



Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

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[Illust] cura

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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

Heavenly Swords of the Stars Two Stars

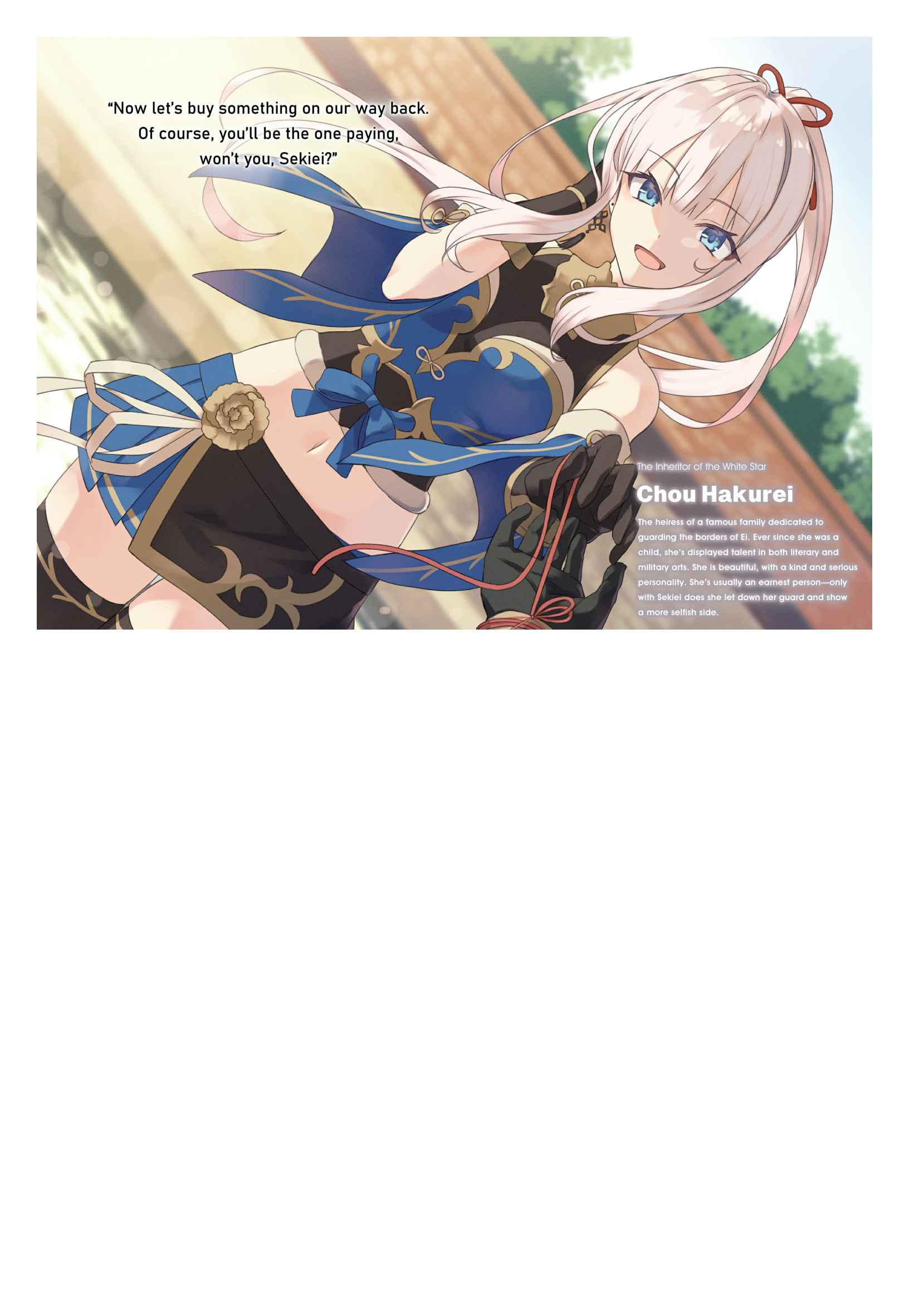


"We shall let them witness the strength of those who survived countless battles against the wolves of Gen."

The Only Daughter of the Late General U

U Oto

The princess of the U family, as well as Ruri's attendant, Oto was the one who led the Chou army to the western regions. She's a straightforward girl who supports Sekiei and the others in order to repay them for saving her on the battlefield.

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, flowing pink hair tied in a high ponytail with a red ribbon. She has blue eyes and a gentle smile. She is wearing a black and blue outfit with gold accents, including a large blue bow on her chest and a gold flower-like ornament. She is holding a red string in her gloved hands. The background is a warm, golden-yellow light with a wooden structure visible on the right.

“Now let’s buy something on our way back.
Of course, you’ll be the one paying,
won’t you, Sekiei?”

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’s displayed talent in both literary and military arts. She is beautiful, with a kind and serious personality. She’s usually an earnest person—only with Sekiei does she let down her guard and show a more selfish side.



Hakurei and Oto launched themselves at me and wrapped their arms around my torso.

“L-Lord Sekiei!”

“S-Sekiei!”

The Reincarnation of an Undefeated Hero

Sekiei

A young man who was rescued by the finest general of the land and grew up alongside his daughter, Hakurei. His past life's training and experiences have granted him exceptional combat prowess, but all he wants is to leave the battlefield behind and settle down as a civil official.



Idiot! Sekiei, you idiot! You big dummy!
I will never forgive you if you die. Never!

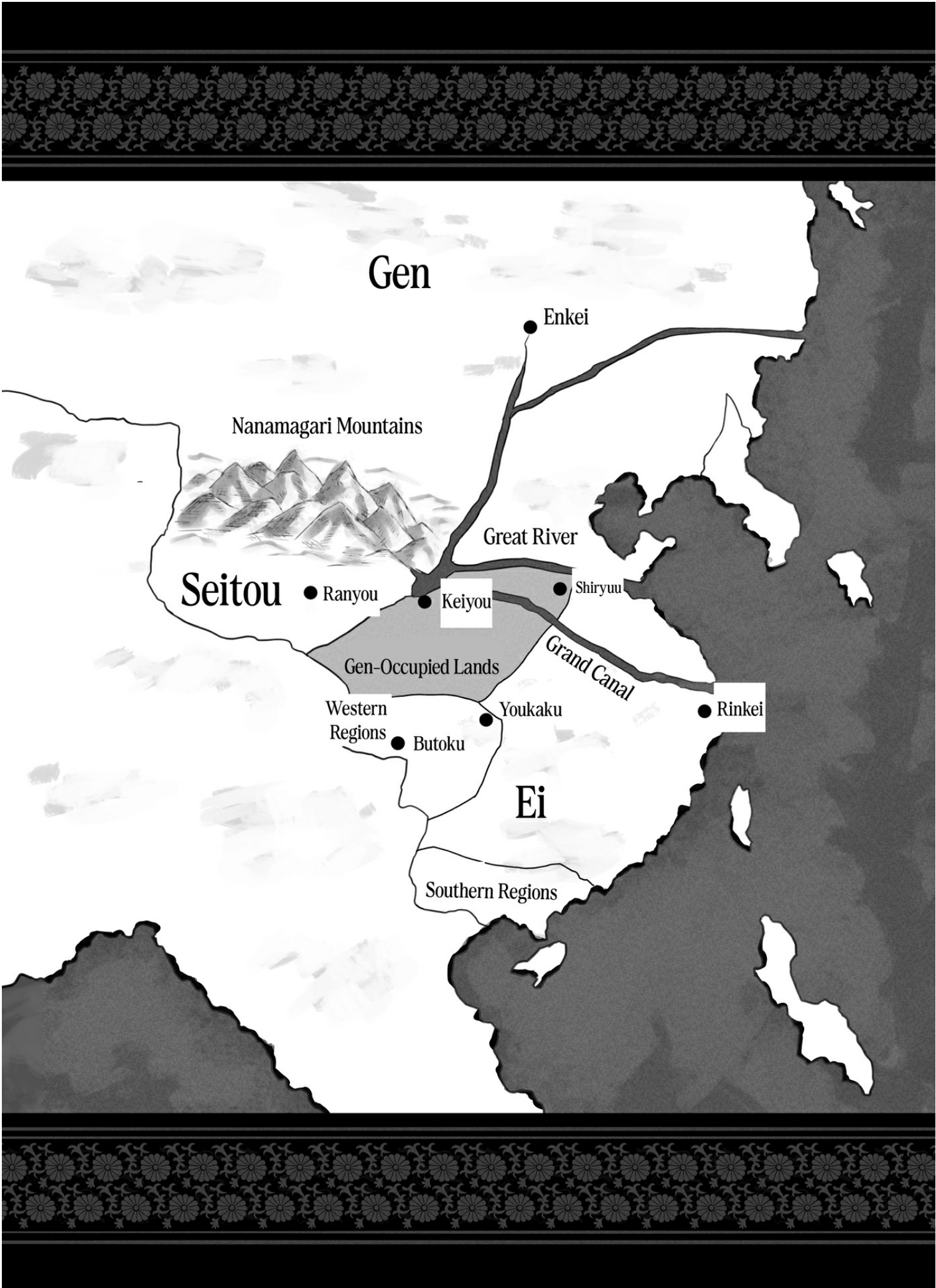
"I am the only one worthy to
serve as his Kouei!"

"Where'd that weird
nickname come from?
I'm Sekiei, the adopted son
of the Chou family."

The Star of the Next Generation of Gen Royals

Orid

Adai's cousin, who possesses a talent for battle,
leadership, and politics. He leads the attack on
the western regions and refers to himself as the
Kouei of the modern ages. As such, he views
Sekiei as his rival.



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“So please—I’m begging you—please
send reinforcements to Rinkei!”

The Patriotic Princess

Kou Miu

The younger half sister of the emperor of Ei.
She can recognize the dire straits her country
is in and feels responsible as the sister of the
foolish emperor. The protection charm around
her neck is a memento from her mother.

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Prologue

“I’d heard rumors around the court, but this is worse than I imagined. To think that things got this bad in a mere six months after Chancellor Rin Chuudou’s capture and peace talks with Gen fell through...”

The words slipped out of my mouth as I—Kou Miu, the younger half sister of the Ei emperor—took in the devastation along the coast. The military ship I’d boarded was traveling down the Grand Canal, which bisected the continent into north and south, and the skies above me were covered in thick gray clouds.

Before me was the line of water fortresses said to be an impenetrable wall protecting the Ei capital, Rinkei. However, the ones at the very front were burned and they’d even lost their flags. The soldiers moved slowly, looking as if they’d lost the war already.

I could guess why they were acting this way. The execution of Lord Chou Tairan, the National Shield, had left an unprecedented impact on the soldiers’ morale. I clutched at the protection charm hanging against my chest. It was the sole memento I had of my mother, who hailed from the western regions. The northern city Keiyou, which the Chou family had protected for so many long years, had fallen. Our enemies could let their main forces rest, whereas we could not even lift a finger to defend ourselves against their invasion.

If only my brother hadn’t put his trust in the foolish words of that treacherous Rin Chuudou, then this wouldn’t have—! I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting back the intense wave of emotion. *Yet the emperor of Ei is still the only one who can save this dying country. I must tell my brother what I witnessed here, even if I must physically drag him away from his concubine to do so.* As a fourteen-year-old girl, there was only so much I could do. But I had to do *something*, or else there was no point in my forcing people to help me sneak out of the palace.

“Your Highness, please stand behind me,” someone said as they tugged on the golden sleeve denoting my status as one of the imperial family.

“Mei?” I turned around to look at her. Mei, though older than me, was my

best friend and had served as my protector ever since my mother was still alive. Like me, she wore a cloak over her clothing, but I could see her short brown hair under the hood.

She shook her head. “This is the battlefield. There is always the chance that an enemy soldier is lying in wait somewhere. Princess, if anything happens to you, then it could cause further danger to the Ei Empire.”

“Ah, yes. You’re right. Thank you,” I replied, running a pale hand through my light brown bangs. My desire to see the reality of the war as a member of the imperial family was genuine. But Mei was right. These days, despite its proximity to the capital, even the waters of the Grand Canal weren’t safe. The fearsome White Wraith ruling over the Gen Empire—a northern horse culture that took the lands north of the great river from Ei about fifty years ago—was trying to destroy my homeland, after all.

I took a deep breath and turned around. “General Gan, would you be so kind as to explain the situation to me?”

General Gan Retsurai was a veteran commander. I’d heard he was around fifty years old. His old-fashioned helmet and armor indicated his many years of service. He slammed his hand against his chest in an extravagant salute and said, “Yes, ma’am. Come this way.”

He led us down into a small cabin within the ship, and as soon as the wooden door shut behind us, Retsurai unfurled a map of the continent. “As His Imperial Majesty placed me in charge of the aquatic fortresses guarding Rinkei, it shames me to admit that—if I must be honest about our current situation—the Ei army is at a severe disadvantage.” He tapped a thick finger on the map, indicating several locations. A wooden bracelet that looked like it’d been made by a child was wrapped around his right wrist. “It’s already been six months since the Battle of Keiyou, when the Chou army fought off the White Wraith’s invasion, as well as Lord Chou Tairan’s unjust execution. We’ve lost three provinces—Koshuu, Anshuu, and Heishuu—and the enemies continue to cross the river into our lands. We cannot let our guard down.”

The ship emanated a creak; we must have started our journey back to Rinkei. Retsurai continued to move his finger, stopping it right above the cities in

northern Ei.

“These days, Keiyou has become one of Gen’s more strategic footholds. Troops from Keiyou have been attacking the fortresses we built along the Grand Canal. According to one of the Gen soldiers we captured, their commanding officer is the Millenary Diviner, a strategist of unparalleled talent. We’re only able to defend half the distance between Keiyou and Rinkei. It pains me to admit that we’re losing soldiers to desertion every day. My fool of a son foresaw this happening. He was in another army but ran away a year ago after declaring that there could be no future for a country that disrespected General Chou.”

A sharp pain stabbed through my heart. *Oh, if only the National Shield and the Chou army were still around! None of this would’ve happened!*

A maelstrom of emotions swirled in Retsurai’s eyes, but he looked down at the map before I could recognize them. “Around fifty thousand soldiers are stationed in the water fortresses north of Rinkei. Most of them are either much too young or much too old. They lack both morale and training. We won’t be able to fight off the enemy soldiers traveling south from Shiryuu or along the Grand Canal, which means we will require reinforcements from the Imperial Guard. My request for help was denied though.”

I reached out to draw a circle in the south and the west with my finger. Our situation with Gen was perilous enough, but Ei also had to contend with issues within its own borders. “Half of the Imperial Guard left the capital for the south just the other day. My brother, at the behest of the substitute and lieutenant chancellors, was the one to personally issue the command. Their goal is to subdue the Jo family in the southern regions, who started an uprising after killing our messenger. The U family to the west has closed off Youkaku. Though the area around Youkaku is narrow, it’s the only place with access to the main road. I hear that they’ve remained silent and are refusing to let our messengers through.” Retsurai’s and Mei’s expressions stiffened as I placed some small black stones on the map to continue my explanation. “Of the ten provinces and two regions that make up our empire, three provinces have fallen into enemy hands. Jo Hiyou, the orphan of the Phoenix Wing, is the one in charge of the south, and the U family, who has closed off communications, rules the west.”

When I was young, my mother told me that when the soldiers from the front lines got drunk, they'd always yell, "We have the Three Great Generals! What do we have to fear from the White Wraith or the Four Wolves?!" The Three Great Generals in question were Jo Shuuhou the Phoenix Wing, U Jouko the Tiger Fang, and Chou Tairan the National Shield. Not a single one of them was still alive to protect Ei.

My voice shook as badly as the hand gripping my protection charm. "It's been half a year. A mere six months. And in such a short amount of time, Ei has already lost half of its land. The messy state of affairs that the imperial court is in has reached even the ears of a little girl such as myself." A sudden gust of wind shook the boat, causing the little stones on the map to fall onto the floor with a clatter. "You Bunshou, the chancellor who'd supported our country for so many long years, was assassinated by Jo Hiyou. Rin Chuudou, who'd urged Lord Chou Tairan's execution over a crime he didn't commit in order to secure peace with Gen, went missing after he left for Keiyou. As for the substitute and lieutenant chancellors, they have no idea what to do even though rumors of the White Wraith Adai Dada's reputation has reached even the court's ears."

"Your Highness..." Mei said, supporting my smaller body from behind.

I turned my head to offer her a look of gratitude, then returned my attention to the commander before me. "General Gan, what should I... What do I have to do in order to save my country?"

A heavy silence weighed over the cabin for a few moments before Retsurai shook his head. "Your Highness, my apologies, but a military man such as myself cannot possibly hope to give you an answer." Retsurai was a soldier who'd worked his way up to the top through his own hard work. He gripped his dagger hard, as if using it to ground himself. The scabbard creaked under his strength. "The ones who could have provided you with insight were people like Lord You Bunshou, Phoenix Wing Jo Shuuhou, Tiger Fang U Jouko, and—" When I saw that gleam in his eye, sharper than any blade, I understood that Ei and the imperial family weren't the reasons why this man continued to fight at the front lines. "And National Shield Chou Tairan! If any of them were still alive and present, then we wouldn't have lost three provinces to Gen, nor would we need to worry about defectors to the south or the west. In fact, if only the capital had

sent ten thousand—no, even just a *few* thousand more—we would have been able to defeat the White Wraith at Keiyou.”

I couldn’t say anything in response. To be more precise, I had no right to. My brother had been the one who made the foolish decision to murder the guardian of this country. *His* imperial seal had been the one on the execution order.

Retsurai removed his helmet and scratched the back of his gray-streaked head, smiling gently. “However, none of that can ever come to pass. They’re nothing more than what-ifs. And in my humble opinion, this country no longer has the luxury to ponder such hypotheticals.”

When I remained silent, Mei gave me a worried look and called my name. Yet I could not offer her a verbal reply. The most I could manage was a glance in her direction. I was so embarrassed by my own imprudence that I wanted to scream. *How can I ask him for advice on how to save this country when I’m part of the family that murdered the very heroes who could have?!*

Retsurai removed that old-looking dagger, scabbard and all, from his belt and narrowed his eyes down at it. “When I was younger, I served under old Lord Raigen. He died an honorable death at Hakuhou Castle, which is one of the fortresses defending our borders at the great river. When I left Keiyou, he gave me this dagger as a parting gift. It’s because of General Chou and Lord Raigen’s recommendations that I was able to attain the position I now hold, that I’m able to speak with you here, my princess. I’ve lived for so many years without repaying even a scrap of the debt I owed them!” He paused and turned his back to us. His broad shoulders shook and a torrent of tears splashed to the ground. “If only I’d discarded everything—my status, my family, all of it—and returned to Keiyou as a mere soldier! If only I’d done *something* in order to save General Chou! I...admit that I’d considered killing myself out of shame. But if I did so while Lady Hakurei, Lord Chou Tairan’s most precious daughter, and Lord Sekiei, who’s said to be the living embodiment of the Chou family’s martial prowess despite his youth, are still missing, then Raigen the Ogre would surely berate me in the afterlife.”

On the night before Lord Chou Tairan’s execution, a fire broke out within the judicial court in the palace. Not only that, but the Dragon Jade—a massive

obsidian boulder viewed as a sacred object—had been sliced in half with some sort of sharp blade as well. I'd heard rumors that members of the Chou family were behind both incidents. Yet in the end, they hadn't been able to rescue General Chou.

General Gan turned to look at me again. I could see in his eyes that he'd long since made his peace with his own death. He pressed his dagger against his chest and, along with a bright smile, professed his tragic determination. "Now that things have come to this, I will fight until the very end! I have no choice but to go to Lord Tairan, Lord Raigen, and my comrades who passed before me in the afterlife and apologize with 'Though ungrateful in life, I fought my hardest until my final breath!' Princess Imperial Kou Miu, you asked me earlier how we can save this country. I hope my determination to fight every battle like it's my last is a suitable answer to your question."

"We must hurry, Your Highness. It'll be trouble if we don't return to the palace by nightfall," my best friend said, wringing her hands. We'd only just arrived in the waterways outside of Rinkei, and the skies were orange with the dusk.

"Yes, I know, Mei," I replied.

Though I was part of the emperor's family, I had no real power of my own. *What should I do now?* Lost in thought, I allowed Mei to lead me off the boat and onto the well-maintained shore. It was quite some distance between here and the palace, so we had no time to spare. I managed to shake off my melancholy and then looked around. By sheer coincidence, a slightly bigger boat than the one we'd taken was in the middle of departing. Most of the passengers were women and children. All of them were crying while holding large pieces of luggage. The vast majority of the people seeing them off from the shore and a nearby bridge were men and the elderly.

It's forbidden to travel via water at night. So why's a ship leaving when the sun is about to set? That wasn't the only thing that caught my attention. Everyone's eyes housed a deep sadness and fear.

"Princess Miu?" Mei leaned down to peer at my face with a confused

expression.

“Mei, what kinds of people are aboard that ship?”

After she glanced in the direction I was staring, she explained, “As you know, the capital sees many ships come and go. I believe that one’s departure time was delayed.”

That didn’t make sense to me, but I replied, “Is that so?” anyway.

The moment the ship disappeared into the distance, the crowd dispersed until only a young girl and an older woman remained, conversing on the small bridge. They both wore cloaks around their bodies, and the girl held a paper bag in her hand. Driven by some unknown impulse, I grabbed Mei’s hand and walked over to them.

“Huh? Princess Miu!” Mei exclaimed.

Ignoring her, I called out, “Excuse me!”

The girl turned around. An orange hat covered her head, and her brown hair, tied in pigtails, poked out from underneath. Though she was much smaller than me, she boasted a most well-endowed bosom. The tall and beautiful woman behind her had long black hair, and she wore her black-and-white clothing well. She gave the two of us a bemused look.

The small girl tilted her head to the side as she looked up at me. “Hmm? Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, I am. I apologize for the sudden question, but I’d like to inquire about the boat that departed just now. Where are the passengers sailing to? I would like to know their destination if you’re aware of it. Please.”

“P-Prin—Lady Miu?!”

I could hear Mei’s panicked voice behind me as I lowered my head in a deep bow. This might not have been proper etiquette as a member of the imperial family. However, I just *had* to know the answer. That was the feeling I got.

“Lady Meirin,” the beautiful black-haired woman said in a cautionary tone.

“Don’t worry, Shizuka,” the girl replied before I felt a light tap on my shoulder. “I don’t mind telling you, but please raise your head. It’s difficult to hold a

conversation like this.”

“Th-Thank you so much,” I said.

I slowly straightened up from my bow to see the girl named Meirin take out a delicious-looking bun from the paper bag and bite into it.

“Mm, yummy! It’s just too bad I can’t eat that kid’s buns anymore. Oh, by the way, those people were evacuating before the big, bad White Wraith attacks the capital.”

“Huh?!” Mei and I exclaimed. This girl—Meirin—stated it in such a casual, matter-of-fact way that we could only gape at her in appalled silence.

People are running away from Rinkei? From the capital of Ei, which has boasted unprecedented wealth and glory? Not only that, but they’re doing so because the White Wraith is on his way? That many people have already given up on this country?! Meirin polished off the bun with such large and enthusiastic bites that she would’ve been a delight to watch if Mei and I weren’t in a state of shock. She even licked the remaining crumbs off her fingers. When she finally looked up at us again, there was an unbelievably keen glint of intellect in her eyes.

“With the fall of Keiyou, which is at the headwaters of the Grand Canal bisecting this continent, Rinkei lost a large portion of its more advantageous waterways. In fact, I’d go as far as to say this loss was a fatal one. It doesn’t seem that the people in the imperial court, including the substitute chancellor or the lieutenant chancellor, have noticed this yet though.”

“Lady Meirin, please have a drink of water,” the woman named Shizuka said. She wiped down Meirin’s fingers with a cloth and then handed her a bamboo bottle.

“Please keep an eye on her,” Mei whispered to me under her breath. “She’s an incredibly experienced warrior.”

After Meirin chugged down the contents of the bottle, she leaped up to sit on the railing of the bridge and began kicking her legs. “Boats are capable of carrying more cargo than horse-drawn carriages. They’re simple yet effective modes of transportation. It’s precisely because of this fact that Rinkei was able

to achieve unprecedented levels of prosperity these past few years. But those glory days will end soon.”

“They’ll end soon?” I echoed, staring at her in surprise. I didn’t know anything about this girl. However, I could sense from every word out of her mouth that she was someone who was able to judge reality with a cold and calm eye. She wasn’t like those in the imperial court, who clung to optimistic hypotheticals. This was a true Rinkei resident through and through.

The sun had completely set. As the veil of night shrouded the sky, the lamps and lanterns around the capital started to light up one by one. No matter how many times I witnessed this, I found the slow illumination of the city such an ethereal sight.

The paper bag flew through the air as Meirin tossed it to Shizuka. “You should have some too,” Meirin said. “They’re delicious.”

“Lady Meirin, that was very improper of you!” Shizuka scolded even as she snagged the bag out of the air with ease.

Meirin waved her hand in a dismissive manner before she returned her gaze to me. “The number of resources shipped along the Grand Canal has reduced significantly in these past six months. As a result, the cost of living has risen, causing the streets to become much more dangerous than before. Fewer and fewer foreign ships are docking here. It was the wrong move to raise the taxes on salt in order to secure more government funding. All the work the previous grand chancellor put into curbing salt bandits has gone to waste. I hear that some bizarre cult has risen among the ranks of the salt bandits to the south.”

A rush of fear surged through me and I clutched at Mei’s sleeve. Compared to the officials within the imperial court and my brother, who was spending more and more time with his favorite concubine in order to escape from the pressures of reality, this girl had a far firmer grasp on the logistics within the Ei Empire.

“You mustn’t sit on a place like that,” Shizuka continued to scold. “Come down, or I’ll tell Lord Sekiei.”

Meirin stuck her tongue out at the woman before hopping back down onto the bridge. *Wait, Sekiei?* She adjusted her hat before she met my eyes again.

When she next spoke, it was in the same calm tone as before.

“I doubt the White Wraith feels the need to order his soldiers to attack Rinkei. So long as he keeps Rinkei isolated and in lockdown, the capital will destroy itself. On top of all these issues, the people haven’t forgotten about the unjust execution of Lord Chou Tairan. I hear that the White Wraith mourned our national hero despite General Chou thwarting his attempts to take over Ei in the past, and that he even refused to enter Keiyou out of respect. Listen, I don’t know what fairy tale you crawled out from, Princess, but the people *know* that Adai Dada mourned Chou Tairan’s death. It doesn’t matter if it was an act or not. I believe that it will be difficult for the emperor to regain the people’s trust, as *he* was the one who ordered his death and desecrated his corpse in the first place. That’s why the ones who can escape Rinkei are doing so right now.”

I took a step back with a quiet gasp, feeling as if I’d just been slapped. Mei called my name, but I couldn’t respond. The words of the sole imperial chancellor in history—Ouei, who’d lived a thousand years ago in the Tou Empire—echoed through my head: “A dynasty forsaken by its people has no way of survival.” *I was too naive! Things are so much more dire than I could’ve ever imagined!*

With Mei supporting me, I looked up and met Meirin’s eyes. “Just who are...? No, I suppose there’s no point in asking that. Thank you very much for all the information you’ve provided me.” I bowed to this prodigy from the city once again, and Shizuka handed me the paper bag full of steamed buns. Blinking, I looked up and accepted it.

“It must have been some sort of fate that led us to have this conversation. At least, that’s what my beloved husband, who lives far away from here right now, would say! I may not look it, but I’m the type of girl who’s easily influenced by the man I love! ♪ Princess Miu, I hope I get the chance to see you again someday! ☆” Meirin said, pressing her hands against her reddening cheeks. Then, she and the black-haired woman crossed the small bridge.

I gripped the paper bag in one hand as I ran her words over and over in my head. This so-called fate taught me that the officials within the imperial court and the citizens in the cities were living in two completely different realities. I had to make use of this somehow, for I was Kou Miu, the younger sister of the

Ei Empire's emperor.

"Princess Miu," Mei started, but I interrupted her.

"Mei." I looked up and met her melancholic eyes. Despite my sorrow at dragging her into this, I said, "In the near future, I will warn my brother about what shall come to pass. If he truly wishes to defend Rinkei and Ei—" Dozens of fireworks shot up into the air behind me as if in celebration of something. They were beautiful yet ephemeral. I sucked in a deep breath and continued to relay my determination: "If he truly wishes to defend Rinkei and Ei, then he *must* call in reinforcements. Even if the Jo family will not heed our summons, the U family returned our messenger safe and sound. There's a chance that they'll respond to us if I go there and negotiate with them myself. We were the ones who foolishly chose to murder the National Shield, Chou Tairan, despite his unparalleled talents and numerous contributions to our country. This is the only way my family can repent for this sin."

Chapter One

“Lord Sekiei, I have eyes on the bandits in question. The intel we received was correct; they are around two hundred strong. Most of them are wielding swords and axes, with very few archers and cavalry. All are dressed in lightweight armor,” Oto reported from the branches of a tree as she stared down at the road below. The red cloth in her hair rippled in the wind.

Oto was the daughter and only child of U Jouko, the Tiger Fang, who’d fallen in battle. She was wearing lightweight armor over the traditional garb of the western tribes, and in her hand she held a bamboo stick with a metal cylinder attached at its end. It was a fire lance, a weapon that could shoot rocks and pieces of metal through the use of gunpowder. A sword hung from her belt, and she carried a well-polished shovel upon her back.

The U soldiers hiding nearby looked up at Oto before glaring at me. In their eyes, Oto was the orphaned daughter of their deceased master. Even if she weren’t using her birth name, U Torahime, that didn’t change her identity. That she was acting as my subordinate was the likely reason behind their hostility.

“Nice! I knew I could count on you, Oto!” I said. In spite of the soldiers’ disapproval, I—Sekiei, the adopted son of the Chou family—was genuine with my praise.

About half a year ago, the foolish emperor of Ei, along with his treacherous subject Rin Chuudou, executed National Shield Chou Tairan in Rinkei, the capital of the empire. We had been in such a state of shock that only Oto, despite being our junior, had been fit enough to lead us to Butoku, a major city in the western regions the U family ruled over. She was very reliable for her youthful age.

I patted off my black military uniform and looked at the road ahead. To the east dropped a steep cliff that few would dare go near. To the west lay a thick forest. Finally, to our south, a group of bandits was approaching a small stone bridge at a sedate pace. We’d heard that they’d been causing trouble around

Butoku these past few months.

I stroked my chin as I assessed their strength. “They’re a lot more organized than the bandits we’ve been dealing with lately. The one in the middle of the group with the axe is...uh...”

“That’s Shigou, or the Tigerslayer as he likes to call himself. There are rumors that he drifted here from the central plains after he couldn’t cut it in the military. But not enough reliable sources can corroborate that story. He’s defeated all of the soldiers the U army sent to capture or kill him, and he’s been vandalizing many of the old shrines to the west as well,” Oto said, scaling down the tree with ease and returning to my side.

That explains why the small and friendly tribes around these parts asked for our help in getting rid of them. I was wondering about that, since we’re not exactly within Ei territory right now.

“Listen up, you guys,” I said, causing Oto and the U soldiers to straighten their postures.

The elite soldiers of the former Chou army weren’t with me right now. They were sneaking behind the bandits in order to ambush them. Their allegiance was to Hakurei (the eldest daughter of the Chou family), Ruri (an ascendant and our military strategist), and me. Yet despite their absence, I was, for some reason, the commander in charge here. *I may have the foggy memories of my past life as Kou Eihou—the great general of the Tou Empire—but I’m not really cut out for this kind of stuff. Not that I could’ve turned down Oto when she asked me to do this though.*

I tapped my hand against the scabbard hanging from my belt. Inside it was Black Star, one of the twin blades that made up the Heavenly Swords. “Relax. Everything’s going according to our scary little strategist’s plans. Our enemy may be the Tigerslayer, but he’s about as threatening as a newborn cub compared to the soldiers we’ve been up against lately. Besides, I think our little princess is much scarier than this bandit. Just don’t tell her I said that.”

The soldiers chuckled. They looked a lot less nervous than before.

Oto smiled as well before she grew serious once more. “As soon as they enter our range, we’ll bombard them with fire lances and arrows. Then, when their

movement from the road is cut off, we'll commence a pincer attack alongside Lady Hakurei and Lady Ruri's team, and destroy them! We shall let that arrogant Tigerslayer witness the strength of those who've fought against Gen's Wolves."

"Yes, Lady Oto!" all of the soldiers said, moving to their stations as one to prepare their fire lances and bows.

The stench of gunpowder, long since familiar, hit my nose. These soldiers had eliminated dozens of bandits these past three months without even a single fatality. I doubted that I needed to micromanage—

"Oh?"

"Huh?"

Oto and I couldn't contain our surprise. The line of bandits had stopped in the middle of the canyon. A large man wielding a poleaxe was yelling something from atop his horse, a panicked look on his face. In response, the bandits picked up the pace; apparently, they planned on forcing their way through the narrow road.

Oto's eyes widened. "Why are they...?"

"They must've smelled the gunpowder. Man, he's got a sharp nose." With bow in hand, I jumped onto my black horse, Zetsuei, and ordered in a curt voice, "Oto, I'm going to slow down the bandits at the front. I want you to follow Ruri's plan and shoot at them from the side to incite confusion. Hakurei and the others will come once they hear the sound of fighting."

"L-Lord Sekiei?! You can't—"

"I'll leave it to you!"

Ignoring Oto's surprised cry, I galloped out of the forest, my black hair flowing in the wind. My field of vision cleared as soon as I broke through the line of trees. I reached the road before the bandits could cross the stone bridge, nocked three arrows into my bow, and, turning to face the bandits, let them fly. The arrows landed in the enemies' shoulders, one by one, as they scattered with faces twisted in desperation. After knocking about a dozen of them out of commission, I steered Zetsuei to stand at the end of the bridge.

The bandits stared at me, expressions slack with shock. They were completely frozen in place, so I called out to them. “I’d sure like to praise you all for catching on to our trap so quickly.” With slow and deliberate movements, I placed an arrow into my bow and looked up to meet the eyes of Shigou the Tigerslayer, who was in the middle of the group. He looked to be in his late twenties and had a piece of black cloth tied around his forehead. I smirked. “Sorry, but it’s the end of the line for all of you. If you put down your weapons, then we’ll spare your lives. Granted, I’ve no clue what will happen to you later. I mean, you guys *did* mess up some shrines.”

“Shut up!”

“You little brat!”

“Go to hell!”

Three of the bandits—the few on horses—rushed towards me with furious expressions, ignoring Shigou’s commands to stop. In their hands, they held poleaxes and metal clubs. But they were much too slow. I unleashed my arrows without mercy, shooting them in the shoulders, arms, and legs. None of them got anywhere close to me.

“Gah!” they cried as they fell off their horses and to the ground. The remaining bandits couldn’t hide their fear at the sight.

“Don’t bother trying to flee,” I warned. “None of you’d be able to escape at this distance. Besides...”

A thunderous rumbling echoed through the air. Oto and her soldiers had started their bombardment. Because fire lances’ range of effectiveness and accuracy were far inferior to a bow, very few of their shots actually hit the bandits. But on a battlefield, nothing spread fear better than noise.

“D-Dammit!”

“Wh-What’s this?! Just who are these people?!”

“It’s all over for us!”

“I didn’t know the U soldiers could use magic!”

“H-Hey, what should we do?!”

The bandits were at a complete loss. As Oto and her soldiers continued their assault from a distance, they wounded some bandits and destroyed many of the wooden boxes they were carrying, sowing even more chaos through the group. Oto and the elite U soldiers had survived multiple battles throughout the course of this war, so they were well aware of the power that the fire lances held. Right when I thought I could take a short break, Shigou slammed his fist against the official Ei armor he was wearing.

“Give me that shield!” he yelled, grabbing a giant one and holding it aloft. “I’ll lead the charge! Watch my back, you bastards!”

“Y-Yessir!” the bandits replied, their morale recovering somewhat after hearing their boss’s order.

They started shooting arrows at me as Shigou charged me on horseback, his teeth bared in a ferocious snarl. *He knows that a commander’s main job when fighting on the front lines is to inspire their soldiers! The rumors about him being former military from the plains are probably true, then.* I released even more arrows as quickly as I could, aiming them at Shigou and his archers, as well as the arrows flying my way. All of them hit their mark. They pierced shields, cut through bowstrings, and knocked arrows out of the air.

“H-He aimed at and shot down the arrows mid-flight?”

“He’s a monster!”

“Wh-What the hell? Just who is this guy?!”

“Wait! Black hair, red eyes, black sword on his belt... D-Don’t tell me he’s the Chou family’s...?!”

Upon seeing the opening, my soldiers let fly their arrows and shot their fire lances in an all-out attack. Despair fell over the bandits yet again. Shigou tossed his shield aside to grip his poleaxe with both hands before swinging it down at me, his voice raised in a war cry.

“Whoa!” I tugged on Zetsuei’s reins and dodged his attack. With a quick glance back, I could see Oto and her soldiers had revealed themselves from their hiding spots to approach the bandits, who no longer had any functional bows to wield. They chose the right time to come out.

“Your arrows are useless against me. You’re not even aiming to kill!” Shigou bellowed, distracting me from my satisfaction at Oto’s leadership skills. Blood dripped down his left arm.

“Oops, you caught me. I just thought it was interesting how you attached a breastplate to that shield to make it effective against arrows!”

No doubt, Shigou was well aware that he’d be ruined if we captured him here. He charged at me with wild abandon, but Zetsuei was far faster than his mount. Though he kept swinging his poleaxe, it sliced through nothing but air. The arrow I shot in retaliation cut through the cloth around his head right at the knot, and it fluttered away, revealing his thin black hair.

“Tch. Dammit, stay still!” he yelled.

He’s getting all riled up. I retreated to the halfway point of the bridge and asked in a mocking tone, “You’re really good, so why did you decide to take up banditry when you could’ve joined the U army? I hear they’re hiring.”

“Shut the hell up!” Shigou’s face had turned bright crimson from rage. He was just about to kick his horse into a gallop again when— “Huh?!”

“Oh, right on time.”

The sound of a gong rang through the air. A massive war flag emblazoned with a single character—Chou—rippled into view behind the bandits, who were exhausted from trying to repel the U army’s attacks. In the next second, hundreds of cavalry appeared, charging at the bandits while roaring their battle cries. Shigou’s eyes widened as he reared back. The movement revealed a wooden bracelet wrapped around his right wrist. It looked as if it’d been made by a child.

“Th-That flag... Why is the Chou army here?!”

“So sorry. My only job here was to buy them time.” I looked over at the charging Chou soldiers. Despite her position as the commander in chief, a beautiful girl with silver hair and blue eyes rode at the very front. In her hand, she held White Star, the other half to Black Star. Projecting my voice to be heard over the din of the battlefield, I yelled, “I’m going to say this one final time. Drop your weapons! You will repent for your crimes, but we won’t kill you

if you surrender!”

The bandits had taken to using what remained of their carriages and boxes as shelter against the arrows and fire lances still raining down upon them. However, on hearing my proclamation, they looked at each other. They were close to agreeing to our terms.

But then, Shigou, twirling his poleaxe above his head, rushed towards me. “If we kill you, we’ll be able to get past this bridge! I’m not going to fall to your pathetic and cowardly archers!”

“Man, you leave me no choice,” I sighed. The poleaxe descended upon me, slicing through the wind with a sharp whistle. But I threw my bow into the air and then, with a single hand, drew Black Star from my belt and slashed out with it!

“Wha—?! Impossi— Gah!” The tip of the poleaxe soared through the air, its blade glinting in the sunlight.

Without missing a beat, I slammed the butt of my sword into Shigou’s stomach to stun him, and then knocked him off his horse. I snagged my bow out of the air with my left hand before announcing myself. “I am Chou Sekiei, son of the National Shield, Chou Tairan! This is your last chance. Surrender!”

The bandits had given up. With wordless gasps, they tossed their weapons aside and kowtowed on the ground. *Looks like father’s reputation has reached even the western regions. Good, good.* Pride surged through me. Oto rode up to me, and the soldiers behind her surrounded Shigou, throwing ropes around him to hold him in place.

“Don’t kill them,” I said. “They still have to tell us where they hid everything they stole. Make sure the wounded are attended to and...uh... Miss Oto? Er, what’s this string here?”

Oto, who’d once again proven that talent as a leader ran through the U family’s bloodline, had approached me in silence and tied a black string around my left wrist. Still shouldering a fire lance and carrying a shovel on her back, and while maintaining an unbothered expression, she explained, “Lady Hakurei and Lady Ruri instructed me to tie this around you and bring you to them if you did anything stupid in battle. To tell the truth, I’m not too happy with you either.”

“What?!” I looked over to that beautiful silver-haired girl Hakurei, who was issuing orders to the soldiers around her without a hint of hesitation.

Despite the distance between us, she noticed my gaze and looked over at me. Our eyes met and she mouthed the words “You’re in for a scolding later. Do not run away.”

Chou Hakurei, you’re a scary one indeed! I... I wanna escape from here. A blonde girl with green eyes, whose blue hat and clothing made for a striking impression, rode up behind Hakurei. She was Ruri, our military strategist and a self-professed ascendant. Though I gave her a pitiful look in an attempt to seek aid, she denied my request with a wave of her hand.

“You made your bed. Now lay in it,” she mouthed.

Our master strategist isn’t any better than Hakurei. I sighed, already exhausted, and returned Black Star to its sheath.

“Hee hee hee.” The muffled giggle came from Shigou, who was being held in place by the soldiers. He fought against their attempts to keep him down and stared up at me before shouting, “What are the two orphans of the traitorous National Shield doing in a place as remote as this?! Did you flee all the way here in hopes of rebuilding your army? Ha! Don’t make me laugh! You guys are nothing more than pathetic losers!”

“How dare—?!”

