



# Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars



RIKU NANANO

[Illust] cura

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# Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

*“My name is Hiyou,  
the only son of Jo Shuuhou!”*

A Pleasant Young Man

## Jo Hiyou

The eldest son of the Jo family, which is led by one of the Three Great Generals of the Ei Empire. His first experience with battle was the Seitou invasion. However, it was a great disaster, resulting in his father's death.

## C O N T E N T S

Heavenly Swords  
of the Twin Stars

P r o l o g u e

C h a p t e r O n e

C h a p t e r T w o

C h a p t e r T h r e e

C h a p t e r F o u r

E p i l o g u e

A f t e r w o r d



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 talents in both literary and military arts. She is beautiful, and has 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.



The Cute Strategist with Godlike Intelligence

## Ruri

A young girl who claims to be an ascendant. Meirin's acquaintance, she was the one who discovered the legendary Heavenly Swords. Despite possessing an extraordinary mind for tactics and a keen eye for observation, she defests war.





“Adai Dada, I’ve come for you!”

“You truly are nothing compared to Kouei.”

“Prepare yourself!”

The White Wraith

**Adai Dada**

The emperor of the Gen Empire, which is at war with Ei, where Sekiei and the others live. Despite his waifish appearance, his sharp mind can conjure many fearsome tactics and strategies. In the seven years since he took the throne, he’s never lost a single battle. In his past life, he and Eiho were only a step away from unifying all the lands under the heavens.

The National Shield

**Chou Tairan**

Hakurei’s father and the man who took in Sekiei. He is the greatest general of his generation and is in charge of guarding the lands in northern Ei.





“You saw my face, didn’t you?  
And my eyes and my hair?!”

The Mysterious Girl

**Ren**

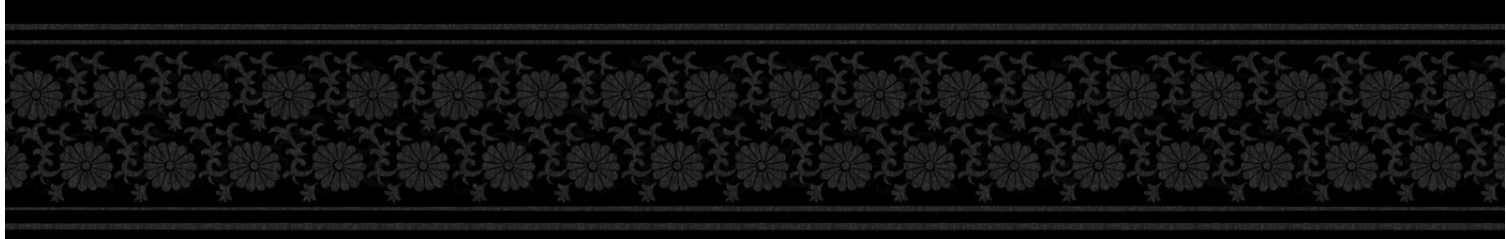
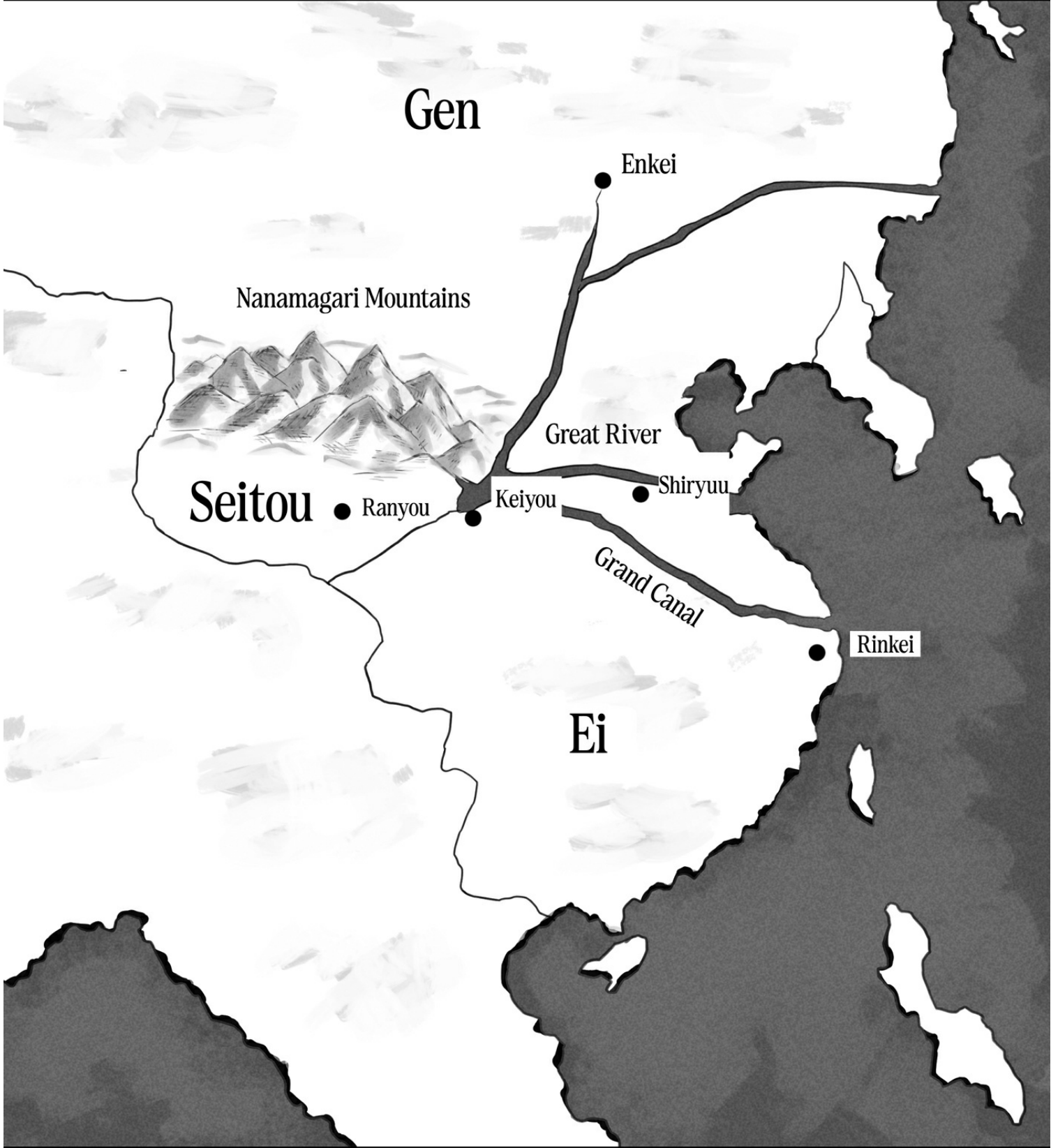
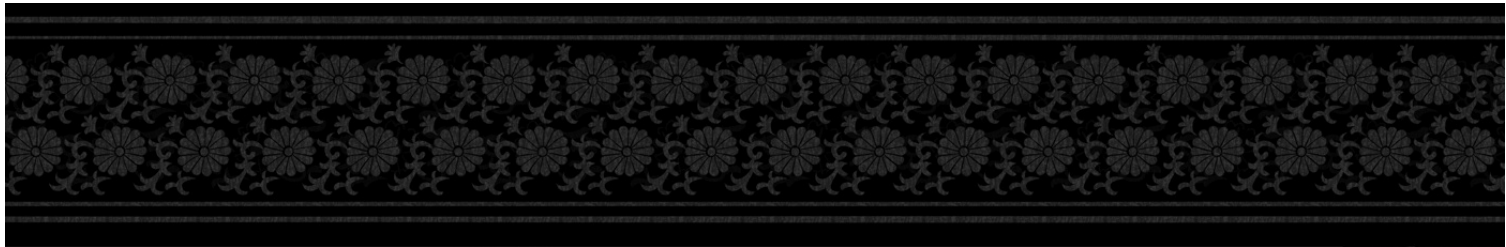
A mysterious girl who appears alongside the Gen emperor, Adai Dada. She normally hides her face behind a fox mask and covers her head with a raggedy cloak.



**"THE HEAVENS  
KNOW THE TRUTH!"**









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# Prologue

“We’ve arrived, son of the Jo family. Get in.”

At the sound of the young prison guard’s cold voice, I, Jo Hiyou, raised my face. I gritted my teeth in a combination of fear and shame; before me was a dim underground cell. The air was filled with a terrible stench and a fat rat raced along the floor before disappearing into the walls. This was not the type of place that one would take the eldest son of the Jo family, which had protected the southern regions of the Ei Empire for generations and generations.

When we invaded our former ally, Seitou, some time ago, my father—the Phoenix Wing, Jo Shuuhou—died on the battlefield. During my escape, Blackblade, the strongest general from the Gen Empire, which ruled the lands north of the great river, gave pursuit. I might have suffered an overwhelming defeat at his hands, but that didn’t mean I should have to put up with this sort of humiliation!

My body trembled from sheer rage and I tried to fight back from being led into the cell, flexing my arms in an attempt to break free from the ropes binding them. However, the muscular guards pushed me down onto the stone floor, kicking and hitting me with their clubs without mercy.

“Gah!”

“Don’t make more work for us.”

The agony was intense and the young prison guard’s voice sounded like it was coming from far away as my consciousness started to fade. The violence stopped and they shoved me into the cell. They cut my ropes with a dagger before they walked out, shutting the metal door, with its one small window, behind them. With trembling hands I dragged myself along the ground, coughing and panting. The sleeves of my robes were dirtied with fresh blood.

After the Seitou invasion had ended in a crushing failure, I, along with the few



surviving soldiers, managed to crawl back to Nanyou. Nanyou was one of the biggest cities in the southern regions, the Jo family's base of operations.

My mother and elderly grandparents welcomed me back with warm, open arms. During the winter I was able to recuperate, healing from both physical and mental wounds. However... I thought back to the summons that had been sent to the city last month, signed with the emperor's own seal.

"During the Battle of Ranyou, Jo Shuuhou and U Jouko, unable to contain their bloodlust, charged before official orders were given. This action caused the Ei army to lose and flee from the battlefield. Jo Hiyou suffered a total defeat during the retreat, causing the deaths of numerous generals and officers, before he escaped to his homeland of Ranyou. Surrender yourself at once to Rinkei and report on your failings. If you do not make an appearance, we will charge you with conspiracy."

Even thinking back on it, the contents of the letter were so different from the actual truth that a shiver ran down my spine.

"You mustn't go. We must first discuss things with the U family in the west and the Chou family in the north," my mother had said. But now that my father was dead, I was the only person left who could lead my family. So it was with that conviction in my heart that I arrived at the capital, Rinkei, as the head of the Jo family. But then...

From outside the door, the young prison guard started to speak to me in an exhausted tone, saying, "I sympathize with you. Even us prison guards have heard of the Phoenix Wing and the Tiger Fang, said to be the National Shield's equals. None of us believe the verdict leveled against you, which is precisely why I'm begging you: please don't try anything funny. If you resist, we'll have no choice but to hurt you even more."

A storm of emotions raged in my chest. Ignoring the pain in my body, I slammed my fist against the door, causing the dim flames lighting the cell to shake. "My father...Jo Shuuhou did not fight in a manner that would sully his name when he was at Ranyou, the capital of Seitou! The reason we lost was because the lieutenant chancellor Rin Chuudou relinquished command of the troops out of his own cowardice and the marshal of the royal guard, Ou



Hokujaku, tried to promote himself!”

I raged on. “My father and General U fought bravely until the very end, and for what?! How come Chuudou and Hokujaku, who survived the battle that day, received no punishment?! Why must my father and the others’ deaths be insulted and the Jo and U families’ honor stripped away?! I was the only one who lost during the retreat! If someone must be punished, then I am the only one who deserves it!”

The guard stood there in silence for a few moments before I heard him walk away. Body still smarting, I limped towards the stone wall and pressed my back against it.

“Why?” I murmured, my breath hitching as tears leaked down my face, falling onto my knees. “How did things turn out this way?”

I covered my face with both hands. As I did, the faces of the black-haired, red-eyed boy and the silver-haired, blue-eyed girl—the ones who never lost hope even when the war seemed hopeless, and who saved both me and the Jo family army from the devastating battlefield of Ranyou—came to mind.

*“Hiyou, you should come with us!”* They’d both said it after they helped us defeat an enemy scouting party. If only I hadn’t separated from their group, too caught up in maintaining my foolish sense of pride, more of my soldiers might have made it back to Ei. I wouldn’t have lost as many of them to Blackblade, my father’s murderer and the one who’d pursued us during the retreat.

Weakness and regret weighed on my shoulders as I kept my face covered with my wrecked hands. “Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, Father, what should I...what should I do?”

Of course, no one answered me. The judge hadn’t given me a detailed explanation of the punishment I would receive, but I’d been forced into this underground cell without even the chance to explain myself. Any idiot could understand what was coming next.

“How pathetic, Jo Hiyou.”

I sucked in a breath as the sound of a man’s cold voice hit my ears. It sounded familiar, as if I’d heard it at some point in the past, but...



It was hopeless. I couldn't place it. "Who's there?" I asked in a curt voice, not bothering with caution.

Judging by the size of the shadow, the person behind the door was not one of the earlier guards. "That's a rather meaningless question, but hmm. I suppose if I had to give you an answer, I am someone who understands you."

"Someone who understands me?" My echo was suspicious. *Someone who understands me, who's about to die after being forced to take responsibility for a loss?*

The man came closer, continuing in a calm voice, "During the Battle of Ranyou, the Jo family army and the U family army fought bravely. The lieutenant chancellor who should have taken command of the whole army never showed his face on the battlefield. A mass attack from the catapults and the heavy infantry of Seitou crushed the royal guard, and yet none of you, including the horsemen from the north, retreated a single step."

Rin Chuudou, the lieutenant chancellor who had been the supreme commander of the invading army, and Ou Hokujuu, the royal guard marshal who had ordered that reckless charge... I would never forget them or this hatred festering inside of me for as long as I lived. I bit my lip to control the anger.

"Even though your loss was clear, the Phoenix Wing and the Tiger Fang never stopped encouraging their men. They fought and died with courage. We might have lost in the end... No, our loss is precisely why their reputations shine with such brilliance! At least, among those with a heart and conscience such as myself. It is far too ironic that the lieutenant chancellor and the royal guard marshal—who have displayed nothing but cowardice, laziness, and envy—were the ones to make it back alive."

"Those with a heart and conscience..." Was he saying that even in a viper nest like Rinkei, there were those who could still be considered human? As I sat there, confused, the man approached the door, though I still could not see his face.

"Jo Hiyou, if nothing changes for you, you will die," he said. "They'll force you to bear the responsibility of their loss and kill you. Not only that, but the Jo and



U families will lose all of their privileges and will eventually become destitute.”

“Impossible! If that happens, then there will be no more peace around the borders!”

Both Jo and U families used their scarce forces to secure the southern and western regions of the Ei Empire. They were already at their limit. If barbarians and rebels sensed any further weakness, they would not hesitate to attack.

In the near future, the Gen Empire would launch a southern invasion. At the focal point of the Grand Canal, which bisected the continent into north and south, was Keiyou. The waters around Keiyou directly connected it to Rinkei. If the Jo and U families didn’t send reinforcements to Keiyou, then even with the National Shield, Lord Sekiei, and Lady Hakurei, we would lose.

The man slammed his hand against his chest in a mighty salute. “I will not permit anyone to kill you! Please have faith in me.”

That was when a thought hit me. This man was able to come to this place despite the dangers he’d be in, as well as send the prison guards away. “Are you by any chance working for the grand chancellor?”

Lord You Bunshou was the grand chancellor of the Ei Empire. He, alongside the Three Great Generals—my deceased father, General U, and Chou Tairan—was one of the cornerstones of this country. I’d heard that the grand chancellor had opposed the Seitou invasion until the very last minute. If this man was working for him, then it wouldn’t be odd for him to approach me and—

My thoughts were interrupted with loud laughter, the sound echoing off the walls of the cell. I could see a gecko near the moths gathered around the lights, its tongue darting out and capturing them.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, my voice low in suspicion.

“Ahh, orphan of the Jo family. You know nothing of the vile world of politics, nor do you have any idea as to how frightening You Bunshou can be.” The footsteps came closer still until they stopped right by the door. I could hear him flicking the bars of the cell a few times with his finger before he said in a cheery tone, “The grand chancellor was the one who used his authority to summon you to Rinkei. He was the one who set the lieutenant chancellor up to do so.”



It was as if his words were a bolt of lightning, the shock traveling from head to toe. My body started to tremble and I couldn't gather my thoughts.

"Wha—?! N-No way! He would never do something like—"

"If not him, then who else could have summoned the heir of the Jo family at this point in time? Who could have called you away from Nanyou, which lost the Phoenix Wing and the elite soldiers in its army, and even showed hints of rebellion? If I recall, the summons had been stamped with the emperor's personal seal. Very few people can convince His Imperial Majesty to use it. You Bunshou is the chancellor of a vast empire; of course he's capable of both morality and corruption. The deaths of your father and U Jouko have been used as tools in a game of politics, all in order to centralize power in this country. He's even planning on offering Keiyou and the northern shores of the Grand Canal to Gen in order to broker peace, you know?"

"Y-You're lying! I'll never believe something like that!"

The people in the capital cared about nothing save for their political power struggles and their own entertainment. Among them, the grand chancellor was one of the few whom General Chou, General U, and father trusted. *Yet he was the one who lured me to the capital and captured me?*

My thoughts were a mess in my mind, and I couldn't sort through any of them. A man wearing a fox mask peered in from the small window in the door before he turned on his heel. The sight of him sent yet another shock through me and I jumped to my feet, forgetting the pain my body was in.

"W-Wait!" I yelled. "You're Denso, the right-hand man to the lieutenant chancellor!"

"I'll come see you again. Allow me to repeat this one more time: I am on your side. I promise to free you from this prison."

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I, Denso, walked alone through the hall, the path before me dark with the veil of night. As part of the Senko, a secret organization that had guided the continent from behind the scenes ever since the start of its history, my presence in Ei was due to a mission. For now, my job was to return to the



foolish lieutenant chancellor's manor before morning came.

In the vast and frigid space, I could see a stone pillar with a dragon and phoenix carved into it, as well as the magistrates' seats. I was in the court, the place which had cast judgment upon countless people over the years. That could be why the air here felt so much colder than anywhere else in the imperial palace.

I stopped walking and stared up at the symbolic obsidian boulder right in the middle of the room. No matter how many times I gazed upon it, I could not fathom the sheer size of the stone. It didn't seem like something from this mortal realm. The people of Ei referred to it as...

"It's the Dragon Jade," a voice sounded out.

"Oh! If it isn't Master Ren."

A person wearing a fox mask and dressed in a raggedy coat that covered even their head stepped out from behind a stone pillar. Upon seeing them, I bent a knee to the ground. I hadn't sensed them at all. *Is this their way of telling me that they can kill me at any time should they judge me incapable of fulfilling my duties?* A cold sweat broke out on my brow at the thought.

Seven years ago, Master Ren, an ascendant shrouded in mysteries, was chosen to serve as the field commander in order to replace our elderly chief. Now, they reached out and placed their hand on the boulder, the foreign blade at their waist making a soft sound with the motion.

"The *Book of Sai*, put together years ago, wrote about this as well. It's one of the most prominent boulders on the continent. I heard that when the false emperor of Ei lost the lands to the north and became the ruler of this place back when it was nothing more than a desolate village, he used this rock as a symbol of his superiority. He called it 'proof that a dragon, the personification of the heavens, watches over the land of Ei.' I also heard that even after he built a palace, he kept this rock here on purpose, and that he has doled out sentences to numerous criminals in this very spot. That's why even the soldiers on night guard avoid this area. Of course, there is no proof that any of the legends are true. I even heard that the great Kou Eihou used his Heavenly Swords to cut apart a similar boulder in the northern land of Routou, but I

doubt the rumor's veracity."

I couldn't even make a sound. I hailed from a tribe that joined the Senko after the Ei Empire lost the lands north of the great river. That was all I was. Even the name Denso, which I'd been given after joining the organization, was taken from a mouse. If I didn't obey the fox—and not just any fox, but a great fox spirit—I'd be eaten. I couldn't even work up the willpower to resist.

Master Ren turned around, the movement revealing some of the hair underneath their coat. "At the same time, no matter what land or country they live in, people are prone to superstition. I cannot fault them for harboring fearful respect for a boulder that a human cannot move or shatter, much less slice in half. So then, how are things going? Do you think the juvenile hatchling of the Jo family will be of use?"

"He's very shaken. I doubt it will take long."

"I see."

The ascendant's beautiful lips twisted with some hint of desolation. Perhaps they pitied Jo Hiyou, who was trapped in the web of the fearsome emperor of Gen, Adai Dada.

"As soon as the winter passes, the White Wraith in the north will recommence his southern campaign," they continued. "The majority of Ei's bravest generals and officers were culled in the earlier conflict. Our only remaining obstacles are Chou Tairan in Keiyou and..." Master Ren's small hand traveled to their waist and they touched the hilt of their sword. "And the elderly You Bunshou. I'm sure that by now, he's yelling at the cowardly false emperor for the injustices he meted out upon the Jo and U families. Ever since the invasion's overwhelming failure, the citizens of the city have been whispering, 'The lieutenant chancellor and royal guard marshal are fools, but the emperor who gave them permission to go is an even bigger fool!' To think that things could have progressed this way just because his favorite mistress told him about those rumors. Sometimes a hardworking and kindhearted person does more harm than a lazy and villainous one."

"Yes, Master Ren!"

The Three Great Generals of Ei would never come together again. There was



no army left in the city that could serve as reinforcements for Keiyou, and rebellions were sure to occur after the people saw the Jo and U families' punishment. This country was done for. Not even the great hero, the National Shield Chou Tairan, could do anything to stop it.

Master Ren drew from their vermilion-lacquered scabbard a foreign sword with a beautiful wave pattern on its blade. They pressed it against my neck and said, "Denso, we sent you to that ugly and foolish Rin Chuudou because the chief predicted the current state of affairs. Hasho became too excited in the earlier battle and got the Gray Wolf killed. If you succeed here, you will surely rise through the ranks of the Senko. At the same time though, if you fail..."

I purposefully steeled my will and ignored the icy blade biting into my skin. If Hasho's job was to puppet Seitou, then mine was to puppet Ei. I would show that annoying ersatz strategist, who'd lost himself in his own arrogance and talent, what I could do.

"I swear that I will bring the Jo fledgling to our side."

"I look forward to your work."

Master Ren returned the blade to the sheath in a movement that could only be described as refined. Then, with no effort at all, they leaped into the air, kicking from pillar to pillar as they made for the entrance of the hall. No human was capable of such a movement.

"Ah, I almost forgot to tell you something." Master Ren landed on the ground without a sound and then turned their gaze over their shoulder to look at me. The glow of moonlight enveloped their slight frame. "Gather information on Chou Tairan's son and daughter. They killed the Crimson and Gray Wolves—wolves that are the pride of the Gen Empire. I am positive that they will stand with Chou Tairan against the White Wraith in the upcoming conflict. Adai is a pain in the ass, but until he unifies the lands under the heavens, we cannot risk his death."

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"Your Imperial Majesty, if I may be so bold as to pose a question, why did you sully the deceased Phoenix Wing and Tiger Fang's honor? And as if that wasn't enough, why did you throw Jo Hiyou into jail? Not only that, but you did so

while this humble servant was on a ship in the Grand Canal, discussing matters with Chou Tairan! I cannot accept it.”

In the heart of the imperial palace, where the emperor’s bedroom was, I, You Bunshou, stood interrogating my sovereign. By all rights, I shouldn’t even be here, as men weren’t allowed in this part of the palace—but desperate times called for desperate measures. I had even pushed past the exhaustion of my trip away from the capital in order to come here and meet with him.

The emperor was dressed in his sleeping robes and I could see how pale he was, even in the dim candlelight. In response to my questions, he replied as if trying to give excuses. “B-Bunshou, quell your anger. Are sure punishments and rewards not the way of this world? Yes, Chuudou personally advised me on this matter, but I also heard from Hokujaku that the Jo family army and the U family army were the reasons that we lost this battle.”

Though I was in front of the emperor, I desperately wanted to tear my white hair from my head. News of our defeat must have disturbed him a great deal if he placed this much trust in the words of just two men, even if one was a favored subject and the other a member of his consort clan.

“Yes, I agree that those who have done well should be rewarded finely for their work, and those who have failed should be severely punished.”

“In that case—”

“However!”

I interrupted the emperor and looked him in the eyes. I’d raised him ever since he was young, and even offered him more affection and care than I gave my own children. I could see how his eyes kept darting back and forth, as if he was so shaken that he couldn’t look at anything for too long.

“However, that does not make sense in this case,” I said. “The invasion of Seitou ended in a failure, but what crime would that fall under? What sins have the deceased generals and Jo Shuuhou’s orphan committed? I don’t know what you’ve heard from those two. However, if you are going to punish anyone, it should be Rin Chuudou, who immediately fled for Rinkei instead of taking command at the final battle, and Ou Hokujaku, whose reckless order led to the royal guard’s defeat! He even had the nerve to come crawling back alive, even



though *he* was the one who caused so many allied deaths in the first place! The reason that the royal guard soldiers under Chuudou's command returned alive is that they retreated without ever fighting in the actual invasion. I confirmed this myself during my meeting with Chou Tairan."

The emperor turned away, a look of guilt on his handsome face. Despite that, I drew closer to him and continued without a hint of mercy.

"The Chou family army fought through the Battle of Ranyou, as well as against the vicious pursuers that chased them from Seitou. They were even the ones who killed the Gray Wolf in Bourou Gorge. None of them said anything negative about Jo Shuuhou or U Jouko. While retreating, Jo Hiyou fought against Blackblade, a Gen general. Yes, he lost, but he did well to gather the Jo family army's survivors and return to Nanyou. To place *him* in jail...why, it's utter insanity. Using the deceased generals' deaths as the reason to strip their families of a portion of their privileges and assets will only lead to rebellion! We can see the truth of these words in how the U family did not respond to your summons."

"Y-You have a point."

My master trailed off, murmuring something under his breath. I figured that his most beloved concubine, who was part of the same family as the lieutenant chancellor, had whispered something into his ear, and he was only doing what he thought best. However, these choices were unforgivable.

In a quiet voice, I informed him of the cold reality we faced. "Of course, part of the responsibility lies on my old shoulders. It will be impossible, mind, to silence the people. Rumors that the emperor is listening to the advice of a corrupt official and is obsessed with punishing his loyal subjects are already floating around Rinkei. In time, the entire country will hear of your awful reputation, my emperor."

The emperor's face grew even paler and he started to shiver. "B-Bunshou," he said, his voice high and begging for help. "What should I...what should I do?"

I thought for a moment before I replied, "Since your seal was on the summons, it will be difficult to take back the punishment, especially since it was only carried out yesterday. The populace will only have a lower opinion of you if

you deal with the matter swiftly.”

*Forgive me*, I thought to Jo Shuuhou and U Jouko, who’d perished in that fateful battle at Ranyou. *It will take some time before I can restore your honor to you.*

I placed my wrinkled hand over my heart and continued, “Your Imperial Majesty, leave everything to this old man.”

The emperor bowed his head low. “Thank you.”

He wasn’t a bad person and because of that, I should be able to guide him back onto the right path. I kicked my old bones into action and took out the papers I needed to continue my report. *This* was what I really wanted to discuss with him. If we made the wrong move, it might lead to a total collapse of this country.

“Next, I would like to report on what Chou Tairan and I discussed. There is great movement to the north. We believe that they will wait for the snow to melt and then cross the river in order to inva—”

“Your Imperial Majesty, it is I, Uto.” A woman’s sultry voice sounded from outside the room. “I have come for you tonight. May I open the door?”

*We’re discussing matters that have to do with this country’s future!* I looked towards the door to yell at the person behind it, but a white hand appeared in my field of vision to stop me. I was shocked when I saw the emperor’s face, for there was clear relief in his expression.

“It is late, Bunshou. We can continue this discussion tomorrow at the imperial court. You should rest as well.”

There were many things I wanted to say, but I finally decided on “Very well.”

*I give up.* If the emperor ordered me to leave in such a manner, then as his subject, there was nothing more that I could do or say. I pushed myself out of the chair, lowered my head in a bow, and then dragged myself out of the room. As I did, the favored concubine Uto—who boasted unparalleled beauty on top of her status as the lieutenant chancellor’s adopted daughter—walked past me. The fragrance of flowers wafted from her pale lilac hair. She entered the room and closed the door behind her.



The moment she did, I heard a conversation that made a chill run down my spine.

“Ohh... Uto, Uto...”

“Your Imperial Majesty, I’ve wanted to come to you ever since the sun rose in the sky. Oh, if only the moon could shine forever.”

I staggered down the hall and used my hand to support myself against one of the pillars. My heart ached. Even standing was too much for my frail body. I glared up at the dark northern sky, where the twin stars glittered, and spat, “So once again, I must rely on the National Shield? If only the Phoenix Wing and Tiger Fang had made it back... No, even *if* they made it back, this country is already...”

