenced him instantly, and I began pacing around the room. As embarrassing as it was to admit as a man past the age of fifty, it was the only way I could quell the rage that was bubbling inside me. "Most of the volunteer soldiers have never wielded a sword or a spear! Not even once! Every time anything fired from a catapult lands in their vicinity, their first reaction is to try to flee! And as if that weren't enough, some of them aren't even of age! Yet despite this, they want me to lead brats like them into battle against the fearsome horsemen of the north? Have the whole Imperial Guard lost their damn *minds*?!" A sense of deep despair settled over my heart. *At this rate, my homeland... My dear homeland will... What will happen to the Ei Empire that Lord Chou Tairan and old Raigen protected for all these years?!* I paused in my internal lamenting and heaved a sigh. "Go take a message back to Lord Hokujaku and his strategist named Denso." Over the preceding few days, contact between ourselves and the imperial palace had slowed, but while I feared something terrible had happened there, I wasn't blessed with the time or means to investigate. "Tell them that if the emperor continues with his refusal to come to the front line, only the heavens know if we can win this war against Gen. I also hope you and your soldiers will fight until your dying breaths. Now, return to your masters."

"Y-Yessir!" The messenger had been staring at me with his mouth agape, but on receiving this very clear instruction, he nodded with palpable relief writ large across his face, then scampered out of the room.

Feeling exhausted, I slumped down into my chair, the wooden bracelet on my arm clattering as I did so. I gazed blankly into the flame of a nearby candle and shuddered. *The final gasp of the Ei*

Empire, huh? To think that a soldier as ordinary as me would live to witness it. My son, Shigou, had grown weary of the officials due to their greed and the scorn they poured on the military. Perhaps his decision to desert the empire had been the correct one after all. I didn't even know if he was alive or not. He might have died like a dog in some remote land. Though even if he had, at the very least, he was spared from having to go through this pain.

"Lord Tairan, Sir Raigen, please forgive me! I'm not strong enough to save our nation!" I clutched the dagger they had given me on my departure from Keiyou and gritted my teeth. *Now that it has come to this, I should die as a proud—albeit former—member of the Chou army.* But before I could move, I sensed a presence just outside my room. *That's odd. I ordered everyone to give me some privacy.* "Who's there?" I called out.

The door opened and a young man wearing a cloak strode in. Although I didn't recognize him, he seemed familiar somehow. Despite the obvious weariness in his expression, his eyes were gleaming, and he bowed his head to me.

"I apologize for disturbing you," he said. "I hear this is the general's room?"

"Who are you?" I said warily as I stood up. Unlike the Imperial Guard messenger, this man had clearly experienced battle before and wasn't unused to the sights and sounds of death.

His expression softened slightly. "General Gan Retsurai, I am honored to make your acquaintance. I am Hiyou, the only son of Jo Shuuhou. I have come to discuss an urgent matter with you."

"You're Lord Shuuhou's son? Ah, I see how it is!" I took a step forwards with my hand grasped tightly around the hilt of my sword, ready to draw it at a moment's notice. Ignoring Hiyou's confusion, I growled, "So killing the grand chancellor wasn't enough for you, huh? You've decided to come and assassinate me, the general in charge of the water fortress as well? Who put you up to this? Was it Ou Hokujaku? Or was it Rin Koudou, who is every bit as cunning and wily as his hideous brother? Did the White Wraith promise you glory if you sell out your country and bring him my head as tribute? I'm willing to bet you had a hand in the deaths of the Three Great

Generals too. How much dishonor will you heap upon the Phoenix Wing name before you're satisfied?!"

I was expecting Jo Hiyou to attack me as soon as I finished talking, but he merely stared at me wide-eyed for a few moments before breaking out into a self-deprecating smirk. He then drew his sword and his dagger from his belt and tossed them to the ground with a clatter.

My brow furrowed in the silence that followed. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm not here to kill you," Hiyou said, looking down at the floor. Seeing him like that reminded me just how young he was—he wasn't even twenty yet. His shoulders shaking, he continued. "I simply wish to speak with you, and discuss the one way in which we can save our dying country. It pains me to admit it, but all this time, I have been dancing to the enemy's tune. I put my faith in Denso, who had once served Rin Chuudou and who now works for Ou Hokujaku, even though he is actually a Gen spy. I make no excuses for the crimes I have committed, but I do plan to atone for them in time."

I didn't respond to his admission right away, although I did relax my stance and remove my hand from my sword. I picked up his sword and dagger, handed them both back to Jo Hiyou, then settled back down in my chair. "Start talking,"

"Thank you for hearing me out."

Once Jo Hiyou had finished outlining his plan, as well as filled me in on the situation in the northwest and western regions (communication with those areas had been cut off long ago), I could only stare at him in shock. "I can't believe it! The U family succeeded in defending Youkaku, *and* the Chou army took back Keiyou?"

Who could have believed that such a miracle was possible? It was as if the Kouei spoken about in ancient times had returned.

Jo Hiyou smiled and nodded. "I was just as surprised as you. However, I've had it confirmed by Lady Chou Saiun, who had retreated to Nansui, so I'm sure it's the truth."

"Lady Saiun?" I hadn't heard that name in a long time, and the sense of nostalgia I got from hearing it again warmed my heart. *So*

that formidable lady survived!

Jo Hiyou's gaze wavered slightly, and a hint of envy flashed in his eyes. "The White Wraith, Adai Dada, emperor of the Gen Empire, is a monster not even the late National Shield, Chou Tairan, could defeat. The only ones alive in this world who stand a chance against him are the wielders of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars."

"You mean Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei, Chou Tairan's children who inherited his spirit?" I asked. Just thinking about the pair lit a fire within me that burned away my despair. *Yes, Retsurai, remember what you learned while serving under Lord Chou Tairan and Sir Raigen! It is now time to repay your debt to them!* I slammed my fist against my breastplate and my eyes met Hiyou's. "I understand! I will pick out some soldiers for the task and prepare the military ships I hid away in case there was a need to evacuate the emperor."

"Thank you. We're still investigating what the situation is inside the palace. We'll keep you informed of our findings. Now, if you'll excuse me."

The young fledgling of the Jo family—who had committed the grave sin of murdering You Bunshou, the cornerstone of the empire—flashed me the first sincere smile I'd seen from him all day before he promptly turned and departed from the base. Using my sword as a cane, I got up from my chair. *I need to hurry. There's not much time left.* My legs had been growing heavier and heavier with age, but in this moment, they felt as light as a feather, and I hurried out of my room, the bracelet Shigou had made for me in his youth shaken out of its usual resting place on my wrist.

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"Okay, are we all here? Let's go over the situation one more time. I'm sure you all know the basics by now, but it never hurts to have multiple briefings to really hammer it home. And remember those words! Our wise and intelligent strategist was the first to say that. So pay attention!" intoned Sekiei. He had entered his office in the Chou manor with a paper bag in his hand, sat down in his chair, and

raised both hands into the air in a theatrical manner.

I—Kou Miu—was no longer getting the odd feeling I'd sensed from him a few days earlier, and he was acting like his normal self again. Ruri had told me that he'd settled down for the time being, but... Teiha, the vice-commander, and the commanding officers, Shigou and Kouzen, flashed small smiles at one another while Asaka prepared tea for everyone.

"Here you are, Lady Miu," she said when she was done.

"Ah, thank you!" I replied, accepting the cup from her.

By the time Asaka had offered me tea, Ruri had already finished placing all the pawns and pieces on the map that was spread out across the table, and was glaring down at the whole setup. Under her blue hat, her blonde hair swayed like silk with every movement she made.

"What's this? If you like, I can explain everything in your stead," she teased. "And here I was thinking the Lord Kouei of the Modern Ages enjoyed these kinds of tasks, what with him once aspiring to be a civil official and all."

"Don't call me by that *ridiculous* nickname. And don't make it sound like I no longer want to work as a civil official!" Sekiei cried out. "Just so you know, I still haven't given up on that particular dream. Once it all settles down, I plan on retiring to some small province somewhere and living out a peaceful life as—"

"Lord Sekiei," Teiha sighed.

"Boss, that joke just ain't funny anymore," Shigou added.

"You're free to have your own hopes and dreams, of course, but..." Kouzen trailed off.

The three of them gave Sekiei matching looks that were a mix of pity and exasperation. Ruri made no comment on the matter, instead contenting herself to walk up to Sekiei and snatch a steamed bun from his paper bag.

Yui the black cat sidled up to Sekiei, who picked the little fur ball up with a grimace on his face. "You guys..." he growled.

Wait, I can't let the meeting continue just yet. "E-Excuse me!" I piped up, drawing everyone's attention towards me. "Um, I apologize for interrupting, but I'd like to ask something before we

start," I said hesitantly, twiddling my fingers.

Sekiei was the first to respond. "Hmm? What is it, Miu? Oh, I know! You forgot to grab a snack, didn't you? Fine, you can have one of my buns. They're delicious!" He walked over to me with the paper bag in his hand and placed a bun on the small plate in front of me.

"Yay! ♪ Thank you *so*— Wait, that's not the issue! Please don't change the subject like that!" Receiving the snack had made me so happy, I'd almost forgotten what I wanted to say. Luckily, I'd returned to my senses just in time, and with my face contorted into a pout, I aired my grievance. "I-I'd understand it if we were in front of a crowd, but why exactly am I sitting at the head of the table here as well? I-It makes me very uncomfortable."

Yes, I was currently sitting at the head of the table. Since Hakurei wasn't here, I'd figured Sekiei would be sitting in this spot, but...

Sekiei handed Asaka the paper bag and said, "Well, you *could* say there are lots of reasons why you're there. But you could *also* say there's no reason at all for it."

"N-No *reason*?!" Then, why was I being forced to put up with this discomfort? If Mei—who was still in Youkaku—were to hear about this, she would have a fit.

Sekiei gave me a gentle pat on the head and shrugged. "Just think of it as practice for the future. You'd better start getting used to it!"

"Um, all right." Although this answer wasn't very convincing, I figured I wasn't going to be able to extract the *actual* reason from him, so despite being conflicted about my present spot, I dropped my complaint. I bit into the bun and its sweetness soothed my anger a little. *This is delicious!*

Ruri tapped her pointing-stick on the part of the map displaying the northwestern regions. "Is everyone ready? Take a good look at the map." When she saw all of our eyes fixed on it, she continued. "Right now, we're in Keiyou. Thanks to our previous victory, we've reclaimed the entirety of Koshuu, which means we can communicate with the U family again. Granted, our messengers will have to go through Kozan to do so."

In all honesty, I never wanted to see a live tiger ever again. Not unless Sekiei was with me, naturally. I glanced over at him and saw him munching away at his own bun. He looked like an ordinary young man whenever he acted like this.

Ruri moved the stick to point to the regions west and southwest of Keiyou. "According to our scouts, the Seitou soldiers who were stationed in neighboring Anshuu have retreated back to their own country, which means Anshuu is without a governor right now. We don't know if something happened in Seitou, or if there was another reason entirely for them leaving. For days now, we've received letters from village chiefs and city mayors begging the Chou army for protection."

Everyone in the room seemed lost in thought at this news. Ruri had told us that the Honorable One—a witch who controlled Seitou from the shadows—had been the one spreading manifestos stamped with a forgery of the Heirloom Seal around the northern regions. Had something happened to her?

With caution evident in her bright, emerald eyes, Ruri continued her spiel. "Meanwhile, the Seitou army led by the Millenary Diviner, Hasho, has retreated to the outskirts of Koshuu, and hasn't moved from that location. The army doesn't seem at all confused by the movements of the other soldiers either."

"Soldiers fighting away from home prefer to follow a general they trust, rather than obeying faceless elites. They must have placed all their trust in their strategist, who has been keeping them alive this whole time. Though there's always a chance that someone has *ordered* them to lie low," Sekiei added after finishing his bag of steamed buns. Teiha and the other veteran soldiers were nodding along while Sekiei was speaking, so his supplementary explanation was probably correct.

"Next, let's take a look at the western regions," Ruri said, bringing us all back to the topic at hand. She smiled with glee as she took a letter from her pocket and slid it across the table to Sekiei. "This arrived from U Hakubun this morning. According to him, the enemy army has learned their lesson from the previous battle and aren't pushing to attack this time, instead choosing to stay at Youkaku and

keep the main U forces there. He plans to send Oto and her soldiers to us as reinforcements."

Sekiei drained the last of the tea from his cup and blinked. Although Oto was the princess of the U family, she had fought in numerous battles by this point—including the failed attack on Seitou—and had been awarded many merits for her efforts. At present, she was in Youkaku, protecting the city with the rest of the U soldiers.

"So they're going to send Oto and the others through Kozan?" Sekiei asked, sounding surprised at this suggestion.

"Yup, and they're bringing plenty of rock salt with them."

Something I had learned while traversing the perilous Kozan region was that wild tigers loved salt. Still, I sincerely hoped I would never have to rely on my knowledge of this particular tidbit of trivia in the future.

While Asaka poured more tea into his cup, Sekiei blinked and said in an exasperated voice, "She's every bit as reckless as I remember. I'm more surprised that Hakubun actually gave her permission to take that route."

"Hakubun wrote, 'If any tigers try to impede their progress, they simply have to act like a certain Chou Sekiei.' Isn't that right, cat whisperer?"

"Ah." Teiha, Shigou, and I nodded and smiled at this in spite of ourselves. We had seen with our own eyes how Sekiei had used words and rock salt to ward off a tiger in the mountains. News of this feat had seemingly reached Hakubun's ears as well.

Sekiei looked around the room awkwardly. "Uh, well, technically, it was a *tiger*, not a cat—"

"All right, this is the final part of the briefing. Let's talk about the situation in the capital," Ruri said, cutting off Sekiei mid-excuse and tapping her stick on Rinkei on the map. The look in her eyes was as cold as ice. "Long story short, Rinkei is doomed."

The atmosphere in the room instantly grew heavy. Everyone was well aware of Rinkei's fate, but hearing it said aloud was still...

"According to the merchants and citizens who have fled to Keiyou, the Gen army has destroyed all of the smaller water fortresses that

were serving as outposts, and they're seemingly well prepared for an invasion, because they're using catapults to fire projectiles at the great water fortress, which is the only fortification still standing." Despite the grim mood in the room, Ruri didn't let it ruin her flow. I couldn't believe how quickly Gen had made it through the outposts. Tapping the western side of Rinkei, she added, "The soldiers presently inside the water fortress are General Gan Retsurai and his garrison, plus two hundred thousand volunteers the capital has apparently cast out. Although they far outnumber the main Gen force, they don't have nearly enough resources for an army of that size. I hear there are desertions day and night, and save for a few units who are keeping their spirits up, morale is dangerously low."

"Dad..." Shigou murmured.

Despite how quietly he had said it, I'd heard him clearly. *So the rumors about him being General Gan Retsurai's son are true.*

Kouzen, who had shown great courage in our previous battle, twiddled his long mustache. "What of the Imperial Guard?" he asked Ruri. "Though I can imagine what situation they're in without even needing to ask."

"They're seemingly still standing, but their commanding officer has holed himself up inside the palace and we have no idea where the emperor is."

I clutched my protective charm to my chest to fight off the ache in my heart. I was sure my brother would be desperately averting his eyes from the painful reality of the situation he found himself in. Even though there remained a possibility that he might still save his homeland, he had chosen to abandon this important task.

Ruri tossed her pointing-stick down on the table and settled into the chair next to Sekiei without any hesitation, as if it were the natural spot for her to be. "Apparently, the situation in the capital is hellish. Many of the major merchants have already contacted the White Wraith in secret, and Gen basically has Rinkei in checkmate."

"We cut off their supply route from Keiyou, but they can still access the northern logistics station via Shiryuu. If the capital could just hold on for a few more years, we'd be able to fight off the Gen Empire, but I doubt they can last. Rinkei's an agglomeration,

meaning it can't sustain farmlands. Under normal circumstances, we would secretly keep in contact with the U family and strengthen our defenses. That would be the usual tactic to take in this situation." Sekiei crossed his hands behind his head, looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "But as you all know, the White Wraith has abducted our princess. He's clearly willing to pull out all the stops to come face-to-face with me."

Yes, that was our biggest concern. Everyone remained silent, unable to find the right words. *"I'll be waiting for you in the capital."* With just that one sentence, the White Wraith of Gen had greatly limited our options.

Sekiei ran his fingers over Hakurei's White Star, which he had set leaning against a chair. "In all honesty, I wanted to go and deal with it myself. But our terrifying little strategist here caught me absconding and lectured me at length."

"Hmm? Don't you mean your *kind* and *beautiful* strategist?" Ruri raised an eyebrow as black petals manifested around her then disappeared again in response to her emotional reaction to Sekiei's words.

"Well, anyway..." Sekiei said, holding his hands up in surrender as he got to his feet. "I'm sorry to ask this of you all, but I'm gonna need your help. I must rescue Hakurei." He bowed his head to us deeply.

Teiha and the others looked at each other, then grinned and jumped to their feet in unison, slamming their fists against their breastplates in a salute.

"Yessir!" Teiha exclaimed.

"I've helped you this much already. Might as well see it through to the end," Shigou added.

"I've already entrusted my life to you, Lord Sekiei," Kouzen said.

Sekiei nodded and smiled. "Thank you all." He turned to face me. "Miu, I want you to stay in Kei—"

"No!" The word escaped my mouth before my mind even engaged.

"Now, listen," Sekiei said. "This time, it's gonna be really—"

"I absolutely refuse!" I yelled again. My grip on the protective

charm containing the black key tightened and I looked down at my feet. “I won’t be of much help if there’s combat, but...” I raised my head again and met Sekiei’s eyes. “I understand that the coming battle will be the final one—the one that decides the fate of both Ei and Gen. If someone bearing the Kou name isn’t there to witness it, future historians will laugh at our cowardice. So don’t worry about me! I’ll stay behind in the base when the real fighting starts!”

If I were to think about it calmly, I would have realized how pathetic that sounded. But they were my honest thoughts on the matter. I understood the danger, and knew I could die, but I still wanted to be at that final battlefield!

Sekiei’s brow furrowed, and after a long silence, he sighed again. “Seriously, what am I gonna do with you, Your Imperial Highness? Asaka, you’ll have to look after her.”

“Of course. Leave her with me,” replied Hakurei’s attendant, who had been observing us from the back of the room. She saluted to show that she had it all in hand, but I already knew I could trust her with my safety.

Still wearing a stern expression, Sekiei looked over at the young officers in front of him who were brimming with energy and motivation. “Teiha, I want you to stay in Keiyou.”

“L-Lord Sekiei?!” he protested. “That’s the most preposterous order I’ve ever heard you give!”

Teiha must not have been expecting to find himself sitting out the last battle, as he looked terribly agitated by the mere suggestion of it. But Sekiei refused to change his mind.

“We need someone to cut off Gen’s access to the Grand Canal and prevent them from forcing their way through if it comes to it, while also monitoring the situation in Anshuu and maintaining communication with the U family. Not to mention, we need someone here who can accept any refugees coming from Rinkei.” With every reason he gave, Sekiei raised a finger. He walked over to Teiha and gave him a firm pat on the shoulder. “You’re the only one who can do all of that. Can I trust you with it?”

“Lord Sekiei...” Teiha mumbled, before nodding and saying, “Understood,” thick tears rolling down his cheeks.

Ruri picked up Yui and started giving out orders in a firm tone. "We'll move out after Oto and her soldiers get here. Until then, I want everyone to rest up. That's all for now. We *will* win this final confrontation with the White Wraith, Adai Dada, and rescue Hakurei!"

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"Please hurry, Lady Miu. Everyone's waiting in the lobby. There's not much time until we depart," a voice called from the hallway of the Chou manor, making me jump.

"M-My apologies, Asaka!" I—Kou Miu—stammered, tearing my eyes away from the mirror I had been gazing at in order to tidy up my hair and picking up the cloth bag that contained the box with the Heirloom Seal inside from a nearby chair.

The black key was quite safe inside the protective charm that dangled from my neck, but the box itself was another story. I *had* considered leaving it here rather than taking it with me to the battlefield, but this was the final confrontation... Anyway, it felt like a waste of time worrying so much about the symbol of the Kou family's authority, especially since Sekiei had told me I could do whatever I wanted.

I walked out into the hallway, which was gleaming in the morning sun, and met the light-armor-clad Asaka there. She flashed me a tender smile. "I shall inform everyone that you are ready now," she said before hurrying away, her back straight and her posture proud.

A week had passed since the meeting that had firmly outlined the present situation between Ei and Gen. Three days ago, Oto—the princess of the U family—and her reinforcements had made the long, perilous journey through the mountains of Kozan, home to tigers, before eventually arriving in Keiyou. On this day, we would be marching into battle, and except for Teiha—who was staying behind—and the personnel who had been stationed in the various regions of Koshuu, all of the teams had finished up their preparations and were waiting to depart at the outskirts of the city.

My grip on my protective charm tightened. Our enemy was the

terrifying White Wraith and our chances of winning didn't look so great, but I had made my decision. I would bear witness to the fight brought by Sekiei, Ruri, and the rest of the Chou army! If I had chosen to remain in Rinkei, I never would have gotten to experience this kind of emotion. I only wished I had Mei by my side.

While I was busy thinking about my best friend, who was engaged in a fight of her own as my body double, I saw someone approaching us from the end of the hall. "Hmm? Isn't that..."

The person was wearing the ethnic garb of the western regions and had a red cloth in her short dark brown hair. She was also carrying a tool known as a shovel on her back. I immediately recognized her as Oto, the princess of the U family. Since I hadn't seen her during breakfast, I'd assumed she'd already made her way to the gathering point on the outskirts of town. She appeared to be searching for someone, as she was peering into rooms and tilting her head to one side with a worried look on her face.

"Oto!" I called out, running up to her.

"Good morning, Lady Miu," the U princess greeted when she noticed me.

"Good morning!" I replied with great enthusiasm.

Oto smiled at me, but it only lasted for a heartbeat before her eyes started darting around the hallway once more. I followed her lead and looked around too, but I couldn't see anyone else around. I'd been told that most of the people who were still in the manor were running about and preparing to depart on Teiha's orders or they were at their guard stations.

Gazing up at the dark expression on Oto's face, I nervously asked her, "Are you looking for someone?"

"No..." She hesitated. "Well, actually, Lord Sekiei hasn't arrived at the meeting point yet, and I'm worried about him."

"Sekiei isn't there yet?"

"Nope."

Oto idly twisted a curl of her dark brown locks around her finger and kicked an errant pebble, as if to let out her irritation. When I'd first seen her back in the western regions, I had believed she was an experienced general despite her youth, but seeing her like this

reminded me that she was still only around my age.

"Last night, he said he'd go directly to the meeting point after breakfast, and that he wanted to hear all about our arduous journey through Kozan before we set out for Rinkei," Oto continued. "So after finishing my own breakfast, I went there and waited for him, but he still hasn't shown up. I'm fairly sure I've searched every room in this manor already, but have you seen him?"

"I-I haven't," I admitted. "I've been too busy with my own preparations to keep tabs on anything else. But I believe he was in the manor up until a short while ago, because while I didn't actually *see* him at breakfast, I did hear Ruri scolding him."

The coming battle was no ordinary one. It would be the final confrontation that would decide whether Ei or Gen emerged victorious from this protracted war. News of it must have also reached the ears of the people, for it wasn't just the air inside the Chou manor that was an odd mix of tension and excitement; that mood had spilled out across the whole city. Sekiei, on the other hand, remained the same as always, messing with me and Kuuen, losing to Ruri at chess, getting his revenge on her in tea-tasting contests and double six, and napping with Yui the black cat curled up next to him. And when Oto and the other soldiers had arrived from the western regions, he had appeared genuinely happy to see them. So him breaking the promise he had made to Oto felt very out of character.

Oto must have been thinking the same thing, as the two of us folded our arms and hummed in unison, deep in contemplation. Where could Sekiei have gone? Just as I was wondering if we'd somehow just missed him, I heard light footsteps approaching.

"Are you two still jibber-jabbering around here? Go on, get to the meeting point, or else we'll leave you in Keiyou. Oto, you of *all* people should be packed up by now! You only just got here!" a familiar voice called over to us.

We turned to see our strategist and self-professed ascendant, Ruri, who was wearing her usual blue robes with matching hat, and had her beautiful blonde hair tied into a ponytail. She had an exasperated look on her face and a hand on her cocked hip.

It's as if she's been heaven-sent! "Ruri!" I exclaimed at exactly the same moment that Oto said, "Lady Ruri!"

"Wh-What is it?" Ruri stammered, taking a small step back at the loudness of our voices. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

I rushed up to her and asked, "Have you seen Sekiei?"

"He should still be in the manor," added Oto, likewise hurrying up to Ruri.

"You're looking for Sekiei?" Ruri's emerald-green eyes that were always beautiful, no matter the situation, narrowed, and she tapped her chin. "That's odd. Oto and I woke him up this morning, and I made *sure* he got himself ready for the upcoming sortie so that he wouldn't run late."

"Huh?!" I cried, shocked by this nugget of information that Ruri had dropped so casually.

"L-Lady Ruri!" Oto exclaimed, flustered.

So the two of them went and woke up Sekiei? Together? I don't like that one bit! That feels like they're freezing me out! I pouted and glared at Oto. "I thought you went to the gathering point yesterday," I muttered.

The princess of the U family flinched and twiddled her fingers, her eyes darting around the hallway, unsure where to look. "Uh, well..."

Ever since she arrived at Keiyou and reunited with Sekiei, I'd found her behavior strange compared to how she had been back in the western regions, and a nagging suspicion that had been festering at the back of my mind rapidly solidified into a certainty. I didn't quite know how to put my suspicion into words yet, but whatever the case, Oto had changed!

The look I was treating Oto to was becoming no less unimpressed, so she hurriedly tried to explain herself. "L-Lady Hakurei isn't around, so I had no other choice but to help out Lady Ruri! Yes, that's it! I had no choice! I'm simply acting as a stand-in for Lady Hakurei, and I don't mean anything else by it. I-I'm telling the truth!"

"I-I see..." I couldn't immediately call her out, since Hakurei *did* spend her nights and mornings with Sekiei, but Oto had yet to fully

convince me of her intentions.

Ruri flashed Oto a mischievous smirk. “You say that, but you were a whole lot nicer to him than you needed to be. Did U Hakubun put you up to that?”

Oto looked at Ruri agape for a moment, embarrassment writ large on her face, before she eventually managed to stammer, “N-No! He, um, h-he didn’t...”

Oh dear. I’m having so much fun right now!

Although I was up for teasing Oto some more, Ruri simply shrugged her narrow shoulders and resumed walking down the hallway. “All right, I’ll save my fun for later. But let me warn you: It won’t be easy convincing Hakurei. Meirin’s a real piece of work too, so you should steel yourself in advance for when you inevitably lock horns. If you’re really serious about him, you’ll have your work cut out.”

“L-Lady Ruri!” whined Oto—who had bravely fought her way across countless battlefields in the past—as she hugged the short blonde strategist from behind.

U-Uh, what was that about? I stared after them, thoroughly confused, when all of a sudden, we caught sight of a black shadow slinking down the hallway ahead of us. I recognized the shadow as the black cat, Yui.

With Oto still hanging off her, Ruri turned back and called out, “Looks like he’s over this way. Let’s go.”

At the end of the Chou manor’s long main hallway stood a courtyard with trees in it, and we hurried across it after Yui so that we wouldn’t lose sight of its black tail as it weaved in and out of the trunks. We soon reached a clearing that seemed to sprout up from nowhere, and a building which wasn’t the Chou manor stood in the middle of it. Its thick pillars and roof were simple and plain, but I could tell at a glance that artisans had used high-quality materials to construct both. The three of us stood at the entrance while Yui slipped inside.

“This is...” Oto whispered.

“A mausoleum?” I breathed, finishing the thought.

Ruri said nothing, but her silence answered the question. This

was a holy place where families laid their ancestors to rest and worshipped them. Still, I couldn't recall a time when Sekiei had ever visited this place, nor even told us about it.

"Let's go," Ruri said, setting off into the mausoleum.

Although Oto and I hesitated momentarily, we both followed her inside, and found a young man with black hair sitting in front of a tomb, hugging his knee to his chest. He radiated a kind of ephemeral impression, as if he were somewhere far away, and before him was the chipped Green Dragon Crescent Blade, the tip of it slotted into a stand.

"Sekiei—" I began, but Oto placed her hand over my mouth to shush me.