“Oto, calm down. But thanks,” I said, stopping Oto before she could get too angry on our behalf. I jumped off Zetsuei and removed Black Star, sheath and all, from my belt. “Well, your guess is on the money, more or less. You’re not wrong that we’re the remnants of a defeated army. But still.” I stabbed Black Star into the ground in front of him and leaned down to stare right into his eyes, our noses so close they could almost touch. His face paled and cold sweat poured down his brow. “If you *dare* insult our father in front of Hakurei ever again, I’ll kill you. Don’t make me do that. Got it?”

Shigou had completely lost the will to fight; in the next instant, he was practically reduced to a shivering wreck. I patted him on the shoulder and then looked over to Oto.

She picked up on my unspoken message and straightened her back before turning around to yell, “Good work, everyone! After we capture all the bandits here, we shall return to Butoku. I strictly forbid *any* violence done unto the prisoners. Do not sully the good names of the U and Chou families!”

“Ugh, every time I take my eyes off you for even a *second*, you do something like this! Do you remember what you told me before today’s operation? You swore that you wouldn’t be reckless. That you’d maintain a cool head. And look at what happened! You went and charged a group of bandits without me and... Sekiei! Are you even listening to me?!”

Chou Hakurei’s irritated voice echoed throughout the uniquely patterned and decorated hallways of the massive U manor in Butoku, the central city of the western regions. It also served as the place where we were staying. Hakurei had tied her long silver hair up with a scarlet ribbon, and she was dressed in tribal garments similar to Oto’s. In Hakurei’s case, her clothes were white and blue. White Star hung from her waist and clattered against her thigh as she scolded me.

It looked like she was about to march right up to me, so I held up both hands to keep her at bay. “Yeah, yeah, I’m listening!” I said. “Stop being so mad at me. I already told you that the situation changed a little from our predictions.”

“Are! You! Sure?! That you’re listening?! Because your attitude doesn’t seem like you are!” Hakurei glared at me, her blue eyes as sharp as blades.

I looked away from her to turn my attention to Ruri. She was petting Yui the black cat, who’d jumped onto her shoulders at some point.

“Oh, Ruri, venerable Lady Ruri! The greatest strategist of all, whose masterful wisdom borders on the divine! Please, won’t you have pity on this prospective civil official and teach him how to quell the rage of the great Lady Chou Hakurei before she—”

“Huh? What makes you think I’d do that?” Ruri interrupted, casting me a cold look with the eye that wasn’t hidden by her blonde bangs. She handed Yui over, and once the cat was safe in my arms, she took a few steps forwards. Her hair, tied up with a blue ribbon, flowed behind her as she started to speak in a quiet,

irritated tone. “We had them surrounded, so my plan would have succeeded despite the hiccups. And yet you *still* chose to charge in on your own. I thought you did so knowing full well that it would cost you a lecture?”

“Ack!” She’d seen straight through me. There was nothing I could say to that.

Ruri walked closer and stretched up to poke my right cheek. Hakurei reached over from behind and ground the tip of her finger into my left.

“Hakurei and I don’t think you would lose to mere bandits. But we’re telling you to stop putting yourself into such dangerous situations when we’re not around to help you! Is that getting through your thick skull, Mister Chou Sekiei, who *apparently* wants to become a local official?”

“Why don’t you consider how Miss Oto feels before you drag her along with your impulsive schemes? She’s a very earnest person. Do you even know how many times she apologized to us on our way back to Butoku?”

“Yeah, I do. Sorry,” I said weakly, raising my hands in surrender. There was no way little old me could win against the prodigy of the Chou family and a genius ascendant.

“Lady Ruri, Lady Hakurei, and Lord Sekiei, I apologize for having kept you waiting!”

As if on cue, Oto ran up from behind us, her footsteps light and quiet against the ground. She held a small bag in her hand. Thanks to her military accomplishments and lively personality, she was very popular with the people of Butoku. Many people wanted her to be the next head of the U family. However...

“There’s no need for all that running,” Ruri said.

“Miss Oto, thank you for your hard work,” added Hakurei.

“Thank you!” Oto chirped. If she had a tail, it would be wagging furiously behind her.

When she’s with Hakurei and Ruri, she’s more akin to a kitten than a tiger.

Finally free of Hakurei and Ruri, I let Yui settle on my left shoulder and said to Oto, “Hey there. What’s that in your hand?”

With quick and energetic movements, Oto opened up the bag and dumped its contents into the palm of her hand. A small and filthy box tumbled out.

“It’s something we found on Shigou,” she explained. “He also had some jewels and coins. But this was the only thing I couldn’t make sense of, so I brought it here. Under interrogation, he told us that he found it in a nameless shrine that had long since fallen into disrepair. It even endured a strike from his poleaxe and still wouldn’t open.”

“A box that won’t open even after someone hits it with a poleaxe?” Hakurei murmured, tilting her head to the side.

Ruri looked at the box like it was some supernatural entity. “Old shrines can contain the oddest artifacts. Like your Heavenly Swords.”

Black Star and White Star had been forged using a fallen star. But at the end of the day, they were nothing more than ordinary swords. They boasted remarkable sturdiness, and no matter how many times they were used in battle, their blades never chipped or dulled. Unlike the legends surrounding them, though, they couldn’t grant their wielder the power to unify the lands. Ruri was very knowledgeable, but thanks to that, she had the bad habit of thinking things were more grandiose than they actually were. Not that I would say that to her face.

“Let’s see.” I gave the box a light flick. It made an unfamiliar metallic *clink* that didn’t sound like steel or copper. *Yeah, there’s no doubt about it.* “Judging by that high-pitched noise, I’m guessing this was made out of a fallen star. It probably needs a key. A normal weapon won’t be able to cut through this thing. I *could* try with Black Star, but I’m afraid it might damage whatever’s inside as well.”

Hi Gyomei, the first emperor of the Tou Empire, might have been more familiar with the box’s make. He’d lived a thousand years ago and was close friends with my past life. We, along with the imperial chancellor, Ou Eifuu, swore an oath before the great peach tree still standing in the northern regions that we would unify all the lands under the heavens. Gyomei had been passionate about making weapons and tools out of various materials. Even when I searched the annals of my memories, though, I couldn’t recall ever

seeing a small box like this. Was it something he made after I died at Routou? I was lost in thought when I noticed that all three girls were staring at me with unimpressed expressions on their faces.

“Wh-What?” I said.

In response, Hakurei and Ruri reached out once again to poke my cheeks.

“Sekiei, where did you learn about all of that?” Hakurei asked. “I’m sure *Meirin* was involved somehow!”

“Sometimes, you know the weirdest stuff,” Ruri agreed. “Now, spill. Who told you that information?”



“Uh...” *Oops!* “I, er, read it somewhere.” I had a bad habit of casually dropping information that only my past life a thousand years ago would know.

Oto, who had been observing us, placed the box back into the bag and held it out to me. “You may have this box, then, Lord Sekiei. My grandmother also ordered for me to give you any treasures we don’t know the origins of.”

“What? I don’t need— Mrgh!” Before I could finish my rejection, Hakurei and Ruri lightly shoved their elbows into my stomach. *Ah, “don’t make her lose face,” right? Your wish is my command.* I gave Oto a grateful nod and accepted her gift. “Thanks, I’ll keep it safe. Let me know whenever you want it back.”

“I don’t believe that occasion will ever arise. In fact, I am the one who should be repaying my debt to all of you.”

“You’ve already done more than enough to repay us.” I patted Oto on the shoulder. Being too earnest wasn’t always a good thing. I let Yui off my shoulder and turned back to look at the girls. “All right then, we should—”

Before I could finish my sentence, a man in formal clothing walked in from the other end of the hallway. His eyes and hair were dull black, and he was both shorter and slighter than me in stature. Despite his beautiful face, his cross expression ruined the delicate impression it would have given him. He was young—only in his late twenties—but he appeared exhausted beyond his years.

This man was U Hakubun, the eldest child of the U family and the son of U Jouko’s legal wife. In other words, he was Oto’s half brother. Now that General U was dead, he was the one in charge of the U family’s internal affairs. I’d heard that despite his smarts, he had little in the way of martial talent.

Hakubun stalked towards us while staring down at a scroll. It took him a moment to notice us, and when he did, he spat, “Humph! So you live to cause us trouble for another day then, rats of the Chou family?”

On top of everything else, Hakubun had quite the foul mouth. I’d heard that he opposed our hiding out in Butoku, even after we’d arrived in the city. To put it in simpler terms, he would be part of the anti-Chou faction.

Ruri, Hakurei, and I remained silent. But Oto was quick to jump to our defense.

“Brother, I cannot abide by that sort of talk! Lord Sekiei and the rest of the Chou army are the U family’s saviors. They are even helping out our exhausted soldiers by getting rid of the bandits roaming our lands! Why must you say such horrible things to them every time you see them?!”

Hakubun grimaced. “Shut up, Oto. Know your place.” He glared up at me, and in his eyes, I could see a deep sense of fear. “Their very existence will bring calamity to the western regions. Chou Tairan the National Shield was a bitter enemy of the Gen Empire, and the Chou family are regarded as traitors by the Ei Empire. There’s no telling when those two will use them as an excuse to attack.”

“You— Mrgh!” Oto was about to make a grab for Hakubun, but I covered her mouth with a hand and stepped forwards instead.

Shooting Hakubun a friendly smile, I said, “Uh, in the meantime, would it be all right if we gave the soldiers some good food and wine? There weren’t any casualties. But it was still a tough battle, and they all fought really well.”

The heir of the U family twisted his expression, shoulders trembling with anger. He opened and closed his mouth several times before he looked down at the ground. The sound of him gritting his teeth echoed in the quiet surrounding us until, eventually, he replied, “I don’t need someone like *you* telling me how to take care of my soldiers. I’ve already prepared everything!”

With that, he stalked off once more. He was just like his sister; they were both far too earnest for their own good, and they were both valuable commanders who refused to let their soldiers starve. Even if he didn’t want to prepare food and wine for the U army, he would have in order to avoid losing to us in—

A light pain shot up my arm, interrupting my thoughts. It was Oto, who’d given me a gentle pinch to remind me that I still had my hand over her face. *Hakurei, don’t give me such a terrifying look. Ruri, stop laughing.*

As soon as I removed my hand, Oto sucked in a deep breath and then bowed her head. “I-I apologize on behalf of my brother! He doesn’t speak for all of us. My grandmother values you all as the U family’s guests, and everyone—from those under our employ to the citizens of Butoku—is most grateful to you all for your help with the bandits. I swear on my departed parents’ honor that none of

that was a lie!”

“Yes, we know,” Hakurei said.

“The princess of the U family shouldn’t lower her head so easily!” Ruri exclaimed as she and Hakurei took Oto by the hand.

I blocked Yui’s attempts to crawl up my arm again as I, in contrast to their fervor, gave my honest thoughts on Hakubun. “It’s not like he’s a bad person. I’m quite fond of people who remain steadfast in their roles. He doesn’t need martial talent or anything. It’s impressive that he’s able to keep everyone’s bellies full, considering how isolated you are from the other provinces. *That’s* what a man should be like!”

The three girls stared at me as if I’d grown another head.

“Uh, what?” I asked.

Ruri pressed her hand against her forehead and sighed. “How can you say that when *you* were the one he was the most antagonistic to? Hakurei, you have your work cut out for you.”

Oto nodded at Hakurei. “You have my heartfelt respect.”

“I’m already used to his behavior. The key to mental fortitude is to maintain indifference.”

“Uh, may I ask what the hell you all mean by that?” *I didn’t say anything that weird, did I?! Um...did I?* I was struck with a sudden bout of self-doubt when an old lady with white hair approached us from the same hallway Hakubun had come from. During our stay in Butoku, we’d met her a few times. She was the attendant to the person who currently held the most power within the U family.

She offered us a bow before handing Oto a piece of paper. “My lady, if you would, please?”

Oto accepted it. She took only a few seconds to read the contents, and she nodded once she was done. “Thanks, I got it.” After we saw the old attendant off the way she came, Oto turned back to give her humble request: “Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, Lady Ruri, the head of the U family—Lady U Koufuu—has summoned you. She wishes to commend you on your work eradicating the

bandits and discuss the situation in the central plains. It pains me to ask you this, as we've only just returned from battle, but would you all please accompany me?"

U Koufuu's room was at the heart of the family manor, where you could hear the sound of the waterways that had been constructed in the inner courtyard. Oto led us there and stood in front of the door to announce herself.

"Grandmother, it is I, Oto."

"Come in," an easygoing female voice replied, followed by the sound of something clacking.

Oto's face took on a more nervous air, and she walked in ahead of us. I glanced at Hakurei and Ruri, who were standing on either side of me, but they pushed me forwards. Even Yui, who'd made its way back up onto my left shoulder, hopped into Ruri's arms.

"Sekiei, what are you loafing around for?" Hakurei asked, her expression impassive.

"It won't do to keep them waiting," Ruri added, equally blank faced.

They're using me as a meat shield?! I glared at them (and Yui for good measure) but followed Oto inside. The first thing I saw was a board of double six—a game popular in the western regions—on an antique wooden table. Around it were an intricately patterned bench, porcelain creations lined up on shelves, and foreign wine bottles made of colored glass. Extravagant candleholders hung from the walls. Steep mountains and beautiful fields expanded past the large round windows, and a pleasant wind swept through the room.

"I hear that everyone from the Chou army made it back without injury. Good work," continued the voice that had summoned us into the room.

From a corner of the room, a small woman emerged, Oto behind her. The woman's long white hair was woven into a braid, and she was garbed in plain traditional clothing. She was U Koufuu, one of the greatest and most famous women in the western regions. As General U Jouko's mother, she was Oto and Hakubun's grandmother. Koufuu had spent her youth wandering the continent,

and during that time, she'd stayed briefly with the Chou family. When I was told that she and Raigen had had a romantic fling, the news literally bowled me out of my chair.

I gave her a casual wave. "It was all thanks to your soldiers that we were able to, granny. Or should I refer to you as the temporary head of the U family, our great and respectable savior sheltering us from our enemies?"

"Ha! This is why you should stick to what you're used to, kid. I'm nothing more than an old lady near the end of her life. I should be the one bowing my head to you lot." Koufuu laughed, tossing a few dice into the air and catching them in her hand.

I heard she was over sixty years old, but she looks like she's in her forties. Can the food of the western regions bestow eternal youth or something? Or perhaps it was the incense that Koufuu had lit in the back?

"Sit, sit," she continued. "Allow me to prepare us all some tea. Oto, help me."

"Yes, grandmother."

I sat on the bench as instructed, with Hakurei and Ruri sitting down on either side of me. Yui curled up on my lap. *Man, that's gonna make it hard to move.*

As she took glass containers full of tea leaves from a shelf, Koufuu said, "Hakubun told me everything. I'm amazed that you battled that fearsome Tigerslayer and returned alive with all your soldiers accounted for. It's little wonder that Raigen and little Tairan had nothing but praise for the Chou army. Ah, yes, and that strange box of his is yours to keep. That's hardly a suitable reward for your efforts though, in my opinion."

I could sense Hakurei and Ruri glancing at me, and they weren't the only ones. Oto even stopped what she was doing to cast an eye in my direction. It was apparently just that shocking that Hakubun would offer his grandmother such a detailed report. *Ha ha ha, I guess I'm the winner when it comes to intuiting a person's true nature!* I gave them a triumphant look, only for Hakurei and Ruri to pinch my cheeks. *They're so prone to violence!*

Koufuu spooned leaves into the teapot and frowned. "Under normal circumstances, the U family would be in charge of exterminating bandits, but as

you know, most of my army died alongside my fool of a son. The only ones still capable of fighting are those who've been with Oto and the defense teams in Youkaku, though we cannot move them from their stations. As the temporary head of the U family, I thank you all for your help. The streets and shrines are safe now, which should be a relief to the people and our ancestors."

The scars left behind by that reckless Seitou invasion were deep. It would take a few more years before everyone made a full recovery. No matter what people said about General U, he had been a commander with foresight. It had been a good idea to leave loyal captains at Youkaku, a strategic location serving as the only access point between the western regions and the central plains.

"We gotta earn our keep some way or another, right?" I said.

"Yes, we are most grateful that you've chosen to take us in," Hakurei chimed in.

In truth, the U family gained little by helping us out. Our former base of operations, Keiyou, had fallen into Gen's hands. Even if well-trained, elite soldiers made up the majority of the Chou army, only a few hundred now remained.

Koufuu handed the teapot to Oto and sat down in a nearby chair, legs crossed. She tossed her dice so high up in the air that they almost hit the ceiling and then caught them again with a deft flick of her wrist.

"Oh, you foolish children. You told me of my son's final moments. You saved my granddaughter, Oto, and her soldiers from certain death, and returned them to the western regions safe and sound. I owe you everything and more, wouldn't you agree?"

Hakurei and I fell silent. Father would've never abandoned his companions to die, and we'd merely emulated him. We hadn't done anything special.

Ruri, who'd been staring at the double six on the table with open interest, chose that moment to join the conversation. "So, what's up? I'm sure you didn't summon us here to give us praise. I'd like to get to the main objective, if you don't mind. The hot springs are calling my name."

Butoku had always been renowned for its hot springs, and there was one in

the U family manor as well. During the summer, Ruri would soak in it multiple times a day.

Koufuu rolled the dice onto the table and set her elbow on the arm rest. “You’re a clever one; I like you. If Hakubun didn’t already have a competent wife, I’d ask you to marry him.”

Ruri scrunched up her face. “I’d never agree.” She grabbed Yui from my lap and set it down in hers. The disgust in her eye must have been genuine because wilted petals appeared and disappeared around her. According to Ruri, she was using something called mysticism rather than magic to create those flowers.

She’s always seemed a little uncomfortable around men, I mused before Oto handed me a cup of tea.

“Here you go.”

“Oh, thanks!” I replied.

“Thank you very much,” Hakurei said.

“Thanks, Oto,” Ruri echoed.

I took a sip. Its unique, fragrant flavor energized every cell in my body. We raised our cups in a final show of gratitude, and Oto’s expression softened with delight.

“Oto, show them the map,” Koufuu said as she took out a scroll from a drawer.

“Yes, grandmother.”

Oto quickly unfurled it and displayed it on the table for us. The Ei Empire had produced this map of the continent back when it still ruled the lands north of the great river. It looked to be a map showing the various countries and factions, as the north, central plains, southern regions, and western regions were all different colors.

“Well, this is...” I started.

“How could this...?” Hakurei gasped.

Ruri narrowed her eyes and hummed while taking in the map.

Even Koufuu's expression was tense as she explained, "We've lost contact with the spy we sent to Keiyou, but the one in Rinkei has reported back. They can send us letters, but security is so tight that they're unable to get in direct contact with the Ou family's daughter. I hear that the capital has been dangerous as of late."

"Grr! Lord Sekiei!" The image of that mercantile genius's pouting face popped into my head. Meirin's father—Ou Jin, the patriarch of the Ou family, an up-and-coming family of merchants—was good at anticipating changes and fluctuations in the market. He must have found it difficult to watch his beloved daughter associate herself with the Chou family, considering how the tides would turn in the future.

Ruri picked up the dice from the table and started placing them on the map. They were all around Keiyou and south of the great river.

"First, it was Koshuu. Since Anshuu's right next to it, I can understand why Gen could take it. But you're telling me that in this short amount of time, Gen conquered Heishuu as well? They haven't deployed their main forces yet, have they?"

When the White Wraith and the National Shield—two of the most remarkable heroes of our time—duked it out face-to-face at the Battle of Keiyou, they dealt heavy blows to each other's armies. The number of great commanders, wise captains, and courageous officers in the Gen army were said to rival the number of stars in the sky. However, I doubted even *they* could shrug off the number of casualties.

Koufuu tapped the land alongside the great river. "You're right, Ruri. The Seitou army were the ones to take Heishuu. Hasho the Millenary Diviner is the one in charge. It appears that the main forces, including the horses, are resting up in Keiyou."

I would never forget that name. He was the strategist who'd come up with all the plans and tactics our former ally, Seitou, had used during the battle at Ranyou, their capital. *So he's with the Seitou army right now? If the enemy's main forces haven't made a move, then that means...*

Koufuu slammed her fist against the table, no longer able to hold back her

emotions. “In other words, Chou Tairan the National Shield, Raigen the Ogre, and all of the soldiers who perished with them are still defending this country! Even in death, they’re protecting this rotten nation. Not that the foolish emperor in Rinkei is aware of that, of course!”

The Ei emperor had been the one who ordered the reckless Seitou invasion. When the Gen army was pushing into Keiyou, he was the one who’d refused to send even a single soldier to act as reinforcement. And, worst of all, he was the one who’d ordered for the National Shield’s execution. For many years, the U family ruled over the western regions, producing sons and daughters loyal to the imperial throne. Yet the current, albeit temporary, head of the household had little interest in hiding her distrust towards the emperor. It was probably much worse in other families.

“The time they bought us is running out though,” Ruri pointed out in a cold voice, running her hand through Yui’s black fur. She removed her blue hat and placed it on my lap in a single smooth motion as she continued, “The Chou army and Lord Chou Tairan defeated members of the great Four Wolves of Gen—the Crimson Wolf, the Gray Wolf, the Golden Wolf, and the Silver Wolf—in a short period of time. However, White Wraith Adai Dada still has many talented officers in his reserve. The soldiers who exhausted themselves during the Battle of Keiyou have surely recovered in the six months since then. There’s no telling when they’ll resume the southern invasion.”

There was no question about it: we—father, the Chou army, our allies, *us*—had fought our best in all of the battles we’d participated in. No one could’ve done any better. But that hadn’t been enough.

Gisen the Black Wolf had stopped father before he could attack Adai in Gen’s camp. The White Wolf had injured father with a compact fire lance I’d never seen before, even shooting it while on horseback. Aside from them, Adai employed a marshal who surpassed even Raigen in terms of experience, as well as many young wolves who’d made names for themselves in the northern plains. In terms of manpower, he was far superior.

Ruri closed her eyes as she fiddled with her blonde hair. “They’re using the Seitou army as a vanguard to feel us out, and we can’t even beat *them* back. There’s a huge difference between us in terms of morale and experience. I

doubt we can win against Gen's main forces, especially if the White Wraith stands at the head of the army. Even if we had all of our water fortresses, that wouldn't change."

"I agree wholeheartedly," Koufuu said, crossing her arms with a somber expression.

"Like how there isn't a single soldier you can't defeat, there's no castle I can't take!" an intoxicated Ouei used to say every time we went drinking in my past life. He'd been right too. From my assessment, Adai's talent either rivaled or surpassed Eifuu's.

I looked down at the map and sighed. "If the southern regions are rebelling, then that means the rumors about Hiyou's revolt against Ei are true? What the hell is he thinking?"

After his father, Phoenix Wing Jo Shuuhou, died, Hiyou had been thrown in jail for a crime he didn't commit. That straightforward and honest young man must have spent torturous days in prison. But inciting a rebellion and, if the rumors were true, assassinating the grand chancellor? He just didn't seem capable of such horrendous acts. What in the world happened to him?

As Koufuu gestured for Oto to pour her more tea, she waved her hand in an exaggerated motion. "Humans are ever-changing creatures, Chou Sekiei. The son of the Jo family survived an intense battle that ended with a loss his own missteps helped bring about. Then, he had to watch the imperial family drag his deceased father's name through the mud with false accusations and slander. It wouldn't be surprising at all if hatred dominated his heart after such experiences."

"Well, I suppose..." A prickly sensation of wrongness persisted, though I couldn't put it into words. We simply didn't have enough information.

A slender hand beside me reached out to touch the map. "I believe that we have a fair understanding of the current situation."

Everyone turned their attention to Hakurei. Though only a year had passed since her first battle, Hakurei's many perilous experiences on the battlefield were maturing her into a general worthy of the Chou surname. I was proud of her, of course. But at the same time, I couldn't tell if this was the best thing for

her or not.

Hakurei tapped her finger on the dice marking the various regions on the map. “Of our ten provinces, three have been taken, and the southern regions have revolted. Excluding the western regions we currently reside in, this means that Ei has lost almost half of its territory in a mere six months. As if that wasn’t bad enough, its army has been divided between the north and the south. Under present circumstances...”

There were only about a hundred thousand Ei soldiers marked on the map. I figured that most of them were greenhorns who knew nothing of war. To make matters worse, they’d been split in two, with one half defending the northern front from the Gen army and the other half dealing with the Jo army to the south. It was as Hakurei implied: the Ei army had no chances of winning.

U Koufuu picked up the dice from the table and rested her cheek against her hand. “And here’s where I’d like to ask your opinion. Do you want to help Ei? Or do you want to stay here?”

None of us said anything for a moment. We’d heard that a messenger from the capital came to Youkaku a few days ago and, in the most arrogant manner, demanded a meeting. Oddly enough, they couldn’t provide any information on who was actually managing Ei at the moment, but it was true that without reinforcements, the water fortresses wouldn’t last for much longer. Now that the Jo family had turned against the Ei Empire, the U family was their last hope.

Koufuu’s expression darkened, and she clutched the dice so hard that they creaked under the pressure. “You know, I have no faith in that clown of an emperor! We attacked when we didn’t need to, and as a result, we lost my son, the Jo boy, little Tairan, and Raigen. If only that idiot hadn’t spouted nonsense about a Seitou invasion, then none of this would have—!”

Her voice bled with pain, as if she suffered from an open wound. This old woman had lost so many loved ones because of an incompetent ruler’s failures. Hakurei, the girl I’d risk my life to protect, reached out and held my sleeve in a tight grip. Her hand was cold and trembling, so I covered it with mine.

“That doesn’t mean I’ll lie down and let those northern horsemen trample through my homeland. We can’t send any reinforcements to the central plains,

but I'm of the opinion that we can take in anyone who flees our way," Koufuu concluded as she started to toss her dice again. With her free hand, she took a brush from the inkstone and drew a circle around the northeastern corner of the province. "The western regions are surrounded by steep mountains, so the only road by which an army can invade us is in the narrow Youkaku. I'm confident that we can outlast even the largest army in a defensive battle."

"I doubt that the Gen army would come this way," said Ruri, who'd been listening in silence. "Adai despises wasting time and energy on unnecessary ventures. He won't split up his army either. If he attacks this place, then it will be after he's taken Rinkei."

"I agree with Miss Ruri," Hakurei said without missing a beat.

Oto smoothly added, "As do I."

When we passed through Youkaku, we'd seen that the walls were strong. Morale was high among the defense teams, led by old and experienced officers, as well. I doubted that a straightforward attack could breach those walls, but...

"Sekiei, I'd like to hear your opinion," Koufuu said.

"My opinion's more or less the same as Hakurei's," I replied. Tracing my finger across the map, I drew a line from the area surrounding Youkaku—an area with countless cliffs—all the way to the north of Butoku. "But it would be bad if they go around Youkaku."

That was what I'd done a thousand years ago to destroy Tei, a country that used to exist right in this area. *Now that I think about it, that campaign was the last time I ever worked with Eifuu.*

"Go around?" Oto asked, dispersing my hazy memories.

"That's impossible," Koufuu said in an exasperated tone. "You're referencing 'Kouei Crosses a Thousand Mountains,' aren't you? I've heard of that story as well. The thing is, no one knows the right path to take. That area is so dangerous even mountain goats slip and die."

The more familiar one was with the modern terrain, the more impossible the feat seemed. In comparison, Ruri and Hakurei were giving my suggestion some serious thought.

“The Gen army was even able to pass through the uncharted Nanamagari Mountains. Such a feat wouldn’t be out of the question for them,” Hakurei said.

“We don’t have any soldiers to spare, you know?” Ruri warned. “The best we can do with our manpower is to meet them at the old bridge in front of Butoku.”

“I know. We’re short on everything,” I replied with a theatrical shrug before closing my eyes to think.

Adai wouldn’t send his army into the western regions. “Use the full might of your army to destroy an enemy’s division.” Even after a thousand years, the rules of warfare remained constant. The White Wraith seemed the type who valued reason above all else; from that perspective, Ruri’s way of thinking was correct. However, on occasion, odd things happened on the battlefield. *If* Gen really ended up attacking the western regions, our only solution would be for me to buy them time to escape.

Koufuu heaved a heavy sigh and pressed a hand to her forehead. “Living for this long seems more like a curse than a blessing.”

“I’m praying that you live a nice, long life. Oto and Hakubun will be in a world of trouble if you die now,” I said.

In response, the old lady clicked her tongue. “I know, I know. You’re just like Raigen and little Tairan.” She stood up and looked out the window. “In any case, good work. For now, I’d like you all to rest your bodies and minds.”

“Hey, Ruri. Don’t sleep over there. If you’re tired, then go back to your room!”

“Mm... I know...”

Ruri, hair down and wearing her nightclothes, had been sitting on the bench in front of me, but she flopped down onto her side, my pillow in her arms. The next second, she started to snore softly. *At least she didn’t drop the dice in her hand. I’ll give her that.*

“I’m gonna play until I win! There’s no way...just no way that I keep losing to you!”

The memory of these past few nights, filled with Ruri challenging me to double six and losing for hours on end, passed through my mind. She'd only give up if she ended up falling asleep. *Nope, never mind! What I need to give this little ascendant is a lecture!*

"Oto, Asaka," I called.

"Yessir!" two voices chimed out immediately.

Oto, in her own nightclothes, poked her head in from the entrance, followed by Asaka. She was Hakurei's attendant, who'd followed us all the way from Keiyou to Butoku.

"Take care of her tonight too, all right?" I said.

"Leave her to us!" Oto and Asaka said as one.

Oto picked up Ruri, and when Yui padded over, Asaka whisked the cat up into her arms. They'd clearly done this many times before now, as they moved with fluid motions. After I saw them off, and just as I began to pour myself a cup of cold-brewed tea, Hakurei walked in from her bath. She still had a towel over her head, and as I'd expected, she was in her nightclothes too.

"I've finished with my bath," she announced.

"Hey," I replied. This was an exchange we had almost every night.

Hakurei settled on her bed. Mine was next to it. As children, we slept in the same room, and even though we grew out of that, we'd kept the habit of our nightly conversations. After we escaped Rinkei, however, Hakurei had started to sleep in the same room as me again. I never asked her for the reason, nor did I ever intend on doing so. I simply accepted her presence in silence. She wasn't the only one grieving for father, after all.

As I started to clean up the double six pieces Ruri had left behind, Hakurei, still lying down, looked over at me.

"Sekiei."

"Yeah?" I paused and looked up to see her patting her mattress a few times.

The dissatisfaction in her sapphire eyes prevented me from turning her down. *Guess I have no choice.* Still with the cup in my hand, I sat down on her bed, and

Hakurei crawled closer until she could rest her head on my lap.

She puffed out her cheeks in a pout and muttered, "I'm still angry at you for standing in front of those bandits on your own, you know?"

"O-Oh, really? Sorry."

"Apologies won't get you anywhere. Please brush my hair." Hakurei still refused to look in my direction, but it was clear that she wanted me to spoil her. So I grabbed a brush from the bedside table and carefully ran it through her long silver hair.

As I gazed out the round window to admire the full moon and listened to the quiet sounds of nocturnal animals and running water, an indescribable sense of peace washed over me. I didn't believe in gods, but I prayed to the old peach tree to the north that such calm and quiet days could last forevermore.

Hakurei shifted to look up at me. "What were you and Miss Ruri talking about earlier?"

"We were discussing the box Oto gave us and the Heavenly Swords," I replied, glancing over to the items in question. The box had been placed on the bedside table, while Black Star and White Star were propped beside the beds.

Ruri came to my room every night to enjoy some board games and double six. But we didn't play for pleasure's sake, nor were we always alone. It served as a time for us to go over our concerns, discuss things we wanted to investigate further, and plan out training sessions for the soldiers. Lately, though, I was spending more and more time talking her down after she got too frustrated about her losing streak.

Once I was done tidying up Hakurei's hair, I put the brush away. "Remember how Ruri said she'd come here a while back at Meirin's request? Since there aren't bandits roaming the streets anymore, she wants to revisit the old shrine where she found the Heavenly Swords. Apparently, it's in the middle of a forest between Butoku and Youkaku. We can survey the area while we're at it too."

"Sounds like something Miss Ruri would suggest." Hakurei sat up and pressed her forehead against my shoulder. "I...wonder how Keiyou's doing," she murmured, her voice soft and anxious.

She looked small and afraid; this was a side of her that she would never let the soldiers see. Chou Hakurei might've been a peerless prodigy, but she was still a young girl who'd only just turned seventeen.

I placed my arm around her shoulders. "I hear that Adai rules over Keiyou with a fair hand. He rejected the treaty because father—"

"I know! I'm...well aware." Hakurei shook her head like a child throwing a tantrum and then wrapped her arms around me. Her entire body was trembling, and tears were gathering in her eyes. Hakurei wasn't an idiot. She knew that Adai held great respect for father and that he'd rejected Ei's attempts at bartering peace due to his fury towards that unjust execution. But the blow that Chou Tairan's death dealt us wasn't so light that we could recover from it in a mere six months.

"Sorry," I said.

"Ah, no, I should be the one apologizing," Hakurei whispered, her face still buried against my chest.

I rubbed her back a few times and tried to lighten the mood. "Man, we really gotta apologize to Teiha when we get back. We put all of Keiyou's issues on his shoulders. I wouldn't be surprised if he hates me now."

Six months ago, when we sneaked into Rinkei, hoping to rescue father before his execution, we'd left Raigen's sole blood relative—a young officer named Teiha—behind. He'd been determined to come with us, but I'd been the one to talk him down and convince him to stay with the words "I leave Keiyou to you." We needed someone to remain in the city, and he was the only person I trusted with the task.

"Yes, I agree. I'm sure he despises you." When Hakurei looked up at me, I saw fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

Using a cloth to wipe them away, I sighed. "Come on, I was hoping you'd refute—"

"No," she interrupted, sitting up to press her forehead against mine. Her voice was so soft as she complained that it was practically a whisper. "I hate how you always rush into battle when I'm not around to help you. I hate you, Sekiei."

“I don’t think I could ever hate you.”

“I hate you.” Despite that final mutter, she didn’t move away from me.

Now that I thought about it, back when we slept together as kids, Hakurei would always hug me close to her. I pushed her away from me and, keeping my eyes averted, straightened up her nightclothes since they’d gotten all rumpled up. One day, I’d have to make her understand that she was the type of beauty who would make anyone turn around for a second peek.

“We should try and get in contact with auntie as well. I’m sure Meirin’s looking into her whereabouts for us, but...” My aunt—the sister of the great Chou Tairan—had fled Rinkei at the first sign of trouble, Asaka’s younger sister in tow. I could only hope they were all right.

Hakurei’s cheeks were still round with her pout as she glared at me. “We should reconsider our relationship with that girl,” she said, pointing out yet another concern regarding Meirin. “Both the government and the people view us as rebels.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ve already given her so much information in my letters though.” Less than two years ago, I rescued Ou Meirin from pirates. But she’d long since repaid me for that debt. At this point, I was the one who owed *her*. “In any case, I doubt she cares about any of that. You’d probably piss her off if you tried to keep her away for that reason. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, yes, I do,” Hakurei replied, though she didn’t look happy about it.

What a surprising reaction. Hmm, well, this is our little princess we’re talking about. Hakurei used to be so shy and introverted, but she was starting to mature past that. I was very proud of Hakurei and her growth, and she must have sensed it because she gave me an unimpressed look.

“Sekiei? What are you looking at me like that for?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing.”

“That’s a lie! How long do you think we’ve known each other for? Now, spill!”

“I’m telling the truth!”

“There you go again, lying and— Eek!”

“Whoa!”

Hakurei stood up and was about to get off the mattress to throw me a few punches when she lost her balance. I hurriedly reached out to catch her before she fell over, and the two of us stared at each other, unable to find the words to say. We both turned as one to look at the massive full moon outside the window. The twin stars glittered together in the northern sky.

We sat there, arms around each other, for a few moments before Hakurei said softly, “The moon is beautiful tonight.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Then, to my surprise, Hakurei rested her small head against my chest once again. “Hakurei?”

“Sekiei,” she said in a weak voice. I waited for her to continue, and she grabbed the collar of my shirt. Tears gathered in her eyes again as she begged, “Please stay with me. If I lose you too, then I... I...”

“Yukihime, you’re such an idiot.” Upon hearing me call her by her childhood name, Hakurei looked up at me, startled. I leaned down to whisper into her ear, “I’ll guard your back, just like how you’ll always guard mine.”

Hakurei let out a wordless gasp. Before my eyes, her ears, cheeks, and neck flushed a deep red, and she pulled my sleeve in a tight grip. She looked up at me and bit her lip. “Sekiei, you’re so mean to me.”

“How can you blame me? I spent all these years with such a dangerous childhood friend.”

“You dummy. You’re so mean.”

“Sure, sure. You better go to sleep now, or else you’re gonna see hell tomorrow.” I rested my hand on her head for a second before I picked her up and set her back down onto the mattress.

It was right after I’d placed the blanket over her that she reached out to take my sleeve in her hand once more. “If you wish to read, then do so here. That’s the most leniency I’m willing to grant you.”

“Huh?! You’ve been saying that practically every night!” I exclaimed, then sighed. “Damn, you’re one troublesome little princess.” I sat down on Hakurei’s

mattress and flipped open my book.

Seeing this, Hakurei's expression softened into one of genuine relief. "Good."

I smiled as I ran my fingers through her silver hair. "Good night, Hakurei."

"Good night, Sekiei. Don't stop until I fall asleep, please."

"Emperor Adai, son of the great Celestial Wolf, it is an honor to be graced with your presence. I have gathered your wolves before you. Please, give us your orders!" the voice of my old marshal boomed within the massive tent that served as our temporary court.

The tent was set up on the outskirts of Keiyou, located at the headwaters of the Grand Canal, which bisected the continent. It was the land my rival, Chou Tairan, had defended prior to his death.

I, Gen Emperor Adai Dada, raised my left hand from the throne I was sitting upon. "At ease, all of you. There's no need to put on airs; those irritating civil officials aren't present today."

"Yessir!" The officers smirked as they settled in their seats.

Only two people, aside from the attendants and servants, remained standing. One was the Black Wolf, Gisen. Formerly known as Blackblade Gisen, he was widely considered to be the strongest soldier in the Gen army, and he possessed skills aplenty to prove that title. The other was Rus, a woman with long purple hair. She'd attained the position of White Wolf in spite of her gender. Both of them adamantly refused to sit so as to better protect me.

I rested an elbow on my throne and grinned. "I summoned you all here today after I realized that quite some time has passed since our last battle. Has our vacation whetted your appetite for war?"

For a moment, no one said anything. In the next, all of the gathered officers raised their voices in a mighty roar. They clapped their palms against their breastplates and scabbards, slapped their neighbors' shoulders, and bumped their fists against each other. Some of them even started to sing.

I gestured at my attendant for some peach wine. This was something that

Chou Sekiei—in other words, Kou Eihou, my best friend from my past life—apparently liked. My attendant poured the wine into a glass cup that belonged to Sekiei, which I'd taken from the Chou manor, and then handed it to me. I took a sip. *Delicious. Ha ha, it seems that his taste in wine hasn't changed in this life.*

A delicate-featured man in plain formal robes and a plain-looking general were standing to the side, giving off an uncomfortable air. Upon noticing them, I chuckled.

“Hasho, Heian, this ruckus is your fault, you know? Claiming Koshuu is one thing, but to take both Anshuu and Heishuu in only half a year's time? What an accomplishment. No Gen soldier can possibly contain their lust for battle after witnessing such skill.”

“Th-Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty. That's, ah, far too much praise for me.”

“It is my honor, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Hasho, the fledgling strategist I'd placed in charge of Seitou, wiped away the sweat pouring down his face and hunched down on himself. In contrast, Gi Heian at the far end of the table remained calm and unmoved. I'd based Heian in Shiryuu, south of the great river, in order to apply pressure on Rinkei. Though he'd lost to Tairan, his ability to build his army back up was a valuable one indeed. The Gen army had never lost a single battle before then. Thus, those who knew the pain of defeat were in the minority.

“Your Imperial Majesty, may I say a few words?!” a young officer exclaimed, his lively voice rising above the yelling and cheering. He had dark brown hair and eyes, as well as a handsome face. His skin was tanned from all his time on the battlefield. Even through his armor, I could make out his toned muscles, though he was nowhere near Gisen's bulk. The two swords hanging from his belt were of western make and high quality.

I gestured for an attendant to take wine to this most promising member of the imperial family's next generation. “Orid, I am glad to see that you are well. Of course you may speak, cousin of mine.”

Orid Dada was only twenty-three years old yet boasted great talent. Not only

was he a good soldier and commander, but he even showed promise as a magistrate and chancellor. He took the wine from my attendant and threw it back, draining the cup in one gulp. He'd been making a name for himself on the northwestern front and was not shy about his ambitions, telling everyone and anyone that his goal was to become my "Kouei of the Modern Era." Once Orid returned the empty cup to my attendant, he began to pace around the tent. My officers were used to Orid's behavior, but old Berig, his commander, massaged his temples. Like his brother, my marshal, he had his work cut out for him.

"According to what I heard in Enkei, the Three Great Generals of Ei are no more. The Ei soldiers positioned at the front are weaklings," Orid said.

Hasho gestured at his soldiers, who raised a map so that everyone could see. The map depicted the continent; we'd taken a similar map from Keiyou and enlarged it. We'd also marked down the enemy's current manpower, as well as which general they reported back to.

Ei's emperor and chancellor are utter fools. They still haven't caught wind of Denso, the rat we sneaked into their court.

Orid stood in front of the map and then tapped the west and south with his fist. "If the U family in the west and the Jo family in the south have revolted against Ei, then they no longer have anyone who can stand against us. I propose that we gather all of our soldiers to attack Rinkei and unify the lands in one fell swoop!"