I trailed off and my muttering disappeared into the darkness of the night. The only sounds remaining were the sweet nothings of the emperor and his precious mistress.

# Chapter One

“All right! We’re done packing everything into the ships. Have we forgotten anything?”

I—Sekiei, the adopted son of the Chou family, which was dedicated to guarding Keiyou, a major city in the Ei Empire’s Koshuu—turned around as I dusted off my coat. This berth, situated in the east of Keiyou, was full of conversing people and patrolling soldiers. It was built along the Grand Canal, the waterway that split the continent into north and south. Due to the bad weather during the winter, this was the first ship in a long time that would be heading towards Rinkei, the capital of the Ei Empire.

Many people had stopped to stare at the docked paddlewheeler—the wheels on both sides of the ship made it a rare sight. However, they could also be looking for the opportunity to let their women and children escape from Keiyou, which was the front line between Ei and Gen. After all, it had only been three months since we suffered a crushing defeat during an invasion of our former ally, Seitou. Gen, a country of cavalymen who ruled the lands north of the river, was a force to be reckoned with; everyone knew that.

“Grr, Lord Sekiei?”

“Uh, huh?”

As I’d lost myself in thought, a girl wearing clothes dyed orange came marching up to me, a dissatisfied look on her face. The hair poking out from the sides of her hat was sticking up. Barring her large breasts, this girl—who was actually older than me—looked like a child. But this was Meirin, the teenage heiress of the affluent Ou family, merchants who had quickly made a name for themselves.

Meirin closed the distance between us and said, “Lord Sekiei, don’t you feel sad that you’re going to be separated from your future wife, who just so happens to be the cutest girl under the heavens?! I feel so lonely and so pained thinking about it that I’m about to burst into tears! Ahh, if I knew that things



would turn out this way, I wouldn't have stayed in Keiyou during the winter.  
Sniff sniff!"

"The cutest girl under the heavens? And my future wife to boot?" I echoed on purpose, ignoring her terrible fake crying.



This little prodigy, who loved to propose marriage to me, was supposed to have returned to the city already. However, she ended up staying for around three months, using excuses like the bad weather or supervising the import of materials for fortifying the city. As a result though, Keiyou's defenses were far better than before, which I was very grateful for. I would have to pay back this debt some day—of course, I would never say any of that to the pouting girl before me.

“Why do you seem confused?! Jeez!” Meirin yelled, frustrated. She didn't notice my gratitude and crossed her arms.

When I looked behind her, I saw a young woman wearing black-and-white clothing and carrying a foreign dagger in her belt. She was Miss Shizuka, Meirin's attendant. Shizuka held her hands together in an apologetic gesture. Her long black hair, which was tied up, reflected the early spring sunlight.

*My own black hair is so much rougher than hers...* I didn't get to think more on the matter because Meirin pointed at me, the tip of her finger grazing my nose. It seemed that she was standing on her tippy-toes in order to reach my face.

“In! Any! Case! I know it's not something I should be bragging about, but I worked really hard this time! I worked my fingers to the bone to strengthen Keiyou's defenses and limited myself to hugging Lord Sekiei only three times a day! And yet...and yet!”

“Ahh.”

I watched, at a loss of what to do as Meirin pouted. This girl was supposed to be older than me. *For starters, I think three hugs a day is still a lot. Yeah, it's way too much.* As a result of those hugs, the silver-haired and blue-eyed heiress of the Chou family, who happened to be my childhood friend, had spent the past few months in a terrible mood! When I asked my blonde-haired, emerald-eyed strategist for advice, all she'd said was “It's your own fault though.” *How cruel!*

Despite that, I had no intention of brushing off the girl before me. Even when I thought back to the foggy memories of my past life as the undefeated great general Kou Eihou, who had lived a thousand years ago in the Tou Empire,



Eihou always had a soft spot for people he accepted as his own. *So this softness from my past life stayed with me in this one? I haven't matured at all.*

I didn't reveal any of my self-deprecating thoughts as I placed my hand on Meirin's hat and said, "Yeah, you really did a good job here. I'm thankful for your help. You especially did well on the...uh, I can't remember the name right now. What's that thing that you use to dig up the earth?"

The name of the tool was on the tip of my tongue, but it wouldn't come out. I moved my hands as I explained it as if that would help. Under the orders of our self-acclaimed ascendant of a strategist, we were building bulwarks and moats in the west of Keiyou. This was far too strenuous a task for our plows and hoes. After a few discussions with Meirin, she had used her connections to import several foreign tools and we'd finished the work in a blink of an eye. Apparently, they were items from a country filled with deserts, far to the west.

Meirin blinked and tilted her head to the side, her finger resting on her chin. "Um, do you mean a shovel? The broad, bladelike tool that has a long stick attached to it?"

"Yes, that's it! I only used them a few times during my patrols, but they were amazing. The soldiers were delighted, saying that the shovels were far easier than plows and hoes when it came to stacking dirt or digging ditches. It's embarrassing that I never thought of something like this. Oh Meirin, I truly believe you're a girl of unparalleled talent, always delivering exactly what we need when we need it. I can't thank you enough! You're amazing!"

Since these were my genuine thoughts, the words flowed out of me like water. If Meirin hadn't provided such excellent tools for the job, we wouldn't have finished even half of our preparations.

"Heh, eh heh heh! ♪ I-I'll feel embarrassed if you compliment me like... Oh! H-Humph! A few compliments aren't enough for me to forgive you! I'm not *that* easy of a—" She was in the middle of shyly twisting her body, her hands on her cheeks, when she interrupted herself with a sneeze. Though it was technically spring and the days were getting warmer, it was quite cold.

"It's because you don't wear enough clothes, you know?" I drawled. "It gets really windy on boats too."

“Grr! This is when you should say, ‘Are you all right, my adorable Meirin?’ and express some worry for— Eh?”

I took off my coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. Feeling a little embarrassed for some reason, I looked away and explained in a rush, “Wear it. I wouldn’t know how to face your parents if you ended up catching a cold.”

After a few whinnies from the horses, I heard people cheering. *They made it in time for the boat’s departure?* I breathed a sigh of relief and then saw Meirin grip the sleeves of the coat with a small smile.

“Thank you. Hee hee! ♪ Lord Seeekiei! ☆”

“Whoa!”

She jumped against my chest and I hurriedly supported her. *O-Oh no. If she sees us like this...*

Ignorant of my fears, Meirin looked up at me, her big eyes sparkling. “I knew that you’re the only man who could be my husband, Lord Sekiei! I’ll treasure this coat for the rest of my life.”

*Oh, she’s serious. That coat was just one mass-produced for the army though.* I scratched my cheek and then said, “You know, you... Oh, here she comes.”

Meirin’s response was a frustrated groan.

The people’s cheering grew even louder, signaling the arrival of the two beautiful women who’d been supervising the work in the western districts of Keiyou. One of them had tied up her long silver hair with a scarlet ribbon, and her blue eyes were as sharp as a blade. She was wearing the same coat I had been and the sword hanging from her belt was the White Star, one of the Heavenly Swords. Her name was Chou Hakurei—my childhood friend and the only daughter of Chou Tairan, the National Shield.

The other girl had blonde hair, which was rare even in the Ei Empire, and she’d tied it up with a blue ribbon. Her left eye was hidden away behind her long bangs. This was Ruri, my strategist. It seemed like she’d rushed over here, as she was fanning herself with her blue hat.





As soon as they reached us, Hakurei crossed her arms and glared up at me. “Sekiei? What do you think you’re doing in front of all these people?”

“I’m sure this is an everyday occurrence for you two, but you’re really standing out,” Ruri added. Unlike Hakurei, whose anger was in part genuine, Ruri seemed like she was just having fun and stirring up the situation.

*Th-This strategist and her love of pranks!* Without a choice, I looked over to the furious princess of the Chou family and explained, “Uh, this isn’t of my free will—”

“Here you are, Little Miss Third Wheeler!” Before I could finish, Meirin butted in. “Coming all the way here to interfere in my relationship with Lord Sekiei... Why don’t you read the room a little?! Ruri, you agree with me, right? Right?!”

*Oh? This seems like the perfect opportunity to get away...*

“Don’t drag me into this,” Ruri complained.

“Would you care to repeat that one more time?” Hakurei asked Meirin in a cold voice. “Whose relationship with whom, did you say?”

As expected, Hakurei had fallen for the taunt, and they started fighting over who would have Ruri on their side. *Heck yeah.* Holding my breath and concealing my presence, I started to move away from the three girls when I heard someone calling out to me.

“Lord Sekiei, Lord Sekiei!”

When I looked in the direction of the voice, I saw Miss Shizuka calling from the shadows of some boxes. *What a considerate young lady!* I hid there with her.

“Lord Sekiei,” Miss Shizuka said, “thank you so much for taking care of Lady Meirin. She seemed quite depressed this morning, but it looks like I won’t have anything to worry about now.”

In the face of her gratitude, I hurried to say, “Ah, please raise your head! It was nothing...is what I’d like to say, but you and Meirin really helped us out these past few months. *We* should be the ones thanking you.” I hadn’t heard how Miss Shizuka had ended up as Meirin’s attendant, but this beautiful

woman who hailed from a foreign country had a wide range of knowledge. She often offered me, Hakurei, and Ruri advice when we were troubled.

We bowed to each other and then started giggling as one. We could still hear Hakurei and Meirin's argument; it was impossible to tell if their relationship was a good or bad one.

Hakurei narrowed her eyes as she sighed, saying, "I can't believe you would hug someone like that in public. Why don't you conduct yourself in a more demure manner?"

"Ohh? So based on what you said, it's all right for me to hug Lord Sekiei as long as we're in private? Hee hee! ♪ It looks like the Chou family's heiress has finally gotten with the program! Once Lord Sekiei and I become man and wife, you'll be my little sister-in-law, so— Mmrgh!"

Hakurei reached out and covered Meirin's mouth. Then she looked at me, even though I should have been hidden away by the shadows of the boxes, and pouted. *Uh, what do you want me to do?* I remained silent.

In response, Hakurei said in a voice so loud it could only be on purpose, "Please be quiet. Otherwise, I'll tell Sekiei that you've been coming to Miss Ruri and me these past few nights, crying about how you don't want to return to Rinkei!"

"Mmrgh?!" Meirin's face flushed red.

"Won't he hear you if you yell it like that?" Ruri asked in an exasperated tone, placing her hat back onto her head.

Meirin managed to break free from Hakurei's hold and was bravely attempting to attack her. Miss Shizuka, watching her mistress with an affectionate gaze, murmured, "Ever since she was a child, Lady Meirin has displayed her talents both publicly and privately. As a result, she wasn't able to make any friends her age." She sat up straighter and then looked at me, her eyes glittering like black pearls. They housed a strong sense of worry. "Ever since we came to this city, she seems to have so much fun every day. As her attendant, I know of no greater joy. Lord Sekiei..."

"I know. I won't let Hakurei or Ruri die."

The political situation now was even worse than it had been seven years ago, back when the former Gen emperor tried to invade us. The invasion that had been caused by our foolish lieutenant chancellor's avarice and the royal guard marshal's desperation for accomplishments ended up costing Ei many of its generals. As of right now, the only people who could protect this country were my father and the grand chancellor You Bunshou in the capital.

I touched White Star's paired blade Black Star, which hung from my waist, and looked over at the three girls. Hakurei was playing with Meirin, while Ruri was pulled along by their antics. *They're probably the only people I'll be able to save.*

"Kuen, Shun'en," I called out. "You're there, aren't you?"

"Y-Yessir!" The foreign boy and girl, who had finished preparing for their trip, appeared in an instant.

They were volunteer soldiers who'd asked to join the army before we left for the Seitou invasion. They were both thirteen years old. According to Teiha, who was my vice-commander, they were the youngest in the army, but even so they were much too small and childlike. *Maybe they're even younger than thirteen.* Even when they were at their limits, they never showed that they were struggling. They looked up at me with matching anxious expressions.

"Teiha already told you your job, didn't he? I want you two to serve as bodyguards for Meirin and Miss Shizuka. To tell the truth, it hurts to let you two go. Not only did you survive the battle in Seitou, but you were also able to keep up with me and Hakurei on horseback, and hand us our quivers."

The siblings were doing their best to survive in this unknown land. When I reached down and patted them on their shoulders, they raised their voices in confusion.

"Ah..."

"Y-Young master?"

"I'm leaving them to you. You'll bring shame if anything happens to the saviors of the Chou family. This is a very heavy responsibility."

"Y-Yessir!"



“We will guard them with our lives!”

The two of them pressed their hands to their chests, flushing. My past memories flooded to the surface of my mind. *People who made expressions like theirs usually didn't survive on the battlefield.*

I shook my head and said, “Idiots. You won't be able to accomplish anything if you're dead. Live on. Survive and fulfill your duties. I know Meirin; once the weather gets better, she'll want to come back over here. When she does, have her make you tag along. All right, there's no time left! Get on the boat!”

“Y-Yes, Lord Sekiei!” Both of them said it at once before they marched towards the ship, not even trying to hide their excitement.

In neither this life nor the past had I ever believed in gods, but I said a prayer to the peach tree in Routou, which had survived over the past thousand years and served as a symbol of my promise to unify the country with my old friends. *Please, make a world where those twins will never have to set foot on a battlefield again.*

After I opened my eyes, I said, “Miss Shizuka, please take care of—”

“Yes, of course. Please leave everything to me.”

“Thank you so much.”

*I know. Of course I know. I'm being hypocritical. There are many women and children who couldn't make it onto the boat this time.* During the winter the Chou family had done its best to evacuate as many people as we could, but once the ice to the north melted and Gen's invasion started, then...

The raucous sound of a bronze gong rang out. It was time for the ship to depart.

Hakurei, Meirin, and Ruri's disagreement had taken a turn for the physical. Miss Shizuka, still holding her handheld luggage, watched as they exchanged some light punches before she opened her mouth. The cold breeze played with the dark strands of her hair.

“Lord Sekiei, allow me to repeat these words: the most important thing a person can do is survive. We all return to nothing in death, after all. Please

never forget that. I...I've also gone through a similar experience in the past."

Miss Shizuka's homeland must no longer exist. She could also tell that I was perfectly willing to risk my life if the situation called for it.

"I'll keep your advice in mind. I don't plan on dying until I become a civil official."

Miss Shizuka's expression softened and she giggled. "Dreams are such ethereal notions. I wish you luck." With that, she turned and walked towards the boats.

*Luck, huh? She's right. I'm going to need a heaping pile of it—a pile as large as the Nanamagari Mountains!*

After Miss Shizuka left, Hakurei walked up and stood next to me as if it were a given the spot was hers. Her gaze remained fixed on the paddlewheeler sporting the Ou family flag. When I looked over there, I happened to see Miss Shizuka meet up with Meirin again. Next to them were Kuuen and Shun'en. They were introducing themselves to the two women, identical nervous expressions on their faces. It seemed that Ruri planned to get closer to the ship to see them off.

Hakurei sighed. "Ugh, that Meirin... What were you and Miss Shizuka talking about?" There was a hint of a pout in her voice.

Hakurei apparently didn't appreciate that Miss Shizuka and I'd had a private conversation with each other. Even so, what we'd discussed wasn't exactly something I could disclose so I tried to play it off by saying, "Oh, nothing much. Just a bit of advice about what's important in life."

Hakurei didn't say anything for a moment before she hummed, clear suspicion in her eyes. "Oh, really? And yet it seemed to me like you couldn't take your eyes off her."

"Wha—?! Y-You..."

"It was merely a joke."

I didn't reply. *How mean. Chou Hakurei is such a horrid girl.* I was glaring at her unmoved expression from the corner of my eye when the gong sounded

out once more. The ship set off at a leisurely pace, pulled along by the smaller boats.

“Hakurei,” I said right at the same moment Hakurei said, “Sekiei.”

We nodded at each other and then took off.

“Ruri!” I yelled.

“Miss Ruri!” Hakurei exclaimed next to me.

“Huh? W-Wait, what are you—?!”

We both grabbed Ruri’s hands and dragged her towards the departing ship. The crowd was waving their hands and handkerchiefs, and we pushed through them until we could see Meirin on the deck. She was in Miss Shizuka’s arms, eyes red from her tears.

Meirin noticed us in a heartbeat and removed her hat from her head. She waved it in the air and then yelled, “Miss Hakurei, Ruri, Lord Sekiei, let’s meet again in Keiyou!”

“In Keiyou!” The three of us bellowed it back simultaneously as we stopped chasing after the ship.

When I glanced over at the two girls, I could see them wiping at their eyes. Hakurei, Meirin, and Ruri had spent an entire season together. It wasn’t surprising that genuine friendship had budded between them.

I thought back to my friends from my past life: Hi Gyomei, the first emperor of the Tou Empire, and Ou Eifuu, the imperial chancellor. I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous. *If only those two were here with me.*

Shaking off my fantasies, I turned to look at Hakurei and Ruri and said, “All right, then. Let’s go back to the manor. My dear strategist, with your years of experience, please tell me all the details about the current situation and our defenses before father returns.”

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“I don’t like to mince my words so I’m going to give it to you straight: the situation is terrible. From what I can gather using the bits and pieces of intel we have, Adai Dada, the emperor of Gen, is planning a large-scale invasion, and



he'll strike when the ice on the Grand Canal melts. We will not be able to avoid this coming battle. Of course, his first target will be Keiyou. He plans on destroying the Chou family army."

We were in my bedroom in the Chou family manor in Keiyou. As soon as we returned from the berth, Ruri began her cold analysis of where we were with the war. The black cat Yui was curled up on my bed. After lashing its tail a few times as if bothered, it crawled under my blankets.

With a pair of iron chopsticks, Hakurei pushed around the coal burning in the brazier. Meanwhile, Ruri, deftly spinning a brush in her hand, scribbled down words and symbols on a map of Keiyou and its surrounding areas. She focused most of her notes on the western side of Keiyou.

"Thanks to Meirin taking command of the projects and General Chou giving us permission for all the upgrades, Keiyou's defenses improved by leaps and bounds in a single winter. This is especially true for the western side, which had been left defenseless until now. We've been using the catapult we took from Seitou to desensitize the soldiers and horses to the noise."

In the north of Keiyou, the river served as a natural moat. Even if Gen's soldiers crossed it, the wall known as Hakuhou Castle would stop them. However, to the west of Keiyou were empty plains. Now that Seitou was our enemy rather than an ally, the Chou family army was forced to protect its western borders as well.

We all still remembered when the Crimson Wolf—one of the great Four Wolves of the Gen Empire—attacked us, as well as how difficult it had been to repel him. That was why after we returned to Keiyou, Ruri, map in hand, rode a horse around Keiyou to check it out...and then strongly suggested that we strengthen the westward defenses. Even disregarding how Hakurei and I vouched for her, father was in complete agreement with Ruri's opinion.

*"You two place your trust in her, right? Then I shall do the same,"* he'd said. This decision wasn't one that every commander could make. Father was truly a general of the highest caliber.

Ruri set her brush down on the inkstone and then, sitting on a nearby bench, she clasped her hands together as if in prayer. "But, improved defenses are

about it for the good news.”

Hakurei set out cups and then started carefully pouring warm tea. Next to her, I filled up some plates with snacks.

After she finished with her task, Hakurei continued in a calm voice from where Ruri left off. “Ei lost the majority of its officers—the Phoenix Wing Marshal Jo Shuuhou, Tiger Fang General U Jouko, as well as many of their more experienced soldiers—in that reckless Seitou invasion. We may have defeated the Gray Wolf at Bourou Gorge with the help of Miss Ruri’s strategy, but if we compare the casualties, we hardly put a dent in Gen’s manpower. Our efforts didn’t bear fruit.”

I thought back to Marshal Jo, who’d died after protecting us and his son Hiyou in Ranyou, and General U, who was said to have fought until his final breath. With those memories, I remembered the anger I felt at the lieutenant chancellor, who didn’t take command of the soldiers on that fateful battlefield, and the royal guard marshal, who had ordered that initial foolhardy charge.

The loyal and courageous generals perished. Meanwhile, the coward who ran away without putting up a fight and the general who’d been defeated within minutes not only miraculously survived, but they received no punishment from the emperor. The world was truly a cruel place.

I sat down in a chair near the table. Hakurei passed a plate and cup to Ruri with a “Here you go” before she sat next to me. Ruri removed her hat with a limp hand and took a sip of her drink.

“When the invasion starts again, we’ll have to deal with the Gen army from the north and the Seitou army from the west. We’ll be forced to defend ourselves on two fronts, and with far fewer soldiers than our enemies have,” she said.

“How many do you think they’ll have?” I asked before draining my cup.

In a smooth motion, Hakurei reached over and poured me some more tea. It might have been because she spent the winter having tea-tasting contests with Meirin, but Hakurei had become very used to preparing and pouring tea. I passed some of the sugary snacks I didn’t eat onto Hakurei’s plate. Near us, Ruri’s face dropped in clear despondency.

“The Gen army will have two hundred thousand cavalrymen at the very least, while Seitou’s army will have a hundred thousand, with heavy infantry making up the majority of their forces. I’m sure that both of them will bring catapults in order to lay siege to the city.”

Seitou was a country that focused on commerce and as a result, it possessed a lot of advanced foreign technology. If a large number of catapults shot boulders and heated metal projectiles at Keiyou, then...

Hakurei and I both shuddered. We didn’t even want to imagine it.

Ruri popped a snack into her mouth and continued, “In comparison, our forces are composed of the Chou family army, military volunteers, and soldiers who met up with us during our retreat from Seitou and ended up staying in Keiyou. In total, we have around sixty thousand. We might be able to get some more once the invasion starts, but...” She trailed off with a shake of her head. So even if we got reinforcements, we would still possess a mere fraction of what the enemies had.

“We’ll be forced to split our forces between the north and the west. If the enemies make it past the great river and Hakuhou Castle, then I fear there won’t even be a battle to defend ourselves. It will be a one-sided massacre,” I said, voicing my honest opinion on the situation.

“I doubt Rinkei would lend us any soldiers, but I hope we can get some assistance from the Jo or U families,” Hakurei murmured.

The Jo and U family armies had lost their generals in the previous battle and had suffered devastating casualties. Hiyou was an upright and conscientious man, but even if he wanted to send us reinforcements, it would be impossible for him to rebuild his army in such a short time. If only I had been firmer in my attempts to get him to stay with us during our retreat, he might not have become one of the fearsome Blackblade’s targets.

“Sekiei.” Hakurei grabbed at my sleeve. In her eyes, I could see both reassurance and criticism. It was as if she were saying, “You’re not the only one here who’s at fault. The blame rests upon my shoulders as well.”

*I can’t hide anything from her.* I gave her pale fingers a gentle tap to express my gratitude.



Ruri, who had been watching us, stood up and poured herself another cup of tea. “It’ll be easy to buy time on the northern front so long as Gen remains on their side of the river. I also had the opportunity to check out Hakuhou Castle with my own eyes and it’s not a fort that can easily be breached.”

“Yeah, I figured,” I replied. “In that case, the problem lies in the west.”

After the great invasion seven years ago, father, along with Raigen—one of the oldest and most experienced generals under our employment—built a giant, impenetrable fortress along the river. Aside from the rare occasion when a small group of Gen soldiers would cross the river without warning, no army had ever broken through Hakuhou Castle.

Though it was improper, Ruri sat down on the table. When she moved, her blonde hair did as well, revealing her sly expression. “Yes, I agree. For now, those useful tools—shovels, I believe they were called—helped us to make far better moats and bulwarks than we initially planned. They’ll have a hell of a time sending in their cavalymen, let alone using their catapults! It’ll be just as difficult for Seitou’s heavy infantry to make it over here. If they attack, we’ll show them what’s what.”

It seemed that our strategist held those tools from the far western deserts in high regard. Hakurei snatched a small bun from my plate. *Aw, man! I-I was saving that one!*

“I understand that you’re busy with training the new soldiers and sorting everyone into units, but you should show your face around the construction sites some more,” Hakurei told me. “It’ll be good for morale.”

I hesitated before replying, “I’ll go tomorrow.”

“Somehow, I don’t believe you.”

She poked my cheek and I made an ambiguous sound in response. Father had been absent from Keiyou these past few days to attend a top secret meeting with the grand chancellor, and due to that, he’d shoved...that is to say, he’d *entrusted* me with all the military-related tasks. My schedule was packed, so I’d left the west’s defensive preparations to Hakurei and Ruri.

Yui, who had slipped out of the covers sometime during the conversation,

hopped onto the table. Ruri petted the cat, who had become completely attached to her, and when she smiled she resembled a child who'd just thought of a prank. "Hakurei's just feeling lonely because she can't spend as much time with you as before. Lord Chou Sekiei, you need to brush up on your knowledge regarding a woman's heart."

It took a second for her words to click in my head. "Huh?" I didn't mean to sound so confused, but Hakurei? Feeling lonely because she couldn't spend time with *me*? I turned to the side to stare at her and she shot to her feet in a panic.

"M-Miss Ruri?!" she exclaimed before she took a second to compose herself. Then, she directed her attention back to me. "Please don't get the wrong idea about my intentions. I'm not feeling lonely at all. I was merely thinking about how you've been so busy that we haven't been able to spend as much time together..."

"Hmm?" Ruri said. "I merely rephrased those sentiments as 'feeling lonely.'"

Hakurei made an embarrassed noise before she yelled, "M-Miss Ruri!"

Our dear strategist had completely mastered the art of bullying Hakurei. *I suppose I should say that humans have an easier time observing others than themselves.*

Ruri set down her cup for a brush and said, "All right, that's enough of the usual jokes."

"Er, you don't have to offer us comic relief," I said with a small smile.

"You're so mean, Miss Ruri," Hakurei pouted.

Instead of responding, Ruri used her magic to create ephemeral white flowers for Yui to bat at. Her eyes grew sharp with deep wisdom. "Let's all get on the same page. Currently, we're preparing for an invasion on two fronts—the north and the west. The difference in manpower is staggering. Even with General Chou on our side, we have no chance of winning if we engage the enemy in open battle. Remember that Gen's leader is the White Wraith Adai, who's adept at military strategy. 'There is no better tactic than bringing a large army,' as they say. If that's what he ends up doing, then our only option will be to fight

to the death.”

At the end of the day, in both my current and past lives, I was nothing more than a warrior who worked best on a battlefield. I wasn't like father, Adai, or Ruri, who all possessed eyes that could focus on the greater picture. I wasn't able to see things the way they could, but I still stood up and gazed down at the map.

Ruri drew a line at a certain point of the map. “And this area here is my greatest concern.”

“That's...” Hakurei said, voice muffled from holding a hand to her mouth, before she trailed off.

“The lower reaches of the great river... You mean his strategy will be to cross from the east?”

Up until this point, Keiyou, near the confluence of the Grand Canal, was Gen's main target when they attacked. However, if they decided to attack from the mouth of the river...

Eyes still focused on Yui, Ruri said in a voice devoid of emotion, “The Chou family army is composed of highly skilled soldiers. It's safe to say they're the strongest in all of Ei right now, considering the current state of the Jo and U armies. However, the Chou army can only protect Keiyou and the areas surrounding it. We simply don't have the manpower to defend any more locations. As for the Gen army, they were able to pass through the treacherous Nanamagari Mountains and take Seitou. We can't ignore the possibility that they'll attempt to invade the lands south of the river.”

“I can understand your thinking, Miss Ruri,” Hakurei said. “However, massive swathes of wetlands and countless rivers line the road to Rinkei. It's not suitable land for cavalymen to traverse and unlike in the Nanamagari Mountains, there are defensive troops to contend with. I believe that they would suffer significant casualties if they tried to force an attack. Wouldn't the White Wraith be aware of this?”

Both Ruri's worries and Hakurei's questions were valid. Under the command of a skilled officer, cavalymen were capable of acting as terrifying shock troops. However, wetlands and swamps prevented them from reaching their full

potential. The people of Gen were from the great plains in the north. They loved and cherished their horses, and tended to avoid fighting on foot even in the thick of battle.

That Rinkei, protected by numerous rivers and streams, was chosen to be Ei's capital likely had to do with the Gen people's equestrian nature. A normal person wouldn't consider attacking from the east. But since our opponent was Adai...

Ruri narrowed her emerald-green eyes and slid off the table. As she paced around the room, she gave us her thoughts on the matter. "The White Wraith is a prudent strategist. He knows very well that Chou Tairan is the only person he has to fear in Ei. We can see this reflected in the history of the two countries. Aside from the invasion seven years ago, he has gone out of his way to completely avoid a direct encounter with General Chou. With that in mind, there's a very high chance that he'll attack the great river's east instead of attempting to take Keiyou. In the past, the Jo and U armies were around as potential reinforcements but both families have been ruined. If I were in his shoes, I would consider sending part of the army across the river as assistance to the main invasion."

Hakurei and I remained silent. Father was, without a doubt, the finest general in the Ei Empire. However, he'd had the Phoenix Wing and the Tiger Fang to support him, and neither of them were around anymore. They would no longer return.