Ruri had removed her blue hat and was holding it to her chest. "This mausoleum houses Lord Chou Tairan's tomb," she murmured. "I hear Adai was the one who ordered its construction."

Oto and I blinked in surprise at this. Now that she mentioned it, I *had* heard a rumor that when Gen occupied Keiyou for a short while, its emperor had treated the Chou manor with the utmost respect due to holding Lord Chou Tairan in high regard. But I never would have guessed that this sentiment would extend to actually building a mausoleum for the National Shield.

Unable to call out to him, we could only stare at the back of the black-haired man, and it was when the wind picked up and started whistling through the branches that Sekiei slowly rose to his feet and —

The three of us gasped at the hard expression on his face. "Severe" was probably the most accurate word to describe it. Although I couldn't say it for sure, I felt like Sekiei had made his peace with the idea of sacrificing himself to save Hakurei.

He patted some dirt off his pants, then finally noticed our presence. "Hmm? Did you three come to pray to father as well? That's really nice of you."

The smile on his face was as bright as usual, but that didn't soothe the feeling of discomfort stirring in my chest. I knew I had to say something. But what?

"Sekiei." Before either Oto or I could open our mouths, Ruri had

taken a step forwards.

Yui had padded over to Sekiei, giving him an excuse to look away and run his hand gently over the cat's back. "Is it about time to leave?" he asked. "Sorry, I was talking to father. I'll be there in—Whoa!"

Out of the blue, Ruri threw her arms around him, letting her hat fall from her hand. Oto and I sucked in our breaths at this unexpected display of emotion.

"What's the matter?" Sekiei asked, looking over his shoulder at Ruri with a hint of confusion in his eyes.

An answer wasn't immediately forthcoming from Ruri, who opted instead to press her face against his back. I looked up at the sky as rain started falling in the form of a gentle shower, as if the heavens themselves were weeping.

Ruri looked up at Sekiei and frantically cried out, "Listen! I won't let *anyone* die! That means you, Hakurei, and everyone else in the Chou army! So... So... I'm begging you! Don't throw your life away! You don't have to take revenge on the Black Wolf, Gisen, for me or my destroyed homeland anymore. Just don't die!"

Ruri the Divine Tactician was always devilishly smart, calm, and logical, but in this moment, fat tears streamed from her emerald eyes, staining Sekiei's clothes. I had heard the Black Wolf, Gisen, the strongest warrior in the Gen Empire, had been the one responsible for the attack that had destroyed Ruri's homeland of Kobi, a mystic vale in the Hakkotsu Desert, and I'd also been told that one of her initial reasons for joining the Chou army had been to exact revenge on him, but here was Ruri stating aloud that she had no issue with abandoning this goal if it meant keeping Sekiei alive. That showed just how important he had become to her.

Sekiei's eyes widened at Ruri's desperation as she punched him repeatedly with her little fists, tears streaming down her cheeks. He spun around to face her. "Sounds like you don't trust me as much as I thought you did."

"Of course I don't," Ruri hiccuped. "You always, *always* act so recklessly!"

"Really?" Sekiei blinked.

"Really!" Ruri exclaimed. The naked annoyance in her reply coupled with her tears made her seem quite immature.

Sekiei produced a handkerchief and wiped away Ruri's tears, then he winked at us. "Oto, could you take care of Ruri for me?"

"O-Okay!" Oto jogged over to the pair with a delighted look on her face.

She's so lucky, I thought, a chip of envy wedging itself into my heart.

Meanwhile, Sekiei's fingers had found the Green Dragon Crescent Blade, which he had previously thrust into its stand with considerable force. "No matter what happens, I *have* to rescue Hakurei," he murmured.

He turned and drew the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars in a flash, the black and white blades reflecting the light back up into the heavens just as the sun decided to peek out from between the clouds. *Huh? It stopped raining?*

"I won't die, and I won't let any of you die either!" he continued. "I wouldn't have dragged you into this mess otherwise. Too bad Meirin hasn't made it here in time."

Seeing the confident smile on his face helped to soothe my fears. *It'll be all right. I trust him to—*

"Humph!" Ruri placed her blue hat back on her head and sniffed, an annoyed look on her face. She stomped over to Sekiei, who was busily resheathing his swords, and pointed at him. "Thanks to your usual behavior, I can't trust you! You need a *proper* education. Once Hakurei is back, we'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget, so prepare yourself!"

"H-Hey, don't you think that's a little *too* tyrannical?" he moaned.

The cool Sekiei from earlier had completely disappeared, and he was back to being the young man who claimed to be an aspiring civil official, cowering in fear at the feet of a girl who was causing countless white flowers to manifest in the air around her. *Ah, I wish that were me.*

As I continued watching on, Oto took a graceful step forwards. "Lord Sekiei."

"Oto! Help me! Could you say something to defend me from my

cruel strate— Uh, Miss Oto?" Sensing that something was off, he hesitantly repeated Oto's name as he placed his hand on Ruri's head —hat and all—to keep her at arm's length.

Despite her calm expression, Oto's cheeks were flushed and she continued walking towards him. "I'll be participating in the lesson as well. I look forward to it."

"Uh, okay?" Sekiei said, blinking in confusion at this rather unexpected statement.

Wait, isn't this the perfect opportunity for me? Mm-hmm, it has to be. I don't know what it's the perfect opportunity for *exactly, but...* I raised my left hand and threw my hat into the ring as well. "U-Um, I'll also—"

"No, Miu!" Ruri interrupted me at the same moment that Oto exclaimed, "No, Lady Miu!"

"Huh?! Why not?!" *How awful! How unfair!* I puffed out my cheeks and opened my mouth to protest when Yui interrupted the moment by rubbing against Sekiei's legs and meowing.

"Oh, we should hurry," Sekiei said. With one final deep bow aimed at the halberd serving as a tribute to his father, he spun on his heels and walked out of the mausoleum. We hurried after him, and he looked over his shoulder at us, his eyes brimming with resolve. "Let's go," he said. "We're off to save our princess, Hakurei!"

"Right!" Ruri replied.

"O-Okay!" I stammered.

"I'll accompany you until the very end!" Oto declared.



Chapter Three

As I sat and enjoyed the warm night breeze, I—Kou Ryuuho, emperor of Ei—shoved a large meat bun into my mouth. I bit down on it and juices so hot they almost burned the inside of my mouth burst forth, spreading delicious flavor all over my tongue. It had been too long since I had luxuriated in this taste. The view from the second floor of the inn was replete with more natural waterways and shorter buildings than in the present, though the most damning evidence of all that this wasn't reality was the sight of a half-built palace in the developing city of Rinkei.

Ah, this is a dream from when I was a child. A wrinkled hand rested itself on my head. Still clutching the meat bun with my own small hands, I looked up.

"Is it good, Ryuuho?" a smiling old man with white hair and a white beard asked me.

The old man was Kou Shuuei, my grandfather. To escape the large-scale Gen invasion, he had fled south and declared that henceforth, a normal fishing village would be renamed Rinkei and turned into the temporary capital of the nation he wanted to rebuild. Thanks to his commoner attire, he didn't look like a member of the imperial family, though by this point in time, he had already retired from politics, having ceded the role of emperor to my father. On occasion, he would sneak me out of the palace and we would explore the capital together. Despite knowing this was a dream, my heart still raced at being reunited with my grandfather, a man whom I had deep respect for.

"Yes, it's delicious!" I cheerily replied.

"Good, good."

Moving with an agility that belied his old age, my grandfather hopped the railing and climbed out onto the roof. I was worried he would fall, but there was such kindness in the gaze he directed at

the citizens strolling down below, I hesitated to stop him.

Left with no other choice, I—or rather, the child version of me—hesitantly aired another worry that was troubling me. "Are you sure it was all right to sneak out of the palace and come here? If we get found out—"

"Shintatsu will get mad at us?"

I looked down at my feet and hesitated for a moment, then mumbled a "Yes."

Even as his son, I found my father to be stern, inflexible, and stubborn. He was deeply passionate about building on and developing the foundations of Rinkei—the city my grandfather founded—and due to his work ethic, the palace reputedly never slept during his reign. As a result, the only child he ever bore aside from myself was Miu, and she was illegitimate.

Stroking his white beard, my grandfather grinned. "If he gets mad, just say, 'My mean old grandfather dragged me out with him against my will, much like he did to you when you were a boy.'"

Unbelievable as it might sound, my grandfather had sneaked my father out of the palace to visit the capital a few times during his own reign, though I'd never gotten the chance to ask about those escapades while they were still alive.

A short but well-endowed woman with long chestnut-brown hair tied into pigtails came up to the second floor with a tray in her hands. She was a village girl who had been tasked with taking care of my grandfather around this period of time, and if I remembered correctly, her surname was Ou. My grandfather shot her a look which turned out to be a wordless request for some tea, then came back inside and sat down in his chair.

"I fled here alone and on my last legs from the northern city of Eikei," my grandfather began, recounting a story he had told me many times before. "Back then, this was just a gloomy little fishing village, but little by little, it has started turning into a proper capital for our new country. However, it's still not enough. As painful as it is for me to admit this, we still haven't become a nation that is powerful enough to repay the Chou, U, and Jo families for protecting our borders."

In my youth, I couldn't understand what he was trying to say, but hearing the same tale again in this dream, I understood that my grandfather had accomplished the difficult task of founding a nation. My own weaknesses and narrow-mindedness were also being revealed to me.

Kou Shuuei—a man whose name would be mentioned in the history books for generations to come—accepted the cup offered to him by the village girl, then drained its contents in one gulp, seeming to revel in its fragrant flavor. The glint in his eyes indicated a deep intellect and wisdom. "Shintatsu is much better at internal affairs than I ever was. It won't be long before Rinkei becomes a city far greater than the Eikei of the past. And even if the wolves of Gen attack again, the many swamps here will protect us from their horses. However, Ryuuho, there's something you must always bear in mind."

I straightened my back as his eyes narrowed and his gaze sharpened on me to a knife's edge. Ever since he was a child, my grandfather had survived countless difficulties in his life, and these experiences had hardened him, giving him a kind of ferocity that my father and I simply hadn't inherited. He placed his cup down on the table and stared out of the window at the sky to the north that was glittering with stars.

"Our clan lost to the Gen Empire that was born in the vast northern plains," he said, his elderly body shivering almost imperceptibly. "They massacred the Kou family, leaving me as the only survivor, and took all of our lands north of the river. However, the cruelty of fate isn't to blame for what happened! Our loss was the inevitable outcome of an imperial family that had spent all of its time holed up in an elaborate palace instead of paying attention to the world outside. We imposed heavy taxes on our citizens while we lost ourselves in wine and women. Only an uneducated fool would repeat such a mistake in this land. Do you understand?"

He looked at me, his wide eyes pressuring me to agree. Perhaps my wise grandfather had foreseen that after his death, my father and I would lead the country to ruin.

I blinked and lowered my head as I gave my honest reply.

"Grandfather, I'm sorry. I don't understand what you mean."

On hearing this, my grandfather extended his wrinkled hand once more and placed it on my head, tousling my hair. "It's all right, Ryuuho. You'll understand when the time comes."

Agony stabbed me through the chest at the memory. *I'm so sorry, grandfather. In the end, I, Ryuuho, haven't been able to live up to your expectations. The country stands on the precipice of destruction, and I—*

"Lord Shuuei, it's about time you returned to the palace," the village girl said.

"Oh, is it that late already? Very well, Yuurin."

My grandfather stood up at the behest of the village girl before patting me on the head for a third time that night. This was ten days before the death of Kou Shuuei, one of the greatest rulers in history. Over twenty years had passed since that night, and in all that time, I had never once set foot in the capital again.

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My consciousness slowly resurfaced after the dream, and the first thing I saw on opening my eyes was the splendid crest my father had—after a long and difficult design process—engraved on the ceiling. With my body still heavy from the remnants of sleep, I pushed myself up into a sitting position, and the moment I noticed the dryness of my throat, a horrible headache assaulted me. It must have been due to all of the alcohol I'd drunk just before going to sleep, in conjunction with the old memory that had replayed itself in my dream.

How many days have passed since the marshal of the Imperial Guard, Ou Hokujaku, locked me in my bedroom? Out of despair, I had taken to drinking bottle after bottle of alcohol during the day and falling to sleep in the arms of my favored concubine, Uto, then resuming my drinking on waking. Thanks to this routine, I was having trouble even registering the passage of time anymore. I reached out with my left hand, but found that Uto—who had been forced to suffer the indignity of house arrest with me—wasn't there.

Perhaps she had woken before me, and was preparing some warm water for us.

"Uto, could you bring me some wa—" It was at that moment that I finally realized something was wrong. "Uto?"

My beautiful concubine wasn't in the room with me. *Wait, she couldn't have... Has she escaped? Without me?* My heartbeat grew irregular and I started panting. Outside the window, dark clouds blocked out the morning sun, and only the roar of heavy rain reached my ears.

I wasn't able to stand up straight, but I managed to stumble out of bed. "Hey! Is anyone out there?!" I cried out.

But the soldiers outside didn't react. No one cared what I—the third emperor of the Ei Empire—had to say anymore. Fury erupted in my chest and I flailed with my arm, bundling a chair over and sending it crashing to the ground. *Why? Why, why, why?!* Already out of breath, I collapsed to the floor, feeling utterly despondent. *Why, Uto?*

The door that had been firmly closed earlier slid open and the sound of a man's voice drifted through. "Lord Kou Ryuuho, you're being quite disruptive. You shouldn't drink so much. Alcohol is poison for the body. Please remember that your very life has value."

"H-Hokujaku," I whispered.

The man who walked in had a thin face, but his military uniform was bright and extravagant, and a group of soldiers in full armor stood behind him. This was the man who'd betrayed me, the marshal of the Imperial Guard. His enthusiasm for the upcoming fight appeared to have been quite a boon for his health, as his complexion looked far better than I had ever seen it. By contrast, his right-hand man, Denso, whom I remembered well due to the burn mark on his cheek, was far skinnier than the last time I'd seen him, though his eyes still glittered with a self-confidence that bordered on delusion. If they were here, that meant...

My anger towards Uto dissipated and was replaced by a deep fear. My knees were shaking so much, I couldn't even stand up. "Wh-What is it?" I stuttered. "I thought you wouldn't be back here until you'd beaten Gen! Have you changed your minds and decided

to kill...”

Hokujaku and Denso exchanged looks, then regarded me with open scorn.

The marshal—who had once served me as a loyal, trusted servant—slapped the golden hilt of his sword with his hand and shook his head. “What a pathetic display from the emperor of the Ei Empire! As a matter of fact, we *have* changed our minds. But rejoice, for we have finally discovered the White Wraith’s base. He has grown so confident of victory that he set up camp within spitting distance of the water fortress.”

Over a decade had passed since Adai Dada’s ascension to the throne, and in that time, he had never lost a single battle. Would the undefeated king of the horsemen truly have advanced all the way to the front line?

Ignoring me trembling at his feet in fear and waving his arms around in an exaggerated way, Hokujaku continued, and it soon became apparent that he was certain of an Ei victory. “Tonight, with the rain masking our advance, I will lead the ten thousand cavalry of the Imperial Guard on a nighttime raid of the enemy base, and kill the king of those vile horsemen! I merely came to inform you of our plan in a final show of gratitude, for you were the one who gave me the opportunity to climb the ranks to reach this position.”

I stayed silent. My thoughts were a total mess, and I had a vague sense of unease. I’d heard it was difficult to effectively employ cavalry in battle, yet he was planning to use them on a rainy night like this? And in a large-scale attack in the swamps near the capital?

“That Gen spy posing as your favored concubine has finally made her escape, I see,” Hokujaku said, a cruel smile on his face. “I’m sure she’s already reached the enemy base to make her report: ‘The Imperial Guard has entered the water fortress and is planning a nighttime attack.’ She didn’t even realize we’ve been feeding her false intel.”

“In order to deceive her, we’ve spent the past few days spreading that particular rumor among the soldiers, to the point where we even lowered our defenses on purpose,” Denso continued with a contemptuous look. “In reality, the great water fortress and the Jo

army will serve as bait while we attack their base."

My breath caught in my throat and I curled myself up into a ball. *Uto was a... A girl like that has been tricking me this whole time?* "Why?" I managed to squeak. "Why would she..."

"A handful of silver coins is more than enough for people to forget past kindnesses," Hokujaku scoffed. "Someone like you, who has only known life inside the imperial palace, could never understand that. The story she fed to you about being a distant Rin relative was complete nonsense."

So Uto has been deceiving me from the very beginning? I could only glance around the room in shock. It was then that I noticed that all of the emotion had disappeared from Denso's face, while the look in his eyes reminded me of something I'd felt when my grandfather and father had scolded me in my youth: suppressed anxiety. But why?

"I have one last question for you," Hokujaku said. "Do you know if the previous emperors had any other children who might be living in this city? Unfortunately, we still don't know where Princess Miu is, and we need to find a successor for you as quickly as possible."

The marshal's words caused the fear of death to stir within me once more, and I forgot all about my curiosity over Denso's reaction. Both my grandfather and my father had only had a few children, and I hadn't had any at all. My relationship with Uto had been purely platonic, only sleeping together in the most literal sense. No, the Kou bloodline hadn't recovered from the massacre that took place more than fifty years ago.

"I-I don't know," I managed to splutter.

Hokujaku sighed. "Lies won't help you—"

"I-I'm telling the truth!" Using a chair to support me, I staggered to my feet and my eyes met his. "At the very least, my father had no other illegitimate heirs. After becoming emperor, he never left the palace."

"So if any other descendants do exist, they'd be from the first emperor?" Hokujaku mused. "We must find one after we have claimed victory. Now, if you'll excuse me."

My former subordinate hadn't even left for the battlefield yet, and

he was already thinking of what he was going to do after the war. His behavior reminded me of my own and my father's in that he was cocksure that things would go his way. The trembling in my hands momentarily subsided, and in my peripheral vision, I noticed an unfamiliar letter and a bottle on my desk. Had Uto left me a note before leaving?

"Hokujaku," I called after him.

"What?" Hokujaku replied, and both he and Denso fixed me with matching looks of disgust.

Resisting my instinct to cower under their glares, I put a question to them as the current emperor of the Ei Empire. "I'd like to confirm a few things with you, if I may. You'll be sending out a large army of cavalry into a swamp on a rainy night, correct? Have you discussed this plan with Gan Retsurai and Jo Hiyou?" The words came easily to me, as if my late grandfather were guiding my tongue from beyond the grave.

Hokujaku blinked a few times in surprise before slapping Denso's shoulder with a meaty hand. "There's no need to worry about a thing. We have this great strategist with us. Not only was he able to predict tonight's weather, but he also figured out that your precious concubine would pick tonight of all nights to make her escape."

"O-Oh, I see. That's good, then."

The strength I'd worked up deserted me again. Jo Hiyou going along with this plan wouldn't have been a surprise, since he and Denso were acquaintances, but even in the face of a national threat, I couldn't see Retsurai lending Hokujaku a hand, and the marshal's answer hadn't soothed my worries one bit, my unease only growing stronger. However, Uto's warmth—which had once brought me so much comfort—was no longer available to call on.

The marshal of the Imperial Guard walked over to the door. "Farewell, Lord Kou Ryuuho. When next we meet, I shall offer you the heads of the White Wraith and the rabbit who has helped bring about the collapse of this country," he declared in an arrogant tone. "Until then, I need you alive, whether you like it or not."

And with that, he left the room, closing the thick door behind him. Without the light from the hall, the room grew darker, and

finding myself alone once more, I picked up the bottle from the desk. Apparently, it contained a poison that promised a painless death.

"You even prepared something like this? Uto, just who were you? No, that no longer matters. I have only one wish." *I hope that wherever you ran off to, you'll get to live a full, long life.*

Light flashed across the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder so deep, it shook the entire palace. It felt like a lament from the Ei Empire, as well as a signal of its coming demise.

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"General Hokujaku, I see a military flag. There's no mistaking it. We've found the enemy base, and it looks like they don't even have a thousand soldiers stationed there!"

"Good work!" With the lantern hanging from my hip allowing us to see in the pitch black, I—Ou Hokujaku—clasped my scout's shoulder and heaped praise on him for his efforts, and under the mud and rain that dirtied his face, I could see a determination to his expression. With the tall grass hiding myself and my horse, I strained my eyes and tried to see through the sheet of rain.

There! Lit by multiple torches and surrounded by Gen flags that were flapping in the wind, there stood a massive tent. The soldiers dotted around it were supposed to be guarding the base, but they appeared slow and languid in their movements. The irresistible bait of the great water fortress and the Jo army had distracted all of their attention, and they had let their guards down. *We can do this! We can win!*

I clenched and unclenched my fist a few times, then wiped the sweat and mud from my cheek. At Denso's suggestion, we'd gathered up a number of small boats from around the capital and attempted to cross the river, though this had resulted in some of our forces being lost due to the bad weather. The march that followed the crossing had been difficult as well, with the terrain proving to be far muddier than we had anticipated, meaning the full army hadn't been able to reach the base in time. However, the rain had masked

our approach, just as we'd planned, and the moment we spotted the enemy base, the rain stopped altogether. *It's God's will!*

I only had around three thousand riders with me, but the ground here was comparatively solid, so we wouldn't need to worry about the mud slowing down the horses, and we had the element of surprise on our side. At Denso's command, the stragglers were gathering at a reserve site we had chosen to launch our charge from, and if we served as the vanguard, I trusted them to bring up the rear.

"Listen to me, all of you," I called out, mounting my horse. My soldiers and captains, all covered in mud, turned and gave me their full attention. The journey here had been long—*far* too long—but I finally had the chance to shake off the humiliation of losing the battle at Ranyou. "I commend you for enduring the difficult march and making it all the way here with me! The inclement weather and the rapid currents have prevented us from bringing our full cavalry to this spot, but even so, we cannot let this perfect opportunity elude us!" I drew my sword and held it aloft, the enemy still unaware of our presence. "We will charge the enemy base and—"

But I didn't get to finish my speech, for I was interrupted by a roar as loud as thunder. Some of the soldiers—the ones who had mounted their horses before I had given the order—fell to the ground, and panic spread through the troops like a shock wave.

Wh-What's going on?! Wait, this stench... Gunpowder! A score of small patches of light flickered in the sky above us as fire arrows rained down on us from every direction. I could see the shadows of my soldiers, who'd been hiding in the darkness, as they cried out into the night.

"I-It's the enemy!"

"It's an ambush!"

"Shit! How did they know we were here?!"

"Get on your horses! We're sitting ducks on the ground!"

"Just loose your arrows at them! The enemy has us surrounded!"

The roars of the enemy soldiers and the whinnying of their horses echoed around us as Gen war flags filled my field of vision. *How could this be? They noticed our presence?!*

"You bastards!" I bellowed, kicking my horse into a gallop. My aim was the enemy base, and ultimately, the White Wraith's neck. I could hear my soldiers following me. *Good!*

"General Hokujaku, don't be too hasty!"

"Hurry! We must charge after him!"

"Kill the White Wraith! Kill him!"

"Get on your horse and follow the general!"

The Gen riders mustn't have been expecting a counterattack, as the ones who stood in my way were slow to react and hesitant.

"Move, weaklings!" Wildly swinging my sword, I destroyed the section of the enemy line with the least soldiers in it and charged on through. Arrows rained down all around me to try to stop my progress, their tips slicing my face and arms, but I gritted my teeth and raised my voice in a wordless cry, fighting through the pain and continuing my charge towards the base, which was glowing in the darkness thanks to the many torches around it. The massive tent drew closer and closer, and when I reached the final palisade, I coaxed my horse into jumping over it to clear it. "Prepare yourself, White Wraith!" I roared, cutting down military flags and confused enemy soldiers alike. I was the first to make it inside the tent and—

My eyes widened until they were as large as plates. I didn't see a single person inside. I couldn't even see a chair or a table, or anything else that might have indicated that somebody had ever been here.

"I-Impossible! Empty?" I gasped. "Where did he... Where did Adai Dada go? Did he already esca—"

"Ou Hokujaku, you're a fool. He never once moved up from the back lines, obviously!"

A broadsword sliced through the canvas, bringing down the tent. I immediately kicked my horse into action again and escaped the collapsing tent before turning to face my attacker. He was a young man with dark brown hair and tanned skin that had clearly gotten its hue from spending a lot of time on the battlefield, and the horse he sat atop had a black coat. His muscular frame was apparent even under his armor, and I could see a second sword dangling from his belt. Although he only looked around twenty years old, I could tell

that he was no ordinary soldier. The screams of my allies drifted through the dancing flames around me and filled my ears.

This is exactly like what happened in Ranyou. But I won't lose! Denso will arrive with the rear guard any minute now! I pointed my sword at the enemy general and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am a loyal servant of Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf," he replied. "My name is Orid Dada."

I blinked. In front of me stood a member of the Gen imperial family. Killing him would be a good enough accomplishment for the time being.

In sharp contrast to my rising morale, Orid rested his sword against his shoulder and let a bored expression spread across his face. "Before I cut off your head, I have a question for you," he said. "Did you really think this childish scheme of yours was going to work against us?"

"What?" My brow furrowed. *What's this man trying to say?*

Despite the two of us being on the battlefield, Orid had to bite back a yawn before continuing. "I mean, duping most of our forces into attacking the great water fortress so that you can ambush our base with a highly mobile team is a smart idea, even if it *is* one of the oldest tricks in the book." He slowly raised his sword as his expression morphed into one of derision. "But if the general leading the attack is a weakling, then even wolves transform into sheep. Your teams didn't communicate or coordinate with each other. You did the bare minimum to grasp the enemy's situation, and you didn't even wait for the stragglers before ordering a charge. Outside of your high morale and the idea of using boats to skirt around behind us, you fail as a general. Granted, we already knew which waterways you would be taking. I have to admit, Ei's merchants are a frightening bunch indeed. One of them offered His Imperial Majesty a detailed map of the rivers and streams around Rinkei, you see. Apparently, it was a family heirloom that had been passed down through the generations."

"L-Lies!" I stammered. But if this man's words were true, that meant we had been playing right into the White Wraith's hands from the very beginning.

Orid swung his sword in an unrefined motion, slicing through the spreading flames, and the gust of wind he'd whipped up reached where I was standing, causing my war horse to take a fearful step back. "Hardworking fools whose efforts do nothing but make matters worse are a cancer, and it's even more egregious when they're in authority," Orid stated. "So, Ou Hokujaku, you will die here. Your neck is worth nothing compared to Chou Sekiei's, but your death will at least add more merits to my name. Wretches like you don't belong in the new world that Emperor Adai is creating."

My blood boiled with fury, and without thinking, I charged forwards and screamed, "H-How dare you!"

It was the fastest I'd ever ridden, and the finest attacking move I had ever made. My sharp blade, wet with the blood of my enemy, scythed through the air, aiming to slice off Orid's head. But...

I screeched in pain, unbearable agony shooting through my body, as I watched my severed right arm flying unencumbered through the air.

"Too slow. That was nothing compared to what Chou Sekiei can do," Orid scoffed, his cold judgment of my skills reaching my ears despite the searing pain overwhelming my senses.

"I..." I choked. "I can't die here—"

Cold steel reflecting the flames around us flashed near my neck, and my thoughts faded into darkness.

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The headless, armless enemy general fell to the ground with a heavy thud. I—Orid Dada—watched on as my soldiers surrounded his now-riderless horse to calm it down, because with the Chou army having reclaimed Keiyou, we couldn't spare a single mount. The tide of this battle had turned entirely in our favor, and we were systematically cutting down the remaining soldiers.

I flicked my sword to get rid of the blood caking the steel. "What a bore," I muttered to myself.

In defeating the enemy's general, this battle was all but won, and it'd hardly taken any effort at all. Not once had I felt compelled to

draw my second sword. While we'd admittedly had fewer soldiers when we attacked the western regions, Chou Sekiei had still managed to keep us at Ten Knights Bridge all by himself until reinforcements arrived. Though as Emperor Adai was always quick to point out, Chou Sekiei was unparalleled as a fighter in the Ei Empire. *I'd sure like to take him on again someday.*

While I thought about my rival sitting atop my horse, an officer in an old set of armor who looked to be in his forties galloped up to me. "Lord Orid, we're almost done clearing out the enemy in the base. Should we give chase to those who have fled?"

"There's no need for that, Heian," I replied, sheathing my sword and shrugging at my vice-commander, who had himself once been a citizen of Ei. "The rain may have stopped for now, but it was really coming down earlier, plus there's no general we absolutely have to kill today. I don't want to be the idiot who orders his men and horses into the mud for no reason."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Heian said. "In that case, I'll call off the pursuit before they go too far out."