"Unify the lands!" The assembly of officers raised their fists in the air as one. Excitement filled the room.

My promising younger cousin was right. If he'd made this suggestion a little earlier, I might have agreed with his plan. However, we could achieve unification at our leisure. There was something more important we needed to prioritize.

"Orid." The tent fell silent in an instant. I raised my left hand and continued, "Your passion pleases me. Nevertheless, things are not as simple as you believe."

"What do you mean?" he asked, confusion blatant on his face. He and the other soldiers waited for my next words with bated breath.

I shifted in my throne, my long white hair brushing my cheeks as I did so. “Now that Chou Tairan is dead, it would take nary a thought for us to trample Ei. If we continue to attack the Grand Canal, the source of their strength, and dry up their aquatic advantage, they will fall apart without us needing to lift a single finger.”

The Ei emperor who’d taken the remnants of his people and fled south of the great river must have been a great one indeed. If he wasn’t, then he would’ve never been able to expand Rinkei from a remote village to a thriving capital. The nation had been able to repel two generations’ worth of invasions, not only due to great generals like Chou Tairan but also thanks to the sheer amount of wealth they’d accumulated from trade.

I handed my empty wine glass over to my attendant and said in a cold voice, “Be that as it may, it is still not enough.”

Orid and the officers blinked, unable to comprehend my words. *This is one of the few flaws of my army.* I had no complaints about my wolves’ performance on the battlefield, but only a handful of them had any talent when it came to internal affairs. Because of this, they were exceedingly easy to fool.

I continued confidently, as if this were all a given, “Think about it, all of you. We will not be plundering Ei nor will we be occupying it. We will be *ruling* it. Hasho.”

“Y-Yessir!” Upon hearing his name, Hasho jumped to his feet. Though inexperienced, he dedicated all of his time and energy to studying Ouei’s strategies. He should be able to answer this.

I ignored the obvious anxiety on Hasho’s face and said, “I hear you’re having trouble ruling over Anshuu and Heishuu.”

Hasho’s expression tensed for a heartbeat before he recovered. “Yes, Your Imperial Majesty, it is as you say.” He had little in the way of talent, and I doubted he could ever best Eihou on the battlefield. However, I was willing to acknowledge the hard work he put into his studies. Hasho wiped the sweat from his brow as he explained, “The issue is quite difficult indeed. Ei simply has far more people than we do. Their population is greater than ours by an entire...no, *two* entire place values. The people of Ei also hold great disdain for

us so-called horsemen. We might have conquered them with brute force, but their loyalties are not with us. It is my humble belief that, based on the precedent of our rule in the lands north of the great river, it will take a great amount of time before we can achieve stability on annexed soil.”

In response to Hasho’s assessment, the officers raised their voices in a furious uproar.

“What?!”

“Surely, you jest!”

“Are you sure the people of Ei aren’t simply too stupid to understand the position they’re in?”

“That could be it. They were the idiots who decided to kill Chou Tairan, after all.”

Caught up in their rage, some of the officers smacked their hands against the tables and chairs.

I stood up from my throne and held out my hand. “Silence.”

Everyone instantly fell quiet. Though I didn’t doubt the loyalty of any single person in this tent, I knew that a land unified through the wolves’ violence would fall apart in the blink of an eye. My decisions...no, the decisions of Ouei were always correct. *It’s simply that, at times, my decisions for the country happen to align with my personal goals.*

With that excuse to convince myself, I pressed my small, waifish hand against my chest, right over my heart. “I agree with the opinions of everyone here. It may be vexing, but Hasho has a point. The problems he spoke of are precisely why our fathers and grandfathers could only take the lands north of the river.”

The people of Gen spent their entire lives beside the horses that had long thrived in the great northern plains. When it came to military might, Ei was no match for us. We had been able to chase them south of the river, despite their economic superiority, due to the vast difference in our armies’ strengths.

It’d been fifty years since Ei’s expulsion. It was only during my reign that we’d been able to cross the great river, but that didn’t mean the previous two

emperors lacked talent or skill. Rather, they had been preoccupied with ruling over the enemy within—the people living in the lands that used to belong to Ei. In other words, it had taken two generations' worth of time before the threat of rebellion at last faded. Gen lacked proper civil officials; I doubted we would be able to rule over the entirety of Ei.

“Never let your allies see your uncertainties. Keep them hidden away.” Oh, Eihou, my dear Eihou. Even in this current life, where I’m an emperor of all things, your words serve to guide my path. So help me understand! Why aren’t you here with me right now? With your strength as a military commander and my skill at internal affairs, we would be able to rule over a unified land in no time at all. I must eliminate that Chou Hakurei. That woman, who can only invite calamity, is leading you astray.

I opened my eyes and said, “In order to make the people of Ei obey us, we need to prove to them that we possess the Mandate of Heaven.” *Hmm, for something I’m making up on the spot, it’s a very plausible excuse indeed. It’s true that we’re having trouble maintaining political control.* “So, with the understanding that this is a foolish decision through the lens of military strategy, we shall split our army in two.”

Another part of me, as if sensing this was the last chance, cried out in anger: *Your advantage is absolute, and yet you’re going to divide your army in half?! Ou Eifuu, you’ve finally gone mad! You can still salvage this. Stop before it’s too late!*

Quiet! There’s something I need to do, no matter how many acts of folly I must commit in order to accomplish it.

Ignoring my inner voice, I pulled my dagger from my belt and gave my order: “We will launch a simultaneous attack on the west and the south.”

No one cheered; a dead silence reigned over the tent. It wasn’t surprising. The officers were experienced enough to know just how stupid this command was.

My marshal, speaking on behalf of everyone, exclaimed, “Your Imperial Majesty, splitting up our main army is a rather...”

“Yes, I’m aware, of course,” I interrupted, returning my dagger to its sheath. I rearranged my expression into a troubled one. “However, I hear that the

western regions have found the Tou Empire's Imperial Seal."

Mutterings erupted from the assembled soldiers. The Heirloom Seal of the Realm was something that Hi Gyomei, the first emperor in history, had made and used. People believed it to be a holy symbol that a dragon—the physical embodiment of the heavens—granted to the imperial family, who had since passed it down from heir to heir. It was a more obvious symbol for the emperor's Mandate of Heaven compared to the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars.

My past life was the one who'd ordered for its creation. In my opinion, it was nothing more than a common seal, and a fake of it would be more than enough for my purposes. Judging by everyone's expressions, though, the Imperial Seal's influence was absolute. Even my old marshal, who'd seen and experienced many things during his long years of service, was shaking.

"U-Unbelievable!" he gasped. "Th-Then, the fake emperor of Ei has..."

"It matters little which one is real and which one isn't," I cut in. My inner voice was still protesting, but the die had been cast. My only choice was to continue down this path. I tapped the dagger on my belt in a show of confidence. "What we need more than anything is a fairy tale for the populace to believe in. They need to see that the heavens themselves chose Adai Dada as emperor."

"Long live Emperor Adai Dada, son of the great Celestial Wolf!" The officers finally started to celebrate, pressing their fists against their neighbors'. Even Hasho seemed satisfied with my speech. All that was left was...

"I will leave Hasho and my marshal in charge of the southern campaign. I will lead the other half and—"

"Your Imperial Majesty, please give me the order to attack the western regions!" Orid exclaimed with his usual cheer. He rushed over to me and lowered himself to one knee, pressing his hands together.

I didn't expect him to volunteer himself. "Orid."

"Please, I'm begging you!" His dark brown eyes burned with determination; he would not take no for an answer. My marshal and old Berig shook their heads slightly. Their goal was to stop me from going to those rural lands by any

means necessary.

I have to go and rescue Eihou from the Chou daughter—that silver-haired, blue-eyed wench who’s poisoning his mind! I opened my mouth to tell Orid to stand down, but...

“It’s fine to take risks. But don’t misjudge the right time to retreat.” The words of my dear friend echoed in my ears and helped calm me down. *Hmm. Yes, I suppose a backwater like the western regions would be an unseemly stage for our reunion. I must prepare a battlefield worthy of our first meeting in this life!*

My lips started to curl in a smile, but I mastered my expression. Looking at Orid, I ordered, “Very well, then. I shall entrust my dear cousin with this task. However, I strictly forbid you from forcing an attack. The roads of Youkaku are narrow and they’re surrounded by steep cliffs. It would be one thing if I personally took command of the army, but a straightforward attack will exhaust our soldiers. For now, your only task is to prevent the U family from sending reinforcements to Rinkei. We will ask them to relinquish the Imperial Seal at a later date. Ah, that reminds me. I hear that Chou Sekiei has fled to the western regions. Watch for him; his prowess on the battlefield is not to be underestimated. Make sure you avoid meeting him head-on.”

“You speak of the one who wields the black sword...?” A hint of doubt entered Orid’s eyes, but it disappeared in the next instant. “I am honored to receive such advice from you, Your Imperial Majesty!”

He might have sensed something amiss. My cousin was a keen scholar of Kouei’s legends, and he was quite vocal about his interest in that erstwhile hero. I was positive that he had looked into Chou Sekiei, the current wielder of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars. *I’ll have to tell Berig to keep an eye on Orid later.*

Putting Sekiei and Orid out of my mind for now, I ran a finger down a Routou blossom on display and lamented, “Chou Tairan, our greatest enemy, is no longer of this world. This coming battle may not be as satisfying as our previous ones. But your work will be the same as it always is.” I straightened my back and gave the order: “Devour everything in your path.”

“Yessir!”

At midnight, I sat on the throne of my temporary palace in wait for my guest. Only Black Wolf remained in my company. He was standing guard as usual, his hand resting on the hilt of his great sword. His shadow, cast upon the canvas by the candlelight, wavered with the flickering of the flames.

“Gisen, enough. Leave me for a moment.”

“Yessir.”

As soon as the strongest warrior in Gen exited the tent, a spy silently stepped out from the shadows. It was Ren, wearing their usual fox-shaped mask and ragged cloak. They belonged to Senko, an organization aiming to unify the lands under the heavens. I’d heard that they fought against Sekiei and his friends back in Rinkei half a year ago.

There was clear irritation in Ren’s voice as they reported, “As we expected, Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei are in the western regions. It took the combined U and Chou forces only a few months’ time to exterminate the bandits around Butoku.”

“I’m not surprised to hear that.”

Mere bandits could never hope to defeat Eihou in battle. Back then, everyone knew of his accomplishments on the battlefield when he had the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars—the weapons that helped establish the Tou Empire—in hand. There were even rumors that he alone was more powerful than ten...no, a hundred thousand soldiers. If only he hadn’t given White Star to the Chou girl, he would’ve been able to slice clean through my slender neck during the Battle of Keiyou.

“I thought you had a low opinion of the Keiyou army,” Ren said, sounding baffled. “Especially when it comes to that Chou Sekiei.”

In lieu of answering, I took a sip of my wine. Of course I had a low opinion of them. But in both my current and my past incarnations, I couldn’t help but be drawn to that way of life. It was straightforward and honest, so similar to that of a sword, and it was something I would never be able to attain. Perhaps this was due to karma or some incurable malady of mine. It didn’t bother me

though.

Ren turned around and made for the entrance but stopped before reaching it. “Though the legends place the Heirloom Seal of the Realm in the western regions, the shrine said to contain the seal was empty. I would love to kill the Chou brats with my own hands, but the Honorable One was most intrigued when she heard that they’d accomplished the impossible and sliced through the Dragon Jade. She ordered us to keep a close eye on them.”

“Oh?” So the mysticism-obsessed witch puppeteering Seitou behind the scenes has noticed Sekiei’s true worth? How troublesome.

Ren adjusted their mask. “Be mindful. She’s sent her people to the western regions. You must destroy Ei at once and unify the lands. Once you do, I shall present to you Chou Sekiei’s and Chou Hakurei’s heads.” With those parting words, wind blew through the tent, and Ren slipped out.

I feel sorry for them. They’ve also been infected by Eihou’s poison. I raised my cup into the air and said into the silence, “Eihou, to be emperor is a horrible job indeed. I wish I could go and rescue you from the clutches of that cursed Chou girl right this minute. Damn you, Kougyoku. I didn’t expect you to hide the Heavenly Swords and the Imperial Seal after my death.”

Kougyoku was the female general who’d served as my past life’s assistant for many long years. I’d entrusted her with the empire after my death, but she’d apparently concealed the Heavenly Swords and Imperial Seal in a temple in the western regions. I had no idea why someone as loyal as her would do such a thing.

Through a window in the tent wall, I could see the twin stars glittering in the north sky. I reached out to them with my left hand.

“Oh well. It’s of little consequence. I shall prepare for us a battlefield worthy of our reunion. That’s when I’ll...”

The howling wind outside the tent erased my final words. Only the flowers of Routou in the vase next to me heard what I said.

Chapter Two

“And that concludes my report of the current situation. The Seitou ships traversing the Grand Canal have inflicted great damage on our water fortresses. Gi Heian’s army has been applying more and more pressure on Rinkei, and the threat of attack grows every day. In my humble opinion, our utmost priority should be to prepare defensive measures.”

After he finished speaking, the virtuous General Gan Retsurai sat back down in his chair. He’d spent days on the front line, taking charge of the water fortresses and issuing orders to the soldiers. The officials and magistrates in charge of the Ei Empire remained silent. The air of the imperial palace’s courtroom was thick with tension that only the sound of the pouring rain outside could counter.

I, Kou Miu, clutched the pale golden sleeves of my robes. My brother, the emperor, had allowed me to sit at the far end of the table after I begged him to let me attend. I could still remember how dire the situation at the front line was. *And it’s gotten even worse since then?* My brother, dressed in bright yellow, sat upon the throne. A dragon—a symbol only an emperor was permitted to wear—was emblazoned upon his silks. His brow was furrowed in a pained expression.

A bald man whose body and limbs were as thick as logs was the one to finally break the silence. He was Rin Koudou, the brother of Rin Chuudou. He’d become the lieutenant chancellor only a few months prior.

Koudou looked at the young man sitting across from him and hummed before saying, “Penny for your thoughts, Interim Chancellor?”

The interim chancellor was You Saikei, the grandson of the great and famous You Bunshou. Like Koudou, he’d been named the interim chancellor only a few months ago.

Saikei looked away for a few moments, then answered in a flattering tone, “I—I’m still a mere youth. It would, um, be my pleasure to hear your thoughts first,

Lieutenant Chancellor.”

“His Imperial Majesty has graced us with his honorable presence. There is no need for humility here. Now then, please tell us what you think we should do.”

“Y-You old pig! This is how you take advantage of my kindness?”

I can't believe it! Ei is in such disastrous straits, and they're still occupied with their political power struggles?

Unaware of my pessimistic thoughts, the delicate-looking interim chancellor took a steadying breath and said, “Under normal circumstances, our powerful army would have no problems dealing with the traitorous Seitou or those who chose to surrender to the northern horsemen. As much as it grates me, however, we cannot ignore the insolent rebels in the south. The fact that those in the west refused to meet with our messenger concerns me as well. For now, we should...”

““We should consider a peace treaty with Gen.’ Is that what you wanted to say?” Koudou butted in. He tapped the table before him with a meaty finger. I could recognize the sadistic glee in his eyes as he stared at the political rival he wanted nothing more than to sabotage. He looked around like a frog in search of prey and shook his head in an exaggerated manner. “My, oh my, the interim chancellor is quite the eccentric. The people of Gen are a group of barbaric horsemen! Did you forget what they did to my courageous brother—Rin Chuudou, the grand chancellor of our empire—after he went to Keiyou alone to barter peace with them?”

You Saikei’s face twisted with humiliation as Koudou scolded him before my brother’s eyes. Though his entire body was trembling with rage, he managed to reply, “I’ve stated my opinion on the matter. Now, it’s your turn, Lieutenant Chancellor. Let us hear your thoughts.”

“The answer is simple, unless you’re a *fool*,” Koudou mocked, standing up. He moved to stand before my brother, the fat on his body jiggling with every step. With the exception of the imperial family and the guards, only the Rin and You families were allowed to bring in daggers. He took out such a weapon now, clutching the handle with a tight grip, and proclaimed, “We must go to war, of course!”

Everyone murmured among themselves, and Gan Retsurai, who'd been the one to explain the situation at the front, grimaced. Only my brother and his favored subject, Ou Hokujaku, the marshal of the Imperial Guard, remained unmoved. Thunder rumbled outside of the court as Koudou kowtowed before my brother.

"Your Imperial Majesty, I daresay that, though we were taken off guard at Seitou, our army still stands strong! Yes, it's true that things do not appear to our advantage, as we've lost Koshuu, Anshuu, and Heishuu. The Jo family isn't the only one revolting; even the U family shows signs of possible rebellion. But we need not worry about those duplicitous cowards. Between the great water fortress protecting the capital and the smaller ones around it, Rinkei will never fall. Not even the horsemen will be able to break through our defenses! Once they exhaust themselves, we will challenge them to a fair fight!"

A bright light flashed through the room as a bolt of lightning landed outside. The weather was so miserable it was as if the heavens themselves were weeping.

My brother on his throne rested a hand against his forehead. He looked over at his marshal and asked in a strained voice, "Hokujaku, what do you think? Do our forces truly stand a chance against Gen in battle?"

"I humbly request your permission to express my honest thoughts on the matter," Hokujaku started. Then, he paused, his expression stiff and unmoving. It scared me a little. If only Mei were with me, I could take comfort in her presence. While I was thinking of my childhood friend, who was outside of this room, Hokujaku approached the platform upon which my brother's throne sat and bowed his head low. "Between General Gan's report and the current war situation, a showdown between our army and Gen's will only invite the destruction of our empire. Of that, I am positive."

"Wha—?!" Koudou exclaimed. He must have been sure that Hokujaku would be on his side. And he wasn't the only one. Many others in the room seemed just as shocked.

"Huh?" I gasped before quickly covering my mouth. Hokujaku, along with Rin Chuudou, had been in adamant support of the Seitou invasion. Not only that,

but I also heard that he'd pinned the blame of our loss on Jo Shuuhou and U Jouko.

Still staring up at my brother and without revealing any hint of emotion, the marshal continued, "Gen and Seitou are not our only enemies. Unfortunately, we must also contend with an army led by Gi Heian, former officer of Ei, to our north, as well as the Jo army to our south. In terms of sheer manpower, we have about a hundred thousand soldiers. According to my advisor, Denso, who once served under Lord Chuudou, the Gen army consists of at least three hundred thousand soldiers."

Their army was at least three times larger than ours. It was said that the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire, Ouei, often told his soldiers, "An attacking army should have three times the number of soldiers as a defending one. Not everyone can be like Kouei, who alone possesses the strength of over a hundred thousand fighters." Our enemy had brought even more soldiers than Ouei suggested.

In a cold voice that matched his stony expression, Hokujaku stated, "We cannot hope to go to war with such a difference between our forces. The water fortresses may be impenetrable, but at the end of the day, humans were the ones to construct them. If there is even a crack in our defenses, the White Wraith will not hesitate to attack our weak point. Like his title suggests, he is a demon in human skin."

The air seemed to freeze around us at the mention of the Gen emperor, White Wraith Adai Dada. He had long white hair, and at first glance, one would be forgiven for thinking he was a young girl. He couldn't wield a sword, shoot a bow, or even ride a horse. However, the soldiers of Gen, whose ferocity in battle bordered on the bestial, all pledged loyalty to him and submitted to his authority. It was because they knew that even a pack of wolves stood no chance against a demon.

"S-So then, what do you think we should do, Imperial Guard Marshal?!" Koudou snapped. He looked seconds away from grabbing Hokujaku and shaking him. "Don't tell me you propose we surrender!"

"Surrender? Perish the thought. If I were the type of person who would roll

over and give up, then I would have died at Ranyou.” For the first time all day, emotion flashed in Hokujaku’s eyes. He turned to kneel before my brother, and another burst of lightning streaked across the sky, sending vibrations through the air. “Your Imperial Majesty, it pains me to say this to you, but without the Three Great Generals, our army no longer has the strength to defend the entirety of the Ei Empire. If we try to protect everything, we will end up with nothing.”

Shock and confusion swept through the room. Many of the gathered men, including Koudou and Saikei, paled. Phoenix Wing Jo Shuuhou, Tiger Fang U Jouko, and National Shield Chou Tairan... Gen hadn’t been the ones responsible for killing these famed generals who’d protected the Ei Empire for so many long years. It had been Rin Chuudou, whose hunger for power trumped his dedication to the country, Ou Hokujaku, whose decision to charge ahead at Ranyou landed the entire army in defeat, and my brother, who’d agreed to Chou Tairan’s execution after his treacherous subjects convinced him it would lead to peace.

Yet, as we all knew, the peace treaty never came to pass. Even worse, Adai wrote us a letter in his own hand with only a single sentence upon it: *We thank you for your aid in killing the greatest general in a thousand years.* Ever since he received that taunting message, my brother’s health had taken a turn for the worse. He’d grown ever more dependent on his favorite concubine, Uto, as well.

Hokujaku’s assessment was a direct attack on my brother’s mental state, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if my brother put him to death for that. However, it seemed he had no intention of ordering Hokujaku’s execution.

Instead, he prompted in an exhausted tone, “There is no need to consider my feelings. Speak your mind.”

“Yessir.” Hokujaku stood up and glanced over at the two chancellors. It was clear You Saikei had attained his position through nepotism, for he looked completely lost. Meanwhile, Rin Koudou was using a handkerchief to wipe away the sweat streaming down his face. “For starters, I would like to recall the portion of the Imperial Guard that the interim chancellor and lieutenant chancellor sent to the south of their own accord. They must return to Rinkei at

once. After they do, we will be able to send reserve units to General Gan on the front line.”

“A-Absolutely absurd! Are you giving up the south?!” Koudou yelled as he and Saikei jumped to their feet.

“I-If the rebel Jo Hiyou marches upon the capital, we must—” Saikei started, but he snapped his mouth shut when Hokujaku raised his hand.

“The Jo army has been rampaging through the southern regions, but they have not proceeded north. They suffered heavy casualties during the Seitou invasion last year, and I doubt they can maintain any supply lines. General Gan, do you have anything to add?”

General Gan blinked, seemingly taken aback by his being addressed. Despite his low opinion of Hokujaku, he replied in a clear voice, “No, I agree with your assessment.”

Hokujaku thanked him with a short nod before turning to meet my brother’s eyes. “Your Imperial Majesty, the enemy we should focus on isn’t Jo Hiyou. It’s the White Wraith.”

The brightest bolt of lightning thus far flashed outside the window. For a second, the entire room turned white before a deep rumbling sounded out. Both the lieutenant and the interim chancellors squeaked and trembled, their knees knocking together.

In contrast, the marshal never stopped speaking. “I would also like to suggest that we send a messenger to the U family in the west posthaste. We must ask them for aid.”

My brother’s shoulders twitched. “I thought our previous messenger was chased away before he could even reach Butoku.”

“But he wasn’t killed. Jo Hiyou *murdered* the messenger we sent to him.”

Was he saying that the Jo family was a lost cause, but the U family was still willing to listen? *Then my duty would be to...*

“We must play all the cards we possess,” Hokujaku argued. “Now that peace is off the table, winning is our only option.”

Silence filled the court for the umpteenth time. I doubted that the U family still held any positive regard towards us. We'd forced them to participate in the reckless Seitou invasion that cost them their patriarch and a large portion of their army for no reason. They hadn't turned against us like Jo Hiyou did, but there was no telling whether negotiation was possible or not.

After a long moment, my brother let out a pained sigh and then ordered, "The meeting shall be adjourned for the day. Good work, all of you."

"Brother!"

As soon as the meeting ended, I raced down the resplendent hallway leading to the inner sanctums of the palace and caught up with the emperor.

"Miu, don't shout. My headache refuses to go away." There was deep exhaustion on my brother's beautiful face. It might have been due to all of the alcohol, but his skin was starting to break out as well. At the far end of the hallway, I could see a beautiful woman whose long lilac hair made for an unforgettable impression. It was Uto, Rin Chuudou's adoptive daughter and my brother's favorite concubine. I didn't have much time before she would reach us.

I clutched at the protection charm hanging against my chest and exclaimed, "I'm begging you, brother. Please send me to Butoku."

My brother shifted his gaze to the window. The thunderstorm had finally let up, but the sky was still dark and cloudy. "Do you know what you're asking? Your mother might have come from the Ha clan, one of the most famous families in the western regions, but you are still my sister. The U family despises me. They may kill you to try and hurt me."

"And I'm prepared to die if that's the case."

If I had to be honest, my brother was not a very reliable emperor. A treacherous serpent's lies were enough for him to question one of his most loyal subjects. After the Seitou invasion—whose enactment he'd urged—ended in a spectacular failure, he became dependent on alcohol and his concubine. He was never able to deal with any of Ei's numerous troubles in an effective way. Even after You Bunshou was assassinated, he was as impotent as ever, failing to

rise to the occasion and fill the gap left by a man who'd been the cornerstone of the Ei Empire.

His worst crime was executing the National Shield, Chou Tairan, for a crime the general didn't even commit. Historians in the future would be sure to describe my brother as "a ruler who didn't move in times of need and only moved when he was not needed, thus leading to the decline of his empire." He was a textbook example of a foolish emperor. Despite all of his faults, however, I could not abandon the man standing before me who wore so troubled an expression on his face. He was the only brother I had, after all.

I held his gaze and waited for his answer. He was the one who looked away first, turning around and steadying himself against one of the vermilion-lacquered pillars lining the hallway.

The Ei emperor—no, Kou Ryuuho—started to walk off but not before saying, "Do what you wish. I will send direct orders in a short while."

"Thank you, brother," I said, bowing my head and neither raising it until he and his concubine disappeared from my sight. Then, I murmured to the girl who appeared behind me, "Mei, do you know of anyone in the capital with connections to the U family?"

"Yes, I do."

I turned around. My childhood friend and attendant was as reliable as ever. She handed me a piece of paper, and I skimmed through the words on it. *The Ou family, a group of up-and-coming merchants?*

"Contact them now to set up a meeting," I ordered Mei. "We must hurry or else Ei will truly be lost."

"Hmm... This is..." muttered an old man whose hair and beard had long since turned gray as he looked over the filthy little box in his hands. He was sitting on a bamboo mat before me—Chou Sekiei—and he still seemed quite healthy despite his advanced age.

A few days had passed since we defeated the bandits under the Tigerslayer's command. I, along with my childhood friend Hakurei, were dropping by an old

workshop on the outskirts of Butoku. We wanted to have this old man examine the mysterious box awarded to us while we still had time to do so.

Oto, who'd visited Youkaku with Ruri to survey the topography there, had said, "He's stubborn, but his skill as an artisan is top-notch. In my opinion, no one in the western regions can make a better metal puzzle box than him." A number of metallic crafts and puzzle boxes were laid out on a long table as samples, but all of them were of expert make. The only item that stood out was the dagger hanging from the wall.

As I observed everything around me, Hakurei's laughter rang out from a room in the back of the workshop. She was having a great time chatting with the old man's daughter and grandchild. *Those two sure were friendly. I doubt they got it from him.*

The old man placed the box on the table and poured some tea into his cup. "Hey, kid, where did you get this box from? Ah, yes, sit down, sit down. If you want some tea, then pour it yourself."

"Did you figure something out?" I asked, settling down without hesitation into an old yet sturdy chair. I grabbed a cup that had been mended with gold-dusted lacquer and, without asking permission, poured tea into it.

The old man fiddled with his beard and poked at the box with a thick, scarred finger. "The box will have to be cleaned before we can see any details on it, but it's been crafted with the same techniques we employ here. However... Well, take a look at this." He showed me several well-used tools. All of their blades were missing. "When I was younger, I hired the greatest metalsmith at the time to create these using the finest iron sand in the western regions. Since you said I could do whatever I wanted with this box, I used these to try and pry it open. The blades broke without leaving even a scratch behind. What in the world is this thing?"

"That's what I came here to ask you," I replied with a small smile before taking a sip of tea. It had a unique yet fragrant flavor. *I can use this the next time I have a tea-tasting contest with Meirin.*

"Your eyes and hair are so pretty!" a little girl exclaimed cheerily from the other room. "I'm jealous of how sparkly they are!"

“Th-Thank you,” Hakurei answered. It seemed that the kid had taken a shine to her. The old wives’ tale about how women with silver hair and blue eyes would bring calamity was sure to die down any day now.

I rested my cup on the table and said, “If you don’t know what this is, then I doubt anyone else in the western regions will be able to figure it out. I took a look at your work, and they’re all masterpieces.”

“Humph.” The old man’s stern expression softened slightly.

“Sorry about the tools. How much do I—?” I started to remove a cloth bag from my pocket, but before I could finish, the old man interrupted me.

“No need.” Though it was my first time meeting this man, his rejection was firm and resolute. He turned away from me to slowly and carefully put his tools away. “A young man with black hair and red eyes, accompanied by a regal-looking young woman with silver hair and blue eyes... I know who you two are. You’re from the Chou family, aren’t you? In that case, I’d rather die than take your money.”

He knows who we are, which is why he won’t take our money? Those tools were clearly of expert make. It would take a lot of time, effort, and money to repair them.

“But that’s—”

“When I was a young man, I lost my wife. I don’t have a kid either,” he said, suddenly offering details about his life.

Huh? Wait, in that case, who’s that woman and little girl?

Before I could wonder about that any further, he continued, “Fortunately, I managed to train up several apprentices. The most accomplished of them set up a workshop in Rinkei, and another one signed contracts with famous merchants and nobles. For some reason, the youngest and worst of my apprentices volunteered for the army. I can’t even remember how many times I yelled at and scolded him back then. He was stubborn and refused to listen to reason; who knows where he got it from? The chair you’re sitting on and the gold-lacquered cup you’re holding were his final creations. They’re terrible, aren’t they?”

When he looked over his shoulder at me, I recognized both joy and a deep sadness in his eyes. *Oh, I see. Then the woman and child were the apprentice's...*

The old man, narrowing his eyes, gazed out the window. “He had more talent as a soldier than a metalsmith. It didn’t take him long to make a name for himself, and before I knew it, he had a wife and kid too. The Tiger Fang himself even picked him as his adjutant. I was trembling in my boots when the general came to my humble workshop.”

I blinked, surprised. No wonder Oto knew about this place.

“The night that he received orders to march upon Seitou, my apprentice came to visit me, all by himself,” the old man continued in a lower voice. “He wouldn’t stop pressing his head against the dirt outside the workshop. He said, ‘Master, thank you for your long years of guidance. You adopted and raised me when I had no other family. I owe you a great debt that I haven’t repaid at all. But I doubt that I will be able to return from the upcoming battle. After I die, please take care of my wife and daughter. I’m begging you. You’re the only person I can put my trust in.’ He probably...he probably knew that...”

Hakurei, dressed in traditional garb similar to Oto’s but dyed a different color, poked her head in from the back. I gestured to her that everything was all right. The Chou princess, quick on the uptake, nodded as if to say, “Understood,” and then returned to the other room.

The old man removed several old books from a nearby shelf. “Shortly after the army left for Seitou, I heard rumors of their defeat—that General U wasn’t the only casualty, and that most of the soldiers from the western regions died at Ranyou. I couldn’t believe it. Of course I couldn’t! I taught my apprentice to treasure his life and his family. I never taught him to sacrifice himself. ‘He’ll be back!’ I clung to that hope as I waited faithfully for his return with his wife and daughter.”

General U fought bravely that fateful day. The Gray Wolf, who’d been his opponent, had nothing but high praise for his skills. But it was true that very few soldiers from the U army returned from Ranyou.

The old man turned around to face me, tears streaming down his cheeks. “That bastard! He managed to escape from the enemy encirclement, and yet he

smiled and said, 'Master would have my head if he knew that I abandoned everyone.' Again and again, he returned to the fray to save his friends until, finally, he was struck by a fatal injury and died without ever returning to Butoku. What an unbelievable fool!"

It was clear that he'd loved his apprentice, much in the same way that father had loved an adopted child like me.

The old man wiped away his tears and brushed his fingers against the dagger on the wall. "My apprentice's army friends were the ones to return this and inform me about his death. Apparently, he wouldn't stop talking about you and your soldiers. Said, 'If the Chou army hadn't risked their lives to cut a path through the enemies surrounding us, we would've been wiped out. We're still here thanks to them and General U acting as bait to save as many soldiers as possible.'"

I remained silent. Oto and the other U soldiers had said something similar. It wasn't unheard of for such acts of caprice to occur on the battlefield.

The old man knelt on the floor and lowered his head until it was practically touching the bamboo mat. "As his master...no, as his father, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thanks to you and your soldiers, my apprentice...my son...was able to fulfill his duties." Hakurei, who'd been eavesdropping from the back, walked out to stand next to me and held my hand in hers. When the old man looked up, his eyes widened slightly before his expression softened. "You heard what I said? For your information, I'm not the only one who knows about your feats on the battlefield. Everyone in Butoku, or rather the western regions, heard about how you saved Lady Oto and her soldiers."

Hakurei and I looked at each other. *Sure, it felt like people were treating us really well, but...*

The old man smacked his palms against his thighs, stood up, and started to flip through the books he'd set out. "The people of the western regions have a strong sense of duty, and we always repay our debts. Leave this box with me. I'll clean it off and take a closer look at it."

Leaving the workshop, Hakurei and I walked down Butoku's main road, which

was lined with historical buildings. As one of the oldest cities in the Ei Empire, the coordination of its infrastructure was easy to account for. The uniform red tiles on the roofs and the grids formed by the artificial waterways were particularly beautiful. Ouei must have been feeling inspired when he planned out the city.

The streets were bustling with activity as the merchants peddled their unique wares. My nose itched with the aroma of spices wafting from the open stalls. *I sure would love to look around the market the next time I'm in the area.* There wasn't a single cloud in the sky, and only an occasional breeze blew past, ruffling our hair.

"I guess this is what you'd call destiny," I said.

"Yes, I suppose," Hakurei agreed.

Our efforts on the battlefield weren't meaningless after all. But if the battle of Ranyou hadn't occurred in the first place, then that little girl wouldn't have lost her father. She'd been so attached to Hakurei that when it came time to leave, it'd been difficult to pry the two apart. The world was truly an unfair place.

Hakurei raised a hand, her slender finger pointing upwards. The movement caused White Star, which hung from her belt, to shift.

"Allow me to take this opportunity to remind you of something. The fact that everything worked out this time doesn't absolve you of your tendency to charge into battle on your own. Next time you do that... Well, I don't believe I need to say any more, do I?" She offered me a beautiful smile before pulling a string from her pocket and taking a few steps towards me. The scent of flowers wafted from her.

With both hands I hurriedly pushed her back. "Wait, wait, put that away! How're you gonna make it up to me if Oto and Ruri start carrying that around everywhere too?"

Hakurei blinked. "They already do, though."

"Wh-What?" A cold shiver, the likes of which I'd never even felt on the battlefield, ran down my spine as I stumbled backwards. I cradled my head in my hands, barely managing to suppress the urge to curl up into a small ball.

“Ah, how could this be? I can’t believe that Chou Hakurei, of all people, would awaken to such a perverted interest.”

“How rude.” Hakurei took out a piece of paper that was written over in a familiar hand. “‘Chou Sekiei is guilty of all crimes.’ This is something Meirin and I already agreed on.”

“Stop that! Stop fabricating lies about my criminal history when I’m not around!”

“That’s all up to you.”

“Urk!”

I can’t... I can’t win against them! Father, please save me!

I placed my hand over Black Star’s hilt to calm myself and heaved a heavy sigh. “And people think *I’m* the mean one?!”

“I’m such a sweet and beautiful girl. Of course I can’t be mean.” Hakurei looped the string around my right wrist and tugged on it. “Now let’s buy something on our way back. Of course, you’ll be the one paying, won’t you, Sekiei?”

When we returned to the U manor, a slim woman with shoulder-length brown hair was waiting for us, balancing a tray with a teapot and cups in her left hand. It was Asaka, Hakurei’s attendant.

“Lady Hakurei, Lord Sekiei, welcome back! ♪”

“Thank you, Asaka,” Hakurei said.

“Hey. We bought some food from the market for everyone to eat,” I said, handing the paper bag over to her.

The cheery attendant who’d come with us all the way from Keiyou gave me a wide smile as she accepted the bag with her free hand. “Thank you very much. I’ve never seen snacks like these before.”

“They’re wheat sticks that’ve been fried and covered with lots of sugar. It’s like a chef decided to throw all of the western regions’ specialties together to

make these, but they're good. Hakurei pretty much demolished an entire portion by hers—"

"Sekiei?" Hakurei walked up to stand behind me, and my life flashed before my eyes.

I could feel beads of cold sweat trickling down my face as I forcibly changed the subject. "B-By the way, Asaka, I see that you're preparing some tea. Have Ruri and the others returned?"

"Yes, they have, but they're in Lady Koufuu's room right now."

"Huh? So that means..."

"Other guests have arrived?" Hakurei finished for me.

In response, Asaka's smile deepened. An eastern wind blew in from the window, bringing with it the melodious chirping of the birds outside.

"Someone we haven't seen for a very long time has been waiting on the edge of his seat for you two. Please meet with him as soon as possible."

Inside the parlor, we were met by a young military officer with a handsome face standing at attention. He must've gone through his fair share of ordeals to get here; everything from the cloak over his light armor to the sheathed sword hanging from his belt was covered in a fine layer of filth. As soon as we'd entered the room, though, he dropped to one knee and started to weep.

"Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei! It's been far too long! I'm so glad that you both are all right!"

"T-Teiha?!" We hurried over and crouched down before him.

Teiha was the only relative of Raigen, who'd been the closest thing to a grandfather to me and Hakurei. We'd left him in charge of Keiyou and hadn't seen him in about six months.

"Man, what a surprise!" I said. "I didn't expect you to come all the way here."

"It must have been a difficult journey," added Hakurei. "I'm impressed that you made it through Youkaku."

In preparation for an enemy attack, the U family had closed off any potential strongholds. *How in the world did he get here?*

Upon seeing the confusion on our faces, Teiha revealed, “The Ou Commerce Guild helped me along the way. Though the others were forced to stay behind at Youkaku, the people of the U family gave me special permission to proceed through.”

“Ah, I see,” Hakurei and I said at the same time. Then, Hakurei shot me a look, to which I nodded in response.

People other than Teiha made it here! And he said the U family gave him special permission, huh? Was it Granny Koufuu?

I patted Teiha on the shoulder to make him stand up and then we gestured for him to sit in a chair. Once he was settled, Hakurei and I lowered our heads.

“Sorry. We didn’t mean to make you clean up the aftermath of our decisions,” I said.

“I apologize,” Hakurei murmured.

Teiha had been forced to step up as the representative of an occupied city. The immense pressure he’d been under was evident from the gaunt shape of his cheeks, and it pained me to realize that bowing was the only way we could express our gratitude.

A sudden clatter erupted around us. Teiha had jumped to his feet, his chair toppling backwards from the sudden movement.

“P-Please raise your heads! I understand that the situation left you no other choice. If the people who stayed behind in Youkaku heard that I made the two of you lower your heads to me, they’d be furious.”

We thanked Teiha as we slowly straightened up, and Asaka placed cups of fragrant tea before us.

I sat down on the bench opposite Teiha and grinned at him. “You know, I’m more impressed that you made it out of Keiyou at all. To tell the truth, I figured that Adai would scout you for his army.”

It took Teiha a moment before he replied, “I still can’t quite believe it, but I’ve

received several official invitations.” He took a sip of tea and hummed in appreciation. When he next looked down at his hands, I could recognize a slight glint of reverence in his eyes. “After I announced my decision to leave Keiyou, the Gen emperor summoned me. To my surprise, I was given the opportunity to meet with him face-to-face. Truthfully, I...prepared myself for the worst.”

There, Teiha hesitated. Then, he began to recount his strange experience.

“Hmm, so you say you wish to step down from your position and leave Keiyou? If my memory serves me right, your name is Teiha, yes?”

“Yes. I am the interim governor-general of Keiyou,” I replied, lowering my head in a deep bow.

The man seated upon the throne before me had long white hair and looked every inch like a young girl. Yet he was the famed White Wraith Adai Dada, emperor of the Gen Empire. The temporary audience room set up in the tent just outside of Keiyou was unbelievably massive. A score of veteran officers and guards wearing metal armor, presumably of Seitou make, glared at me.

In the past, I might have been frightened by the emperor’s presence and the open hostility, which might have also led me to embarrass myself. But now, I knelt down, placing the palm of one hand on the foreign carpet covering the floor, and said, “Several months have passed since your army took Koshuu. Thanks to your vigilance against pillaging, many members of the populace have returned to their peaceful lives. We’ve finished grieving for General Chou, General Raigen, and the soldiers who perished in battle. And now that I’ve handed duties over to the new civil officials, there is no longer any reason for me to be here.”

Adai hummed, then rested his cheek against his hand as he thought for a short while. *If he took offense to anything I just said, I won’t be able to leave here alive.* Sweat dripped down my brow at the thought.

The emperor held my gaze. Though he looked like a frail girl, there was a fathomless depth in his eyes.

“You’re related to old Raigen, aren’t you? Word of that veteran officer’s

reputation has reached Gen's lands as well. Chou Tairan and Raigen were peerless warriors, yet Ei refused to send even a single soldier as reinforcement. Swearing fealty to such a country will not benefit you in any way."

"My loyalty only lies with the Chou family." I stared back at him. *"Smile, no matter the situation. That's an important job for officers too."* Lord Sekiei's advice echoed through my mind, and I forced a grin onto my face. "There are many people in Keiyou who, like me, will one day rise against you in rebellion. But even if we all work together, we will not be able to claim victory. That's why I wish to remove them from this city and bring them to someone who *can*."

Murmurs erupted around the tent, and some of the officers even placed a hand on their swords. However, Adai only smiled, rubbed his chin, and peered at me in amusement.