Considering what we knew about Adai, there was always the chance that he would come up with a bold strategy to avoid a direct confrontation with Chou Tairan. On top of that, the Chou army didn't have enough people to protect the entirety of the great river. *If only all of Ei's forces could be under father's command!*

Ruri looked out the window. The sky was dark and gray, looking like it was about to rain at any second. As if to cheer herself up, she said in a bright voice, "This goes without saying, but if the higher-ups hiding in Rinkei's palace can remain calm, then we can deal with Gen even after they cross the river. Like Hakurei said, the land around the capital is not fit for cavalry so they'd be marching at a slower pace. The inexperienced royal guard, who probably aren't

raring for a fight at the moment, and defensive troops will be able to hold them off with ease so long as they use the terrain and geography to their advantage.”

I popped the final snack into my mouth and washed it down with tea before looking over at Black Star. *There’s no use in losing too much sleep over this. All I need to do is swing the sword when the time comes!* Out loud, I said, “I can’t tell if this is lucky or unlucky for us.”

“I suppose we have no choice but to trust in the grand chancellor,” Hakurei said. It seemed that she had also stopped worrying about it. Right as Hakurei picked up White Star, the bell at the door rang. All three of us turned to look at who entered.

“Excuse me, Lady Hakurei, Lord Sekiei, and Lady Ruri.” The person who walked in from the open door had shoulder-length brown hair and a slender frame. It was Asaka, Hakurei’s attendant. Asaka was usually a lively person, but there was a strange anxiety about her.

Hakurei passed Black Star over to me as she asked, “Is something the matter, Asaka?”

As I took the sword from her, I happened to glance over at the map. Shiryuu, the name of the land near the mouth of the great river, stood out to me.

Asaka straightened her posture and said, “Master has returned. He wishes for the three of you to visit him at once, as there is an urgent matter he needs to discuss with you.” She paused for a moment. “From how Master was acting, it seems serious.”

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“Oh, Hakurei, Sekiei, and Master Strategist! I apologize for summoning you all here. I’ve only just returned to Keiyou.”

When we arrived at one of the detached rooms in the Chou family manor, the National Shield Chou Tairan was the one to greet us. He was a handsome man with a stern face and a well-groomed beard. Behind him stood Raigen, whose hair and beard had long since turned white. He was supposed to be at the front line and not here. Both of them were still in their military uniforms.

Father had been staring down at the map on the table, and I could see some



white strands in both his hair and beard. The stress of being the only person who could protect this country was getting to him, and I could see it in his exhausted expression as well. It was clear that something was wrong from both the way father carried himself and the fact that he'd called Raigen back to the city.

*His meeting with the grand chancellor must've been...* Hakurei and I glanced at each other before we bowed to our father as one.

"Welcome back, father," I said.

"We're glad you're unhurt," Hakurei added.

Father's severe expression softened at our greeting.

Ruri removed her hat and nervously said, "Um, General Chou, 'Master Strategist' is a little bit too much for..."

"But you *are* our strategist, aren't you? Hmm?" Father stroked his beard and grinned, causing Ruri to fall silent.

*Oof, he's doing this on purpose.* Father might have been the greatest general in the Ei Empire, but he was still human. He enjoyed his fair share of jokes and pranks. Hakurei ushered Ruri behind her back while I handled the National Shield.

"Father, please don't bully our ascendant too much. She only seems arrogant and self-assured. But in reality, she's incredibly shy, hates to lose, and is always clinging onto Hakurei and that black cat. She's a kid."

"Wha—?!" Ruri exclaimed. "Lord Chou Sekiei?"

"I'm telling the truth, aren't I?"

Ruri, who was still using Hakurei as a human shield, made a low growling noise. *This is what I mean when I say you're a kid.*

Right after our short conversation, father burst into raucous laughter. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean any harm. Please forgive me." He dipped his head.

Ruri hurried out from behind Hakurei, a panicked look on her face, and waved both hands. "N-No, it's, um, all right. Please don't worry about me."

“You have my thanks. Hakurei and Sekiei have told me a great deal about your contributions, Master Strategist.”

“Father, Miss Ruri is an amazing person.”

“H-Hakurei...?! Jeez!” Unable to keep up with the Chou patriarch and his daughter, Ruri placed her hat back onto her head, pulling it as low as it could go. She created a white flower to fiddle with as she glared at me. “I’ll get you back for this,” I could practically hear her say.

*So she decided to pin the blame on me? Master Strategist sure makes snap decisions.* I offered her a placating smile before I turned my attention to Raigen. “Gramps, it’s been too long. Is the front going to be all right without you?”

“I’ve left it in Teiha’s capable hands.”

Teiha was a blood relative of Raigen’s. After the battle against the Crimson Wolf, the Seitou invasion along with its intense retreat from Ranyou, and the battle in Bourou Gorge with the fire lances and gunpowder, Teiha had matured into a fine young officer and one of the cornerstones of the Chou army.

Raigen smiled. Like this, he looked more like a cheery grandfather than a general with decades of experience. “As a result of spending so much time with you and Lady Hakurei, Teiha’s come into his own. Soon, this old man will no longer be needed.”

“You think we won’t need Raigen the Ogre? That’s a pretty wild joke to be making, Gramps.”

“An elder’s job should be to rest. Those are words that the great Ouei of the past left behind.”

“It’s hard to argue with the only imperial chancellor in history,” I replied. *Did Eifuu say anything like that? He was the type who put the elderly to work.*

While I was enjoying my conversation with Raigen and my trip down memory lane, Hakurei cleared her throat and said, “Father, what would you like to discuss with us? What did the grand chancellor say?”

She, Ruri, and I focused our attention on father. The black cat Yui must have sneaked in somehow because it sauntered up and climbed onto the table.

“Ah, yes, that was why I summoned you here,” father said. “Right. Let me warn you in advance: I come bearing very little in the way of good news.” He walked over to the window as the air in the room turned tense. With his back to us, he started to explain in a quiet voice, “For starters, the grand chancellor displayed great worry about Gen’s southern advance, which will likely occur some time after spring. At the same time though, he warned me that we should not count on reinforcements from the remnants of the royal guard, even if Gen comes knocking on our doorsteps. Apparently, the emperor has been so upset from our defeat that he’s terrified to leave the capital unprotected. Many of the survivors are supporters of Rin Chuudou and Ou Hokujaku as well. Even if the grand chancellor wishes to deploy these soldiers, he can’t. They’re taking so long to train up and reorganize their forces that progress has stagnated.”

It was worse than we expected. All three of us frowned, unable to speak as we digested the information. I had figured that we couldn’t count on the royal guard to be our reinforcements, but it would be a lie to say that a little part of me hadn’t been hoping to get at least a few soldiers.

The Grand Canal connected Keiyou and Rinkei. The citizens were saying that if the Chou family army lost, then Ei would be lost with us—and yet, we wouldn’t be getting any help. *Are they serious?* Considering we had actually been forced to attack Seitou in a reckless invasion, there was likely little point in asking that question.

Suppressing my desire to hold my head in my hands, I said, “Father, they can’t actually be serious.”

“Father,” Hakurei said but father interrupted her before she could continue.

“Hold your horses. I still have bad news to share.”

“I-Is it...” I started.

“Worse than what we just heard?” Hakurei finished for me.

In contrast to how Hakurei and I gaped at our father, Ruri seemed to realize something because she said, “Wait, don’t tell me...”

Father sat down in a nearby chair. A hint of his strong disappointment was visible in his eyes. “During my meeting with the grand chancellor, a messenger

from the capital came to give us an emergency report. As for what he said..." He paused. Clouds hid away the sun, casting the room into shadow. With his hands clasped and eyes closed, it seemed that the National Shield was suppressing his rage. "He came with information on the Jo and U families' punishment. 'The generals' defeat was what led to the failure of the Seitou invasion. As a result, the emperor stripped away a portion of the families' privileges and assets. If the head of the house has anything they'd like to say, they must surrender themselves to Rinkei at once.' The U patriarch didn't show up, but Jo Hiyou responded to the summons. I hear that they ended up arresting him and locking him up in the palace's underground prison."

A heavy silence descended upon the room. *They pinned the defeat on the Jo and U families, and captured Hiyou? The grand chancellor's absence was probably the reason such a bizarre turn of events happened, but still...they went too far.*

After glancing at Hakurei, I said in a bitter voice, "Father, that's not funny even as a joke."

"Marshal Jo and General U fought valiantly. Hiyou did as well, whether at Ranyou or during the retreat. Yet this is how the government treats them? What's the meaning of this?" Hakurei asked.

A loud boom resonated through the room. Yui jumped up, surprised at the noise, and then fled for the gaps between furniture, looking for a place to hide. Father removed his fist from the shattered table and twisted his face.

"I know that Shuuhou and Jouko weren't responsible for our defeat at the Battle of Ranyou! Not only did *he* plan that heedless invasion and abandon his post on the battlefield, but he also...!" Righteous fury burned in father's eyes. I couldn't blame him; both generals had been his irreplaceable friends. "The fault lies with the lieutenant chancellor Rin Chuudou for retreating with only the soldiers under his direct command, and with royal guard marshal Ou Hokujaiku for rushing to get personal results and causing all armies to be routed! But...but..."

Father placed a hand to his forehead, not bothering to hide the pain he was in. I'd never seen him like this before.

“This is terrible,” Ruri murmured in a quiet voice.

“His Imperial Majesty had been the one who ordered all of this,” father said.

“That’s...” But I fell silent without saying anything else. I couldn’t find the words.

“Sekiei.” Hakurei held on to my sleeve, a worried look in her eye.

*The emperor himself was the one who came up with this harebrained idea?!  
Th-Then the Jo and U families are...*

Father did his best to control his raging emotions as he continued in a grim tone, “After cutting our meeting short, the grand chancellor returned to Rinkei. He promised that he would get the emperor to rescind the families’ punishment and that he would not let them execute Jo Hiyou—but I doubt that we’ll see any immediate results.”

Hakurei was so anxious she was shaking, so I took her hand and started to think. Saving Hiyou wouldn’t be too difficult. The emperor could exercise his nigh-omnipotent authority to stay his execution. But what would the people say if he repealed a document that had his personal seal on it in only a matter of days?

Once I figured out an answer, I asked father, “Is this because His Imperial Majesty is worried about how the citizens in the capital will react?”

Father thought for a moment before he replied, “Yes. By now, everyone in the capital knows that the Seitou invasion ended in a crushing defeat.”

“That’s no reason to—!”

Before I could finish yelling, Ruri stopped me with a small hand and said, “He made a bad move.” Taking a step forward, she picked up the black cat sitting by her feet. She carried herself with the refined elegance of a war strategist as she continued in a cold voice, “He made a ridiculously bad move. I’m willing to bet that he took the advice of either the lieutenant chancellor who’s a member of his consort clan, or his precious royal guard, who miraculously returned from the battlefield.”

Ruri looked down at the map and sighed in a soft, melancholic way. After



setting Yui back down on the ground, she traced the map with a slender finger. “Thanks to this decision, the Ei Empire has to deal with threats both internally and externally. We have Gen to the north and Seitou to the west, but we now also have powder kegs brewing within the eastern and southern regions. The Jo family’s eldest son, who was set to inherit his father’s position, has been captured, and the U family knows that a miscarriage of justice has taken place. I doubt they will send reinforcements even in the event of an invasion. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they take advantage of the chaos and declare independence. Jo Hiyou heeded the summons and was arrested, yet no one from the U family was caught. This is enough evidence to prove that people now harbor mistrust towards the palace.”

“Ahh, so in other words...” I did my best to wrap my useless brain around what Ruri said. Hakurei seemed to already understand the issue, because she had grown deathly pale and was hugging my left arm close against her chest. I put together Ruri’s explanation and tried to imagine how things might progress from here. “So you’re trying to say that even if Gen and Seitou start to attack us, we can’t expect any help?”

“That’s right. A lone struggle, a desperate fight, an intense altercation... All of them sound like they’d be right up a boy’s alley.”

“H-Ha ha.” Dry laughter was the only response one could give in hopeless situations like this. *Dammit! We’ll be fighting alone and if we lose, the country will be lost with us? This is the fucking worst!*

Hakurei took a few deep breaths to calm herself down before she jumped into the conversation. “Father, Miss Ruri and I also discussed our expectations for the coming war. But there’s something that we’re both concerned ab—”

“You mean how Gen plans to cross the great river from downstream?”

Father said it in such a casual tone that we could only take a sharp breath of surprise in response. Raigen beamed with pride when he saw our reactions. *Well, I suppose I shouldn’t have been too shocked.* The National Shield, Chou Tairan, was like Ei’s guardian deity. He was the only man in Ei capable of keeping up with Adai Dada the White Wraith.

He shook his massive paw of a hand left and right as he replied, “Even if we

know the invasion route, there's nothing we can do. There are two hundred thousand skilled cavalymen to our north and a hundred thousand heavy infantry to our west. In comparison, we have less than sixty thousand, and that's if we put all of our forces in without considering the consequences. Our Eifuu once said that the attacker must have at least three times the soldiers as their target, and our enemies have met this condition. If Adai is willing to sacrifice a large number of his officers and soldiers..."

I understood what father was about to say when I saw the look of resignation in his eyes. He knew perfectly well where we were at in the war.

Father took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and said: "We have no hope of winning."

Even in my past life, I never had the experience of hearing such words from an undefeated general.

Hakurei took a step away from my side and bowed her head low. "My apologies." She sounded like she was about to burst into tears.

"Don't worry. I'm not blaming you." Father shook his head.

*Our situation is hopeless.* As Ruri predicted, not even the most elite soldiers of the Chou army were able to protect everything. In other words...

"Father," I said right as Ruri asked, "So you plan on abandoning the eastern front, yes?"

Ruri and I realized at the same time what key information father was trying to tell us. Hakurei must have noticed too, because she made a small noise of frustration.

After exchanging a smug smile with my strategist, I gave my honest thoughts on the matter. "We already have fewer soldiers than they do; it's obvious what would happen if we decide to split up our manpower. Our chances of winning are low enough as it is. If we lose even more people, we won't be able to put up a fight here." Without waiting for my father's permission, I split the pawns on the map between Keiyuu's north and west.

Ruri stepped forward as well. White blossoms danced through the air, responding to her emotions, and the black cat batted at them. "'The Chou

family army will not send a single soldier to defend the east.' I'm willing to bet that you set up the meeting with the grand chancellor in order to inform him of this. The cavalrymen under your direct command would not be able to perform at their maximum potential in that area anyway."

Many of the soldiers and officers protecting this country died on the fields of Ranyou. The Chou family army was the only one that still had most of its soldiers, but that meant we were alone in our battle against the enemy's astronomical numbers. One couldn't produce results from nothing.

Father brushed at his beautiful beard before he turned to Raigen and shrugged his shoulders. "Well," he rumbled, "it seems like you won the bet, Raigen."

"It's thanks to my many years of experience."

It seemed that the two of them had a bet going on as to whether or not we'd come to the right conclusion on our own. Hakurei walked back to my side.

Father slapped a hand against the scabbard of his sword. "Our job is to protect Keiyou until the very end! Even if our enemies number the droplets in the sea, we should be able to handle them so long as we remain on the defensive. A crossing from the mouth of the great river is something we should be on the lookout for, but Adai isn't the type of man who engages in worthless battles. He and the rest of Gen take great pride in their equestrian heritage as well. I doubt they will be able to put together units with infantry troops as the majority. Sekiei, Hakurei, you two have found a wonderful strategist!"

A warm feeling flooded my chest at hearing him praise Ruri, as if the compliment had been directed at me. Hakurei must have felt the same way because I heard her giggle.

"G-Get off!" Ruri exclaimed as Hakurei hugged her from behind.

I smiled at the two girls and their close friendship before agreeing, "Yeah. I don't have to use my brain as much, so it's been a lot easier on me."

"He still won't stop spouting nonsense about how he wants to be a civil official though!" Hakurei said.

"H-Hakurei?!" I exclaimed.

“You don’t have what it takes to become one, you know?” Ruri added.

“R-Ruri?!”

*How terrible. The Chou family’s princess and my strategist are both such horrible meanies! It’s just so inhumane of them to gang up on me and crush my little dream!* I kept my mouth shut though. If I actually complained about this treatment to their faces, they’d probably insult me even more.

“Young master, sometimes the wisest thing is to know when to give up,” Raigen said.

“Sekiei, give up!” Father boomed with laughter. “It’s your loss.”

“Father, Gramps, you too?” I groaned. I’d thought they’d be on my side. Even Yui yawned as if bored.

Chou Tairan raised his left hand into the air and said, “As soon as the ice on the Grand Canal melts, our enemies will come at us from the north and the west. Hakurei, Sekiei, Ruri, we must not be caught unprepared! If we lose, then Ei is doomed.”

“Yessir!” Hakurei and I replied as one.

“I will do my best as your strategist,” Ruri promised.

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That night, I was sitting in my room with a chess board before me. The situation on the board was awful and I was growling to myself, running a rough hand through my black hair. *The left and right flanks... No, they’re completely annihilated. I succeeded in attacking from the middle once, but I doubt it’ll be as easy this time.*

Thanks to the Seitou-made hot-water bottle full of water from the hot springs in the manor and the large portable stove by my feet, I didn’t feel the cold at all. Meirin had been the one to procure them both, stating, “*Lord Sekiei! This will really warm you up! Please give it a try!*” as she had done so.

*I already took a bath and warmed up my body, but my heart...my heart remains so cold! Oh, I should’ve never agreed to play chess with a genius strategist. I can’t believe how stubborn she is about winning!* The sound of the

rain from outside the window sapped away at my concentration.

“Weeeell, Lord Chou Sekiei? Aren’t you gonna make your next move?” Ruri taunted, smirking at me from across the board.

She was wearing a thin blue nightgown. It was the same kind that Hakurei wore except in a different color. Thanks to Ruri’s loose hair and her lack of curves, she looked a lot younger than usual. Since I knew it would make her angry, I kept my mouth shut. I also never planned on telling Ruri that Hakurei tended to talk about her like a little sister behind her back.

“Sh-Shut up!” I snapped back. “Just gimme a second!”

“Sure, sure. But it’s going to be checkmate in fifteen moves.” She rested her cheek on her hand, as confident as could be, and gave a wide yawn. The black cat Yui, sitting on a nearby bench, yawned as well, as if Ruri’s drowsiness were contagious. Since the Chou family’s strategist was still young, she couldn’t stay up too late at night.

I glanced at the crescent moon glowing outside the round window. *Just on time tonight as well, huh?* I looked at the ascendant rubbing her eyes before me. Perhaps she hailed from a far more prestigious family than she’d told us?

As I wondered about her past, I said, “I surrender. It’s my loss.”

“Humph! ♪ That’s my seventh win in a row!” Ruri, still looking very sleepy, stood up, holding a hot-water bottle to her chest. She settled on my bed with a happy expression, Yui following right behind her, and the last thing I saw before she burrowed under my blankets were her eyes, soft with fatigue.

I tidied up the board and pieces before I said in a warning tone, “Hey, go back to your own room if you wanna sleep. Hakurei’s gonna get mad at us and I’m not ready to die just yet.” As for Hakurei, she’d only just finished her work and was taking a late bath.

Ruri made a muffled noise before she replied, “That’s your problem...not mine.” With that lethargic and rude reply, her breath evened out in sleep.

*She fell asleep way too fast!* Now that I thought about it though, Ruri was not only an orphan, but she’d also lost her homeland, Kobi. *Yeah, it’s a good thing that she can go to sleep with such a peaceful expression on her face.*



I sneaked towards the bed and whispered, “I’m gonna move her, okay?” to Yui before I carried Ruri to a bench. Then, I called out to the hallway: “Asaka.”

“Please leave her to me,” Hakurei’s attendant said as she walked inside the room. She picked up Ruri, still cocooned in the blanket, and started to go.

“Thanks and sorry for making you do this every night,” I said before she could leave.

“There’s no need for that. These are Lady Hakurei’s orders as well,” Asaka replied before she looked down at Ruri in her arms. “She...truly weighs too little.”

Asaka’s eyes as she gazed down at Ruri, who was much too petite for her age, were soft with maternal love. Ruri’s side profile, slack in sleep, looked every inch like the beautiful ascendants of legend.

“She’s been eating a lot more these days. But keep an eye on her for me, will you?” I said.

“Of course! ♪”

I watched Asaka walk down the hallway...but then a shiver ran down my spine! When I turned around, Hakurei was standing before me in a pale pink nightgown, a dissatisfied look on her face.

“Good evening,” she said.

“H-Hey.”

After we exchanged our usual greetings, Hakurei walked into my room before I could. Talking before we went to sleep had been our nighttime routine ever since we were children. Hakurei glanced at the chessboard on the table but she didn’t say anything as she shrugged off her jacket before walking over to my bed and collapsing onto the mattress. Her long silver hair fanned out over the sheets.

“You were playing chess with Miss Ruri tonight as well? Just the two of you?” she asked, hugging my pillow to her chest. Her bad mood was obvious from her voice alone.

Meirin and Ruri were precious friends to Hakurei, as she didn’t have many

friends around her age. It seemed that they were close too, thanks to spending an entire winter together. Their interactions reminded me of a group of squabbling sisters—though it seemed to be a different story where our nighttime conversations were involved. Hakurei wanted to monopolize this time.

I placed the board and pieces back into a drawer and retorted, “It wasn’t just the two of us. Yui was here too.”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses!” Hakurei snapped. She shot up into a sitting position and smacked her hand against the mattress several times. In the past, the sudden noise and action would surprise Yui, but the cat was used to it by now. It remained curled up on the bed. Hakurei’s hair was a mess. She took several deep breaths, shoulders heaving, before she continued with her rant. “You two spend all day arguing over this and that, so how come you’re all buddy-buddy and playing chess with each other at night?! It doesn’t make any sense! It’s weird!”

“H-How should I know?”

Hakurei made a dissatisfied noise and puffed out her cheeks before she turned away and adjusted how she was sitting on the bed. Then... “Ngh.”

“Huh?”

Hakurei patted the spot next to her. *U-Uh...* I scratched my cheek and Hakurei glared up at me.

“Ngh!” she repeated.

“Okay, okay. J-Just don’t get mad at me.” Having lost to the selfish princess of the Chou family, I sat down next to her. In the next moment, she rested her head on my lap.

“Jeez, you’re a terrible person, Sekiei. Meirin grabs onto you all day and at night, then you go and trick the young Miss Ruri? Do you have any excuses for yourself?”

Though spring was just around the corner, nights were still rather cold. It was especially chilly now, as we didn’t have our hot-water bottles and the portable stove was far away. I placed a blanket over Hakurei’s shoulders and once again

tried to stand up for myself. “Those are both false accusations.”

“No, you’re guilty. That’s what I’ve decided.”

“*Th-That’s* terrible.”

“No, it’s not. *You’re* the one who’s terrible.”

Hakurei had a tendency to voice her dissatisfaction with my behavior, even if some of her complaints were on the unfair side, but she was on another level of strictness tonight.

I used my fingers to tidy up her silver hair and muttered, “Meirin’s one thing, but *Ruri?*”

“Did you say something?” Without waiting for my reply, Hakurei pushed herself up and placed the blanket over me instead. “It wouldn’t do for you to catch a cold,” she explained in a rush before she prompted me to continue with her eyes.

“Well, uh, I’m pretty sure that she still doesn’t understand romance if she’s part of the equation. When we have a match, she acts a lot younger than her actual age; it’s kind of like playing with a kid. She probably thinks of me as a kid who’s the same age as her.”

Ruri was an amazing strategist and I trusted her tactics with my life. However, I also felt like her true self was a shy and competitive girl who enjoyed sleeping and waking up early. The real reason she spent every night in my room until she felt sleepy was likely due to her loneliness.

“Well...that may be so... Meirin said something similar.” Hakurei probably felt something similar from Ruri, as her reply was a little hesitant.

Without missing a beat, I teased, “Oh! I knew you thought the same. Nice, nice. Now we’ve both committed the same crime!”

“Wha—?! *Th-That’s* cheating, Sekiei!”

“Ha ha ha! The only thing that matters...is victory!!!”

“Grr...” Hakurei’s lips jutted out as she playfully punched my arm with both fists.

The wind blew in from the window and Yui's ears twitched. Hakurei leaned forward and pressed herself against my shoulder. Silence stretched between us, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one.

"Sorry for taking Shun'en from you," I said, offering my sincere apologies. "I knew you had a soft spot for her."

"You're hardly one to talk. You were fond of Kuuen as well, weren't you? I remember hearing you say that he had a good head on his shoulders."

"I guess."

Though that difficult invasion had been their first time in battle, those foreign twins managed to survive and had returned relatively unscathed. Sending them to Rinkei had been my own selfish decision—I knew it was precisely because they displayed rare talent on the battlefield that they would be one of the earliest to die if they were there.

People like them tended to get overconfident. Plenty of records and documents were testaments to this cruel truth. It was the same in this life as it was in the one I led a thousand years ago. So long as they remained alive, those twins would one day do great work for the Chou family. Letting them die would be a waste. Barring anything that had to do with Hakurei, this was probably the first time since the Chou family had taken me in that I'd insisted on having my way. Granted, Shun'en had been one of Hakurei's attendants and not mine.

I looked at Yui, curled up and asleep on the bench, and murmured, "To tell the truth, I wanted you and Meirin to go to the capital with th— Ow! H-Hakurei?!"

Hakurei had pressed her canines against my neck. When I looked down at her, I saw her glaring up at me, a slight flush to her cheeks. "If you say any more than that, I'll bite you."

"You already bit me! That's improper behavior for the princess of the Chou family!"

"Don't worry. You're the only person I plan on biting. Nom!"

"What kinda logic is that?! Whoa!"

Hakurei was still trying to bite me so I tried to stop her, but she ended up shoving me backwards onto the bed. Her face—the face I'd seen the most in my entire life—was pressed close to mine. There were tears gathering in her eyes and she ran a gentle finger down my cheek.

"I will remain at your side," she said. "At times, I will protect your back and at times you'll protect mine. Even if..."

*Ah, so she's noticed as well.* Our next battle would be harder than the ones against the Crimson and Gray Wolves. It would likely be far more difficult than facing off against that terrifying general with the black armor—Blackblade Gisen, who'd murdered Ruri's parents and people, as well as destroyed the remnants of the Jo family led by Jo Hiyou as they retreated from Ranyou.

Hakurei smiled. The expression was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. "Even if we're on a battlefield so dangerous we must prepare ourselves for death."

It took me a moment before I could find my voice. "Hakurei."

As someone who'd been found and picked up from a battlefield, I owed my life to someone else. Hakurei was, without exaggeration, my life's savior. I reached out to her and she rested her body on mine. The Black Star and White Star, which we'd placed next to the bed, clattered together.

Hakurei picked up my hand and pressed it against her chest, right over her heart. She closed her eyes and said, "At this point, I will never let you try and sacrifice yourself for the rest of us. *Never.*"

Her voice was soft, but in her words I could hear the terrifying depths of Hakurei's determination. After a slight moment of hesitation, I reached out and slung an arm around her shoulders. Her slender frame trembled somewhat under my touch so I patted her on the back in reassurance.

"Jeez, you're so selfish, Yukihome," I said, using her childhood name.

She didn't say anything for a moment before she replied, "Stop making me repeat myself. You're the only person I plan on being selfish towards."

"Then, what if I decide to be selfish?"

“I’ll ignore you.”

“What the hell?! Miss Chou Hakurei, you’re a tyrant! You’re worse than Ou Meir—”

“Please don’t bring her up right now. I’ll bite you.”

“I-I already told you not to bite me!”

We broke down into giggles together. Yui, who had sidled up without either of us noticing, sat down and meowed.

*It’s all right. So long as the two of us are together, we won’t die on the battlefield.* Over the past millennium, a myriad of legends were told and passed down about the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars. One of them said that those who possessed the weapons would never die in battle. We pressed the palms of our hands together and nodded at one another.

“Well, I’m counting on you,” I said.

“Of course. I won’t let you down,” she replied.

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“Oh, child of the great Celestial Wolf, Emperor Adai! It is my greatest pleasure to bear witness to your holy visage. All of your officials and officers have been gathered before you. Now, please bestow upon us your orders!”

In Enkei, the capital of the Gen Empire, an old marshal’s deep voice rang out, echoing in the reception hall at the heart of the palace. He spoke as if he were bellowing commands on the battlefield. A sense of anticipation and anxiety dominated the atmosphere.

*Not bad.* I, Gen emperor Adai Dada, remained seated on my throne as I lifted my left hand in a slow and composed manner. “Everyone, I am pleased to see you all. Raise your heads and have a seat. There is no need for such formality.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!”

All of the gathered civil officials and officers calmly stood and sat down in their prepared seats. I could see the brothers Golden Wolf and Silver Wolf, who were part of my empire’s great Four Wolves. Their accomplishments on the northern front had been brilliant. I could also see Gisen, the strongest warrior in



Gen. I'd summoned the Blackblade—or the Black Wolf, as he was now known—after a change in plans.

Aside from those three, I could see courageous, wise, and fierce generals everywhere in the room, as many as there were stars in the sky. With the exceptions of the White Wolf, out routing barbarians in the northwest, and the strategist Hasho who was in charge of Seitou, all of the greatest officers in Gen were present.