"Good, good." I suddenly recalled something and called out to Heian, who had turned to leave. "Oh, that reminds me. Did you happen to kill a man with a burn on his left cheek? I hear he's the one who came up with this amateurish scheme of theirs."

Heian regarded me over his shoulder and frowned. "I'm afraid not. I can only assume he deemed the situation unsalvageable and fled, abandoning the soldiers."

That stood to reason. After all, a "rat" would naturally choose to flee a sinking ship. But even so, that pathetic excuse of a man had been too slow in coming to that decision. I couldn't help but sympathize with the man who had once been on an equal footing with Hasho as I thought about the fate that would soon befall him.

In the distance, I could see the enemy fleeing. With my eyes trained on them, I addressed Heian again. "Very well. We've finished our job for tonight. Let's leave hunting the rat to the vixen sisters."

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Relying on the dim light cast by the light in the distance to guide me through the pathless forest, I—Denso—pounded the ground with my fist, not caring about the mud that flew up and splattered onto my strategist's robes as a result. "D-Dammit!" I panted. "What happened to the Jo army?! Why didn't they show up?!"

Anger, humiliation, and a fear of death made me shudder. I never imagined this could happen. My decision to lead the stragglers into battle, advancing at a slower pace than Hokujaku and his bait had ultimately saved my life, because we caught wind of the Gen ambush before running headlong into it. However, morale crumbled as soon as it became apparent that the plan had failed, the Imperial Guard turning tail and running without even bothering to shield me, the strategist. So I abandoned them to the enemy riders who were descending upon them and fled the battlefield, urging my horse to gallop as hard as it could until it finally collapsed. But at this rate, I would also...

After making sure there were no enemies lurking in the surrounding undergrowth, I overcame the exhaustion racking my body and heaved myself to my feet. "No, I haven't lost yet! Even if Hokujaku's dead, the palace still has that coward of an emperor and those fools, You Saikei and Rin Koudou. They're the only ones left now! If I can manipulate them and the army that's still in the great water fortress, I can still turn this around!"

Conducting my brilliant strategy through a weakling like Hokujaku, who had been absolutely humiliated in the Seitou invasion, had been a total waste. For my next stratagem, I would maintain absolute authority over it and step out onto the battlefield myself, feathered fan in hand. I scurried onwards, staying low to the ground and with my hand hovering over my dagger so that I could draw it at the slightest provocation. I had to somehow make it back to the place where we crossed the river, as we'd tied up small boats there in preparation for our escape.

"I-Impossible!"

After a desperate trek and numerous tumbles into the mud, I finally made it to the dilapidated pier that marked where we'd crossed the river. But the sight that greeted me left me rooted to the

ground in shock. Multiple torches were still alight under the makeshift roof we had constructed to keep out of the rain, yet I couldn't see a single boat or any soldiers. All I could see were swords and spears that had been thrust into the pier, and barrels that were presumably filled with water.

D-Don't tell me... "They *ignored* my strict orders to guard our escape route and fled without waiting for a single allied soldier?! I can't believe how far Ei's Imperial Guard has fallen."

Despair weighed heavily on me, threatening to rob me of my last slivers of strength, while my mind raced, searching for a way to survive. *Should I go to the other crossing point? The one closer to the enemy base? No, to go back there now would be certain suicide. If they were to surround me, I wouldn't even get the chance to negotiate before they—*

"I pity you, Denso."

These words dripping with scorn came from behind me while I was busy visualizing the worst-case scenario.

"Sister, there is no need to sympathize with traitors."

A cold vice tightened around my heart and my breathing grew ragged. I slowly turned around, and when my eyes landed on the pair standing a short distance away, my expression stiffened in fear. Illuminated by the crescent moon and lit torches behind them, they appeared to be young girls in fox masks.

This isn't just the worst-case scenario! This is the absolute worst *situation I could find myself in!* I drew the dagger from my belt and gritted my teeth. "Ren of Senko! And..." I glared at the other slender girl, who had tied up her long lavender hair with a ribbon. "Uto, Kou Ryuuho's favored concubine! I *knew* you were a Senko operative too!"

Senko, the clandestine organization that had ordered me to infiltrate the palace and declaw the Ei Empire from within, was home to many secrets. Its goal was to unify all of the lands under the heavens—something only the Tou Empire had ever accomplished—but I wasn't familiar with everyone within its ranks. I knew Ren because she was serving as the interim leader of Senko in place of the elderly head, and Hasho, whom I had once competed against for

the position of Gen's strategist, but other than them, I was only really aware of a handful of other operatives. If only I could've figured out Uto's *true* identity before Hokujaku went rogue and placed the Ei emperor under house arrest!

Ignoring me, Ren removed her hood and fox mask, and I gasped as I gazed upon her true face for the first time. With her silver hair and blue eyes, she was a girl of calamity, but she boasted such an ethereal beauty, it bordered on the supernatural. I wasn't expecting the leader of Senko to look like this.

When she noticed I was tongue-tied and gawking at her, Ren pocketed her fox mask, and in a bitter tone, she spat, "What a headache you've been with your delusions of free will, little rat. You should have known your place and followed the orders we gave you."

I froze as I came to the sudden realization that Ren had only removed her mask because she was totally certain I would be dying here by her hand.

She fixed me with an ice-cold glare and tossed her silver hair over her shoulder. "Did you *really* think someone of your caliber could defeat the White Wraith on the battlefield?"

I didn't answer as my mind was too busy trying to find a way out of this situation. I was certain I could outduel the average soldier, but my opponent was Senko's leader, and while her true power was a mystery to me, if she could go toe-to-toe with Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei, the wielders of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars, she surely had to be stronger than me. Perhaps I could fight my way past Uto? Actually, I had no real choice but to gamble on Uto being my inferior in combat. Cold sweat trickled down my dirt-covered cheek, and I was clutching my dagger so tightly, the handle was creaking in my palm.

"The water fortress is the anvil and the Jo army coming from the south is the hammer, with the Imperial Guard serving as bait-slash-expendable pawns. And of course, you had Ou Hokujaku believe the positions were reversed," Ren said, lashing out at a barrel with her foot, her eyes not even on me. "While the swamps here make the terrain difficult for cavalry, there are also plenty of rivers, streams,

and natural waterways. With an armada of small boats, you could certainly cross the river and launch an ambush. And this foul weather only made conditions more favorable. That's more or less what you thought. Am I right?"

The cold vice around my heart tightened its grip yet further. *Sh-She saw through my plan completely?!* Before the shock of this could fully sink in, a loud crash assaulted my ears. To my disbelief, a barrel flew through the air and landed in the water—no, more accurately, it *slammed* into it. That silver-haired, blue-eyed girl had actually kicked it into the river. How could a slip of a girl like her possess such monstrous strength?!

Seeing me unable to move or even speak, Ren gave me a slightly pitying look. "You're such a fool, Denso. Adai Dada is a greater strategist than even Ouei. Did you really think he wouldn't see through such a basic tactic? By the time that hardworking fool, Ou Hokujaku, made his move, Adai Dada had already seen through all of it, including your scheme of spreading rumors before launching an attack."

"L-Lies!"

I'd heard that the White Wraith, Adai Dada, emperor of Gen, boasted something of an abnormal talent for strategizing, but so long as he was bound by the constraints that came with being mortal, there was surely no way he could have predicted *everything*, let alone my plan.

"'He came up with a solid plan. I commend his idea of transporting the cavalry across the river using small boats, as well as his shrewdness in taking advantage of the inclement weather to launch an ambush,'" Ren recited, the rhythmic nature of her words making it sound almost like she were performing a poem.

Still wearing her own fox mask, Uto continued in the same tone. "'However, that rat makes no distinction between living humans and pawns on a board. He believes soldiers will carry out his plans on the battlefield perfectly without accidents or incidents that might throw them off track. He is an inexperienced strategist. He reminds me of when Hasho first joined my army.'"

My knees were knocking together, and I couldn't move a single

muscle. I'd never met the White Wraith in person before, but I could almost trick myself into believing he was here at this very moment.

A chill wind picked up, causing Ren to reach up and place her hand on her head to stop her silver hair from blowing into her face. "Denso, as a parting gift to you before you embark on your journey to the underworld, I shall enlighten you with a rather interesting fact."

Next to her, Uto's fox mask shifted to reveal an eye with an ice-cold glare as intense as Ren's. *So her personality when she posed as the emperor's concubine was all a ruse! A-Are these two sis—*

"Even as we speak, neither the Ei army embedded in the water fortress nor the Jo army have marched so much as a single step."

Of all the shocks I'd had that night, Uto's bombshell was the biggest. Stumbling backwards on the pier, I cried out, "Wh-Why? Why haven't they?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Ren sighed with exaggerated exasperation as she drew the long, exotic sword from its sheath on her belt.



"After finalizing your strategy, you never once decided to have a face-to-face meeting with Lord Gan Retsurai or Jo Hiyou in order to give them a proper explanation of your plan. Without even allowing them the chance to voice their opinions or ask questions, you simply ordered them to attack the Gen army after you sortied. Did you believe they would blindly obey a command from someone like that, especially on the battlefield?" Uto said, removing her mask to reveal her beautiful face. The shadows cast on her features by the torches were in constant motion, mirroring the movement of the dancing flames, and she clasped her pale hands together while giggling like a little girl. "No, of course they wouldn't. Never in a million years. Especially as from their perspective, a loss at this vital stage would mean the collapse of their country. As long as there existed a shred of doubt in their minds about you or Ou Hokujaku, they would never risk an attack. Isn't that obvious? As a result of your ignorance, even the Jo fledgling you had deemed to be easy to manipulate ordered his army to retreat to the southern regions. Your subordinate informed me of this when he surrendered."

Bombarded with these successive revelations, I found myself unable to speak. *I-Isn't it a given that you should listen to what an intellectual tells you to do? Those fools!* Ren held her devastatingly beautiful foreign sword aloft, causing my face to stiffen, the burn on my left cheek spasming in reaction to the movement. *I can't win. If I don't do something quick, I'll die here without having accomplished a single thing!*

The petite beauty with silver hair and blue eyes took a step forwards. "There's a reason we viewed you as a simple rat while treating Hasho as a proper strategist. Don't underestimate Senko, you traitorous fool."

"W-Wait! I mean, please just wait a moment!" *I can't die now. Not until I've gotten one over on Hasho! He's my inferior in both chess and intellect. I* have *to beat him!* Struggling to form a coherent sentence in my panic, I continued pleading my case. "I-I can still be of use to the organization. I've read books on every single subject and from every single country around the world. No one in Gen *or* Ei is smarter than me. Of that, I am positive. P-Please

give me the opportunity to atone for this mess. I'm begging you! Please!"

"You are unnecessary," the girls said in unison without a hint of mercy in their frosty voices.

Ren pointed the tip of her sword at me and continued. "For starters, I know someone who has read *far* more books than you, and has participated in far more battles than anyone else in the empire."

"As intellectuals go, you are second-rate. And even worse than that..." Uto paused as she also drew a foreign sword—a slightly slimmer blade than Ren's—from its sheath on her belt, wielding it in a reverse grip. Deep anger twisted her exquisite face, though I couldn't even begin to guess where her rage was stemming from. "The moment something unexpected happens, you lose yourself in overconfidence and become consumed by this inferiority complex you have in relation to your erstwhile rival, Hasho, which leads you to go with the flow without ever thinking of the consequences." Her harsh critique of my behavior struck a nerve, and I found myself taking another step back while floundering pathetically for words in my defense. She lowered her sword. "In the end, that industrious fool, Hokujaku, was the one who actually acted in an effort to change the situation. Not you. Future historians will regard you as a mere minor villain who did nothing but stir up trouble in the last months of the Ei Empire."

"I... I..." I wanted to argue back, but no words came to mind. *They're saying history will remember me as someone* inferior *to Ou Hokujaku? I-Impossible!*

"Denso, I commend you for your hard work leading up to this moment. But your life ends here. You have no place in the new world that is to be unified under the Gen flag," Ren said.

"It is a fox's job to hunt down pests like rats. We shall complete our task without fail," Uto added.

The conversation was over. Ren and Uto lunged forwards as one, darting across the pier with a speed that could only be described as inhuman.

My eyes widened in despair at these two monsters who were

bearing down on me and I screamed, "I... I can't die here! Not until I've fulfilled my ambition of surpassing Hasho and Adai, so that everyone under the heavens knows my name!" I grabbed an Imperial Guard sword that had been thrust into the pier, and crossed it over the dagger in my other hand to protect myself. Biting back fear, I stood my ground against this pair of half-human beasts. "Feast your eyes on the strength of a cornered rat!"

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"I see. So the enemy has called back the front line at Youkaku. Do you know the reason for their withdrawal, Lord U Hakubun?"

"I don't. Kyou Shunken doesn't believe it is a trap. Perhaps Princess Miu's body double has proven more effective than..." U Hakubun paused, then shook his head. "No, I'm sure the reason lies with you, Lord Chou Sekiei. Or should I be calling you by your title of 'Kouei of the Modern Ages'?"

In a fishing village overlooking the Grand Canal, far to the east of Keiyou and the province of Koshuu, I—Chou Sekiei—watched on as the next head of the U family, U Hakubun, sat down in a chair without waiting for permission to do so. We were in the manor the Gen governor had ordered the citizens to construct during his time here, U Hakubun and around five thousand elite members of the U army having arrived in the village that morning after crossing Youkaku's Sengai Valley. Although Orid had set the precedent, I still couldn't believe the risk Hakubun had taken to get here.

"You're so mean," I complained. "*I* didn't come up with that title, you know."

"Humph!" U Hakubun snorted suspiciously, crossing his scratched-up arms.

"I appreciate the reinforcements, but was it really *wise* to remove these soldiers from Youkaku?" I asked, taking a seat across from him and voicing my main concern.

"My grandmother insisted we come. She said, 'The next battle will surely be the final one that decides the fates of both the Ei and Gen Empires. The U flag being absent on that battlefield would humiliate

us for generations to come. Jouko will be spinning in his grave if we allow that to happen.' How could I refuse her request after that? Besides, the loss of the Chou family would soon lead to our own family's destruction," U Hakubun replied, his tone and expression softening.

Hakubun and Oto's father, Lord U Jouko, the Tiger Fang, had been one of the Three Great Generals, alongside my father and Jo Shuuhou, the Phoenix Wing. *So General U's mother, Granny Koufuu, was the one who urged them to come here, huh?* I poured some water from a bamboo bottle into a cup and handed it to Hakubun, who drained the liquid in one gulp.

He roughly wiped the excess water off his lips and grinned. "Rejoice. Everyone in the western regions knows how hard you and the Chou army fought during the Seitou invasion, and that it was all thanks to your personal efforts that so many of our soldiers survived that battle. We've been swamped with volunteers, all saying, 'Now's the time to repay the debt!'"

"I don't know if 'conscientious' is the best way to describe them, or 'reckless,'" I sighed. If the plan Ruri and I had come up with proved successful, our final opponent would be the White Wraith, whom even father had been unable to defeat. It was likely to be a tough battle, and one that could potentially cost the lives of all of us. Drinking water directly from the bamboo bottle, I continued. "The soldiers you brought with you will enter Oto's command and serve under Ruri. Is that all right with you?"

"Do as you wish. My sister is the most talented military commander in the U army right now."

We could hear the cheery chatter of the girls in the distance. With a little help from Miu, Oto was apparently making lunch in the courtyard. Much like Ruri, Oto had become fast friends with Miu while I wasn't paying attention.

Hakubun brushed away some of the dust that was dirtying the skin around his eyes, then stood up. "You and your strategist wish for the final battle to be conducted somewhere other than Rinkei, right? In that case, I shall stay here and maintain the logistics stations, as well as keep in touch with Teiha," he said. Then, another

thought seemed to enter his head. “Chou Sekiei.”

“Hmm?”

What Hakubun lacked in martial prowess, he more than made up for with his broad overview of a situation. I’d been sitting in impressed silence, listening to him talk, and only looked up at him when I heard my name said in an austere tone. To my surprise, U Hakubun, the most principled man I knew, was smiling at me!

“There’s something I’d like to discuss with you once this war is over,” he said. “It’s a very, *very* important matter. One that will decide the future of both of our families.”

“O-Oh, okay,” I replied, nodding despite my confusion, for the look in Hakubun’s eye brooked no other response. *If it’s really something that important, I think I’d rather pawn the responsibility off on either Hakurei or Ruri.* Hakubun held up a fist, so I mirrored the action and bumped mine against his.

“So don’t go dying and heaping more troubles onto my plate,” he concluded.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I replied. “After all, my dream is to become a civil official, and—” I suddenly sensed a dangerous presence behind me. *Wait, was the letter right? Is* she *here?* I stood up, trembling in fear, just as the door was flung open.

A short and beautiful girl—Ou Meirin—stood in the doorway, and despite her slight frame, she was actually older than me. She had tied her chestnut-brown hair into pigtails, and as she ran towards me, they swayed with every step she took. Her large eyes sparkled with delight. “Lord Se-ki-ei! ☆”

She sprinted straight at me, her large bosom bouncing, and completely indifferent to the fact that her orange hat and jacket went flying as she threw herself at me at top speed. She buried her face in my clothes, pressing her head firmly against my torso. *Sh-She’s right in my solar plexus!* A few moments later, another beautiful woman with black hair—Meirin’s attendant, Miss Shizuka—entered the room and picked up the orange hat and coat discarded by her mistress. She was every bit as pleasing on the eye as I remembered.

Soldiers who were hard at work coordinating the base

construction in the manor stole a peek inside before walking on, making pitying noises and whispering among one another. *I-I feel like there's been a huge misunderstanding here!* Hakubun placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, fixing me with an icy smile. *O-Ow!*

"Um, pardon me for asking, but why do you seem so angry?" I asked him.

"To think I would need to start my explanation there... It appears I overestimated you, Chou Sekiei," he replied. "I look forward to our conversation after this war has concluded. I'm sure I don't need to remind you what will happen if you make my sister cry, do I?"

At some point along the line, I'd somehow managed to tick off the next head of the U family. *Hey, wait, why are we bringing up Oto all of a sudden?* I watched Hakubun stalk away, then sighed and looked down at Meirin, who was still hugging me tightly. "Hey, we only just reunited, so why did you..." I paused when I saw she wasn't reacting to me addressing her at all and peered down at her face. "Uh, Miss Ou Meirin? Hello?"

"I-It's really L-Lord Sekiei," Meirin panted between drunken-sounding giggles. With her lips curled upwards into a bizarre-looking smile, no one would have guessed from looking at her that Meirin was a real prodigy.

She's terrifying. She's awful! In spite of my copious experience on the battlefield, I had never felt the kind of fear she was inducing in me at that moment. I tried to free myself from her grip, but... "Ack! I-I can't get her off me?!"

"Ha ha ha! I've taken the pain I felt in those long, lonely days waiting for my beloved husband and turned it into strength! I, Ou Meirin, now have no weaknesses!"

And accompanying this bizarre logic was a triumphant grin the girl (who was older than me, let's not forget) flashed at me before tightening her grip on my torso. According to Kuuen's reports, her allegiance to the Chou family had gotten her disowned by her father, the renowned merchant, Ou Jin. But I couldn't see a single hint of doubt or sadness in her expression.

I glanced at Miss Shizuka, who promptly whispered to me, "My

apologies, Lord Sekiei. She suppressed her desire to meet with you for so long, she cannot hold back the floodgates anymore."

"That makes sense."

The last time I'd seen Meirin was the day of my father's execution, and we hadn't been able to exchange letters for the past few months either. I couldn't blame her for acting... No, actually, I could, because this was *very* bizarre behavior. An exasperated laugh escaped me as I placed a hand on her small head.

"Lord Sekiei?" Meirin blinked.

"Thanks for coming. I'm glad you're safe." Since I occasionally gave Hakurei head pats, I figured I was just acting my usual self. However...

Meirin finally pulled away from where she had been buried in my torso and looked up at me with an unhappy smile on her face. Without releasing me from her embrace fully, she muttered, "Th-This isn't going how I'd planned it. I expected Lord Sekiei to be in a far more vulnerable mental state than this, which would've given me an opening to comfort him and spoil him rotten until he couldn't possibly live without me. It was the perfect plan!"

"Hey now, Ou Meirin," I sighed. "Don't say something so terrifying like it's no big deal. And get off me now. You've been clinging to me long enough."

"Ah!"

As soon as she relaxed her arms, I fled from her hold on me. If I'd let her cling to me any longer, the soldiers would've started spreading rumors about us. Meirin's cheeks puffed out like an affronted child's and she stomped her feet.

"L-Lord Sekiei, you meanie!" she exclaimed, pressing her left hand to her voluptuous chest. "How could you?! Your child bride has made the arduous journey across the continent to come and see you, and yet you treat her in this terrible manner?!"

"If I recall correctly, you're older than me, aren't you?" I couldn't help retorting in a calm voice. *"Child bride"? That's awful phrasing!*

Meirin stood still momentarily to let Miss Shizuka place the orange hat back on her head before raising a finger at me. "Oh, boo to you! Lord Sekiei, men who care about insignificant details like that are

unpopular with the ladies."

"Hey! Didn't you know that some words are so hurtful, they can kill a man?" *Ou Meirin, you dreadful, horrible person. I can't believe you'd go that far.*

While I was wallowing in self-pity, Ruri entered the room, but the moment she saw Meirin, she crossed her arms with a look of disbelief on her face. "Oh, it's you. I was wondering what all the ruckus was. Long time no see, Shizuka. I'm glad to see you're well."

"Likewise, Lady Ruri," Miss Shizuka replied. "I'm also relieved to see you in good health."

"You're so *mean*! So you're *not* happy to see *me* again, Ruri?!" Meirin exclaimed before charging at the blonde strategist.

"Dummy. I never said *that*," Ruri said, sidestepping the oncoming Meirin with an elegant turn and ending up to the right of me. She then continued her report in an unruffled tone. "The scout has just returned from crossing the river. There aren't many guards there, likely because there was a recent change of personnel in the garrison."

As our army stood at present, we were at a major disadvantage compared to the main Gen forces, so in order to gain the upper hand, we needed to carefully choose where we would engage them in battle.

I nodded and plucked a speck of dust from Ruri's shoulder. "Understood. By the way, I'm handing the U reinforcements over to you, all right? Oto will command them."

"All right, sounds good."

"However, I forbid you from ordering them all into the fray and leaving yourself with no one to protect you, like you did last time."

"Can't make any promises there. And don't go wasting your breath giving that order to Oto or Miu either. They obey me more than they do you."

I growled, unable to deny it. In Hakurei's absence, *I* was supposed to be the supreme commander of the army, but my strategist was always playing dirty. She just loved to cheat.

"I see how it is," Meirin said, her eyes narrowing at us as I struggled to think up any kind of comeback. She marched forwards

and squeezed herself in between me and Ruri, then puffed her chest out and pointed a finger at the blonde ascendant. "So *you* were the culprit, Ruri!"

Ruri and I both blinked, then looked at one another in confusion. *What in the world could she be talking about?*

Meirin cupped her cheeks and shuddered. "On my way here, I got word that the White Wolf had kidnapped Miss Hakurei. But what I *didn't* receive were any reports of Lord Sekiei going off to try to rescue her directly after the incident, and I thought that strange. I never expected *Ruri* would have been the one standing in his way! Oh, but wait. Now that I think about it, I've seen Miss Oto and Miss Miu in the base as well. I-Is *everyone* in on it? U-Unthinkable!"

"Uh, Miss Meirin?" I said in bewilderment as the diminutive prodigy lost herself in her own little world. *I don't understand her at all.*

Peeved at her name being brought up by Meirin, Ruri glared at the merchant in silence, a sharp look in her eyes.

Meirin returned back to reality from her fantasies and puffed her chest out again. "Humph. T-Too bad, though! Now that I, Ou Meirin, have arrived, your atrocities end right here! Lord Sekiei is *my* husband, and I'm not sharing him or giving him to any of you. If you refuse to back down, then you'll just have to defeat me in com— Ack!" I didn't let her finish, karate chopping the top of Meirin's head, right over her hat. Her words *had* put Ruri in a bad mood, after all. "Lord Sekiei!" Meirin whined, clutching her painful head and looking up at me through tear-filled eyes.

"Don't throw a tantrum so soon after our reunion. And just what do you take our Master Strategist for, anyway? Are *you* gonna take responsibility if she starts sulking?"

"I'm fine. I don't care," Ruri interjected.

Yeah, maybe I'll start believing that when you stop creating those black flower petals around you. I took a piece of candy out of the cloth bag hanging off my belt and fed it to Ruri.

Meirin looked terribly offended by what she was seeing. "Grr, Lord Sekiei, you're only ever mean to *me*! I request much nicer treatment from you! Or else!"

"Or else?" Ruri and I queried in unison.

Meirin again stood still momentarily so that Shizuka could put her jacket back on her, then she placed her hands on her hips and exclaimed, "Or else I won't show you the thing I prepared for you on the off chance you'd need it!"

"Sekiei." Ruri tugged at my sleeve and her wordless order was clear: "Play along." As much as she acted like she didn't care, my strategist was actually a very kind girl.

"Hmm, well, that's not good," I said, feigning apprehension. "In that case..."

"Tee hee! Do you really think you can butter me up *that* easily?" But her tune quickly changed. "Lord Sekiei? Wh-What are you—Eek!"

I embraced Meirin in a loose hug, and while playing with her hair, I whispered into her ear, "To tell you the truth, I was waiting for you to get here. Won't you lend us your might so that we can save Hakurei?"

"Y-Yesh..."

By the time I released her again, Meirin's cheeks were bright red, and she was fidgeting awkwardly. "Wait until Hakurei hears about this," Ruri's frosty glare seemed to say. *D-Don't blame me! It was the only way!*

As Ruri and I exchanged a silent argument using just our eyes, Meirin looked up at me, fluttering her eyelashes. "L-Lord Sekiei, you've become better at handling women."

"Have I? I haven't noticed, personally."

"So what did you bring? Granted, I already have an idea what it might be," Ruri said, cheerily barging into our conversation.

Meirin trotted over behind the ascendant and placed both hands on Ruri's shoulders. "Heh heh. It's something the Chou army needs more than anything else right now. The parts were hidden all along the Grand Canal, but it takes one to know one! I collected them all! ☆"

Ruri and I exchanged another look. *Looks like Meirin brought what we expected her to bring.* We had no ally more reliable than this little prodigy.

My eyes met Miss Shizuka's, and upon seeing the wordless request in them, I made a suggestion to the girls. "I'm sure we all have a heap to catch up on, so let's chat over some tea, okay? Meirin, why don't you tell us everything you know about what's been happening over in the capital?"

***

I—Chou Hakurei—hurried down the hallway of the opulent manor that had once been some noble family's abode with my guide, the White Wolf, Rus—long spear still in hand—urging me on. "Lady Hakurei, please hurry. Emperor Adai is waiting for you in the inner courtyard up ahead."

The prospect of seeing her master again after so long had put her in high spirits ever since that morning. Yes, this was the day I would finally get to meet the White Wraith.

"All right," I said, though it felt like my feet had weights strapped to them. With each step I took, my purple clothing fluttered around me.

In the end, I never managed to figure out where this place actually was. Since Adai was leading the attack on Rinkei, I worked out we must be close to the capital, and while I'd kept an eye out for an opportunity to escape the whole time, Rus had never once let her guard down. Security was tight too, with female armed guards standing to attention at various points around the manor. Ah, if only I'd had a weapon, things might have gone very differently.

At the end of the hallway, I could see a garden with a variety of flowers in full bloom. Anxiety threatened to crush my heart, and I gripped the ends of my sleeves tightly. *Sekiei!* Rus stopped suddenly just before crossing the threshold into the courtyard.

"So you've come, Chou Hakurei." But the person who peeled out of the shadow of a vermilion-lacquered pillar was a girl wearing a fox mask and a tattered cloak, whom I recognized as Ren, the leader of the organization Senko. On the night that Sekiei, Miss Shizuka, and I sneaked into the palace to rescue my father, Chou Tairan, we had fought her before the Dragon Jade. But what was she doing *here*?

Ignoring my confusion at her presence, the girl placed her hand on the hilt of her foreign sword. "Do you remember what I said that night? I told you I would kill anyone who saw my face. Your head is mine."