"Humph. A brave one, aren't you?" Those cold eyes burned as he looked up at the sky, visible through the ceiling. "'A general must always have a smile on his face.' I can see why Chou Sekiei placed his trust in you."

I simply bowed my head, unable to say anything in reply. *To think that the White Wraith would say the same thing as Lord Sekiei!*

Though I didn't look up, I felt the air move as Adai raised his slender left hand. "Very well. I accept your resignation."

"Th-Thank you!"

He accepted it, just like that?!

In response to my bewilderment, Adai smirked and said, "I assume you wish to meet with Chou Sekiei and the Chou girl with silver hair and blue eyes. They're likely in Butoku to the west. The topography is most precarious there, so take heed. Do not hesitate to make requests if you need anything for your journey."

I gaped up at him. "Wh-What?!"

He knows all of that, and he's still going to lend me aid?

The old marshal of Gen, standing amid the gathered officers, twisted his expression as if he'd just bitten into something bitter. Adai reached out with a

pale, slim hand and brushed his fingers against a flower on display beside him. It looked to be a peach blossom.

“There’s no need to look so surprised. As they say, a great general does not suffer weaklings. Kouei embodied that proverb well. I don’t expect anything less from Chou Tairan’s son.”

Shock swept through me like a bolt of lightning. Adai Dada was truly an extraordinary figure, worthy of being the master of the wolves of Gen.

“Y-Your Imperial Majesty, you mustn’t!” the old marshal called while the officers continued to converse frantically among themselves.

Adai simply rose from the throne and approached me. He leaned down until his mouth was mere inches from my ear and whispered, “I’d like you to pass along a message to Chou Sekiei: ‘I will meet you on a worthwhile battlefield. Until then, I wish you well, wielder of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars.’ Good work, loyal subject of the Chou family. You may leave.”

“Well, you...” I trailed off, unsure of how to continue.

“You went through something amazing,” Hakurei finished for me.

We both grimaced. An audience with the White Wraith himself? Teiha was probably the only person in Ei who’d done that and lived to tell the tale. Apparently, Gen soldiers had captured Rin Chuudou after his visit to Keiyou and then sent him to the Gen capital of Enkei. No one had heard anything of him since.

“I hesitate to say this...” Teiha stopped to take another sip of Asaka’s tea before looking down at the ground.

I could hear the faint sound of arguing voices—*Hakubun and Oto?*—from outside the room, but Teiha’s next words interrupted my thoughts.

“The Gen emperor is a good ruler. I hear that despite Ei’s dire situation, our emperor spends all of his time holed up in the palace with the Rin daughter he’s taken as his concubine. He can hardly compare to the White Wraith. According to rumors, many of Rinkei’s residents have been singing songs in mockery of the

Ei emperor.”

I could hear Teiha’s barely suppressed rage in his words. *The emperor of Ei must be a truly incorrigible fellow to make Teiha, of all people, say something like this.* Hakurei tugged on my sleeve, her expression dark. “Do something,” she seemed to be saying.

“In any case,” I said, clapping my hands. When Teiha, who’d loyally braved the journey to Butoku for us, looked up at me, I offered him a confident smile and said, “I’m glad you’re here! We’re counting on you and the others still in Youkaku.”

“Yessir!” The entire time he’d been recounting his story, a grim look had planted itself in Teiha’s eyes. But finally, his affect brightened.

I popped a fried snack in my mouth, and its unique flavor spread over my tongue. It didn’t taste like the merchant had simply fried it and sprinkled it with sugar; there might’ve been spices in it as well. Anyhow, it was delicious.

“What was your impression of the White Wraith after meeting him? Rumors say he’s so unbelievably beautiful and slender that it’s easy to mistake him for a young maiden. Are they...? U-Um, Miss Hakurei?”

A slim hand reached out from beside me and snatched away the bag of fried snacks. Hakurei turned to look at me with a beauteous curve to her lips.

“Is something the matter, Mister Chou Sekiei? Did you want to continue with your depraved questions?”

Sh-She’s terrifying! I looked over at Asaka and Teiha to beg them for help.

“You must be exhausted. Allow me to take you to the hot springs,” Asaka said, avoiding my gaze.

“Thank you!” Teiha replied, ignoring me as well.

How cruel!

Hakurei turned her face away, not bothering to hide her irritation. She shoved snack after snack into her mouth as she complained, “Unbelievable! Aren’t there more important things to worry about? Yet the first thing you ask about is his looks! Even if the White Wraith’s appearance is to your liking, you should

have a sense of propriety.”

“H-Hey, that’s just slander! And don’t eat it all! Some of that’s mine!”

Hakurei tilted her head to the side. “Isn’t what’s yours mine?”

“Why are you acting like you’re genuinely baffled?!”

As we continued to squabble, the black cat Yui jumped onto the table. It meowed as if scolding us just as a familiar girl’s voice rang through the room, drawing our attention towards the hallway.

“Sorry to bother you in the middle of your usual lover’s spat.”

“Another idiot who keeps having the wrong impression of us!” I exclaimed.

“Miss Ruri, this is *not* a lover’s spat,” Hakurei corrected.

As expected, Ruri was standing in the doorway, using her blue hat to fan herself. Her brow was furrowed in a troubled expression.

“Could you come with me for a moment? The squabbling between the U siblings is getting out of hand.”

“Oto, *listen* to me! I don’t want you going to battle ever again!”

“I refuse. How many times must I repeat myself before you understand, brother?”

From Koufuu’s office came U Hakubun’s irritated voice and Oto’s cold reply. They sounded seconds away from an outright brawl. *Ruri was right. This isn’t good.* I glanced over at Hakurei and Ruri, then gestured with my hand to Teiha, indicating that he should wait in the hallway.

I rang the bell next to the door and walked in. Koufuu, her features overcome with exhaustion, was sitting in a chair in front of the U siblings, who were locked in a fierce glaring match. As soon as we entered the room, however, they directed their gazes towards us—or, more precisely, me, since I was at the front of the group.

Feeling awkward, I scratched my cheek and said, “Er, it sounds like you guys are busy. We’ll be back la—”

“A-hem.” Hakurei and Ruri cleared their throats in an exaggerated manner. Not only that, they even pushed me forwards.

All right, all right! I get it already!

As the two girls cut off my escape path, Hakubun crossed his arms and twisted his face in disgust. “I have no intention of taking back my words, Oto. No matter if it’s Gen or Ei who attacks us, I forbid you from leading a team to Youkaku to engage them! Stay in Butoku. That is my official order as Hakubun of the U family.”

Oto met her brother’s eyes without flinching. She glanced in our direction, then sighed. “Enough already. Everyone who returned from the battlefield with me are powerful fighters with years of experience. Do you believe we can defend the western regions without their help?”

“There’s no need for a youth like yourself to lead them. *That’s* what I’m saying! Let the officers in Youkaku take command!”

“Brother! Don’t you understand the traditions of a military family such as ou — Mmrgh!”



As soon as I saw the fury burning in Oto's eyes, I reached out from behind her and covered her mouth. Now that the argument had gotten this heated, it would be difficult for them to reach any sort of agreement today. I winked at Hakubun, wordlessly urging him to leave the room. He must've shared my opinion because after a click of the tongue, he turned and left the office.

Exasperated, I turned to Koufuu and asked, "Why didn't you stop them? Rumors are gonna start flying around about how the U siblings don't get along."

"My apologies. I didn't mean to cause you any trouble." She sighed as she leaned back in her chair, looking drained.

Hakurei walked up to stand at my side. "Their quarrel seemed too heated for a simple family disagreement about going to battle. Is there something else going on between them? Also, Sekiei, please remove your hand from her."

"O-Oh, right." Hakurei's tone brooked no argument. I trembled as I released Oto.

She was blushing so fiercely that even her neck had turned crimson, and she hid herself behind Hakurei. "I didn't mean for any of you to see that shameless display," she said in a terribly soft voice.

Her attitude was surprising considering how reliable she was on the battlefield. *Well, I guess it's normal for a girl to react this way if a guy suddenly covers her mouth.*

Hakurei was still glaring at me, so I looked away from her as Ruri provided more context.

"U Hakubun wants Oto to stay in Butoku and take care of internal affairs. Her mother hails from the Ha clan, which is a reputable family in the western regions, so her presence would be useful from a political standpoint. It seems he also wants to take away some of the Seitou survivors' authority and step onto the battlefield himself."

"Ah, I see," I said, nodding. It wasn't completely unheard of.

Hakurei hummed. "So that's why Miss Oto was so against the idea."

"I survived numerous life-and-death situations with those soldiers. It would

be unacceptable for me to remain in the back and spend my days in peace,” Oto said. She must have recovered from her embarrassment because she sounded as calm as she usually did.

So the sister wants to go to battle, while the brother wants to keep her away from the front line. No wonder they can't see eye to eye.

“All right, then as someone who wants to become a civil official, I—”

“Please be quiet,” Hakurei interrupted.

“Are you capable of doing the same amount of work with the same level of quality as U Hakubun accomplishes in a single day?” Ruri asked.

Before I could even attempt to brighten the atmosphere in the room, the Chou family's princess and strategist shut me down. *So cruel!*

As the two girls peppered me with elbow jabs, Koufuu looked out the window and said, “The people of the U family are born with remarkable martial talent, but even I can see that Hakubun is lacking in that regard. He might be jealous of Oto. In fact, his envy may extend to you and the rest of the Chou army as well.”

U Hakubun was quite thin, and he didn't appear to have any combat prowess whatsoever. But...

“Er, are you sure he's not keeping his cute little sister away from the battlefield out of fraternal love?” I said. “After all, isn't U Hakubun the kind of socially awkward guy who can't say what he thinks?”

Everyone stared at me with unreadable expressions on their faces. Even Oto was shaking her head as if to say, “No way. Absolutely no way.” *Uh, I don't think I said anything too weird.*

Koufuu sighed and shrugged. “I can't tell if you're perceptive or slow. So, what brings the lot of you here?”

“Ah, right, right. Teiha!” I called.

“Yessir!” The young officer walked into the room. He looked even more impressive than earlier in this new light.

Koufuu's eyes widened. “You're...”

“My name is Teiha, a relative of old Raigen,” he said immediately and without a hint of timidity despite Koufuu’s presence. It seemed that surviving a direct encounter with the White Wraith had impressed upon him a much calmer composure.

“He’s a lieutenant of ours who came all the way from Keiyou,” I added.

“The other soldiers from Keiyou are in Youkaku,” Hakurei concluded.

Koufuu blinked several times without saying anything. Then, she took a few deep breaths before saying, “All right, I understand. So you’re the person Hakubun was talking about?”

“Hakubun?” I echoed. The awkward son of the U family must’ve been the one to grant Teiha permission to pass through, then. Hakurei, Ruri, and Oto blinked in obvious surprise before they turned away, looking conflicted.

Koufuu tossed the die in her hand and then snatched it out of the air. “Yes, he came to tell me about you this morning, saying that he heard you were related to Lord Raigen. Humph. Clever one, that boy.”

I’d only been in Butoku for a few months, but I had a pretty good understanding of what Oto’s brother was like. He was skilled when it came to handling internal affairs, and despite his outward appearance, he was quite considerate of others’ feelings. On top of that, he understood the importance of military logistics and gathering intel. If only he would soften his icy gaze and sharp tongue.

U Koufuu looked up at Teiha and sighed, her eyes faraway as if lost in the reminiscence of the distant past. “You look so similar to Raigen in his younger years. It took me by surprise.”

Teiha gaped at her. “Me, similar to Lord Raigen?”

“You’re his spitting image. I’m sure he can rest easy on the other side, knowing that someone such as yourself is his successor.”

“Thank you...so much,” Teiha managed to reply before squeezing his eyes shut.

Hakurei and Ruri tugged on my sleeves, urging me to continue the

conversation. They could very well say something themselves, but for some reason, these two loved to put me directly in the line of fire. *It's not as if I'm particularly adept at navigating these social situations either, you know?! Sheesh.*

Running a hand through my black hair, I said, "Granny, would you be willing to let our people in Youkaku into Butoku as well? There are about...uh, Teiha?"

"Yessir! There are about five hundred soldiers with me. All of them have combat experience."

"F-Five hundred?!"

"That's quite a number of people," Hakurei remarked, her eyes wide.

Ruri looked equally astonished. "Impressive."

So he's saying that five hundred veteran soldiers from the Chou army, of all places, are coming to join us? And Adai just let them?! That number was nothing compared to the great army of Gen, but it was still an unbelievable act of benevolence. "I will meet you on a worthwhile battlefield," he said. It seems that the great White Wraith is expecting a lot from me.

Oto walked towards the shelves, took out a piece of paper, and handed it over to Koufuu. As soon as it was in Koufuu's hands, the old woman began to write on it with broad, sweeping strokes of her brush.

"The people around me won't stand for having that many people in Butoku, but it doesn't matter. We need as much help as we can get right now." Her voice darkened with that last sentence, and we all tilted our heads to the side, confused as to the reason. After Koufuu set her brush back down, she revealed, "Not too long ago, we received word from someone we sneaked into Keiyou. The White Wraith's armies have finished recuperating and are ready to set off again. Gen's southern campaign is about to resume."

The air in the room seemed to freeze. *So the time has finally come for Gen's main troops to return to battle?*

I looked over at my strategist. "Ruri?"

"There's simply not enough information," she said after a long silence. She

might've seen this coming, but that didn't make the news any less shocking. Ruri adjusted the blue hat on her head and then rubbed her chin. "I'm willing to bet their target is Rinkei, and that they want to use this attack to topple the Ei Empire once and for all. Their plan is probably to strike in a pincer formation, with one group approaching from the Grand Canal and the other from south of Shiryuu."

"It would be difficult for the Ei army to put up any form of resistance. They already have to divert soldiers away from the capital to keep the Jo army at bay. The Gen attacks we heard about must have been to familiarize the soldiers with steering military ships." Hakurei leaned against my side, her entire body tense.

I had no idea who the supreme commander of the Ei army was at the moment, but it was an absolutely foolish decision to split it across three fronts, especially when they already had less manpower than the Gen army. *Or does no one have full authority of the army right now? Things would make more sense if that were the case.* As for the reason behind such a military structure, it was likely due to Ei's fear of another potential rebellion. I could see the civil officials in Ei, who tended to look down on military leaders, issuing an order like that. *Don't tell me that they don't even realize the country will be destroyed if they lose this war?*

U Koufuu neatly folded up the document she'd been writing. "I'll gather some more intelligence on what's happening in the capital. The palace still harbors some of my spies."

"Thanks," I said.

In any case, information was what we needed more than anything else right now. So long as we had that, our strategist would lead us down the right path.

Still sitting, Koufuu turned her back to us and gazed at the patch of sky visible through the window. Despite her evident fatigue, her conviction remained firm. "I doubt Gen would do something as meaningless as attack the western regions, but on the off chance they do, I hope you will lend me your strength. Everyone's counting on you all, inheritors of National Shield Chou Tairan's legacy."

"Please wait here until our mistress arrives."

“We’ll take our leave, then.”

“Thank you.”

After I—Kou Miu—thanked the pair of young attendants, they offered me an elegant bow and left. The two looked quite similar; they must’ve been brother and sister, and their close age suggested they were fraternal twins. I was in the Ou family’s villa, our designated meeting spot for today. I sat down in a chair in the inner courtyard and clutched the golden sleeves of my imperial robe in a tight grip. The result of our conversation would decide the fate of the Ei Empire. But...

No longer able to endure the tension, I turned around to Mei, who was wearing a cloak and standing ever vigilant, and said, “I can’t believe the Ou family has such a grand manor as a villa. How impressive!”

“Lady Miu, please do not let your guard down. Those twins are no mere servants. It’s clear from the way they move that they have combat experience.”

“Impossible,” I gasped.

The two had introduced themselves to me earlier. The girl’s name was Shun’en, and the boy’s name was Kuen. It was clear from the color of their skin and hair that they weren’t from Ei, but they seemed no older than thirteen. It was hard to believe that they’d ever set foot on the battlefield. I was about to say more when a voice interrupted me.

“I apologize for having kept you waiting.” A young girl with chestnut-brown hair tied in pigtails and boasting large breasts despite her petite frame emerged from the house and approached us. To her side was a beautiful woman with silky black hair.

“Huh? I remember you from...” There was no mistaking that eye-catching orange hat or the matching clothes. This was the young girl I’d met on that bridge on the outskirts of Keiyou. The one who’d told me about the current political situation.

W-Wait, then that means this girl is the Ou family’s...? I gaped at her as she stood before me and smiled.

“It’s lovely to make your acquaintance, Princess Imperial of the Ei Empire. I

am Meirin, the daughter of Ou Jin. I apologize, but the head of the Ou family is very busy, and so I shall be addressing your concerns today.”

It doesn't seem like she's lying.

I adjusted the way I was sitting and said, “My name is Kou Miu. The girl behind me is Mei. Please, there is no need for such formalities.”

Meirin’s eyes gleamed with slight curiosity as she sat down across from me. The black-haired woman picked up the teapot with practiced grace and began preparing tea for us.

“Then, just for now, I’ll call you Miss Miu. Have some tea while it’s still hot. This blend is delicious.”

A fragrant aroma rose from the porcelain cup placed before me. They seemed to be different leaves from the tea we usually drank in the palace. In order to prove that I had absolute trust in her, I took a sip and smiled.

“What an amazing manor. I was taken aback by its scale.”

“Oh, yes. I agree,” Meirin replied, clasping her hands together. A shiver, the reason for which I could not explain, ran down my spine. “I hear that this used to be the Chou family’s private villa. It felt like a waste to let it fall into disrepair, so I purchased it for the Ou family. From the perspective of us merchants, National Shield Chou Tairan was on par with a living god.”

Unable to muster a response, I looked down at the amber liquid in my cup. The words cast a dark shadow over my heart. Even if it had been due to the schemes of a traitorous subject, my brother had been the one to kill that great general. The girl sitting before me despised me and the rest of the imperial family. We had only just begun our conversation, and I was already feeling somber.

Though she must’ve noticed how my mood had shifted, Meirin’s smile remained as bright as ever. “So then, what brings you here today? If I recall, my family is already doing business with the imperial palace.”

“I would like to discuss something confidential with you.” I forced past my pessimism as I set my cup down on the marble table. Sitting up straighter, I said, “His Imperial Majesty wishes to send a messenger to the U family. Of the many

merchant families in Rinkei, the Ou family is most familiar with the path to the western regions. I would like to ask for your assistance.”

After my brother granted me permission to go to the western regions, he’d brought it up during a meeting of the imperial court. But the officials were vehemently against my proposal.

“It’s far too dangerous.”

“We should think of the U family as traitors to the empire.”

“There’s a high chance that they’ll take the princess imperial hostage.”

The interim chancellor and lieutenant chancellor might have regarded each other as rivals, but they’d been on the same page about this. They likely feared that the U army would return to the capital and take revenge on them. In the end, the emperor had made the final decision by asking, *“If everyone is holed up in the water fortress, then where will we get our reinforcements?”*

It had been a valid question, yet no one had been able to give him an answer. And since no one volunteered to serve as the messenger, I was finally the one chosen to go.

Meirin tilted her cup. “What kind of assistance are you asking for, specifically?”

My heart started to pound in my chest. I didn’t even want to think about what I’d do if Meirin turned me down. I sucked in a deep breath and then blurted out, “I would like the Ou family to guide me, Ei’s messenger, to Butoku in the western regions. Of course, we will offer payment for your aid.”

The wind carried towards us the fragrance of flowers, and the aroma seemed to lighten the atmosphere a little. What would the girl before me say? Would she agree? Or would she answer in the negative? In the end, her reaction was far beyond anything I’d expected.

She tilted her head left, then right, repeating this action a few times with a truly baffled look on her face. “Payment? Is that what you said? Shizuka, that’s what you heard too, right?”

“Yes, Lady Meirin,” the black-haired beauty said with a nod before stepping

back to stand behind her mistress.

Meirin crossed her arms, her eyes never wavering from me. “Hmm. Sure, the Ei Empire might last the rest of the year. But what value is there in receiving a reward from a country that’ll only exist in history books until next spring?”

Huh? For a moment, her words didn’t register in my mind. *Is she saying that my country will cease to exist?*



I sucked in a breath, but kept control of myself enough to not jump out of my seat or yell at her. Once I was calm again, I asked, “Ou Meirin, is that your opinion as a member of the Ou family?”

“It’s my personal opinion! That’s why my father isn’t here today.” Her tone remained light and casual. In her voice, I could sense neither fervor for the country nor awe from being in the presence of a noble. After tossing a snack into her mouth, Meirin waved her left hand. “But I believe that the major merchants all share my opinion. If anyone’s still on the imperial family’s side in this current situation, they’re probably gambling addicts! ★”

“I-I can’t believe it...” The biggest merchants in Rinkei had already forsaken my family and the rest of the Ei Empire? If Meirin was telling the truth, then simply deciding to fight off Gen and Seitou would no longer solve anything. My body trembled; there was nothing I could say.

Cold wisdom far beyond her age shone in Meirin’s eyes. “Courageous Princess Imperial, we are merchants. And successful merchants value faith far more than people think we do.”

According to my intel on her, Meirin was sixteen. We were only a few years apart, and yet looking into her eyes was like gazing into an abyss. Only the now-deceased grand chancellor ever displayed eyes like hers.

Meirin continued in a singsong voice, “However, His Imperial Majesty, who’s been completely taken in by his concubine, let the great Phoenix Wing and Tiger Fang die in a foreign land. He then went as far as to execute the National Shield before the public’s eyes. A thousand years from now, history books will surely deride these actions as those of an utter fool. Has anyone in the imperial family ever given serious thought to how injurious their deaths have been to the Ei Empire?”

I was unable to provide her with an answer. “*I will execute Chou Tairan. He stands in the way of peace,*” my brother had told me, having already made his decision. Back then, he refused to speak with me. I’d done my best to try and stop him, but he wouldn’t even permit me to have an audience with him.

No, that’s nothing more than an excuse. I’d done well to avoid thinking about my sins until Meirin threw them in my face.

Meirin twisted her lips. There wasn't any scorn in her expression but, rather, pity. "The great heroes who contributed to the glory of the Ei Empire had been loyal without compare. Yet, they were murdered as a result of a single foolish decision. Those are not the actions of an empire with faith. It is impossible to trust you based on mere words."

The political mishaps that had accumulated into a heavy distrust weighed upon my shoulders, practically crushing me as if it were a real physical presence. The divide between those in the imperial palace and the rest of the populace was deep and impossible to bridge. Filled with despair, I clutched the charm around my neck.

"My brother regrets what he's done," I said. Everything that had happened within the span of a year—a failed Seitou invasion so disastrous that it would be remembered for the rest of time, the execution of Chou Tairan despite his extraordinary exploits on the battlefield, and our failure to establish peace with Gen—was more than enough to crush my brother's spirit. He had always been a kind soul, and his mental health had taken a turn for the worse.

Meirin pressed a hand against her mouth in an exaggerated motion. In contrast to her adorable looks, the daughter of the Ou family was truly a horrifying little monster. "My, oh my! Miss Miu, do you believe that *regret* can bring people back to life? You must be dizzy from all the time your head spends in the clouds! ★ 'A fallen star returns not to the heavens' is something that Ouei often said after he lost Kouei. Have you not heard about this story?"

I bit my lip, fighting back my emotions.

Furious, Mei yelled, "How dare you—?!"

But Meirin interrupted her. "After the White Wraith Adai Dada occupied Keiyou, he expressed his respect for Chou Tairan, despite the fact that General Chou had been his most formidable enemy. He even held a grand funeral to commemorate his memory. As a result, the people of Koshuu feel indebted to him. Since then, I've not heard of anyone rebelling against Gen's rule. In comparison..."

I failed to suppress a soft gasp or the way my body tensed as fury suddenly burned in Meirin's eyes.

“Do you recall how you and your family killed that great hero?”

I couldn't look away from her. There was so much venom in her accusatory glare that I felt it like a dagger piercing through my chest.

“Chou Tairan protected and served this country, giving his all and more. Yet you beheaded him and put it on display before the public, did you not? On top of that, once Gen refused our peace treaty, you hurriedly tried to recover his body, only for the citizens in the capital to stand in your way. If this is all some sort of joke, then you have a twisted sense of humor indeed. If you're serious, then you're far too lacking in self-awareness. The people in this world aren't as foolish as you believe them to be.”

It felt like a storm was blowing through my heart. I'd been arrogant, and my subconscious mind had truly underestimated the populace. Though some were much more critical than others, the distrust that people harbored towards my brother, the imperial family, and the officials who squabbled over useless debates in the imperial court all stemmed from what Ou Meirin had just pointed out. She was absolutely correct! *We killed the only person who could've saved this country, and now I'm here begging for her help?* If Meirin chose to insult me by calling me a shameless woman, I wouldn't be able to say a single word in my defense.

Meirin crossed her legs and said in a bored tone, “Miss Miu, please tell me the most you're willing to offer as payment. We can discuss the job after that.”

The Ou family no longer has any faith in the Ei Empire. They'll only work for gain. It makes things simpler, I suppose, but it won't get me anywhere with her.

As those bleak thoughts swirled in my head, I explained, “I may be the princess, but I possess virtually no authority in the court. The only thing I can offer you is a verbal agreement, though I understand it's next to worthless to you. Even when setting up today's meeting, I practically had to force the emperor to agree to my proposal.”

“Oh, so you were the one who...?” For the first time all day, something like genuine interest appeared in Meirin's eyes. Then, she looked down at the charm around my neck. “What's that you're wearing? The embroidery is lovely. It depicts a ruby, doesn't it? It looks like an antique from the western regions.

May I take a closer look at it?”

This girl is truly frightening. She might have been a merchant’s daughter, but it was still impressive that she could recognize the image on the cloth. Not only was it from a foreign country, but it’d been embroidered several hundred years ago. In fact, there was a high chance that its age stretched even further back, upwards to almost a thousand years. But I couldn’t let this opportunity pass me by.

Mei grabbed at my sleeve with a worried look. “Lady Miu.”

“It’s all right. It...really is all right,” I replied as I removed the charm and set it down on the round table. Working up my courage, though I wanted nothing more than to run away, I explained, “This is a memento from my mother, who was born from the prestigious Ha clan in the western regions. It’s been passed down her lineage for generations, so I can’t tell you any details. However, this is the only thing I can offer you. Ou Meirin, I’m well aware that I’m asking a difficult task of you. Even so, I would like to pawn this in exchange for safe passage to Butoku.”

“Oh? So this is from the western regions?” Meirin hummed, then frowned slightly, deep in thought.

The emperor’s younger sister is bargaining with a memento of her dead mother in exchange for a favor. If historians record what happens today for future generations, how will they describe it? I doubt it would be anything positive.

As my imagination started to run wild, Meirin looked over at the black-haired beauty and said, “Shizuka, could you tell me something? Did your homeland also use accessories as physical symbols of authority?”

Shizuka blinked, befuddled by the question, before replying, “Yes, we had the Regalia of Succession. Is something the matter?”

“Nope! ☆ But thank you! ♪”

Cold sweat dripped down my brow. *Did this little girl realize what’s inside my protection charm?*

Ou Meirin straightened her clothing and then bowed her head to me. “I

understand. In that case, I will accept your request with the contents of your protection charm as payment.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yes, really! ♪”

“A-Are you sure you don’t wish to inquire about what’s inside of this charm?” I asked, baffled at the turn of events.

“Nope. I trust my gut instinct. Oh, you can hold on to it for now. I’ll leave using it to someone who’s far better than I am when it comes to exercising their intelligence for nefarious affairs. ★ No matter your motivation, you’re taking action, and you even summoned the courage to meet with me. I believe that I should repay your determination in kind,” Meirin replied in a clear, confident tone.

So she’s serious. A fire blazed in my chest as I picked up the protection charm and pressed it against my heart. *Thank you, mother. This country’s fate may not be sealed yet.*

“For this country to survive, it absolutely needs to force the White Wraith to discuss peace once more,” Meirin, this monster in the form of a human girl, said slowly, as if trying to make me understand something. “In other words, Ei absolutely needs to win this coming battle.”

“Yes, of course,” I said after a brief pause.

If Adai Dada, emperor of the Gen Empire, were to take direct command of his troops, then the Gen army would be undefeatable. I’d heard that Chou Tairan was the only reason Ei had been able to fight on equal footing. Now that the various generals and commanders of the Ei Empire had died, I had no idea if anyone was standing up to the Gen Empire.

The weight of reality threatened to crush me once more, but I noticed that Meirin’s eyes were bright and twinkling, her cheeks flushed. She looked every inch like a young girl in love.

“And of all the people under the heavens, there’s only one person who can bring Ei to victory.” She puffed out her chest, which was bizarrely voluptuous despite her youthful appearance, and bragged, “That person is none other than

Lord Sekiei, the son of Chou Tairan. Oh, and by the way, he's my husband! He's just so cool! I'm sure you're aware of the consequences that'd follow if you tried to seduce him, right? I won't let any home-wrecking slide. ★"

"U-Um...I would never."

Husband? Wait, this girl's married? And to Chou Tairan's son, of all people? I'd heard that the Chou family had gone missing, but this girl has a connection to them?! Question after question welled up in my mind before I realized something. Has this girl been observing me this whole time to gauge my opinion of the Chou family...?

Meirin looked up to the western sky and winked. "The members of the Chou family fled to the western regions with the U family's princess. My family will take full responsibility in guiding you there and then you may speak with them in Butoku. I would also like you to pass along a letter and some items for me."

"A-All right."

So this is something like an exchange of secrets? The reality of what had just happened—that I'd finally struck a deal with Meirin—sank in, and my hands started to shake.

Meirin raised the index finger of her right hand. "I'm sure you're already aware of this, but steel your will before your meeting with the members of the Chou family. Lord Sekiei loved and respected Lord Chou Tairan more than anyone else in this world. If you say something that rubs him the wrong way, then..."

Then that misstep could cost Ei its future. A sudden gust of wind blew through the courtyard and played with the chestnut-brown hair poking out from under Meirin's orange hat. If I'd heard what she just shared before I came here, I might have suspected the verity of her words. But in the eyes of this little monster, I could see an overwhelming amount of love along with the unmistakable glint of fear.

None of what she'd said was a lie. The U family weren't the ones with the authority to send reinforcements. Chou Sekiei was.

"Understood. Thank you for your advice, Ou Meirin. Um, may I call you by

your given name?”

“Don’t worry about it! If I didn’t warn you in advance, then I’d get in trouble as well! And of course you may, Miss Miu. I’m pleased to have made your acquaintance! ♪”

Chapter Three

“Man, this place gives me the creeps. Feels like a ghost or something is about to appear at any second,” I murmured as we walked down a stone hallway, the floor underfoot covered in dead branches.

“Sekiei, please refrain from such absurd comments,” Hakurei snapped. “Something as ridiculous as a *ghost* would never show itself. Of course it wouldn’t!” On her right, Oto nodded in agreement.

We were walking through an abandoned temple, located deep in a remote forest on the outskirts of Butoku. We’d decided to pass through here on the way back from our meeting in Youkaku with the Keiyou soldiers Teiha’d brought, but I didn’t expect the place to look like this.

Ruri, who was the person who’d suggested this trip in the first place, walked away from a moss-covered stone pillar and joined the conversation. “Hakurei, Oto, spirits might *actually* appear. This place used to house the Heavenly Swords, after all. Did you see the stone door on the way in? The one that likely caved in after an earthquake? It bore design elements unique to the Tou Empire in the era after Ouei disappeared. That means it’s at least a thousand years old. Considering how much time has passed, it wouldn’t be surprising if a ghost or two exists in these ruins, right?”

“M-Miss Ruri!” Hakurei exclaimed at the same time Oto cried, “Lady Ruri!”

I glanced over my shoulder at the frightened girls before brushing my fingers against Black Star, which hung from my belt. *So this is where Black Star and White Star were hidden away?*

Putting that out of my mind for now, I readjusted the cloth bag I was carrying and said, “Now then, Miss Hakurei and Miss Oto.”

“Wh-What is it?” they asked warily. The two were clutching onto each other’s hands, which was such a far cry from how gallant they usually acted that it was a novel reaction.

Offering them a wide smile, I suggested, “You don’t have to show *me* any courtesy. Walk at the front of the group! The woods we passed through on our way were so thick that only Ruri, who’d been here before, could guide us, but this stone corridor seems like it’s a straight path.”

“Sekiei,” Hakurei growled, a furious look in her eye.

“L-Lord Sekiei, I, er, believe that some people are better at certain things than others,” Oto uttered in a slow and hesitant voice. It seemed that they were seriously not feeling up to it.

Looks like I don’t have any other choice. I’ll let Ruri take over.

“All right, got it,” I said. “Then it looks like our ever-reliable master strategist will have to—”

“No way.” Her rejection was firm and absolute. She brushed her bangs out of her face and looked away. The faint breeze traveling through the corridor ruffled the sleeves and hem of her coat. I urged her to continue with a silent look, and she explained quickly, “D-Don’t get the wrong idea! I-It’s not like I believe in ghosts or supernatural entities or anything like that. It’s just...”

“Just what?” I prompted.

“Urk...” As Ruri played with her fingers, sad-looking white petals appeared and disappeared in the air. It seemed that emotions tended to affect one’s magic, and Ruri was quite rattled by something. After she adjusted the hat on her head, she looked down at the ground and said, “You and Meirin are my employers, but *I* was the one who actually came and retrieved the swords. I’d figured out their general location from documents and such, but I didn’t expect them to have been sealed behind such thick and heavy stone doors. In other words, we can assume the person who commissioned this temple didn’t want the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars to appear in the world again. If—and, keep in mind, this is hypothetical—if th-there’s something out there, the first one it’d bear a grudge against would be—”

“You,” I said immediately.

“It’d be you, Miss Ruri,” Hakurei agreed.

“Lady Ruri...I’m rooting for you!” Oto exclaimed.

All three of us had spoken in unison. *Our master strategist has an unexpectedly cute side to her.*

Ruri gaped at us for a second before she started to tremble. “Y-You guys are seriously...”

Oops. Looks like we went too far with the teasing. I turned to face down Ruri and her fury, but in the next second, a sound echoed through the halls of the temple. It sounded like someone was sobbing.

“S-Sekiei!” Hakurei screamed at the same second that Oto also called my name.

“Oof!”

They launched themselves at me, wrapping their arms around my torso. Ignoring the dull pain from my stomach, I looked around until I met Ruri’s eyes, which were tinted with disbelief. *Oh, I see.*

“C-Calm down, you two,” I said. “It was just the wind.”

“Th-The wind?” Hakurei and Oto echoed, looking up at me with pale faces.

We heard the same sound once more, but now that I was paying attention, I could see the slight movement of the branches and roots taking over the walls and pillars. Glancing back down at the girls, I gave them each a light smack on the head.

“It’s a pretty old temple, so the walls have cracks in them. As the princesses of your respective houses, don’t you think you’re acting a little too cowardly?”

They both made noises of dissatisfaction and embarrassment as they moved away from me. I’d known since we were children that Hakurei was scared of the supernatural, but it was surprising that Oto was in the same boat.

Ruri, who’d been observing us up to this point, said in a mocking tone, “Sekiei, you’re such a dummy. You should’ve praised them for the fact that *the* Chou Hakurei and U Oto have a more feminine side to them!”

“M-Miss Ruri!”

“L-Lady Ruri!”

“Oh? Did I say something wrong?”

Wow, that was mean. Are strategists all like this? Eifuu was pretty austere in comparison, though he was difficult to deal with once he got some alcohol in him. I was watching over the three girls as they continued to bicker when suddenly—

“EEK!” Ruri, who’d been playing with Hakurei and Oto while enjoying her absolute advantage, literally jumped into the air. Then, she darted straight into my arms and looked around with teary eyes. She didn’t seem to notice that her hat had fallen off her head. “Wh-What? What was that?! S-S-Something freezing t-touched my neck just now!”

“Uh, Ruri, calm down,” I said, trying to make her listen.



But Ruri paid me no attention. “D-Don’t tell me that there really *are* gh-ghosts or supernatural entities?! I-If they wanted to curse us, then they g-got the order wrong! It should be Chou Sekiei, Ou Meirin, *and then* me! You have a grudge against the wrong person!” She was shaking like a leaf. It was easy to forget that Ruri was the youngest of us all.

In any case, I need to get her off me as soon as I can. I glanced up at Hakurei; as expected, she was looking at us with the most beautiful smile on her face. “Get. Away. From. Her. *Now*,” it seemed to say. She was far more terrifying than any mere spirit. I entrusted a still-panicked Ruri to Oto for the moment and went over to pick up the strategist’s hat. Then, I returned to the girls and lifted my hand. A cold droplet of water hit it and dispersed, rolling down my skin. I’d seen through the mystery of the supposed ghost.

Ruri was still latched on to Oto, so I placed the hat on her head and gave her a light tap on her forehead when she turned around to face me.

“Some rainwater dripping from the ceiling happened to hit your neck,” I explained. “You’re fine. There’s nothing here.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, blinking her teary eyes, but then her face and ears started to turn a bright crimson. “Th-Thank you,” she murmured in a low voice as she released Oto and looked away from us. “Ahem. I-I wasn’t scared or anything, all right? It was a test! I was testing to see if you’d be able to properly deal with an emergency, should you need to! It was a good exercise, wasn’t it?”

Our master strategist is ridiculously smart, but in terms of competitiveness, she’s on par with Meirin and Hakurei. Thankfully, I learned how to deal with people when they get like this.

“I got it, I got it. It’s nice to see that our strategist has a more feminine side to her!”

Ruri growled and puffed up her cheeks in a pout, resembling a squirrel in the process.

Heh. Got her. Incidentally, I didn’t fear ghosts or supernatural entities at all. I’d already killed my fair share of people in my past life, so if they existed, I

would've been cursed already. The girls had finally calmed down, but I decided to go out of my way to confirm something one last time.

"Okay, enough joking. Now, does anyone want to trade off leading the group?"

"No," Hakurei and Ruri said at once without a shred of sympathy in their voices.

Oto took a breath as if mustering her courage. "L-Lord Sekiei, I-I don't mind..."

She was the only person who volunteered, and I was giving her a pat on the head before I even realized it.

"You're such a nice person, Oto." Oto made a soft noise of surprise as a faint blush appeared on her cheeks. I waved at her and added, "I was just kidding. Don't push yourself. We all have things we're not great with."

"Y-Yes... Thank you very much."

Oto looked away, embarrassed. Gazing down at her youthful face, I felt like I understood why Hakubun no longer wanted her to go to battle. *I gotta find the opportunity to have a drink and a nice, open conversation with the next head of the U family.*

I was still considering my future plans with Hakubun when I heard Ruri's exclamation—"Wait, hold on, Hakurei! Don't be hasty!"—along with Hakurei's dark chuckle. The little strategist had an arm around Hakurei's neck and was trying to hold her back.

Nope, I didn't see anything.

"We've arrived," Ruri said, pointing ahead. We'd finally compromised by having her walk in the front at my side.

Flowers of all shapes and colors bloomed from the makeshift plaza before us. At some point in time, the ceiling must have collapsed, allowing sunlight to pour in from above. There were some saplings as well, and when I took a closer look, I realized what kind they likely were. *Wait, peach trees? In a place like this?*

"Come on, don't just stand there gawking," Ruri said. "Our destination is up

there!”

I looked at where she was pointing and saw a massive dead tree with a hollow in the trunk. It had been reinforced by several ancient pillars. *There are trees like this outside of Routou?* Hakurei and Oto had been hiding behind my back the entire journey down that gloomy corridor, but now, they revealed themselves and stepped forwards to take it all in.

“So this is...” Hakurei started.

“Where the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars were kept?” Oto finished.

The birds here must not have feared people at all, for several flittered down to rest on Ruri’s outstretched arm, making her look like a character from a story.

“That’s right,” she said. “Meirin collected almost every single ancient book in the capital and read through them to find this place. The answer was written in a diary penned by someone with connections to Ouei who lived during the final dynasty of the Tou Empire.”

“And then you were the one who came to retrieve it, right? Were they in a coffin or something?” I asked.

“It’d be faster if you took a look yourself.” With birds still perched on her arm and shoulders, Ruri made her way through the field of flowers, and we followed behind her.

There were no signs indicating that anyone had ever walked through this thousand-year-old abandoned temple. When I approached the cavity in the tree, I could peer right inside to where a small stone shrine was nestled. Other than the old roots wrapped around it, its structure was intact despite having been made so long ago.

While we looked around in awe, Ruri stroked one of the birds and said, “They were leaning inside of that shrine, and it appeared as if they’d been there for the past thousand years. Anyway, today we’re here for those characters. Sekiei?”

“Here you go.” I lowered the cloth bag onto the ground as Ruri sat on a nearby rock in preparation for copying down the characters etched around the

temple.

She deftly twirled a brush in her hand, looking like she was already having fun. “I wasn’t able to spend much time investigating this place back when I retrieved the swords. Since we’re already in the western regions, I figured there’d be no harm in checking this place out again, right?”

“I guess so,” I said, taking out a dried gourd that served as a water bottle.

“Yes, I suppose,” Hakurei agreed, retrieving her own gourd.

Oto remained silent, her gaze fixed on the wide-open doors.

Ruri, in the process of spreading out a scroll, noticed the direction of Oto’s stare and said, “Oh, you’re curious about that text? It’s written in a pretty old language, but not the Tou Empire’s.”

“Yeah, I figured,” I said.

After taking a swig of water and a quick breather, I used a dagger to cut away the dead roots around the shrine. *If I recall correctly, these characters are...*

Racking my brain to call upon the foggy memories of my past life, I continued, “I’m pretty sure these characters are used by a minor clan in the western regions. Dunno anything more than that though.”

If Gyoumei or Eifuu were here, they might have been able to decipher it.