Even in my past life—for I was the reincarnation of the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire, Ou Eifuu—I would have been pleased to gaze upon the gathered talents. Of course, none of them held a candle to the great general of the Tou Empire and my closest friend from my past life, Kou Eihou—he who possessed the Heavenly Swords.

I rested a hand on the arm of my throne and spoke in a casual tone, "Today, I have called you all before me to discuss the southern campaign."

The sound of firewood cracking in the stove was drowned out by the murmurs of the crowd. All of them sounded delighted, of course; there was no one in the Gen Empire who did not dream of unification. I accepted a cup from one of my servants. Inside it was a wine that had been made with the fruits of the massive peach tree in Routou, which bloomed all year round.

"The cold has let up these past few days," I continued. "The ice on the Grand Canal has started to melt and soon, we will be able to travel by ship without issue. Ei's greatest officers and bravest soldiers have returned to the soil in Seitou. Now, the only obstacle that stands in our path is Chou Tairan, who has holed himself up in Keiyou." Seven years ago, the previous emperor of the Gen Empire fell on the battlefield. I thought back to that courageous Ei officer with the black beard, who'd recklessly charged into the Gen base after I ascended the throne. It was time to say farewell to my old enemy.

I pounded back the alcohol in one gulp and stood up, staring down at my horde of subjects. I pushed back my long white hair and then held out my slender, feminine hand. "I have grown weary of my conflict with that man. Prepare yourselves for our final showdown with him."

In response everyone roared, punching the air with their fists. Morale was

high!

*“Military officers prefer plans that allow them to take action. A soldier’s gotta work fast, after all.”*

*Eihou, you’re never wrong.* As I reminisced about my past life’s best friend, a short and muscular man wearing a dusky gray military uniform—Silver Wolf, Ooba Zuso—slammed his fist against the ground.

“Your Imperial Majesty!” Ooba exclaimed. “Please allow this loyal subject of yours to stand at the very front of your army! I swear that, with my poleaxe, I shall take revenge for Nguyen and Seul!”

“It has not been long since Sir Silver Wolf accomplished many great deeds at the battlefield in the north.” This was said by the Golden Wolf, Bete Zuso. “Your Imperial Majesty, please allow my serpent spear the opportunity to mete out justice as well.” Bete was tall and thin, with more than a passing resemblance to a fox and golden accents adorning his military uniform.

Upon hearing that, Ooba exclaimed, “Brother, those weren’t my accomplishments! Everything I achieved was because I followed your tactics to the letter! But you keep giving me credit for everything...”

“My plans only worked because of your superior martial prowess. I didn’t do anything.”

“But...”

“Little brother, as your older brother, I wish only to see you rise through the ranks of this army. Hurry and surpass me.”

Though the two of them looked nothing alike, they were both members of the Zuso family, one of the more prestigious houses of the Gen Empire. The brothers kept trying to let the other take credit for their military exploits. The elder wished for the younger to accept the glory and vice versa. The people of Gen, who lived in the plains alongside their horses, valued blood relations more than anything—family was a simple treasure. Yet gazing upon the brothers, I felt a slight tinge of envy.

I glanced over at my marshal. The older man had been around since the emperor before my predecessor, and had trained many generals and officers in

his time. He cleared his throat in a loud and exaggerated manner. “You two, remember that you are standing before your emperor.”

“M-My apologies!” Both Wolves straightened their backs upon hearing the marshal’s reminder.

The Zuso brothers were the bane of the northern barbarians. It was rare to see them act in this way, and so some laughter escaped from the other officials and officers. Even the serious and severe Gisen looked away. I made a small waving motion with my hand and said, “It’s all right. There is nothing more beautiful than such a close bond.”

*That’s right. Ahh, Eihou, Eihou. I can understand why Gyomei doesn’t exist in this lifetime, as he passed without any regrets. But if only you were by my side, I wouldn’t have to play the troublesome part of an emperor and could instead focus on internal affairs. What a cruel man you are.*

Once I finished with my unspoken complaints, I drew the dagger from my belt. “The Silver Wolf and Golden Wolf shall be in the vanguard.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!” The Zuso brothers bared their teeth as they pressed their fists together in a salute. Not even Chou Tairan could win against two of the Four Wolves. Granted, I had no intention of letting them engage in a fair battle. Fighting against a strong enemy risked injuring my allies.

I moved my dagger and turned my attention to my warrior with the deep scar on his left cheek. He was supposed to attack the west of Keiyou along with the rest of the Seitou army. “The Black Wolf and the new Black Lancers shall be in the rear guard. Gisen, you must be tired after the long journey from Seitou. You should rest and recuperate until the time of battle.”

“Understood,” Gisen said after a moment, lowering his head in a bow. His mind must have been filled with questions, but his expression remained placid. This was the man who would either kill or capture the Chou family’s son and daughter, those two who were arrogant enough to wield the Heavenly Swords.

“After the entire army gathers once more, I shall head for Sansei Castle at the river. Then, along with the strategist Hasho and his hundred thousand Seitou soldiers...” I sheathed my dagger and revealed to my gathered soldiers the goal of this operation: “We will take Keiyou in one fell swoop. Unification is within

our grasp.”

“Leave everything to us!” Everyone roared as one, their voices shaking the very air of the reception hall.

*Yes, this isn't bad at all. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that I feel satisfied. But it's still not enough. This does not fill the gaping, hungry hole in my heart!* No matter what happened, I couldn't help but think, “If only Eihou were here.” It was almost like a chronic illness at this point. It made things quite difficult for me.

Ooba raised his hand in the air and the ruckus in the room quieted down. “Your Imperial Majesty, will you not assign cavalymen to the strategist?”

Plains stretched far and wide in the west of Keiyou. The terrain was perfect for cavalry, which made up the vast majority of the Gen army. Ooba's question was a fair one. I signaled to my servant, who handed a scroll to the Silver Wolf. The scroll contained a map of what Keiyou currently looked like, courtesy of my spies. In the west were numerous bulwarks, as well as a moat so long and complicated that it resembled a slithering serpent.

“This is...” Ooba said.

“It appears that the impudent Chou Tairan has set up anti-cavalry constructs to the west of Keiyou. If we try to forcibly charge through, we will only increase our casualties. I do not wish to become a fool who kills my soldiers for no reason in an easily winnable battle.”

“Ohh, such merciful words.” Ooba's small body shook as fast tears dripped down his face. Those born on the plains were a simple and honest lot. They took words at face value and the thought of there being a hidden meaning never crossed their minds.

Ooba's older brother Bete, who had been born in Enkei, opened his mouth with an apologetic expression. “Your Imperial Majesty, if I may?”

“You may. Speak.”

“Thank you.” The Golden Wolf turned to point at one of the officials seated at the far end of the room. He was a plain-looking man who seemed to be in his thirties. “Who is that Ei officer sitting over there? I apologize for what I am

about to say. However, I remember seeing him on the battlefield during the southern campaign seven years ago.”

The man did not reply. In truth, many people in Gen viewed those born in the lands formerly known as northern Ei as beneath them. The officials and officers who deigned to look at the man did so with contempt in their eyes. Ever since I took the throne, I’d been working to recruit talented individuals regardless of their race or status. However, it was clear that I still had a long way to go when it came to erasing such prejudice.

Without revealing any of the cold thoughts swirling in my head, I praised, “My Golden Wolf, I commend you for noticing and remembering him! He is Gi Heian, an Ei general who surrendered to us.”

“I thank you for your praise,” Bete said, bowing his head low and taking a step back. He was considered one of the smarter generals for a reason; he must have understood what I was trying to do.

“Last year, we took Seitou and we defeated the Ei savages in Ranyou when they tried to invade us.” We’d created a situation in which Keiyou had to contend with two fronts. If we looked at the greater picture, we’d already won. It mattered little what Chou Tairan and his family achieved on the battlefield. It was only a matter of time before Ei buckled under our pressure and surrendered. You Bunshou, the grand chancellor, was a thorn in my side but I could use the rat I’d sneaked into Rinkei’s court to deal with him. *Even in this situation, I will not let my guard down.* “However, at the same time, we lost the Crimson Wolf Nguyen Gui and the Gray Wolf Seul Bato. These were heavy blows to our army.”

I thought of those two Wolves, who had been some of the most loyal soldiers I ever had. They would have been standing here before me right now if they’d survived. With Gisen and the White Wolf’s additions, the Four Wolves were four once more—but still, there was no greater fool than a commander who lost two generals. When Eihou led the Tou army, he hadn’t lost a single one.

In a firm voice I told the gathered lot, “That is why for this southern invasion, I will exercise the utmost caution, as if knocking on a stone bridge before I cross it. Heian will assist me in doing so. No one has come close to matching him in

the exploits he achieved at the northwestern border. I hope you will all work well with him in the future.”

“Very well...” The wolves of Gen lowered their heads, though it was clear they weren’t happy with my order. It would take more time before their bias towards soldiers from the southern Gen regions vanished.

I rearranged my expression into a more casual one. “Now then, everyone, raise a cup. Tonight, we shall drink to our hearts’ content.”

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The reception hall at midnight was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I sat, drinking alone. The party had ended hours ago. Only Gisen, staying near me as my bodyguard, remained. *The marshal might give me a tongue-lashing tomorrow.* I was gazing at the Routou twig I’d placed inside of a simple vase, admiring the blossoms, when a shadow behind a pillar moved.

“Gisen, it’s all right. My guest has arrived,” I said, noticing Gisen react. I drank the rest of my wine down just as a small person wearing a fox mask emerged.

They were a member of the Senko, a spy organization that worked from the shadows. If I recalled correctly, this particular one’s name was Ren. Without wasting time on any greetings they said, “As you planned, Denso is feeding poison to the poor heir of the Jo family. It is only a matter of time before he folds.”

My reply was curt. “I see.” *So the eldest son of the Jo family is that pathetic and foolish? You Bunshou, grand chancellor of the Ei Empire, it seems that your fate is sealed. How unfortunate for you.*

Ren glanced over at Gisen before asking, “Why did you not summon Hasho to the capital? Keiyou’s defenses may be tougher now but there was no need to call for the Blackblade.”

“This method will make him work harder. The most effective way to discipline a strategist who hasn’t completely abandoned their emotions is to give them the cold shoulder.”

I thought of that immature strategist, who hadn’t been able to make it in the Senko and claimed to have studied all of Ouei’s tactics. His childishness was



most amusing to me. But despite that small man's strong sense of pride, it seemed that he still had some measure of common sense. It was clear that he felt responsible over the Gray Wolf Seul Bato's death. I wished for him to rack his brains and come up with some sort of plan in order to get back into my good graces. Even if he failed, his tactics would serve as a wondrous supporting attack.

I spread out a scroll and looked down on it. Right next to the river was Hakuhou Castle, built to serve as a wall to protect Keiyou. "About that matter I'd trusted to the Honorable One... Her estimations *are* correct, right?"

"She was most confident in herself. She even wished for me to pass along a message, stating that she wants some sort of reward. Even if she's wrong, your victory is certain."

If that purple-haired demon who slithered about in Seitou's shadows and cared only about mysticism was *that* certain in herself, then it was probably fair to place my trust in her.

Ren approached me, practically drifting along the ground, and whispered my own plan in a lilting tone: "A large enough army to completely overpower the other side and a simultaneous attack from north and west. On top of that..." A cut had been engraved on the map, right where the mouth of the great river was. I could see Ren's blue eyes through the fox mask. "If we can drag that irritating Chou Tairan from Keiyou, then the Ei army has no hope of winning, even if those who wield the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars are among them. I will not pray for your victory, for I do not see any use in doing so."

The spy walked into the shadows of a pillar and then disappeared. They were a strange lot; their only goal was to see unification done and were manipulating me for that vision. Though they were odd, they, like the Honorable One, had their uses.

I looked up at the dark ceiling and said, "I hope we will not need to use the pathetic son of the Jo family. It may come as a surprise, but I can feel pity for others as well. Regardless..." I wondered what Eihou would think of my plan. Would he find me cruel or would he understand? Unable to get an answer, I looked down at my hands and steeled my will. The fire in the stove shook from

the wind. “With this battle, I shall rid myself of Chou Tairan and those who possess the Heavenly Swords.”



## Chapter Two

“Oh? Looks like lots of construction was done while I was busy with other things,” I exclaimed, gazing at the impressive sight before me.

Half a month had already passed since we saw Meirin and the others off to Rinkei, and I hadn’t been able to visit the western regions of Keiyou until today. *“Sekiei, I plan on training the soldiers again before the Gen invasion restarts. Help me,”* father had asked of me. As a result of this request, everything here had been left to Hakurei and Ruri.

“Layers of bulwarks, countless moats, and watchtowers to keep an eye on the battle at all times... Ruri was right. This is amazing!” From atop one of said watchtowers, I praised the absent strategist.

The soldiers around me snickered so I gave an exaggerated shrug, as if asking, “What’s so funny?” This time, they couldn’t contain their laughter and guffawed, catching the attention of the others working on fortifying the defenses and the civilians helping with the woodwork. I was about to wave at them when someone made a loud coughing sound next to me.

“Ahem. Sekiei, please refrain from acting like a hyperactive child. Everyone’s staring at you.”

Though we’d been exchanging information on Keiyou’s progress over the past fifteen days through our nightly talks, it’d been a long time since I was able to spend any time with Hakurei during the day. She didn’t even bother turning her blue eyes my way to tell me off. She was wearing a white military uniform, White Star hanging from her waist. Her long silver hair, tied up with a crimson ribbon, reflected the warm spring sunlight.

“I was only being honest. Sorry for bothering you guys.”

“It was no problem, sir!”

After apologizing to the guards, I started to descend from the watchtower using the ladder. Hakurei followed from the ladder next to mine. When I was

halfway down, I stopped and looked around. What a beautiful sight.

“Sekiei, that’s dangerous!” Hakurei snapped.

“Right.” I resumed my journey down to the ground. I would never dream of rebelling against the scary princess’s orders.

*Even so...* Behind me were the walls of Keiyou. Before me were bulwarks, a serpentine moat, and the vast plains. The watchtowers had amazing views, but they’d be targeted by the catapults first. Seitou, which had become part of the Gen Empire, excelled in technology and I remembered the devastation those large catapults caused during the previous battles in Keiyou and Ranyou. The bulwarks and moat were effective in stopping cavalry and heavy infantry—as it was almost impossible for either to climb or swim—but we had no idea how effective they would be in staving off damage from boulders and metal projectiles until it was time for battle.

I reached the ground safely, thoughts still brewing in my mind. Despite stopping in the middle, it looked like I’d somehow managed to pass Hakurei during the descent. She was almost to the ground but I approached her and reached out with my hand.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Yes, I am. I’m not a child so stop treating me like—ah!” Despite her muttered complaints, Hakurei had reached out for my hand but she must have let her guard down. She slipped on the ladder and jumped to the ground, clinging onto me.

In response, the soldiers and civilians cheered, whistling and whooping.

“Y-Young master!”

“Have you finally resigned yourself to your fate?!”

“Everyone, calm down! Calm down!”

“Remember what Master Strategist said! This is normal for those two!”

“You’re right!”

*These guys are so... Anyway, I’m gonna have to give Ruri a scolding later.*

In my arms, Hakurei's face and neck were as red as an apple and she was huddling in on herself, looking as small as possible. She made a low noise that sounded like faint distress so I gave her a comforting pat on the back before drawing away.

"Sekiei, you dummy," Hakurei said, pursing her lips in dissatisfaction and staring up at me.

*Uh, what do you want from me?* Instead of voicing that, I scratched my cheek and gave her my serious opinion on the situation. "Most strategy books recommend stopping cavalry with bulwarks and moats, but seeing this many of them is pretty breathtaking. Ruri did amazing work."

Hakurei adjusted her uniform before reaching out to tidy up mine. There was a bright glint of intelligence in her blue eyes. "I hear that she has a plan to deal with those catapults as well. Miss Ruri calculated the distance of their attacks by testing the catapult we took, as well as using information collected at Ranyou. Unless the enemies place catapults right where the closest line of bulwarks are, they won't be able to reach these watchtowers."

"Ah, I see. And they'll have a hell of a time getting them there, considering what we've set up. Trying to clear the area beforehand would be a hassle and a half too. We were the idiots for not realizing the best way to counter those catapults."

"I agree that Miss Ruri is a very intelligent strategist. However, you're the only idiot around here."

"Wha—?! Hey, that's not playing fair!"

Throughout the conversation, we each returned to our normal selves. We had made peace regarding our nightly talks—since Ruri would fall asleep before us they were still ours alone...but it *had* been half a month since I had last seen Hakurei under the sun like this, so maybe I was feeling a little nervous.

I held my hands behind my head as Hakurei and I started to walk around the encampment. "What did Ruri say about Hakugin Castle?"

"She apparently advised father to abandon it, saying, 'It's unfortunate but the Chou family can't afford to lose even a single soldier.' We'll increase the



number of cavalry in order to deal with potential spies or scouts.”

“It’s a merciless decision, but I agree with her.”

Hakugin Castle was a branch castle that used to be an abandoned fortress in the western plains. Though it had been of great help when the Crimson Wolf attacked us, we’d essentially abandoned it afterwards. Several hundred soldiers would be less than meat shields against an army of over ten thousand and upgrading it would be meaningless as well. In which case, it made sense to focus all of our attention and manpower in Keiyou.

Eventually, we reached where construction on the fortifications was actually going on. Everyone working on the project was covered in dirt and they were all holding that bizarre “shovel” tool.

“Oh, it’s the young master!” one of them said, catching the attention of everyone else.

“Lady Hakurei! You’re as beautiful as ever today.”

“Is something the matter?”

More and more soldiers and civilians noticed and called out to us.

“All we’ve been doing is digging and making mountains of dirt.”

“This tool is really convenient!”

Morale was really high! Unlike the previous invasion, Chou Tairan the National Shield was present in Keiyou. It was probably the reason for the high spirits.

I walked towards them without hesitation. “Our strategist and princess kept nagging me to check out what’s going on here. Hurry up and dig! Make more mountains! The bulwarks must be as high as the moats are deep. Let’s make those horsemen in the north *work* for this invasion. All right, it’s not every day that we get to do this so I’ll show you guys how it’s done. I’m borrowing that tool there.”

A small cheer rose from the crowd. I wasn’t anyone special, but there was meaning in a commander sweating and working along with everyone else. It didn’t matter if it was all just an act—it fostered a sense of...solidarity, I

believed the word was. A good general was someone who could ingrain such togetherness among the soldiers. Gyoumei had been particularly good at this. Humans never changed, even after a thousand years.

I grabbed a nearby shovel and started to dig through the dirt with it. “Oh, wow. This really is easier to use than a hoe!” It looked like I had to ask Meirin to procure us some more. Shovels were good enough that I wanted to have these as official equipment for the Ei army. I stabbed the sharp head of the shovel into the ground and turned around. “Hakurei, I’m gonna be working here so can you continue the pat—”

“Let me borrow this.” Hakurei, shovel in hand thanks to a nearby worker, walked up to stand next to me. Without a change in her blank expression, she said, “I’ll work here as well.”

“Er, that’s kind of...”

She set her shovel down onto a rock that had been poking out of the ground, slicing it in half with a clean cut. *Whoa, that’s one sharp shovel.* Hakurei looked up at me, her beautiful smile affixed to her face.

“I’ll. Work. Here. As. Well. Is that all right with you?”

“Y-Yeah... S-Sure thing.” I nodded, the motion frantic. *Why did she get so mad?*



The soldiers and civilians around us didn't let me take that lying down.

"Young master, you're pathetic!"

"Lady Hakurei has her work cut out for her."

"This is a tremendous help though!"

"Once you get used to it, shoveling dirt's pretty fun."

"I gotta let everyone know that the two of you are working together! Maybe one day you'll be holding a wedding tea ceremony together too!"

"You guys know we can hear you, right?" I glared at everyone and they all dispersed as one, returning to their tasks. I shook my head, my hair hitting my cheeks. Hakurei was digging next to me, though it was clear she was unfamiliar with how to use a shovel. "Jeez, you're probably the only heiress under the sun who's willing to make bulwarks and dig moats with the rest of the soldiers," I complained. "I don't count since I'm just an orphan father took in."

Hakurei stabbed her shovel into a half-built bulwark and turned to glare at me.

*I-I can sense something dangerous approaching!* "M-Miss Hakurei? I-Is something the ma— Eek!" I couldn't suppress the pathetic squeal that escaped my mouth. Hakurei shoved me into a bulwark with such strength that I could feel a gust of wind whip past my cheek. There was a massive pout on her face when I looked up to stare at her.

"You're also..." she started before trailing off.

"Y-Yeah?" I was so confused and shocked by the turn of events that I stammered out my response. I knew that the soldiers and civilians were staring at us with smirks on their faces. *Damn them!* But Hakurei didn't pay them any attention, leaning ever closer to me.

"You're also a member of the Chou family, aren't you? Why did you exclude yourself just now? Do you...not want to take on the Chou name? I may be kind and patient, but you're testing my temper with your ridiculous jokes."

"Kind? Patient? I've never seen you act—"

This time, I felt a sharp breeze next to my right cheek as Hakurei slammed her fist into the dirt wall behind me. She drew away, pulling back her arms before giving me such a beautiful smile that I could practically see flowers dancing next to her face.

“Did you say something?” she asked.

“A-Ah ha ha, I was joking. Just joking! Uh, do you want some water?” I pulled out a bamboo bottle from my pocket, the forced smile on my face twitching with the effort of maintaining the expression. Hakurei didn’t respond, but she snatched the bottle out of my hand.

*Yeah, maybe it’s pathetic of me, but I just don’t see the appeal of throwing my life away. Besides, if I make her mad, she’ll refuse to leave my room tonight.* It was true that I wasn’t a real member of the Chou family so why did I have to get in trouble? Granted, no one around me ever believed that. I could tell that the others were thinking, “Young master, you’re the one at fault,” based on the way they were staring at me. *Looks like I don’t have any allies here. The world is such a cruel place.*

I sighed and let the strength seep out of my body as I looked down at the shovel. It was much better at constructing and preparing bases than any other tool we’d used in the past. “We gotta get more of these things.”

“Miss Ruri said the same thing, but...”

“Yeah, I doubt they’d get here in time.”

I accepted the bamboo bottle back from Hakurei, who’d drunk her fill. We could ask Meirin for more shovels now, but they wouldn’t arrive before Gen’s attack. Not even Ou Meirin could conquer the distance between Rinkei and Keiyou. I doubted even her paddlewheeler could make it in time. I wanted to get more of those fire lances and the powerful bow that I used as well, but there was no point in thinking about it anymore; the final battle would be starting too soon.

“Sekiei, for now...”

“Yeah, I know!”

Hakurei must have had the same thought as me. *Oh, there’s dirt on her cheek.*

*I'll have to wipe it off later.*

“Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, I finally found you two!” The loud voice of a young officer interrupted my thoughts. Raigen’s relative, Teiha, hurried over to us, wearing a scuffed suit of armor. After surviving multiple battles, he had matured into a fine officer despite his young age.

I handed him a shovel and said, “You came because Ruri ordered you to hurry us, right? Yeah, we know. Finish the job here, will you?”

“Yessir! Please leave everything to me! I, uh, advise you to hurry.”

*It seems that Miss Ascendant's in a bad mood. Nah, the hurry's probably because Raigen's coming to check out the fire lances and she doesn't want to handle him on her own.* I turned to face Hakurei and said, “Let’s get a move on. Can’t keep Gramps and our strategist waiting, after all. Oh, before we do...”

“Sekiei?”

I ignored the curious look Hakurei was giving me and took out a bamboo bottle. After wetting a cloth with the water inside, I pressed it against Hakurei’s cheek.

She squeaked in surprise and then stammered, “S-Sekiei?”

Her large sapphire eyes had always been prettier than any jewel. “Women with silver hair and blue eyes will bring misfortune to the country” was a saying so old that I’d even heard it a thousand years ago. *But I’ve spent this much time with Hakurei and haven’t experienced anything close to misfortune.* I cleaned off her hands as well and gave her a light push on her back.

“Your face is so pretty that it’s a shame to walk around with dirt on it. All right, let’s get going, then.” In response, she made a quiet noise of dissatisfaction.

I hopped away from the half-finished bulwark; we needed to make our way to the northern plains of Keiyou where Ruri was. Just as I was wondering what Raigen thought about the new fire lances, I felt a wet cloth press against my face.

“Whoa! H-Hakurei?” She’d circled in front of me and was moving her hand

with a calm look on her face. However, I could see a faint blush dusting her cheeks.

“There was something on your face so I was wiping it off. Do you have an issue with that?”

“Uh, no, I don’t.” I could see a stubborn determination in her eyes so I decided to surrender entirely to her ministrations, letting her do as she pleased. The soldiers and civilians enjoying the show stopped working, smiles on their faces. I could practically hear their thoughts: “She really treasures you, young master! ♪”

*When people say that the eyes are windows to the soul, they aren’t kidding, dammit!* Hakurei had moved on to wiping the dirt off my hands so I took the opportunity to yell at the spectators, “Hey, get outta here, all of you! Get back to work!”

Everyone scattered like fleeing insects, returning to their tasks. The soldiers and civilians of Keiyou had a mix of love and healthy respect for father, Hakurei, Raigen, and even Teiha. I was the only one they made fun of. *Well, they might tease and spoil Ruri like a little kid.*

“Jeez, those guys... Don’t you think they should stick to babying Ruri?” I muttered.

“They respect Miss Ruri. I’m going to prepare the horses so hurry up and get ready.”

“What...did you say?” I was shocked at the cruel truth Hakurei revealed to me. *N-No way... They show respect to that pint-size strategist but not me? Impossible!*

As I glared at Hakurei cheerily walking off, her long silver hair and crimson ribbon waving in the breeze, Teiha said, “Everyone trusts General Chou, Lady Hakurei, and Master Strategist. That goes for you too, Lord Sekiei. I have complete faith in you.”

“Of course everyone trusts father. And it’s one thing to trust Hakurei and Ruri, but me? Now that’s a funny story,” I replied in a brusque manner before looking around at the workers. Though they were serious about their work, they were



still smiling and laughing. We were a mere fraction of our enemy's greater numbers and could only rely on our own hard work; we wouldn't be getting any reinforcements. Yet despite the despairing odds we were faced with, the people of Keiyou hadn't given up. In that case, I would do my best as well.

"Teiha," I said in a quiet voice, "the soldiers who returned from Seitou can move out at any time, right?"

"Yes. We have about three thousand riders, including the volunteers. All of them are capable of mounted archery."

We had thirty thousand elite soldiers in Hakuhou Castle to the north. We also had ten thousand soldiers on reserve; father had set them apart from the rest for a counterattack. Twenty thousand of our soldiers were in the west of Keiyou but they were our defense, so it would be hard to move them away from their stations. Unless Hakurei and I led a team of riders and used their superior mobility on the battlefield to cut through the enemies, we had no chance of winning.

During the battle of Keiyou, the Crimson Wolf Nguyen Gui had fixated on a direct attack on our western side. He could have easily split his army into two and sent half of his soldiers to attack Hakuhou Castle from behind—but he didn't. According to our captives, this was due to his stubbornness as a general. Nothing more and nothing less. I didn't know who the enemy general would be this time, but I doubted it would be anyone I knew of personally. The calm spring breeze blew through the air, bringing with it the scent of fresh dirt.

I pressed a fist against Teiha's chest, right over his heart, and said, "The winter is over. Soon, their attack will begin. Hakurei and I will take command of those three thousand soldiers, with Ruri giving out the orders. This coming battle will be a difficult one and we'll all be fighting to our very last breath. Prepare yourself for the worst."

"Yessir! We've all steeled our wills. Don't worry, Lord Chou Sekiei."

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"Sorry to have kept you waiting!"

"Miss Ruri, I hope you didn't wait for long."

In the plains stretching far beyond the northern regions of Keiyou stood a temporary watchtower on a nameless hill. In the distance we could see Hakuhou Castle on the southern bank of the great river. A young girl wearing a blue hat—our strategist Ruri—was peering through a spyglass said to have been created by the ascendants of the past. Asaka and a few other women, all of them wearing armor, were the only people around; Ruri wasn't fond of men. Several hundred soldiers wielding odd-looking sticks were lined up in the plains and it looked like Gramps Raigen hadn't arrived yet.

Hakurei and I dismounted from our horses and Ruri, on seeing us, put away her spyglass and said in a teasing tone, "You two sure took your sweet time. Did you have a nice little date on the way? We've already finished our preparations."

"A-A date?! O-Of course not... S-Sekiei and I...we're not like that! O-Of course, there's no telling what'll happen in the future. But..."

Where did the cool and elegant Hakurei of a few seconds ago disappear to? She pressed her hands to her cheeks and twisted her body side to side. As expected, Asaka and the other female soldiers gazed at us with maternal affection in their eyes. *Everyone who works for the Chou family is a bit too soft on Hakurei.*

Leaving Hakurei to wrestle her emotions back under control, I replied, "We were just seeing what it was like to dig the bulwarks. By the way, I could feel the tenacity of our Kobi-born chess-loving ascendant. I bet you were thinking something like, 'So long as I'm around, I won't let any cavalry or catapult through without a fight.' It was really impressive."