I didn't even have time to open my mouth before she was lunging at me in such a low crouch, it almost looked like she was crawling. *The long journey here has left me out of practice. I can't dodge her attack!* Ren drew her blade—which bore a wave pattern so beautiful, I shuddered to gaze upon it—and the resulting scream of metal on metal filled the air.

Rus had maneuvered herself in front of me and used her spear to deflect the flurry of attacks delivered by Ren's four swords of differing lengths. *What superhuman skills Rus possesses! No, in fact, she's blocking the attacks as if she can see them before they land.* Rus blocked the last strike, then sent Ren flying backwards. She sailed through the air as if she weighed less than a feather, before planting her feet on one of the vermilion-lacquered pillars to kill her momentum and drop back to the ground.

"Tsk! Impressive, White Wolf," Ren spat. "Mother would be delighted if she knew how skilled you'd become at the magic of foresight."

Irritation twisted Rus's beautiful face, and twirling her spear in her hand, she snapped, "Lady Ren, you go too far with your games. Lady Chou Hakurei is a guest of Emperor Adai's, and I am under strict orders to treat her hospitably. If you insist on continuing with this roughhousing, then I, the White Wolf Rus, shall be your opponent." She delivered this last line firmly, flashing the tip of her spear to reinforce the threat.

For a moment, an icy tension filled the hallway. But Ren backed down first. She sheathed her foreign sword, and as if to apologize, removed her fox mask to reveal the same silver hair and blue eyes I possessed.

"I'm aware of his orders. I never planned on doing any real harm," she muttered, spinning on her heels and heading for the door that led to the inner courtyard. She looked back over her shoulder at me, and I could see a hint of admiration in her beautiful azure eyes.

"While I do still intend to kill you and Chou Sekiei, I have to say I admire your tenacious spirit and how you're fighting on even after losing Chou Tairan. Now, come on, before Adai drinks himself silly."

Beyond the door lay an impressive garden filled with blooming flowers of all sizes and colors. The previous owner of the manor must have had an interest in botany, for the garden here was on par with the one at the Ou manor in the capital, which I'd visited several times. Sandwiched between Ren and Rus, we walked deeper into the garden until... *There he is.*

Sitting in an elaborate chair was a man with a hat perched atop his long white hair, and he was so slender, he could easily have been mistaken for a girl. This man was Adai Dada, emperor of Gen and my late father's nemesis. Next to him stood a woman of unparalleled beauty, her long lavender hair and pale green clothes making her seem quite delicate. I couldn't see any soldiers guarding the inner courtyard, but that only meant these three women around me had more than enough strength to defend their emperor should the need arise. My hands grew clammy from anxiety.

In contrast to my nervousness, the beautiful purple-haired Rus broke into a jog, her spear still in hand. She knelt before the white-haired man and lowered her head in a deep bow. "Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf, I, White Wolf Rus, stand here before you."

I can almost envision the big, wagging wolf's tail behind her.

Standing a little way in front of me, Ren must have glimpsed the same thing, because she muttered, "So he can reduce even a wolf to a dog."

The white-haired emperor placed his cup down on the table and, ignoring me, showed Rus a letter. "I'm glad to see you have returned safely, Rus. I've just received an interesting report. Your mysticism-obsessed mother, the Honorable One, was planning a revolt. She ordered the soldiers in Anshuu to return to Seitou without my permission. The soldiers under Hasho's command ignored her orders, but Ukuna in Shiryuu is furious."

No way. Seitou betrayed Gen?! I couldn't hide my shock at this confidential information being spoken about so freely in front of me.

If only I could get this info to Sekiei and Miss Ruri! But a thunderous noise interrupted my thoughts, and all the birds in the garden took to the air as one, startled by the loud disturbance.

The noise had come from Rus slamming the butt of her spear against the ground, unadulterated fury blazing in her eyes. "Your Imperial Majesty, order me to attack Seitou," she growled. "My mother's obsession with the Heavenly Swords and the fairy tale that is mysticism has clouded her judgment. I will murder the foolish woman myself and bring her head back to you!"

Rus had told me that the witch known as the Honorable One, who ruled Seitou from the shadows, had been pouring nearly all of her time and effort into reviving mysticism, a kind of magic that had existed in the age of the gods. Had the Heavenly Swords caught her interest in her attempts to achieve this?

"Uto," Adai called out, then handed the letter to the beautiful woman with lavender hair, before addressing Rus once more. "It's fine. I cannot ask you, my loyal retainer, to commit such an act. Next spring, once we have destroyed Ei and unified all the lands under the heavens, I shall do the deed myself."

Rus didn't look all that happy when she heard that, but she didn't argue against it. Instead, she murmured "Yessir" and backed away.

Ren caught my eye, and understanding the unspoken command in her gaze, I stepped forwards, my heart pounding so hard, it was hurting my chest. *Sekiei, give me courage!*

Adai finally noticed my presence and his eyes narrowed. "Silver hair and blue eyes... It's been too long, Chou Hakurei. We last met on the battlefield at Keiyou, did we not?" he said, spitting the words out like a curse, not bothering to hide his disgust and animosity towards me as he snatched up his cup again. But despite his open hostility, he had the woman he had called Uto pull out a chair across from him before winking at me to sit.

Now that I'm here, I guess I just have to go with the flow. I steeled my resolve and sat down in the antique chair. Uto set a porcelain cup on the table in front of me and poured some tea into it. I could see a blizzard raging behind her eyes. *She looks a little like Ren.*

Adai tossed his alcohol down his throat, then in a gesture that reminded me of Sekiei, gave a casual wave of his left hand. “Leave us, all of you.”

“No, Your Imperial Majesty!” Rus cried out in a panic at the same moment that Uto exclaimed, “We can’t *possibly* leave the two of you alone!”

I couldn’t blame them for their trepidation. While Adai might have been the one who’d requested this meeting, in what world would an emperor desire a private meeting with someone who had sworn revenge on him? Not only that, but I’d heard Adai couldn’t even swing a sword, which meant if I had any intention of harming him...

“There’s no need for that, daughter of Chou Tairan,” the White Wraith said, sounding bored as he poured more alcohol into his cup. The aroma wafting from the cup told me it was the same mountain peach wine Sekiei enjoyed. “Someone Chou Sekiei allows to stand at his side would never resort to such underhanded tactics. Or am I wrong?”

My silence was my answer. He was right, of course. I could never—*would* never—do anything to dishonor my father or Sekiei.

Ren clapped her hands. “Rus, Uto, let’s wait outside. We can trust Chou Hakurei.”

“All right,” Rus whispered after a moment’s hesitation.

“Sister,” Uto started to protest, but the three of them departed the inner courtyard together, leaving me alone with Adai.

No matter what happens, I will maintain my dignity as Chou Hakurei. After swearing that to myself, I waited to see what the emperor was going to say and do.

The white-haired man placed an elbow on the armrest of his chair. “If we waste too much time, either Rus or Uto will find some excuse to return. Or perhaps Ren will be the first to come back. Don’t let her attitude deceive you; she takes her work seriously.” His gaze pierced me like shards of ice, and while it was mostly hatred behind that glare, I also sensed an unfathomable and unshakable envy. “There’s only one reason I summoned a detestable woman like yourself here.” He paused and let out a soft sigh. Looking at him like this, he was so waifish, I felt like I could break him just by touching

him. However, this was the same man who was actively destroying my homeland. He tapped the table and said calmly, "Hand over Chou Sekiei. If you do that, I promise to give the Chou and U families a place—both literally and metaphorically—in the Gen Empire once this war is over."

In an instant, my emotions threatened to boil over, but I bit my tongue and with immeasurable effort, managed to keep them in check. "What did you just say?" I said, doing my best to keep my rage out of my voice. Dying here would go against the vow I'd made to watch over Sekiei on his deathbed.

"The Ei Empire's fate is already sealed," Adai murmured, sounding like he'd long since grown tired of the war. He stood up, turned his back to me—rendering himself defenseless—and raised a hand in the air. "Half of the Imperial Guard has marched to its own ruin, and the Jo army has fled back to the southern regions without even putting up a fight. The great water fortress, which is still seeing daily desertions, is on its last legs, thanks to the efforts of my cousin, Orid Dada, and my marshal." A small bird fluttered down and perched on his thin, pale finger. "Soon, I shall rule over all of the lands under the heavens. The last time an empire accomplished unification was a thousand years ago, during the days of the Tou Empire."

I couldn't argue with that. If the Three Great Generals were still alive, things might have turned out differently, but as it stood, the more I thought about the present situation in the ongoing war, the more I realized how little chance Ei stood against Gen.

Still playing with the birds, Adai turned to face me. "However, unification doesn't mean the continent will be at peace. For starters, the tribes to the north and south must be subjugated. Then, we'll need to take control of the trading route to the far west. If we strike now, the technological gap between us when it comes to gunpowder shouldn't be too wide."

I stared at him agape, shocked at just how far into the future his vision extended. For many people—myself included—the idea of "unification" only encompassed the lands the Tou Empire had once conquered. But this man wanted even *more*?

Standing up, I glared at him and let out some of the simmering

anger that was boiling inside me. “So that’s why you want me to hand Sekiei over to you?”

“It’s not a bad trade for you, is it?” he pointed out. “What do you say?”

He wasn’t wrong. The Chou and U families lacked the strength to continue battling the powerful Gen Empire. However...

“Of course it is. There’s no way I can accept that condition,” I said.

“Humph. I knew you’d say that,” Adai snarled, again not bothering to hide his enmity towards me. He ran his hand roughly through his white hair to let out his irritation, then flashed me a cocky grin. “In that case, we must settle it on the battlefield. If you remain my captive, he’ll surely come and rescue you. Of that, I’m positive. And once I’ve defeated him, he’ll be *mine*!”

“You...” I suppressed my body’s natural instinct to start trembling in fear and pressed my fist against my chest. If only I’d had the ribbon Sekiei gave me, I could’ve summoned even more courage. But I still managed to work up the nerve to quietly pose Adai a question. “Why are you so obsessed with Sekiei? Are you after the Heavenly Swords?”

The White Wraith froze. “What?” He covered his eyes with his hand as his lips contorted into a grimace. “Someone like *you* could never understand the string of fate that ties us together,” he spat, merciless in his contempt. “If you want the Heavenly Swords, they’re yours. I’ll give you all the land, riches, and men you could possibly want.” When he removed the hand covering his eyes, ice shot down my spine. “I’ll say this one more time, Chou Hakurei: Give me that man. Give me my Kouei! I, Ouei, am the only one who deserves to stand at his side! It could never be *you*!”



All the strength in my legs drained away, and I collapsed back into the chair with a choked gasp. In my time spent on the battlefield, I'd often felt auras of murderous intent directed at me by enemy soldiers. *But I've never felt anything like this before! It's a hatred as deep as an abyss, and it's reserved solely for me! I have to... I have to say something. I need to yell, "You're wrong!* I'm *the one who gets to stand at Sekiei's side!" But why am I finding it so hard to form any words?*

I sat in silence with Adai glaring down at me, before he settled back into his own chair. "That's all for this conversation." My reaction must have assured him of victory, for he unfolded another letter with a wide grin. "Is life with you as his partner *truly* the right path for him? Think about it as well as my deal while you're relaxing in this manor. You have until Sekiei's arrival to come to a decision."

***

In the depths of a cold palace in Ranyou, Seitou's capital, I—the Honorable One—lounged on a bench while listening to reports from my subordinates. It was the dead of night, meaning the room was dark, and the aroma of incense filled the air.

"Honorable One, the soldiers stationed in Anshuu have returned home, as per your orders."

"Unfortunately, the Millenary Diviner and our main forces in the central plains have refused to follow your command. They even resorted to killing over half of our messengers."

"Of the messengers sent to Princess Rus, only one survived her wrath."

My eyes narrowed as I glanced up at my kowtowing subjects, all of whom were dressed in religious robes. "Oh? So my daughter and the main forces of my army are ignoring my orders?"

I slid a feather between the pages of the old book I had been reading. My army disobeying me was one thing, but I hadn't expected my daughter, Rus, to prioritize the White Wraith's command to abduct Chou Tairan's daughter over my own directive of retrieving the Heavenly Swords, which were the key to reviving

mysticism. Allowing one messenger to return alive was her way of sending me a warning: "I don't care if you're my mother, if you stand against Emperor Adai, I will cut off your head."

Humph! So she'll listen to a man, but not her own parent? She might not have inherited my talent for magic, but she truly is my daughter. Still, things aren't going the way I wanted. My plan to sow chaos in the rear lines of the Gen army by handing out manifestos stamped with a fake Heirloom Seal in the northwestern territories of Ei had been a success, and Chou Tairan's orphans had reclaimed Keiyou as I'd hoped, delaying the unification of the empires, which would have led to peace.

The problem I had was my daughter had ignored my order to take advantage of that distraction to steal the Heavenly Swords. Now that I had given the order for the soldiers in Anshuu plus those under Hasho's command to retreat, Gen would turn its sights on Seitou once it was finished with Ei, and not even I could defeat Ouei on the battlefield. If only I'd gotten my hands on the Heavenly Swords, I could've appeased him by giving him the head of the oafish king of Seitou and his country.

Wait a second. Rus kidnapped Chou Tairan's daughter, didn't she? And she moved on Adai's orders. That means... I sat up. "Gather everyone who can move," I ordered. "And don't forget the incense. I will personally head for the central plains and remind those insubordinate fools who their mistress is."

"Understood." My acolytes didn't ask any questions. They simply scurried out of the room and disappeared down the dark hallway.

With my open fan hiding my lips from view, I murmured to myself, "White Wraith, despite your godly intellect, you are as mortal as the rest of us. I have found the chink in your armor. If it all goes to plan..." Then not only would I get my hands on the Heavenly Swords I so dearly wished to possess, but I might even take that monster's head as well.

I glanced into a nearby mirror and saw my own sadistic glee reflected back at me.

Chapter Four

"General Ukuna, as I have, um, explained *repeatedly*, we lack the manpower to pursue the Seitou soldiers who have deserted their posts. Our supply routes will collapse!"

"And isn't it *your* job to figure out what to do? We cannot allow those who have broken military protocol to just roam freely, lest they sully Emperor Adai's reputation!"

The young general who had burst into headquarters slammed his hands down on the desk, causing the mountains of documents and scrolls to fly everywhere, with some fluttering gently to the ground, which still lacked flooring. My predecessor, General Gi Heian, had turned the backwater village of Shiryuu into a proper logistics hub, though while he'd accomplished a lot in a relatively short amount of time, we still had a lot of work to do.

I—Kou Riu—had arrived here from Enkei a few days before as the replacement logistics officer, and had been toiling away at my desk since that morning. Placing my brush on the inkstone, I patted down my pale yellow robes to dislodge some of the dust and dirt that was clinging to the fabric. The handsome face of General Ukuna Dada—who was still in his armor—glared down at me. As a female noncombatant whose family hailed from Ei and who was rumored to be a descendant of the Ei imperial bloodline, I doubted I had the trust of the Gen people, who—with the possible exception of the emperor—valued strength above all else. And as one might have been able to guess by his surname, the general was a member of the Dada imperial family. At twenty years old, he was around the same age as me, yet he'd already made a name for himself on the battlefield. He also disliked civil officials. *Of course, I can see where he's coming from on that...*

"S-So you say. But I can't give you supplies we don't have," I stammered. "Now that we have lost Keiyou to the Chou family, we

need to work faster and harder than ever to make sure the soldiers on the front line don't starve. Because even if His Imperial Majesty has forbidden it, they may end up resorting to pillaging. I-I believe *that* would damage the emperor's reputation far more than a few deserters."

General Ukuna gnashed his teeth and spat a curse word, then stomped out of headquarters. Once the sound of his footsteps had faded away completely, I heaved a sigh and leaned back in my chair.

"That was terrifying," I said to myself, twiddling my light-brown hair by curling strands of it around my finger and noticing how the stress of consecutive days of hard work had manifested as split ends. "I *know* General Ukuna's not a bad person, but..."

I'd heard the emperor himself had appointed me as leader of the Shiryuu garrison. General Ukuna was far from foolish, and one of the few people who understood the importance of proper governance over an annexed land, which was why he had backed down after listening to the explanation given to him by a mere logistics officer, even if he *had* scared the life out of me before doing so. With unification so close at hand, leaving the front line must have been frustrating for a warrior like General Ukuna. *Still, having General Gi take his spot at such a critical moment seems rather reckless. Is it all part of the emperor's design?*

I stood up, removed the lid from an earthenware pot, and poured some water into a chipped cup. *"I heard the new female logistics officer is a descendant of the Ei imperial family, whose line branched off about fifty years ago,"* I recalled the soldiers whispering about me. *Hmm, I wonder what they'd say if they could see me now.*

My childhood home had boasted a large tapestry depicting my family tree, so I was also aware that my side of the family had branched off from the imperial family about fifty years ago after losing the lands north of the great river. I'd read that we had survived the enemy's vicious pursuit by hiding among the populace and blending in. My grandparents—who had been children at the time—had shared anecdotes about that period with me, and I didn't doubt their stories.

But even so, I felt no personal attachment to my heritage. I was

set to turn nineteen this year, my homeland was Enkei, and I had never received special treatment in the army because of my family. Granted, as someone of Ei descent, I *had* faced plenty of persecution here, and I couldn't help wondering whether my life would have been easier if I'd been born in Ei instead.

"Though I hear someone assassinated the chancellor in the imperial palace, so I would've had to deal with a whole other set of problems..." I reflected, answering my own question. "I should work hard every day to accomplish my dream of leading a nice, relaxing life as a local official. Let's do this!" With my words still echoing around my humble office, I picked up my brush and got cracking on a few tasks while my attendant was out of the room fetching my breakfast. As usual, the words "Keiyou" and "Chou army" appeared several times throughout the scrolls and documents. "Chou Sekiei," I murmured. "With the Heavenly Swords that were crafted from a star that fell during the age of the gods, he's like the second coming of the Tou Empire's undefeated general, Kou Eihou."

As someone who had never set foot on the battlefield, I hadn't been afforded the opportunity to witness the legendary feats performed by the National Shield's orphan with my own eyes, though I did once meet a soldier in a bar who had, and he'd described Ei's monster to me. Apparently, Chou Sekiei had defeated multiple courageous and powerful generals all by himself, as well as surviving an encounter with the Black Wolf, our strongest fighter. He had also done the impossible and bisected the Dragon Jade with nothing more than a sword, and if that weren't enough, this famous general had never once suffered defeat on the battlefield.

Everything I'd been told about him bordered on the unbelievable, though soldiers had a tendency to exaggerate, so the rumors about Chou Sekiei were likely equally embellished. *There's no way someone like that—much less, someone who is younger than myself—can exist. Once Emperor Adai unifies the land, these battlefield rumors are bound to disappear in time—*

In the next moment, there came a rumbling noise so powerful, it shook the basic walls and roof of the headquarters, and I barely managed to stop myself from tumbling out of my chair before I ran

outside into the thick morning fog. Soldiers and officials likewise raced out of the surrounding tents, the air abuzz with panic. *What in the world just happened?!* There was another rumble, and this one seemed to shake the brightening sky itself. *This isn't thunder!* I was still standing with my mouth agape at this sudden turn of events when General Ukuna galloped into the central courtyard on horseback and raised his spear high in the air.

"Everyone, to arms!" he roared. "The enemy is attacking! As soon as you are ready, meet me at the front gate!"

"Y-Yessir!" The soldiers jumped at the command and ran off to prepare for battle.

I'd expect nothing less from such an experienced general! I had nothing but respect for him.

"Kou Riu!" General Ukuna called out to me, drawing my attention. "Regroup with the garrison as quickly as possible. You may get caught up in the conflict if you don't move from there."

"G-General..." I began, but he interrupted me.

"I've heard that rumbling noise many times since the battle at Seitou. It's the sound of fire lances: powerful weapons that launch stones and the like using gunpowder. What they lack in accuracy, they more than make up with their efficacy in frightening the horses," he explained, his expression a mix of austerity and joy at getting to return to the battlefield.

An enemy army that makes heavy use of fire lances? Wait, does that mean...

"I heard the National Shield once used the mobility of boats to destroy Gi Heian's army here," General Ukuna continued. "They must have employed the same tactic. Not a bad idea. After all, it's like you said. We've already lost Keiyou. If we lose Shiryuu as well, it'll stall our forces on the front line."

Don't tell me the enemy plans to take this base as well! I must have paled at this unexpected and highly perilous turn of events, because General Ukuna gazed down at me with an exasperated expression on his face. His elite riders who were gathering around us scoffed at me as well.

"Stop looking like you're about to keel over on the spot," he

chided. “They have a few hundred soldiers at most, meaning our force far outnumbers theirs. You remember how His Imperial Majesty gave us orders to destroy or seize enemy ships along the Grand Canal, yes?”

“I-I do.”

On this southern expedition, Emperor Adai had been particularly cautious of the Ei army’s ships, and had ordered his generals to do something about them. And no matter how powerful the Chou army was, they couldn’t send soldiers across the river without vessels to do so.

General Ukuna grinned. “My soldiers and I will give them hell on the front lines. Head to the hill just behind headquarters and wait for us there. The fog should provide you with cover.”

“G-Good luck!” I replied, my voice wavering pathetically. The battlefield really wasn’t for me.

I braced myself for a scolding, but the general was staring into the surrounding fog, his eyes narrowed. “Soon, His Imperial Majesty will unify these lands, and when he does, he’ll need skilled officials like you. The time has come for us soldiers to put our lives on the line and fulfill our roles.”

This unexpected praise left me speechless. I never knew the general held me in such high regard.

Raising his spear above his head, the youthful yet experienced general roared, “Let’s go, my brave, loyal wolves! With me!”

The soldiers raised their voices into a war cry as they, too, held their weapons and shields aloft before racing out of headquarters to engage the enemy, their muscular backs growing smaller and smaller until they eventually disappeared in the fog. *They’ll win. There’s no way they can lose.* With that thought calming my mind, I turned around and started making my way to the hill behind headquarters as instructed, making a mental note to thank General Ukuna and the others and apologize for my previous ignorance as soon as they returned.

But as soon as I got there and gazed out at the battlefield, now visible after the fog had cleared up, my heart pounded with fear. “Wh-What in the world is happening?” I whispered.

Not much time had passed since we had found ourselves under attack, yet the approximately five-thousand-strong Shiryuu garrison army was already in danger of being totally annihilated, seemingly unable to land a glove on the smaller enemy force they were facing. The defensive troops we had stationed up on the hill in order to have them swoop down at the very end of the battle had already started advancing to provide reinforcements to the main force, but before they'd even had time to get their bearings, the enemy had caught them in a pincer attack and routed them.

The massive war flag that billowed in the wind before me bore the character "Chou." Our army was in a state of complete disarray, with only General Ukuna's men still putting up a fight. On matters of warfare, I was a complete novice, but even I could see we were about to lose. Although I'd received orders to retreat, I couldn't possibly flee at this point. All I could do was watch the inevitable unfold.

General Ukuna yelled encouragement to his soldiers as he clashed with a massive man wielding a battle-axe, but the second the general decided to put some distance between himself and his opponent, a black horse appeared from nowhere, galloping towards him like a gust of wind. The newcomer hadn't quite gotten the drop on the general, however, and the latter quickly urged his horse to face his new foe and surge forwards to meet him. The two riders passed one another and...

A gasp went up from the soldiers and officers who were still fighting at the sight of the young general—a man who had amassed countless military merits from his feats on so many battlefields while in the service of Emperor Adai—falling from his horse.

"Capture him!" the black-haired enemy general yelled, his voice carrying across the battlefield. At once, a group of enemy riders surged forwards and surrounded General Ukuna. *N-No way!*

"Th-The general lost?!"

"Impossible!"

"But he's one of the greatest heroes from the northern battlefront!"

The distressed cries of my allies reached my ears, and although

General Ukuna's soldiers tried to hold the line, as soon as the black-haired general who had defeated their commanding officer with a single attack turned to face them, their spears wavered.

"Black hair, red eyes, black sword?"

"Wait, you're..."

"It's Ch-Chou Sekiei!"

"It's the Kouei of the Modern Ages! The Kouei of the Modern Ages is here!"

"We can't defeat him!"

"Run away! Run away before he kills us!"

Even though there was only a single general facing them down, the several thousand soldiers that remained of the Shiryuu garrison turned tail and fled. From my perch on the hill behind headquarters, I couldn't tear my eyes away from this young enemy commander on his black mount as he slowly made his way across the battlefield. My muscles felt like they were locked in place. *What a... What a godly presence! I can see why the soldiers call him the reincarnation of Kouei.*

"Ah." Before I knew it, the enemy had surrounded our headquarters and the hillside I was standing on.

"Hmm?" The massive enemy general tilted his head to one side. "A female official?"

I let out a scream as he held out his battle-axe and pointed it at my face. Freed from my paralysis, I collapsed to the ground. *Oh god, I'm going to die he—*

But before I could even finish my thought, a youthful voice casually called out to him from the rear of the enemy forces. "Wait, Shigou. There's something I'd like her to do. More importantly, I want you to go after all those fleeing soldiers. But don't let your guard down. They're the underlings of that skilled commander we just fought, so if they manage to recover from their confusion, they'll hit us with a counterattack."

"Okay, boss! Let's go, you bastards!"

"Leave it to us!"

And with that, the team of enemy soldiers who had surrounded our headquarters galloped away. The only ones who remained were

the black-haired, red-eyed enemy general on his mighty steed with his black sword in hand, a girl with short black hair in ethnic garb wielding a bizarre round-tipped weapon, and what seemed to be a child soldier carrying multiple quivers on his back.

Sheathing his black sword, the enemy general dismounted and called over to me. "Hey, you there. You know who I am, yes? I've got a message I'd like you to pass on to Adai."

"T-To His Imperial Majesty?" It took my brain a moment to catch up with this unexpected request. Someone of my low standing could only dream of a personal audience with the emperor, yet this man wanted to leave his message with *me*?!

"Lord Sekiei." The dark-skinned girl seemed anxious, though she continued eyeing me with suspicion.

But the enemy general simply shrugged. "Oto, she's the best one for the job," he said, before turning his gaze southwards and skywards, and continuing in a calm voice. "'If it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get. You're the one who should be showing his ugly mug out here. And make sure you bring our princess with you when you do.' Pass that message on to him. Use those exact words."

His Imperial Majesty is akin to our god! How can you be so insolent?! Under normal circumstances, I would have voiced my fury, but what actually escaped my mouth was more of a fearful shriek. "Th-That's insane! You're asking the impossible of me!"

I wasn't the only one in disbelief at his request. The girl he'd called Oto looked equally astonished.

But Chou Sekiei pressed on with his merciless order, a bright smile splashed across his face: "However you have to do it, secure an audience with him and give him my message. Oto, once you've made a note of her name and position, give her some supplies and a horse."

"You'll be the one explaining all this to Lady Ruri," Oto muttered.

"Well, let's work on an excuse together before she shows up, okay? Kuuen, help us out," Sekiei said, calling out to the young soldier.

"Oh, fine. I guess I don't mind that," Oto murmured, while Kuuen stammered, "Y-Yessir!"

The enemy general must have lost all interest in me, because he had launched into conversation with the other two. While their eyes were momentarily not on me, I pinched my cheek.

"Ow. Well, this isn't a dream." *Rejoice, mother. Your little Riu has earned herself the opportunity to have an audience with His Imperial Majesty.* The greatest challenge of my life awaited me, and my only response to it was to grimace.

***

"Oh, wow. What a view!"

Somewhere south of Shiryuu, I—Chou Sekiei—looked out over Gyoumei Moor—named as such due to the story of Hi Gyoumei, the first emperor of the Tou Empire, discovering a spring here—where countless Gen flags were flapping in the wind. The horses underneath them were whinnying ceaselessly, while soldiers bustled about frantically. Morale appeared high. I recognized quite a few faces down there too.

"The Black Wolf, the White Wolf, the Millenary Diviner... Oh, hey, that flag is Orid Dada's! And they've even brought the regiment that's full of Ei descendants. All together, I count about fifty thousand soldiers. I'm guessing they've brought out Gen's finest for this. Kou Riu did her job, all right. Kuuen, feast your eyes on this. That there is a once-in-a-lifetime sight." I let out an impressed sigh as I gazed out from the makeshift watchtower we had set up, then patted my young attendant on his shoulder. The light armor he was wearing suited him well.

"Y-Yes, Lord Sekiei!"