Before Hakurei or Ruri could react, Oto walked up to stand at my side. “Um, most of the words have been weathered away, but I can read a little bit of it.” We froze in surprise and waited with bated breath as the princess of the U family leaned closer to the shrine. “As Lord Sekiei said, this is the ancient language used by the Ha clan, a minority clan from the western regions.”

“Oto, how are you able to read this?!” Ruri demanded. Her expression had completely changed as she jumped to her feet, causing the birds resting on her to fly away. Countless flowers—physical representations of her emotions—appeared around her and danced in the air.

“My deceased mother hailed from the Ha clan,” Oto explained, a hint of sadness in her voice. “I have vague memories of a story that goes like this: Ouei, sensing that his death was imminent, ordered his Gyoku clan subordinate to

dispose of the Heavenly Swords and other relics. However, after Ouei passed, the subordinate in question hid the items away in secret.”

I’d had my suspicions as to why Oto didn’t use her given name, Torahime, even though she was the daughter of Tiger Fang U Jouko. It must’ve been due to her mother’s origins. The U family had long-standing rivalries with the various tribes and clans of the western regions, and had been fighting them for many long years along the empire’s borders. The Ha clan was no exception.

Oto lifted a hand and traced the words upon the doors in the air. “‘As expected, only the previous emperor and Kouei had a place in that person’s heart.’ ‘The peach has rooted itself into this land as well. Though it will not live for long, it will still hide this temple away.’ ‘Should an unworthy hand wield the Heavenly Swords, then calamity will be sure to follow. That’s why I must seal them away. He will surely be furious, but in time, the jade, too, will...’” Oto paused for a moment. “That’s all I can decipher. Everything else has become illegible. Ouei’s subordinate, who appeared in that story I once heard, might have been the one who commissioned this temple’s construction.”

Hakurei, Ruri, and I looked at each other in complete silence. It felt like we’d taken a peek at some hidden piece of history. *Eifuu’s subordinate, huh?* I thought back to the northern lands of Routou, which had served as the final battlefield of my past life. Back then, I’d faced off against a female general. If I recalled correctly, her name was...

“Is this...some sort of symbol or emblem?” Hakurei asked. She’d discovered a small mark engraved in the corner of one of the doors. Ruri and Oto examined it with keen interest.

“It looks like a jewel,” Ruri observed.

“Though faint, it appears to have residue from red dye on it,” Oto added.

The memory of that female general, her face twisted like she was on the verge of tears after Eifuu had scolded her, appeared in my mind, as clear as the day I’d witnessed it. “*Kougyoku, retreat. I’m ordering you as the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire,*” he’d said. *So that woman—Ha Kougyoku—was the one who’d concealed the Heavenly Swords here after Eifuu died. In that case, what was the jade in the inscription?*

“Is something the matter?” Hakurei asked, peering into my face. The scarlet ribbon I’d gifted her rippled with the action.

Stop. My past life is ultimately just that: a past life. The era of Hi Gyoumei, Ou Eifuu, and Kou Eihou ended a thousand years ago. What I need to protect now is... I reached out and ruffled my childhood friend’s hair, purposely messing up the silver strands.

“H-Hey, stop that, Sekiei!”

“Let’s get back before the sun sets,” I suggested. “The last thing we want is to get lost in these mountains.”

To My Beloved Lord Sekiei, the Kindest, Coolest, and Most Noble Person in the World:

This is my first letter to you in about six months. I have been oh so lonely without you. Oh! So! Lonely! A wife’s place is at her husband’s side, and yet cruel fate has torn us apart... My frail heart is on the verge of breaking. I’m sure you feel the same way, right? Lord Sekiei, please tell me you’re as torn up as I am! Otherwise, I’m going to be very upset. I’ll do something you’ll never expect the next time we meet!

Anyways, since the rumors of Gen resuming its southern invasion started flying around Rinkei, more and more people have been leaving the capital. As someone who’s familiar with its glory days, the empty streets are a sorry sight indeed. The tides are shifting within my family as well. My father sympathizes more with Gen, whereas I remain firmly on your side. I won’t be able to visit you for a while, so please heal my broken heart with your reply. Your letter is all I need to stay strong until we can finally meet again. I’ve included something useful with this correspondence, so I hope you make use of it. I will write you again as soon as possible.

PS: It appears that those loyal to the Chou family have escaped Rinkei and made it to the southern regions. Someone is on their way to you and should arrive in a few days’ time. They’ll fill you in on the details regarding the Chou loyalists.

With love,

Meirin, Who Dreams of Her Future Husband Every Night

“She never changes. I’m glad to see she’s doing well, though,” I said with a small chuckle.

It’d been a few days since we went to the temple that once held the Heavenly Swords. I was sitting on a bench in my room in the U manor, Meirin’s letter in hand. The rain that started pouring last night still hadn’t let up, and the black cat Yui was curled up on my bed. The small round container on my bedside table—the “something useful” that Meirin had written about—was an instrument known as a “compass.” In recent years, foreign ships had apparently been using it to know which direction they were traveling. This was, according to Meirin’s letter, a prototype for land use.

“I hear that there are many unmapped forests in the western regions, so I had someone make this! I figured it would come in handy!” had been written on the letter, so Meirin must have predicted we’d need it. The Ou family’s prodigy had amazing foresight. With this compass, we’d be able to traverse the vast forest between Youkaku and Butoku, dramatically decreasing the distance our armies would have to travel. *I gotta find some time to write her a thank-you letter.*

Hakurei, sitting next to me on the bench, breathed a sigh of relief. The blue-and-white traditional garb she had on was becoming more familiar to me than what she used to wear in Keiyou.

“I’m glad that auntie is all right,” she said.

Before father’s arrest, the brave sister of Chou Tairan had managed to escape Rinkei by the skin of her teeth, and for six months, we hadn’t been able to get in contact with her at all. She was an eccentric who’d always wanted me to succeed Tairan as the head of the Chou family, and I had been sure she was safe. But *knowing* it was still a weight off my shoulders.

Hakurei started to read the letter again. On the surface, she seemed to have recovered from father’s death, but on the inside, she was still as fragile as cracked glass. If we’d received news of yet another death in the family, she

wouldn't have been able to withstand the grief. The emotional wound from losing father was too deep to have healed in a mere six months.

Speaking of which, "someone is on their way," huh?

I looked over to Ruri and said, "Ruri, we're apparently expecting a guest. Do you know anything about that?"

"Shut up for a second," she snapped. "I'm focusing all of my energy right now." Her eyes were squeezed shut, and she was clasping her hands before her. Perhaps this was her idea of a good luck charm, but she'd removed her hat and tied up her hair in the same way as Hakurei, albeit with a blue ribbon instead of a scarlet one.

Er, you don't have to take the game this seriously.

I looked down at the double six board we'd borrowed from U Koufuu's stash. "Don't think too hard. You just need to toss two dice and get a minimum of three. If you roll at least three from a total of twelve, then your victory is guaranteed."

"Sh-Shut up already! Don't you know that words have power?! I've lost three days straight now. My pride as Ruri of Kobi will *not* stand for another defeat!"

"Sure, sure..."

My lackluster response made Ruri tremble with rage. When it came to strategy games, she was able to wipe the floor with everyone in the U family (with the exceptions of me, Hakurei, Oto, and Hakubun). However, she was oddly weak in the case of double six. *Sure, Hakurei's winning streak is pretty amazing, but that doesn't mean I understand Ruri's decision to try and manifest that luck by copying Hakurei's hairstyle.*

I rested my cheek on my palm as I waited. Before long, Ruri took a deep breath and her eyes snapped open.

"All right, I'm ready! Victory, you're mine! Go!" This was not the enthusiasm you'd expect from someone throwing dice. She tossed them onto the table with great vigor, and they rolled before stopping. One and one. "WHA—?!" Despair flooded her wide open eyes as she cradled her head in her hands. Anyone could see that this was the worst roll possible. "I-Impossible... How could this have

happened?!”

“It’s my turn now, isn’t it?” Hakurei said, tossing her dice. Five and six.

“Oh, you reached the goal,” I commented.

Without giving Ruri time to lament, Hakurei moved her game piece to the end of the path. She’d managed to score a victory from behind. Ruri collapsed to the ground, staring into space like she didn’t even want to face reality. *How many losses does this make now?*

Noticing how I was staring at her and the mess she’d made of her beautiful blonde hair, she glared at me. “Is there something you’d like to say, Lord Sekiei?”

“C-Calm down. Look, you’re gonna be in second place.”

Ruri’s pale green piece was only one tile away from the goal. There was no way she wouldn’t reach it on her next turn. In comparison, my black piece was eleven tiles behind hers. My loss was evident.

After taking a look at the board, Ruri steadied her breathing and crossed her arms. “H-Humph! I’m calm, all right? I might have lost to Hakurei, but unless you manage to roll double sixes, you have no chance of beating—”

“Excuse me. Would anyone like some more tea?” came Oto’s gentle voice as she walked into the room. We had the day completely off and didn’t even have training, so she was wearing a light-green outfit that was unique to the western regions. Yui, who’d been asleep on the bed, woke up and jumped down to wrap itself around Oto’s ankles.

“Thanks, Oto,” I said.

“Thank you very much,” Hakurei said as well.

“You don’t have to trouble yourself, you know?” Ruri added.

If Hakubun knew that the princess of the U family was pouring us tea, he would surely lose his temper.

“It’s fine. I enjoy chatting with all of you,” Oto replied with a smile while filling each of the porcelain cups.

I took out a piece of paper with the shrine's undeciphered words on it as Oto placed a cup in front of me. "Oh, hey, Oto, do you mind tossing my dice for me? I'll lose to Ruri at this rate."

Oto blinked and tilted her head to the side, hugging the empty tray to her chest. "Huh? You'd like *me* to roll the dice?"

Yeah, she really does remind me of a cute little animal. We'd stayed with the U family for so long that I had become acquaintances with some of their soldiers. According to them, Lady Oto was cool and collected on the battlefield yet "absolutely adorable" when at home in the manor. *You guys were right.*

I placed the paper on the end table next to the compass while Ruri stood in front of Oto as if to protect her.

"Hey, don't drag Oto into this," she said.

Our strategist really trusted Oto. She had no qualms about lending Oto her beloved spyglass and even allowed Oto to do her hair. Hakurei, who carefully folded up Meirin's letter before placing it in a nearby table drawer, was the exact same.

"It's not a big deal, is it?" I protested. "I won't complain, even if she rolls a low number!"

Ruri didn't say anything for a moment before sighing. "Fine. Oto, go ahead."

"A-All right." Oto picked up the dice handed to her and then glanced at me to see if I'd changed my mind. I raised my hand to let her know that my decision was firm. "I understand. In that case, here I go." Her eyes sharpened as if she were staring down an enemy army before she threw the dice.

Well, unless she rolls the highest number, my loss is pretty much a guaran—

"Oh. I got six and six."

"Huh?" I gaped at her and then looked down at the dice. *No way.*

"WHAT?!" Ruri shrieked, falling down to her hands and knees yet again. Yui patted her on the arm as if trying to comfort her, but Ruri was too shocked to react.

Ah...yeah, to be honest, I kind of figured this would happen.



“Hm? Huh?” Oto looked confused at the miraculous underdog victory she’d just accomplished.

I grinned at her and said, “I didn’t expect anything less. You’re reliable on both the battlefield and in double six.”

“Um, I’m glad to have been of use.”

My eyes grew hot at her innocent reaction. She was a good kid. *Man, I remember when Hakurei used to... Actually, never mind. She was never like this.*

Hakurei returned to the bench and gave Oto a completely unnecessary warning. “Miss Oto, please don’t let him fool you. Sekiei always does this. He’s a horrible person who loves to lead young women astray.”

“S-Stop sullyng my name! I was being hon— Hm?”

A hand about the same size as Meirin’s grabbed my leg in a firm grip. Ruri, who should’ve been knocked out after such an intense match, was glowering at me as dangerous-looking black petals danced around her.

“One more match!” she growled. “How do you expect me to sleep after yet another loss?!”

Wow, I’m not sure how to react. Should I find her competitive spirit impressive, or should I find it frightening that she looks seconds away from turning into some kind of ghou? I grabbed some fried snacks from a paper bag and showed them to Ruri. Since she opened her mouth, I popped a few inside. Halfway through feeding Ruri, I saw Hakurei open her mouth, so I gave her some as well.

“U-Um...” Oto fidgeted as if she wanted some snacks too, but I hoped in my heart of hearts that I was just seeing things.

After confirming that the light of reason was back in Ruri’s eyes, I wiped my hands off with a cloth. Then, I touched the compass and flapped the piece of paper from my pocket at them.

“Hey, I wanna discuss the characters we copied from the abandoned temple as well as how we can use Meirin’s toy.”

Ruri glared up at me, her lips pursed in a pout. She sat down on the bench,

crossed her arms and legs, then said in a slow voice, “If you don’t want to play a rematch with me, then I’ll stay here until morning.”

“Sekiei, let’s play another match,” Hakurei said before I could even open my mouth. Even now, the princess of the Chou house wasn’t able to sleep without me. She also heavily despised anything that would cut into our nightly conversations. In fact, it felt like her attachment issues had gotten even worse. This morning, I’d woken up to her arms wrapped around me.

“Gotta take out the horse first before you can reach the general! ♪” Ruri mouthed at me.

Damn! She completely figured out the best way to handle us! I racked my brain for a few agonizing moments before finally slumping my shoulders.

“Fine, fine. Only one more though, got it? Oto, do you wanna join?”

“Gladly!” Oto said as she excitedly picked up a game piece.

“I won’t lose this time!” Ruri growled, her eyes brimming with enthusiasm.

Hakurei smiled at them both, then picked up Yui and placed it in my lap. From the bottom of my heart, I prayed that this peace could last for an eternity. I was about to tidy up the board to start a new game when—

“L-Lady Hakurei, Lord Sekiei, Lady Ruri!” Asaka raced into the room, breathless. Something was wrong. Yui’s ears twitched in surprise at the intrusion.

“Asaka, what’s the matter? Calm down,” Hakurei said, hurrying over with a handkerchief.

“Please, take this.” Oto poured water into a cup and handed it to Asaka.

“Th-Thank you very much.” Asaka wiped away her sweat and downed the drink. Once she’d collected her breath, she reported, “I bear a message from Lady U Koufuu: ‘A messenger has arrived from the capital. Come to my room at once.’ She also said that this is something very important for both the U and Chou families.”

“From the capital?” we echoed.

At this time? I had a bad...no, a *horrible* premonition. Hakurei must’ve felt the

same way because she whispered my name and anxiously tugged at my sleeve. Oto's gentle expression from earlier had morphed into one much more serious. Ruri was the only one who acted like it was business as usual, freeing her hair from the ribbon and returning it to its usual style. She pointed at her hat, so I picked it up from the table and tossed it to her.

In an impressive display of bodily coordination, Ruri managed to catch it with her head. She curled her lips in a sardonic grin and said, "It looks like Meirin was right about the guest, though she forgot to mention that they would be a troublesome one. We'll still have our rematch tonight though. I won't let you sneak away with a victory."

When we entered the room, we were greeted by Koufuu and Hakubun, seated in their chairs amid a solemn atmosphere. *So this messenger is important enough that even Hakubun had to be summoned? He's been so busy lately, rushing around to prepare Youkaku's defensive measures.*

"Grandmother, I've brought Lord Sekiei and the others," Oto stiffly declared. Her brother's presence must have been quite unexpected.

Koufuu pressed a hand to her face, which was taut with exhaustion. "I apologize for the sudden summons."

"Don't worry about it. Here's the double six board I borrowed from you," I replied in a casual tone.

Hakubun, whose angry stare seemed to demand an explanation as to why Oto was present, twisted his expression even further. He kept wiping at his sweaty brow with a handkerchief and running a rough hand through his hair.

"We've asked the messenger to wait in the other room. I doubt they have anything good to say."

The U family was one of the most influential military families in the Ei Empire. I was sure that Hakubun also had combat experience, but he wasn't making any effort to hide his stress. If someone were to listen in on this conversation and spread the word of Hakubun's frazzled mental state, it would have a negative influence on morale. *I gotta remind Koufuu later.*

Ruri and Hakurei must have sensed my worries because they forcibly changed the subject.

“So, who’s the messenger?” Ruri asked.

“I heard that the last time Ei reached out, the U soldiers sent them away at Youkaku,” Hakurei mused.

Oto’s squad of veteran soldiers and a team of guards were the only members of the U army in Butoku. Everyone else was in strategically located Youkaku, through which ran the only road connecting the western regions to the central plains. The five hundred or so soldiers under Teiha’s command were stationed there too. No one could get through Youkaku without their express permission.

U Koufuu heaved a heavy sigh. “We wanted to refuse them this time as well, but several soldiers recognized the visitor. Not only do they carry direct orders from the emperor, but they also have a letter from the Ou family. If Jouko were still alive, he might’ve been able to turn them away regardless, but I wasn’t able to make such a firm decision. If we lose contact with the Ou family, then we’ll lose our ears in the central plains.”

So this really does have to do with Meirin. Just who in the world did she send?!

Hakubun’s face twitched, but despite his reluctance, he revealed in a clear voice, “It may be difficult to believe. However, the messenger from the capital is none other than the younger sister of His Imperial Majesty, Her Highness Kou Miu.”

Oto gasped, pressing her hands to her mouth. I couldn’t blame her. *Meirin sent someone from the imperial family, of all people?!*

“Hakurei,” I said. But she didn’t say anything in response. Her sapphire eyes burned with fury, and I slung my arm around her shoulder in a loose hug. The dark expression on her face didn’t suit her.

Ruri glanced at us before scoffing. “Considering the emperor’s little sister still has some measure of authority to her name, it wasn’t a bad choice at all to send her. In truth, the U family has given her access to Butoku, hasn’t it?”

“Heh, hurts to hear.” Koufuu admitted to the shame with a defeated smile. She’d lost her son in the reckless Seitou invasion the emperor had ordered, yet

she had no choice but to welcome that same emperor's sister into her territory. I could empathize with her emotional turmoil.

"I'm positive that she's here to ask for reinforcements," Ruri said in a firm voice, her emerald eyes sharp and cold. "I doubt the U family has the means to help though."

"You're absolutely correct." Hakubun unfurled a scroll onto the table and jerked his chin at it in a wordless command. Apart from the motionless Oto, Hakurei, Ruri, and I looked down to read it.

This is information on the U family's manpower and remaining resources! This must be highly confidential.

Hakubun sighed in open irritation before he continued, "The U family doesn't have the might it used to possess. The soldiers who died alongside Jouko at Ranyou were experienced fighters; it's impossible to replace them. We're not able to send the manpower they're sure to request."

Koufuu placed her elbows on the armrests of her chair and buried her face in her hands. The rain and wind outside the window grew stronger and louder.

Her distress was palpable as she said, "Things might not be so bad if they'd sent a nobody. But of all people, it's the emperor's sister, and she's got his direct orders. Depending on how we treat her, we might need to seriously consider open conflict with the Ei Empire."

"But you can't do that either because you need time to build up the army necessary for a rebellion?" I guessed.

Koufuu and Hakubun didn't say anything, but they nodded in unison. The U family was stuck between a rock and a hard place; whether they sent reinforcements or not, the end result would still be less than ideal. *How terrible.*

Hakurei was starting to shake with anger, so I soothingly rubbed her back as I suggested, "Granny, let's start by listening to what the princess imperial has to say. We can decide what to do after that, right?"

The room that the two girls from the capital were waiting in was empty and barely furnished. One of the girls looked to be around thirteen or fourteen

years old. Her brown eyes and hair, as well as her pale skin, were quite remarkable. She had a very beautiful face even though it was drawn from the exhaustion of a long journey, and what looked like a protection charm hung around her neck. Since she was wearing the golden silks reserved for the imperial family, she was more than likely to be the princess.

The girl next to her was wearing a cloak and looked to be around Hakurei's or my age, maybe even younger. She must've been the princess's attendant and bodyguard. I could see the tension in her body as she remained vigilant against any potential threat.

Koufuu was at the front of our group, and she was the first to sit across from the girls. Hakubun and Oto stood behind her. Meanwhile, Hakurei, Ruri, and I remained near the entrance of the room.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. I am U Koufuu, the temporary head of the family. These are my grandchildren, Hakubun and Oto. Over there are...some guests who will be sitting in on our meeting. I was born and raised in the countryside, so you'll have to forgive my informal manner of speech. If you find the way I talk offensive, then take your leave. I won't try to stop you."

It was tradition to reserve the seats at the back of the room for the imperial family, and the emperor's sister would fall into that category. However, Koufuu sat across from her without even asking for permission. This was her way of signaling that the U family did not intend to curry favor from the imperial family. Her brazen attitude was impressive, considering how anxious she'd been earlier. A tiger's mother was a tigress as well.

The bodyguard must have taken this as an insult against her mistress because she started to get up.

"Mei," the emperor's sister said in a sharp voice, stopping her. Then, she looked to Koufuu. "Yes, your manner of speech is fine." She was gutsier than I expected.

Actually, it felt like I'd had a similar experience recently, and soon Koufuu's words were echoing in my mind. *"They also had a letter from the Ou family,"* she'd said. *So it was you, Meirin?!* Hakurei and Ruri were whispering among themselves as well.

The emperor's sister straightened her back and, though she remained sitting, lowered her head to Koufuu. "I come bearing a message from Rinkei. My name is Kou Miu, the younger sister of the emperor of the Ei Empire. From the bottom of my heart, I would like to express my gratitude for granting us this opportunity to speak."

The nobles in the imperial palace would be struck speechless if they saw this. Sure, the U family was a famous house in the western regions, but at the end of the day, it was still a military family. Civil officials enjoyed a higher status in the Ei Empire, and yet here the emperor's sister was, bowing to the interim matriarch of the U family. *This is what you'd call an earth-shattering moment. I guess this also means that they can no longer waste energy on saving face.*

We of the Chou family, as well as Oto, had fought through too many battlefields to care much for reputation in the same way civil officials did. Hakubun, on the other hand, had some measure of common sense. He was still wiping away the sweat pouring down his face.

Oto must have been worried about how pale her brother was getting, because she said, "We have a few questions for you before we read the contents of the emperor's orders." As she spoke, she glanced at Hakubun several times, sending him unspoken encouragement.

Drawing courage from her, Hakubun looked straight ahead and asked, "Just what in the world does His Imperial Majesty want from us at this juncture? As you know, we lost many soldiers at Ranyou, including our leader. The remaining soldiers still haven't emotionally or mentally recovered from that loss. It's difficult to admit, but—"

"Yes, we know! But our only..." Miu interrupted. She'd committed one of the worst sins when it came to negotiating. She lifted the small bag that hung from her neck and pleaded in a sorrowful tone, "But our only choice is to beg you for help."

Koufuu and Hakubun fell silent. They'd been loyal to Ei for many long years, and their respect for the imperial family was still rooted in their hearts. We, on the other hand, had actually been on the battlefield and seen the carnage their decisions had caused. Her sadness didn't affect us one bit.

Still holding on to the charm, Miu forced out the words “The White Wraith has already departed from Keiyou and resumed the southern invasion.”

We gasped. It was shocking news to hear, even if it was within our predictions. *Adai and his forces are marching upon Rinkei. Now that the Ei army's lost father, it can't possibly...*

The girl named Mei spread out a map on the table as Miu explained, “My brother has pulled out our forces from the south. We’ve also called on volunteer soldiers from all across the empire to rebuild our army. The entire Ei military is centralized in Rinkei.”

She pointed to various areas on the map, her finger shaking all the while. It was understandable that she’d be so nervous. After all, if she failed here, then her country was doomed. No one could remain calm under such pressure, and those who could were absolute weirdos. I could think of a few examples: Meirin, Ruri, *Meirin...*

“Lord Sekiei?”

“Hey, did you just insult me?”

It felt like I could hear Meirin’s voice in my head and Ruri whispering in my ear, but they were surely a trick of my mind. Ruri was standing on her tiptoes to glare up at me, and I pressed down on her head to keep her away.

Ignoring us, Miu continued to speak in a firm voice. “Our plan is to fend them off at the water fortresses. In total, we have a hundred thousand soldiers.”

All of us sucked in a sharp breath. *To think that the emperor is the one desiring a final showdown. And here I thought that yet another treacherous subject had simply led him astray...*

“Hm?” Ruri and I said at the same time. Without thinking, I placed a hand to my head. Meanwhile, Ruri brushed her fingers against her hat.

It was great that Ei was gathering all of its soldiers in one spot! With very rare exceptions, quantity would always win against quality in regard to manpower. However, if Adai was at the helm of the Gen army, then it would be an easy task for them to methodically destroy each part of Ei’s forces, especially since only weak and inexperienced soldiers remained of the latter. Sure, the terrain south

of the river was difficult for cavalry to traverse. But even so, why wasn't Adai deploying his troops at a faster pace?

"Nonetheless, our plan to hole up inside our fortifications will only work if there are reinforcements to hold out for," Miu was still saying. "They say the great water fortress is impenetrable, but Gen will surely break through it with enough time. I believe that with the U army's help, we will be able to turn the fortunes of war around!"

"Sekiei, Miss Ruri, what's the matter?" Hakurei whispered, peering into our faces.

Her worried expression looked the same as it did when we were kids. Chou Hakurei might've been rude, harsh, and selfish. But her kindness was my salvation. Back on that nightmarish battlefield, the snow stained crimson with blood, she— *Wait, where did that memory come from?*

"Sekiei, seriously, are you all right?" Hakurei asked, her voice still pitched low.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine," I replied.

The image of that snowy battlefield disappeared, replaced by Eifuu's words: *"A fundamental rule in war strategy is to destroy your enemies one by one. Granted, it's easier at times to gather them in one spot and crush them all in a single fell swoop."*

Ah, I get it now. So this was all calculated. Adai had been the one pulling the strings behind everything, including Jo Hiyou's revolt and even the temporary splitting of the army. He simply had Ei gather its forces because he no longer needed them to be spread out. Ruri must've reached the same conclusion I did because she'd scrunched up her face.

The princess took a breath before looking up at Koufuu and Hakubun. "I understand that the U family no longer trusts the imperial family, and I cannot blame you for that. But if you don't do anything to help us, then the country known as Ei will cease to exist. Please, won't you lend my brother your strength one more time? I'm begging you."

They didn't say anything in response to her sincere plea. The idea of swooping in to save their country from certain defeat was an appealing one indeed; a sort

of irresistible venom dripped from Kou Miu's words.

When I glanced over at Hakurei, I saw that she was staring at Miu, her hand on White Star's hilt. She was a kind person and was of sound character, but even an idiot would be able to decipher the look in her eyes. There was deep sadness—as well as anger on the verge of eruption. If I had to put her thoughts into words, it would probably be something like “You were the ones who killed my father, Chou Tairan, and yet you're crawling back here and begging us for help? Are you kidding me?!”

Chou Hakurei saved my life when we were kids. I didn't want her to give voice to the rage swirling inside of her, for it would surely hurt her far more than it would the emperor's sister. My childhood friend wasn't so strong that she could yell at someone and remain unfazed. I didn't want to see her regret her actions. *Ever.*

I stepped forwards and hid Hakurei from the princess. Then, affecting a brusque tone, I asked, “So, what will you give us in exchange for our aid?”

Miu blinked, looking confused by my sudden intrusion into the conversation. “Who are you?”

“I'm Chou Sekiei.”

I could feel Hakurei start to move behind me, so I sent a signal to Ruri. No one else needed to stand in the way of potential danger.

Miu's light brown eyes widened. “So you're the Chou family's... I spoke with Ou Meirin in Rinkei.”

“I'm not in the habit of wasting time on pleasantries. Answer my question, please. On the off chance that the U family sends reinforcements to the central plains, what does the emperor plan to give them as reward?”

The princess imperial must not have expected me to be so cold. She didn't give an immediate answer and shrank back with a frightened look before staring down at her hands. Meanwhile, her bodyguard, Mei, was so incensed by my attitude that she looked seconds away from pulling out a dagger.

Miu shivered and then replied, “I may be the messenger, but as the daughter of a concubine, I possess very little power. The orders from the emperor do not

mention any reward, but it will be decided after the war is over and the empire is safe.”

In other words, the imperial court expected absolutely nothing from this girl when they sent her out here. The officials in the capital were still deluding themselves into thinking that the situation would work itself out and had no intention of actually asking for the U family’s cooperation. Every cynical prediction we’d had turned out to be accurate. *But strange things tend to occur in a country’s final days.*

I walked over to the window and gazed out through the curtain of rain at the mountains in the distance. A flash of lightning streaked through the sky near the summit, resembling a golden dragon. A moment later, thunder rumbled.

“I respect your courage for coming all the way here despite your status as an imperial princess,” I said quietly. “However, I don’t trust a single member of your family. Not one bit. Of course, if the U family plans on sending reinforcements, I won’t stop them. If Granny Koufuu wants to help, then she can do as she pleases. But even if by some miracle you manage to beat back the White Wraith...” I looked over my shoulder. Hakurei was being held back by Ruri’s grip on her arm. The Chou strategist was a very kind person. Then, I turned to U Koufuu and U Hakubun, meeting their eyes. “They’ll execute you after the war. History has proven that death is the only fate for a hunting hound after it’s fulfilled its purpose.”

“Th-That would never come to pass!” Miu cried out before the members of the U family could say anything. She looked even more shocked than they did.

“You bastard, you dare to even insult His Imperial Majesty?!” Mei snarled, her cheeks flushed a deep scarlet.

I ignored them. Instead, genuinely curious about what their responses would be, I asked, “Don’t you remember what the emperor did to my father, Chou Tairan the National Shield, even though he risked his life every day to protect the empire?” They fell silent and avoided my gaze. U Koufuu and U Hakubun were still lost in thought, their eyes closed. I approached Miu. “Princess, you asked the U family to help you ‘one more time’ earlier, right?”

“I did.”

I rested my hand on Black Star's hilt and shook my head. "Well, you were asking the wrong question. Faith is something that you can never get back once you've lost it. You can gather as many soldiers as you want, but an army harboring distrust towards its superiors is as weak as wet paper. The imperial court can forget its past crimes, but the people and the soldiers won't. Our enemy is the White Wraith Adai Dada. He'll take advantage of that rift."

The princess was staring straight at me, still as a statue. Judging by her reaction, Meirin might have told her something similar back in the capital.

"Considering what's happened thus far in the war," I continued, "Adai is sure to have seen through Ei's plot to gather its soldiers in Rinkei. In fact, there's a very high chance that Adai manipulated Ei into doing so. Even splitting up the Imperial Guard's forces might've been part of his plan. He's having Ei focus all of its soldiers in one location so he can eliminate everyone in a single strike. That terrifying White Wraith is no longer concerning himself with Ei."

In retrospect, Adai took care to avoid a direct confrontation with father. By the time he agreed to an open battle at Keiyou, he had already achieved a greater victory off the battlefield. Though he was an enemy, I had to admit he was good.

Miu leaped out of her seat and shook her head, her hair whipping her cheeks. "I-Impossible... How can a human possibly—?"

"Don't think of him as a human. He's a monster who surpasses even Ouei. I'd say he's one of the greatest men ever born to this millennium. It won't surprise me if I hear news of the water fortress falling three days from now."

No matter how impenetrable a fortress was said to be, it had still been made by humans. Without exception, it would meet its end in time.

Still holding on to Hakurei's arm, Ruri said in a critical tone, "Your assessment of the situation is far too naive. Do you think new and volunteer soldiers, who lack experience, can deal with a barrage of catapult projectiles? Now that Gen has Seitou, I wouldn't be surprised if they sent in soldiers trained to fight in metal armor or if they took the opportunity to test new gunpowder weapons."

"Then, I guess it'll only last half a day," I said, changing my mind.

“Yeah, that sounds more accurate.”

Koufuu, Hakubun, Miu, and Mei shivered at how casually Ruri and I exchanged quips. Gen commanded heavy infantry who could withstand arrows, large catapults designed for siege assaults, and a myriad of weapons that used gunpowder. Sure, Ei’s terrain was full of rivers and marshlands, making it difficult for Gen to deploy their famed cavalry. But in light of Ei’s current manpower, they wouldn’t be able to put up much of a fight against the far more experienced Gen forces.

I brushed my hair out of my eyes and said, “Kou Miu.”

She froze in response. Considering her position, only her family would dare call her by name. She lacked knowledge of how the real world worked, but she had courage, and I could tell that she was as quick-witted as those geniuses, Meirin and Hakurei. She must’ve predicted how Hakurei and I would feel upon seeing her. Something big must have happened—big enough that Meirin believed this meeting to be a worthwhile one.

I offered Miu a light wave of my hand and warned, “If you have a trump card, then show it. I have little interest in wasting time on political games that focus on one-upping the other person to gain control of the conversation. Granny, you agree with me, right?”

“Of course. Let’s lay our cards out on the table. If the Chou family refuses, the U family will as well. It would tick off our veterans otherwise.” After Koufuu finished speaking, Hakubun nodded. The U family made it clear that it would take the same path as the Chou family.

Miu’s face twisted, and Mei glanced at her with worry, looking like she desperately wanted to be of some use. In the meantime, Ruri whispered something into Hakurei’s ear before releasing her. The moment her arm was free, Hakurei raced up to stand at my side. She was fuming.

“Sekiei’s right,” Ruri said, taking over the conversation from where we left off. She removed her spyglass from her belt and twirled it deftly with her fingers. Her emerald eyes were frigid. “If Meirin sent you here, then you must have some sort of trump card, right? It must be a big one since Meirin went out of her way to let you keep your secret. But you’re not the one who gets to judge if

it's useful in negotiations or not. *We are.*"

The princess took a small breath before she stood up and, focusing her gaze on me and Hakurei, removed the charm from around her neck. "From the bottom of my heart, I would like to apologize for my rudeness. Allow me to try again. This is the only thing I have to offer as a reward."

We blinked, confused, as we stared at that small bag. The symbol embroidered on it seemed familiar. *Oh, right, it's the gem that had been carved into the shrine where the Heavenly Swords were held.*

Ruri flapped her hand, urging the princess to finish her explanation, so Miu continued, "My mother is of the Ha clan, and she was the one who passed this family heirloom to me. It's from our ancestor, who lived during the days of the Tou Empire. This is said to be the key to the Heirloom Seal of the Realm, commissioned by the first emperor of Tou. I will gladly hand this over to you. So please—I'm begging you—please send reinforcements to Rinkei!"



The night of Miu's arrival at the U manor, I was standing in the courtyard in front of my room. I held Black Star and White Star in my hands, and my eyes were closed in concentration. The breeze that occasionally ruffled my hair was cool and refreshing.

The opponent I was imagining in my mind's eye was a massive man with a deep scar in his left cheek—the Blackblade Gisen. He was one of the most fearsome generals in the Gen army and the one who'd massacred Ruri's clan. After fighting him at Bourou Gorge and Keiyou, I was sure that he was the strongest man I knew. *If I can't beat him, then I won't be able to protect Hakurei and the others.*

The wind stopped. I snapped my eyes open and drew the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars. Black and white flashed through the dim lantern light of the inner courtyard. I dodged to the side to avoid the imaginary great sword that descended upon me, and countered with my twin blades. However, my attack didn't land.

I licked my lips and picked up the pace, slashing through the air from various angles. Using my swords to block yet another strike from that great sword, I barely managed to deflect the attack and knock my opponent away. I leaped to the offensive and swung Black Star while thrusting White Star forwards at lightning speed. But the Gisen in my imagination read both moves and avoided them.

Dammit, he really is a monster. Pain racked my body as I pushed it to its limits. Though my burning lungs were begging for oxygen, I couldn't stop. Father and Raigen weren't around anymore to protect me or Hakurei. I had to become even stronger if I wanted to keep my childhood friend—no, my savior—safe. I clutched my swords tighter and took a step forwards.

In that instant, an unfamiliar battlefield flashed through my mind. I saw corpses and destroyed carts littering the bloody snow. Judging by their clothing, they were probably merchants and bandits. All of them were dead. The only person still standing was a young boy, covered head to toe in others' blood.

I swung White Star to the side, then stopped. The shimmering blade sliced

through the Gisen in my mental simulations, dispersing him and the vision of that snowy battlefield. *What was that?* I tilted my head to the side as I slowly sheathed the swords and then let out a long breath.

The Heavenly Swords were starting to feel like extensions of my arms again, especially compared to the first time I wielded them in this life. It'd been a thousand years since I held them as Kou Eihou, after all. Hakurei was reluctant to lend me White Star, but it wouldn't be so bad to practice with both swords again on occasion. Applause distracted me from my thoughts, and I turned around to see Ruri standing next to a chair.

"Your skills are as impressive as ever," she said. "The way you wield those twin swords, they move as if alive, like two sentient animals." Ruri must have just come from a bath, for a towel still lay draped over her head.

I picked up a piece of cloth from a nearby bench and wiped the sweat from my brow. "You can praise me all you want, but I'm not gonna let you win in double six."

"I-I plan on winning with my own skills!"

Despite her angry response, Ruri tossed me a bottle. She was a good person. I grabbed it out of the air and took a swig of the refreshingly cold water as I sat down on the bench.

After I finished, I asked, "Where's Hakurei?"

"Chatting away with Oto while helping her prepare tea. They'll be here any minute now, I figure."

I was glad that the princess of the U family was close with Hakurei and not just Ruri. Now that I thought about it, she'd gotten along with Meirin back in Keiyou as well.

I patted Yui, who was curled up in a basket on the bench, and said, "Things sure have gotten troublesome, haven't they?" I was talking about the information Miu had shared with us from the capital.

Ruri understood, but her reply was a simple "Oh? How's that any different from usual?"

I huffed out a small laugh at her bluntness. *Well, she's not exactly wrong.* I clapped my hands together and bowed my head in a reverent manner.

“Now then, my great strategist, whose mind holds as much knowledge as a library of encyclopedias. Would you care to enlighten this uneducated one on what the Heirloom Seal of the Realm is?”

“Sure thing. In return, you have to play chess with me tomorrow.”

You want a win that badly? Man, you really hate losing!

Ruri sat down in the chair and gave me a look, silently ordering me to dry her hair. I wasn't sure if I should be happy that she was willing to let me get that close to her or if I should remind her that someone with her looks shouldn't be so unguarded around a man. In terms of physical beauty alone, she was on equal footing with Hakurei. In any case, I moved to the chair next to her and started to pat down her hair with the towel.

Ruri kicked her feet, obviously in a good mood, and started to explain: “About a thousand years ago, Hi Gyomei of Tou became the first emperor of a unified continent. Until that point, the ruler was sworn in through mystical rites. However, under the advice of the imperial chancellor, Ou Eifuu, Hi Gyomei scrapped those traditions.” The wind ruffled through Ruri's hair, causing the blonde strands to sparkle. Like this, she looked every inch like the ascendants from legend. With time, she was sure to mature into a head-turning beauty. “Instead, they decided to use documents to prove one's right to rule. The old peach tree in Routou, located to the north, was considered a holy symbol even back then, so they used a branch from that tree to create a seal. That seal is the artifact known today as the Heirloom Seal of the Realm.”

Was that what happened? I'd usually let Ouei handle such complicated affairs, though I *did* remember cutting down a branch from that tree.

“You know a lot about this thing,” I said.

“My ancestors apparently helped them make the seal,” Ruri replied. “Did you know that items made using the branches of the Routou peach tree are tougher than metal?”

I could only laugh in response. The two materials weren't anywhere in the

same league. The team we'd sent to harvest the branch couldn't cut a single chip out of the tree, forcing me to go and personally lop it off. I also remembered how an old man claiming himself to be an ascendant gave specific instructions to the artisans when the seal was being carved into the wood.

Ruri crossed her arms and continued, "After the Tou Empire fell, the seal went missing. Since then, lots of rulers commissioned counterfeits so that they could have a physical symbol to prove their authority. The seal in the Ei emperor's possession is one of those fakes too, I'm sure. Water!"

"Huh, I see."

It felt weird to think that something I'd made with the friends from my past life had been passed down through the generations and was still around today. *Ouei would've loved to see that, I bet.*

"Here you go."

I finished drying off Ruri's hair, so I handed her the water bottle I'd taken a swig from earlier. Without hesitation, she started to drink from it. A normal girl might've been embarrassed by the implication of an indirect kiss, but my master strategist, likely due to her experience on the battlefield, didn't care about trivial things like that. This tendency was even more obvious when Hakurei and Oto were absent.

"The black key that the troublesome princess imperial showed us..." Ruri said. "We couldn't figure out what it is, nor do we have any method of proving it's the genuine article. It's not as if we know how to use it either."

"Yeah, I agree," I sighed.

The item that had been in Kou Miu's protection charm was a key even darker than the night sky. Koufuu and Hakubun were shocked when they saw it, but the Heirloom Seal—the more important relic—was still missing. There were too many questions. The desperation on Miu's face flashed through my mind as I thought of the princess, who would be staying with the U family for a few days.

"I'm sure the princess is a good person," I said. "She's smart enough to understand the reality her empire's facing. That's already better than those idiots relaxing in the imperial court." Ruri only stared up at me and remained

silent, her quiet gaze urging me to continue. “But still, even with our army on Ei’s side, Ei won’t be able to win against Adai. We can stop the enemy at Youkaku and prevent them from taking Butoku, but if we lose Rinkei, then it’s game over. The western regions are nothing more than a branch on the tree known as Ei, and Adai’s not the type to make tactical mistakes. He’s not going to attack us here.”

“Yes, I share that opinion as well.” Ruri’s beautiful emerald eyes grew as cold and sharp as a blade. “There’s only one way for us to attain victory. Either you or Hakurei, leading an army of over a hundred thousand soldiers, need to engage in open battle against Gen’s main forces. Even with those conditions, it would be a gamble, and the odds would most certainly be stacked against us.”

“Sounds like something that could only happen in a dream anyway.” Even father hadn’t been able to command such a large army.