"It was because our trade route to Seitou has been severed that I was able to fortify the fields like that for an open battle. It would've been impossible under normal circumstances. Meirin shipping in those useful tools was another boon for us."

"Yeah, I agree."

Keiyou was originally a commerce city. The roads connecting it to other countries and cities were lifelines as important as the Grand Canal. Yet, ironically enough, we'd had to build bulwarks and moats on those trade routes

with our very own hands.

“Oto, thanks for the escort. You can step down now,” Ruri said to her assistant next to her. Her assistant was a youthful-looking woman with short, dark brown hair, dark skin, and a tall slender body.

*Ruri's assistant, Oto*



“Yes, ma’am!” Oto picked up a nearby war flag and waved it before she offered us a salute, hopped onto her horse, and raced down the hill. She reacted quickly to commands, which made sense since she used to lead one of the U family army platoons. Upon seeing Oto’s signal, the soldiers on the plains adjusted how they were standing in line in a rush.

Ruri straightened her hat and explained in a calm tone, “Despite all of our work, only the western side has finished its fortifications. If the enemy general becomes frustrated that they can’t penetrate our defenses...”

“They’ll try to attack from either the north or the south.” Hakurei had recovered from her embarrassment and joined the conversation. “Sekiei, I’m feeling thirsty. Please give me some water.”

“Oh, uh, sure.”

Hakurei took the bottle from me and chugged it down in one smooth motion. *She can even make drinking water look like a work of art.*

Hakurei stealing my water from me was an everyday occurrence at this point so Ruri didn’t even bat an eye. She unfurled a map of the areas around Keiyou, spreading it across the small table that’d been set up and tracing it with her finger. “If they try to attack Keiyou from the north, they’ll be able to attack Hakuhou Castle from behind. Our defenses are weakest in the south, but it’s not as if we can seal off the roads there...”

Her expression clouded. The only obstacle on the roads to Keiyou’s north and south from the west was a small tributary of the great river. If an army as massive as Gen’s seriously tried to cross it, they’d be able to do so without any issue. It had been due to sheer luck that, despite being well aware of this fact, Crimson Wolf Nguyen Gui hadn’t taken advantage of this information. Perhaps there *was* a meaning to landing a blow on him with an arrow and taunting him during our duel.

I clapped a hand against Ruri’s small shoulder. “So we’ll be the ones to take care of it—father commanding the army from Keiyou, your fire lance unit, and Hakurei and I.”

Ruri frowned before she replied, “You were the one who pushed the fire

lance unit onto me, remember? I'm not cut out to lead an entire unit. Well, I've been leaving everything to Oto anyway. Thanks for giving her to me as an officer."

"Just don't work her too hard."

The female officer we'd picked to serve as Ruri's attendant had not only been a member of the U family army, but she had a reputation for being a highly capable soldier despite her youth. As proof, she'd survived the doomed battle at Ranyou along with the platoon under her command. She'd even participated in the battle at Bourou Gorge during our retreat from Seitou and contributed to our victory.

*"Thank you for saving my life. I'd like to repay this debt,"* she'd said, and had continued to work with the Chou family army even after returning to Keiyou. That being said, it must have been difficult taking care of the prodigy Ruri, as well as being the real leader of a team handling unfamiliar new weapons. I needed to offer her some more praise or compensation later.

After deciding on my future plans, I looked over at the wooden box next to me. Inside there were over a hundred strange wooden sticks with bamboo cylinders at their tips. These sticks were disposable fire lances.

"What's up with these?" I asked.

"Meirin delivered these to us. Apparently, she was cleaning out her stock."

Ruri was about to wave the flag herself this time when Hakurei snatched it away from her with a smile and an "I can handle this." In the plains, Oto had drawn her sword and was barking out orders to the collected soldiers.

Ruri pursed her lips and gazed out at the fire lance unit. "We added more of the improved copper fire lances, which can fire more than one shot before breaking. In total, we have three hundred of them. I wanted to send the bamboo ones to Hakuhou Castle but General Raigen said that we don't have time to train everyone on using this new technology, which means that they might make things more chaotic during emergencies."

"Ahh." I nodded.

"He has a point," Hakurei said.

It was a reasonable opinion from Raigen, an old veteran who, at this point, had been in charge of defending the front line for decades. These new weapons weren't infallible either. *They're effective against cavalry, but...*

As Hakurei and I hummed our approval for Raigen's decision, a deep voice called out to us, "Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, Miss Ruri!"

"Oh, we were just talking about you. Hey, Gramps! Sorry for summoning you all the way here!" I exclaimed.

"Raigen!" Hakurei greeted him from next to me. Ruri remained silent.

Raigen hurried up the hill on horseback. He was wearing armor, and I could see his white hair and beard poking out from underneath his helmet. In battle, friends and foe alike both feared and respected him, referring to him by the name of "the Ogre." He had several old soldiers Hakurei and I recognized as his guards.

He slid off his horse and peered into the wooden box with keen interest. "So these are the so-called fire lances? I hear they can produce a sound as loud as thunder. My, my, but times have changed. Perhaps living for a long time isn't such a good thing after all."

I picked up a fire lance and twirled it in my hand. The sharp stench of gunpowder irritated my nose. "They're mostly used for intimidation," I explained. "They don't have as much range as a bow and they're impossible to aim."

"I'm sure they're effective against horses. In that sense, I can understand why you and Miss Ruri place so much emphasis on using them in battle."

I didn't expect anything less from Raigen the Ogre; even if he had no intention of utilizing these weapons himself, he still read through our reports. Though I was happy hearing what Raigen said, I was pulled from my thoughts—literally—when Ruri and Hakurei tugged at my sleeves.

"Convince him!" they mouthed in unison.

*These damn prodigies.* I returned the fire lance to the box and, though I wasn't expecting much, suggested, "Gramps, I want Ruri's team to be the one in charge of using the improved fire lances. But we can also send a good number



of the bamboo ones to Hakuhou Castle. They're single use, but they're better than nothing, right?"

"Young master, I appreciate the sentiment." Raigen dipped his head, playing with his beard. His eyes burned with conviction. "However, our forces at Hakuhou Castle are far too old. Now that the horsemen's invasion is certain to come to pass, we must eliminate anything that may court confusion among my soldiers."

"Please, just this once, allow us to turn down your offer!" the old officers and soldiers behind Raigen said as they bowed their heads.

*What more can I say to them at this point?* I sighed. "Fine, fine. I won't nag you about this anymore."

"You have my thanks," Raigen said with a relieved smile.

The officers and soldiers at the vanguard were always under extreme duress. Piling even more responsibilities and stress onto their shoulders would be the most foolish thing to do. In war, new weapons didn't always guarantee a turnabout victory.

Ruri had been listening to us in silence so I looked over at her to present my compromise plan. "Ruri, let's send all of the single-use fire lances to the volunteer soldiers in the west. Since none of them have any official combat training, they might have an easier time learning how to use them. If you find anyone with outstanding talent, you can place them in your team."

"All right."

She must have picked up on my intention because she didn't try to argue with me. It looked like—

"But it's not *my* team," Ruri snapped. "It's Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei's. Don't make that mistake again!"

Scratch that. It looked like the situation was *not* resolved yet because Ruri turned away from me, puffing her cheeks out in a pout. *Yeah, looking at her like this makes it hard to believe she's an intelligent and reliable strategist. She looks like an ordinary kid.*

Hakurei and I patted her over her blue hat. “All right, all right,” I said.

“Miss Ruri, don’t worry,” Hakurei added.

“Wha—?! What’s with those ‘Say less; we understand you’ expressions on your faces?! It’s one thing for *Sekiei* to look at me like that, but you too, Hakurei?”

“Huuuh? What’s the issue?” Hakurei and I playfully asked in unison.

“Y-You two...!” The genius strategist started to stomp her feet on the ground.

Hakurei and I, as well as Asaka and the other female soldiers, watched over her warmly. Then, we heard Raigen’s booming laughter. When we turned to look at him, we saw that the severe expressions of his old soldiers had softened as well. Ruri made a wordless squeak and then hid herself behind me and Hakurei.

Upon seeing that, Raigen’s face stretched in a wide grin and he clanged his fist against his breastplate. “You all are truly reliable! You all possess incredible nerves to be bantering like this before a major attack. I was nothing like you when I was your age. The time for us old soldiers has passed, I see.”

“Gramps...”

Raigen and the other veterans had been fighting to retrieve their homeland—the land north of the great river—for years. They’d been doing so even before father was born.

Raigen stared down at the fire lancers while stroking his beard. “However, we old men can still work and fight! Hakuhou Castle is the center of Keiyou’s defenses and, more importantly, it’s the castle that my master has entrusted to me. We are all aware of where we shall bury our bones.”

“Please leave everything to us!” his soldiers yelled.

At that moment, a thunderous boom echoed over the plains. All of the fire lances had been fired at once. However, Raigen and his soldiers didn’t react.

“You old-timers,” I said in a half-exasperated, half-complimentary tone. “If we survive this invasion, I’m going to have you all learn how to use a fire lance, got it? And before you ask, yes, the teacher will be our strategist.”

“Yessir,” the soldiers replied.

“Excuuuse me?” Ruri glared up at me, dissatisfied with my decision.

I waved my hand as if brushing away her concerns. “Don’t worry; I know you’re shy around strangers. I’ll have Hakurei and Oto accompany you, okay?”

“Miss Ruri, let’s do our best!” Hakurei said.

“Ack! I-I knew you were all treating me like a child. I—”

Before Ruri could finish her sentence, the deafening scream of a fire bell rang through the air. We all looked up, our breaths catching in our throats as we realized what we were hearing. *Th-This is the alarm that we set up in Hakuhou Castle. It only rings when there’s an invasion!*

Raigen and his soldiers leaped onto their horses’ backs in a smooth motion. “Young master, we’ll return to the castle!” Raigen bellowed.

“Excuse us!” his soldiers said before they galloped down the hill as one.

*They’re finally here!* They might have had more soldiers than we did, but they had no choice but to charge at us from the front. If we remained on the defensive, there was no plausible way for us to lose. After all, we had Chou Tairan, the National Shield, on our side.

“Sekiei!” Hakurei said.

“We should go as well,” Ruri added.

“Right!” Hakurei and Ruri pulled me back to the present; I mounted my horse again. Asaka, the female soldiers, and the fire lancers were gathering up all of their weapons and supplies.

“We’ll check out the situation first and then return to Keiyou,” I ordered from horseback. “Ruri, if you notice anything, anything at all, then report to me as soon as possible. Our enemy is the White Wraith Adai Dada, the emperor of Gen. He won’t use the same tactics that the Crimson Wolf did. Hakurei, you—”

“I will watch over you to make sure you don’t pull any reckless stunts on your own, as well as stay at your side to watch your back,” she interrupted.

“O-Oh, sure,” I replied. Hakurei’s tone had been so matter-of-fact that I didn’t

know how to respond.

“Pfft.” Ruri drew her horse close to mine and flicked Black Star’s scabbard. “That sounds like a plan. Make sure you protect the princess’s back with all you have, wielder of the Heavenly Sword. Now, let’s go!”

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“Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, the cavalrymen of Seitou have arrived. We fought with them at Ranyou so there’s no mistaking their colors. There are about three thousand of them!”

In the northwestern regions of Keiyou, near a nameless tributary of the great river, Ruri’s assistant Oto peered through a spyglass as she made her report. She, along with the rest of us, was hiding in the shadows of a small hill as she kept watch.

I heard that she was a year younger than Hakurei and I were, but she looked mature beyond her years. There were scratches and scuffs all over her light armor to serve as physical evidence of the fights and skirmishes this girl had experienced over the course of her career. Oto loved to take care of others and even the shy Ruri had warmed up to her. Our strategist had even lent her spyglass to Oto since Ruri herself was staying behind in Keiyou to assist Teiha with the preparations.

In other words, Oto was a great and valuable asset to our army. It was especially true in our current situation: around a hundred thousand soldiers from Seitou’s army, with heavy infantry making up most of those numbers, were making their way towards us. Meanwhile, the main forces of the Gen army, numbering around two hundred thousand and led by Adai himself, were standing at the ready on the northern shore of the great river.

I waved a hand to express my gratitude to Oto and then narrowed my eyes. *She wasn’t mistaken.* Spear-wielding soldiers in heavy metal armor were looking for the best place to cross the river.

“I can see them too,” I said. “Everything from the numbers to the crossing point to the time was exactly as Ruri predicted! And if that’s the case, I’m willing to bet that there’s movement in the south as well. Father’s stationed over there so I doubt anything will go wrong.”

Ten days had passed since the Gen army's attack had begun. The defensive formation Ruri had set up in the western regions of Keiyou had done a good job at keeping the enemy soldiers at bay, preventing the catapults and siege engines—some of the biggest threats—from doing any effective damage. Some of the officers and soldiers were so impressed that they started to worship the shovels, which had been instrumental in making all those walls and moats in time for the invasion.

As we'd planned, Raigen and thirty thousand elite soldiers were stationed in Hakuhou Castle while father and the remaining thirty thousand protected Keiyou with casual confidence. Since the Seitou army only ever tried to attack from the front, we hadn't suffered any casualties to our walls or our soldiers.

*"If the enemy general knows what they're doing, then it should be about time for them to go around to Keiyou's north or south in order to make some actual progress."* That had been our strategist's prediction. We were able to figure out the enemy's movements thanks to our scouts. We used their reports to guess that, judging by how many soldiers there were, the group heading south would be Seitou's main attack force. Father himself, along with ten thousand of his troops, were on their way to meet them. The Seitou soldiers in the north were likely to support the southern group's attack, as well as to scout ahead for future operations.

Hakurei, who had been at my side observing the enemy army, huffed, "I agree that Miss Ruri is an amazing strategist. However, it's ridiculous how you can see them from this distance. I've wondered this for a while now, but what kind of eyes do you have? Oto and the other soldiers are scared of you."

"Huh? What are you—"

"Even when I used my spyglass, they were as small as grains of rice..." Oto said, causing me and the others to fall silent. I could see how the soldiers' faces were drawn with fear and anxiety.

*Uh... Er...*

"See?" Hakurei said before the veteran soldiers followed her example and started to bully me.

"The young master's so strange."

“Lord Sekiei’s so odd.”

“Well, he’s always been a weird one.”

“Oh, shut it!” I yelled. “Hey, you should be on *my* side. Do you want to see me cry? Because I’ll cry, all right!” I hid my face in the crook of my elbow and exaggeratedly mimed sobbing. There were quiet snickers and it was clear that some of the tension escaped Oto and the new soldiers.

*Well, that was easy.* I flicked my eyes over to Hakurei in acknowledgment before looking up to face the gathered cavalry and the soldiers wielding the fire lances. There were only about two thousand soldiers—however, all of them had survived either the Battle of Keiyou or the Battle of Ranyou. They were experienced and skilled.

“Now then, let’s get to work,” I said. “We have to get back to Keiyou as soon as possible, or that strategist of ours is gonna start pouting. She may act all aloof, but she’s prone to feeling lonely. Teiha had the bad luck of being chosen to stay behind, but he’ll get a stress ulcer if he has to deal with Ruri for any longer. All right, everyone, pay attention to me.” As soon as I said that, the entire army focused their eyes upon me. *Not bad.* I grinned and gave my orders: “I’ll handle the first attack. Fire lancers, you’ll be second. Oto, take command of them.”

“Yessir!” she said with a nod, gripping her fire lance even tighter. Her eyes were brimming with excitement and I couldn’t see a hint of fear in them. Considering her age, its absence was bizarre.

*Father had been the one to choose Oto as Ruri’s attendant, but maybe he knows something about her I don’t.* Even as I pondered about Oto, I continued barking orders. “After that, we’ll just fight as we always do. Follow my—”

“Follow *our* lead,” Hakurei interrupted with her usual calm expression.

More and more lines of enemy soldiers were gathering, the horde becoming bigger with every passing second. Still keeping an eye on them, I protested. “Hey.”

“That’s how we always fight.”

I turned to glare at Hakurei for her stubbornness, but I ended up being the

first one to look away. I ran a hand through my hair as I moaned, “Jeez, what am I gonna do with you, princess of the Chou family? I used to think you were as cute as a real little sister, but then you turned into a tyrant who’s only ever mean to me.”

“Considering how I grew up, it’s only natural that this is what I turned into. Also, I am *always* your older sister, no matter what we’re discussing.”

“Grr...” Upon seeing how pathetic I was acting, the veterans’ smiles began getting wider and the fire lancers’ expressions softened as well. I raised my left hand into the air and said, “There’s no need to try and wipe out the enemy army. We just need to confuse them and have them retreat. I’ll bring up the rear and—”

“Sekiei and I will bring up the rear. Under no circumstance will any of you pursue the enemy if they start to retreat. Preserve your stamina for the final battle.”

“Yes, Lady Chou Hakurei!”

After saluting us, the soldiers started to prepare for battle. The fire lancers got off their horses and the stench of gunpowder began to waft through the air. I went back to observing the enemy soldiers’ positions and movements as I muttered in a mutinous tone, “Hakurei.”

“Did you forget that bringing up the rear *together* is how we’ve always fought? I’ll punch you the next time you say something that ridiculous again.”

“Man, you’re already mad.” I sighed before I continued in a more serious tone, “Hakurei, just don’t die.”

“Of course, Sekiei.”

We pressed our fists against each other’s. So long as we remained together, neither of us would die. I steered my horse to where the fire lancers were stationed; they were in the perfect position to shoot their ammunition from the hill. I nocked an arrow onto my bow. The enemy commander was obvious in the middle of the lines. He was easy to make out, between his flashy armor and his fat body.

Oto had been observing the enemies with her spyglass and when she noticed



me, she asked in a confused tone, “Lord Sekiei? They’re not in range for our arrows yet.”

“Oto, prepare your soldiers,” Hakurei ordered in a sharp voice.

“Y-Yes, ma’am. Prepare to fire!”

At Oto’s command, the fire lancers, still with skeptical looks on their faces, readied their weapons. This newfangled weapon had a short range, but their true potential was elsewhere. I pulled back the string of my powerful bow and —

“Ack!”

I shot an arrow through the fat enemy commander’s left shoulder. His bright armor reflected the spring sunlight as he toppled off his horse, landing in the river. The enemy lines fell apart as the soldiers hurried to try and help him out of the water. I continued to shoot my arrows as fast as I could, hitting the soldier I figured was the vice-commander. Their formation fell apart.

“Oto!” Hakurei and I yelled in unison.

Oto had been standing with her mouth agape, dark eyes wide, but she shot into action at our cry. “Fire lancers, ready!” After the three hundred soldiers held up their weapons in a shooting position, she gave her next order: “Fire!”

The next moment, a boom rang out over the air, as loud as a thunderclap during a storm. Panic engulfed the enemy cavalymen, who had already been off-kilter from the sudden attacks on their commanders. One by one, they fell off their horses. None of them were in any condition to continue marching towards Keiyou.

I smiled grimly and looked over my shoulder at the gathered Keiyou soldiers. All of them were still in their saddles. *Looks like spending the winter acclimating the horses and soldiers to the sound of the fire lances paid off!*

As Oto and her fire lancers prepared for the second shot, I said in a lighthearted tone, “All righty, let’s go. Follow us and don’t fall behind, you guys! If you do, then you’ll get a scolding from the big, scary Lady Chou Hakurei!” The soldiers laughed at that and the enemy cavalry, who must’ve noticed us, grimaced. They probably didn’t want to deal with the kind of soldier who would

laugh while on the battlefield. Our veterans slammed their fists against their helmets and suits of armor, and raised their swords and spears high in the air.

Hakurei pulled up next to me, giving me a sullen look, but I ignored her in favor of yelling, “Charge!!!”

“Yessir!!!”

My horse, Zetsuei, and Hakurei’s horse, Getsuei, reacted at once, galloping down the hill. The enemies, their expressions tight with panic, tugged on their reins to try and order their horses to retreat, but we rained arrows down upon them, shooting them off their mounts. Our archers weren’t aiming to kill. Instead, they were shooting for the enemies’ arms and legs. While still commanding my allies and chasing back the enemies at the front line—reduced thanks to the arrows and fire lances—I noticed scores of cavalymen gathering at the shallows of the tributary. *Oh? They’re still going to charge at us despite being at a disadvantage?*

“Team One, with me!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Hakurei, her hair a silver banner in the wind, led a team of allies in a merciless charge against those riders. She was able to pick out enemies still willing to put up a fight and prioritize them as the most dangerous threat to eliminate. *Father, your daughter will become a great general in the future.* Happy at the prospect, I continued to direct Zetsuei through the enemy lines, shooting down anyone who tried to ambush Hakurei and her team from behind.

As a result of that, however, once I’d cut through the enemy formation and turned Zetsuei around, my quiver was completely empty. I tossed it and said, “Kuen, give me my next... Oh.”

I’d called his name by habit before remembering that he and his twin sister had been evacuated to Rinkei. I was forced to recover quickly, drawing Black Star from its sheath to cut down several arrows in midair. We had a total advantage but it seemed that at some point, I’d been separated from the rest of the Keiyou soldiers—and the Seitou soldiers had targeted me.

“Tch!”

“I can’t believe that attack didn’t kill him...”

“It looks like Master Strategist was right to be worried about him.”

“Ready your arrows again!”

The Seitou riders held up their bows once more after their quick conversation, but before they could pull back their bowstrings, I kicked Zetsuei into a gallop and closed the distance between us.

“Just try and get me!” I yelled, slicing through an arrow that one of them let fly in desperation.

“Y-You basta— Augh!”

“Wha—?! Ack!”

I slashed two of the young riders, straight through their armor. I must’ve become accustomed to wielding Black Star again because the blade felt even sharper than before. Through the mist of blood in the air I could see the remaining riders place their hands on their swords—but they screamed as Hakurei’s arrows, shot from our flank, pierced through their wrists. Instead of attacking me, they urged their horses to turn and run away.

I placed my bow back into its holder on my back as Hakurei, expression twisted in fury, yelled, “Don’t let your guard down! I’ll be angry at you if you die!”

“E-Even in death, I won’t escape your wrath?”

The veterans following Hakurei gathered around us, their expressions abashed as if they thought they’d messed up. A thundering noise boomed over the battlefield again and this time, several enemy riders emerged from the explosions sporting injuries. The fire lancers’ second attack had plunged the enemy’s formation into further chaos, and had lowered morale even more.

An enemy cavalryman, his entire body shaking, pointed at me and yelled, “Ch-Chou Sekiei!”

Wordless cries rose from his allies. It was clear that they no longer had any intention of fighting. They stopped resisting and instead, turned and ran.

I blinked before sighing. “It seems that thanks to a rude strategist, a strict

princess, and the greatest merchant prodigy the world will ever see... I've become pretty famous."

"There's no need for false accusations. We'll need to discuss this with Miss Ruri when we return. Just in case, we should write a letter to Meirin as well."

The fire lancers shot at the retreating enemies for a third time, but they didn't hit anyone. If the soldiers weren't in orderly rows, then the weapons' accuracy was pretty low. I looked over at Hakurei. Her eyes weren't doing a good job at hiding the anger she was directing at me.

"Ruri's one thing, but don't you think Meirin will be happy to hear about my fame?"

"You're right. What a troublesome girl."

Though Hakurei gave an immediate reply to my joke, her expression and voice remained stiff. She was probably blaming herself for how I'd become isolated in the middle of that chaotic battlefield and how, as a result, she was late to come support me. *What am I gonna do about her?*

I sheathed Black Star and ordered in a sharp voice, "Don't pursue them! We'll retreat as planned. Pass that message along to Oto."

"Yessir!" Everyone jumped into action at once, leaving me alone with Hakurei. Some of the veterans remained, but at a distance; it seemed they were giving us space out of consideration. Hakurei looked like she was about to burst into tears so I held her hand and removed her fingers from White Star's hilt.

"Heeey, stop beating yourself up. You came to my aid right on time," I said.

"I'm not beating... Sorry, that's a lie. I have to protect you, though! I thought I'd be able to catch up to you in a heartbeat but it took only a second of inattention for me to lose sight of you..." She looked really downtrodden.

I took White Star and sheathed it for her. Then, leaning close to whisper in her ear, I said, "I let you go attack those riders because I trusted you, you know?"

Hakurei sucked in a sharp breath before she whispered back, "That's such an unfair way to put it!"

"Those are my honest feelings though."

Hakurei made a quiet noise of frustration before she looked down at the ground. I turned to raise a hand at the veterans and offer them my gratitude before suddenly, I remembered what the enemy soldier had said. *The enemy's strategist, huh?* During the Battle of Ranyou, Ruri figured out that there was someone like that in Seitou's army. *Did they have something to do with today's battle as well? Nah, we don't have enough information. I can ponder this later.*

After seeing Oto and her team descend from the hill, I nudged Hakurei's shoulder. "Let's get back to the others. I'm sure that father's crushing the enemies in the south by now."

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"That concludes my report, Master Strategist."

A military tent stood in the ruins of an abandoned fortress, located in the plains west of Keiyou. I, Hasho the Millenary Diviner, strategist of the Gen Empire and current leader of the Seitou army, sat inside. The line of Seitou officers before me had just finished telling me all about how they had been forced to retreat after suffering defeat. The sun had set and the light of the torches, visible even through the tent's cloth, wavered.

I used the feathered fan in my hand to hide the lower half of my face. In a calm voice, I summarized what I'd just heard: "So, while crossing the river in Keiyou's south, our forces—Seitou's twenty thousand strong—fell to Chou Tairan's surprise ambush on our flank, with almost all of our soldiers lost to enemy blades. The team looking for a way to cross in the north also met with enemy resistance, with that Chou Sekiei fellow at the head of their defense. Though this attack didn't cost us as many soldiers, over half of them returned wounded." I shook my head. "What a pathetic display."

"W-We apologize..." the Seitou officers said as one, their faces twisted in humiliation.

I sighed. Ever since the invasion started, the attack on Keiyou had been hampered by countless bulwarks and moats. We'd made almost no progress. Our powerful catapults couldn't even get in range of the city. Every time we shot boulders at the dirt walls they'd built, they would fix them without delay. Not only that, but the heavy infantry the Seitou army was so proud of had

difficulty getting over the walls or wading through the water.

That was probably why my protests regarding the pincer attack from both north and south had been ignored. Yet, that operation ended in an inexcusable failure as well. *The south was a lost cause to start with, but the cavalry attacking from the north could have worked, at least.*

I set my feathered fan down on the table. “Thank you for your report. We’ll learn from your failure and come up with a new plan of action. Please focus your attention on caring for the wounded.”

“Your suggestion is most kind. Thank you.”

The officers bowed their heads and filed out of the tent. *I should hope they never complain about my strategies ever again.* I looked down at the map of Keiyou’s surroundings and massaged my temples. “Chou Tairan and his army are much more powerful than rumored.” I’d heard that the Chou family army only had around ten thousand people and yet they were able to destroy Seitou’s twenty thousand. I never expected them to score such a clean victory against an enemy force twice their number, and in an open battle at that.

However, there was something even more pressing that I couldn’t comprehend. From my pocket, I pulled out a letter containing a confidential order, written in His Imperial Majesty Adai’s own hand...

*“Accept all of the Seitou army’s propositions.”*

I thought of the emperor’s long white hair and slim, waifish body. His eyes, which seemed to house a deep intelligence that allowed him to see through everything and everyone, came to mind as well. The emperor despised losing soldiers without reason, so he must have some plan with this missive.

Keiyou had strengthened its defenses and Seitou was having a hard time taking them down using conventional routes, so I had known the Seitou officers would suggest a pincer attack. They too wished to bring honor and glory to their own homeland. Of course, in the end, Chou Tairan and his army sent them crawling away in shame.

I looked down at the map. The Grand Canal connected Keiyou and Rinkei. News of our defeat, as well as the second invasion, would reach the Ei capital in

no time at all. The thought of that second attack was when the pieces clicked together in my head. “That can’t be—”

A chilly voice interrupted me. “It’s exactly as you guessed.”

I sucked in a sharp breath as a shiver ran down my spine. Slowly, I turned around. A small person wearing a cloak and a fox mask stood before me.

I lowered my head in a hurry and said, “W-Well, if it isn’t Master Ren! It has been too long.”

“Spare me the formalities. It seems like you’re having a tough time, Hasho.”

It took me a moment to work up my nerve before I replied, “Yes, Master Ren. My deepest apologies for this shameful display.”

The secret organization Senko had its claws in every corner of the continent and its deepest desire was to see all the countries unified under a single flag. The organization had raised me and taught me everything there was to know about Ouei’s strategies. Master Ren was the closest confidant to the Senko’s leader, and yet Master Ren themselves remained shrouded in mystery. I wasn’t even sure if they were a man or a woman. Hearing them say my name always felt like an icy grip around my heart. *Shit, how did they even sneak in here?*

Ignoring my fear, Master Ren played with one of the pawns on the map. “However, your guess is correct. The Seitou army’s loss is well within the White Wraith’s plans. It would be one thing if the entire army charged from the front and engaged in an open battle. But challenging Chou Tairan with only double his forces was a fool’s errand from the start. It *was* a good idea to use the south as bait and look for a location to cross the river in the north... It only ended in failure because someone in Keiyou has a *very* keen eye.”