Half a month had passed since we had used the boats Meirin had gathered for us to launch a successful surprise attack on Shiryuu. Sure, this meant we had taken control of their supply routes, but even so, I hadn't been expecting the main Gen army to turn around from its attack on Rinkei and return northwards so soon. Maybe I had gone a little overboard while trying to tick off Adai.

Observing the enemy formation through her spyglass, Ruri let out a loud sigh that was obviously meant for my ears. She thumped my

chest with her small fist, the impact causing the Heavenly Swords, Black Star and White Star, that were hanging from my belt to shake. "You're the one who orchestrated all of this, aren't you? I can't believe you went and picked a fight with Adai behind my back."

"O-Oh, come on. Don't say that," I said, placing my hand on Ruri's blue hat while she continued to complain under her breath. "The early bird gets the worm, as they say. My methods might have been a *little* unconventional, sure, but thanks to that, we managed to set up our formation before they could. The advantages we have gained from dragging them to the battlefield of our choosing aren't something to sneeze at either. And if you wanna complain about the messenger, well, Oto and Kuuen were both there, and they approved of the idea."

The pair were presently serving as Ruri's bodyguards, and when they heard this assertion, they jumped to their feet and shook their heads frantically.

"L-Lord Sekiei!" Oto cried out, shovel in hand.

"W-We didn't! We didn't approve of anything!" Kuuen exclaimed.

Ha ha ha! You two became my accomplices the moment you didn't stop me!

Ruri placed her spyglass back into its holder at her waist and leveled an unimpressed look at me. "They don't seem to agree with your version of events."

"It's sad how a difference of perception can bend the truth so," I replied innocently. *Yes, it really is very tragic and unfortunate.*

Our conversation was interrupted by Ou Meirin—the star of the river ambush, for she had been the one who had gathered up all the ships along the Grand Canal—who was tied to Miss Shizuka by a rope so that she wouldn't fall off the watchtower. She slammed her little fists against the guardrail, gritting her teeth and growling. "To think Lord Sekiei would go this far for Miss Hakurei... I'm so jealous of her! Oh, hey, I know! Maybe if the White Wraith kidnaps *me*, Lord Sekiei will pick a fight with him for my honor!"

"Um, I don't think that's a good idea," Kou Miu—who had accompanied us to the front lines in spite of my protests—pointed out.

"Lady Meirin, no," Miss Shizuka sighed calmly. Over the past two weeks, this had become something of a regular sight.

Ruri and Oto are one thing, but I sure wish Meirin and Miu would go back to Keiyou...

"Of course I'm accompanying you! Or else I'll die from a lack of Lord Sekiei in my life!" Meirin had chirped at the time.

"It may not be much, but my presence might serve as a boon to morale," Miu had argued.

Ah, what a headache. As the girls continued chattering away, I saw the line of cavalry in the middle of the enemy formation split in two, with one group heading to the right and the other to the left. "It looks like they're making their move," I observed.

Kou Riu had survived the mission I'd given her to convey my message to Adai, only for him to send her straight back with his response. She had subsequently returned to Shiryuu, and, looking like she was on the verge of passing out, she'd delivered Adai's request to us. "'Before the battle begins, I would like to exchange Chou Hakurei for Ukuna Dada, a member of our imperial family. After that, I'd like to have a private conversation with Chou Sekiei.'"

Okay, I thought, surveying the battlefield. *Time to go find out what he wants from me.* I winked at the girls—who had all fallen silent by this point—and said, "All right, I'm heading off now."

"Sekiei," Ruri mumbled, clutching my sleeve.

"I will serve as your bodyguard!" Oto volunteered, running up to me and only stopping when she was practically in my face.

In both pairs of eyes, I could see a deep distrust for Adai. Normally, Meirin and Miu would have said something too, but Miss Shizuka had her hands over their mouths to keep them silent. *Thanks for your hard work*, said the look I gave her as I nodded in gratitude. Then I unhitched the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars from my belt, and tossed them over to my attendant.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed as he caught them.

"Kuuen," I called over to him. "Hold on to those and come with me."

"Y-Yessir!" The youthful face of the foreign boy brightened as he clutched the twin swords closer to his chest.

From what Meirin had told me, his younger sister, Shun'en, was in Butoku guarding Karin, the youngest daughter of the Jo family. *I'll have to come up with some kind of plan for the final battle tomorrow. I can't let death separate this pair of siblings.*

With a new resolve burning in my chest, I turned to face Ruri, Oto, and Miu, who were all looking at me with worry etched on their faces. "Don't worry," I assured them. "Adai won't do anything to me. I mean, just imagine how it'd look if he killed me in the middle of our talks. He'd have to bear the shame of it for the rest of his life."

"I suppose," Ruri conceded reluctantly.

"Please be careful," Oto said.

"Sekiei," Miu whispered.

I turned to head for the ladder down to ground level, my attendant at my side, but suddenly, I was distracted by the sound of light footsteps.

"Lord Sekiei!" Meirin cried as she threw her arms around me without a hint of hesitation.

"Hmm? Oh, hey," I said, while the other girls all raised their voices in shock.

Ignoring the fact that her orange hat had once again flown off her head, Meirin smiled at me, looking satisfied with herself. "Goodbye for now, my husband! ♪ I pray for your safe return!"

I can see I must never let my guard down around this little prodigy. I glanced at Ruri and the others, who looked a lot like cats with their tails puffed out for some reason, then snatched the orange hat out of the air as it fluttered downwards and placed it back on Meirin's head before peeling her away from me.

"I'm not your husband, but keep those prayers coming," I said to Meirin, before turning to my crowd of onlookers. "Miss Shizuka, I'm leaving everyone in your care."

"Understood, Lord Sekiei. Good luck."

After mounting my horse, Zetsuei, I sauntered through the rows of allied soldiers with Kuuen in tow. They raised their voices in cheer as I passed and shouted words of encouragement.

"Lord Sekiei!"

"Please bring back Lady Hakurei!"

"If things start going sideways, just hightail it outta there, okay?"

"We'll protect you!"

"No, *we* will!"

"Huh? What'd you just say?!"

The soldiers must have somehow found out we were planning to exchange the enemy general for Hakurei. Without dismounting, I replied to each shout, promising to flee if I felt in any danger, telling them they could leave Hakurei to me, and advising them not to fight among themselves. Past three lines of wooden fences that served as our fortifications, I spied Gan Shigou and Kouzen at the head of their company, with a tied-up General Ukuna standing among their soldiers. Beside them stood Asaka wearing light armor. Not a single one of them could hide the anxiety on their faces.

"Hey, sorry I kept you waiting," I said, greeting them.

"Boss, do you think this might be a..." Shigou trailed off, so Kouzen finished the thought for him.

"Could this be a trap, Lord Sekiei?"

They were right to be worried. I gave them all an appreciative look before leaning down and peering into the young enemy general's face. "Hey, you still alive?"

After a moment of stony silence, he replied in a defeated tone, "Thanks to you. I never once imagined I would be a prisoner of war, waiting to be exchanged."

In the two weeks he had spent as our captive, we had learned that he was Orid's rival, and the two often competed over their military accomplishments. I raised my left hand and directed Zetsuei onwards, with Kuuen, Shigou, and Kouzen following me. All of a sudden, a beautiful female officer with long violet hair rode out from the enemy ranks on a white horse, and seeing the speed of her approach, I kicked Zetsuei into a gallop. We reached the middle ground between our two armies and stopped at a distance away from each other that our horses could cross in a second at a gallop if the necessity arose.

To prove she wasn't wielding any weapons, the woman released her grip on the reins of her horse. "I am a servant of Emperor Adai Dada, the child of the great Celestial Wolf," she said. "My name is

Rus, and I've been blessed with the title of the White Wolf."

"I am Chou Sekiei. You haven't hurt a hair on our princess's head, have you?" I called back over to this devastatingly beautiful wolf.

Instead of responding verbally to my question, a squad of female soldiers all in white led a lilac-garbed Hakurei forwards. A length of white cloth bound her wrists together, and she appeared thinner than I remembered, but I couldn't see any signs of injury on her.

"S-Sekiei! Why are you here?!" she cried out in a pained voice, sounding seconds away from bursting into tears.

Seems she's been overthinking things during her captivity. I signaled to Shigou and the others with a nod, and while officers from both sides sized each other up, Asaka was the first to dart past me and the female officers. As I watched her go, I noticed some Gen soldiers—with extreme efficiency—laying out a carpet on the ground nearby and setting up a shade cloth to block out the sunlight. A further group of soldiers carried over two old-looking stools and an antique table.

"Once we have exchanged Chou Hakurei for Ukuna, His Imperial Majesty wishes to speak with you. What do you say?" the violet-haired general proposed.

She already knew my answer to this question, so she had voiced it aloud on purpose. A cacophony of murmuring broke out all along Gen's ranks, indicating that only a few in their army had known about the forthcoming meeting.

Hmm, this is also a kind of ambush in its own way. She's testing me. "I agree!" I shouted back.

This time, it was the turn of my side of the battlefield to make all the noise. Hakurei and Ukuna were escorted away by Ei and Gen soldiers respectively, and now freed, they hurried back to their own sides.

Held tightly in Asaka's arms, Hakurei cried out my name again. "Sekiei!"

I met her gaze, and with my own look, communicated the message, "Don't worry; I'll see you later," to her, before dismounting my horse.

"Please excuse me for a short while," the White Wolf said with a

polite bow before turning her horse to go back towards the Gen lines.

But before she could go, a group of muscular men carrying a palanquin slowly made their way towards us from the other side of the battlefield. Beside them was a black-haired man with a scar on his left cheek and a great sword affixed to his back. This monster riding his massive horse alongside the palanquin bearers was known as Black Wolf Gisen. Inside the palanquin appeared a man with long white hair and a hat, his physique so slender, it would be easy to mistake him for a woman. This was the White Wraith, Adai Dada, the fearsome emperor of the Gen Empire. The last time I had seen him was when father succeeded in charging into Gen's headquarters during the Battle of Keiyou.

The people of Gen valued strength above all else, so you might ask why they obeyed Adai, who could neither ride a horse nor swing a sword. The answer to that was simple: His strategies were unbeatable. He crushed anyone who dared to take up arms against him. Still, I hadn't expected him to rise to my challenge so easily. I figured he would at least have waited until *after* he had taken Rinkei.

The men lowered the palanquin to the ground as Rus dismounted and held her hand out towards the occupant. Adai took it and allowed her to help him out. And as soon as our eyes met, I sucked in a breath, because all my questions faded away at once. *Oh, I see. I get it now.* No wonder Adai was so talented when it came to tactics, schemes, and politics. Adai Dada whispered something to Rus, then turned to face me. We had finally met one another.

"Hey," I said.

"Hello," he replied.

With nothing more than that brief greeting, we were able to communicate and understand one another. A thousand years ago in Routou, the two of us—Kou Eihou, commander general of the Tou Empire, and Ou Eifuu, imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire—along with our best friend, Hi Gyoumei, the first emperor of the Tou Empire, swore a vow to unify all the lands under the heavens and bring peace to the world. It was a day I could never forget, even if

our promise did ultimately end in tragedy.

I sat down on one of the stools and cursed the man who had once been my best friend but was now my enemy. "Don't kidnap Hakurei just to draw me out," I grumbled. "And I can't believe you actually stopped your attack on the capital."

"Ha! And here I was wondering what your first words to me would be." He produced a glass bottle from an inner pocket of his robes and removed the lid. Judging by the fragrance that wafted from it, I guessed he'd brought some mountain peach wine with him. "You're the most obtuse man in the world. You never noticed who I was, so you would never have come to meet me if I hadn't done something drastic. And just so you know, I realized who you were back at the battle of Keiyou. Anyway, you're one to talk! I can't *believe* you took Ukuna hostage!" Before I had the chance to point out that it was actually Adai who was the oddball for catching on to my real identity in that split second, he held out a small, pale hand towards me. "Eihou! What I want is simple: Join me!" Clouds must have drifted in front of the sun, for a dim darkness suddenly descended on the plains. The gaze of my former friend never once left me, the abrupt change in lighting seemingly not worth his attention. "I'll never forget that day a thousand years ago. But while I was too weak to save you in Routou, that won't happen in this life. I can give you everything you desire! From a million soldiers to riches that surpass even Kozan! You can even have this continent, plus the unknown world beyond our lands! If we work together, we can conquer it all. So join me!"

"Eifuu."

This man... My best friend in my former life had a venomous tongue, but in truth, he was far too kind for his own good. Even in this life, he still regretted the fact he couldn't save me in Routou. Even in this life, he was still trying to fulfill the vow he had made back in his previous one. However, that unfinished business belonged to Ou Eifuu, who lived and died a thousand years ago. It wasn't a burden Adai Dada living in the present day needed to shoulder.

I looked up at the sky and saw three hawks flying high above us.

"You're amazing, you know. Both Gyoumei and I died, but Tou still managed to unify the lands. Not only that, but while you were alive, the country didn't once descend into civil unrest. You're probably the smartest person who ever lived." *Sorry, Gyoumei.* I lowered my gaze back to Adai and continued. "But that's precisely why Kougyoku hid the Heavenly Swords and Heirloom Seal."

"What do you mean?" Adai asked, raising an eyebrow in displeasure.

My thoughts turned to that female general, who despite serving Ou Eifuu for her entire life, went against his will after his death and hid both the Heavenly Swords and Heirloom Seal in a different shrine. *I'll tell him now what you weren't able to back then. I feel it's my responsibility as the person who discovered and dug up both artifacts.*

"I'll say it again: You're the smartest person in history. But because of your talent, you take far too much onto your own shoulders." The wise emperor remained stock-still as I rose from my stool and gazed down at him with pity in my eyes. "As a result, your great, unified country will collapse after you have died. After all, no one can do what you do, even if they want to. A political uprising is sure to follow your death. According to legend, the one who will unify the lands shall wield the Heavenly Swords, while the Heirloom Seal is a symbol of authority. What do you think happens if they exist during a period of political turmoil? Civil war breaks out and blood flows through the streets, that's what."

Kougyoku had hailed from the western regions, so perhaps she had been capable of *real* mysticism, such as possessing the power of foresight. Now that I thought about it, she had been right on my tail when she found me in Routou and when she attacked me. However, she had passed away before getting the chance to warn Eifuu what would happen in his next life—what would happen to "Adai Dada"—if he got his hands on both the Heavenly Swords and the Heirloom Seal.

"Kougyoku might've had a clear vision of your reincarnation," I continued. "I doubt she saw a clean death. That's why she hid the artifacts. She loved Ou Eifuu and wanted your second life to be a

happy one."

"Wh-What are you *saying*?!" the White Wraith yelled, jumping to his feet so furiously, he almost toppled right over.

I reached out to steady him, but couldn't prevent his hat from falling from his head to the carpet. I stared into his face, desperate to convince him. "Listen, Adai Dada. You're not Ou Eifuu. Place some trust in others. Instead of losing yourself in your own thoughts, take a look at the vast world around you. Our era ended long ago, and the only relevance we have now is in the history books." The white-haired emperor fell silent, and I released him so he could pick up his hat before directing him to hold it while I clutched his small hand in mine. "And I don't think I need to remind you, but I'm not Kou Eihou anymore." Adai's eyes widened and his slender body trembled. As a beam of sunlight shone down on the two of us, I gave him my answer. "My name is Chou Sekiei, son of Chou Tairan, the National Shield, and I will stay by Chou Hakurei's side until the end of our lives. I am nothing more and nothing less than that. I cannot join your army. Not while you're like this, at the very least."

Silence hung in the air between us. Adai picked up the bottle with a shaking hand, took a swig from it, then coughed. He wiped his mouth roughly and collapsed back onto his stool, shoulders slumped. "I see."

"I hope you do," I said with a nod before spinning on my heels.

A short distance away, I could see Hakurei leaning on Asaka for support with her hands clasped together and looking like she was about to cry. *Yukihime the crybaby. What in the world did they say to her while she was in captivity?*

"In that case, you leave me no choice," I heard Adai say, followed by the sound of his stool falling to the ground, but I didn't stop walking. Although I didn't possess the gift of foresight, I knew exactly what his next words would be. "As Adai Dada, emperor of Gen, I will kill you in tomorrow's battle, Chou Sekiei! Your demise will serve as the final death knell for Ei!"

Idiot. Don't say stuff like that in a voice that's thick with tears. You'll dull my blade.

"Farewell! Farewell, my friend!" Adai yelled after me, pounding

the ground with his fists. “I look forward to seeing your glorious death with my own eyes!”

That, however, I couldn’t ignore. Looking back over my shoulder at the White Wraith, I calmly said, “Sorry, but I have no plans to die anytime soon. Besides, I haven’t accomplished my own dream yet.”

“Humph. Your own dream, huh?” Adai muttered sadly. He placed his hat back on the head and left the shelter of the shade cloth.

Rus and a couple of girls wearing fox masks immediately galloped up to him. One was Ren of Senko, but who was the other? With that question tumbling around my head, I resumed walking away until I reached Hakurei and the others, who had been watching the conversation.

Hakurei ran up to me, her silver hair flowing behind her in the wind, and she threw herself into my chest, sobbing. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! Sekiei, I... I...”

“Don’t cry. My talks with Adai are all wrapped up. They didn’t torture you, did they?”

“They didn’t. But... But...”

She must have had to put up with so many painful insults and accusations. *She might not recover in time to take part in tomorrow’s showdown.* I rubbed Hakurei’s back as she continued sobbing, but soon had my attention drawn by Shigou and Kouzen calling out my name in alarm. I returned my gaze to the battlefield and saw a young general—Orid Dada, whom I had fought at Ten Knights Bridge in the western regions—charging towards us atop his massive horse, his sword drawn. He was alone and the distance between us closed rapidly. *Did Adai or Rus order—*

But both of them looked surprised and they were yelling something indistinct after Orid. Gisen, too, was moving to try to stop him. *Orid’s gone rogue?!* Although my allies immediately started firing arrows at him in an attempt to halt his progress, none hit their mark. He was simply too fast.

“Asaka, take Hakurei!” I yelled, entrusting the silver-haired girl in my arms to her attendant. I stepped forwards from the group. “Kuuen, my swords!”

“Yessir!”

I took the black and white swords from the boy, unsheathed them, and ran forwards.

"Die, Chou Sekiei!" Orid yelled as he charged at me.

From up his horse, he swung his sword downwards, intent on killing me where I stood. The scream of metal on metal resounded around the battlefield, followed by a surprised grunt from Orid. I'd used White Star to deflect his initial attack, then in the same movement, thrust Black Star towards the enemy general's face and stopped it a hair's breadth from his nose.

"Stop this," I warned in an icy voice. "I do not wish to see any bloodshed today."

A moment of total silence followed before shocked and fearful muttering rose from both the Ei and Gen sides. I looked up at the enemy general, who had broken into a cold sweat, and with a silent warning in my glare, I drew back Black Star. He ground his teeth so loudly, I could actually hear it from where I was standing, before pulling on the reins and galloping off back to Gen's lines once more.

"Chou Sekiei! Chou Sekiei! Chou Sekiei!" the Ei soldiers chanted, stomping their feet and slamming the butts of their spears on the ground so hard, the earth shook underneath us. The air trembled due to the sheer volume of their cheering. Maybe Orid's surprise attack had worked out for the best. After all, it had seemingly helped to raise morale for the battle the next day.

I turned to see Hakurei leaning on Asaka again, her expression twisted into a grimace. *Though it looks like our princess still isn't feeling too good.*

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"All right, Lady Hakurei, I shall leave you to your rest now. Please call for me if there is anything you need."

"Thank you, Asaka. Don't worry about me," I—Chou Hakurei—said, managing a smile.

My lady-in-waiting still looked worried, but she left me in the simple room she had escorted me to, shutting the door behind her. I waited until I could no longer hear her footsteps, then heaved a

sigh. I lay down on Sekiei's bed and hugged the blankets to my chest, making wrinkles in my nightgown. The familiarity helped to calm me, and I could tell myself I belonged here.

I'd thought Shiryuu was more akin to a campground, but it seemed that under Meirin's supervision, the existing buildings had been converted into new facilities in a short amount of time. They even had hot springs here!

"It goes without saying that we need to stay on our guard, but tomorrow's the final battle, and we'll get a much more restful night's sleep here if we camp outside," I recalled Sekiei saying to some of the officers and soldiers who were worried about Gen launching an attack under cover of darkness.

Yes, the final battle was set to be fought the following day. I had no idea how the great water fortress or the capital were faring at present, but I could take an educated guess after seeing the number of soldiers the Gen army still boasted. If we lost the upcoming battle, Ei would be left with only a handful of defenders, meaning Gen would be free to trample Keiyou, the western regions, and the southern regions as they pleased.

And yet, I... My gaze wandered over to where Black Star and White Star were leaning up against a chair. Earlier that day, Sekiei had swung the Heavenly Swords and halted the attack of Orid Dada in a single movement. And much like the Kouei spoken about in legend, he had wielded them both by himself.

"I, Ouei, am the only one who deserves to stand at his side! It could never be you*!"* Adai's words echoed around my head, and I had to shut my eyes tight to block them out. *Stop that, Hakurei. Your weakness will only drag Sekiei down with you.*

The door opened, followed by the sound of familiar footsteps. "Oh, you're awake? Meirin, Ruri, Miu, and even Yui are already snoring their heads off, you know. Oto said she'll be settling down to sleep after she's checked up on the night guards too. Apparently, some of the soldiers are acting a bit strange. Guess their excitement about tomorrow has gotten to them."

"Sekiei."

He must have just come back from the hot springs, because he

had already changed into his nightwear and he was drying his hair with a piece of cloth. He sat down on the mattress, dragged the desk closer to him, and started preparing some tea. He was acting like the abduction had never happened, and the familiarity of the scene helped to soothe some of the anxiety in my heart.

With the blanket still on my head, I crawled closer to him and grabbed his sleeve. I'd promised myself long ago that I would spend the rest of my life with this black-haired man, and I knew nothing would shake that resolve, but I still found myself having to summon up the courage to ask him something I'd been curious about since earlier.

"Um, so what did you and Adai—" But before I could finish my question with the words "talk about," he patted my blanketed head.

"Want some tea?" he asked.

I paused for a moment. "Yes" was my eventual reply. I sat up and hugged my knees to my chest, watching Sekiei in profile as he poured tea into a porcelain cup.



"You look terrible."

This sudden insult made me pout. *Is that really the thing to say to your already-upset childhood friend?!* "Shut up."

And to highlight my displeasure with him, as soon as he handed me the cup of tea, I turned my back to him. I glanced outside the window and saw the full moon being swallowed up by clouds, which I could only hope wasn't a sign that it was going to rain the next day.

Sekiei crossed his legs and sipped his tea as if our earlier exchange hadn't happened. "I figure Adai said something like, 'You don't deserve to stay at Chou Sekiei's side, so hand him over to me' to you and you've spent all this time worrying about it. Am I right?"

I jumped in surprise. "H-How do you—" I stammered.

Seeing how flustered I was, Sekiei chuckled. "You've always had surprisingly low self-esteem, Yukihime."

I made a dissatisfied noise, then drained my tea and transferred myself into a chair in front of Sekiei. "Yes, you're right. I don't believe in myself as much as I pretend to. So..." I placed the empty cup down on the desk and averted my gaze. "So I couldn't just snap back, 'You're wrong! *I'm* the one worthy of being with him!' even if in truth, I never had any intention of giving up this spot by your side, nor did I believe he could wrestle it away from me."

Sekiei gave a noncommittal hum, which was rather a cold response to my frank admission.

I flashed him the most unimpressed look I had ever directed his way. "Can you please focus on our conversation? Do you even know how long I've been stressing over this for? Even the White Wolf—my *abductor*—sympathized with me."

"Well, yeah, but..." Sekiei moved his cup and teapot to one side, then spread a map of Gyoumei Moor across the desk. As he lined up the pieces representing the two armies, he calmly continued. "Neither you nor Adai have the final say in that, right? I do."

Sekiei had a point there. My childhood friend was one of the most stubborn men on the continent, which meant Adai could long for Sekiei as much as he liked, but if Sekiei wasn't interested, there would practically be no way of ever changing his mind.

He reached out a warm hand and patted me on the head again, although slightly rougher this time. "And besides, I don't plan on letting you go until you're sick of me."

I could only muster a pitiful noise in response to that and I launched myself out of the chair and back onto the mattress again. *S-So Sekiei wants to... With me?!* I kicked my feet in an attempt to calm myself down, then taking advantage of his magnanimous mood, I admitted to my weakness. "But I *did* cause you extra trouble, so Adai wasn't wrong to say—"

"He was. He was completely out of line," Sekiei interrupted firmly, placing the emperor piece down in the middle of the enemy formation. In front of it stood wolves painted black and white. "If he wanted to speak with me, he could have just sent a letter or something. Instead, he resorted to these underhanded tactics. He's got a twisted personality."

"Sekiei." *I'm truly a despicable woman, taking joy from the anger in his tone.* But at the same time, I was also extremely curious about something. "You really do seem to understand Adai so well. It's as if —"

It's as if the two of you have known each other for a long time was what I was thinking, but I couldn't bring myself to say the rest out loud. Soldiers and officers on both sides had started referring to Sekiei and Adai as the Kouei and Ouei of the Modern Ages respectively, comparing their feats to the unprecedented heroics achieved by that duo a thousand years ago. It was admittedly a crazy theory, but what if that legendary pair had reincarnated into our world?

Seeing me fall silent, Sekiei peered out of the window at the scene outside. The moon was still hidden behind the clouds, making the landscape look dark and a little eerie. "Yeah, I guess I do understand him. And far better than the persona that's hiding away in his shell does," he said sadly, tapping the emperor piece he had placed on the map. "But you know what? Even if I'm the reincarnation of Kouei and he's the reincarnation of Ouei"—he turned to look at me, his eyes focused on nothing other than my face—"I'm Chou Sekiei. I could never be Kou Eihou. Nor would I

want to."

I suddenly felt a weight lift from my heart. I knew it was simpleminded of me, but I couldn't help it. He was right. This man in front of me was Chou Sekiei, my childhood friend who wanted to become a local civil official for some reason and the man I had chosen to spend the rest of my life with. That meant I didn't need to waste any time worrying about his previous life. I admitted it was a rather forced conclusion, but... *I-I guess you could say love turns you into an idiot.*

While I was busy floating on cloud nine, Sekiei grinned. "I see, I see. So you thought I'd choose Adai, huh?" he teased.

"W-Well, that's... It's because..." I trailed off with a groan and lowered my head. He'd hit me right where it hurt. *You don't have to say it like* that*, though...*

I heard Sekiei move and felt the mattress sink even lower as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me in close. "What am I going to do with you, huh? All right, to keep you from ever doubting me again... Hakurei." And in the kindest, softest voice I'd ever heard come out of his mouth, he whispered the words I wanted to hear the most at that moment into my ear.

Huh? W-Wait, did Sekiei just say... A high-pitched noise escaped from my mouth. My heart was beating faster and faster in my chest, and I could feel my cheeks turning bright red. Embarrassed, I buried my face into the chest of the black-haired man beside me, and although I tried to return the confession to the best of my ability, all I could muster was a murmur. "Um, I... I feel the same way."

"Good, good."

The embrace he pulled me into was tighter than any we'd ever shared, and I wrapped my arms around him in response. All of the uncertainty that had sunken its claws into me suddenly disappeared as if it had never even existed, and I could feel courage and power welling up within me instead. *I'll never lose to the White Wraith, Adai Dada, ever again!*

Sekiei released me from his embrace, then gave a casual wave of his hand. "Well, now you know. You feel better now, right? In that case, let's get some shut-eye. Tomorrow's the final battle, and—

Hakurei!”

“Sekiei!”

I jumped into action, grabbing White Star and unsheathing it as a sweet aroma wafted into the room. Was it incense?

“Don’t breathe it in!” ordered Sekiei beside me, Black Star in his hand. Covering his nose and mouth with a cloth, he ran from the room, and I wasted no time dashing out after him.

Standing underneath a dim lantern outside was a woman with long purple hair and an old fox mask covering her face. This look, combined with her loose purple robes, reminded me of Rus.

“Calm yourselves, children of the Chou family,” the woman said, slowly removing the mask. “This is no night for slaughter.”

“Who are you?” Sekiei barked, his expression tense.

“I’ve long since forgotten the name I used to go under while messing around as a Senko operative. These days, people refer to me as the Honorable One.”