Ruri held out her left hand and raised three fingers. ““Right time, right place, right people.”” It sounded familiar. The strategist whom I’d placed my absolute trust in looked up to the heavens, focusing on the twin stars twinkling to the north. “It’s said that the great Ouei often repeated this saying after he helped the Tou Empire achieve unification. The idiom reminds people what favorable conditions are necessary to win a war. Of those three, we only have the right people. So let me say this in advance—and know that I’m just saying whatever comes to mind. This is for your ears only, so don’t bring it up to Hakurei or Oto.”

Despite my confusion at her sudden pushiness, I nodded. “A-All right.”

Once she got my agreement, Ruri looked down and, slowly and reluctantly, murmured, “This is all hypothetical...but let’s say that the key in that protection charm really *is* the genuine article. Let’s say that a miracle really *does* happen.” A sudden gust of wind blew through the courtyard, messing up her hair. She didn’t pay it any attention as she looked at me, her eyes dead serious. “What do you plan on doing after you obtain the Heirloom Seal of the Realm?”

My only reaction was to blink at her. I hadn’t even thought about that.

Ruri leaned forwards and whispered into my ear like she was sharing a secret, “Listen, Chou Sekiei. For as long as humanity has existed, people have always been partial to legends.”

“They sure have,” I agreed, lowering my voice as well. A thousand years past the era of Kou Eihou, and people still clung to stories of mythical heroes and weapons.

Ruri narrowed her eyes and smirked. Her expression made her look like a villain in a play. “Just imagine this: the emperor’s younger sister, who, out of genuine concern for her country’s future, sought out the Heirloom Seal of the Realm. Don’t you agree that she’s the perfect heroine to rally behind?”

I couldn’t respond, my mind racing. Though the thought had never occurred to me, I agreed wholeheartedly with what Ruri was hinting at. *I’m so glad she’s on our side.* Ruri was also wise to avoid bringing this up to Hakurei and Oto. The two of them were kind souls. They’d agree with the logic behind Ruri’s suggestion, but it would surely trouble them from a moral standpoint. To me, though, Ruri was right. If everything went well and the princess got her hands on the Heirloom Seal, thus guaranteeing her authority, we would be able to use her as a figurehead to persuade more people to join our army.

“Let’s help the young princess imperial save the country”—if anyone with a certain degree of patriotism in their hearts heard that, they were sure to pick up arms and support the cause. It was true the U family didn’t have enough manpower to fight off Gen, but we *could get* the necessary soldiers using the influence of Kou Miu and the Heirloom Seal. Of course, even if we managed to win the war, an ugly battle for power would still await the princess. She had far too much faith in humanity’s inherent goodness.

I gave Ruri a grateful pat on her head. “Even if we use the princess, the focus will still be on the U family.”

Granny Koufuu and Hakubun wouldn’t like that, but they would go along with the plan anyway. They were well aware that we could use all the tricks in the book and it still wouldn’t get the Ei Empire out of its current predicament. The fact that they were trying to form an alliance with the various clans in the western regions—clans they’d fought against for many long years—was proof of that.

I looked down at Ruri, who was holding a hand to her head with a peeved expression, and continued, “For starters, a large portion of the U army is

frightened of Gen. Even disregarding the differences in numbers, it'd be difficult to lead those fearful soldiers all the way to the central plains. A defensive battle is the most they can handle. It'd be another thing if the impossible happens and Adai foolishly decides to try and invade Youkaku by splitting his army in two. In that case, we'd be able to win against the Gen soldiers and recover some morale."

Ruri puffed out her cheeks like a dissatisfied kid. She placed the water bottle on the nearby table and fiddled with her bangs. "You seem to place a lot of faith in the enemy's emperor."

"Aren't you the same?"

"Well, that's...true, but..." With that, the conversation fizzled out.

I stood up and brushed my fingers against the pale petals of a plum blossom. "Well, no matter what happens, my job's the same as it's always been. I have to watch Hakurei's back."

Yui rubbed itself against my legs and then climbed up to my shoulder. *Now that I think about it, this cat's led a pretty exciting life.*

Ruri rested her cheek on her hand and grinned. "Sure, sure. I figured you would say that, Lord Chou Sekiei. But consider this."

"Hmm?" I had a bad feeling about whatever Ruri wanted to say.

She waved her hand in the direction of the manor and continued, "That's something Hakurei should hear from you."

I slowly turned my head in the direction Ruri was staring and glimpsed Hakurei and Oto, dressed in their nightgowns, hiding behind some trees. As soon as she saw us looking at them, Oto walked out with a tray in her hands. Meanwhile, Hakurei, still huddled in the shadows, blushed and looked down at the ground.

"Ah," she said in a quiet voice, frozen in place.

I glared at Ruri. *Hey, what do you expect me to do?!* But, as expected from my master strategist, Ruri knew the best timing for a retreat. She sauntered over to me, took Yui, and went as far as to give me a light pat on the shoulder.

“All right, Oto,” she said, looking over to the black-haired girl. “Let’s play some double six in my room.”

“Y-Yes, Lady Ruri!”

The two of them left the courtyard, leaving only me and Hakurei behind. Left with no choice, I scratched my cheek, then walked up to stand at Hakurei’s side.

“Er, just so you know, I wasn’t lying,” I said.

“I know,” she replied, pressing her head against my chest. The sweet scent of peaches wafted from her silver hair. “I’ll protect you as well, so if you’re going to die, die after I do.”

“Sorry, but that’s one promise I can’t keep ’cause I’ll be the first to go!”

“Idiot,” Hakurei murmured. Her voice was so soft that the night breeze carried it away.

“That concludes my explanation of our upcoming strategy. We will not push our soldiers any more than necessary. So long as we can keep the U army at Youkaku and prevent them from attacking the rear of His Imperial Majesty’s main forces, then our mission will be a success.”

After I—the strategist of the Gen Empire, Millenary Diviner Hasho—finished my presentation, I looked around at the gathered officers. I was the one in charge of designing a strategy for the hundred thousand soldiers assigned to the invasion of the western regions. We were in our headquarters in southern Anshuu, and even at night, it was warm inside the tent we’d set up in the middle of the base.

I looked over at the head of the table where Orid Dada sat to get a read on his expression. Orid was a member of the imperial family, as well as the supreme commander of the invasion army. Though he was younger than me, he had an air of authority that was enhanced by his dignified military uniform.

Hiding my mouth behind a feathered fan, I continued, “I’m sure that some of you are dissatisfied with your role in this operation. After all, the western invasion isn’t where the main battle is, and everyone wishes to help His

Imperial Majesty conquer the south.”

The Seitou-born soldiers weren’t so bad, but the Gen officers, thanks to their long years of military service, could be stubborn about getting their way. If I didn’t stroke their egos, they were at risk of losing control on the battlefield in an attempt to prove themselves.

“However, in comparison to the Ei army, which has lost its Three Great Generals, Tiger Fang’s U army remains strong!” I went on. “The famous Sengai Valley from the legends of Twin Ei bars an army as vast as ours from entering, and the treacherous Youkaku is impossible to take. Overconfidence is our greatest enemy. Unification is within our mighty Emperor Adai’s grasp. If we fail and cause His Imperial Majesty to lose, then tales of our shame will be passed down for generations.”

The officers’ expressions hardened. I looked over at Lord Orid, who was as calm as usual. Then, I shifted my gaze to his vice-commander, Lord Berig. Berig was the younger brother of Emperor Adai’s marshal and a veteran soldier with decades of experience.

“This morning, a horse arrived with a message,” I reported. “The main Gen forces, led by Emperor Adai, have already taken Enri, one of the major cities in the province of Kashuu.”

In response to this news, the assembled soldiers began to murmur among themselves. We’d all known that the Ei army was weaker than ours, but none of us expected the invasion to be *this* easy.

“Amazing!” one of them exclaimed.

“Already? What incredible speed! His Imperial Majesty managed that in less than ten days?!” another cried out.

“At this rate, won’t His Imperial Majesty take Rinkei before we can even reach Youkaku?” yet another one asked.

I tapped the map with my feathered fan, pointing out Shiryuu along the great river. “Gi Heian’s army has been applying nonstop pressure from Rinkei’s north. It’s little surprise that our army is progressing slower than His Imperial Majesty’s. But it’s another story if we’re slower than an army that once swore

allegiance to Ei.”

The soldiers’ anger was palpable, but this spirit of competitiveness was the source of our army’s strength.

Bang! Lord Orid stood up, the armrest of his chair in pieces from him slamming his fist into it, and roared, “None of us have anything to worry about! We will destroy our enemies like we always do and put the emperor’s worries to rest! I look forward to hearing of your great exploits in battle, everyone!”

“Thank you, Lord Orid Dada!”

After our meeting, I was on my way out of the tent when a melancholic voice stopped me.

“Hasho, may I speak with you for a moment?”

“Lord Orid?” I straightened my back in a hurry. There was a very stern look on Orid’s face. This man, despite his youth, had achieved more merits of war than the Four Wolves during his time in the northern plains and had the emperor’s absolute trust. It was rare for him and Lord Berig, who was standing behind him, to look this troubled.

I felt the blood drain from my face as I stammered, “D-Did I make some sort of mistake? Yes, my strategy lacks assertiveness. But in our last meeting with him, His Imperial Majesty told us to avoid a forceful assault and to deal with the Heirloom Seal after—”

“I have no issue with your strategy. The U army, twenty thousand soldiers strong, will pose little trouble. What I’m about to say to you is...”

“Yessir,” I said, grasping the meaning of his half-finished sentence. *He wants me to keep what we discuss here a secret.*

Lord Orid furrowed his brow, scrunching up his beautiful face. “Don’t you find this western invasion strange?”

“What do you mean?” I asked haltingly. The flames burning on the candles around us flickered; only the quiet sizzling of their wicks broke our brief silence.

Lord Orid tapped a tanned finger on the map. “It’s as you said: the Ei army has

lost its Three Great Generals. Meanwhile, the Jo boy has been rampaging in the south due to His Imperial Majesty's machinations, and the U family has holed itself away in the countryside." Sensing what Lord Orid was getting at, Berig and I remained silent. Lord Orid gritted his teeth as he continued, "What meaning is there in splitting our army in two at this juncture? The best course of action is to gather all of our forces, take Rinkei, and then crush the Ei Empire!"

"Lord Orid, please be mindful of your words," I urged. People in the Gen Empire viewed Emperor Adai as a living god. It would be one thing if Lord Orid were joking, but any legitimate criticism of the emperor was akin to sacrilege.

But Lord Orid must have had a lot of pent-up frustration, for he pressed on, "In the decade or so since my cousin became the emperor, his decisions have only ever been right. Thanks to that, our country prospered and is on the verge of defeating Ei, despite the numerous advantages they had over us." He must have been *really* mad since he chose to refer to Emperor Adai as his cousin rather than by his title. "That's why...that's *precisely* why I don't understand! The Heirloom Seal of the Realm would demonstrate his authority to all the lands under the heavens, yes, but at this point in the war, it's hardly a priority. Why is my cousin suddenly concerning himself with a useless invasion of the west? And now that he's no longer taking direct command of the attack, he wants us to suspend our search for the seal and avoid a forceful assault so as to minimize casualties?!"

I could sense Lord Orid's genuine confusion and anger. *It must be difficult for someone born and raised in an equestrian tribe to understand.* He was right to think that splitting up the army was the wrong move. I'd shared that opinion as well. But now that unification was within our grasp, we had to start laying the foundation for our future rule.

My guess was that His Imperial Majesty had heard about the Heirloom Seal of the Realm from Senko, the organization I once belonged to. That was why he'd wanted to personally lead the attack on the western regions. His mentioning Chou Tairan's orphans was an excuse to satisfy his officers, and his not wanting us to push ourselves was because he feared losing too many soldiers if he had to let someone else take command. No one could match His Imperial Majesty's genius or talent. A human had no chances of winning against a monster.

Before we set out for battle, I must stop Lord Orid from putting that plan of his into action. Though I couldn't tell him everything I knew, I tried to change his mind.

"Lord Orid, please listen to this strategist's most sincere request. It would be foolish to use this invasion to earn merits on the battlefield. Our main goal is to intimidate the U family and keep them in the western regions, but this will not be an easy feat, especially since Chou Tairan's orphans fled to Butoku. They will surely fight alongside the U army."

"You speak of Chou Sekiei, the 'Kouei of the Modern Era' our soldiers fear, and the silver-haired, blue-eyed girl said to bring calamity?" Lord Orid spat, narrowing his eyes. This young general had never been shy about his ambitions of becoming the "Kouei" for Emperor Adai. He slapped the plain scabbards hanging from his belt and bared his teeth. "Humph. Interesting. I'll show His Imperial Majesty that I'm the only one worthy of being considered a contemporary Kouei!"

I'd managed to change the topic, but it seemed that in doing so, I'd lit an unnecessary fire inside of him.

"Please, don't do that," I said. The plea came from the bottom of my heart. If anything happened to the emperor's younger cousin, then my death wouldn't be enough to make up for it.

Lord Orid gave me a bright grin and patted my shoulder several times. "I was joking! However, I will be taking command of the operation I told you about. I've already made arrangements with the Honorable One of Seitou and found a guide. They're someone who entered the western regions as a hunter and are familiar with the topography around Youkaku. As Ouei said, dividing up an army's strength is one of the most foolish things a commander can do. We must defeat the U army as fast as possible so we can reunite with my cousin and his forces. Once we unify the lands under the heavens, we have all the time in the world to find the Heirloom Seal."

I gaped at him, feeling like my heart was about to give out. *So he hadn't given up on acting on his own?! And to think that I would hear that witch's name here, of all places!* Old Berig, who'd remained silent up to this point, met my eyes and

gave a small shake of his head. *So Lord Orid's the only one who thinks it's a good idea.*

After a moment to steady my voice, I said, "As I mentioned the previous day, I hope you will reconsider that plan. I have no doubts about your strength and skill on the battlefield, but it's far too dangerous. Besides, who shall lead the army in your absence?"

"You will, Hasho," Lord Orid replied. "I will... I have my own task to complete. Once I finish with that, I will take Butoku for Gen. If they stand in my way, then I will defeat Chou Tairan's orphans as well. Everything I do is for my cousin's good."

"Lord Orid, that's—!" Before I could finish speaking, Lord Orid laughed and swept out of the tent.

Ugh, what a headache. My stomach is starting to hurt from the stress. I lowered the hand I'd unconsciously raised to stop him and heaved a heavy sigh.

"My apologies," said Lord Berig, who'd stayed behind with me.

I pressed a hand to my forehead and asked, "What should we do? To tell you the truth, His Imperial Majesty gave me some secret orders. He doesn't mind if Chou Sekiei escapes, but he wants us to capture the Chou daughter no matter what. Should we let the main forces know about Lord Orid's independent plan?"

"Lord Orid only told me about the guide this morning. Master strategist, I'm sure you're aware of this, but the young master has dreamed of becoming His Imperial Majesty's Kouei ever since he was a little boy. And yet, rumors of those wielding the Heavenly Swords have started to spread throughout the lands. Not only are they Chou Tairan's children, but His Imperial Majesty has shown great interest in them. I can understand the pain that the young master must be going through. I'm not sure how useful I am in my advanced age, but I will accompany him and keep him from losing control."

"I suppose that's our only choice," I replied, dissatisfied.

Upon hearing my answer, Berig, one of the oldest and most experienced officers in the Gen Empire, turned and left the tent as well. *Looks like my report*

to the emperor will have to wait until the dust settles. I just have to make sure the other officers don't catch on to Lord Orid's plan.

Now alone, I looked down at the map of the western regions. Under normal circumstances, it was impossible to reach Butoku, the U family's home base, unless you passed through the impenetrable Youkaku. Sengai Valley, where the Chou army was stationed, was so steep and perilous as to prevent anyone from entering. However, according to legend, Kou Eihou, the undefeated great general of the Tou Empire, had used a path that didn't lead him through Youkaku and went on to destroy Tei in the western regions. It had taken him a single day to accomplish all of that.

"I understand the risks. But if our army's 'Kouei of the Modern Era' is the one carrying out the plan, then..." I smiled, confident in the upcoming victory.

A moth fluttered close to a candle, drawn in by the flame, and then fell to the ground.

Chapter Four

“Meirin, how many times do I have to repeat myself?! Stop associating yourself with the U and Chou families! They will bring the Ou family trouble no matter which empire we choose to ally with. Can’t you see that?! The National Shield is dead. Now that Gen has launched a western invasion alongside its southern campaign, there is no way for Ei to win!” Ou Jin’s voice echoed off the walls of a room in the Ou manor. He’d just returned from his travels to Rinkei, the capital of the Ei Empire.

Ou Jin was usually a gentle person. But now he was so angry that his shoulders trembled and his black beard twitched. The fact that my mistress, Ou Meirin, had sent Kou Miu, the younger sister of the emperor, to Butoku in the western regions must have further fueled his rage.

Lady Ou Meirin, who was sitting before me, waved her hand in a manner reminiscent of Lord Sekiei. “Father, please refrain from raising your voice like that, especially when Shizuka’s in the room.”

“Meirin!” Lord Ou Jin narrowed his eyes, his gaze burning with fury. He stared Lady Meirin down with fierce determination. It was clear that today, he planned on making his daughter see reason no matter what.

Lady Meirin must have sensed this too. In contrast to her usual lackadaisical attitude, she straightened her posture and said in a much more respectful tone, “I understand your concerns.”

“Then—!”

“But!” my mistress interrupted. She refused to back down from her wise and cunning father. “Father, you’re operating under a major misunderstanding. We may gain some short-term profits in cutting off the U and Chou families, but if we look at the grand picture, refusing to ally with them will ruin us in the future.”

“What?”

Framed by the gray and cloudy sky outside the window, Lady Meirin fixed how her orange hat was sitting on her head and continued, “At first glance, the U family to the west is indeed a thorn in both Gen’s and Ei’s sides.”

“As are the members of the Chou family you helped escape,” Lord Ou Jin scolded, though he couldn’t conceal the pain in his tone. It was proof of his conflicted emotions about the situation, even though his priority was the Ou family’s material profit. All of the patriots in the Ei Empire must have felt *something* upon hearing of Lord Chou Tairan’s execution.

Lady Meirin started to pace around the room, but she maintained a level tone as she went on, “However, unlike the Ei Empire’s officials, the Gen emperor, Adai Dada, makes clear his respect for powerful enemies.” She paused and opened up a drawer with both hands. The item she took out was the dagger that Lord Sekiei had given to her before fleeing Rinkei half a year ago. After she took it home, she’d only ever stared at or polished it. “I’m sure you’ve heard about this, father. But even after the White Wraith took Keiyou, he never set foot in the city; he only ever remained at his headquarters on the outskirts of the city. On top of that, he organized a grand public funeral to honor Lord Chou Tairan’s memory.”

When I first heard that news, I’d felt a deep sense of fear towards that emperor. The idea of paying respects to a strong enemy sounded easy enough on paper, but it was actually a very difficult task in practice. Adai Dada was truly a great man for being able to do that in front of so many people.

Meirin pushed the drawers closed and turned around. Her brown hair, which was tied in pigtails, and her voluminous sleeves rippled with the motion.

“With that in mind,” she said, “let’s discuss our family. Yes, it’s true that turning the tides in Ei’s favor would be very difficult at this point in time. I understand your desire to get in contact with the Gen Empire as well.”

“If we act now, we can get an advantage over the more influential merchants, who’re distracted by trying to keep their rivals in check,” Ou Jin replied. “The first family to rub shoulders with Gen will stand out and make themselves a target after the war. But the second...no, the third family will see great profit. That’ll all go up in smoke if they know we’re still helping U and Ch—”

“Our loyalty to our old friends will improve our reputation in the eyes of the Gen emperor. I’m sure of it. Absolutely positive. In fact, abandoning them now will invite his displeasure. That’s the kind of person Adai Dada is.”

Ou Jin didn’t say anything to that. Meirin’s tone was so firm that it shut down his argument before he could even finish making it.

Lady Meirin pressed the dagger against her voluptuous chest and frowned, uncertainty clear on her face. “Besides, the White Wraith is a very frightening person. I don’t have any proof, but I have a feeling that he was somehow behind the grand chancellor’s assassination, the Jo family’s rebellion, and even the Ei soldiers’ gathering in the great water fortress.”

Lord Ou Jin, who had survived countless battles in his time, shivered, looking more like a warrior than a merchant. He ran a hand through his hair, which had turned grayer since I’d first met him, and said, “Don’t be ridiculous! The White Wraith may be smart, but you think he can manipulate people’s thoughts? That’s impossible!”

“Actually, I *do* believe he’s manipulating us. Six months ago, Lord Sekiei told me something.” There were two kinds of reactions Lady Meirin made whenever she or someone else brought up her beloved. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, she would express her straightforward affections for him. As for the remaining time, she would reveal a fear similar to what she felt towards Adai.

She closed her eyes and said, ““Adai Dada’s talents have already surpassed Ouei’s.”” The next second, the room grew dark and thunder rumbled through the air. Holding the dagger in both hands, Lady Meirin slowly opened her eyes. “Against such a dangerous opponent, excessive flattery or servitude will only garner the opposite response. What the Ou family must show him is our faith in our leader. I’m positive that’s the right move.”

Ou Jin buried his face in his hands and didn’t say anything. The only sounds to break the silence were the thunder and rain. I could sense Shun’en’s and Kuuen’s anxiety from their position in the hallway, just past the closed door of the room.

I had no idea how much time passed before Ou Jin said, “I understand.” He crossed his thick arms and met Lady Meirin’s eyes. The hostility in their gazes

was so fierce that I could almost see sparks flying through the air.

“Meirin, from this moment forth, you are no longer my daughter. I disown you as a member of the Ou family.”

I froze upon hearing that austere proclamation. *Disownment?! Though I knew I was being rude, I exclaimed, “M-Master, that’s far too—!”*

“Shizuka, don’t worry,” Lady Meirin interjected.

“B-But, Mistress Ou should also—”

“It’s fine. Shizuka, really, I’m all right. Okay?”

I couldn’t say anything in response. Despite the situation, Lady Meirin sounded like she was having a grand time.

Ou Jin stood up and headed for the door. “I’ll give you three days to pack your bags and get out of my house.”

“I’ll leave first thing tomorrow morning, and I’m taking Shizuka with me.”

This was her father’s final act of grace towards her, and yet there was no hesitation in Lady Meirin’s immediate rejection. *I’m glad to hear that she still wants me with her, but...* The conversation died between them. Lord Ou Jin had just made it to the door when Lady Meirin opened her mouth once more.

“Father.” She removed her hat and bowed her head low. At this moment, she seemed so much smaller than usual. “Thank you for raising me these past fifteen years. I will never forget this debt. Please take care of yourself and lay off the alcohol.” Her shoulders trembled faintly.

Without turning around, Lord Ou Jin murmured his final complaints to the girl who was once his daughter. “You unfilial girl! Do you know how difficult it was to be the father of a prodigy such as yourself? I only wish you could have shown me my grandchild. If this man is so important to you that you would choose him over your own family, then make sure you don’t let him get away. I hope you two have a good life together.”

“Yes, we will! ♪” Lady Meirin straightened her back, not a single hint of sadness on her face. In fact, the heat in her gaze reminded me of when she first met Lord Sekiei.

Lord Ou Jin sighed and turned around to meet my eyes. In the hallway past him, I could see Mistress Ou, whose long chestnut-brown hair was as beautiful as her daughter's. There was a gentle smile on her face.

"Shizuka," he said, "sorry, but I'll have to trouble you some more."

"Please leave everything to me."

Upon hearing my reply, Lord Ou Jin's expression softened slightly and then he finally left the room. Lady Meirin's mother, who looked so young she could pass for her sister, mouthed, "Good luck!" to us. *Did she know in advance that this would happen?*

I pressed a hand to my mouth and asked, "Lady Meirin, was that...?"

"I asked everyone to stay away, but rumors sure spread like wildfire here."

So everything had been a show put on by Ou Meirin and her parents? It all suddenly made sense. Now that Gen had resumed its southern campaign and conflict had even reached the capital, this was their way of creating a plausible reason for Lady Meirin to depart from Rinkei. They had to put on this skit since the imperial palace had likely sneaked a spy into the Ou family. *Life as a smart person must be so tough. I'm glad that I'm nothing more than a simple attendant.*

"Shun'en, Kuen, what do you two want to do? If you want to return to Lord Sekiei's side, I can make some arrangements, though it may have to wait until after Gen's western invasion ends," Meirin called out to the twins in the hallway while rummaging through her drawers. She had just gotten "disowned," and she was already choosing what items she wanted to bring with her.

"We'll go with you!" both of them replied in unison as they poked their heads into the room. Their fast and bold judgment was probably why Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei liked them.

"I'll prepare our luggage, but some tea before we start packing would be nice. Shun'en, Kuen, would you two be so kind?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the pair answered before running off.

After I could no longer hear the gentle pitter-patter of their footsteps, I said,

“Lady Meirin, judging by your question to Shun’en and Kuuen, I’m guessing we’re not headed for the western regions?”

Lady Meirin hummed. She stretched to reach for a scroll in a cabinet above her head, and when she turned around, I could see warring emotions on her face. “Well, of course I’d love to rush to Lord Sekiei’s side as soon as I can. There’s plenty of things I want to chat with Miss Hakurei and Ruri about, and I’d love to know Oto better too.”

“Lady Meirin,” I said, my heart skipping a beat.

What a wonderful girl my mistress is! The way she treasures her friends is—

Lady Meirin tossed the scroll onto the table and pressed her hands against her cheeks, twisting her body from side to side. “More! Importantly! I wanna go up to Lord Sekiei when he’s with Miss Hakurei and say, ‘To tell you the truth, I’ve been disowned! You’ll take responsibility. Won’t. You?’ or something like that!” she squealed.

Never mind. My mistress was looking forward to even her future argument with Lady Hakurei. *Suffering the consequences of such actions might do her good one day.* As soon as that ascendant, who may prove to be the girls’ greatest rival in love, realized her feelings, then the situation was sure to escalate. Lady Ruri seemed the type to be clingy with the people she let break through her shell.

I was shaken out of my thoughts on the future when I felt Lady Meirin give me a light pat on the hand. Looking at her, however, I recognized a slight hint of fear in her eyes.

“That reminds me,” she said. “Um, I told father you’d be coming with me, but do you—?”

“My place is at your side, Lady Meirin.” I’d lost everything from my country to my family. The person who’d saved me from my loneliness was the person I’d sworn to protect.

Lady Meirin offered me a small, shy smile. In a quiet voice that I heard loud and clear, she said, “Thank you.” Those words were more than enough for me.

She carefully placed the dagger back into its cloth bag and then placed her

hands on her hips. “All right, it’s time for us to get serious. Our destination is the southern regions! We have to meet up with the most powerful woman from the Chou family, then go back up Lord Sekiei and the others. There’s no need to worry; I’m sure he’s fine. After all...”

After all, if Adai was a present-day Ouei, then Lord Sekiei was the great and undefeated Kouei of the modern ages.

“I bear a message from Youkaku! ‘The enemy is marching upon us. We require immediate assistance.’”

“The reserve troops in Butoku have finished their preparations and are ready to depart as soon as the order is given. Young master, what is your final decision?”

“Some of the civilians have started to panic. In my humble opinion, calming them is one of our top priorities right now.”

“We mustn’t forget to send messengers to the various villages and settlements! We must conscript more soldiers!”

“Tsk! Damn the horsemen of Gen! Why in the world are they *here*?!”

Messenger after messenger raced into the room to give their reports on the rapidly changing situation, causing the listening officials to cradle their heads in despair. U Hakubun’s office had turned into our military headquarters overnight, and it was more than clear that everyone in it was seconds away from full-blown panic.

“Sekiei,” prompted Hakurei, dressed in her military uniform.

“I know,” I replied. Obeying her unspoken order, I walked into the room.

The news that reached Butoku the previous night had been one of the worst ones yet: “The forces of the Gen-Seitou alliance have launched an attack on Youkaku.” *To think that Ruri would be wrong about something.* When I glanced over at the little strategist to my right, she gave a small shrug of her shoulders before leaning over to a stiff-faced Oto and whispering, “It’ll be all right.”

I guess planning for an opponent’s irrational decisions isn’t her forte.

I walked up to U Hakubun's desk, and as soon as he finished barking out his orders, I said, "You sure look busy."

"I don't have time to chat with you!" he snapped. With sweat still dripping from his brow, he waved his hand and ordered everyone else in the room to leave. After they closed the door behind them, he unfurled a map on his desk and explained, "According to Kyou Shunken, the general in charge of defending Youkaku, the enemy army consists of over a hundred thousand soldiers. General Kyou is an elderly man pushing eighty, but he's served my father, my grandfather, *and* my great-grandfather. He is one of the most experienced soldiers in the U family's employ. If he says the enemy is a hundred thousand strong, then there's little reason to doubt his word. Judging by their military flag, I'd say that the enemy's supreme commander is someone from the Dada clan."

"The Dada clan? Don't tell me the White Wraith himself is leading the troops?"

As if in reaction to my question, the temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees. *If that monster is leading his main forces to attack the western regions, then...*

"That's impossible," Ruri declared in a clear and confident voice, her gaze focused on the map. There was barely any emotion in her cold eyes. "If the emperor were personally leading the attacking army, then they'd have even more soldiers. The Blackblade isn't at the vanguard either. So, we can conclude that someone else is the enemy commander."

Blackblade Gisen was the strongest soldier in the Gen army and the man Ruri had sworn revenge on. When she was a child, the Blackblade burned down her homeland, killed her parents and clan, and then kidnapped her. Despite this history, Ruri didn't let any of the violent emotions swirling inside her show on her face. Soldiers were sensitive to a commander's unease, and despite her youth, Ruri was well aware of this fact. It was how she'd managed to become such an indispensable asset to our army.

I softened my expression somewhat and said, "That's a relief! Or at least, that's what I want to say..."

“But considering the vast difference in our manpower, it’s hard to be optimistic about our chances,” Hakurei finished for me, tapping her slender finger on the map, right where Youkaku was. North of Youkaku was Sengai Valley, which was surrounded by such steep and treacherous cliffs that not even a single protruding rock could act as a foothold. The sole road in the southwest that led to Butoku was blocked off by fortresses that took advantage of the higher altitude. “Our enemies number a hundred thousand, whereas we only have twenty thousand. Considering the narrow topography of Youkaku, it would be difficult for them to deploy large numbers of heavy infantry or cavalry. How are our defenses?”

“As per Lady Ruri’s orders, we’ve carried in a substantial number of fire lances, as well as the improved catapults. These catapults are smaller than the normal ones, which means that they’re easier to maneuver. If we include the ballista that was there to begin with, I believe our weapons are sufficient,” Oto answered confidently, pressing a fist against her chestplate.

Her swift response was impressive but hardly surprising. Over the past few months, Oto had, as Ruri’s attendant, often made her way to Youkaku to discuss the defensive measures with the general in command. Granted, this exchange was also a little show we put on to calm Hakubun’s nerves.

Ruri adjusted the blue hat on her head and said, “The battle we’re about to face will be a defensive one. There’s no chance of us winning, but there *is* a possibility that we won’t lose.”

“So calm yourself, U Hakubun,” I finished. “Is granny still in bed?”

Under normal circumstances, U Koufuu would be in the room with us. However, she hadn’t shown her face around the manor these past few days. Even Oto hadn’t been able to meet with her.

Hakubun heaved a heavy sigh, as if trying to physically expel his worries. “She hasn’t been feeling well. It seems that the stress of dealing with the imperial messenger and the chiefs of the various clans in the western regions has caught up with her. Though conscious, she’s unable to lead the army.”

Hakurei, Ruri, and Oto fell silent. A horde of enemies was on the western regions’ doorstep, and yet the interim head of the U family was nowhere to be

found. It wasn't so bad at the moment, but once the battle started in earnest, her absence would surely have a negative effect on the army.

U Hakubun stood up and grabbed the sword that'd been leaning against his chair. "I'll go to Youkaku. I may not be much of a fighter, but my presence will still boost morale. I would like the members of the Chou family to accompany me. It goes without saying that the princess imperial will remain in Butoku."

"Of course," Hakurei replied instantly. Next to her, Ruri nodded her agreement. Teiha and the Chou army were at the front line as well, so there was no reason to turn down his request.

"So," Ruri said, twirling her blonde hair around a finger and glancing over to her attendant, "what do you plan on doing, Oto?"

Hakubun surely sensed his half sister's glare on his back, but still, he declared in a firm tone, "I already said the other day that we would be leaving Oto behind. We are the only ones who can pass down the blood of the U family. If we both die on the battlefield, then our line dies with us."

"Brother!" Oto yelled, slamming her hands against the table. Her eyes blazed with such fury that she looked seconds away from reaching out and grabbing his collar. "I can't accept your decision! We need as many combatants as possible on the front line!"

As if having anticipated her argument, Hakubun coldly replied, "The decision has already been made. Grandmother agreed with my reasoning."

"I refuse to obey such an order! Brother, I can't believe you would go this far just to cause me trouble!"

Looks like these two won't be making up anytime soon.

I reached out before Oto could continue and said, "Oto, save your sibling rivalry for later and be quiet for a moment."

Tears of frustration welled up in Oto's eyes, and it took her some time before she eventually backed off without further argument. "Yessir. My apologies."

Man, if you care about your sister, just tell her that. Though I was exasperated by how awkward Hakubun was, I decided to focus on something I was more

concerned about.

“Hakurei, Ruri, do you remember that hypothesis we had the other day?” I looked down at the map. Upon it was a row of cliffs that looked more like a line of spearheads, ending just north of where we were now. “Is there really no way for them to traverse Sengai Valley and launch a surprise attack on Butoku?”

Just like how I did a thousand years ago when I was Kouei, the great general of the Tou Empire? Back then, I'd led a small team of cavalry through Sengai Valley, enacting a plan set out by the imperial chancellor, Ouei. That was the Twin Ei's final victory. The game trail we'd used back then was surely gone by now. But if there were other paths to take and if there was a general brave enough to consider it, then...

Hakurei and Ruri were silent, deep in thought. Before they could respond, Hakubun tapped the table several times and growled, “That will never happen! Sengai Valley is so treacherous that even the local hunters seldom set foot in there. I hear that only a handful of people are familiar with the game trails. What, do you think every generation produces a Heavenly General like Kouei?”

A Heavenly General? Damn, past me, did you hear that? People really exaggerated your tales when they passed them down. Anyway, that's not important right now.

“Hey, Hakubun. Was what you said just now the truth?”

Hakubun blinked, confused. “Which part?”

Ruri's and Hakurei's eyes sparkled, and they leaned forwards.

“You said that only a handful of people are familiar with the game trails, which means...” Ruri started.

“That there's someone who can guide people through the valley?” Hakurei finished.

“W-Well, that's... But, there isn't enough room for such a large army to pass through!” Hakubun argued.

“If there's a trail for them to take, they'll be sure to take it,” I warned. “Don't you remember what Hakurei told you about the Gen soldiers traveling through

the unmapped Nanamagari Mountains?”

Hakubun didn't say anything, his face turning paler than it already was. At times in war, an unexpected surprise from a small troop of soldiers could lead to significant consequences on the battlefield. Though he knew of that on paper, Hakubun must not have truly understood its meaning until now.

“One of Gen's favorite tactics is to attack an enemy from their rear. It's too dangerous to send all of our soldiers to Youkaku,” I concluded.

“Then what do you propose we do?! If we split up our forces, neither Butoku nor Youkaku will have enough soldiers to defend themselves!” Hakubun gritted his teeth and then furiously swept everything off the table.

I picked up the map, which had landed on the ground, and said in a casual tone, “Hakurei, Ruri, I want you two and Hakubun to go on ahead to Youkaku.”

Hakurei's eyes widened. The idea that she wouldn't be staying must've never occurred to her. “Sekiei?!”

Meanwhile, Ruri sighed. “Fine, I guess we have no choice.” It seemed she'd caught on to what I was thinking, but she didn't look happy as she nodded at me.

I placed the map back onto the table. “Oto and I will keep watch on their movements from headquarters. If this was all the work of my overactive imagination, then no big deal. We'll rush to Youkaku and meet you all there. If we push our horses, it'll take us five days to get there. The problem is if my theory is right. They'd be coming from—”

“If they're going to take the same route the Twin Ei's did, then it would be here.” Oto pointed at an area north of Butoku.

North of Butoku was the Rakusei Plains, said to be where a star had fallen once upon a time. A thousand years ago, I'd passed through this land in order to destroy the enemy country of Tei. After we descended from the cliffs, there had been nothing but the occasional hill and the rapids flowing through the field. Such a topography meant it was ridiculously difficult to defend.

I looked over to Hakubun, who was furrowing his brow, and asked, “Hakubun, are there any places where a small number of soldiers would be able to buy

time against a larger army?”

The next head of the U family glared at me and snarled in a disgusted tone, “Why are you asking *me*?! I can wield neither sword nor bow, and I’m poor at making decisions on the fly!”

In contrast to his irritation, I remained calm as I spread out my arms in an exaggerated motion. “Isn’t it obvious? It’s because you’re the one most familiar with the area. Sure, you can’t swing a sword or anything, but I hear that you’re a skilled equestrian. I hear the citizens talk about you every time I go on my rides with Hakurei. They say that the young master of the U family is a kind man who always lends them an ear.”

Hakubun didn’t reply, but Oto blinked, looking befuddled by this unexpected revelation of her brother’s gentler side. “They say that about...my brother?” she murmured. A cool breeze blew in from the window, passing through the group of us.

“Once the cavalry descends to Rakusei Plains, they will be within hailing distance of Butoku. The hills will not stop them for a single second. The only place that can serve to buy us some time would be...” U Hakubun said in a soft yet confident voice before pointing down at a river that wound through the plains.

I placed my hand on my chin and thought back to all the history books on the western regions I’d read during these past few months. “That’s Ten Knights Bridge, isn’t it? If I remember correctly, that’s where an ancestor of the U family fought to quell the conflict in this land?”

“Considering the time of year, the river downstream will be rather dry. But, apart from the area around the bridge, it should still be deep enough to slow down the Gen invaders.”

Just because it was possible to traverse the treacherous Sengai Valley didn’t mean that it would be easy. Gen wouldn’t be able to bring a large army if they took that path. In that case...

Throwing Hakubun a bright grin, I said, “Well, look at you. You have some unexpected talent as a military officer. But remember what I told you earlier? You gotta maintain your cool in front of other people. The soldiers’ eyes will be

focused on you, as you're the next head of the U family."

"I don't need someone like *you* to remind me of that! Oto!" Hakubun snapped. Oto looked up at him, perplexed as to why he suddenly called out to her. Without looking in her direction, Hakubun rested a hand on the sword now at his belt and headed towards the door. "If by some twist of fate...if the impossible occurs and the enemy army appears at Rakusei Plains, I want you to obey Lord Chou Sekiei's orders. You're next in line to inherit the U house if I die."

Oto sucked in a sharp breath, but she quickly recovered and replied, "Yes, brother. Good luck out there."

"Humph!" And with that, the socially awkward man walked out of the room.

He really is a great guy. Hakubun was well aware of his own lack of talent, but he never gave up on doing what needed to be done. I didn't want him to die here.

"Ruri," I called.

"We've finished checking out the topography around Youkaku," she answered, correctly guessing what I wanted to discuss. She picked up Yui, who'd slipped in from the window, and continued, "The compass Meirin sent us is working beautifully, so we can carry out the plan if we need to. I just hope we don't."

Our enemy was a powerful one. But between this young girl, who'd successfully defended Keiyou from past sieges, and the elite forces of the Chou army, things were bound to work out.

"I'll leave Youkaku to you then, my master strategist," I said, holding out my fist.

"It'll be safe in my hands, General Chou Sekiei," she said, bumping her own fist against mine. Now that I thought about it, we'd come a far way from home. But the faith I had in Ruri was the same as it had been back in Keiyou. "Oto, let's go."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Oto hurried after Ruri, and the two left the room, leaving me and a silent Hakurei alone.

“Ahh,” I said, searching for the right words. But nothing came to mind, so I simply continued: “Hakurei.”

“Yes, I know.” She walked towards me, and I felt something impact my chest. I looked down to see that she’d pressed her fist against it. “I understand fully well that Miss Ruri is the strategist who devises tactics, and Teiha is the one who gives orders at the front line. But without you or me, the Chou army will be missing its leader. They may be experienced and well trained, but the absence of a supreme commander will affect morale. I’m well aware of that. But I... I still —!” Fat tears soaked into my clothes as Hakurei buried her face in my chest. She was so close to me that I could feel the tremors racking her entire body. “I’m still terrified of being apart from you. If I lose you as well, then I... I...”

Her quiet confession reminded me anew of just how deep a scar father’s execution had left in Hakurei. My death could very well seal her fate.

“Hakurei, I have something to ask of you,” I said in my usual tone. She looked up at me in silence, but there was no disguising those red eyes. Wiping away the tears still streaming down her face, I asked, “Could you lend me White Star? I only need it for this battle.”

A sudden gust of wind blew into the room, messing up her silver hair. She ignored both that and the tear traveling down her face to ask in a slow voice, “Why do you want it?”

Hakurei’s expression right now is probably what people think of when they say, “the face of despair.” I embraced her—my childhood friend and my savior—and closed my eyes. Though it was embarrassing to be this honest with her, I offered my own confession.

“You’re not the only one who’s scared of separation. But if you lend me White Star, then I think I can fight with more strength than usual. So—please.”

Hakurei didn’t say anything at first. Instead, she wrapped her arms around me and returned the gesture with a strong hug of her own. She gave me a strained smile and patted me on the head before she replied, “I suppose you leave me with no choice. Just this once, I’ll let you borrow it, Scaredy Cat Sekiei. Promise you’ll give it back! I’ll be mad if you don’t return it to me.”

“Of course I’ll give it back to you. Otherwise, Scaredy Cat Yukihiime will start

bawling like a baby.”