My thoughts traveled back in time to the Gray Wolf Seul Bato’s death. He had been caught in the Wolf-Killing Envelopment, which surrounded the enemy on all sides and then murdered them. *I see how it is. So the enemy strategist saw through my plans yet again!*

Master Ren slid a pawn to the area left of Keiyou. “I went to check out Keiyou’s west. Their defenses won’t be easy to break through, even with the Blackblade...ah, right, he’s the Black Wolf now, isn’t he? In any case, even with



an army of elite riders led by the Gen army's most powerful warrior, they would have a difficult time."

"So in other words..." I had been confused as to why Sir Gisen, the Gen army's most experienced soldier, and the old Crimson Knights, had been removed from the Seitou army. It had been as if the emperor *didn't* want the Seitou army to win. After tidying up my thoughts, I gave voice to my conclusion. "By causing the Seitou army to lose, we once again reinforced Chou Tairan's image as an undefeated general to the citizens and magistrates of the false city...no, to the false emperor himself, yes?"

"In times of crisis, people tend to take the easy way out. As far as I'm aware, the false emperor may be a good person, but he is not a wise one. The Seitou invasion he so loudly supported ended in a disastrous failure. Once he hears of all the insults his own people are slinging behind his back, he'll feel so much pressure that he'll jump at the chance to feel any sense of security. In this case, he believes that so long as Chou Tairan is around to defeat the enemies, he has nothing to worry about."

As I listened to Master Ren's calm evaluation of the situation, I felt a shudder rack my body. *Just how long has His Imperial Majesty been plotting this invasion?* Another pawn slipped from Master Ren's slender fingers, landing on the map right where the lower reaches of the great river were.

"His plan worked," Master Ren continued. "Gi Heian and his forces crossed the great river and took Shiryuu. According to his report, the soldiers guarding the area fled without even putting up a fight. I'm sure that the courts of Ei are in a panic right now. Denso's infiltration mission there is coming to an end."

I didn't say anything, grimacing in disgust at hearing Denso's name. Denso had been my peer in the Senko and we'd been rivals when it came to our studies. While I had become Gen's war strategist, saddled with the responsibility of an entire country, he had ended up a spy working behind the scenes in the Ei Empire. *Our battle ended with my victory, yet you still haven't given up?!*

Master Ren turned around and walked to the back entrance of the tent. "I've delivered the Honorable One's prediction to Adai. I have my suspicions about her, but she truly has the ability to predict the weather. The battle to decide the

fates of the Gen and Ei Empires is finally about to begin. I look forward to your work.”

“Yes, Master Ren, even if it kills me!”

They didn’t reply. Instead, the only answer to my vow was the cold breeze from outside the tent caressing my cheek. A sudden and overwhelming exhaustion settled into my bones and I sat in a chair, my mind whirling. During the Battle of Ranyou, I’d realized that while the purple-haired vixen hidden in the shadows of Seitou possessed a most disturbing power, she was very useful to our war efforts. The situation between both empires would soon go through a major upheaval.

“‘Avoid a direct confrontation with a powerful enemy’ and ‘separate the enemy and then take them out one by one with an entire army,’ huh?” Those had been some of Ouei’s most basic strategies, which the Senko taught to me when I was much younger.

Emperor Adai had gathered a huge army of over two hundred thousand soldiers, and had summoned the Four Wolves from the various regions they’d been stationed at. The plan was to drag our most formidable enemy Chou Tairan from Keiyou and then cross the great river with all of Gen’s forces during his absence. Once that happened we’d be able to take Keiyou even if his children, who’d been the ones to slay the Crimson and Gray Wolves, were present.

Suddenly, I thought of that earlier report I’d heard. Though the team trying to cross the river from the northern regions of Keiyou hadn’t lost many soldiers, a lot of them had been injured during the battle. *That reminds me. Kou Eihou, who’s said to have been Ou Eifuu’s best friend, never cared for taking lives on the battlefield.*

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“Just *what* in the *world* are the people in the capital thinking?!”

Hakurei’s yell echoed throughout the army headquarters inside the Chou manor in Keiyou.

Yui had been fast asleep on a chair but the cat jumped up in surprise and ran

away. Father, wearing a military uniform and sitting in another chair, and Ruri, sitting next to me, had matching serious expressions. Hakurei was panting after her outburst, her shoulders heaving with every breath.

“I know how you feel,” I said, “but calm down.”

“No, I will *not*! Not this time! Sekiei, you must find it weird too, don’t you? ‘Enemy forces crossed the river from the lower reaches. Shiryuu has fallen. We order Chou Tairan to immediately muster his forces and destroy the enemies there.’ Don’t they realize the enemies are attacking us right now?! This is utterly ridiculous! I am *firmly* against this!”

“Uh-huh...” She was speaking so fast that I couldn’t even get a word in. Though I didn’t say anything, I agreed with her.

It had been seven days since father and I defeated the Seitou forces to the north and south of Keiyou. Though the Chou family army had the advantage right now, we had no idea when the Gen army stationed at the northern shores of the great river would make their move. Leaving Keiyou to put out a small fire in the east was not something we could do at the moment. I looked over at Ruri for help. She had been lost in thought, rubbing at her chin, but when she met my eyes, she nodded.

“Pressuring Keiyou from the north and the west, only to cross from downstream where the Chou family’s defenses are the thinnest... Humph, they did exactly what I figured they—” Ruri caught herself and spoke again, this time less casually. “I mean, their movements are exactly as I predicted before the battle commenced.”

“Talk as you normally would,” father said. “The only people present right now are my family.”

“Th-Thank you very much.” There was a faint blush on Ruri’s face.

Hakurei wrapped her arms around Ruri’s shoulders from behind. Perhaps this was her way of calming down from her earlier rant. She started to play with Ruri’s long bangs, using her fingers to comb the golden strands away from Ruri’s eye.

I watched them from the corner of my eye as I asked father, “I thought you

had an agreement with the grand chancellor that the Chou family wouldn't involve itself with skirmishes east of the great river? Besides, even *if* they crossed the river there, the terrain saps a lot of their horses' mobility. I believe we should leave the east's defense to the soldiers already there."

The land near the lower reaches of the great river was fertile, but there were a lot of marshes and wetlands. It was difficult terrain for the cavalry that served as Gen's main force to traverse and they had an aversion to dismounting from their horses. Though Ei's defense forces were far inferior to the Chou family army when it came to experience and morale, it wasn't as if they were useless. So long as they weren't going up against Adai or one of the Four Wolves, it should be easy enough to protect the capital while using the geography to their advantage.

Father, whose hair and beard had grown even whiter since the attack started, rumbled in a grim tone, "The Gen soldiers who crossed the river aren't cavalry. They're infantry."

Hakurei and I blinked, confused. Ruri must have realized something, however, because she muttered, "Infantry? Wait, don't tell me..."

In the next moment, lightning flashed across the sky, its light illuminating the room through the round window. Rain began to fall. "The enemy officer leading them is a man named Gi Heian," father spat. "He used to be a peer of mine, though he surrendered to Gen seven years ago. The invading army, numbering fifty thousand, likely consists of Ei citizens who stayed behind on the northern shores of the great river."

"That's..." I started before words failed me.

"I can't believe it," Hakurei whispered, covering her mouth with both hands.

*Well, it's not like it's unthinkable.* Over fifty years had passed since the Ei Empire lost the lands north of the great river. It wouldn't be too strange if the people who remained there started to think of Gen as their homeland instead. However, it was clear that Adai had been the one who made the decision to give a former enemy officer fifty thousand soldiers to command.

Ruri, who had managed to escape from Hakurei's hold, tidied up her hair and clothes. "It's not strange for officers or rulers to mobilize people from lands

they conquered. We didn't know about a unit consisting of Ei civilians who stayed north of the river because Gen never sent them here. But they were probably already fighting for Gen on the northern front."

"Those former Ei soldiers haven't been used here because they fear them rebelling if they fight against people who used to be their countrymen?" I asked.

"Yes."

From what I heard, the people of Ei who stayed behind within Gen's walls were considered second-class citizens. The Gen military must have worried about the possibility of the Ei soldiers suddenly defecting on the battlefield and then returning to their former homeland. That was why they'd never appeared at the front near the great river until this attack.

Ruri adjusted how she was sitting and then looked over at father. "Lord Chou Tairan, I would like to ask your opinion. I believe that heading east will put all of Keiyou, and all of Ei by extension, in grave danger. Speaking as a novice strategist, I am *firmly* against obeying the emperor's orders!"

Despite her powerful voice, the undercurrent of panic was obvious. Hakurei grabbed onto my sleeve. Father never took his eyes off Ruri, waiting for her to continue.

She stood up and started pacing around the room. "Our enemy possesses several times more soldiers than us. Breaking up our army and sending General Chou, of all people, away is tantamount to suicide. Judging by the small number of enemies who crossed the river, it's clear that what's happening east is nothing more than bait. In other words"—she paused and spun, her hair whipping around her—"if we entertain the paranoia of a fool, then we'll lose everything we hold dear. Are you prepared to let this country die?"

The aggression in her tone as she insulted the officials in the capital was so at odds with her delicate appearance.

"Father," Hakurei and I said at the same time, our own opposition clear in our tones as we fixed him with a determined look. The lightning continued to flash outside and the flames of the candles along the walls shook.

“I appreciate your opinions,” father said after a long and unbearable silence. He pushed himself to his feet and looked away from us, staring out the window at the raging storm. In a tone that sounded like he was forcing out each word, he continued, “However...however, I’m a subject of His Imperial Majesty. If he sends me a letter written in his own hand and signed off with his personal seal, then I have no choice but to follow. Even if...this is...”

In every word, I could hear the deep anger he had for himself, as well as his thick despair at our current situation. He sounded exactly the same as Ou Eifuu did a thousand years ago, when he bid farewell to Kou Eihou in Routou.

Dull resignation tinged father’s words. “Even if this is a decision that was made without consulting the imperial court and is the result of his personal conversations with Rin Chuudou’s daughter as part of a conspiracy to remove the grand chancellor from his position, I must obey it. I hear that the defense forces in the east fled without putting up a fight. It’s also true that there aren’t enough soldiers between the capital and the enemy forces to impede the attack. If I don’t move, then sooner or later, we’ll even lose the Grand Canal.”

“But then, we’ll—”

“Hakurei.” I held out my hand and shook my head to stop my childhood friend from saying more on the matter.

*It’s too late. All too late.* From the moment Seitou betrayed us, Ei was cast into shadow. Since we lost the vast majority of our officers and soldiers in that reckless invasion, we were fated to fight at a difficult disadvantage. Not even Chou Tairan could fix everything on his own. The only thing left for us to do was to keep fighting and resisting until we found an opportunity we could seize.

Fat tears welled up in Hakurei’s blue eyes and rolled down her face, making a mess. “My apologies...” She left the room, not even caring about how loud White Star was as it clattered against her. Hakurei wasn’t an idiot; she simply cared about her father. She knew that his mind was set.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go,” Ruri told me. She picked up Yui and set the cat on her shoulder before she hurried out of the room after Hakurei.

“Sorry,” father said. “I’ll be putting a hefty burden on your shoulders again.”

“Yeeaaaah, you will,” I replied with brutal honesty. I sat down in a chair, crossed my legs, and shrugged in an exaggerated manner as I spoke for Hakurei. “Hakurei’s worries are mine as well. Like Ruri said, it’s ridiculous for the side with fewer soldiers to split up their army and try to take down a larger force. If Ou Eifuu was here, he would’ve quit in protest, saying something like ‘No elixir can cure a fool who longs for defeat!’”

“Well, that’s a painful pill to swallow indeed,” father said, his expression softening somewhat as he stroked his beard. The strong determination in his eyes never wavered, though. “I shall take ten thousand soldiers with me. Any more than that and we won’t be able to cover as much ground. Though I never wanted things to turn out this way, I’ve prepared a few contingency plans in my discussions with the Ou family. Take care of Keiyou while I’m away, Sekiei.”

“Of course. I’ll discuss everything with Hakurei and Ruri before making any decisions.” We didn’t have any manpower to spare. If the enemy knew that Chou Tairan would leave Keiyou, then they were certain to launch an even more aggressive attack than before. “I sure wish I could leave Gramps in charge of Keiyou’s defense while I take his place in Hakuhou Castle. Keiyou’s safety is quite the heavy responsibility.”

“Raigen would never agree to that; he’s always been of the opinion that *you* are the best person to defend Keiyou in times of emergency. Hakurei’s ability to seize opportunities in battle is a natural talent, but her overreliance on instinct rather than learned experience can cause her to misjudge a situation. You, on the other hand, have no qualms assigning tasks you’re unable to accomplish to other people. You’re the best man for the job.”

“That’s, uh, a little embarrassing to hear.” He was right; I knew my own limits. I always pawned off the troublesome work to Ruri and Meirin.

“He may be our enemy, but the White Wraith Adai is quite impressive,” father sighed. “He truly is the modern Ouei. If I ever get the chance to meet him under more favorable circumstances, I’d like to offer him a toast. When that time comes, I want you at my side.”

“I’ll...think about it.” Drinking with the person most similar to Eifuu in this era? *If possible, I’d sure love to skip out on that. He was the type to get all up in*

*my space when drunk. Ah, well. It's just a metaphor; it's not like he's actually Eifuu.* I stood up from my seat and slapped a hand against Black Star's sheath. "We will await your safe return, father. Good luck."

"I have no need for luck, so keep it for yourself. Take care of everyone."

I left the room and was walking down the hall when I noticed Hakurei and Ruri sitting on a bench in the corridor to the manor's other building. Ruri was the first to notice me. She picked up the cat, gave me a look that said, "I'll leave for a bit," and then did just that. Miss Ascendant was very considerate of other people's feelings.

"Don't be mad," I said to Hakurei. "It pained father to make the decision he —"

I stopped talking when a weight crashed against my chest. Hakurei had jumped into my arms, punching me as if to let out her emotions. Her tears soaked through my uniform.

"I'm not a child," she cried. "I know that! But...but it's so...!"

"Yeah. I know."

I let her sob and take out her frustrations on me as I stared up at the northern sky. The rain continued to fall with no sign of letting up, and the dark clouds cloaked the heavens, hiding away the stars.

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"So, Chou Tairan has left Keiyou and made his way east, yes? You're sure about that?"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty! This is information from the spy we left behind in Keiyou; there's no mistake."

"Hmm." I, Gen Emperor Adai Dada, leaned back in my throne and set my elbow on the arm rest. We were in the reception hall of Sansei Castle on the northern shores of the great river. My long white hair fell into my field of vision as I gazed out at the gathered officers lined up and quietly asked, "How are the soldiers feeling? Are the Seitou soldiers still on the offensive?"

"Everyone is brimming with motivation!" one of the officers replied.



“The Seitou soldiers have been aggressively attacking Keiyou every day!” another one said.

“And how goes the preparations for our secret weapon?”

“We’ve finished setting them up and checking them; you have nothing to worry about, my emperor. Consecutive shots will be difficult, but we are positive that the first one—at the very least—will work.”

We were ready. Chou Tairan, the biggest threat, had headed for the east. The enemy soldiers were trapped inside Keiyou thanks to Hasho, who intuited what I needed him to do. In other words, Hakuhou Castle on the southern shores of the great river was on its own. Of course, a direct attack from the front would only lead to severe and unavoidable casualties.

So I ordered in a soft tone, “Prepare for battle. We’ll move out at sunrise. As I told you in Enkei, the Golden and Silver Wolves will be at the vanguard. The enemy general may be old, but he is still the famed Ogre. Hakuhou will not go down without a fight. Work hard and make your country proud.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty! Understood!”

The officers raced out of the room like a pack of ravenous wolves until only my guard Gisen remained with me. Everyone craved combat.

I pressed a hand to my forehead. I’d never met the false emperor of Ei myself, but I felt a strong sense of disappointment towards my opponent in this game of war. “How boring. Checkmate already.” *Ahh, Chou Tairan! Chou Tairan, surely a man of your caliber has already seen through my plans. How unfortunate for you that you are a famed general rather than the emperor. How unfortunate that you are not Kou Eihou, who would even ignore the emperor’s direct orders to eliminate any threat against the Tou Empire.* “Tell me, how was Rinkei?”

My question was directed at Ren, the slender, fox mask-wearing figure in the shadows. Considering they had to travel across the continent to Rinkei or Keiyou if necessary, this spy might have had a busier schedule than even I, the emperor of Gen.

Ignorant of my amusement at their expense, Ren said, “Everything is going as

planned. The eldest son of the Jo family has started to believe Denso's lies that the true poison infecting his country stems from the grand chancellor. I'm sure once he hears that the emperor ordered Chou Tairan to leave Keiyou despite his country's time of need, he'll completely turn to our side under the belief that the grand chancellor is manipulating everything from the shadows."

The twin pillars supporting the Ei Empire were Chou Tairan's martial strength and You Bunshou's political expertise. Yet one of their lives was already in my hands.

"When can the poor son of the Jo family leave the prison cell?" I asked.

"Soon, and on the grand chancellor's own orders too. Denso will inform us when the grand chancellor makes a decision," Ren replied.

My lips twisted into a grin. Despite my best efforts to stifle it, a chuckle escaped me. If the insurance I set up worked, then all was well. Even if it didn't, I could sow discord among the people of Ei. Nothing threatened my victory.

I looked at Ren, who was the only person other than myself to know the full scope of my plans. "Yesterday, the crescent moon and the night clouds blocked out the twin stars. The Honorable One's predictions continue to be accurate."

"The Chou daughter and son remain in Keiyou. They're the current wielders of the Heavenly Swords."

"Ah, yes. Them." In an instant, my heart grew cold as I thought about the two people who held the twin swords that my best friend had given to me in my past life. In this one, I'd searched for them for so long. I glanced at Gisen before I rested my cheek in the palm of my hand. "Very well, when I conquer Keiyou, I shall take the time to look upon their faces. I simply hope that they bear *some* resemblance to Eihou, who carved open a new path for this land's future with every swing of the Heavenly Swords."

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"Good morning, Sir Raigen!"

In the north of Keiyou stood Hakuhou Castle, built along the southern shores of the great river. In all my long years, I'd never seen such a thick fog enveloping the great river. I was in the middle of gazing out upon it from one of the

ramparts when someone called out to me from behind.

“Teiha?” I said. “You’re up early.”

The nephew who walked up to me looked sharper and more mature compared to the young man of a few months ago—perhaps this was due to the young master’s and Hakurei’s influence—and had become one of the more promising commanders in the Chou family army. He’d arrived at the front line only last night, bearing a message about how the Seitou army had been attacking Keiyou for days on end. He must have wanted to do *something* about the situation.

“I thought I’d see you before I returned to Keiyou,” Teiha said. “It may be spring now, but it’s still quite cold. Please return inside. It’s impossible to see anything through this thick fog anyway.”

“I will not,” I replied. “I have a bad feeling.”

Now that I thought about it, a thick white fog had appeared the day of the large-scale invasion seven years ago as well. Back then, we didn’t have a castle like this, and between the supreme commander’s pigheadedness and Gi Heian’s surrender, the Gen troops were able to easily cross the river. It had caused my lord, Chou Tairan the National Shield, unnecessary stress. I couldn’t let my guard down. To remind myself of that, I slammed the butt of my spear against the stone of the ramparts.

“I’m positive that the enemy already knows that our lord has left Keiyou. The White Wraith would *never* let such an opportunity escape him, especially since the young master and the others have to protect Keiyou from the Seitou army,” I growled.

“You have a point,” Teiha said.

Unable to contain my irritation, I ran a hand through my white hair. “The officials in the capital have no idea what the situation is like at the front! They only know that Chou Tairan is the finest general in Ei and a loyal subject of the emperor.” All these years, I’d wielded my spear if only to lessen the heavy—no, the cumbersome burden weighing upon my master’s shoulders. I had no intention of stopping, even if it meant my death. I slammed my fist against the stone wall. “But my lord can’t save *everyone*! If only the Three Great Generals

were alive—no, if only we could travel to a time in the future when the young master and Lady Hakurei have matured— Wait, what’s that sound?”

I could hear several odd noises coming from the great river, but I had no idea what they were.

Surprise colored Teiha’s expression as he yelled, “This sound is... Sir Raigen!”

“Whoa!”

He shoved me to the ground. In the next moment, a sound so loud that my ears ached rang out, followed by the entire castle shaking. I could hear the soldiers screaming and see smoke rising from various parts of the castle. I stumbled to my feet and stared in shock. Hakuhou Castle was known for its impenetrable defenses—and yet massive holes now dotted the walls. Several of the ramparts and paths had collapsed as well.

“Wh-What happened?” I gasped.

“It’s Seitou’s catapults! But, how did they...?” Teiha stopped talking, narrowing his eyes in the direction of the great river.

The other soldiers hurried up the ramparts, shouting and yelling:

“H-Hey, look at that!”

“That’s...”

“Warships!”

“What’s that behind them?”

*This isn’t good. Panic is starting to spread.* I looked back at the great river in order to get a grasp on the situation, only to see countless warships cutting through the fog. Behind them was a large, flat shadow.

“H-How could this be?!” Teiha wailed. “Such a large army...and they’ve placed catapults onto barges!” Teiha’s words sent a wave of fear through the soldiers as hunks of metal pelted the castle, causing the entire building to shake.

*Milord, it looks like it’s time for this old man to lay down his life.* I took a deep breath and then bellowed, “Everyone, to your stations! Do not let a single enemy through! Don’t forget we’re one of the last bastions for Ei! Our lord

Chou Tairan has entrusted this land to us!”

I’d raised my voice so that everyone in the castle could hear me, and they responded with fire in their eyes and clattering salutes, slamming their fists against their weapons and armor. “Yessir!”

Now that I’d taken control of the situation again, I ran to the massive bolt thrower attached to the castle and tightened my grip on my spear. Then, I ordered in a quiet voice, “Teiha, escape *now* and make your way back to Keiyou. Tell the young master that Hakuhou Castle will not stand for much longer and that I wish him good luck.”

“Sir Raigen?!”

“Take care of the young master and Lady Hakurei in my stead.” Since Teiha was still gaping at me, I gave him a steadying pat on the shoulder. I’d wanted to watch him come into his own, but that was not the future fate had in store for me. I grabbed a helmet from off the ground and placed it on my head as I snapped, “Hurry! Go!”

“Yessir... Yessir!” Teiha ran off, tears in his eyes.

As I watched him go, I realized that the thundering and shaking had stopped. Like the young master had said, the catapults weren’t capable of shooting ammunition multiple times in a row. I had to buy as much time as possible so the soldiers could evacuate.

“Sir Raigen!”

“Ah, you’ve arrived.” The soldiers who gathered around me were the oldest veterans in the Chou family army. Keeping an eye on the enemies setting up stepping ladders to scale the castle walls, I said, “I wish to buy enough time for as many young soldiers to escape as possible. Lend me your strength.”

“Yessir!”

“I’m sorry. I’m truly sorry.”

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*How long have I been fighting for?* I panted, gasping for air. I was the only person left standing in front of the castle gate; behind me was the path to

Keiyou. Most of the soldiers who'd fought by my side had fallen and fire blazed around me. Some allies were still fighting elsewhere, but they wouldn't last for much longer—we'd suffered greatly from the ambush that separated us. My white beard, spear, armor, and helmet were all wet and heavy with blood. I could no longer feel pain.

"H-He's a true ogre..."

"You monster!"

"Don't be reckless. Take him down with arrows!"

The Gen soldiers must have forgotten their courage on their horses when they dismounted, for they were too frightened to approach me.

I grinned and laughed, loud and mocking. "Ha ha ha! Pathetic, all of you! What is there to fear from an old man on the verge of death?! Forget defeating Chou Tairan; none of you will be able to win against Chou Sekiei or Chou Hakurei. I suggest that you do the smart thing and return to the north with your tails between your legs!"

"Why, you!" Their faces flushed red with humiliation as they raised their bows.

*It's the end of the line.* I tightened my grip on my spear.

"Back off, everyone," a voice rang out.

"Wait!!!" another boomed.

Two officers, their armor and helmets decorated with extravagant gold and silver linings, appeared from the stairs before they leaped down to the ground. One of them was tall and the other one was short. It was clear from their manner of dress that they weren't common foot soldiers.

"Oh?" I said. "Finally, soldiers who look like they'd put up a fight. What are your names?" I adjusted how I was holding the spear, the blood on the tip dripping onto the ground.

The officers, one holding a serpent spear and the other holding a halberd, grinned confidently.

"I am one of the Four Wolves serving Emperor Adai, the successor of the

great Celestial Wolf. I am the Golden Wolf, Bete Zuso.”

“I am the Silver Wolf, Ooba Zuso. You’re something, all right, old man. Tell us your name.”

*So my final opponents will be members of the Four Wolves?! There is no greater honor for a warrior.* I straightened up, proud and dignified, as I gave my answer: “I am Raigen, a subject of Chou Tairan.”

*Yes, that’s right. I am the most loyal subject Chou Tairan has.*

The enemy officers’ eyes widened in surprise before they started to glitter with anticipation.

“Oh? So you’re Raigen the Ogre?” the Golden Wolf said.

“Ha! Looks like you’ll be a worthy opponent!” the Silver Wolf yelled.

I smiled before I roared with the might of a battle-hardened tiger, “My head is a difficult one to take indeed, you brats! Come and get it at your own peril!”

## Chapter Three

“Here you are, General Gi! I’ve been searching for you.”

At dusk near the great river stood a military camp, built on the outskirts of a deserted village known as Shiryuu. I, Gi Heian, was one of the officers of the Gen Empire. I had been staring at the sun sinking past the horizon as the soldiers bustled about, but when I heard someone call out to me, I turned my weary body around.

A few days had passed since I led my regiment of fifty thousand strong—otherwise known as the Second Ei Invasion Corps—across the great river. Though Ei’s army didn’t put up any resistance and we hadn’t suffered any casualties thus far, we were still standing within enemy borders. It might have been my homeland once, but there was no time for nostalgia or homesickness.

“Did something happen, Anseki?” I asked my adviser.

Anseki was a youthful man with black hair who gave off a cheery yet intelligent air. “Nothing much,” he replied. “We sent scouts in all directions, so I don’t believe the enemy can get the jump on us. Is... Are we really in Ei right now?”

It seemed that he’d only been searching for me to chat. “Ah, that reminds me. You were born in Eikei, weren’t you?”

“Sir, it’s called ‘Enkei’ nowadays. Please keep in mind that there are Gen people in our corps as well.”

I scratched my nose, feeling awkward. “Sorry.”

About fifty years ago, the Ei Empire ruled the lands north of the great river. Back then, the capital was called Eikei, but after the Gen invasion, the city’s name changed to Enkei. The people from the areas that once belonged to Ei had a very low status in Gen; I shouldn’t say anything that might cause unnecessary conflict. I’d only defected to Gen seven years ago and yet the emperor personally gave me the order to cross the river and apply pressure to



Rinkei. Many officers were unhappy about that fact.

I touched the stubble on my chin and focused my gaze to the north. “We crossed the great river. Not only that, but we also defeated the Ei soldiers! Even if they weren’t from Ei’s elite forces, I’m sure His Imperial Majesty is happy with our work.”

“I...hope so.” My adviser’s words were hesitant and there was a dissatisfied look on his face.

“What’s the matter? Weren’t you the one who was saying things like, ‘I wanna achieve something amazing on the battlefield and rise through the ranks! Surely that’ll improve the standing of former Ei citizens within Gen!’ before we set off? Take pride in our accomplishments! I’m far too old to change anything now; you must be the one to aim for greater heights.”

“Uncle, if you could lend me your ear,” Anseki whispered, looking around. As one of the most capable members of the Gi family, Anseki was sure to become the head of house in the future—but for now he was still young. That he was referring to me by our familial relation meant that he wanted to bring up something troublesome. “The soldiers have been whispering, saying that we’re nothing but bait to draw out Chou Tairan. They’ve also been wondering whether those unconfirmed rumors about the Chou family army leaving Keiyou are true or not.”

The soldiers in the camp had started preparing dinner. Unlike the northeastern front where we spent most of our time, the climate here was temperate and there was plenty of water. I’d been under the impression that morale wasn’t bad, but...

I huffed. “Impossible! Do they know how far it is between here and Keiyou? The Chou army may have a small number of cavalry compared to Gen, but it’s impossible to lead any army through rivers and marshlands in such a short amount of time. They wouldn’t make it even with ships. Have there been any reports from the scouts we sent towards Keiyou?”

“No, but...” There was still a worried expression on Anseki’s face. He must have a measure of trust in the veteran soldiers’ words thanks to his past experience in the army.

I put my arm around my adviser's shoulders and said, "Listen, the one thing Emperor Adai hates more than anything is losing soldiers for no good reason. Even when we were on the northeastern front facing off against those barbarians, he held that opinion. This is confidential, but His Imperial Majesty gave us the right to use our own judgment and retreat from battle if our enemies are too powerful for us. We don't need to fight. Our mission is to place Gen soldiers in the lower reaches of the great river. That's it."

Anseki's eyes widened. "Is that truly what His Imperial Majesty said?"