Sekiei and I both sucked in a breath as ice ran down my spine. *That name...*

Sekiei slowly drew Black Star from its scabbard. “Well, that explains the Seitou soldiers’ sudden retreat,” he said coolly. “And why some of our soldiers have been acting so oddly this evening. It’s all because of this incense, isn’t it? What does the monster who lurks in the shadows of Seitou want with us? You know we’re facing off against the White Wraith—who’s worlds scarier than you—in battle tomorrow, right?”

“Heh. I’m only here to ask a simple question,” the woman replied, her lips twisting into a sensuous smile before holding her fox mask up to hide the bottom half of her face. “Why don’t we work together?”

“What?” Sekiei’s brow raised in suspicion.

We could tell that she still had that eerie smile affixed to her face, and from the noises coming from behind her mask, it sounded like the Honorable One was licking her lips as if she were hungry. “The Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars you hold in your hands are genuine relics from the age of the gods, forged by ascendants using metal from a fallen star. Those blades are more than just sturdy;

supernatural power is housed within that steel. I wish to revive true mysticism, for that will surely make this world a much more fun and interesting place. If you promise to aid me in my quest, I will grant you all of the military technology and engineering Seitou possesses. Its weapons will surely turn the tide of battle in Ei's favor. Quite a favorable deal, wouldn't you say?"

More like a suspicious one! I'll never forget what this demonic woman did to Miss Ruri's hometown either!

"Tell me one thing," Sekiei uttered, lowering Black Star despite a blizzard raging behind his eyes. "Were you the one who ordered the Black Wolf to destroy Kobi, a mystic vale that once existed in the Hakkotsu Desert?"

The woman moved the fox mask away from her mouth and stared off into the distance as she ran a hand through her purple hair. "Kobi? Ah, that name takes me back. Yes, I did give that order. Those pests wouldn't stop interfering with my work, you see. Not only that, but they possessed a number of rare books, and some of them could even use the dregs of mysticism. They were such an eyesore."

Sekiei and I stared at her, mouths gaping. *She destroyed them for such a petty reason?!*

The Honorable One chuckled as she continued. "The Black Wolf is earnest and uncompromising, so I told him the power in Kobi could eventually lead to war. I wasn't lying either. The technology they possessed was far more advanced than even what Gen and Ei have now. It was Kobi, not Seitou, that was the first faction to make catapults and heavy armor, as well as this mind-addling incense. They refused my offer to collaborate on reviving mysticism, yet conspired to march out into the central plains in order to gain more influence for themselves. Chou Sekiei, I'm sure you understand what I mean, yes?"

Sekiei didn't answer the question. Instead, he shot me a surreptitious look. *Understood.*

Unaware of our unspoken communication, the Honorable One murmured, "Not everything is black-and-white in this world. I plucked the bud of conflict before it could bloom, and as a result,

prevented the deaths of so, so many people."

My rage finally boiled over. "Is that why you took the innocent Miss Ruri and taught her to be a strategist?!" I yelled at her.

The Honorable One didn't seem at all upset by my fury, however. In fact, she seemed proud of herself. "That girl was such a wonderful student despite not possessing a scrap of talent for mysticism. She's earning her keep, isn't she? I taught her the most efficient methods for killing swathes of soldiers on the battlefield, after all. Anyway, enough talk. Give me your answer."

"Ruri! Oto!" Sekiei yelled.

"Fire!" I ordered.

At our command, arrows rained down from the manor, all aimed at the Honorable One.

"So this is your response? How unfortunate," she said.

To our shock, the woman deflected every arrow that should have struck her with a weapon concealed in her sleeve. Then, in a move that seemed to defy gravity, she leaped to a nearby rooftop.

Miss Ruri appeared in her nightgown with a crossbow in her hand. "It's *her*! She's the one who burned down my village!" she snarled, black petals materializing all around her.

Oto raised her fire lance and aimed it at the rooftop, but by this point, the Honorable One had disappeared, with only her sadistic laughter echoing in our ears.

"I won't give up," she called back to us. "Look forward to tomorrow's battle, everyone! I'm sure you'll all enjoy the show."

We all grimaced, no one willing to break the tense silence that descended over us. *Looks like we've got something* else *to worry about in the battle tomorrow.*

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"And with that, you're all set!" Hakurei said, pulling her hands away from the armor I—Chou Sekiei—had just finished putting on with her help. Judging by her dignified countenance, she must have gotten over any lingering uncertainty she'd had. She'd tied her long silver hair up with a scarlet ribbon, and was wearing a white military

uniform. With both White Star and a bow in her hands, the figure she cut was as beautiful as always. While I continued to stare at her with that simple compliment running through my head, she pushed Black Star and my bow into my hands. “Sekiei, everyone’s already assembled. We should get going.”

The weather was fair that day, with not a single cloud in the sky. As for the early morning chill, that would quickly dissipate once the sun rose. That meant both sides would be able to send in their cavalry units without any worries. According to our scouts, the Gen army had also finished setting up their formation by this point, and their morale was sky-high. There was little time left now before the start of battle.

I slid Black Star into my belt and picked up my bow, then scratched my cheek sheepishly. “Actually, do you think you could handle today’s speech—”

“No way.” My childhood friend refused to take on the role of motivating the soldiers without any hesitation. She proceeded to the door and opened it with a flourish. “Let’s go defeat the White Wraith, Sekiei!”

Countless fences, abatis, and moats surrounded the encampment we had set up in the field. The mood among the soldiers was tense, like a bowstring pulled to its limit that could snap at any given moment, although the veteran soldiers who had survived countless battles and life-or-death situations were still chatting and joking away as they moved into position, enjoying the general atmosphere as well as the shocked looks they were getting from the greenhorns. On noticing Hakurei and me, the veterans called out to us:

“Lord Sekiei! Lady Hakurei!”

“You two are spending today together as well?”

“Nothing beats seeing ’em next to each other!”

“To be honest, I wouldn’t mind seeing him and Master Strategist __”

“No way! Our Lady Oto is my preference!”

“Nah, older chicks are the best, so I’m cheering for Lady Meirin!”

“What about Kuuen and his puppy dog charm?”

“In that case, I think Princess Miu stands a chance!”

Morale among the soldiers was high, and it was good that they weren't overly nervous. However, I couldn't help noticing the questioning hum being made by the girl walking next to me. *Uh, why is Hakurei's glare getting angrier and angrier? And what's up with all of you and your grinning faces?! You're saying all those things on purpose, aren't you?!*

After enduring wordless pressure from my childhood friend the whole way, we eventually reached the patch of land serving as our headquarters that we had set up in the middle of the encampment. A shade cloth had been erected to block out the sunlight, and countless shields surrounded the area to protect it from stray arrows. We met the elite members of the Chou and U families there, and among them stood Kuuen, whose face was red with excitement. Once I'd exchanged a few pleasantries and words of encouragement with him, I moved on.

On the table in the center of the "room" was a detailed map of Gyoumei Moor, which Ruri and I had made after personally walking each and every inch of it. Pieces representing both armies had been placed on it, and huddled over them was my strategist, who was exchanging opinions with the ever-reliable princess of the U family, Oto. Meirin and Miu didn't appear to be here yet.

"Hey," I called over to them.

"Hello, Miss Ruri, Miss Oto," Hakurei said.

"You're late," Ruri grumbled, while Oto added, "We've been waiting for you two!"

I gave them an apologetic wave and approached the table, then looked down at the map. The enemy's right flank consisted of the approximately fifteen thousand elite Seitou soldiers under the Millenary Diviner Hasho's command, who had ignored the Honorable One's orders to retreat from the front. They would undoubtedly have stationed soldiers wielding large shields at the front of their formation, since they boasted incredible defensive might and could protect themselves from most of the projectiles in our arsenal. Back when we fought them at Keiyou, we buried a stash of thunder crash bombs in the ground to blow up not only them but also their encampments. We couldn't use that same tactic again, however, as

we hadn't been able to procure enough of those bombs for it. Who knew if the stalling strategy Ruri and I had come up with would work?

Next to consider was the enemy's left flank, which boasted roughly the same amount of soldiers as the right flank. This side of the formation consisted largely of Gi Heian and his army of Ei descendants. In the past, father had fought them here and sent them packing, but according to an elderly Chou soldier who had actually participated in that battle, defeating them hadn't been easy at all. I couldn't let my guard down around them.

Last but not least was the center of the formation. The Black Lancers, led by the powerful and renowned Black Wolf, and the White Lancers, led by the equally strong White Wolf, made up the bulk of the forces here. If you included the soldiers protecting the White Wraith, this part of the formation numbered around fifteen thousand as well. We also had to factor in the five thousand troops that made up the rear guard. In comparison, our whole army only had less than thirty thousand soldiers in it.

"Their formation's about what we expected," I said, rubbing my chin. "They've still got around fifty thousand soldiers. Of their major players, it looks like Orid Dada's the only one who has been ordered to stay in the rear guard, near their headquarters."

That fact proved that his solo charge from yesterday really had been a case of him acting on his own, because otherwise, there was no logical reason to remove such a powerful general from the front line. Although naturally, they wouldn't hesitate to order him into the fray if the situation called for it.

"We've more or less finished setting up our own battle formation too. The only thing left to do is for you to give us all your words of encouragement before we begin," Ruri said with a grin, brushing her long bangs out of her face.

O-Oh no! I didn't expect my ally to cut off my escape route! I rubbed my hands together, and in my most respectful tone, I tried to get her to change her mind. "Miss Ruri, this is only a suggestion, but instead of *me* giving the speech, how about you—"

"No way. Now, get out there."

Grr... Hey, Kuuen! Stop laughing your head off! You do *know I could order* you *to do it, right?!* I glared a warning at my young attendant—who had seemingly finally stopped being excessively courteous towards me—then turned to the girl with short black hair. "Miss Oto?"

"Oh, no, I could never! Besides, I'm not a member of the Chou family y-yet."

"Uh, okay then." I blinked at the U princess, who was so embarrassed, she was forced to turn her smiling face away from me. By contrast, the expressions on Ruri's and Hakurei's faces had become notably stonier. *Um, what kind of conflict has been brewing behind my back?*

I grimaced, then let my shoulders slump. There was nowhere I could run to on Gyoumei Moor. I handed my bow to Kuuen, ordered him with my eyes to follow me, and trudged out of our makeshift headquarters. Behind me, I heard cheerful giggling from the girls.

"Boss!"

"Over here!"

On arriving at the front line, we were greeted by Gan Shigou and Dan Kouzen. While Gan Shigou refused to change out of his mountain bandit attire and still had his trusty battle-axe strapped to his back, Dan Kouzen looked like a real soldier with proper armor and a sword at his hip. For this final battle, the plan was for Shigou to lead a division of ten thousand soldiers to take down the enemy's left flank. At the same time, Kouzen and his own ten thousand-strong division would focus on the right flank. I had picked out the soldiers myself with Teiha's help back in Keiyou, so I knew their morale and experience would be high. Many of the volunteer soldiers who had come here from all corners of the continent had only done so after reading Miu's manifesto, which proved she hadn't wasted all that time and energy stamping those papers with the Heirloom Seal. As for the last part of the formation, Hakurei and I would be leading the ten thousand Chou soldiers in the center.

I hopped onto Zetsuei and raced out of the encampment at full gallop until I reached the very front of our army. As soon as the soldiers saw me, they raised their weapons, banged their fists

against their breastplates, and sounded their gongs. Some even started waving the massive Chou and Ei war flags. But as soon as I raised my left hand, they all fell silent until the only sounds reaching our ears were those made by the army on the opposite side of the battlefield.

I took a deep breath. "All right, I'm sure I don't have to tell you this," I said loudly, kicking Zetsuei into a slow walk and tapping Black Star, which was hanging down from my waist. "Today's battle is the last one." No one said anything in response, but I sensed a ripple of excitement running through the gathered soldiers. I waited for them all to settle again before closing my eyes and continuing. "However, I have no intention of saying anything like 'This battle will decide the fate of our homeland.' That's more a line my father would have used, anyway." This time, there was a smattering of laughter, though the soldiers responsible tried to cover it up quickly, and I heard some of the veteran soldiers furiously sniffling. I opened my eyes again and rested a hand on the hilt of Black Star. "I only ask one thing from you all." I unsheathed the sword and held it high in the air, the obsidian blade giving off an extraordinary glow as it reflected the sunlight. "For the sake of the comrades who fought beside us and perished before us, we will win this day! Follow me to victory!" I roared.

The soldiers and officers raised their voices in a war cry as they hefted their own weapons aloft. Satisfied by the sight, I resheathed my sword and returned to the encampment, where I found Hakurei chatting to Asaka, who was dressed in light armor and had the reins of the white horse, Getsuei, in her hand. After a moment, the pair exchanged a hug. *There's Miu and Meirin, accompanied by Miss Shizuka.* From the enemy formation behind me, I heard a horn blaring out over the battlefield. *Ah, it's finally time.*

I patted my genius strategist on her blue hat, then leaned in close to whisper something to her. "Ruri, I'm putting you in charge of headquarters. Be on your guard for whatever the Honorable One is going to pull. She's sure to try something."

"Humph. It's you and Hakurei who should be on your guard," Ruri retorted, reaching out and brushing my hair with her fingers. "I'll

give you hell if you die on me, you hear?”

“I don’t plan on dying anytime soon.” I straightened up, and we bumped fists and nodded at each other. But just as I was about to leave to have a word with the U princess, my blonde strategist clasped my left sleeve between her fingers.

“If you meet the Black Wolf out there, can you pass on a message from me?” she said. Once she had told me what she wanted me to tell him, she returned to headquarters with her head held high and no magical petals anywhere in sight. She had truly grown strong.

“Oto,” I started. “If anything goes wrong, I want you to take Ruri and the others and—”

“I refuse,” she said, cutting me off with a resolute look on her face. “Yesterday, you said *Lady Ruri* would be in command of headquarters for this final battle. And those are the orders I will obey.”

She wasn’t wrong. That was exactly what I had said. No falsehoods passed U Torahime’s lips, but even so... “You know, when you talk like that, you sound a bit like Hakubun.”

“N-No way!”

Shocked by my comment, Oto clapped her hands to her cheeks in despair. Seeing their princess’s reaction drew a chuckle from the usually rather sober soldiers of the U army, causing some of the tension to ease from their shoulders. *Yeah, that’ll do for now.*

Oto looked genuinely upset about what I’d said, so I gave her a gentle pat on her slender shoulder and told her, “I’m counting on you.”

“You finally have time for me, yes? May I take Miss Miu’s turn as well?!” Meirin exclaimed.

“Hey! Th-That’s so unfair!” Miu wailed.

In the end, neither Meirin nor Miu had left the battlefield, and at present, they were poking each other like good friends. *Um, friends?* In any case, they didn’t seem all that worried or even scared about the upcoming battle. *These two...*

“Miss Shizuka,” I said, turning to the ever-reliable black-haired beauty. “Please keep a close eye on this pair, will you? Make sure

Little Miss Prodigy and Princess Reckless over here don't run off anywhere."

"Wha—" Meirin gasped. "L-Lord Sekiei! That is blatant favoritism! I want you to say something sweet to me, like you did to Miss Ruri and Miss Oto!" she said, jumping up and down without a care for what it would do to her orange hat nor how much it would make her large breasts bounce.

Meanwhile, Miu tilted her head to one side, the protective charm dangling from her neck swaying with the movement. "Is 'Princess Reckless' a compliment?"

Standing behind the pair with her foreign longsword attached to her belt, Miss Shizuka gave me a gentle smile. "They will be safe in my care."

"I trust they will be."

According to Hakurei, Ren of Senko—the girl with the fox mask we had fought in front of the Dragon Jade in Keiyou—was one of Adai's bodyguards, although she didn't know how that arrangement had come about. It seemed unlikely she would show herself on the battlefield in broad daylight, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Glancing over at Hakurei as she mounted Getsuei, I called out to my two generals as they set off for their respective flanks. "Shigou! Kouzen! Go wild if you must, but don't try to take out any of the enemy generals! If you die on us, young Teiha will end up growing even more gray hairs."

The soldiers guffawed at that image, and sensing what I was doing, the generals played along.

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" Shigou chuckled.

"We certainly don't want him hating us," Kouzen added.

I thanked them both with a wave and a nod, then gave an order to my attendant, who was waiting behind me on horseback. "Kuuen, once the charge begins, I want you to stay with me and Hakurei. Then, as soon as you've exhausted your arrows, head back to headquarters at once. Got that? Good. Now, bring me my quiver!"

"Y-Yessir!" I guessed he must have been running around due to overexcitement earlier, because his bangs were sticking up every which way. Displaying his masterful skills as an equestrian, Kuuen

turned his horse around and galloped away, unaware of the warm gazes he was attracting from the onlooking soldiers.

Ordering him to retreat in the middle of battle would now be much easier after that little exchange. *It's pretty hypocritical of me, though.*

Bow in hand, Hakurei approached and poked my cheek. "You plan to make him exhaust all of his arrows before the end of the battle, don't you?"

"I was just reminding him."

"Liar."

As we conversed, the gongs and horns drifting over to us from the enemy formation grew wilder and louder. Any second now, a fierce fight would break out among the vanguards, and—

"Huh?" Hakurei whispered as the soldiers started murmuring among each other.

The enemy army wasn't launching a large-scale cavalry charge at all. Instead, the main forces were sitting back while riders in light armor approached as scouts, watching to see how we'd respond. Were they worried about Ruri's tactics, which employed gunpowder and fire lances? I couldn't see any troublesome catapults either.

I urged Zetsuei to walk up to Getsuei's side and commented on the enemy's strategy to Hakurei. "Looks like they've learned their lesson from the last time we faced them. They're not just blindly charging in now."

"No, I don't believe that's what they're doing. Look." She pointed at the enemy's right flank.

I had no idea what the Millenary Diviner was planning exactly, but he was moving up in a formation that saw a portion of the Seitou army jutting out from the lines. As soon as their light cavalry reached our vanguard encampments, they loosed fire arrows before retreating to a safe distance. Behind them, a group of soldiers in thick metal armor with large shields that gleamed dully in the sunlight rushed forwards as one.

I was confused by what I was seeing. "When we checked out those shields at Keiyou, we figured out they were just three normal shields stacked together. Some had marks from where they had

deflected stone projectiles. Are they using their light cavalry to check for buried thunder crash bombs?"

"They can search for traps that don't exist all they want. Let them waste their energy and arrows," Hakurei replied calmly. Turning to our soldiers, she barked, "Until headquarters gives the command, no one is to loose any arrows!"

Outside of Oto's team of fire lancers, the plan we were following barely involved any gunpowder. But to make up for that, Ruri and I had come up with a trick that we had subsequently set up while fortifying our side of the battlefield. It had worked well during training, but who knew how it would fare in real combat?

Some members of the Seitou cavalry who had been shooting arrows at will stepped onto the patch of grass in front of the encampment, and a second later, they had tripped and fallen to the ground with a yell. Before anyone could give the order to halt, the heavy infantry at the front of the line also walked into the trap, all of them screaming as they collapsed one by one. The enemy's advance slowed considerably.

"Oh? Considering they were just lengths of thorny twigs we tied together and hid in the grass, they've proven quite effective," Hakurei remarked, sounding surprised.

"A horse's legs are its weak point, after all. And I'm not surprised it also worked well on heavy infantry, since it's hard for them to get up again if they fall over." In contrast to Hakurei's calm demeanor, I was unable to suppress a fearful shudder. *God, we set those up to deal with the cavalry, but those traps look like they'd work on all types of soldiers.*

"Think we can do something with these thorny twigs? There's a bunch of them growing here." It had been Meirin's thoughtless comment that had been the spark of inspiration for Ruri and myself, as up until that point, we had been racking our brains over what we could use to secure victory. At the time, we had considered it a last resort, and although we didn't yet possess the technology to make them, the thought of those thorny twigs being replaced with metal wires sent a chill down my spine. *Yeah, that really would be a nightmare.*

But what was up with the Seitou army's bizarre charge, anyway? According to the eye-opening secret message we had received from Auntie Saiun that morning, if any part of the enemy formation was to move first and out of line with the rest of the army, it would be the left flank.

A powerful gust of wind whipped past as a soldier from one of the lookout ladders called down to us. "Emergency report! Abnormal activity spotted on the enemy's right flank! Purple smoke has enveloped the soldiers who marched out, then retreated!"

Startled by this news, we stared out into the distance. I squinted, only to see soldiers bearing the Seitou flag turning on their allies and attacking them. *Impossible!*

Next to me, Hakurei's eyes widened as well. "Are a portion of the Seitou army betraying Gen? They were acting strange before all this too. Is this the Honorable One's doing?!"

Adai's faith doesn't lie in Hasho alone. He also trusts the Seitou soldiers. So how did the Honorable One convince them to turn against... Oh, wait, I see! That purple smoke must've contained that incense! As soon as I reached that conclusion, I looked at Hakurei and gave a wordless signal. *Oto and the U army are holding the fort at headquarters, so let's do this!*

I gripped my bow tight and yelled at the soldiers behind me. "Don't let this chance escape us, men! Let's go! Charge!"

***

Sitting on my throne in headquarters with wooden abatis surrounding me as a protective measure, I—Adai Dada—listened intently to the steady stream of messengers who rushed in, gave me their reports, then returned to the battlefield.

"I bring an urgent report from the Millenary Diviner, Lord Hasho: 'After breathing in some bizarre purple smoke, about two thousand of the Seitou vanguard have suddenly turned on us. Unsure at present if they are colluding with the enemy.'"

"Both enemy flanks are approaching fast, firing arrows! We've launched a counterattack, but we're evenly matched."

After listening to these reports, I turned to my aide. "Uto, the pieces."

"Yes, Emperor Adai." The girl with long lilac hair who wasn't wearing her usual fox mask added some pieces onto the battlefield map to represent the traitors.

Humph! So your plan is to sow mistrust in my army, then take advantage of the confusion to attack my headquarters, is it? I figured she was going to give herself away eventually, but I never expected her to use her bewitching incense to turn some of Hasho's subordinates into her pawns. *It seems I underestimated the Honorable One. How infuriating.*

Standing behind me, Ren of Senko said nothing, although I could sense her murderous rage radiating outwards from her. This meddling right before we were to achieve our goal of unification must have hit a nerve. Despite her foul mouth, the girl's only wish was world peace.

"The main body of the enemy forces has..." a soldier from a lookout ladder started, then hesitated.

Despite choking on his words, his fearful reaction told me all I needed to know. Goose bumps rippled over my skin in my excitement, and an intense enjoyment racked my slim frame. *He's here!*

"The main body of the enemy forces has begun its charge!" the soldier screeched. "Th-Their flag bears the 'Chou' character! I-It's the Chou army! They're being led by a black-haired general on a black horse and a silver-haired female general on a white horse!"

The soldiers stationed in headquarters murmured among themselves, their fear apparent on their faces. These days, it wasn't just the soldiers who knew about the Kouei of the Modern Ages—an apt nickname, for even children playing in the alleyways of Enkei had heard of him.

I covered my eyes with a small, pale hand and praised my erstwhile friend. "He hasn't changed a bit. There is no one faster than him at seizing opportunities on the battlefield. He got the jump on us."

But this is exactly what I wanted. Kou Eihou's true worth is best

measured when he's swinging his swords on the front line! Ever since the Seitou Invasion, the Chou strategist had dealt serious damage to my army, though her plans basically always boiled down to letting Eihou do as he pleased on the front line while she focused primarily on pulling him and the others back before things got too dangerous. *She's a most formidable opponent, I'll give her that. Once this war is won, I'd like to recruit her if possible.*

"Emperor Adai." Sitting atop her horse and with a long spear in hand, the White Wolf, Rus, trotted back to headquarters. She must have left the front line in Gisen's hands. My beautiful wolf dismounted in a flash and knelt before me, head bowed. Despite the thickness of her white-and-purple military uniform, I could see her whole body trembling with rage at the actions of her mother, the Honorable One.

But before she could voice her opinion on the matter, I reminded her, "Rus, you and Gisen are to deal with the enemy forces in front of us, not what's going on over on the right flank."

Rus's lovely face contorted in frustration, and her grip on the spear tightened until it was creaking in her palm. "Forgive me," she murmured. The day we first met, she offered me fierce loyalty, and she had never wavered once in that sentiment.

"It's fine. I figured that witch would eventually turn against me." I paused, then added, "My apologies if I've offended you."

"O-Of course you haven't! I don't even *think* of that woman as my mother anymore!" Rus replied. "I vow to smite her down with my spear!"

I offered her a small nod of gratitude for the offer, but if I really wanted to order the Honorable One's death, I had someone far more suitable in mind. I turned to the two sisters standing guard behind me. "Ren, Uto. Considering how much incense she has used, I doubt the Honorable One is acting alone. She should be somewhere close by, mocking the conflict while waiting for an opening to swoop in and claim the spoils."

Still wearing her fox mask, the older sister remained silent, but the younger, more talkative sister flashed me a bright smile. "Give us your command, my liege."

I planted my elbow on the armrest of my throne and waved my left hand around in an exaggerated motion. “On the off chance that both Chou Sekiei and I die in this battle, it will delay unification anywhere from a few hundred years up to a thousand. I ordered my marshal to use the rat’s idea where, instead of taking the water fortress by force, our forces detour around it and launch a direct attack on Rinkei, but all of that will go to waste if we end up losing here. The foolish heads of the You and Rin families have sent me a secret letter of surrender too. So what do you suppose we should do?”

Naturally, I had no intention of losing this war, but my enemy was the undefeatable Kouei. I knew better than anyone—yes, even that girl in the Chou family—how he could manifest miracles on the battlefield.

Ren tapped her scabbard a few times to let out her irritation, then clicked her tongue. “That accursed witch! She’s taken my chance to behead Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei away from me!”

“Please leave that wretched mysticism-obsessed fool to us,” Uto said, bowing her head deeply beside her angry older sister.

A second later, they had both disappeared from my sight, which apparently wasn’t some feat of mysticism—something I had rarely seen, even a thousand years ago—but simply that they did not have the same limitations as regular mortals. In any case, as long as they killed the Honorable One, I didn’t care what methods they used. And even if they were to fail in their task, if I destroyed Seitou itself, then —

“The Chou army is advancing fast! Ukuna’s team is on the verge of collapse!” the soldier atop the ladder bellowed.

Although Ukuna had been freed from captivity, his wounds hadn’t healed enough for him to participate in this battle, but the soldiers under his command had still begged for the chance to fight, so I appointed them as the vanguard for the central army. *If the Chou army gets any closer, it’ll affect the morale of the whole army.*

Still seated on my throne, I glanced across at my purple-haired female general, who was still awaiting her orders. “Rus, do not send aid to the flanks! Work with Gisen and take down Chou Sekiei and

that Chou girl with all your might! I will await news of your victory here at headquarters."

"Yessir!" the beautiful woman replied after a brief pause. She saluted me, then mounted her horse and galloped away, though I spied a tinge of sadness in her expression as she did so. Was it pity for the Chou girl?

After Rus had departed, I sat and listened to the blaring music of the battlefield when a man on horseback rushed in, calling my name. It was Orid Dada—whom I hadn't given permission to be here—and beside him was a pale-looking Ukuna Dada. Under normal circumstances, even members of the Dada clan would have found themselves on the receiving end of severe punishment for the violation of military regulations seen the previous day. However, after hearing an appeal from Gi Heian and his troops, as well as taking into consideration how the final battle was the following day, I had simply decided to station Orid at the rear.

I tapped my fingers on the armrest. "Ukuna, Orid, I believe I already gave the two of you your orders."

"You did, yes. But..." Ukuna trailed off, so Orid picked up where he left off.

"We came here to convince you to reconsider sending the rear guard over to the right flank!"

"Oh?"

Before the start of the battle, our right flank had comprised fifteen thousand soldiers, but the battle had taken a difficult turn for them, as they were forced to deal with two thousand traitors on top of the ten thousand enemy soldiers bearing down on them. No one presently on the battlefield could come to their aid either. The left flank didn't have the numbers to send across any of its soldiers, and we needed both the Black Wolves and White Wolves where they were in order to stop Eihou's charge. This meant that the task of assisting the right flank with this unexpected trouble naturally fell to the approximately five thousand soldiers in the rear guard, and my cousins weren't fools, meaning they could understand the logic behind it.

"You're saying to let Hasho suffer?" I asked, drumming my fingers

on the armrest even louder.

"We are," Orid confirmed with a nod. "If we send the rear guard in, the defenses around headquarters will be stretched too thin."