The sensation of being hugged while someone pats my head is really familiar. It felt as if a veil were being lifted over some forgotten memories. I saw a field covered with bodies and bloodstained snow. I saw a dagger in my hands and soldiers surrounding me. But before I could glean anything else, Hakurei’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“I have no idea to whom you’re referring. Here you go, Sekiei.” She backed away from me and handed me White Star, dispersing the memories as she did so.

What’s up with that vision I keep seeing? I wondered, but I kept the bewilderment off my face as I accepted the sword from her. In return, I gave Hakurei my dagger.

Hakurei looked up at me with tears in her eyes. But instead of crying again, she smiled and nodded. “Be careful!”

“Yeah. You too.”

She turned and left the room, her long silver hair trailing behind her like a banner. *After seeing her make that expression, I can’t in good conscience let myself get killed out there.*

Gripping White Star in hand, I called out Oto’s name.

The U princess peeked in from the window that opened to the courtyard, hiding the rest of her body behind the wall. Her tanned skin was flushed, and there was clear panic on her face as she stammered through her apology.

“I-I’m terribly sorry! I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. L-Lady Ruri was worried and asked me to check in on you two, so I...um...”

What an overprotective strategist I have! I appreciate it though.

Sliding White Star into my belt, I winked at Oto and replied, “Since you’re here, come with me. There’s something I’d like to request from Granny Koufuu. Your soldiers are skilled fighters, but experience can’t replace numbers. Meirin sent me a letter from the southern regions, and she told me something interesting. We need to make use of anything that we can.”

From below my vantage point, I could see the enemy army's slow progress down the narrow road to Youkaku. Their armor and helmets had been polished so much as to emanate a dull glow under the sun. They were using their long spears to ward off potential attacks from the front and holding their large metallic shields aloft to protect their heads. Ten days had already passed since the invasion began. Judging by their equipment and their flags, it looked like the Seitou army was once again leading the charge. To their rear were rows of Gen archers hiding behind wooden shields.

I was watching the enemies' approach from the first watchtower along the front line. Like the other watchtowers and fortresses of Youkaku, it had been built into the surrounding natural cliffs.

Teiha, his armor and helmet covered in scratches, reported, "Lady Hakurei, the enemy's front line is now within range of our arrows. We can attack on your order."

"Not yet. Wait for Miss Ruri's instructions."

"Yes, ma'am."

This young officer was considered to be one of the veterans now. If Sekiei or Miss Ruri, who was watching over our enemy from the very top of the watchtower, were here, then the exchange just now would've been unnecessary. Teiha had been showing me consideration, as I was still inexperienced as a commander.

I gave Teiha a grateful look before returning my gaze to the soldiers below. The past few days, the enemy had dragged siege weapons with them, despite how difficult they were to maneuver in this terrain. But they were empty-handed now. *Did they change their strategy?* No matter their plan, we'd already stationed the thousand soldiers of the Chou army around the cliffs, using the high altitude to our advantage. If we fired on our enemies with arrows, fire lances, and the ballista we'd borrowed from the U army, we'd be sure to deal some devastating—

I clutched Sekiei's dagger in a tight grip and stopped that train of thought. *No, Hakurei. Calm down. If we rush into action, then the enemy will retreat.*

“Draw them in, closer and closer, and then strike! Strike without mercy! With that approach, we’ll be sure to win. Well, we’ll be sure to win this battle, at the very least,” Miss Ruri had said during the strategy meeting this morning. She’d been most confident in her tactic too. Thanks to Miss Oto putting in a good word for us, as well as the success of Ruri’s plan, which had scored us victory after victory, the soldiers of the U army deeply trusted our reliable strategist. I refused to ruin that faith with my hasty judgment. Sekiei would get mad at me too; among us, he was the one who was most taken with Miss Ruri’s talents.

After a few minutes more of waiting, the distinctive, hair-raising screech of metal reached us as the enemy soldiers passed below the first watchtower. They even walked past the second watchtower, which was quite some distance away due to the road between us. Step-by-step, they drew ever closer to the tightly locked gates of the main Youkaku watchtower until, at last, the first line reached the thorned branches—an abatis and sharpened stakes—covering the doors and started to tear away at them.

Now! At that moment, several war flags emerged from the first watchtower, the Chou character raised high in the air. I removed Sekiei’s dagger from its sheath and issued the order in a clear voice.

“Attack!!!”

The soldiers in the first, second, and main watchtowers let loose their projectiles. The roaring of the fire lances and the smoke emerging from their tips made it seem like the sky itself was splitting apart. Fletchingless arrows from the ballista stabbed deep into their large metal shields. Catapults within Youkaku released boulders, the enormous rocks whistling through the air before wreaking havoc on the enemy lines.

The Seitou army’s formation, which had just before made them resemble one shimmering mass, disintegrated. In the middle of the rampage, a commander on horseback raced about, desperately trying to maintain control. However, the horses were still panicked from the thundering roars of the fire lances and catapults.

It’s the perfect opportunity! With the dagger still in my hand, I nocked an arrow in my bow but then hesitated. The target was too far away for my

archery skills, and there was only a fifty percent chance that I would make the shot.

“Just have faith and release the arrow. The key is to relax your body.” Sekiei’s voice—oddly relaxed even on the battlefield, yet calming nonetheless—echoed in my head. *Unbelievable! Even when you’re not here, you...* My lips curved into a subconscious smile, and I released the bowstring. In the next moment, my arrow pierced the forehead of the enemy general, who’d stuck his head out from behind his shield, sending him toppling off his horse. The enemies’ flags and spears wavered, whereas my allies raised their voices in a triumphant roar.

“Lady Hakurei!” Asaka gasped in delight at my side. She was the leader of the female attendants, and all of them were wearing their military uniforms.

The enemy archers at the back of the lines hurriedly started to let their arrows fly. They weren’t aiming to kill, but rather, they were trying to support their allies’ retreat. The rush of light footsteps made me turn around.

“Hakurei! Angle your bow— Eek!”

It was Miss Ruri, racing down the stairs with spyglass in hand. She’d tripped on a step and started to fall, but I rushed forwards with a “Watch out!” to grab her. The sunlight reflected off our hair, creating a cascade of gold and silver.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Th-Thanks, I’m fine. Good job on controlling yourself earlier,” my best friend praised from the cradle of my arms, though she looked a little embarrassed about the tumble. Pride welled up in my chest at her compliment.

“Protect Lady Hakurei and Master Strategist!” Teiha bellowed.

“Cover them with your shields!” Asaka yelled.

Both of them had lifted their voices to be heard over the booming of the fire lances. Upon hearing their orders, the soldiers surrounded me and Ruri, and used their large shields to hide us from enemy projectiles. Apparently, Sekiei had issued strict orders for the soldiers to protect us, as our hair made us stand out. He was really overprotective.

Miss Ruri backed away and patted the dust off her body before she

commanded in a quiet voice, “Slowly increase the angle at which you shoot your arrows, and don’t let up on the projectiles until they’re completely out of range. As for the enemy stragglers...well, we’ll let him deal with it.”

I followed the direction she was pointing with my eyes and saw Mister U Hakubun, wearing an ill-fitting military uniform. Even though he was the supreme commander of the allied army, he was barking out orders from the second watchtower.

“Shoot!” he yelled. “Keep shooting!”

He was trying to stop the scores of Seitou soldiers who, after judging that it was impossible for them to retreat, had charged at the gates of the main Youkaku watchtower. As if possessed, they tore through the abatis and stakes with single-minded determination. Before long, they reached the castle gates.

“Now! Drop the rocks!” an old commander ordered, his voice so loud that it echoed across the entire battlefield.

The ceiling above our enemies’ heads opened up, and several boulders tumbled out. Screams of agony rang through the air before they eventually stopped. As Miss Ruri and I watched the fleeing soldiers return to their line, the Chou and U soldiers raised their voices in a victory cheer. The Chou soldiers pressed their fists against one another’s before shaking hands. Even without Sekiei, we’d managed to win yet again.

I was relieved, but I quickly switched gears and started to issue orders. *If Sekiei were here, that’s what he would do.*

“Teiha, if there are any injured, treat them immediately. Don’t forget to replenish the arrows and gunpowder. Asaka, please prepare some warm food for everyone. Miss Ruri and I will return to headquarters.”

Teiha and Asaka blinked, looking a little surprised, before they gave me matching wide smiles.

“Yes, ma’am! Leave everything to me!” Teiha said.

“Lady Hakurei, Lady Ruri, please be careful!” Asaka added.

The first and second watchtowers were connected to the main Youkaku watchtower via an underground passage. The main gate of headquarters had been constructed by wedging metal plates between thick pieces of wood, and the walls were made of the same, only they were fortified by four layers in total. Everyone knew that the walls of the western regions were sturdier than the ones made in the central plains, so it would be difficult to break through these barriers. With enough wells in Youkaku too, there was no fear of the enemy cutting off the water supply. Between that, its wealth of food and medicine, and its stockpile of military equipment, they could hole themselves up for several years without issue. Or so I heard.

The U family had spent the past hundred years improving this fortress, and it now lived up to its “impenetrable” reputation. Ruri and I passed by the small catapults, which had been of great use in the earlier battle, chatting as we ascended the stairs. Every step I took, I felt the weight of numerous gazes on me. Was it because of my silver hair and blue eyes? A little confused by the attention, I nonetheless climbed all the way to the top of the walls and followed them to the headquarters in the middle of the fortress.

After ringing the bell at the entrance, we entered. Inside, we saw U Hakubun, still dressed in a dirty military uniform, and a jolly-looking old man peering down at a map on the table. The old man was Kyou Shunken, the defending general of Youkaku and one of the most experienced soldiers in the U army. The armor he was wearing seemed very light; apparently, it was made of cloth.

When he noticed us, his eyes lit up with gratitude. “Oh, aren’t you members of the Chou family?”

“General Kyou, we’re still on the battlefield. But I appreciate your kindness,” I replied.

An old general with white hair and a white beard? He reminds me of Raigen. I paused, feeling melancholic at the memory.

Meanwhile, Miss Ruri, showing no concern for formalities, sat in a chair and reported to Mister Hakubun: “The Chou army didn’t suffer any casualties.”

“Our soldiers were merely injured as well. We didn’t defeat as many enemies as we first thought, but...”

“Fire lances and catapults are mainly good for shocking the enemies or their horses, so there’s not much we can do about that.” Miss Ruri sighed. “The ballista was powerful, but since the arrows don’t have any fletching, the range leaves much to be desired. It’s not capable of shooting consecutively either, since we need to set it up every time. What’s most important right now isn’t results but the fact that we managed to protect this place from an enemy force several times larger than ours. The narrow road really saved us.”

The Seitou and Gen armies had been stifled by the topography and withheld from using the same oversized catapults they’d brought to besiege Keiyou. In comparison, we had the high ground. With how small the road was, the three watchtowers were able to concentrate all of their projectiles on our enemies. We had the obvious advantage.

General Kyou unfurled a piece of paper on the table. “Some of the enemy soldiers we took hostage gave us the names of their leaders. Please take a look at these.”

I leaned down to read the names: Hasho the Millenary Diviner, Orid Dada the “Kouei of the Modern Era,” and Berig, Orid’s elderly vice-commander. My entire body tensed, and I brushed my fingers against Sekiei’s dagger. Mister Hakubun’s face paled, and even Miss Ruri placed a hand on her forehead.

“The military strategist who’s in charge of Seitou along with an experienced general who’s supported the Dada clan for decades,” she said. “On top of that, we’ve got a member of the Gen imperial family, said to only advocate for the bravest officers and living legends. They’ve really brought their best.”

The flames on the candles in the candelabra flickered as if in fear. We hadn’t seen any of these three on the battlefield, which meant that the true attack was yet to come.

“Our soldiers’ morale is through the roof as a result of our consecutive victories these past few days,” General Kyou said. “Some of them are even asking if we should press a counterattack.”

“Absolutely not,” Miss Ruri and I replied immediately, shaking our heads. It was thanks to the terrain that we’d been able to win. Considering Gen and Seitou had around five times as many soldiers, there was no doubt we’d lose in

a direct confrontation.

Upon hearing our response, General Kyou brushed through his long white beard with a wrinkled hand. “Yes, I figured as much. The only reason we’ve been winning is precisely because we’ve been focusing on defense. If we abandon the advantage of height and challenge them to an open battle, we’ll be sure to lose. They’re skilled enough on their horses that they’re able to collect the wounded and even the dead without dismounting. They live up to the rumors about their skill.”

“I agree,” I said.

Ruri nodded. “It would be suicide to engage them in direct combat.”

This experienced soldier didn’t let his guard down for even a second. He was the kind of warrior that Sekiei would like, if only Sekiei were here.

Mister Hakubun had been listening quietly up to this point, but now he opened his mouth to ask, “Old Shunken, I’d like to discuss the matter I brought up with you earlier.”

“You mean the hunter? I’ve sent soldiers to ask around, and we know the locations of all the local hunters save for one. I’ve heard the story of Kouei’s accomplishment myself, but in my honest opinion, I believe the members of the Chou family are worried over nothing. It’s impossible to lead an army through Sengai Valley without a guide.”

“What of the hunter that’s unaccounted for?” Mister Hakubun asked, slight fear and worry on his face. I also felt an anxious stirring in my heart, though I couldn’t put my finger on why.

“I hear that he entered the mountains before the invasion started and has not yet returned. He isn’t a local, though. I hear, rather, that he hails from the north.”

Even after hearing his reply, the thumping of my heart didn’t slow down. Miss Ruri also removed her hat from her head, lost in thought. *Our enemies haven’t made a move yet, but...*

In contrast to our unease, General Kyou’s answer must have dispersed Mister Hakubun’s worries, for he said, “Sorry to have given you extra work.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. For you and Lady Oto, this old man would work until my back gives out! Now then, I must go and check up on the soldiers. Excuse me.” Despite his age, he still had a lively sense of humor. He gave us a polite bow before leaving the room.

In the silence that followed, Ruri and I returned our gazes to the map. Mister Hakubun collapsed into a chair, exhausted after days of battle.

Covering his eyes with his hand, he asked, “What do you two think? Is Lord Chou Sekiei simply paranoid?”

He must have attached a title to Sekiei’s name out of consideration for me. *If he would only show this much care when interacting with his sister, then maybe he and Oto wouldn’t have so many arguments.*

I ran my fingers down my sheathed dagger and responded, “There’s no solid evidence that they’ll take that path. Plus, compared to when we faced them at Ranyou and Keiyou, the enemy army is sorely lacking in motivation.”

“I don’t know why they decided to split up their army and attack the western regions, but from Gen’s perspective, this attack is to support the Ei invasion. I can understand why the soldiers aren’t too excited for it, considering they weren’t able to join the main forces in attacking Rinkei. That’s why their commander is trying to minimize the amount of energy and resources they expend. Their more passive attacks are clear proof of that,” Ruri explained. She clasped her hands together and then murmured as if to herself, “They could also just be waiting for something to change on another front.”

A change on another front? Logically speaking, “another front” would be Rinkei. But...

Though Ruri and I remained subdued, Mister Hakubun seemed more incredulous than anything. “There haven’t been any changes in the enemy,” he said. “I received a report from Shunken just now, but outside of sending their wounded to the rear, they haven’t done anything of note. I can’t agree to letting my sister participate on the front line, but if Lord Chou Sekiei and Oto’s soldiers came here, then it would improve morale.”

I blinked. “They’ve been sending the wounded...”

“To the back?” Ruri murmured.

Despite all the fierce battles we’d gone through these past few days, the enemy had only ever sent in a small number of soldiers. On top of that, more than half of the invading forces were Seitou’s heavy infantry. There *hadn’t been* a lot of wounded soldiers.

The realization hit me the moment it did Ruri, and we looked at each other in shock.

“Miss Ruri, could they be...?”

“I can’t believe they managed to trick us. We *knew* what they were planning! I was even talking about it with Sekiei! If we don’t hurry, then something terrible is going to happen!” Ruri exclaimed, gripping her blue hat in her fist and running a rough hand through her beautiful blonde hair.

I pressed the dagger to my chest. *Sekiei!*

Mister Hakubun was staring at us in surprise at our sudden panic. “What happened? Where is this coming from? We have the upper hand, so there’s nothing to worry—”

“E-Emergency! Emergency!” General Kyou threw the door open as he ran in. He bent over, panting with exertion and wiping the sweat from his brow, then straightened and looked at us. “A-A messenger just arrived from Butoku!”

No! Tell me this can’t be happening! But no matter how much I begged on the inside, I couldn’t change the cruel reality before me.

The old general raised his voice in a cry and gave us the news we feared most. “Enemy cavalry have suddenly appeared north of Butoku! They’re coming from the Rakusei Plains!”

“Wha—?!” Mister Hakubun shot to his feet, the chair falling backwards with the movement. His eyes wide with fear, he yelled, “I-Impossible! That simply cannot be! Are you telling me that the horsemen of the north are capable of witchcraft?!”

“It’s not witchcraft. They sent some soldiers to the rear to act as the ambush team, that’s all. It seems that we weren’t the only ones familiar with Kouei’s

story. I wonder if this was the work of that ‘Kouei of the Modern Era’ we keep hearing about,” Ruri said.

“What?” Mister Hakubun became even more unnerved upon hearing Ruri’s reply. “But then what of Butoku?! What will happen to everyone? To my grandmother and to Oto?!”

With Sekiei’s dagger against my chest, I managed to maintain my calm. “General Kyou, what did the messenger say?”

“He said that Lord Chou Sekiei and Lady Oto are leading an army in an attempt to engage them in battle. They’ll be fighting at—”

“At Ten Knights Bridge, right?” I cut in.

“That’s right.”

Everything is going exactly as he feared! Idiot! Sekiei, you idiot! You big dummy! I will never forgive you if you die. Never! Despite the storm of emotions in my chest, I managed to hold on to my composure as Chou Hakurei.

Turning to look at the heir of the U family, I said, “Mister Hakubun, we’ll leave you in charge of Youkaku’s defense.”

It’s all right. Sekiei won’t lose before I get there. He wouldn’t.

“Of course. You can count on me. But what do you plan on doing? We can send a portion of our forces back as well if—”

“We figured something like this would happen, and we have a plan for it,” Miss Ruri interrupted in an unbothered tone. “It’s something that only the Chou army can pull off, since it comprises elite veterans. Though, we may not be able to make it in time if we head for Ten Knights Bridge from Butoku anyway.” At first glance, she seemed the same as always. However, a more discerning eye revealed how she was gripping her hat so hard that her knuckles had turned white.

Mister Hakubun and General Kyou thought for a moment, conflicted expressions on their faces. Should they send soldiers back, or should they keep everyone here? It didn’t take them long to reach a decision.

“We’ll leave everything in your hands. But we’ll send a team of soldiers back

to Butoku posthaste,” Mister Hakubun said. “Good luck out there.”

“If there’s anything you need, please feel free to make your requests,” General Kyou added.

Ruri and I nodded at each other. Of course, part of me was scared. But if we wanted to save Sekiei, Miss Oto, and the others, the only way was forwards.

“Thank you very much. In that case...” I started, and Ruri finished my request for me.

“Could you introduce us to a local hunter? We want them to guide us. Not to Sengai Valley in the north but to the forests in the south. It would be boring to simply re-create a story from a thousand years ago, don’t you think?”

“Oh wow, they really came!” I remarked from atop my horse.

We were standing at the sole bridge over the river bisecting Rakusei Plains north of Butoku. On the opposite shore, the massive Gen war flag, its golden threads reflecting the sunlight, slowly came into view. I estimated that the army underneath it numbered three thousand.

A day had passed since the report of an attack came in. We’d sent a scout to the plains just in case, and they’d returned bearing news: “*The Gen army is attacking! They’ve passed through Sengai Valley!*” Thanks to the time and effort we’d put into preparations, it didn’t take the U army, led by Oto and strengthened by reserve forces until they were a thousand strong, long to position themselves in the field. Some soldiers were hiding in the shadows of a hill to the east, ready to ambush the Gen soldiers once they crossed the river.

As Hakubun had mentioned, the river levels were lower than usual, but the water flowed swiftly. It would be difficult for the Gen soldiers to cross without the bridge, since they’d dressed in light armor in order to brave the cliffs. I looked over my soldiers, who were checking their equipment, and rode Zetsuei to the old and narrow stone bridge. An ancestor of the U family had fought the final battle to claim the western regions right at this bridge, using only ten soldiers on horseback to stop an army of over a thousand combatants. That was why the name of the bridge was now Ten Knights Bridge.

I moved the bow that was slung over my back into my hand and narrowed my eyes at the enemy. They'd passed through Sengai Valley, which was shaped by rows of treacherous cliffs, and yet over half their number consisted of cavalry. That meant they must've found a path other than the one Kouei had taken. *I have to give it to them. That's pretty impressive.*

Oto, on her own horse, rode up next to me and gave me an unimpressed look. She was holding a shovel in hand, the metal end of it sharpened to a point. Apparently, she found it very easy to wield.

"Lord Sekiei, could you *try* to act like you're nervous?"

"Don't get mad at me, Oto. They did so well pulling one over us that they deserve some credit, don't they? I don't know who their commander is, but their name will be immortalized by historians in the future!"

It was clear from the way the Gen soldiers were holding their flag that morale was high. They'd just accomplished the impossibly difficult task of traveling through Sengai Valley, and yet the hand holding the standard aloft was steady. The enemy commander was very skilled indeed.

A horn sounded from the enemy formation. They stopped and formed a line. But when the cavalry, archers, and infantry noticed us waiting for them, they started to murmur among themselves.

Oto, who looked the same as always even though she was staring down the Gen army, puffed out her cheeks in a small pout. "I can sympathize with how stressed Lady Hakurei and Lady Ruri seem. In the future, I shall respectfully decline their requests for me to keep an eye on you."

Soldiers paid attention to their commander at all times, so a leader had to maintain a serene front, even if they were terrified on the inside. The girl next to me had talent as a general; the Tiger's blood flowed strong in his descendants. Her demeanor raised my opinion of her even further.

I nocked an arrow and pulled back the bowstring. "That's terrible, Oto! Unlike those two brutes, I'm a sensitive man. I was just trying to soothe my nerves after seeing such a vast army. Hup!" I released the arrow, and it hit true, landing in the pole of the war flag and snapping it in half. Both the U and the Gen armies buzzed with surprise. "It's hard to keep your cool before battle. Don't

you agree?”

My last question was aimed at a large bearded man with a battle-axe on his back, riding his own horse some distance away from us. It was Shigou, the bandit we’d captured some time ago. We’d convinced U Koufuu to add him to our troops, arguing that we needed all the fighters we had. Shigou, we added, was a bandit, but he’d never killed a single civilian. Shigou himself only agreed to join us under the condition that his subordinates’ sentences would be reduced.

The foolhardy bandit stared at me, his face pulled in a grimace. “Are you insane? You’re going to try and stop the elite Gen army with such a small team of fighters? I-It’s not gonna work. There’s no way we’ll be able to—!”

“Wow. You’re dumber than I thought.”

“Y-You bastard! How dare—?!” The moment Shigou’s hand touched his battle-axe, the veteran soldiers of the U army raised their fire lances and crossbows. Oto must have given the order.

I urged my horse forwards a few paces, keeping my eyes fixed on the enemy soldiers. “If they get past here, then it’s a straight line to Butoku! Granny Koufuu, a few old men, and some wounded soldiers still capable of wielding arms are the only ones defending it. Women and children make up the rest of the city! Do you know what’ll happen if that city falls? It’s one thing if the White Wraith himself were leading the Gen army. Under his supervision, the soldiers are sure to remain disciplined. But only a fool would expect the same consideration from an anonymous commander. They’ll pillage and ruin the city before turning their attention to the rest of the western regions.”

Shigou fell silent, as did Oto and the other U soldiers. Aside from me, everyone present either hailed from Butoku or had spent most of their lives in the western regions. So what did they think about the prospect of Gen destroying their homeland? Still with bow in hand, I glanced at the enemy riders. They’d only just finished a difficult march, but they were already preparing to charge. Some soldiers in their formation were holding back a large man—an officer, by the looks of it, who must have made a name for himself in the past.

Looking back at Shigou, I gave him a casual wave and continued, “In other words, until the troops in Youkaku can come to our aid, we’re the only ones who can protect the innocents in Butoku. Simple, right?”

In response, he clicked his tongue and rejoined his subordinates. At least he didn’t seem interested in desertion.

I turned to the gathered soldiers, Oto several paces behind me. After looking around at them, I said, “I’m not familiar with General U Jouko, the Tiger Fang. I only met him once, before the Battle of Ranyou, and my impression of him was that of a broad-minded general.” The soldiers remained silent. From what I’d heard, they’d looked up to General U. Brushing my fingers against White Star, I continued, “However, I’m sure that if he was here in our place today, he would stand and face those Gen soldiers without a moment’s hesitation, laughing off the pessimism about our chances.”

“Yessir!” The soldiers’ eyes burned with resolve.

I drew Black Star from its sheath in a flash of obsidian steel and yelled, “My friends of the U army, you who survived Ranyou, Bourou Gorge, and Keiyou!” The gong behind me threatened to drown out my words. Gen had only just arrived at our doorstep, and they were already raring to get this fight started. The enemy commander knew the importance of timing. I turned to face the bridge, my back to my soldiers. “We face down yet another formidable foe. However! This time, we have no allies behind us nor anyone to protect the people in our place.”

Gen had around three times more soldiers than we did. They might have been exhausted after forcefully making the trip through Sengai Valley, but they knew that if they didn’t rush to Butoku before our reinforcements arrived, they would be the ones stranded in enemy territory. They would charge at us with everything they had.

I swung Black Star to the side and roared, “The time to risk your lives is now! I expect you to fight with everything you’ve got!”

“YESSIR!” Allied soldiers and officers clanged their weapons together with fervor. The Gen cavalry across the bridge glanced at each other nervously as their horses nickered.

I ran a hand down Zetsuei's neck and then looked over my shoulder to bark, "Oto! I'll stop as many of them as I can here at Ten Knights Bridge. Don't worry; look at the width of this thing! Even if they want to charge through, they can only send a few riders at a time. I want you to focus on issuing orders at the back. Take care of any soldiers who get past me, or those who try to cross from the water!"

I swore I saw her dark brown hair start to puff up like an angry cat. She rode up close to me and yelled back, "I refuse! If anything happens to you, then what in the world am I going to say to Lady Ruri and Lady Hakurei?!"

"Don't worry about that. Here, use this." I shoved the custom bow and quiver Meirin had given me into Oto's hands, and she blinked in confusion. An ordinary archer wouldn't be able to pull back the string, but I was sure that Oto could handle it. "I won't die. After all, I promised her."

"Lord Sekiei." Oto clutched my bow with a conflicted expression.

The sounds of the gong and the horn were becoming more rhythmic as our enemies calmed down. In the middle of their formation was a young man without a helmet, riding atop a large horse, and an elderly general at his side. The young man's armor, fashioned using golden threads, and the impressive twin swords hanging from his belt signaled that he was of no ordinary rank and file. He was sure to be a powerful fighter. I was almost jealous of Gen and their seemingly endless pool of talented soldiers.

"In any case, don't let the enemies pass!" I ordered Oto in a firm voice. "We only need five...no, four days. If we can protect this side of the river, then the army at Youkaku will return to Butoku. Once they do, we can win!"

"Yessir! Good luck!" Focused on the task at hand once more, the princess of the U family returned to the lines of soldiers. She'd not only survived countless battlefields, but she'd also been personally trained by both father and Ruri. Oto knew what she had to do.

I watched the leader of the bandits issue orders to his own subordinates. At my request, Meirin had looked into his past, and it hadn't taken her very long to send me back her findings.

"Shigou, son of Gan Retsurai, one of the oldest generals in Ei and the former

right-hand man to Raigen the Ogre!” I yelled, revealing his identity. “I don’t know what happened to you, nor do I have any interest in knowing. But if you still possess the mettle to protect the innocents as a soldier of Ei, then unleash your full might on our enemy! Dying in battle would be far better than being executed, don’t you think?”

“Humph. You don’t need to tell me twice!” His eyes glittered with excitement. Shigou’s father was one of the few remaining virtuous generals under Ei’s employ. Like General Gan, he wasn’t an idiot; he wouldn’t do anything as foolish as betraying us on the battlefield.

“Hyah!” I kicked Zetsuei into a gallop, and we raced towards the middle of the bridge. The enemy cavalry stared at me, unable to understand my actions. Only their general, who was easy to make out due to his massive horse, continued to glare at me.

Now then, I suppose it’s time to accumulate some merits for myself.

I sucked in a deep breath and then yelled in a voice loud enough to reach the other side of the river, “Listen up, warriors of Gen! You might have braved Sengai Valley!” The row of spears before me shook, and the clattering of armor filled the air. I smiled and slowly drew White Star. Holding the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars in a casual stance, I proudly announced myself: “But now you face me—my name is Chou Sekiei, the son of Ei’s guardian deity, National Shield Chou Tairan!”

My eyes met the enemy general’s hate-filled gaze. *Good, good. He took the bait. If things boil down to a duel on this bridge, then it’ll buy us even more time. Even better if I can strike him down right here, right now. Time is our ally in this battle.* The moment that thought ran through my head, I made the decision to accomplish what needed to be done here, no matter how reckless I needed to be. Everything would be all right so long as Hakurei and Ruri didn’t hear about it.

Still staring down the enemy general so that he knew I was talking to him, I smirked and taunted, “Fools who believe they’ve already won the war could never kill me. As for those who still possess a wolf’s bravery in their hearts, come at me if you dare! I welcome you to try and take my head!”

In the middle of the old stone bridge, the young enemy general in black—Chou Sekiei—swung his black and white swords with lightning speed. Blood sprayed through the air with each flash of steel. My subordinates who tried to charge him from his flanks fell limp before sliding off their horses, dead before they could even scream. The remaining two froze, shocked at their comrades' sudden deaths. But Chou Sekiei sped towards them from atop his black horse and, in the blink of an eye, slashed through them, breastplates and all.

He's truly one with his mount! The words of my deceased father rang through my mind: *"Orid, horses are the source of our power. Our equestrian skills can help us fell even the mighty Ei Empire! Learn all you can, and make the Dada clan proud."*

I'd heard the rumors, but I still found it hard to believe that after losing the Three Great Generals, the Ei Empire still had someone as powerful as this man. Not only that, but I recognized those twin swords in his hands. In fact, I was *very* familiar with them, for they greatly resembled the legendary Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars!

"I can't believe four riders of the elite guard weren't enough to kill him..."

"Wh-What a beast!"

"How can he so freely swing those swords while on horseback?"

"It's Kouei! The Kouei of the Modern Era!"

Fear was spreading through the veteran soldiers lined up around me—a fear so potent that I had no way of quelling it. Our plan had been to request aid from an underling of the Honorable One lurking in the shadows of Seitou, and have them guide us through Sengai Valley. It was something Kouei had done in the past, and the plan had gone well. I figured that we would be able to take Butoku and subjugate the U family in no time at all. We could topple Youkaku, which boasted far greater defenses than our intelligence suggested, at our leisure afterwards. At least, that had been the plan up until three days ago.

After defeating all four riders, Chou Sekiei made his way back to the middle of the bridge, putting on an air of nonchalance for the soldiers watching him. The

very existence of that fearsome black-haired, red-eyed general, who never tired even after fighting for days on end, threatened my entire strategy. *I must do something or else...*

The old general Berig, here to both protect and supervise me, sent me a scolding look. I knew what he wanted to say: “A general must maintain his cool in front of his soldiers.” Emperor Adai had reminded me of that numerous times in the past as well, but I couldn’t control myself! *If we can just cross this bridge —!*

Interrupting my thoughts, the roar of exploding gunpowder thundered around us. The enemies had fired the weapons called fire lances on the soldiers who, with the help of rope to keep themselves upright in the current, were desperately trying to cross the river. They screamed as small rocks and metal scraps pierced through their skin. At the same time, the young female officer on the opposite bank waved a strange weapon and shouted orders. In the next second, arrows rained down upon the soldiers in the water. They fell limp, groaning in pain as they were swept away.

My blood boiled as I bellowed, “Those soldiers fought with me on the northern lines! How dare you?! I shall slay you where you stand!”

“Young master, you mustn’t!” Berig reached for the reins of my horse, but I was faster.

Ignoring my soldiers shouting my name, I raced forwards, drawing my twin swords and swinging them down upon the enemy general. “CHOU SEKIEI!”

“Damn, you never give up, Orid!” he snapped, deflecting my killer blow with a grimace.

I stayed on the offensive, thrusting and slashing with my weapons. Sparks flew as steel met steel, and we exchanged dozens of strikes in a matter of seconds. This was actually my fifth time fighting him like this. The battles on the northern front had been fierce, but no fighter had been as formidable as Chou Sekiei. Though I never said this to anyone, I’d been under the impression that no one, save for the strongest warriors in Gen—Black Wolf Gisen and the White Wolf—could defeat me. And yet...

I managed to defend myself against the onslaught of attacks from those black

and white blades, and then rode past him. Turning my horse around, I raised one of my swords above my head and tightened my hold on the hilt.

“Go to hell! I’m killing you today! No matter how brave the U army is, they will surely falter once I show them your head. I’m the only person in the world who will carry on Kouei’s legacy!” With that roar of determination, I galloped forth and unleashed a flurry of strikes aimed at both his neck and torso.

“In your dreams!”

“What?!”

After successfully parrying every single one of my attacks, he pulled his black horse back and put distance between us. He laughed as he wiped the sweat off his brow.

“Orid Dada, how do you think the White Wraith will react if he hears that the supreme commander of these forces is standing at the front line and indulging in a duel? Do you think he’ll be angry or exasperated? You may even lose your head over this.”

I didn’t answer him. His strength might have rivaled that of a thousand men, but I doubted he had much energy left to spare after consecutive days of fighting. Yet he pushed past his exhaustion and put on a smile for his soldiers. He was a dangerous man—far too dangerous. With time, he might very well mature into a fighter powerful enough to lop off my cousin’s head. *I have to kill him right here, right now!*

The blades of my twin swords were chipped, and they were at their limit. But I still held them up as I growled, “If I can take you with me, then I shall gladly offer my life!”

My decision to come to the western regions had been the right choice. *I, Orid Dada, as the Kouei of the Modern Era, shall eliminate any obstacle that may stand in my cousin’s way!*

“Young master, you mustn’t!” It was Berig, who’d suddenly barged between me and Chou Sekiei. From behind him, the riders in my elite guard shot at Sekiei with some of the few arrows we had left.

“Whoa!” He cut them down in midair and then started to retreat, not a hint of

worry on his face.

That's not enough. He won't be killed by such a half-hearted attack!

I yelled, "Berig! Don't get in the way of—" Before I could finish scolding the old general, the female officer and several veteran soldiers on the other shore rushed forwards.

"Now!" she yelled, and they released arrows in our direction.

Without thinking, I knocked them aside with my swords, but a dagger flew past my face, the blade grazing my cheek. The stench of blood filled the air. A bearded man wielding a battle-axe had been the one to throw it, and when I looked at him, his lips twisted.

"Protect the young master! We must retreat!" Berig barked at the elite guard riders holding wooden shields as a horn sounded from our formation.

Dammit! I can't believe I couldn't end this today!

I glared at the young enemy commander, who was standing behind the female officer with the dark brown hair and her experienced riders. "Chou Sekiei! We shall finish our fight next time. Tomorrow...for sure, I will kill you tomorrow!"

Without waiting for a response, I turned my horse around. Today marked the third day in a row that I'd made that promise.

"Young master, I'm begging you. Please refrain from any further duels with them," I said.

"I refuse."

"Lord Orid!"

"I refuse, Berig!"

The quiet yet firm voice of my master, whom I'd served ever since he was a baby, carried throughout the tent. It'd been three days since we started attacking this so-called Ten Knights Bridge. Yet they still held strong. At this rate, our plan to launch a direct attack on the enemy headquarters in Butoku

while it was undefended would fall apart.

Lord Orid started to pace around. Thankfully, we were the only ones in the tent. “These past few days, I’ve had many opportunities to exchange words and blows with the enemy commander. Because of that, I’ve figured out the reason behind my cousin’s bizarre behavior of late. I’m positive that it has to do with his obsession with that Chou Sekiei! In the past, he would’ve *never* cared to attack the western regions over a mythical Heirloom Seal of the Realm. As someone who’s been with him since childhood, I know him better than anyone!”

“I understand where you’re coming from. But...” I attempted to explain.

My young master, whose multiple accomplishments on the northeastern front had garnered him a reputation on par with the Black and White Wolves, stopped in his tracks. “I know that I’m spending too much time here, Berig. We are alone in foreign land. If we cannot finish this before the enemies at Youkaku return, then we will be annihilated.”

I remained silent in response. According to Kouei’s legend, after arriving at Rakusei Plains, the great general had led a handpicked company of several hundred elites to take Butoku—then the capital of Tei—in a single day. We no longer had the luxury of time.

“Tomorrow,” Lord Orid said, as if trying to convince himself rather than me, “I’ll end things tomorrow! His Imperial Majesty might have ordered Hasho to take Chou Sekiei alive, but...” My skin crawled as his murderous intent filled the space. I never realized how much the young master desired Chou Sekiei’s death. “I will kill him. Everything I do is for the great Celestial Wolf.”

He murmured the last words like a prayer before departing the tent. *What should I do?*

“Father?” One of the elite guard captains—my youngest son, Tokuta—walked in, a dark expression on his face.

“The casualties?” I prompted after a moment to steady myself.

“Many who attempted to cross the river perished. According to those who survived, the ones who managed to reach the other bank found themselves

surrounded and chased back by a powerful warrior wielding a battle-axe. We have very few swords, spears, and arrows left. More soldiers are injured by the day, and we're running low on both medicine and bandages. Though we do have enough provisions and water for the soldiers..."

"There's not enough feed for the horses." I sighed.

"Yessir," Tokuta murmured.

Like Lord Orid had said, we were alone. No one would come replenish our supplies. That was precisely why a swift end to this battle was necessary.

I looked down at the map. "How's morale?"

"After fighting him for so many days, fear of Chou Sekiei has spread through the troops. They say that, with those black and white swords he wields, *he* is the true Kouei of our times. Apparently, this is not the first time such rumors have traveled through the ranks."

"I can't say I'm surprised. If I were your age, I would've believed it as well."

There was no doubt that the young master was a skilled fighter. But the National Shield's son was no pushover either. I'd say that they both had an equal chance of emerging victorious, which meant that this fight wouldn't end anytime soon. *Is Chou Sekiei aware of that fact, and so he's using the young master's personality to buy himself more time? In that case...*

"Tokuta, send your most trusted soldiers north tonight and have them confirm that we have a path to retreat by. I would also like you to prepare the prototype that the Honorable One lent us."

"Father, that's... Never mind. I understand. Leave everything to me." Despite his youth, my son was a wise soldier. Without questioning my orders, he left the tent.

I smiled as I turned my gaze to the small flame flickering from the candelabra. "The most important part of a military strategy is a backup plan, and the most important thing in war is victory. Even if we cannot win, the young master's life is my highest priority."

Maybe it was time for these old bones to return to the earth. In anticipation

of the final battle tomorrow, the blood of wolves running through my decrepit veins started to boil.

I was in a dream—a fleeting, cold, and sad dream. The boy standing before me was myself as a child. In my hands, I held the dagger that my parents had used to protect me until their final breaths, though the blade had been broken and what remained was drenched in blood. No one lying in the crimson snow—neither my acquaintances nor the bandits who’d attacked—moved. The ring of soldiers pointing their weapons at me didn’t move either.

Standing behind them was...ah, Raigen, though he looked younger than in my more recent memories. His face, as fearsome as an ogre’s, was twisted in distaste. He shook his head several times and raised his hand to give his soldiers an order when two horses raced onto the scene. A younger Chou Tairan was atop one, and on the other was a girl with silver hair and blue eyes. I could never mistake her for anyone else. It was Chou Hakurei as a child.

Father drew close to Raigen and started to speak with him. Meanwhile, the girl, her small frame wrapped up in a cloak, did not tear her eyes from me. To our collective disbelief, she approached me, all by herself.

Raigen and the soldiers looked taken aback and hurried to pull her away, but father stopped them with a wave. *Ha ha, what admirable courage.* The young Hakurei dismounted and walked up to me. Then, taking out a piece of cloth, she rubbed my face so hard that my cheek started to smart and turn red.



Uncaring of the icy wind whipping her silver hair about her face, she smiled at me, the expression more beautiful than anything else in the world. *“It’s all right now. I’ll protect you. My name is Hakurei! What’s yours?”*

“I’m...”

The nickering of the horses and the footsteps of the soldiers greeted me as I woke up. When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was the ceiling of the tent I’d pitched in the western regions, near Ten Knights Bridge, north of Butoku. It felt like I’d been having the same dream these past few days, but I could scarcely remember any details upon waking up. Not the best feeling in the world. I pushed myself to my feet, grabbing Black Star and White Star from my bedside. Three days had passed since we started our fight against Orid Dada and his Gen troops. If we could survive today as well, then the chances of us holding out until reinforcements from Butoku arrived would be significantly hi—

“Oh?” Vertigo struck me, and though I tried to support my weight with the twin swords, I fell to one knee, panting. Exhaustion must’ve built up from so many consecutive days of combat. My body felt heavy, like weights were strapped to it, and my brow was drenched with sweat. This wasn’t good.

“Lord Sekiei, are you awake? Breakfast is rea— Lord Sekiei!” Oto, dressed in her military uniform, peeked in from the entrance, but as soon as she saw the state I was in, she rushed inside, her face pale. However, it was clear that she was at a loss, because she simply looked around in a state of panic. It was a far cry from how cool and collected she normally was.

I chuckled at the contrast as I managed to sit down on my bed. “I stood up too fast, that’s all. Calm down before the soldiers notice something amiss.”