"Yes. When I heard his order, a shiver ran down my spine."

It was precisely because I'd abandoned my homeland and surrendered to Gen that I was certain of this fact: when it came to the strength of their rulers, there was a world of difference between Emperor Adai and the false emperor of Ei!

The false emperor might be a good person. However, the fact that he still placed subjects as treacherous as Rin Chuudou and Ou Hokuaku by his side was proof enough of his inferiority. The two of them had never liked me—as I spoke in a direct manner—and so they framed me and forced my hand, causing me to leave Ei. *On top of that, the emperor even took that foolish man's adopted daughter as a prized concubine?!* A strong sense of irritation filled me.

"Besides, if Chou Tairan leaves, Keiyou will fall. And if Keiyou falls..." The memories I'd left in the past welled up within me again and words failed me for a moment. Of the Three Great Generals I once looked up to, the Phoenix Wing and the Tiger Fang had been lost. I'd heard that the National Shield was now in charge of the entire empire's military affairs. I shook off my grief and continued, "Then the Ei Empire will fall with it. No matter how foolish the people of Rinkei are, You Bunshou would never let that happen."

"Uncle, er, have you met Chou Tairan and You Bunshou before?" Anseki asked in a nervous tone.

Despite his voice, I could see in his eyes the same bright curiosity he'd had ever since childhood. *He's already in his midtwenties and is about to be a father, but he hasn't changed.* I nodded my head with a fond smile and then puffed my chest out. Back when I was in Ei, I never thought this would be my future. But I still took great pride in my past.

“Of course I have! Even back then, they were a famed general and chancellor. However...”

“However?” Anseki looked confused at my hesitation.

*Chou Tairan and You Bunshou are two of the greatest people in our generation. However, they’re both loyal subjects of that fool of an emperor. Because of that, they aren’t able to fully utilize their own talent.* I closed my eyes for a moment before shaking my head. “No, nothing. In any case...” I placed a hand on my nephew’s hand, acting as cheery as I could. General Chou Tairan had been the one to teach me that a leader must never let his men see his worries. “We only need to do the job given to us! With this victory, I plan on retiring from the army. I’d like you to succeed me as— Wait, what’s that?”

Countless whinnies sounded in the distance, accompanied by the rumbling of the ground. *Wait, from the south?* The enemy’s defense forces had fallen apart; it would be difficult for them to return with such a large group of soldiers.

“Have the scouts returned?” Anseki asked, sounding hopeful.

“No.”

The soldiers had stopped working, looking around with caution. Then, right at that moment, I noticed a war flag billowing from a hill to our south. Seeing the character upon the flag, my nephew and I took a step back, shocked.

“I-Impossible!” I exclaimed. “How could this be?!”

“N-No way...” Anseki murmured.

Illuminated by the setting sun, the flag proudly displayed the character “Chou.” The National Shield—the final guardian spirit of the Ei Empire—had come to deliver his punishment. Enemy cavalry and infantry appeared from the hill, rushing into our camp in waves.

Unable to contain myself, I screamed, “How did they...? They arrived far too quickly, even with ships! Were they helped by an ascendant?!”

“General, we must defend ourselves!” Having recovered from the shock first, Anseki grabbed my arm.

I let out a harsh breath and then ordered, “Let’s go!” before turning around.

“Yessir!”

They must have traveled down the Grand Canal by boat and then sneaked the army all the way here. The land in this area was full of rivers and marshlands, but we were still within Ei territory. It didn’t take a genius to realize that they’d be more familiar with the terrain than we were. However, the march here must have been a fast and exhausting one—which meant the fight wasn’t over yet. We still had a chance!

*We don’t need to win, but we need to fight. If we do something as disgraceful as running away, then the Ei citizens in Gen will...* I tried my hardest to stir the flames of determination within me, but the analytical part of me knew perfectly well how this battle would end.

Seven years ago, my mentor Chou Tairan had been able to fight even the White Wraith to a standstill. We stood no chance against him.

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“Lord Sekiei, I see the enemy, numbering around fifty thousand! Their flag is bordered by gold and silver thread, bearing the character for ‘Wolf’!” Oto shouted her report in a tense voice from the watchtower. It seemed that she’d returned the spyglass to Ruri.

Upon hearing the news, a wave of shock traveled through the camp we’d hurriedly set up in the north of Keiyou. I couldn’t blame anyone. Over half of the people here were soldiers who’d escaped from Hakuhou Castle, which had fallen only three days ago. That the Gen army didn’t immediately start their attack again after crossing the river was because Gramps and the other old soldiers, who fought to their very last breaths to hold up the rear, dealt them some serious damage.

*“The Gen army has taken Hakuhou Castle and killed General Raigen!”* Neither Hakurei nor I had been able to believe the report. How could Gramps have died? Seeing the overwhelming number of enemy soldiers standing in formation, however, I had to accept it—no matter how much I didn’t want to. *How could this have happened?!* I wanted to scream, but I swallowed the rush of grief. Hakurei and Ruri, who were usually at my side as support, were absent. They were busy holding back the Seitou army’s attack, which had started again

this morning.

“It is precisely in times of crisis that a general must remain calm.” I repeated to myself the words that Kou Eihou used a thousand years ago to soothe the nerves of some young officers. *It is precisely in times of crisis that a general must remain calm.*

I stroked Zetsuei’s black mane and said, “The enemy vanguards have finally arrived. Judging by their flag, they’re probably the Silver and Golden Wolves. They’re two of Gen’s Four Wolves, and I hear they’ve been quite the menace in the northern plains.”

According to the soldiers who made it back from Hakuhou Castle, the enemy had used fog to transport their catapults with massive barges, as well as launch a surprise attack and invasion. It had been during this attack that Raigen the Ogre, who’d supported the Chou family for decades, died. The last time the fog was so thick that it could hide away the entirety of the great river was seven years ago in another battle with Gen. A similarly thick fog had appeared during the battle at Ranyou as well. *Is the White Wraith a monster capable of controlling even the weather?!*

At my left, Teiha gritted his teeth. “Everyone! Prepare to cha—”

“I know how you feel, but calm down, Teiha,” I ordered, holding out my hand to stop him. This young officer was blaming himself for Raigen’s death.

“But, Lord Sekiei!” Teiha yelled, looking like he was close to tears.

“Gramp was...!” Ignoring the shock on Teiha and the other soldiers’ faces, I looked up at the sky, so dark that it seemed like it was about to rain. *Ahh, I’m no good at all.* For a moment, I closed my eyes and offered a prayer to the deceased old general. I urged Zetsuei forward and turned to speak to my soldiers. “For Hakurei and me...Raigen was... He was like a second father. He’d taken care of us for so many years and...and I always wanted to repay that favor. We can’t let them get away with this! We *must* get revenge for him. That’s why...I must remain calm. The same goes for all of you! All of you returned from Hakuhou Castle with your lives. Do *not* throw them away in vain.”

The soldiers’ expressions filled with determination and they tightened their

grips on their weapons. “Yessir.”

*Even while standing before an enemy force larger than ours, morale is high. It’s all thanks to Gramps, who loved every soldier under the Chou flag.*

“There’s movement from the enemy! What seems like two officers are riding towards us, with a unit behind them. Is that...a wagon? It looks like there’s something on it,” Oto called down in a confused yet cautious tone.

“Huh?” Almost everyone turned to stare at the lines of Gen soldiers before us.

Two officers clad in silver-and-gold armor were approaching on horseback. In the taller officer’s hand was a serpent spear—a spear with a winding blade that resembled a snake. Meirin had shown it to me in the past. According to her, a nameless blacksmith invented it after drawing inspiration from a foreign dagger. Apparently, it was far more dangerous than a normal spear. Meanwhile, the shorter officer held a plain-looking poleaxe. They stopped their horses and wagon just out of the range of our arrows and raised their voices to announce themselves.

“My name is Bete Zuso! I am a subject of Emperor Adai, son of the great Celestial Wolf, and the Golden Wolf of the Four Wolves!”

“My name is Ooba Zuso! I am the one they call the Silver Wolf, he who serves the great and merciful Emperor Adai!”

Murmurs broke out across the camp. Everyone was in disbelief at the fact that enemy officers would go out of their way to extend this courtesy. I doubted they were trying to copy what I had done during the earlier battle at Keiyou. The two generals raised their weapons into the air. In response, the soldiers behind them backed away, leading the horses away from the wagon as they did so.

“We have a message for the enemy commander!” Bete yelled. “Before we commence our battle, we’d like to return the body of Raigen the Ogre!”

“We swear on our honor that this isn’t a trap! We’re showing respect to a brave old general!” Ooba added.

My eyes widened. *I see... I see... So Gramps really is...* I took a deep breath and let it out, touching Black Star hanging from my waist. Teiha looked like he

was seconds away from attacking the two Gen generals. Meanwhile, Oto leaped down from the watchtower, so I took the chance to give them both orders. “Teiha, stay here. Oto, you’re with me. Sorry, but I’d like you to take charge of retrieving the coffin.”

“Lord Sekiei?!” Teiha exclaimed.

“Yessir!” Oto replied.

Teiha was giving me a look of disbelief so I pressed my fist against his chest and gave him a nod. A score of old soldiers, covered in light injuries and wearing armor that was scratched and dirty, stepped forward to volunteer themselves for the task. They were survivors of Hakuhou Castle.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “They’re true wolves. They wouldn’t do anything to sully their honor. Let’s go.”

“Yessir!” Oto and the other soldiers replied.

With Oto and the old soldiers on foot, I rode forward on Zetsuei. Before me were over fifty thousand enemy soldiers. Behind me were twenty thousand friendly soldiers. *And I have to retrieve a coffin while sandwiched between them? It feels like something that’ll be written down in a history book for future generations.* The moment we reached the wagon, the old soldiers threw themselves onto the coffin. As soon as they peered inside to check the contents, they broke down in tears.

“Ahh...!”

“General!”

“Dammit... *Dammit!*”

“Sir Raigen sacrificed himself so we could escape...”

I shot Oto a glance, signaling for her to start the coffin back towards Keiyou. Then, I moved my horse closer to the two Wolves. In order to show them I had no intention of attacking, I slapped Black Star’s scabbard and then revealed my identity.

“I am Chou Sekiei, the one in charge of this place! Golden Wolf, Silver Wolf, we may be enemies, but I truly thank you for the respect you paid Raigen!” The

rows of Gen soldiers murmured, turning their heads to look at each other in surprise. Their movements made it seem like a wave washed through the crowd.

“Oh? So *you’re* Chou Sekiei,” Bete said, eyes wide.

“You’re the Chou son who murdered Nguyen and Seul?!” Ooba, his silver uniform shining under the light, twirled his poleaxe as if it weighed nothing and glared at me with all the aggression of a starving wolf.

*He’s strong!*

Bete, the one in the golden uniform, swung his serpent spear to the side and exclaimed in an earnest voice, “Son of Chou Tairan, I’m sure a commander of your caliber can understand the situation your army is in. You have no chance of victory! Surrender! Emperor Adai loves those with talent. If you serve Gen under His Imperial Majesty, you would surely attain great riches and honor!”

I unsheathed Black Star and pointed it at him. “Thank you for the overgenerous praise. However, I refuse!” Sunlight hit the obsidian blade, the reflection causing it to glow. The dark clouds overhead had cleared. “My name is Sekiei, the one whose life was saved by Chou Tairan and Chou Hakurei, and the one loved by the elderly Raigen! You wish for me to repay this debt with treachery and become an underling of the White Wraith? No way in hell!”

“Chou Sekiei! Chou Sekiei! Chou Sekiei!” The soldiers behind me cheered and chanted.

The two Wolves turned their horses away from me.

“I see. How unfortunate,” Bete said.

“I’ll be the one to kill you!” Zuso snarled.

Someone blew a horn on the Gen side and their riders began to gallop in preparation for battle. I slid Black Star back into its scabbard for the moment and pulled on Zetsuei’s reins, hurrying back to the coffin behind one of the bulwarks. Raigen’s face was peaceful in death; it was hard to believe that he had gone out fighting two of the great Four Wolves of Gen.

Teiha let out a low groan of despair and as if on cue, the veteran soldiers



who'd survived Hakuhou Castle burst into tears. They slammed their fists against the ground. The other soldiers watching them were crying as well.

"Sir Raigen... Sir Raigen!" one of the veteran soldiers exclaimed.

"We weren't able to protect you!" another one wailed.

"Please forgive us..." the last one sobbed.

Oto was skillfully barking orders to a team of fire lancers who had been pulled from the main unit. After sending her a signal with my hand, I straightened my back and turned to face the crowd. "Everyone, save your tears for later. This isn't what Gramps would want. What Gramps would want to see"—I raised my sword high into the air—"is our victory! The victory of the Chou army! Ring the gong! We're moving out!"

"YESSIR!" the officers yelled back, lifting their weapons in salute.

*Not bad. The soldiers Gramps protected are still able to put up a fight.*

"I'll organize everyone! Excuse me, sir!" Teiha said with a salute before he mounted his horse and galloped away.

He had matured into a fine young officer, capable of supporting the Chou army with the best of us. Since I'd be fighting at the front line, I needed him to focus on commanding the others. Oto was a distance away, ordering her soldiers to prepare for a defensive battle while carefully checking over the fire lances.

I rode up to her and said, "Oto, I need to ask a favor from you. This is a task I can only entrust to you, as you're still unfamiliar with most of the Chou family army."

"Yessir!"

The sounds of a horn and a gong rang throughout the battlefield. Oto's short hair ruffled in the wind and she used her hand to press it down.

Keeping my tone light, I said, "I don't plan on dying and we're just going to test the waters today before retreating. But our opponents are two of the Four Wolves. There's no telling what could happen, especially with Teiha's current mindset. *If* I get killed, then immediately send out a message to Ruri and ask her

for your next orders.”

If anyone could protect Keiyou with Hakurei until father returned, it would be that strategist. After all, she had been the one to hold off Seitou’s forces—a hundred thousand soldiers strong—with an army of only twenty thousand.

Oto blinked her wide eyes, confused. “Not Lady Hakurei?”

“No.”

Gen’s cavalrymen were lining up in a formation that resembled a bird spreading its impressive wings. This was a military formation that nomadic tribes in power in the northern plains preferred using. Such a large army had no need for careful strategy; they only needed to crush the enemy with their cavalry’s powerful charge.

*Things haven’t changed, even in a thousand years.* It was funny in an odd way. I winked at Oto and continued, “Our little princess seems the calm type and, well, she *is* the calm type... But it’s a whole other affair when it involves people she considers her own. I’m sure she’ll go out of control if I’m not around. Ruri, on the other hand, would be able to make the optimal decisions.”

Hakurei was truly one of the kindest people I knew. If I died right after Gramps did... Well, she’d cry, for one. Or perhaps, she’d get angry at us while crying?

Oto nodded in agreement. “Understood. However, may I say something?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Oto might have once been in the U family army, but she’d been a great help to us. I didn’t mind listening to her request. But then, Oto gave me a mischievous smile, the expression making her look as young and childish as her actual age. She pointed at me, the tip of her finger grazing my nose.

“If something happens to you, then Miss Ruri will be *very* upset. Please keep that in mind. On the off chance you do forget it...” She mimed firing the fire lance in her hand.

*So this version of Oto is her real self? No wonder the shy Ruri likes her so much.* I raised my hands in the air in mock surrender and nodded. “No problem.

I'll make sure to remember it."

"My apologies. I was out of line." Oto bowed her head low in a movement so elegant she seemed more like a sophisticated aristocrat than a soldier. I'd heard that some of the indigenous people from the western regions of Ei were part of the U family army as well, so perhaps Oto was from a family of good standing.

Since prying into others' business wasn't my style, I grinned and said, "You've only been with us for a short amount of time but it looks like you're already Ruri's right-hand woman. Tell her to go easy on me next time I play a board game with her."

"Excuse me? Lord Sekiei, are you ordering me to go and get on Miss Ruri's bad side?"

"It's just a joke!" I waved at Oto, who was far easier to talk to than I'd imagined, and then moved Zetsuei to the very front of the rows of soldiers. After checking on my bow and arrows, I called, "Teiha!"

"Sir! Our three thousand cavalymen have finished their preparations. Lord Sekiei, I wish you good luck!" He rattled off the report without hesitation before disappearing behind a bulwark. A commanding role really suited his talents.

I smiled and then yelled, "Let's go, soldiers of the Chou family! With me! Don't fall behind!"

"YESSIR!"

I kicked Zetsuei's sides and galloped forward, with the three thousand cavalry making up the charge behind me. Our high morale and determination reached even the enemy vanguard and they reacted with quiet shock, their flags and spears wavering as they shifted in place. The enemy army far outnumbered ours, and they were led by the Golden and Silver Wolves. However, it wouldn't be impossible to decimate their front lines while they were still disorganized and force them to retreat.

Nocking several arrows on my bow, I took aim at an enemy commander. Before I could shoot, several riders, clad in older-looking armor, pulled up next to me.

"Young master!"

“We’ll watch your back.”

“This was one of Sir Raigen’s final orders.”

“We apologize for disobeying yours!”

They were veterans who’d survived Hakuhou Castle. As if from far away, I thought I heard Gramps scolding me, warning me against recklessness.

“Humph! Even in death, that old man’s such a busybody!” I released an arrow and it pierced through the skull of the enemy commander, who was too busy waving his swagger stick to notice. The enemy riders began to rush towards us in a hurry. However, I continued to let my arrows fly, hitting shoulders, arms, and legs. As I did so, I continued to encourage my soldiers. “Don’t let up! Keep on smashing in the faces of those wolves!”

“Yessir!”

Thanks to the fact that the cavalymen with me were capable of horseback archery, we were able to keep up a steady rain of arrows into the Gen soldiers’ brash charge. One by one, they continued to fall. *We’re at a clear advantage! Our enemies are the great Gen cavalry, yet we’re able to fight them on even footing—no, we’re overpowering them!* However, I knew that this was temporary, lasting only until they recovered from their surprise. At some point, we would need to hide behind our defensive walls and draw them in until they were within range of our weapons.

“CHOU SEKIEI!” With that shout as my only warning, a spear flew towards me out of nowhere.

I clicked my tongue and swung Black Star, slicing the spear in half. The Silver Wolf Ooba Zuso was charging towards me on his own, waving his poleaxe above his head. Though my allies were shooting arrows at him, he avoided them with little effort. *I knew it couldn’t be this easy.*

“Wait!” I yelled when the veterans and other riders behind me moved to meet Ooba. Shouldering my bow, I continued, “That’s enough! Retreat to the bulwarks and listen to Teiha’s orders!”

“L-Lord Sekiei!”

Ignoring the soldiers' attempts to stop me, I faced off against the enemy general, who was still expertly twirling his poleaxe.

Ooba's face under his silver helmet was bright with glee. "Don't interfere," he snapped to his soldiers before he closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. "Ha ha ha! The commander in chief leading the charge at the vanguard? I'm liking you more and more, Chou Sekiei! As a reward, I shall personally part your head from your shoulders!"

"In your dreams!"

Poleaxe clashed with sword as we rode past each other, sparks flying through the air. The gong rang out even louder, ordering for my allies to retreat. Most of the Gen riders were staying back to watch me and Ooba, and they didn't seem interested in chasing after the retreating Chou soldiers.

Ooba grinned, showing his sharp canines. "You're good. Not many swords can withstand the full weight of my poleaxe!"

"Thanks for...the compliment!"

We rushed up to each other again and this time, we exchanged over ten blows. A poleaxe was not an effective weapon in close quarters. However, thanks to Ooba's extraordinary skill, he was parrying all of my thrusts and slashes.

"What's wrong?!" he yelled. "Show me the moves you used to kill the Crimson and Gray Wolves!"

"Dammit!" I growled.

He brought his poleaxe down on my head, but I blocked it with my sword. For the third time, I backed away to put distance between us. Only Gen riders surrounded us at this point, but so long as I could defeat Ooba, it wouldn't be difficult to fight through—

Right as the thought crossed my mind, the enemy formation parted to reveal Bete, clad in golden armor and with his serpent spear in hand.

"Ooba!" he bellowed.

"Brother, don't interfere! I'll be the one to kill him!" The Silver Wolf's horse

must have been one of high pedigree. He approached me yet again with speed that bordered on frightening and continued to strike at me with his poleaxe. One, two, three... My hands shook under the effort of parrying every heavy blow. I remained unscathed only thanks to Black Star. If I'd been using a normal sword, Ooba would've cut through it within seconds and—

I grunted with effort as I leaned back as far as I could, barely managing to avoid Bete thrusting his serpent spear at my side. The winding blade, from which the weapon drew its name, gleamed with an eerie light. After regaining my balance, I swung out with my sword and knocked the serpent spear away from me. I backed away to see Ooba draw his horse close to the Golden Wolf Bete Zuso with an angry look on his face.

“Brother!” he yelled.

“Ooba, you forget yourself. This is the battlefield! We are the vanguard of our entire army. Chou Sekiei, apologies, but this is where you'll die! Nguyen and Seul were our friends!”

“Ha! I'll send you two crawling back with your tails between your legs!” I shot back, mind racing to come up with a way to get out of this situation. These brothers were strong; it would be most difficult to fight both of them at once. *Time to take my leave.*

“What are you thinking about?!” Ooba demanded.

“A way to defeat you!” I shouted.

Bete utilized a unique fighting style in which he combined sharp thrusts with irregular slashes. As I rode Zetsuei through the plains and deflected Bete's attacks, I strained my ears. The enemy riders were loud, so Teiha must be applying pressure to—

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

“Sorry, but go to hell!” Bete yelled.

At the same time, I whipped my dagger out and threw it at Ooba, who was charging at me from the other side. He cut through the knife while it was still in the air. Bete took advantage of my distraction and adjusted his hold on his serpent spear.

“Ooba!”

“Brother!”

They lunged at me, their pincer formation trapping me between them.

*Shit, I’m gonna die! At the very least I’ll take one with m—*

Then, part of the enemy formation broke apart and a dagger flew towards the two enemy generals.

“Huh?!” Bete exclaimed.

“What’s this?!” Ooba yelled.

Though the Golden and Silver Wolves defended themselves from the sudden attack, they backed away, eyes narrowed with caution.

From atop a massive horse, a general with a magnificent beard stepped forward, wielding the Green Dragon Crescent Blade, a glaive of legend. He gave off such a tremendous and overwhelming aura. Even the enemy cavalrymen, who were renowned for their willingness to toss away their lives, remained frozen.

“That one there’s my son,” the general rumbled. “I won’t let you kill him.”

“F-Father?!”

The National Shield, Chou Tairan, should not be here. Yet he rode his mount forward until he was standing in front of me, his hand stroking his beard. The Keiyou riders managed to fight their way through the Gen cavalrymen and they rushed forward to surround me. I couldn’t keep my eyes off father. *Er, how did you get here from the lower reaches of the river? That was way too fast!*

The enemies were as confused as I was. I could see panic in their riders’ eyes.

“Impossible...” Bete breathed.

“You gotta be kidding me!” Ooba exclaimed.

“So, what will you two do? I don’t mind taking the heads of every Gen rider present,” father said.

A wordless gasp rose from the Gen soldiers as their faces paled with fear. Everyone knew who father was. He’d protected this land over many long years,

scoring victory after victory against invading forces.

Bete waved his serpent spear with a sharp look in his eye as he gave the order: “We retreat.”

“Wha—?! Brother!”

The Golden Wolf gave no reaction to his little brother’s dissatisfied yell. He simply turned his horse around and began to trot back to his soldiers. The Silver Wolf let out his frustration by smashing a rock into pieces with his poleaxe before following behind the Golden Wolf. But halfway to the enemy lines, the brothers stopped and turned around.

“Chou Sekiei! I shall remember that name!” Bete yelled.

“We’ll kill you next we meet!” Ooba growled. After they pointed their weapons at me, the two Wolves finally returned to their army and retreated in an orderly fashion.

*I...I’m saved.* Exhaustion bore down upon my shoulders, but I didn’t have time to rest.

Father turned to look at me. “Sekiei, let’s return. I asked Miss Meirin for the paddlewheeler fleet she’d kept hidden on the Grand Canal and we used that to move the army. We managed to come to your rescue thanks to those ships, but... I’ll have to scold that fool Raigen for dying before me.”

“Ah, Meirin’s...! Understood. U-Um, father, th—”

“There’s no need to thank me. I did what any father would do.”

“Y-Yessir!”

I could hear the quiet chuckles from the soldiers and officers around me, and they only became louder when I turned to glare at them.

Father smiled, his eyes wrinkling into crescents, before he turned and bellowed in a voice so loud it echoed across the battlefield: “Everyone, good job holding down the fort in my absence! There’s no need to give pursuit. It’s time for all of us—including the wounded—to return to Keiyou!”

“Yes, Lord Chou Tairan!”



“Seeekiiiiiiiiiii...”

“Whoa!”

As soon as I walked into my room, I saw a furious Hakurei glaring at me. If she were a cat, her fur would be puffed up with rage. Her blue eyes were sharp as blades. Asaka and Oto were in the room as well, but they wouldn’t be of any help—it was clear from their smiles that they were enjoying the situation.

Though Hakurei’s wordless pressure terrified me, I held up my hands and managed to push her back. “Wh-What is it? I-I haven’t, uh, done anything to incur your wrath today...”

“Miss Oto told me *everything*.”

“Wha—?!” *I was betrayed?!*

Though Asaka still looked cheery, Oto schooled her expression into something more neutral, as if she were completely innocent. “No matter the situation, I will always take a fellow girl’s side. I’m going to go get Miss Ruri,” she said.

“I feel like I’ll be able to get along well with Miss Oto! ♪” Asaka chirped before the two of them left the room together.

*So from the very beginning, they formed an alliance to keep an eye on me? I...I let down my guard...* I wanted to bury my face into my hands, but Hakurei sat down and patted the empty space next to her.

“Come and sit down, please.”

“All right...” I didn’t have the nerve to turn her down while she was like this. After setting Black Star by White Star, I walked over and sat next to her.

“Unbelievable! What did you mean, ‘if I get killed’?! I don’t recall permitting you to die! And what’s this I hear about you taking on both the Silver and Golden Wolves at the same time? Do you *want* me to get angry?!”

“Uh...aren’t you already angry?”

Hakurei clasped her hands together and smiled. A cold shiver ran down my spine at her expression. *Oh shit.*

“Did you say something?” she asked in a sweet voice.

It took me a moment to work up the nerve to reply, “Sorry.”

*The best thing to do is to just be honest.* I heard a sigh and then I felt her wrap her arms around my head. The scent of flowers engulfed me. It seemed that those who had fought in the west had the time and energy after battle to wash themselves off.

As she ran her fingers through my black hair, Hakurei muttered, “This is why I don’t like letting you run off by yourself. You always go on about how much you want to become a civil official and then...when I’m...*hic*...not around, you always go and...be reckless...”

Something warm hit my face. When I looked up, I saw tears streaming down Hakurei’s cheeks, so I said in a teasing tone, “Stop crying. Have you gone and seen Gramps?”

“I’m *not* crying,” Hakurei said after a soft sniffle. “I’ve bid farewell to Raigen, yes.” She turned away to wipe her eyes with her sleeve. Then, she pressed our shoulders together and said in a rush, “The two of us will spend tomorrow together. Is that clear?”

“Er, well, that’s—”

“No arguments, got it? *None.*” After a few seconds, Hakurei murmured in a much softer tone, “No arguments.”

I heaved a heavy sigh. In the face of her bullheaded attitude and distressed tears, I had no idea what to do. Chou Hakurei was a stubborn girl. Several footsteps sounded from the hallway so I decided to beg for reinforcements. “O my great strategist, she who has experienced hundreds of battles, my apologies but would you help me in convincing my dear little princess here?”

“Are you stupid? Of course I won’t.” Ruri stomped towards me, Yui on her shoulder and her blue hat in her hands. Oto was next to her, looking as if it were a given that she’d be at Ruri’s side. Ruri pointed at me, sticking her slender finger before my eyes.

*Huh? Wait, is she actually mad?*

“Are you listening?” Ruri said. “This is the perfect opportunity, so listen up, Mister ‘Wants to Be a Civil Official but Loves Being a Brash Fool Instead.’ Everything’s over for someone once they’re dead! So you have to live and survive and see the next day!” The strong determination in her bright green eyes pierced through me.

*Ah, right, this ascendant lost her family and homeland.*

Ruri flicked my forehead. “The job of the living is to see the world that the dead can’t. That’s the duty we owe those who passed on ahead of us. Don’t you agree, Sir Chou Sekiei?”

“Sekiei?” Hakurei, who was still crying, tugged on my sleeve.

*Looks like I’ve got no choice.* I raised my hands and said, “I give up. It’s my loss. However, we have to ask you and father for permission before Hakurei can spend—”

“I don’t mind,” Ruri interrupted. “Long story short, we’re basically at a standoff in the west. Oto.”

“Yes, Miss Ruri.”

Oto unfurled a map on the round table. I peered down on it, wiping away Hakurei’s tears with a cloth. Though some of the bulwarks and moats in the west had been destroyed, the vast majority of them were still there.