"If *anything* should happen to you, we—"

"I don't need your consideration!" I yelled, interrupting Ukuna. A stronger wave of displeasure than expected washed over me, and I glared at the enemy encampment in the distance. "They went to great pains to set up their field fortifications. Not even the Black and White Lancers will be able to get through their defenses in a frontal attack." I could see the general I yearned to be beside me galloping across the battlefield on his black horse, loosing arrow after arrow without pause. I could also make out the silver-haired, blue-eyed girl riding alongside him on her white horse. *Unforgivable!* "Chou Sekiei has left their encampment and his only focus is on charging here to take my neck. This is the perfect opportunity."

Yes, the perfect opportunity. Their anticavalry tactics have evolved to the point where defeating them would have been next to impossible if they'd holed up in their encampment. So today is the day! Today, I will beat Eihou! And when I do, I'll show him my worth! As long as I can achieve that, I don't care if I have to use myself as bait!

"With Chou Tairan gone, the only threat in the Chou army is the Kouei of the Modern Ages, Chou Sekiei! All we need to do is defeat him!" I proclaimed to Orid and Ukuna in a firm voice.

My cousins gave me a deeply sad look and shook their heads.

"Your Imperial Majesty," Ukuna murmured.

"Why are you so..." Orid didn't finish his question, but instead of giving up entirely, he continued with his impudent attempts to change my mind. "But what if the enemy is planning an ambush?! We have to remain cautious!"

"Hmm? Cautious of who exactly? Are you talking about Jo Hiyou, who didn't make a move even after reaching the capital, then scurried back home to the southern regions? Or do you mean Gan Retsurai, that oxygen thief of a guardian of the great water fortress? If you're worried about Teiha and U Hakubun in Keiyou, I don't recall receiving any reports about them leaving there."

"Well, um..."

Admittedly, the Seitou soldiers turning traitor due to the Honorable One's interference was something I had not accounted for, but I'd done everything I needed to do with the information I could get my hands on.

"The U army in their headquarters is all they have in reserve," I continued. "So I'll say this as many times as it takes to get it through to the two of you: We only need to defeat Chou Sekiei! Once we've managed that, no one else will give us any trouble." But when neither of them replied to this, I felt my irritation bubble up to the surface. I got up from my throne, pointed my dagger at them, and gave them their orders in an icy voice. "Orid Dada. Ukuna Dada. As emperor of Gen, I, Adai Dada, command you to take the troops in the rear guard and aid those on the right flank at once. After you have defeated the traitors, you are to fall under Hasho's command. Now, go!"

"Yessir," the pair replied after a long silence. Their shoulders visibly slumped, they turned their horses around and trotted out of headquarters.

Unbelievable! I was hoping to enjoy this final battle! I resheathed my dagger and threw myself back into my throne. "Hmm?" But an odd feeling struck me, as if someone were gripping my heart tightly, and I laid my hand over my chest. A vivid memory of a conversation I'd once had with Eihou in my past life flashed before my eyes.

"Even when you think you've accounted for everything and predicted all that's to come, the battlefield is the place where the unbelievable happens. Listen, Ouei, you're way too smart for your own good. You think you can make no mistakes. That kind of thinking is a trap in and of itself. One day, you'll trip on a pebble you didn't notice and hurt yourself. Focus your eyes on the big picture: the whole battlefield, the province, and even the entire country. If you do that, there's no way you can lose."

The wind carried with it the stench of spilled blood. But why, after all this time, would I care about something Eihou had once said to me? I turned my gaze from my chest to my former best friend as he raced across the battlefield on his black horse.

***

I—Chou Sekiei—loosed the final arrow in my quiver, and watched as it found its target, sending a Black Lancer who had been about to deal a fatal blow to one of our boy soldiers toppling off his mount. Without stopping, I yelled, "Asaka, take care of him!"

"Understood, Lord Sekiei!"

The brown-haired attendant had been guarding Hakurei, who was fighting only a short distance away, but she and the other female soldiers under her command didn't hesitate to gallop over to the boy soldier and lead him away from the battlefield. I glanced over my shoulder at Kuuen, and saw he was doing his best to keep up with me. We had used up all the arrows we'd brought with us.

I tossed away my empty quiver and drew Black Star from my belt. The enemy riders murmured to each other at the sight of it, but none made a move to attack me. Unlike the other enemy forces we'd faced thus far, they never once let their guard down and always fought together as a group. Things had been going smoothly for us since breaking through their vanguard, but...

"The Black Lancers and White Lancers really are the pride and joy of Gen, aren't you? You've all been trained well— Hmm?"

I'd been galloping across the battlefield on Zetsuei, deflecting every arrow the enemy sent Hakurei's way, when I looked over to the central section of Gyoumei Moor where the fighting was at its most intense and noticed something odd. The reserve unit who were supposed to remain stationed in enemy headquarters with Adai were marching out.

"The rear guard's heading for the right flank? But..." I mumbled to myself, but I didn't get the chance to finish my thought because I was interrupted by bellows from beside me.

"Chou Sekiei!"

"We'll take your head!"

"We're not gonna keep losing to you!"

With a barrage of arrows covering them, three enemy riders charged straight at me, though before I could even react, veteran soldiers holding giant shields forced their way between us.

"Protect the young master!" yelled one. "Master Strategist's orders!"

"Understood!"

Although the shields managed to ward off most of the arrows, some still made it through the gaps in the line of shields, causing the shield bearers to grunt in pain. Gen riders used catgut when constructing their bows, and the power in them as a result far exceeded ours.

Hakurei wasted no time in firing her own arrows in retaliation. The Gen riders' armor was tougher than before, but her arrows found the vulnerable gaps between the plates, and two riders grunted in pain as they fell from their horses. *A superhuman feat*, I marveled. The remaining rider must have realized what fate had in store for him, for his expression twisted in fear.

"She shot *both* riders at once?! The National Shield's daughter is just as str— Gah!" The final arrow skewered his right palm, forcing him to drop his spear.

"Sekiei!" Hakurei snapped. "Stop letting your mind wander! We're on the battlefield!"

"Hmm? Oh, right. Thanks." I replied.

"Unbelievable! What's the matter with you?" Hakurei huffed before raising her voice and delivering a sharp command to the rest of the soldiers around us. "Everyone, use this slight lull in proceedings to patch yourselves up!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

She wasn't going to miss this opportune pause in the fighting. When self-doubt wasn't clouding her heart, our princess was a skilled commander who lived up to our father's reputation. I smiled with pride, then tossed my bow to my young attendant, who was busy wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Kuuen, I want you to do something for me," I said.

"L-Lord Sekiei, I refuse to go back! I'm your attendant!" exclaimed the foreign boy, who had already given me all of the arrows in the quivers he had brought with him onto the battlefield. His face was flushed red and he remained seated in the saddle.

I figured this would happen. The veterans were watching us with

identical grins on their faces, so I turned away from Kuuen momentarily to glare at them. Then, from my pockets, I produced a white cloth and a bamboo bottle of water.

"No, idiot," I admonished the boy. "I mean I've got a mission for you. One so important it might change the tide of this whole battle."

"A mission, you say?"

The enemy riders who were lining up before us were starting to make some serious noise. *They're coming.* Pressing the cloth and bottle into my young attendant's hands, I said, "Go back to headquarters and tell Ruri to send the U soldiers to the center of the battlefield. If you die, I'll release you from your duties as my attendant. So ride hard and don't look back!"

"Y-Yessir!" he replied with a nod before darting off, galloping back the way we had come.

I signaled to my veteran soldiers with my left hand, and a handful of them broke off and raced after Kuuen to serve as his bodyguards.

A pale hand reached up to wipe the sweat from my brow and cheek with a cloth, then held a bamboo bottle to my mouth. "You're as big a liar as I remember," Hakurei teased.

"Well, I don't want Shun'en and the youngest daughter of the Jo family—Karin, if I recall—in Butoku to hate me. I hear they're rather attached to Kuuen."

"He'll be upset with you, you know. And I'm sure Miss Ruri has already sent out the U army."

She's seen straight through me. I smiled at how much Hakurei had grown as a general. It went without saying that reporting developments on the front line back to headquarters was of absolute importance. War hadn't changed much over the past thousand years, so there was always a disconnect between what was happening on the battlefield and the hypothetical situation on a table somewhere behind the lines. It also went without saying that when it came to battle, reality was always stranger than fiction.

However, our Ruri wasn't like the figurehead strategists you found in other armies. During the chaotic hell that was the Seitou invasion, she had fought alongside us, even putting together her own team of messengers to gather as much information as possible from all

around the battlefield. Ruri wouldn't hesitate to make the same call I had just made. The only way for us to win this battle was by taking advantage of even the smallest openings Adai allowed us.

The hair on my arms suddenly stood on end, and in a low voice, I said, "Hakurei."

"Yes, I know."

"We'll deal with them. Stay out of it," I barked sharply to Asaka and the other Chou soldiers before riding forwards a few paces.

The enemy line split to reveal two generals on horseback. One was a massive black-haired man in a black uniform, a scar marring his left cheek and a great sword resting across his shoulders. This was the Black Wolf, Gisen. Beside him was a beautiful woman with long lilac hair, who was wearing a white-and-purple uniform and wielded a long spear. This was the White Wolf, Rus. These two were the most fearsome generals in all the land, and symbolized the Gen Empire's great power and strength.

"Oh, so you finally decided to show up," I said by way of greeting.

"Rus," Hakurei murmured.

In place of an answer, they raised their weapons, ready to engage in close combat. And that was all they did. Yet with that one simple motion, soldiers on both sides—easily numbering twenty thousand in total—paused and gulped. The aura emanating from the two generals was so intense, I could hardly believe they were real, flesh-and-blood warriors.

I tensed my muscles, willing strength into my core in response to their intimidation, then flashed them a casual smile. "I guess you're right. An actual battlefield is no place for pleasantries. Let me just say one thing, though." I pointed at the black-haired general and locked eyes with him. This would be my fourth time fighting him, and I was impressed with myself for surviving all of our previous encounters. "Gisen, I bear a message for you from my strategist, the sole survivor from the mystic vale, Kobi. She says, 'I won't believe or forgive you. But I want to know the truth behind my village's destruction.'"

The Black Wolf's gaze wavered almost imperceptibly. He held his great sword up in front of his face as if offering a prayer and replied,

"If you defeat me, I will tell you everything I know. I swear it on the memory of my late daughter."

"Oh, yeah?" My grip around Black Star tightened. *In that case, I've really gotta win this one for that self-professed ascendant!*

After my exchange with the Black Wolf, Hakurei dipped her head at the female general, although she had an awkward look on her face. "Rus, I know this might sound like an odd thing to say, but thank you for taking care of me while I was your captive."

"There is no need to thank me. I was simply following Emperor Adai's orders."

All conversation ended there. The wind gusted across the battlefield as we raised our voices as one: "Prepare yourselves!"

We all charged forwards on our horses, and, as if on cue, the soldiers watching us with bated breath resumed attacking too. The music of battle—the clanging of metal on metal interwoven with screams, roars, and war cries—filled the air once more. The distance between us and our foes grew shorter and shorter until Gisen eventually decided he was within range, and with one slow movement of his great sword, he swung the blade towards my neck.

I grunted as I blocked his attack with Black Star, sparks flying from our blades. "You're as superhuman as ever!" I remarked before countering with a slash of my own, then, gripping the hilt with both hands, I locked my sword onto his and pushed with all my might.

A bitter look I'd never seen Gisen make flashed across his face. "I should be the one saying that. With every battle, you get stronger and faster. Once you reach your prime, you alone will be the greatest threat to Gen. I will not allow that future to come to pass!"

"Whoa!"

He parried Black Star and, taking advantage of the opening it afforded him, launched a series of rapid attacks. Guarding myself against them was the most I could do.

"Sekiei!" cried out Hakurei, who had been exchanging blows with Rus every time they darted past each other, but she cut herself off with a grunt.

"Pay attention or you'll die!" Even on horseback, Rus's posture was immaculate and she unleashed another flurry of thrusts at

Hakurei, preventing her from riding over to assist me.

I gritted my teeth and focused solely on parrying Gisen's attacks as our horses galloped parallel to each other. I pulled Zetsuei back to avoid his last downwards swing, buying me some distance so that I could catch my breath. Gisen's expression tightened even further, the look in his eye promising death. He must have been intending to kill me with those unbelievably fast slashes. *Thanks to all the times I've fought him, I'm starting to see through his attacks. But I can't find an opening to strike back!*

Hakurei was panting heavily by this point, swinging her sword vertically and horizontally to deflect Rus's thrusts, which were so fast, they seemed more akin to flashes of light. Although she hadn't managed to escape the White Wolf's flurry of attacks unscathed, she had only suffered minor injuries. Since her first duel with the Crimson Wolf, Nguyen Gui, which had left her in tears, Hakurei had been in countless life-and-death situations by my side on battlefields. In fact, the experience she had racked up was incredible! Some of the foes she had defeated were so powerful, those reading of her exploits in the future were certain to have a hard time believing the veracity of her accomplishments. But it stood to reason that she would grow strong.

Rus drew her horse back as well and spun her spear, flicking away droplets of blood. "You're good. If you'd displayed this kind of skill when I came to abduct you, I would've had a lot more trouble completing my mission. Still, I'm Emperor Adai's loyal wolf, so I cannot lose here. Absolutely not!"

"Neither can I!"

Their white horses whinnied, then raced towards each other once more. Rus swung her spear in a wide arc, slicing through the tall grass, but Hakurei blocked it with White Star. The purple-haired general smiled at this, her expression so beautiful, it could have toppled entire kingdoms.

Oh no!

With her free left hand, Rus reached down to her waist and in one smooth motion, pulled out a miniature fire lance. When our father had Adai cornered at the battle at Keiyou, Rus had used this

weapon to injure him and push him back. Without thinking, I shoved my hand into my pocket and threw every single dart I had at Gisen—who was charging at me again—and Rus. In an impressive display of skill, Gisen cut most of the darts out of the air with his great sword, but the final dart—one of the larger and stronger ones—struck the miniature fire lance and knocked it to the ground.

"Now! Hakurei!" I yelled.

In response, Hakurei raised her voice into a yell and thrust White Star in front of her, the platinum blade flashing in the sunlight. Rus leaned backwards and managed to dodge the attack, but several strands of her lilac hair fluttered loose in the air. She withdrew to where Gisen was standing, opening and closing her left hand several times, as if trying to shake off the numbness caused by the dart whipping the mini fire lance out of it. In her eyes, I could see how surprised she was at the coordination between Hakurei and myself.

"Don't let your guard down," Gisen warned her in a cool voice as he adjusted his grip on his great sword. "These two are strong enough to pierce our throats with their fangs."

"I suppose you're right," Rus said after a moment. "She's like a completely different person from the one I whisked away from the manor."

It would've been so much easier if they'd kept viewing us as their inferiors. I rode up to Hakurei's side. "How're you holding up?" I asked.

"She's incredibly fast. And..." There was a look of bewilderment in Hakurei's blue eyes as her voice dropped to a whisper. "She can see through my attacks. Although not quite all of them, and she wasn't able to predict all the trajectories of your darts."

"Maybe she's able to see into the future for a brief second," I whispered back. "It's not out of the question that she can use something like magic if she's the Honorable One's daughter. Guess we have no choice but to try to overcome it the best we can."

Hakurei had told me how when Rus had abducted her in Keiyou, she had closed the distance between them in an instant. It sounded like our safest bet was to assume she could use a few strange, mystical techniques.

Hakurei's brow furrowed as she wiped the sweat from her face. "Stop saying such reckless things, and stop pushing yourself so hard. I—"

"Don't worry. You have me here at your side," I said, holding out my sword.

The silver-haired girl blinked at me for a moment, then extended her own blade towards me. "Fine, if you insist."

She smiled at me, and her smile was more beautiful than anything else in the world. We were catching up to the Gen generals in terms of strength, but they were still our superiors when it came to technique. Which meant...

"All right, Sekiei. Let's go win this! And prepare yourself for a lecture after we've emerged victorious!"

"Love the enthusiasm, but I feel I could do without the lecture, thanks!"

Hakurei's White Star and my Black Star—the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars—clinked together, and a glow reminiscent of starlight started emanating from the blades. Hakurei and I looked at each other. The Heavenly Swords had lost their supernatural powers a long time ago, and these days, people enjoyed attaching their own legends and meanings to the swords. In this moment, however, they seemed to be reacting to our determination. *Maybe they've finally accepted us as their rightful wielders!*



We smiled and called out each other's names.

"Let's go, Hakurei!"

"Right with you, Sekiei!"

Our horses galloped forwards, putting all their strength into the fastest burst of speed that whole day. Gisen and Rus drew closer and closer.

"A head-on charge without a plan?!" Gisen roared at us.

"You dare to underestimate us?!" Rus snarled.

Both generals glared at us as they raised their weapons to fend off our charge, but we didn't slow. We had no use for fear. My body seemed incredibly light, and I felt like I could control every little part of it, even down to the tips of my hairs. Gisen swung his great sword at us and Rus thrust her spear in front of her, both moving as fast as a bolt of lightning, but...

"You're too slow!" Hakurei and I yelled in unison.

So this *is the power of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars?* Their attacks had seemed so terrifyingly deadly before, but in this moment, I could clearly see their movements in great detail. Hakurei and I raised our voices into a yell and put all of our strength into our attack, slashing out as we rode past the two generals. But the Black Wolf and the White Wolf were far more experienced than any of our previous opponents, so while our dual strike would have killed an ordinary general, they had reacted fast enough to deflect our blades away from doing major damage at the last second.

"Gisen!" Rus exclaimed. While she had only suffered a light scratch to her left arm, Gisen groaned and held a hand up to his right eye.

Fire still raged in his visible left eye, but bright red blood poured out from between the fingers of the Black Wolf's right hand. I turned to face the pair once more, exhausted from the drawn-out affair. The light coming from Black Star had weakened as well. Hakurei didn't appear to be faring any better. Her face had gone pale, and her shoulders heaved as she panted, her silver ponytail shaking with every breath. I didn't really understand how it all worked, but this power seemed to eat up a lot of our physical and mental strength, and if I had to guess, the reason I hadn't been able to use this in my

previous life was because I always wielded both swords at once.

Gisen and Rus remained silent, but I could tell their determination to defeat us hadn't wavered in the slightest. *Both the Black Wolf and the White Wolf are truly fearsome opponents!* Hakurei and I both took a deep breath, preparing to throw ourselves into our final battle, but just at that moment...

Incoherent cries went up as the enemy's left flank led by Gi Heian —where Shigou and his soldiers were fighting—fell into complete disarray, with even their flags tilting to one side. The cause of the confusion appeared to be the arrival of several hundred riders attacking them from their far side.

"I-Is that..." the usually calm and collected Rus stammered, looking shocked.

Gisen's one working eye widened as it glimpsed the battered Jo and Ei war flags flying high above the battlefield. "Impossible! The Jo army's *here*?!"

"And the garrison from the water fortress too?!" Rus added.

The secret letter that had reached us from Auntie Saiun earlier that day had surprised even Ruri. *"We negotiated with Ou Jin, and had him evacuate Jo Hiyou and his army from Rinkei using paddle wheelers, along with some of the elite members of the Ei army. They've taken the sea route and are waiting at the mouth of the great river. Requesting further instructions."*

Without the help of Asaka's younger sister, Yuuka, we would never have been able to exchange letters with so much enemy territory between us. Still, I had to hand it to Hiyou: His timing was perfect. Behind me, I could hear the Chou soldiers all cheering, and with these reinforcements combined with the U soldiers marching out from headquarters, morale among the Black and White Lancers who had been pushing the Chou soldiers back was plummeting fast.

Gisen and Rus still seemed to be having a hard time accepting the sudden shift in the tide of the battle, so I called over to them. "I'm sure you two had absolute confidence you were going to emerge victorious from this duel, and in the battle overall. So Black Wolf, White Wolf, let me tell you why you two have lost." Total silence was their reply. *No, I'm sure they already know why.* I huffed

out a soft laugh as I allowed the tension to escape from my shoulders. “It’s because you viewed the White Wraith, Adai Dada, as an absolute emperor who could do everything except fight, rather than the mortal man he is. A god can do no wrong, which is why they don’t have anyone to advise them.”

Frustration appeared on the faces of the two generals. Feeling rather bittersweet about the outcome, I squinted into the distance. At the very back of the well-defended enemy headquarters was a man with long white hair, sitting frozen on his throne. He was a true hero who had lived for two lifetimes without ever suffering a single loss in battle. But on this day, he was about to get his first taste of defeat.

“No one could hope to measure up to his intelligence,” I continued. “I’m sure most of his predictions come true.” He’d also been like that a thousand years ago. He was way too smart for his own good. People often viewed him with respect at first, but it never took long for that respect to morph into fear, and eventually, blind fealty. I knew it wasn’t fair of me to blame these two generals for the irrational anger I felt in my chest, but I couldn’t help myself lashing out at them. “At the end of the day, he’s human. Nothing more, nothing less. That’s why he underestimated Jo Hiyou and Gan Retsurai, and wrote them off as bit players in this war, instead focusing all of his energy on settling things with me.” Although Gen’s left flank was putting up an admirable fight in response to the ambush, they couldn’t push the new fighters back, their war flags falling and disappearing in the melee. It wouldn’t be much longer before they started thinking about retreat. “That’s why this has happened.”

Gisen and Rus didn’t say anything. Although they might have lost a skirmish or two in the past, the White Wraith had won every single battle he had personally overseen. That legend would be coming to an end on this day in time, and the ones terminating it were the children of the Three Great Generals—Chou Tairan, Jo Shuuhou, and U Jouko—who had all died before they could bear witness to the collapse of their bitter enemy, the Gen Empire.

“I have business with Adai,” I said. “Black Wolf, White Wolf, get

out of my way."

It was time to end it. Summoning up all of my might, I began my final charge of the day. Gisen held up his great sword and Rus readied her spear.

"You think you can get past *us*?!" Gisen yelled.

"We won't let you through!" Rus agreed.

But they froze in shock as an order shouted out by a young girl rang out across the battlefield: "Fire!"

A roar echoed all around as the fire lance team discharged their weapons, and although they barely inflicted any damage, the noise alone was enough to slow down the enemy riders, including Gisen and Rus.

"Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, go now! Ride straight to their headquarters and Adai Dada!" Oto yelled. Fat beads of sweat dotted her brow and cheeks—a testament to how much she had pushed herself and her team to get to the front line—and from the middle of her formation, she swung her shovel with abandon.

Looks like Ruri sent them just when we needed them. "Hakurei!" I yelled.

"Sekiei!"

The two of us galloped into the enemy headquarters without breaking stride. It was in a state of total disorder and confusion, as they were having to deal with soldiers fleeing from the left flank as well as fighting off some enthusiastic Chou and U soldiers. *We can do this!* Trusting Hakurei to have my back, I charged in alone, cutting my way through the tiny gaps in Gen's defense. They must have sent most of the garrison out to fight, because no one even attempted to stop me.

The slender man with long white hair cascading down from his hat was standing in front of his throne, and I could see his lips forming the words: "I knew it would be by your hand that I—"

"It's over, Adai!" I bellowed.

"Come, Chou Sekiei!"

We both let out yells as Zetsuei closed the distance between us incredibly fast. On reaching the final set of stairs leading up to the throne, the horse leaped into the air. I saw Adai smile at me—and it

was an expression of genuine satisfaction—before a flash of obsidian starlight sliced through the air.

Epilogue

"In other words, Keiyou is a city of infinite possibilities! It's connected to Enkei and Rinkei via the Grand Canal, and to the east, the great river leads directly to the sea. You can access so many different regions through Keiyou, making it the perfect trading hub. Now, Miss Kou Miu, let's make our dreams come true! All the gold and silver under the heavens will belong to *us*!" On finishing her speech, the slender prodigy, Ou Meirin, clenched her fists and regarded me with sparkling eyes, the energetic motion causing her chestnut pigtails and voluptuous bosom to jiggle. Yui, the black cat, watched Meirin sleepily from where it was lying on the bench.

Half a year had passed since the battle at Gyoumei Moor, which had determined who would rule over the resulting unified continent, and which the people referred to as "The Battle of the Twin Ei's." I—Kou Miu—was sitting in a sunlit office in the Chou manor in Keiyou, a major city in the province of Koshuu. Holding the Heirloom Seal aloft, I carefully stamped a document requesting more houses be built, awkwardly trying not to meet Meirin's eager eyes. *And to think, I was in a good mood earlier when Hakurei bought me that adorable outfit that matched hers!*

"Um, Meirin," I said hesitantly. "I, um, think your idea is a great one. But I'm only a representative of the Chou family, so I don't have the authority to make those kinds of decisions..."

"That's fine! We'll come up with some excuse *after* we've carried out our plans. It won't be easy convincing Miss Hakurei, of course, but we only need to get Lord Sekiei on board! Besides, it's my *husband's* fault for abandoning his child bride! *I'm* not the one to blame here. Nope, no way!"

"Th-That's not a good reason, you know." *Oh no, I can't stop her. And it's my job to protect the peace and quiet of Keiyou while Sekiei and Hakurei are away! Wait a second. Did Meirin just say she*

thought of herself as a "child bride"?!

My attendant who doubled as my best friend, plus a beautiful woman with silky black hair, poked their heads around the doorframe.

"Lady Miu, please be a bit quieter," my friend said. "You'll wake Kuuen and Lady Karin from their naps."

"You too, Lady Meirin. Please calm down," the beautiful attendant pleaded.

"Mei..." I whined, although Meirin cheerily replied, "Shizuka, I *am* already calm! ☆"

In the past, Mei had always considered me to be her highest priority, but these days, she also showered her unconditional love over the young girl she had met in Butoku, and Sekiei's attendant. It made me a little sad that I didn't have her all to myself sometimes. The two attendants turned and exited to the room next door at almost the same moment the self-professed ascendant—wearing her usual blue hat over her blonde hair—and a young girl with short black hair and wearing a cloak walked in.

"What's with all the noise?" the blonde girl asked.

"We're back!" the black-haired girl added.

"Oh, welcome back, Ruri, Oto! How did the talks go?" I asked, greeting the Chou family's strategist and the princess of the U garrison in Keiyou. Over the past few months, we'd all become something approaching friends.

Ruri picked up Yui and sat down on the bench, then set the cat back down in her lap. "Meirin, pour us some tea. Out of everyone here, you're the best at it."

Meirin made an annoyed sound before replying, "Fiiine."

With a dismissive wave of her hand, Ruri continued. "It's just like facing them on the battlefield. They never let up, and I'm sick of it. I said what I wanted to say in there, but it's still too early to let our armies train together. Still, that's all right, because I've discovered his weakness."

"His weakness?" Meirin and I parroted, tilting our heads to one side.

"L-Lady Ruri, please don't say it!" Oto cried out.

Yui started batting at Ruri's hat, so she removed it and placed the cat inside before shooting Oto a mean smile. *Ah! That's the same look she gives Sekiei when she's bullying him at chess!*

The Master Strategist leaned forwards and steepled her fingers. "Apparently, the messenger for the western Gen Empire, the Millenary Diviner, Hasho, has a soft spot for Princess U Oto. I guess you could call it love at first sight. Next time, we should get Oto to do the negotiating for us."

"Oh?" Meirin and I exclaimed in unison, interested in this sudden romance.

"L-Lady Ruriii!" Oto whined. "I... I can't do that..." The subject of the conversation looked uncomfortable and fiddled with her bangs.

But Ruri simply shrugged her small shoulders. "I'm only joking. Besides, do you really think Hakubun would sign off on that? He's the overprotective type. According to Sekiei, his love for his sister *really* comes out when he's had some alcohol."

"Oh, I've heard him talk about that," I said, clapping my hands together.

"He's gotten worse with it," Meirin agreed as she lined up a row of porcelain cups.

Amid the chaos of shifting allegiances postwar, Hakubun had officially become the head of the U household. He was very smart and possessed a strong sense of duty, so I had no qualms about placing my trust in him, although I wasn't altogether sure how I felt about him coming up with some frankly bizarre reasons for leaving Butoku and coming to Keiyou just to visit his younger sister.

No longer able to stomach the embarrassment, Oto yelped and covered her face with both hands.

Oh my goodness! That's so cute! According to Shun'en—Kuuen's younger sister—the soldiers secretly loved that element of Oto's personality. They had good taste.

"To move on to a more serious matter," Ruri began. "There's been a never-ending stream of people from the former Ei territories wishing to immigrate to Keiyou and the western regions. We have to come up with some countermeasures. If Gen complains about it, it'll be a pain in all our necks trying to appease them."