“Yessir. My...apologies,” Oto said, looking down and deflating.

“Always be up-front when expressing gratitude to someone! I, for one, would be much happier receiving a proper thank-you.” What Hakurei once said to me when we were kids echoed through my head for some reason. *I guess you’re right though.*

I smiled and said, “Thanks for your concern. Oto, you’re a great girl!”

“I shall fetch you some water,” she said, scrunching up her face and leaving the tent. That was the opposite reaction from what I was expecting.

Uh, did I make her mad? I heaved a sigh.

“An entire lifetime later, and I *still* don’t understand women.”

As if in agreement, White Star shimmered in my hand.

Once I’d finished all of my preparations, I walked through our base. From the opposite side of the river, I could see the waving Gen flags and hear the army’s occasional roars. Their morale was unbelievably high. Orid wasn’t an idiot; he knew that if they didn’t cross the bridge today, they’d be the ones with their backs to the wall. It was literally life or death. I was in the middle of talking to the U soldiers, who’d become my close acquaintances over the past few days, and teasing Gan Shigou when a familiar voice called my name. It was Oto, with Zetsuei in tow.

I waved in gratitude at her and stroked my horse’s neck. “Hey, Oto.”

“The preparations are complete. Supplies from Butoku reached us this morning, and we’ve finished replenishing everyone’s stock of water, arrows, and gunpowder,” she reported. In her hands, she held her shovel and my bow. Her attitude from this morning was gone as if she’d never been upset.

In a soft voice so as not to alert the other soldiers, I said, “Judging by how they’re acting, they’re willing to sacrifice their lives for a victory. If they continue to charge us without caring about their own casualties, then they might be able to push us back with sheer numbers.”

Oto didn’t reply. She merely placed a hand against her forehead. Considering her keen strategic mind, she must’ve realized what I was trying to say without me needing to spell it out.

I adjusted how White Star and Black Star were hanging from my belt and, disregarding Oto’s lack of a reaction, continued, “Hakurei and the others should be arriving at Butoku about now. We investigated the area as much as we did so that they could pick the fastest routes, after all. But if you believe that we won’t be able to stop the Gen army from crossing the river, then retreat. Don’t worry

about me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Oto?”

For the first time since I’d met her, I could hear anger in her voice. Confused by her response, I looked down at her. Then, Oto stuck her shovel into the ground and grabbed the collar of my shirt with both hands. In this moment, she stood before me not as a subordinate or as Ruri’s attendant, but as a veteran commanding officer of the U army.

“I refuse!” she yelled. “How many times have you rescued me and the rest of my forces since the Battle of Ranyou?! You want me to abandon you? When I haven’t repaid you for the debt we owe you?”

The soldiers, who’d been enjoying their free time between battles some distance away, murmured among themselves. I couldn’t blame them. No matter how dangerous the battlefield got, Oto never lost her composure. Her levelheaded approach to war and tactics was how she’d managed to keep so many of her soldiers alive. Yet now, the U princess had tossed away the mask of the ideal leader out of sheer fury.

Without bothering to wipe away the tears streaming from her eyes, she pressed her small fist against her light armor. “Don’t be ridiculous! I will *not* let that happen. I am U Torahime, daughter of the Tiger Fang, U Jouko. On the honor of the U family, as well as that of my deceased parents, I absolutely refuse to obey your order!”

She spun back around to face me. I didn’t really understand women, but even I could tell that no matter what I said, I wouldn’t be able to change her position on this. This might have disqualified me as a general in the soldiers’ eyes, but I started to look around and beg for help.

“Hey, can someone do something about your princess?” I asked. But it was to no avail.

“Lord Sekiei, *you’re* the one in the wrong.”

“Yup, you sure are.”

“I can’t believe you made our princess cry.”

“I recommend that you watch your back when you’re alone at night.”

“You playboy!”

“Someone should tell Lady Chou Hakurei about this.”

“Tell Master Strategist too!”

No one’s on my side?! Even Zetsuei shook its head at me as I stood there, flabbergasted. *Not you too!* There was only one person left to turn to.

“Oto,” I entreated again.

“No,” she said before I could get another word out.

This must be how it feels to be left adrift at sea. The low drone of a horn reached my ears, carried to us by the wind. There was little time left. I looked over to Gan Shigou, who was leaning his battle-axe against his shoulder and watching us like we were the most interesting show he’d ever seen.

“Hey, you rotten bandit.”

“Anyone who makes a girl cry should get kicked by a horse and go to hell.”

I didn’t waste any more time on him. Looking around, I saw that all of the soldiers were grinning at me. They must’ve been able to figure out what Oto and I were discussing based on her outburst, and they were still acting like this. *Idiots!*

I ran a rough hand through my black hair, uncaring of how messy it got, and sighed. “What’s wrong with you people? Do you all have a death wish or something?”

I wasn’t trying to make a joke, but snickers broke out among the soldiers watching. Before long, everyone was laughing. Oto wiped her tears away and picked up her shovel with a smile.

After I gave her a nod, I jumped onto Zetsuei’s back and drew my twin swords. “Oto, you’re in command. Reinforcements *will* come! I don’t want any of you bloodthirsty bastards dying before I do, got it?”

“Leave everything to me!” Oto replied at the same time as the soldiers

bellowed, “Yessir, Lord Chou Sekiei!”

Our enemies sounded their horns and rang their gongs as they started to move out. It looked like they were all going to attempt to cross the river this time. The only ones left in their base were the elderly officer and a few riders.

The din of roaring fire lances and furious yells echoed through the battlefield. Among the chaos was the enemy supreme commander, Orid Dada, atop his horse with his swords already in hand. The corpses littering the stone bridge had been removed in the middle of the night, leaving the path unimpeded for his giant mount. Orid’s eyes burned with deep resolve—it seemed that he was determined to end things today, no matter what.

I kicked Zetsuei into a gallop, and we raced forwards to meet Orid at the center of the bridge. As soon as I approached, he glared at me with murderous rage.

“You won’t escape today, Chou Sekiei!” he snarled as he launched his attack.

“That’s my line!” I shot back.

He thrust, slashed, and sliced without mercy. The blades of his swords would’ve sunk into my vital points had I not deflected them in time. Due to the difference in our frames, there was far more weight behind Orid’s attacks than mine. No longer able to withstand his heavy blows, I pulled Zetsuei back and attempted to put some distance between us. However, Orid wasn’t the general for nothing. Skillfully commanding his horse without even holding the reins, he continued his onslaught.

“Give it...a rest!” I panted.

“Humph! Aren’t you supposed to be a modern Kouei? This should be nothing!”

After exchanging several dozen...no, several hundred attacks, he finally backed off. My body felt heavy. The exhaustion from fending off Orid and his soldiers for the past few days was taking its toll on me, leading to my current disadvantage. I glanced at the river, where a rain of arrows was falling upon the lines of Gen soldiers in the water, and affected an air of nonchalance.

“Where’d *that* weird nickname come from?” I asked. “I’m Sekiei, the adopted

son of the Chou family.”

The slow advance of the enemy forces in the river was halted yet again by a sudden explosion. Shields flew through the air as pillars of water rose. Because of how little we had, we’d been hoarding our gunpowder until this day, stuffing it inside ceramic containers in order to create thunder crash bombs. Oto must’ve given the order to deploy them; I just hoped they were enough to fend off the Gen soldiers.

Orid gripped the handles of his swords so tightly that his hands shook. He glared at me, his mouth a firm line. “You’re dangerous. Far too dangerous! Your continued existence will threaten my cousin’s rule.”

“Really appreciate your overconfidence in my skills,” I joked back even as cold sweat dripped down my brow. *The core members of the Gen army are aware of me?*

Orid slammed the sword in his right hand down on the bridge’s railing, the blade slicing through the stone, and yelled, “That is precisely why I, Orid Dada, will slay you right here! Everything I do, I do for my cousin’s rule over the unified lands. You will lead him astray no more. I am the only one worthy to serve as his Kouei!”

The pressure he was emanating seemed to increase. With a tailwind and his blind devotion to Adai giving him renewed strength, Orid dealt out consecutive strikes. Though he had a wide repertoire of techniques, he was relying on his brute strength and speed rather than finesse. I did my best to defend myself against him, but I couldn’t dodge everything. Blood dripped from the countless cuts I was accumulating on my arms and face.

Ignoring the pain, I swung out with Black Star, deflecting Orid’s swords, and pushed him back with White Star. “Enough with the ridiculous accusations! I’ve never even *met* Adai!”

“And all of my instincts are screaming at me to keep it that way!”

The screech of metal against metal rang through the air. He swung both his swords down, aiming straight for my head. I barely managed to block them with the Heavenly Swords, the two blades crossed above me. But I was being pushed backwards. Orid, eyes bloodshot, kept applying more strength.

“Y-You muscleheaded...!” I started to growl when the sound of multiple horses galloping caught my attention. The next second, an alarm sounded in my head. Honed over two lifetimes of battle, my sense of foreboding was never wrong. I gathered all of my strength and shoved Orid’s twin swords away, but I was too late.

“Now! Shoot!” the old officer Berig ordered, appearing from Orid’s shadow.

Gen cavalry released arrow after arrow from the small crossbows in their hands. *Those crossbows can shoot continuously?!* I immediately used my two blades to knock down the metal arrows. *They’re fast!* A stab of agony shot through my left arm.

“Dammit!” I’d leaned to the side to avoid the projectiles, but in doing so, I’d toppled off Zetsuei in an unrefined heap. Though I managed to brace myself for the fall and avoid taking too much damage, the arrow sticking out of my left upper arm sapped away the strength in my hand. I couldn’t pull it out, lest I started to bleed out on the battlefield.

Gritting my teeth and pushing past the pain, I held up my swords. Crossbows were more powerful than bows, but they weren’t capable of continuous shots. This must’ve been a prototype that overcame this weakness. Before me, Orid was screaming at his right-hand man, furious at him for interrupting our duel.

“Berig!”

“Young master, this is the battlefield!”

I was careless. So from the very beginning, they’d planned on using their supreme commander as bait to kill me. No wonder Adai had assigned that old officer to take care of someone from his clan. The blood from my left arm continued to stain my uniform. Though the U soldiers were fighting their hardest, Gen’s powerful assault, fueled by their disregard for their own lives, was pushing my allies back.

Orid took several deep breaths before looking at Berig and his riders, wordlessly ordering them to stand down. Then, he swung his swords through the air, cleaning the blood off the blades.

“I doubt you can continue fighting with such an injury,” he called.

Some of the blood from my wound dripped down onto White Star. *Aw man, Hakurei's gonna yell at me again.* From the hills behind me, I could hear a faint noise. It wasn't Oto or her soldiers though, so I had no idea what it was.

During the brief moment I'd been distracted, Orid approached me and shouted, "It's over, Chou Sekiei! I apologize for this."

"Ha! You're acting like you already won. It's not over yet!" I tightened my grips on both Black and White Star. I couldn't die here. After all, I'd made a promise with Hakurei that—

The snowy plains and the girl's tears that I'd seen in my childhood suddenly came to mind, the memory clear as if it'd only happened yesterday.

"You can't die here! Live with me!"

Ah, I see. So that's what happened. The first time we met wasn't in the Chou manor but in the crimson snow. How could she say that to me after I'd slaughtered every last bandit who'd attacked us? No wonder I can never refuse her. I started to chuckle, and Orid looked at me as if I'd gone mad.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"I just remembered an old promise, Orid Dada," I said. The sound from earlier was growing louder. "Sorry. My head isn't yours to take."

"Your courage even in the face of certain death is impressive! Out of respect, I will end you in a single— Huh?!"

One of the Gen soldiers had finally reached the opposite bank, but before he could take another step, an arrow flew out from the side and struck him. He fell, disappearing under the water. Several other Gen soldiers stopped in surprise, then turned to point at the hill to the east, where a massive war flag was billowing in the wind: "Chou," it declared. The deafening sound of a gong rang out through the air as Teiha and his riders galloped down the hill.

The enemy troops gasped before jumping into action. As much as they hurried to adjust their formation to defend themselves against this unexpected ambush, Oto and her soldiers, who'd recovered from the Gen charge, destroyed their flank. Despite the distance, my eyes could clearly recognize the blonde-haired, green-eyed girl giving out orders from the top of the hill.

“The Chou army?! How in the... How could they have made it back so quickly?!” Orid cried, taken by surprise.

Our enemy’s fervor was, along with their advantage, disappearing. An army that had been giving its all—literally—for a victory could not muster its strength again after an unexpected turnabout. *We win!* Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a silver-haired, blue-eyed girl racing straight towards me atop a white horse. I grinned at the young enemy general.

“Sorry. Looks like this war of attrition goes to us!”

“Y-You scoundrel!” Face twisted in fury, Orid charged me with his massive horse. He must have decided that at the very least, he would strike me down.

But in a gust of white, Getsuei—Hakurei’s horse—galloped in to stand between us.

“Hakurei!” I called, tossing White Star to her.

“Sekiei!”

Without exchanging another glance or word, we moved in unison, flanking Orid and then rushing towards him with a battle cry. Though Orid’s weapons looked to be of expert make, they snapped in half when we swung the Heavenly Swords down upon them. The blades flew through the air before landing in the ground, their tips lodging into stone.

“Impossible!” Orid exclaimed, eyes wide as he stared at Hakurei, who’d leaped forwards to protect me. “A girl with silver hair and blue eyes, like the ones said to bring about calamity. So you’re the Chou—” The sight of her must’ve thrown him completely off guard. And as if in payback for my injury, a sudden arrow sunk deep into his left arm, and he fell off his horse with a pained scream.

“Lord Sekiei!” It was Oto with bow in hand, hurrying towards me on horseback. Allied soldiers were gathering around us as well.

Killing a member of the Gen imperial family here will give us a massive advantage in the war. With that thought, I turned my gaze back to Orid. He was baring his teeth as he lifted the broken sword in his right hand and—

“You mustn’t!” The old general Berig and a hundred Gen riders stepped between us to form a wall. He tossed his crossbow aside and dismounted before unsheathing his sword. Without looking back at his lord, he urged, “Young master, please retreat. We’ve lost. Take my horse and get out of here.”

“Berig, what are you talking about?! If we don’t kill Chou Sekiei and the Chou daughter...if we don’t kill those who wield the Heavenly Swords, then they will bring calamity unto my cousin! Hey, let go of me! Unhand me this instant!”

Unable to admit defeat, the brave young general fought against the wave of soldiers shoving him towards the proffered horse. Then, despite the fact that he was facing down a row of enemies, Berig turned his back to us. He looked so noble at that moment that we couldn’t move to strike him down. Even at his age, this old wolf hadn’t lost sight of what he must truly protect.

“You idiot!” Berig roared. “Now is the time to retreat, Orid Dada! My lord, you are young, and so you are bound to make mistakes. Admit your miscalculation, and live on to become a true wolf one day.”

Orid’s entire body trembled before he glared at us. If looks could kill, we’d have been dead. He pulled himself up onto the horse and tossed his twin swords aside.

“I understand! I’ll retreat. Berig...I’ll be waiting for you!” With that, he turned and galloped away, beginning his escape.

“W-We must give pursuit!” Oto exclaimed, recovering from her surprise at the exchange.

“After him!” Teiha ordered.

The two of them, leading the elite cavalry of the U and Chou armies, rode past us. Berig gave one final look at Orid, who was desperately urging his horse to gallop faster, and then turned back to face us off.

“I apologize for the wait,” he said. “Now then, shall we begin?”

Hakurei and I hopped off our horses, but we hesitated to raise Black and White Stars. The battle was already won. I didn’t know if Orid would be able to shake off his pursuers in his injured state, but even if he did, it would be a difficult journey across Sengai Valley. The sight of the old general doing

everything he could in order to let his young master escape reminded me of the deceased Raigen, and I shook my head.

“Just stop it, old man. You can’t win against us.”

“What an odd thing to say. Aren’t you injured as well?” He laughed before his expression turned serious once more. “Unless you are the reincarnation of the Undefeated Kou, there are no absolutes in the world of battle! My name is Berig, subject of Orid Dada, the finest general in all the Gen Empire!”

Now that he’d given his name in battle, as the children of Chou Tairan, we had no choice but to answer in kind.

I walked up to stand at Hakurei’s side and proclaimed, “My name is Chou Sekiei.”

“My name is Chou Hakurei.”

“To battle!” the three of us yelled in unison.

I ran forwards, and as we passed each other, I slashed out with my sword. In the same second, Hakurei’s and my sleeves were sliced through. In the blink of an eye, he’d launched consecutive attacks on us! This old officer boasted incredible skill.

“Truly impressive,” Berig remarked, and still with a smile on his face, he collapsed onto the stone bridge.

Berig might have been our enemy, but his final moments had been those of a proud warrior. None of the soldiers behind us cheered his death; instead, they pressed their hands together in respect. *He was one amazing geezer.*

I looked up to see Ruri, on horseback, running about the hill and giving out orders, and heaved a sigh. Using Black Star to keep me from falling onto my face, I sat down on the ground. The pain in my left arm that I’d been ignoring was starting to make itself known again, but I looked up at Hakurei to say, “Thanks, you’re a lifesaver. You’re always saving my— Huh?”

“Sekiei!”

The strength left my body, and I fell backwards. Before I could hit the ground, Hakurei, tears welling up in her eyes, supported my weight. *Aw man, my blood’s*

getting her uniform all dirty. It's exactly like when I first met her.

I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore, and I felt like I was in a dream. Even so, I smiled and said, "I kept my promise. Didn't like the idea of dying and making you cry like when we first met, Yukihome."

"Stop talking! Someone, please help!"

I bet I'll get a scolding when I wake up. With Hakurei's screams still echoing in my ears, my consciousness was swallowed up by darkness.

Epilogue

“Hmm, so that’s when you remembered the first day we met? Oh, please don’t move, Sekiei.”

“I didn’t remember *everything*. Only bits and pieces. And come on, I was just trying to reach for the map.”

I was sitting up in bed as I defended myself against Hakurei, who was wearing the traditional garb of the western regions. Ten days had passed since we fought off the Gen invasion. After losing consciousness on the battlefield, they’d immediately carted me off to the U manor. Apparently, anyway. I was asleep for a few days, and by the time I woke up, the arrow in my arm was gone and Hakurei was sobbing at my bedside. So, I had absolutely no memory of what happened after the battle.

Ruri, who’d helped chase after and deal severe damage to Orid and his fleeing soldiers, had also given me an angry scolding: “*Hakurei took care of you the entire time, and Oto was worried sick. Stop acting so recklessly and causing them trouble!*” Tears had welled up in her eyes all the while, but I hadn’t had the heart to point them out. Even I was capable of reading the room sometimes.

As I unfurled the map on my lap, Hakurei said, “Considering how young you were, I can’t say I’m surprised. It’s not as if I rem— Oh, but I *do* clearly remember how you were crying.”

I wanted to argue against that. It wasn’t as if I had *bawled*, and besides, Hakurei had been the one crying back then. She was probably lying about how she couldn’t remember much anyway. The memory of hugging a strange boy holding a bloody dagger in both hands was bound to have an impact. Chou Hakurei was far kinder than anyone I knew. I’d considered her my savior for so long, but that wasn’t giving her enough credit.

I was smiling to myself when a wooden spoon full of warm congee was held in front of my mouth.

“Uh, I can still move my right hand,” I pointed out.

“No.”

“Okay” was my meek reply. Ever since I woke up, I hadn’t been able to eat meals on my own; Hakurei always came and fed me. It was terribly embarrassing, but I had no way of asserting myself. Ruri would always grin at us while Oto blushed. The one time U Hakubun came by to see me, he’d even scoffed at the sight. Absolutely unforgivable.

It didn’t take long to finish everything, and after I was done, I drank some of the tea Hakurei had prepared for me.

“Oh, I forgot to ask. How did you guys manage to get back to Ten Knights Bridge so quickly?”

I’d been under the impression that they would first return to Butoku before marching out to Ten Knights Bridge. They had to, since there weren’t any proper paths between Youkaku and Rakusei Plains.

Hakurei wiped at my mouth with a cloth. For some reason, the sight of the scarlet ribbon in her silver hair put me at ease.

“It’s all thanks to the preparations Miss Ruri made beforehand,” she said. “With the help of the compass Meirin sent us and a local hunter, who served as our guide, we were able to cut through the forests south of Youkaku. It was a gamble though; we didn’t know if we’d get there in time.”

My strategist was very good at her job. After leaving me and Oto in Butoku, she must’ve realized what the worst-case scenario would be and considered what measures could be taken against it.

“Was the compass useful?” I asked.

“It was. That we can tell which direction we’re marching in even when the sun and stars can’t aid us is very convenient indeed.”

For this battle, Orid Dada had used the story of Kouei to help him with the arduous task of crossing Sengai Valley. In contrast, Ruri used the information she’d carefully gathered and combined it with modern technology. Time was moving on from the glories of Kouei and Ouei.

I sipped more of my tea. The taste made me crave some snacks. “What happened after you all retreated from Youkaku? Hakubun kept mum on the details.”

“I hear that they had some trouble. The enemy tried to besiege them using trench tactics, and according to Lady Koufuu, the first watchtower on the far east side almost fell.”

“Trenches, huh?”

Back in Keiyou, Ruri had also combined trenches and fortifications in open battle in order to prevent cavalry and heavy infantry from exercising their true potential. Employing those tactics to attack was another way of looking at the same strategies.

Hakurei combed her fingers through my bed head to tidy it up. “Something else that went through a major change while you were asleep is the U family’s mindset regarding the war. It seems that they’ve steeled their resolve after almost losing Butoku in this Gen invasion.” A light breeze blew in from the circular window. Hakurei looked out at the inner courtyard, using her free hand to keep her hair from blowing in her face.

“They’ll be sending reinforcements to the central plains?” I murmured. “To Rinkei?”

“Yes. They’ve already begun making their preparations. It seems that the capital has no time to spare.”

When Kou Miu had come by to visit me, she’d started trembling at the sight of all my injuries. But she was probably cheering right about now. *If I know Koufuu, Hakubun, and Ruri, though, they probably haven’t even told her the news.*

I swallowed the last of the tea and set it on the side table. Ignoring Hakurei’s mutter of “I could’ve done that for you” and ensuing pout, I reached out with my hand and brushed my fingers against her shimmering silver hair.

“Hakurei, what do *you* want to do?”

“That’s the question I’d like to ask *you*.”

What a cold answer. If the U army decided to make a move, then, as guests, we had no choice but to go along with them.

I lowered my gaze and admitted, “I don’t think you’re capable of revenge, nor do I want to see you obsess over it.”

“I feel the same about you.”

I hated the foolish Ei emperor and his treacherous subjects—the ones who’d executed father—so much that I wanted to kill them with my own hands. Hakurei’s anger towards them was likely the same. However, we both didn’t want the other to bear the burden of resentment. It was a contradictory yet very human way to feel.

I looked up to meet Hakurei’s eyes. “Judging by the stories people tell of him, the Ei emperor is likely a good person. Nonetheless, a hardworking fool will lead others to ruin. I can’t put my trust in him.”

“Miss Ruri said something similar, though her wording was far more aggressive. Even so, she seemed against the idea of sending out soldiers.”

“That’s about what I expected.” Ruri didn’t have any particular attachment to Ei. If she did, then it was due to her friendship with us, Oto, and Meirin. She might have had the Heavenly Swords, as well as her grudge against the Blackblade, on her mind, but she couldn’t fully conceal the softness of her heart.

Closing my eyes, I said, “You know what though? I want to go back to Keiyou with you and everyone else.”

“You’re...not the only one.”

I had no grudge against Adai. Though his schemes were the reason father’s hands had been tied, his thorough manipulations were impressive. He was a great leader too, based on what I’d been hearing about his rule over Keiyou. But to swear fealty to him? That I couldn’t do. In order to return to our homeland, we had no choice but to defeat him.

Reaching out to the side, I picked up White Star from where it was leaning against my bed and handed it to Hakurei. “Here, I’m returning it to you. I’d like you to hold on to it.”

“Are you sure? With your skill, you’re more than capable of handling the Heavenly Swords of—”

“It’s fine.”

Hakurei blinked her sapphire-blue eyes as she took the sword from me, and I looked away from her, feeling a little embarrassed.

I scratched my cheek and said, “It seems that without you, I’m hopeless. If I keep on fighting my usual way, I’ll die in no time. So that’s why I’d like for you...for Chou Hakurei to keep that sword.”

“Grr...and I thought I forbade him from catching me off guard like this,” Hakurei muttered to herself. Though she looked a little dissatisfied, she hugged White Star with both arms and then turned her face away. “H-Humph! I’m not going to spare you the lecture just because you said that!”

“Hey, wait a second. Didn’t you give me a lecture as soon as I woke up? You have even *more* to say?!”

Hakurei blinked at me, looking bewildered. “That goes without saying, doesn’t it?” Her expression was ridiculously cute.

Wait, this isn’t the time to be thinking that. I need to find a way to avoid her lecture, or else my heart...my heart won’t be able to take it! I thought for a moment before coming up with a plan. *All right. Time to make my escape.*

“Excuse me? Sorry for interrupting you lovebirds, but may I have some of your time?”

Hakurei and I both jumped, then looked to the doorway. Ruri was standing there, fanning herself with her blue hat and holding a cloth bag in her left hand.

“Oh! If it isn’t the genius strategist herself! You accomplished the most out of any of us in this battle,” I said.

“M-Miss Ruri, we’re not I-lovebirds!” Hakurei exclaimed.

The ascendant smiled at our differing reactions before walking in and sitting down near my bed. Then, poking at my cheek with a slender finger, she said, “I only accomplished as much as I did because you—who are in second place in terms of military merits—let me, Lord Chou Sekiei. Besides, I know you went

behind my back and convinced U Koufuu to give me that honor. The next time you do something like this, I'll use any method at my disposal, including working with Meirin, to spread the legends of the second coming of Kouei all across the lands."

"Ahhh, oh, Lady Ruri! Lady Ascendant! Please spare me!" I cried, practically showing my belly in surrender at the sudden critical hit. Orid had been going on about it too, but what was all this nonsense about "Kouei of the Modern Era" anyway?

Yui the black cat entered the room, looked around, and then jumped onto Ruri's lap. Ruri had been digging the tip of her finger into my cheek, but upon Yui's arrival, she backed away with a huff and said, "You lack far too much self-awareness! Once that left arm of yours heals up, I have a scolding prepared for you. Oto's excited to give you a piece of her mind too. Anyhow, look at this."

I was sure that what Ruri said about Oto was just a lie to scare me. In any case, Hakurei and I followed her instruction and peered into the cloth bag. It was the small black metal box, so clean that it took me a second to recognize it. A keyhole was now visible, and the emblem that had been engraved into the lid depicted a peach blossom and three swords.

"Oh, that old artisan came by? And this emblem is..." I said.

"It looks completely different from when we dropped it off with him," Hakurei commented.

"He came by while you were asleep," Ruri explained, glancing in my direction. "He spent a lot of time looking into it for us, you know?" She smiled as she stroked Yui's fur, but there was no mirth in her eyes. "I'll put it in simple terms. There's a high chance that this little box contains the Heirloom Seal of the Realm. The real deal too. That emblem is, without a doubt, the emblem of the first emperor of Tou. And the person who can open it—Kou Miu—is right under this roof."

Hakurei and I remained silent, lost in our thoughts as we stared down at the small, unassuming box. *Could a miracle like this really occur?*

Ruri pulled the tie from her hair, letting her golden strands flow loose, as she moved to sit on the mattress. "Now, what should we do? We have the

emperor's sister, perfect for a figurehead, and the heirloom seal to prove one's right to rule. Along with those two, the U and Chou armies now have a sure reputation of might, as we were the ones to defeat Orid Dada. The fate of the Ei Empire rests with your decision."

"You mean 'our' decision," I pointed out.

"Miss Ruri, that's a bad habit of yours," Hakurei scolded.

We couldn't make such a major decision on our own. This reliable strategist was part of our team.



Ruri looked taken aback before she pressed a hand to her forehead and smiled. “I’ll never want for entertainment around you guys, will I?” She sighed. “Fine, then. Let’s brainstorm together. I’ll be with you until the very end, after all.”

“So, Orid put Kouei’s ambush tactic into action. Though it worked, our enemies saw through it, thus causing him to lose Berig and a vast majority of his soldiers. Is that what you mean to tell me, Hasho?”

“Yessir. M-My most sincere apologies, Emperor Adai.”

Some time ago, I’d arrived in Sotaku, a major city in Gen-occupied Suishuu. I—Millenary Diviner Hasho—came to the headquarters set up on the outskirts of the city in order to give my report on our most recent loss. My body trembled as I knelt before the emperor, and I didn’t dare move a muscle, not even to wipe away the cold sweat dripping down my face. I couldn’t face the emperor, who sat upon his throne and looked down at me.

Though Lord Orid had managed to survive the battle and make the difficult trek back, many of the elite fighters under his command didn’t. As for myself, I’d achieved quite a bit on the battlefield, but I hadn’t been able to complete the most important task of getting through Youkaku. *Oh, I’ve made yet another mistake! We were finally healing from the pain of losing the Gray Wolf, Seul Bato, too. The old marshal on the front lines will surely grieve the death of his younger brother.*

The veteran officers who were listening to my report started to murmur among themselves.

“This is Lord Orid we’re discussing, right?”

“He lost? Inconceivable.”

“Sir Berig was one of our oldest and most experienced, wasn’t he? How could this have happened?”

“Has someone informed the marshal?”

“Just who was the one to kill—”

“Silence.” With a single word from the emperor, all uproar died down. In the face of his majestic might, the only thing we could do was sit in fearful respect.

Sweat dripping down my face and to the foreign carpet beneath me, I forced my dry mouth to move. “As the strategist, I bear the responsibility for this defeat, as I wasn’t able to stop Lord Orid from executing his plan. I was positive that his grand scheme to cross Sengai Valley and launch a direct attack on Butoku would work. Please, I am the only one who must be punished for this disgraceful loss.”

I did it! I said it! I’m not like the irresponsible fools that history books talk about! If the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire, Ou Eifuu, were here, he would surely say the same thing. Granted, according to the books, he never knew defeat.

The air moved as His Imperial Majesty raised his hand. “Enough. If anyone must be punished, it should be me, for I misjudged the depths of Orid’s loyalty and bravery. It is terrible that we lost old Berig in all of this.”

“Th-This unworthy one is most grateful for your kind and generous words.”

“Have the soldiers who fought on the front lines reorganized and rested. And enough with the bowing; raise your head.”

“Y-Yessir!”

All strength seemed to flee my body as rage started to burn in my chest. *There’s only a handful of people who could’ve seen through Lord Orid’s strategy. Yet again, that accursed Chou strategist threw my plans awry!*

The emperor rested his cheek in his hand. His long white hair waved slightly from the wind. “Thanks to the secondary invasion on the western regions, our main forces are advancing smoothly through Ei. We’ve already annexed two more provinces, and we’ve destroyed both the water fortresses along the great river as well as the ships that hadn’t fled to open sea. I hear that my elderly attendant on the front lines is having a hard time handling the White and Black Wolves though. They refuse to let the other hog all the glory.”

Chuckles rose from the assembled officers. It seemed that even the old marshal had trouble controlling the proud wolves of the Gen Empire. *But still,*

he already took two provinces and destroyed all of the war ships and fortresses? He works unbelievably fast.

The emperor took a map from a servant and said lightly, “The only target left is the great water fortress, which holds the hundred thousand or so soldiers protecting Rinkei. This is your time to accumulate some military merits, everyone.”

“We will not disappoint you, Emperor Adai Dada, son of the great Celestial Wolf!” all of the gathered soldiers cheered and roared as one.

The final grains of sand in Ei’s hourglass had run out during my struggles at Youkaku. The emperor pushed himself to his feet and approached me, setting a small, warm hand on my shoulder.

“As we don’t possess the Imperial Seal, it will be difficult to exert our authority over the annexed provinces. You have your work cut out for you, Hasho.”

“Y-Yessir! Please leave everything to me!” I could feel my face starting to flush.

Under His Imperial Majesty, I will learn all that I can from his superior stratagems, and one day, I shall become the Ouei of the Modern Era!

The emperor gave a satisfied nod and had taken a few steps back towards his throne when he paused. “Ah, yes, that reminds me.” He turned and fixed his eyes upon me again.

A cold shiver ran up my spine. *Wh-What was that?!* I blinked, and when I opened my eyes again, the emperor was seated on his throne once more, looking the same as he always did.

“Tell me,” he said. “For future reference, who was the one who stopped Orid and Berig?”

In the late hours of the night, my laughter—the laughter of Adai Dada, emperor of the Gen Empire—sounded through the empty military headquarters. My guard, Black Wolf Gisen, was on the front lines, and my

guards, who were all handpicked members of the former Crimson Knights, were protecting the surroundings. No one was around to hear my voice.

I covered my eyes with my hand, my chest filled with so much joy that it felt like it would burst open. *Eihou, I knew you could do it. There was never any doubt in my heart! Considering your age, you must still be far from your prime, and yet you defeated Orid and Berig with such little effort. In retrospect, perhaps it was a given. Who was it in our past lives who first started saying, "Kou Eihou's martial prowess rivals that of a hundred thousand men, and legends of his feats have reached all corners of the four seas"? I for one have never doubted those rumors.*

Removing my hand, I glared at the candle flame and muttered, "So she really is trouble."

The Chou daughter with the silver hair and blue eyes was unforgivable. She was in *my* place; *I* was the one who was supposed to be at Eihou's side. Anyone who would steal my rightful position deserved death, especially if they were also dealing significant damage to my officers and soldiers! I had great respect for Chou Tairan, of course, but in time...

"Well, it's of little consequence. For now, at least," I said.

Oh, Eihou, my dearest friend! In our past lives, you were truly a hero among heroes. I doubt that you're any different in your current one. Wait for me. I shall use everything in my power to prepare a suitable battlefield for a hero such as yourself. In order to do so...

I drained my cup of peach wine. "The fledgeling of the Jo family will need to play the part of a jester once again. This time, until he takes his very last breath."

Afterword

Hello! It's Riku Nanano. It's been four months since I last greeted you like this. Rest assured, I withered away to sand once again while working on this volume. It's so strange... Why does this happen every time? Life is really full of surprises.

Now let's talk about the contents of this book. Up to this point, everything has been going according to Adai's plans. Thanks to that, he was able to overpower Ei, as well as Sekiei and his friends. But in this volume, we can see him starting to fray. Historically, the equestrian tribes in northern China were able to conquer with brute force, but they ran into a lot of problems when it came to actually governing the country. It's also true that they needed something that could prove their right to reign.

But if I can say something extreme, at the end of the day, it's the winners who get to write history. Zhuge Liang has proven how difficult it is to go up against an empire that's more or less conquered an entire continent when you only have a single territory in the west. This is due to the difference in population and economic strength. Sometimes it feels like Zhuge Liang *wasn't* actually a tactical genius, but it would take far too long to argue my point. As for the weakness that Adai showed in this book and what it'll bring about...well, that's something to look forward to.

Now, let's get to some announcements! The newest volume of *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter*, volume 15, is in stores now. Volume 16 will come out this winter. And I mentioned this before, but...can you believe it? There's going to be an anime adaptation! You truly never know what'll happen in life sometimes. It still doesn't feel real to me.

I'd like to thank the people who helped me with this volume. To my editor, I'm really sorry that you went through so much trouble when you were just newly assigned to me. I-I truly apologize; I really do. Cura, thank you again for your artwork in this book. I love your design for Miu. And finally, I'd like to thank all of my readers who got this far. To my readers who've been with me

since Kakuyomu, *Private Tutor* is going to have an anime! I made it!

I look forward to the day we can meet again in the next volume, “The Dancing Fledgling and the Laughing Wraith.”

Riku Nanano

RIKU NANANO
[Illust] cura

4



Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

Heavenly Swords of the Stars Two Stars

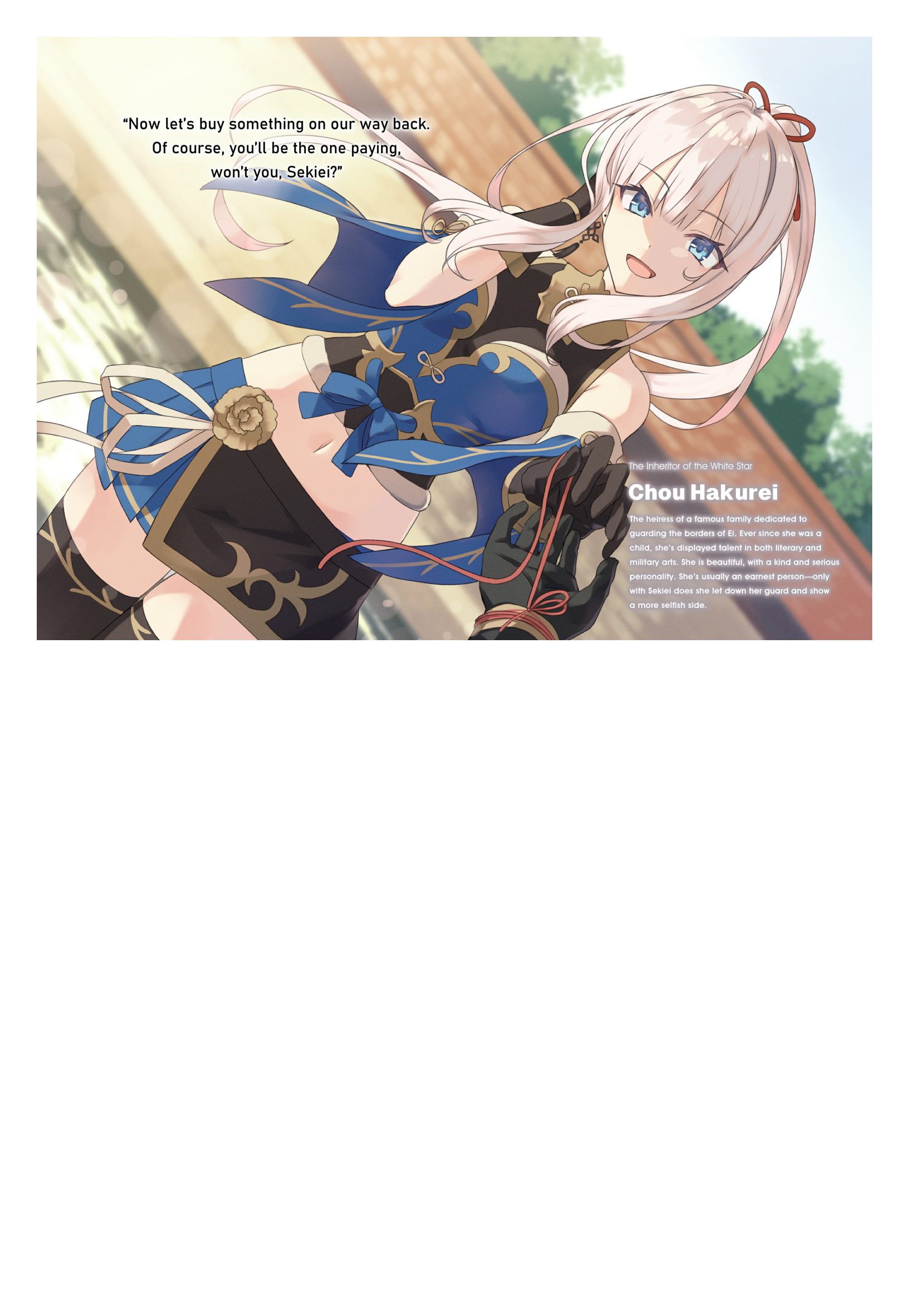


"We shall let them witness the strength of those who survived countless battles against the wolves of Gen."

The Only Daughter of the Late General U

U Oto

The princess of the U family, as well as Ruri's attendant, Oto was the one who led the Chou army to the western regions. She's a straightforward girl who supports Sekiei and the others in order to repay them for saving her on the battlefield.

An anime-style illustration of Chou Hakurei, a young woman with long, flowing pink hair tied in a high ponytail with a red ribbon. She has blue eyes and a gentle smile. She is wearing a black and blue outfit with gold accents, including a large blue bow on her chest and a gold flower ornament. She is holding a red string in her gloved hands. The background shows a wooden structure and green foliage.

“Now let’s buy something on our way back.
Of course, you’ll be the one paying,
won’t you, Sekiei?”

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’s displayed talent in both literary and military arts. She is beautiful, with a kind and serious personality. She’s usually an earnest person—only with Sekiei does she let down her guard and show a more selfish side.



Hakurei and Oto launched themselves at me and wrapped their arms around my torso.

“L-Lord Sekiei!”

“S-Sekiei!”

The Reincarnation of an Undefeated Hero

Sekiei

A young man who was rescued by the finest general of the land and grew up alongside his daughter, Hakurei. His past life's training and experiences have granted him exceptional combat prowess, but all he wants is to leave the battlefield behind and settle down as a civil official.



Idiot! Sekiei, you idiot! You big dummy!
I will never forgive you if you die. Never!

"I am the only one worthy to
serve as his Kouei!"

"Where'd that weird
nickname come from?
I'm Sekiei, the adopted son
of the Chou family."

The Star of the Next Generation of Gen Royals

Orid

Adai's cousin, who possesses a talent for battle,
leadership, and politics. He leads the attack on
the western regions and refers to himself as the
Kouei of the modern ages. As such, he views
Sekiei as his rival.

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“So please—I’m begging you—please
send reinforcements to Rinkei!”

The Patriotic Princess

Kou Miu

The younger half sister of the emperor of Ei.
She can recognize the dire straits her country
is in and feels responsible as the sister of the
foolish emperor. The protection charm around
her neck is a memento from her mother.



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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars: Volume 4

by Riku Nanano

Translated by Stephanie Liu Edited by Leah Bogert

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