“I agree,” I said after a pause and nodding as I returned the Heirloom Seal to the black box. I also returned the black key to its small pouch and held it against my chest.

Yes, in what turned out to be an abrupt end, the Ei Empire was destroyed, and it was the Chou army that won the final battle to determine the fate of the continent. The water fortress didn’t fall and the chains across the Grand Canal remained uncut, but Ei had no one to turn the war in its favor, and on the night of the new moon, the Gen army used a fleet of small boats to launch a direct attack on the capital.

When they entered the city, they met no resistance, as no one within its walls had the mental strength or will to fight. Rin Koudou, the lieutenant chancellor, and You Saikei, the interim chancellor, had been more focused on their own power struggles even after the death of Ou Hokujaku, and the night before Ei surrendered to Gen, their plots to assassinate the other resulted in them both being slain. My brother, who had been locked away in solitary confinement up until that point, had used poison to commit suicide. I still had no idea how he came to have it...

Koshuu remained under the control of the Chou family, while the U family continued to rule over the western regions. Jo Hiyou, the interim head of the Jo family in the southern regions, had gone missing after the Battle of the Twin Ei’s, but at the cost of a large portion of its territory, the Jo house was allowed to continue under the stewardship of Jo Yuushun.

This meant that people who didn’t like the idea of living under Gen’s control were flooding into these three provinces. Incidentally, despite my position as the princess of a fallen nation, I was treated very generously after the war ended. I was permitted to remain in Keiyou, and served as a proxy for Sekiei and the others whenever they weren’t in the city. The Heirloom Seal remained in my possession as well. They must have determined that I alone didn’t have the power needed to change the world.

“Heh heh heh.” Meirin chuckled theatrically once she’d poured everyone’s tea with practiced movements.

“Meirin, enough with the fake laughter already,” the lady

ascendant complained, glaring at the girl with an annoyed look on her face. "It creeps me out."

"Ruri, my chest feels like it's about to burst with joy at the bright future that lies ahead of us! I mean, a population boom? Isn't that just wonderful? ☆ After all, no one would *dare* to do anything unlawful while residing in lands governed by the living legends who wield the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars, Lord Sekiei and Miss Hakurei! ☆ I don't see any problem with it at all."

Although Ou Meirin's intelligence rivaled Ruri's, she had a decidedly more optimistic outlook on life and the problems it threw up, and I really respected her for that. If I continued to do my best, then one day, I might even be able to reach her lev—

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry! How thoughtless of me!" Meirin continued. "I suppose your chest is too small to hold much of anything inside it, Ruri! ☆ Oopsie-daisy! Silly me! ☆"

Ruri didn't say anything for a moment before finally scoffing, "Ha! This conversation is a total waste of my time."

Th-The atmosphere just got really heavy... I glanced over at Oto for help, but she was staring down at the cat, her mouth stretched into a firm line. *Okay, nope. She won't be of any use. She's playing with the cat while wondering whose side to take like it's a matter of life or death.*

Ruri's magic manifested black flower petals around her as she flipped her blonde hair over her shoulders without even trying to hide her irritation. "Listen, I'm still growing, unlike *someone* who's already peaked. It's not like I'm jealous or any—"

"Oh, really? You know, whenever I hug Lord Sekiei, he kind of looks like he enjoys it!"

In response to Meirin's comment, the rest of the girls in the room gazed down at the floor in silence. *Hmm, I see... So Lord Sekiei is just like all those other men, huh? Hmm...* And I wasn't the only one negatively affected by Meirin's revelation either.

"I really don't care..." Ruri muttered to herself.

"I'm still growing..." Oto murmured.

Both Ruri and Oto were equally unhappy about that particular observation. *Wh-What a terrifying truth!*

"Tee hee. Do you see the difference in our powers now? I win!" Meirin said triumphantly, puffing out her chest and practically arching her back to show it off, before cackling loudly.

It was a terribly infuriating sight, so I decided to calmly and coldly remind her of the truth of the matter. "Meirin, if you really *must* turn this into a competition... After the peace settlement was signed, Sekiei visited the different regions of Koshuu with me, and dropped by Butoku with Oto. He's also spent the last two months in Enkei with Hakurei. Doesn't that make *us* the winners?"

"Bah!" The older girl had been so assured of victory before, but my comment brought her back to reality with such a bang, her knees gave way and she collapsed to the floor. Of course, my remark wasn't enough to make her choke up blood, but I could have sworn I saw some sort of crimson liquid dripping from her lips. She pretended to wipe it from her mouth as she staggered back to her feet. "Y-You're good, Miu. I'm impressed you managed to bring me to my knees. However! My victory is set in stone! I might not be able to claim the position of his *legal* wife, but the person Lord Sekiei loves the most is—"

"Sekiei and Hakurei are currently in Routou, apparently," Ruri said, sitting down on top of the table with a cup in her hand.

Huh?

"For many years, Routou was a holy place you needed permission to enter. Looks like they had no trouble getting it this time," Ruri continued.

"Isn't Routou..." I started.

"That's the place with the giant peach tree, right? The one that's over a thousand years old?" Oto said, finishing my question for me.

"That's the one, Miu, Oto," Ruri replied. "I have no idea if the legends are true or not, but it's also supposedly where you can find one half of the giant boulder Kouei sliced in twain with the Heavenly Swords. They said they were going to try to find it if they had the time—"

"Ruri." With a lovely smile on her face, Meirin stood up and clasped her hands together, but a second later, she was pointing her finger at Ruri to begin her interrogation. "You just let the cat out of

the bag, and I don't mean Yui. Despite all your fronting about how you don't really care, how in the *world* do you know that Lord Sekiei and Miss Hakurei are in Routou right now?"

"Idiot," Ruri muttered, placing her cup down on the desk but keeping her cool. "Isn't it obvious how I know? I received a letter from them."

Meirin sighed. "A textbook example of letting the cat out of the bag. Let me tell you an interesting little story." She placed her orange hat on top of Ruri's head, then ground her knuckles into it and, by extension, Ruri's scalp. "Lord Sekiei is a terrible correspondent. He *never* picks up a pen to write a letter. I mean, he hardly ever wrote to Miss Hakurei when he was in Rinkei! So how in the world did you get *him* to write a letter to *you*?"

"Th-That's a secret," Ruri said after a long pause and looking out of the window, her cheeks flushed.

She's unfairly cute right now, but we can't let this slide.

Meirin grinned and clapped her hands. "Lady Kou Miu! Lady U Oto! Please make preparations for the trial! ☆"

"Understood!" Oto replied.

"Yes, I wholeheartedly agree about the need for a trial!" I exclaimed.

"What?!" Ruri cried out. "Miu, Oto, you're betraying me?!"

This wasn't the first time we'd had a conversation like this, and it was the kind of lighthearted back-and-forth I'd never experienced in the palace, which I'd heard had been reduced to rubble. *I hope these peaceful days last for as long as possible.* I offered up this prayer to the twin stars in the sky to the north, which had just started twinkling outside the window. Yui was the only one who noticed me looking up at the heavens, and its only response was a sleepy yawn.

***

"Oh, wow, it hasn't changed at all!"

At the end of the old mountain path, the giant tree of Routou greeted us. It had completely consumed the cliff by this point,

growing to the size of a small hill, and around us, we could hear the roaring of multiple waterfalls. The tree was perpetually in bloom, and the countless red blossoms that floated down from its branches had created a carpet of flowers at its base. It was a sight that was so ethereally beautiful, it was hard to believe it was real. Half of the boulder that Kou Eihou had sliced in two with the Heavenly Swords a thousand years before also remained, and the cross section—free of moss—was polished to the point that it resembled a mirror.

I—Chou Sekiei—gazed up at the old peach tree. "Feels like I'm meeting an old friend. Just how old is this thing? Now that I think about it, this tree's the strangest out of all of us. Don't you agree, Adai?"

I looked over at the emperor, who was struggling to catch his breath. He'd cut his annoying long hair short so that it just barely covered his ears, and his white clothing was easy to move around in, same as mine.

The hero who had been the first to unify the continent since the days of the Tou Empire placed his hand on a nearby rock to support himself and spat curses at me while panting for breath. "S-Sekiei...you bastard. Y-You're trying to kill me, aren't you?! You didn't finish me off...at Gyoumei Moor...just so you could see me suffer like this. Is that why you didn't hesitate to accept my summons to Enkei when I wrote it in the peace treaty? Y-You monster!"

"Idiot. Of course not," I replied with a short laugh, grabbing a petal as it fluttered down from the sky.

That wasn't a lie either. Back then, I really had been aiming for the kill. But just as I was about to swing Black Star at him, I caught sight of the genuinely happy look on Adai Dada's face as certain death loomed large before him. *"Finally, I can repent for my failure to save you a thousand years ago, Eihou. I welcome my death,"* the look seemed to say.

Yes, he actually *smiled. He didn't even care how I felt about it!* Unfortunately for him, I had no interest in helping him with his harebrained attempt at suicide, and at the last second, I altered the course of my sword and swiped his hat off his head instead. After

that, I simply left the battlefield. Although Gen had definitively lost the Battle of Gyoumei Moor, marked by the fact that it pulled back its main forces, both sides remained on the moor in a stalemate for about ten days after that, and the only thing that eventually brought it to an end was the news that the capital, Rinkei, had been taken.

As a result of all of their deception and political games, those in the palace had ended up killing each other, while the still-captive emperor committed suicide. It was some small mercy that Hiyou, whom we'd met up with after the battle, never got the chance to do the deed instead. In the end, the country of Ei was conquered and dissolved with over two hundred thousand combat-ready soldiers still in the water fortress, and without anyone ever being chosen to negotiate what would happen to the remaining citizens. It was a bit like watching a sandcastle collapse.

After an armistice was announced between us and Gen, Shigou rode to the capital as a messenger. On his return, he reported that Gan Retsurai was so furious and humiliated by what had happened, he looked on the verge of dying from high blood pressure. Still, I couldn't blame him for that. I wondered if my father would be rolling in his grave if he knew that, as a reward for all of the work they'd put in defending Ei from Gen, the Chou, U, and Jo families had been given permission to continue existing.

At the very least, I figured Lord Jo Shuuhou would feel sad for Hiyou. The young general had played an important part in the final battle, but as soon as the peace accord was signed, he entrusted the Jo family and his soldiers to me, then disappeared into thin air. I was still none the wiser over where he had gone.

In any case, the Jo family's successor, Yuushun—who was soon romantically entangled with Shun'en—was a talented youth. He could also call on Auntie Saiun's help if needed, so I wasn't too worried about the future of the Jo family. I hoped I would soon be able to meet him in Rinkei, which was in the process of being rebuilt by Orid Dada.

I took a gourd full of water out of the fabric pouch that was hanging from my belt and tossed it to Adai. "Perhaps you should consider walking around on your own two legs every now and then.

And maybe next time, I'll even help you with your horseback riding."

"Shut up!" Adai snapped before draining the contents of the gourd in one gulp, then wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

I hated to admit it, but his beauty could make even a casual motion like that look like poetry in motion. But at least I had a good story to tell Rus and Uto, who were serious about becoming his legal wife. *Oh, I can probably tell Ren too...* That girl was dangerous, since she still had half a mind to kill me and Hakurei, but luckily, she also had a sense of humor.

Unaware of what I was thinking, Adai took a glass bottle and three glass cups from the leather bag attached to his belt. He placed the cups on the small shrine underneath the tree and poured mountain peach wine into them.

"Is that one for him?" I inquired.

"I'm sure he would appreciate a drink as well," Adai replied, shooting me a meaningful look that prompted me to pick up one of the cups.

"To our friend from a bygone era," we said in unison, lifting our cups high into the air. For a moment, an illusion of Hi Gyoumei, Kou Eihou, and Ou Eifuu in their youth flashed before my eyes, then quickly vanished again.

After finishing my drink, I poured myself some more without telling or even asking Adai. "I'm surprised this place is still standing."

"For the people in the north, Routou is a holy land and a divine realm. These days, hardly anyone ever sets foot here."

"So how did you get permission to let us in?"

"Isn't that obvious? I pretended it was for a ritual," the white-haired emperor replied, sounding extremely proud of himself.

Oh, right. I forgot what kind of person he is.

I gave him an unimpressed look, and Adai raised his cup above his head. "I don't have any proof to back up my theory, but I believe the ancient mysticism the Honored One seeks did truly exist in this world once upon a time. In fact, it's hard *not* to believe in it, having gotten a look at both this tree and your Heavenly Swords up close. Those with silver hair and blue eyes are descendants of folk adept in mysticism."

"Oh?" Although I allowed my fingers to brush against Black Star, which was hanging down from my belt, my response was noncommittal. *Ancient mysticism, huh? Yeah, I guess he's right. A supernatural power really did lend me its power in that final battle.*

Adai placed his cup down on a rock and proceeded to scold me. "At least *pretend* to be interested. Considering no human can do anything with this tree, the Honorable One we failed to rid ourselves of will surely target you and your Heavenly Swords."

"Well, sure, but..."

Adai was right, of course. We knew next to nothing about that witch and her true identity, and there was a high chance she'd go after Hakurei again. But that was exactly why the one-eyed Black Wolf, Gisen, and the White Wolf, Rus, were tagging along as bodyguards on this short journey. Gisen, in particular, might have made a promise to Ruri during the brief conversation they shared after the peace settlement...

I scratched my cheek and shrugged. "Have you already forgotten? Only Hakurei and I can unsheathe the Heavenly Swords, and the swords can't unleash their full power unless we wield them both at the same time. The Honorable One can have the swords if she wants, but she won't be able to do anything with them."

"I'm worried about *you*," Adai muttered, though the roaring of the waterfalls suddenly swelled and it was next to impossible to make his words out clearly. The white-haired emperor heaved a loud, exaggerated sigh, then shook his head. "No, never mind. I forgot what kind of person you are!" He returned his cup down in front of the shrine, then slowly heaved himself to his feet. He batted the dirt from his clothes with a small, pale hand, and grinned at me. "Next month, I will raise an army and launch a campaign against Seitou. She may not possess *true* mysticism, but Seitou's technology, combined with the dregs of that magic, will be a great threat in the future. More importantly, she incited a revolt among my soldiers in the middle of a battle. I must destroy her."

Ooh, he's seriously pissed off this time. Gotta admit, I feel a little sorry for the witch, considering she's about to face the full force of the White Wraith's fury.

I continued sipping my wine even as Adai pointed at me. "As for who will lead the vanguard of said campaign, I believe Chou Sekiei is the man for the task. What say you?"

"Uh, I say Orid or Ukuna would do a better job than me. After all, you don't have a kid, so let a few of the other members of the imperial family earn some prestige."

"How do you feel about serving as vice..." Adai paused. "Hmm, wait, no. Ukuna is out of the question, but there's always a chance that you'll find common ground with Orid, become friends with him, declare independence, rise up against me..."

"Hellooo?" *Yeah, he's not listening. He's completely lost in his delusions.* I glanced back at the mountain path we had just climbed, and saw the White Wolf, Rus, and the beautiful Uto waiting there with a group of palanquin bearers. *Perfect*, I thought. I gave them a grateful nod, then mercilessly interrupted Adai's murmurings. "Hey, look. Your people have come to pick you up. Hurry home now, Your Feebleness. I'll take the rest of the wine with me."

"Oh?" Adai's good mood seemed to fade somewhat as he took a swig from his gourd and looked down at me. "You have some nerve, treating an emperor like myself in that way, you bastard. I suppose this means you won't mind me making you a fief lord."

I laughed at this. "Your Imperial Majesty, sometimes you go a little too far with your games. I humbly request you refrain from such cruel pranks." I shot to my feet and grabbed Adai by the collar. For a moment, we glared at each other.

I wouldn't have minded so much if Adai had been joking, but the problem was he was half serious about it. We'd already discussed the matter previously and reached the conclusion that Adai would wait until Miu and Kou Riu were ready before enfeoffing them.

Adai eventually calmed down and released his grip on my shirt. "Very well. Still, before you return to Keiyou, drop by Enkei for some drinks." He turned away and began walking towards Rus and the others. *Wait, my gourd...* I was watching him go when he paused and turned around again. "Back then, you had the perfect opportunity to part my head from my shoulders. But you didn't. So in that case..." His eyes met mine and the true hero who had unified

the country twice smiled at me. “Keep me company until we die.”

I didn’t reply in words. I simply lifted my cup in a salute.



Who knew what awaited us in the future? All I knew was, at Gyoumei Moor, I managed to cut through Ouei's lonely ghost. If I could be selfish, my only wish was that I would never have to kill a friend again—

"Ah, that reminds me. Chou Sekiei, find yourself a wife and fast. Soldiers who have accomplished great feats on the battlefield tend to be very popular among the people of the north. Every day, I receive letters from folk wanting me to marry you off to them. Although of course, you're free to marry as many people as you like, and it goes without saying that as soon as your children become conscious of the world around them, I'll make them my attendants. I won't brook any argument on the matter." With a loud laugh, Adai Dada, the emperor of Gen, walked away.

Scratch that. I should've cut down that white-haired tyrant when I had the chance! Ah, whatever! If that's how you want it, I'll team up with Rus and Uto, and we'll—

"You two looked like you were having a lot of fun together. What were you talking about?" A pretty girl with blue eyes that sparkled like twin sapphires peered into my face. No matter how many times I gazed upon Chou Hakurei, I could never imagine myself becoming accustomed to her beauty. She must have climbed the mountain with Rus and the others. She'd tied her long silver hair up with a scarlet ribbon, and she was wearing a white military uniform. I wasn't surprised to see White Star hanging from her belt.

I drained the last of the alcohol in my cup and replied, "We were just teasing each other."

"Hmm." Hakurei didn't sound all that happy with my answer and she stared up at the tree that continued to scatter countless red petals from its branches.

"Hey, don't stray too near to the cliff's edge!" I warned her.

"I *know*!" Hakurei replied irritably. "What a beautiful tree. So this is the thousand-year-old peach tree that Routou—" She was cut off by a cry of surprise that escaped her own mouth as she almost tripped over something.

"Whoa!" I rushed over to her and held her in my arms. She looked up at me, blinking in surprise, and I gave her a gentle,

reassuring pat on her back. “Be careful, all right? Not even I can survive a fall into a waterfall.”

“Y-Yes, of course. I’m sorry,” Hakurei said. Despite her immediate apology, she made no move to pull herself away from my embrace. Instead, she continued gazing up at me with a tender look in her eyes. “B-But if I *did* fall into the waterfall, you’d jump in after me, wouldn’t you, Sekiei?”

Seriously? I don’t believe her! I’m a man too, and I have my limits. I opened my arms and released the girl who had suffered for years as a result of those old legends about women with silver hair and blue eyes bringing calamity, then softly said her name. “Hakurei.” She blinked at me in surprise. I paused for a moment to take a deep breath and calm myself down, then continued in a quiet voice. “Do you remember what I said to you the night before the final battle?”

“Huh?” A second later, Hakurei’s cheeks had turned bright red. So red, in fact, it extended downwards, and even her neck, arms, and legs seemed to go a pink color. She twiddled her fingers and shrank into herself. “U-Um, uh, yes, I do. You said you’d become my husband...” She practically whispered the words, but she smiled happily as they passed her lips.

My heart started pounding faster and faster. Feeling embarrassed, I hurriedly added, “Ah, it’s n-not because you can unsheathe White Star, nor because you saved my life. It...has a little to do with father entrusting you into my care. After all, if I don’t make you happy, he’ll curse me from the other side.”

“Well, that’s... I suppose I can forgive you for that,” Hakurei giggled as she drew closer to me again.

By contrast, I’d used up all of the courage I’d mustered and I scratched my cheek as I floundered for words to say next. “So, uh, yeah. I just wanted to say that I didn’t ask you out of some sense of duty or obligation. I, Chou Sekiei, am asking for Chou Hakurei’s hand because—”

“Sekiei.” Before it even registered that she had called out my name, the most beautiful girl in the world pressed her lips to mine. She pulled away slowly and treated me to a happy smile as fat,

joyful tears rolled down her cheeks. “I love you more than anyone in this country. No, in this whole entire world.” She said the words like she was offering up a holy prayer.

Aw, man... I held her in a gentle embrace to communicate my own feelings for her, and surrendered. “Even Kouei in his prime could never have won against you.”

“Of course he couldn’t. That’s because...” Hakurei skipped away a few paces then turned to look back at me. Slowly and deliberately, she drew the sword from her belt and urged me with her eyes to do likewise. “Did you know that people have been calling us”—she placed White Star against Black Star once I’d unsheathed it, then continued in a firm voice—“the wielders of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars?”

The swords slipped from our hands and fell to the ground, the tips of the blades sinking into the dirt at the same moment that a blizzard of flower petals blew around us. Were we suddenly in a dream or was this still reality? In the next second, Hakurei and I flew up into the air, and below us, we could see the proud blossoms of the Routou peach tree, the lights emanating from Enkei, and the Grand Canal. Was this the power of the Heavenly Swords? This must have been the regular view of the birds that were flying about the blue sky all around us—

Once the blizzard of flower petals had settled down, I found myself in front of the shrine again, staring into Hakurei’s eyes. She must have seen the same vision I had, for she had her hands clamped to her mouth and a surprised look on her face. A moment later, she was clinging to me in a tight embrace, her face buried in my chest.

“We’re stronger when we’re together. Even when we’re flying through the sky,” she remarked. “Although that goes without saying.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I agreed. “My Yukihime is always, *always* right.”

“Have you only just realized that? From now on, I’ll teach you even more things you don’t know about me, so prepare yourself.”

I was sure the road ahead of us would still be full of obstacles, and this didn’t mark the end of us getting wrapped up in the

problems of our nation. After all, while all the lands under the heavens had been unified, we were still a long way from peace. But with the two of us—Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei—working together, we had nothing to fear.

We held hands as we pulled the Heavenly Swords out of the ground and held them both aloft, while up above us, the twin stars shimmered vibrantly in the northern sky, illuminating the future that lay ahead of us.

Afterword

Long time no see! Riku Nanano here! I also found this volume really difficult to write, to the point where, even though it's been six years since I took my first tentative steps into the light novel scene, I don't ever remember feeling this much pressure to complete something. I'm glad I was able to make the deadline.

This volume marks the end of this series. From the very first volume, I wanted to write about the self-destruction of Ei after Chou Tairan's death, as well as Adai's ultimately successful attempt to unify the lands. So I'm really happy that I was able to do both of those things. I also feel like even if I write anything after this, I won't be able to come up with a better rival or villain than Adai.

Now, let's talk a little bit about what lies in store for the three great families of Ei, plus the future of the Gen Empire. For starters, they attack Seitou and destroy it, then ask the surrounding nations to become vassals for Gen. There's also a chance that Adai will launch a western campaign, if only to earn military merits for Sekiei.

The problem is what happens after Adai, Sekiei, and the others die. The U family's territory is remote, limiting its growth. As for the Jo family, it lost access to the waterways when Gen took some of its land. By comparison, the Chou family is guaranteed to prosper during peacetime, for it has access to Gen and the former Ei cities via boat, and Ou Meirin—the most OP character in the series—is the one who'll do all the negotiating for them. So if whoever succeeds Adai lacks vision, they might end up viewing the three families as threats and set out to destroy them.

However, if that happens, Gen won't have much of a future itself. In any case, I believe Sekiei will lead a happy life, even if trouble still lines his path. I don't think he'll ever manage to become a civil official, but he'll forever be viewed as a great hero who loves his wife and frets over his kids. I believe the lessons he has learned

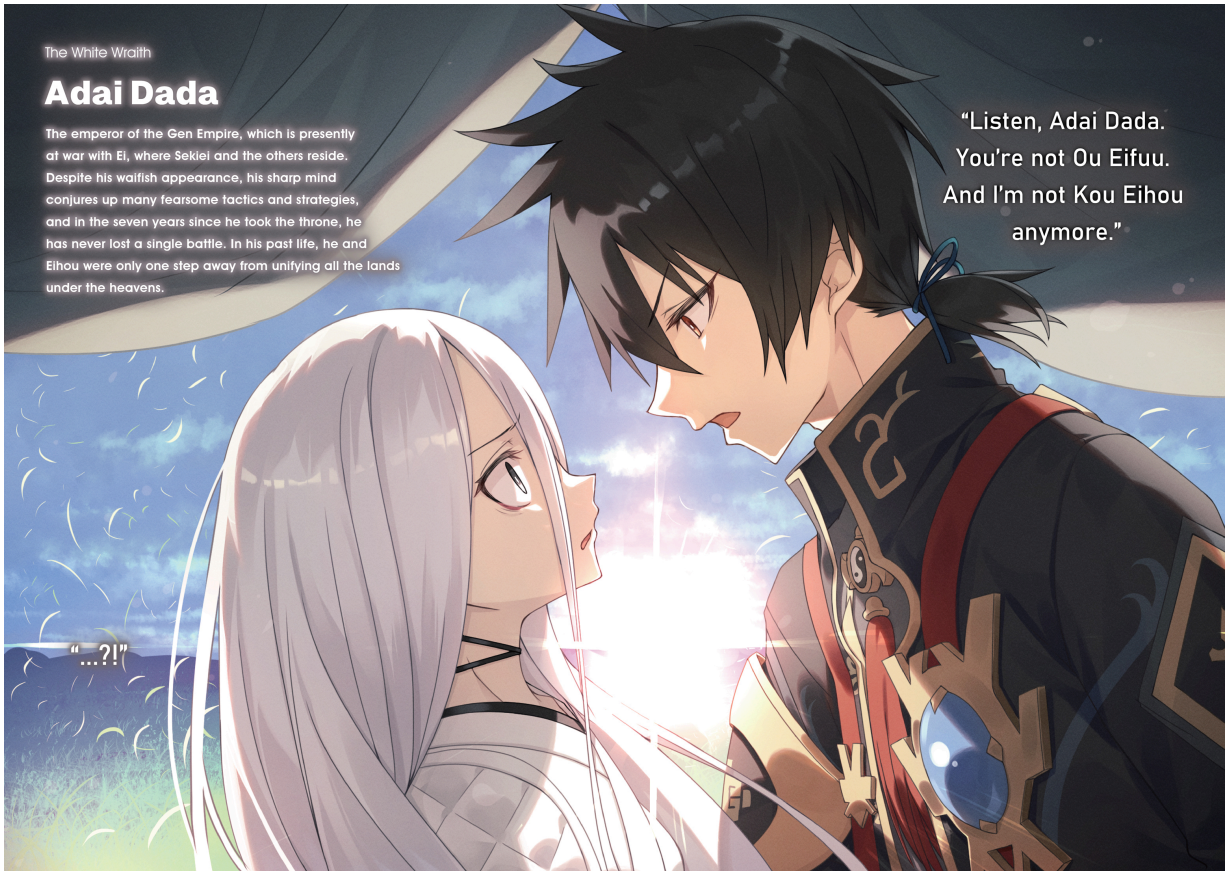
throughout this series will be of benefit to him for the rest of his life.

Now, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me out on this series. A big thank you goes to my editor, as well as an apology for all of the trouble I caused you. Cura, the cover on this volume was perfect, like always. It's so beautiful! I'm excited to continue collaborating with you on *Duke's Daughter*. Thank you to all of my readers who have stuck with me this far into the book. I'd like to continue writing, one novel at a time!

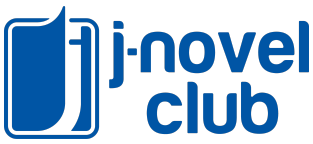
Riku Nanano


RIKU NANANO
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6
Heavenly
Swords
of the
Twin Stars


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.
"Uh, Miss Meirin?"
"So *you* were the culprit, Ruri!"
"..."
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.
The Merchant Prodigy
Ou Meirin
The daughter of the up-and-coming mercantile Ou family. Apart from a certain part of her anatomy, she's quite small, but her talents as a merchant are the real deal. She thinks of herself as Sekiei's "child bride," and reunites with him after a cross-country journey.


The White Wraith
Adai Dada
The emperor of the Gen Empire, which is presently at war with Ei, where Sekiei and the others reside. Despite his waifish appearance, his sharp mind conjures up many fearsome tactics and strategies, and in the seven years since he took the throne, he has never lost a single battle. In his past life, he and Eihou were only one step away from unifying all the lands under the heavens.
"Listen, Adai Dada. You're not Ou Eifuu. And I'm not Kou Eihou anymore."
"...?!"


"I love you more than anyone in this country.
No, in this whole entire world."
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.



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by Riku Nanano

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