Ruri sat down next to me and placed Yui on her lap, running her hand down the cat’s back. “After their attempt to go around us failed, the Seitou army has been slowly but steadily advancing by destroying each and every one of our defensive measures. We’ve been countering that by using our bows and fire lances. Sometimes, we even rush out for a counterattack. You know, today, Hakurei went and burned one of the enemy catapults and—”

“Wait.” That was when I interrupted Ruri’s report and glared at Hakurei. “Hey, I didn’t hear a thing about a counterattack.”

“I figured you would be against it if I told you about it. Father gave me permission.”

“Wha—?! Look, you’re the heiress of the Chou family, you know? What do

you plan on doing if something happens to— Uh...Miss Ruri? Miss Oto? Why are you two looking at me like that?” My words grew quieter and quieter under their combined attention. Though I’d been in the middle of my lecture, I wasn’t able to withstand my strategist and her assistant staring at me like I’d grown another head.

“It’s *your* fault,” Ruri huffed.

“I believe it’s because you’re at fault, Lord Sekiei,” Oto agreed.

“Huh?!” Their tone brooked no argument. I could only stare at them, opening and closing my mouth like a carp. Hakurei and Ruri poked my cheeks.

“You’re *Chou* Sekiei, remember?” Hakurei muttered.

“I get why Meirin keeps complaining about you,” Ruri sighed.

“Looks like he doesn’t realize it himself though,” Oto said.

“Grr...” It was no use. I couldn’t think of a way to win against any of these girls in an argument. *And even Oto joined in this time!*

Booming laughter interrupted my thoughts and a loud voice exclaimed, “Looks like you’re all having fun!” Father, still in his military uniform, walked in with a big smile on his face.

“Excuse me,” Teiha said as he walked in behind father.

I tried to push myself up, but father stopped me with a large hand.

“Relax. We don’t have much time. Tomorrow will be the final battle, after all. We must rest early and recover our stamina. I apologize for the late hour, but I’d like to make sure we’re all on the same page.” I could tell from the fire in his eyes that Chou Tairan, the National Shield of Ei, hadn’t given up yet.

After giving Hakurei a quick glance, I looked over at Ruri, who’d displayed her extraordinary talent as a strategist in this battle as well. “Ruri, tell us your predictions for tomorrow’s battle. We imagine that Gen’s main forces, with the White Wraith Adai leading them, will form their lines in the morning. The Four Wolves, who have surely replenished their lost members, and their armies will be there as well.”

“I don’t believe they’ll have any catapults with them for an open field battle,”

Hakurei added. “It’s been three days since they took Hakuhou Castle. They don’t have time to move them or take them apart and put them together again.”

“That’s hardly reassuring. They may not have as many soldiers as Gen, but the Seitou army will be there as well, remember?” Ruri let out a heavy sigh before she pressed her clasped hands against her forehead.

“If we can go back to the topic of the Four Wolves, one of them still hasn’t shown themselves,” Oto said.

“The scouts who just returned said the same thing, so that intel should still be accurate,” Teiha added.

The Golden and Silver Wolves had been at the vanguard of Gen’s army. We’d defeated the Crimson and Gray Wolves. But there was still one more? The image of Blackblade Gisen—that monstrously powerful black-haired and muscular warrior with a scar on his cheek—flashed through my mind. If it hadn’t been for Hakurei’s and Ruri’s help, I wouldn’t have survived my last encounter with him. I’d heard that he was the one who murdered Ruri’s family and village as well. There was a high chance that we’d run into him on the battlefield once again.

Ruri looked up and shook her head, a somber look in her eye. “I won’t mince my words. Not even the great Ouei would be able to claim victory unscathed.”

There was nothing I could say to refute her conclusion. She was right. *Technically speaking, he’d be the one cornering the enemy into our exact situation.*

*“War is best won before it even starts,” Eifuu used to say. “Granted, someone like yourself, who can turn any disadvantage into an advantage with nothing more than your sword, would never understand that philosophy!”*

*Now that I think about it, he sure was a rude guy. I wasn’t that much of an idiot in my past life—*

Interrupting my thoughts, Ruri said, “Judging by the camp they set up, the Gen army brought around a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers. The White Wraith is the commander in chief, and he’s brought with him a large number of

famed generals and officers. On top of that, we can assume that they're all elite riders and cavalymen." It was a candid opinion on the enemy forces, formed with information we'd gathered from multiple sources.

After taking Hakuhou Castle from us, the Gen army set a defensive team in the fortress to prevent us from reclaiming it, and even so they could still bring such numbers to open battle. The enemy was able to split itself up and cover more ground, yet our forces had to concentrate all of our efforts at a single front. *Perhaps father's temporary departure from Keiyou was part of the enemy's plans as well.* Adai Dada was a man of frightening intellect indeed.

Ruri placed her finger on the map, right over the western regions of Keiyou. "The Seitou army lost many of its riders when hostilities started. They haven't tried to attack from behind again. However, if they *do* attempt to take Keiyou once more..."

"We won't be able to remove the twenty thousand guards from the city to help our main force," I concluded for her.

It was almost certain that the Seitou army would participate in tomorrow's attack as well in order to assist with Gen's invasion. In other words, we only had thirty thousand healthy and uninjured soldiers to use in open warfare.

"We can't hole up the entire army in the city either, though," Ruri pointed out. "According to the message we just received, we can't count on any reinforcements."

She picked up a letter from the table and handed it to me. I recognized Meirin's handwriting and I could see her distress from how rigid each word was. *"The imperial court is unable to come to a decision. My sources tell me that those in favor of rescuing Keiyou and those in favor of defending Rinkei are debating with each other every day. I've sent you a prototype I hear Seitou is testing out. Miss Ruri, I beg of you: please lend Lord Sekiei and Miss Hakurei your strength."*

*This is terrible.* The grand chancellor was arguing that they should send reinforcements to back up Keiyou. Of that, I was sure. But why were there people arguing for protecting the capital at this point in time?! Hakurei grabbed my sleeve, an anxious look in her eye, while father clenched his fist.

“I have no intention of holing up inside Keiyou. I’ve destroyed the enemies who crossed the river from the lower reaches. We no longer have to fear an attack from the east.” Father announced his new military accomplishment like it was nothing special and then proclaimed in a confident voice that seemed designed to cut through our worries, “Now that things have come to this, we have no choice but to charge our way to the enemy’s main camp tomorrow. There’s no need to fear. Our enemies’ army is so large that there is sure to be some weakness within the chain of command that we can exploit. Adai is a powerful opponent, but he is no god.”

Chou Tairan the National Shield was truly a force to be reckoned with. The one thing we could do to turn this situation around was to kill the enemy commander in chief, Gen Emperor Adai Dada. And here he was claiming that this was the only goal he had his sights on.

“I’ll go with you,” I volunteered at the same time Hakurei said, “Father, please allow Sekiei and me to ride with you!”

Father didn’t say anything for a long moment before he bowed his head. Ignoring Oto’s and Teiha’s soft gasps of shock, he murmured, “I accept, but I’m sorry to ask it of you.” His willingness to humble himself before his subordinates was what marked him as a skilled general.

“I have a plan,” Ruri said in a reluctant tone, drawing everyone’s attention to her. She created a black flower in her hand and, keeping her eyes focused on it, smiled in a self-deprecating manner. “Sorry, let me rephrase that. It’s not even a plan. More like a trick. However, I think that using it will give us a higher chance of success than a simple charge would. Please listen closely.”

By the time Ruri had detailed her plan and we had all finished discussing tomorrow’s battle, it was late. Father and Teiha left the room in a hurry. Oto was next, a slumbering Ruri on her back. The little strategist must have been exhausted from all the thinking she’d had to do.

Finally, once Hakurei and I were the only ones left, I turned to look at her and said, “Okay, you should go back to your room—”

“I...!” Hakurei interrupted, pressing her face against my chest. Her entire body

was trembling. "I'd like to stay here for tonight. Is that...all right with you?"

A million thoughts raced through my mind as I pondered her request before I gave her a gentle pat on her back. "Fine, fine. Just don't attack me."

"I-I would never! Jeez!" Hakurei puffed her cheeks before she rolled into my bed. She looked up at me with a happy smile and continued, "I lied. It's not 'for tonight,' but rather 'for tomorrow as well.'"





“I know, I know. After so many years with you, I’m not gonna nag you about this anymore.” I pulled out a blanket from my closet and placed it over her. Then, I untied the crimson ribbon from her silver hair before I turned my attention to the twin swords leaning against the bedside table. “The Heavenly Swords comprise two weapons—Black Star and White Star. The White Wraith thinks he’s got this in the bag, so let’s show him just how wrong he is. Leave your back to me. I’ll keep you safe.”

“In that case...” Hakurei pushed herself up and took my right hand in both of hers. She held it close to her chest and closed her eyes as if in prayer. “I won’t let you die. I promise.”

“That goes for me as well. You’re not dying on my watch.”

“Y-You were supposed to feel embarrassed! Unbelievable!”

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“Father!” Hakurei and I called as one in the early hours of the morning.

We were in the northern outskirts of Keiyou with the thirty thousand soldiers of the Chou family army lined up behind us. All of them were prepared for battle. Chou Tairan was standing at the very front of the line, his gaze focused on the enemy soldiers we could see moving through the morning fog. The Green Dragon Crescent Blade in his hand glimmered in the dim sunlight.

“I was waiting for you two. Did you manage to convince Ruri to stay back?” he asked without turning around to look at us.

“Yes, somehow,” I replied.

“She was quite unhappy, but Miss Oto calmed her down,” Hakurei added. “Asaka is with her as her bodyguard.”

We lined up next to him. It had been quite a bit of work to convince Ruri to stay behind; granted, it hadn’t been easy to convince Asaka either. I took out the spyglass that Ruri had shoved into my hands with a furious “Make sure you return this to me!” and peered through it, checking out the enemy’s front line.

The flags at Gen’s front line were those of the Golden and Silver Wolves. If Ruri’s plan went according to her predictions, then my rematch with them

would come soon after our first meeting.

I placed the spyglass into my pocket and shrugged. “Unlike the shut-in strategists recorded in history books, Ruri is the type who rides out to battle. Heck, she can even use a bow. In truth, I’d love for her to take command on the battlefield as well.”

“Just as she predicted, there’s movement from the Seitou army,” Hakurei reported. “Keiyou *needs* Miss Ruri.”

Father hummed before he asked, “And what of Teiha?”

“He gave us the most trouble.”

Normally, Teiha was the serious type who always followed my orders or Hakurei’s. However, he must have still felt responsible for Raigen’s death. It took us a lot of time and effort before he finally nodded his consent to remain in Keiyou. I could understand how he felt though—after all, this would be our final showdown with Gen.

I let out a breath and then looked out over the battlefield. At the back of our left flank was the one small hill that existed on these plains. Upon it, we’d set up several catapults we’d taken from the enemies and the Chou flags fluttered upon them. The three thousand soldiers near them were under my and Hakurei’s direct command, and we’d positioned them there the previous night.

They must have stood out from the enemy’s perspective, and they probably considered our unit obvious bait. *In fact, that’s exactly what we want.* The wind blew through the plains and the morning fog lifted in increments, revealing Gen’s unbelievably large army. A shiver of anticipation ran down my spine and I gripped Black Star’s hilt.

“However,” I said, getting back to the point about the soldiers left behind in Keiyou, “with the three of us leaving the city, we needed someone to stay behind. Ruri may have the soldiers’ complete trust, but she’s only been with us for a little while. We needed someone who could take command.”

“I feel bad for what we did to him though,” Hakurei said in a pained voice, a hand pressed to her forehead. The person who killed Teiha’s family was right before us, and yet he had been ordered to stay behind. It must not have been

easy for him to obey.

“It was cruel of us, yes, but we had no other choice,” father said. “Teiha is an experienced warrior who has survived many difficult battles now. I’m sure he knows how to see the greater picture. Now then, take a look at this. It’s information from the scouts I sent to check out the enemy lines.”

“Yessir!” Hakurei and I said. After taking the piece of paper from father, I unfolded it and held it in a way so that Hakurei and I could read it together.

Upon the paper was a simple diagram of the enemy formation. As expected, the Golden and Silver Wolves, along with their elite cavalry, were at the front. Behind them were countless warriors and officers. Adai was in the main camp, which was at the very back of the lines. Protecting him was someone called the Black Wolf. If I had to guess, the Black Wolf was Blackblade Gisen, the most powerful fighter in the Gen army. He must have gotten a promotion.

In order to kill the White Wraith—our ultimate goal in this battle—we would need to get through the Golden Wolf, the Silver Wolf, commanders and officers, over a hundred and fifty thousand enemy soldiers, and a monster in human flesh.

After I finished looking at the map, I let out a loud breath and gave my honest opinion. “Wow! What an amazing lineup they’ve got!”

“Sekiei, what do you think you’re doing, complimenting the enemy?” Hakurei muttered as she jostled me with her elbow.

I folded up the paper and slipped it into my pocket. “It’s the truth, isn’t it? If father were able to have this many soldiers under his command, I would’ve been a civil official ages ago.”

Hakurei narrowed her eyes, not bothering to hide her displeasure, before she turned to look away. “I’m not in the mood for your ridiculous jokes right now.” Hakurei was the prodigy of the Chou family; she understood more than anyone what I was trying to say. She stood up straighter and said, “Father, if I may offer a suggestion: I believe that even with Miss Ruri’s plan, we have little chance of winning this battle. Please, take command from headquarters! I promise that Sekiei and I will defeat the White Wraith in your stead!”

Apparently, I had no choice but to go with her. Granted, even if Hakurei *had* tried to get me to stay, I'd have followed along. *I don't plan on letting her die.*

"Hakurei," father said before suddenly sweeping her into a tight embrace.

"Huh?" Hakurei breathed while the soldiers watching us from behind shifted in surprise.

Without concerning himself with everyone's reactions, father used his large hand to pet Hakurei on the head. "Ha ha ha, no wonder my hair and beard have grown so white. It wasn't the stress of battle at all—I thought you were still a child, and yet you've grown up right under my nose."

"Father..." Hakurei whispered.

He removed his hand from Hakurei's head and smiled. It was such a bright expression that it was hard to believe the fate of the Ei Empire rested on his broad shoulders. "Your consideration and filial piety make me happy, my daughter. However, the plan remains unchanged. You understand why, don't you?"

Hakurei's face scrunched up like she was fighting back tears, but she managed to reply, "Yessir," before she turned to press her face against my chest. Her tears soaked through my uniform.

We had a plan—a tide-turning plan that Ruri squeezed out using every drop of wisdom and intellect she had. The chances of success were so low that it was akin to using a thin, delicate strand of thread to pull victory our way. Hakurei and I weren't strong enough or skilled enough to accomplish that.

Night was about to end. I hugged Hakurei tight around her shoulders and said, "General Chou Tairan, we're all waiting for your words."

Father nodded and turned his horse to the thirty thousand soldiers gathered behind us. "It is I, Chou Tairan! My soldiers, you've all done well to survive until this day." The replying cheer from the gathered Keiyou soldiers was so loud that a small ripple passed through the Gen forces. Father stroked his magnificent beard and gave a lopsided smile. "I spent all night thinking about what I wanted to say today, but I couldn't come up with anything. This might be why the educated folks in the capital make fun of us military officials and call us idiots."

It was curious how father wasn't raising his voice, and yet it carried so easily on the air. Perhaps this was a skill he attained after surviving countless battles until now.

Suddenly, father's face became severe. "I'm a simple man and that is why I cannot deceive any of you here. We are at a great disadvantage." Everyone fell silent when they heard that and father turned his horse back to face the enemy lines. He thrust out the Green Dragon Crescent Blade and continued, "The Gen emperor, White Wraith Adai Dada, is the commander in chief of the enemy army. The Golden and Silver Wolves stand in the front lines. There are so many other powerful and famous officers and commanders among them that counting them all would be akin to naming all the stars in the night sky. Even at a glance, there is a clear difference between our manpower."

I could see father's profile and recognized both his exhaustion and resignation. I couldn't blame him. For the longest time, father's enemies hadn't only been the wolves before us. He'd also had to fight our allies in the capital, who preferred to pretend nothing was wrong and indulge in frivolous political plays.

After adjusting his helmet, father heaved a heavy sigh and said, "Our army is smaller and our soldiers are weary after so many consecutive battles. It's true that we have little chance of winning."

Silence reigned on our side of the battlefield. I could recognize fury in the officers' eyes, no doubt aimed at those who put such a grim expression on their lord's face. In the past seven or so years, the Chou family army had never lost on the battlefield. And yet, the situation with the war only ever continued to grow worse.

"However, we cannot give up here. We cannot afford to give up!" With that impassioned roar, father slammed his fist against his breastplate. The motion caused Raigen's dagger, which he'd hung from his belt, to make a clattering noise. "Hakuhou Castle has fallen and we've lost old Raigen, along with many of our veteran soldiers! We cannot count on those in the capital to help us. If we don't fight, then Gen will take Keiyou by day's end. If that happens, then it shall only be a matter of time before our homeland is destroyed..."

“Father...” Hakurei and I murmured as he trailed off.

A tear rolled down the cheek of the great general known as the National Shield, guardian deity of the Ei Empire. He gripped the handle of Raigen’s dagger so hard that I could practically hear the material’s whine of protest. When he spoke, it was in a trembling voice. “That we find ourselves in such a sorry situation despite my years of campaigning for an attack on the north is my failure as a leader. The shame is enough to kill me. What a wretched display. And even more pathetic, the only option I have left is to hope that all of you will fight with your lives on the line.”

*No, father, you’re not the one at fault! The ones to blame are—*

At that moment, a light shone down upon us. Dawn had broken.

Illuminated by the morning sun, Chou Tairan raised the Green Dragon Crescent Blade high into the air and roared, “This battle will determine the destiny of Ei! I humbly beg you—lend me your strength!”

“Long live Chou Tairan! Long live the Chou army! Long live the Ei Empire! We swear on our lives that we will bring victory to Ei!” the officers and soldiers yelled, holding their own weapons aloft.





Hakurei was still in my arms, tears streaming down her face. After I gave her a pat on her back, we looked each other in the eyes and nodded. *It's time for us to go. Whether we win or lose all falls to our next task.*

Having raised morale to its limits, father smiled, looking like he was enjoying every second. "Sekiei, Hakurei, let's race to see who can take Adai's head first. Don't blame me if I get to him before you. I shall wait for you two in the enemy's base!"

"Yessir!"

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"So, even knowing that they're at a disadvantage, he chose to raise his army's morale and engage in an open battle? He never disappoints me," I, Gen Emperor Adai Dada, murmured from my throne. Even in Gen's base north of Keiyou, I could hear the pleasing sound of the Chou army's cheers. Next to me were various flags; some were emblazoned with "Wolf," some with "Dragon," and yet others with "Routou." The Black Wolf, Gisen, stood behind me, his sharp eyes glaring at the enemy army.

Thanks to the Honorable One's information about the morning fog, we had been able to use the catapults positioned on our barges to ambush and take the once-impenetrable Hakuhou Castle. A hundred and fifty thousand Gen soldiers were lined up before me, most of them on their mounts.

Various sources had informed me that, on the field, the Chou army only had about thirty thousand. My plan to use the Seitou army to attack Keiyou and force them to split up their army—already smaller than ours to begin with—had worked. It was why I let those injured in the battle against Raigen the Ogre rest, as well as leaving soldiers behind to defend Hakuhou Castle. Even without them, I had over five times the soldiers of the Chou army.

In an impressive display of might, Chou Tairan had destroyed the secondary army that had crossed the river in the lower reaches. However, just as I'd planned, the invasion was enough to scare the fools in Rinkei. Ei's old grand chancellor You Bunshou could inform everyone of the coming danger all he wanted: so long as the false emperor was too scared to make a move, Rinkei would not send any soldiers. Keiyou would not receive any reinforcements. To

hole up in Keiyou in preparation for a siege would equate defeat. The last thing I wanted was to engage in open warfare against Chou Tairan. However, it wasn't so bad if I thought of this as a final act of mercy to a worthy opponent and skilled general.

I smiled, resting my elbow against the arm of my throne, and a young rider bearing the Golden Wolf's flag on his back rode towards me. "I bear emergency news from the front!"

"Do you realize you're standing before His Imperial Majesty, you bastard?! Dismount you—"

"There's no need for formalities on the battlefield. I permit you to speak while on your horse," I said, interrupting my marshal's scolding. *This is nothing more than a farce for my officers' sake. My old caretaker has always been much too protective of me.* I glanced at the marshal for a moment in an apologetic way before I gestured with my left hand for the rider to continue.

"'Around three thousand enemies are stationed on a hill to the southwest! It's unclear which team Chou Tairan is leading!' Excuse me, Your Imperial Majesty!" the messenger said, cheeks flushed, before he returned to his position.

I rested my silken cheek against the palm of my hand, lost in thought. My long white hair grazed the periphery of my vision. "No one can confirm where Chou Tairan is, hmm? He isn't the type to hole himself up in his city..."

The word "surrender" didn't exist in a great general's dictionary. Kou Eihou had never given up. No matter what situation he found himself in, he always cut his way through with his Heavenly Swords. And so it was with Ei's general. This was the final battle between us; I doubted that a man such as Chou Tairan would be sitting in the back lines, content to let his soldiers do the fighting. *Should I hold off the attack until I can locate him?*

My thoughts were interrupted by the marshal pressing his fists together in a salute and yelling, "Your Imperial Majesty, your humble subject would like to voice his thoughts. Our army is great—*much* greater than the enemy's. Please give us the order to stand in a formation as vast as these very plains to devour all that stand in our path! *That* is how Gen has traditionally fought its wars!"

*He saw my hesitation. Being too cautious in the face of uncertainty has always been my bad habit.* I forced myself to relax and smile. “Ha, my intellect is no match for years of experience.”

“If I may be so bold, you are the third emperor I’ve served and fought next to, after all.”

I unsheathed my dagger and commanded, “Sound the horn! Order the Golden and Silver Wolves in the front to lead the charge. You, Gisen, and the Black Lancers shall remain in the main camp, along with soldiers to deliver messages and observe the battlefield. Go!”

“Yessir!”

Officers and soldiers alike raced out of the camp, their steps light with enthusiasm. *Wolves need to be unleashed from time to time.* The ones who remained chained—the old marshal and the broad man with the black hair—continued to glare towards the enemy.

I thought for a moment before I placed my dagger back into its scabbard. “Gisen, it seems like you have the Chou family’s son on your mind.”

Gisen didn’t answer for a moment. “No, that’s not...”

“You need not put on any airs. Depending on how the battle goes, I may need to call on your strength, as well as that of your Black Lanc—”

“I-I come bearing a messa— Eek!”

Another rider, bearing a different flag than the other one, raced in. He was so young that he looked akin to a child. Before he could even finish his sentence, one of the Black Lancers guarding me pointed his spear at the messenger’s face. I didn’t expect anything less from someone Gisen himself picked for his unit. They were all serious about their duty as guards.

“Speak,” Gisen ordered in a curt voice.

“Y-Yessir,” the young messenger replied, collecting himself. After giving his report, he hurried out as if trying to escape from us.

I couldn’t say anything, struck speechless for once, before I covered my mouth with a hand. *Well, well, I thought that one wouldn’t make it here in time*

*from the north.* I started chuckling and Gisen furrowed his brow, confusion on his face.

“My emperor, is something the matter?” the marshal asked.

Listening to the various horns that the different teams were sounding, I waved my left hand in a dismissive gesture. My body in this life was so slender and weak that I could neither swing a sword nor ride a horse. However, my hearing, at the very least, was far superior to that of an average person’s. “Ahh, sorry, it seems that we’ve already won this batt— Hmm?”

Several odd noises, like something was coming, rang out. In the next second, the soldiers at the front lines flew through the air while a burst of fire rose with a thunderous noise, so loud that it seemed to cause a tremor through the battlefield. *Was that ammo from the enemy catapult on the hill?*

“Oh?” I narrowed my eyes.

“Wha—?” my marshal said, looking around and shifting in place as if in preparation for a counterattack.

“It’s gunpowder,” Gisen said, recognizing the weapon used.

The other Ei soldiers and armies didn’t use gunpowder in their tactics. There was someone in the Chou army who, like us, was paying attention to the technological advancements in Seitou.

“This is a weapon that Seitou was developing in secret,” I said. “It’s a bizarre one, made by filling earthenware with gunpowder and throwing it at the enemy. They called it a thunder crash bomb, if I recall. But using a catapult to launch those projectiles at us? Very clever.” Engineers from Seitou were developing weapons with gunpowder in Enkei. But, just like with the fire lances, the Chou army got the jump on us in utilizing these prototypes first. I ordered my marshal, “Send a messenger to calm the soldiers at the front. Like I ordered before battle began, they can ignore the enemies on the hill. They’re bait. Besides, the catapults aren’t capable of consecutive shots; they have nothing to fear for the moment. Finding Chou Tairan is the priority. He is trying to incite confusion in my army so that he can attack us here. We... Wait, a horn to order a full charge?”

My sharp ears didn't miss the sound of it, even though it was not something I should have heard. Try as I might to confirm, I couldn't get a clear view of my army through the clouds of dirt.

"What's happening?!" my marshal barked at a soldier standing on a tall ladder, whose job was to observe the battlefield and report the situation to us.

"The Silver Lancers have started charging the hill!" the soldier reported.

"It looks like the Golden Lancers are charging with them!" another one added.

"What?!" I exclaimed. *The Zuso brothers, two of my most loyal soldiers, are going against my explicit orders? That means there's someone on that hill who's so dangerous that they had no choice but to attack.*

"Who's the enemy commander on the hill?" Gisen demanded in a sharp tone.

"Because of the distance and the dirt, I can't make them out. But I can see a silver-haired officer upon a white horse at the front of the enemy lines! Next to them is an officer atop a black horse!"

"Understood," Gisen rumbled while the Black Lancers murmured among themselves, worry in their eyes.

*I see.* Rubbing my chin, I said, "A woman with silver hair and blue eyes, said to bring calamity... Considering Chou Tairan's daughter and son were the ones to kill Nguyen and Seul, the Zuso brothers must have considered them two of the greatest threats from the Chou army. Marshal!"

"I shall take command on the front line. Excuse me!" Sensing the danger of the situation, my old marshal raced off, followed by some of the guards.

*I just hope they make it in time.* The situation on the battlefield was changing with every second that passed. Though quieter than the sound from the catapults, multiple explosions rang in the air. Mingled among them were my soldiers' yells of Chou Tairan's name. But oddly, I could hear their cries coming from multiple different directions. Reports from my soldiers kept coming in:

"A mysterious rumble has sounded from the enemy side! The front is crumbling!"

"The enemies at the hill are launching an attack on the Golden and Silver

Lancers!”

“The enemy is preparing to charge with its whole ar— O-Oh no! They’re attacking us from the flank!”

I remained silent, my elbow resting on my throne’s arm as I waited for *that* time to come. Then, just like what happened seven years ago, an announcement rang out from the battlefield, the feat so impossible that it didn’t sound like a human was yelling the words: “I, Chou Tairan, have killed the enemy generals, the Golden and Silver Wolves!”

The soldiers around me were experienced warriors. Still they—all save Gisen—gasped in shock. Cheers from the enemy mingled with despairing cries from my soldiers.

Morale was sinking fast. Gathering all the information I’d collected so far, I deduced, “So he used his son and daughter as bait, ordering them to use a weapon as eye-catching as the thunder crash bomb. Once he managed to lure out the Zuso brothers, he killed them himself at the most climactic moment, thus maximizing how much morale he could raise for his army. Not only that, but he also used the ten shadows strategy, placing multiple decoy soldiers around the battlefield to shout out the wrong information and invite chaos among my soldiers. So, you won’t take your defeat lying down, Chou Tairan? Just as I expected from you.”

I knew the word “surrender” didn’t exist for this man or any great general. They used any and every method they could in order to pry victory from us. We were in for a difficult battle indeed if the enemy’s fearsome determination was any indication.

Suddenly, a young woman wearing a fox mask rode into the camp on a red horse. Gisen gripped the hilt of the great sword slung on his back while the other soldiers readied their spears. However, I raised my hand to stop them.

“Are you one of Ren’s?” I asked.

“Read this,” the woman said without naming herself. She handed me a letter and explained, “It happened in Rinkei three days ago.” Then, she turned her horse around and disappeared from the battlefield.

*Like master, like subordinate.* She was as blunt as Ren. However, I had to hand it to her. The journey from Rinkei to Keiyou was around five days on horseback. That she made it here in three proved her skills as an equestrian. I looked through the document and then leaned back on my throne. *I see.*

“What poor, unfortunate souls You Bunshou and the eldest son of the Jo family are,” I said. *And Chou Tairan is the most unfortunate of all.* The guards keeping watch on the battlefield were still giving me updates on how poorly the battle was going:

“The soldiers from the front have retreated, but they ran into the soldiers in the middle, causing confusion!”

“Sporadic attacks are coming from the hill with the catapult! I believe the soldiers there are using fire lances.”

“The enemy army won’t stop advancing!”

“I can’t make out where Chou Tairan is! The silver-haired female officer is leading a team and coming this way!”

This was a major disadvantage when it came to commanding a large army. Even the tiniest spark of confusion could lead to an inferno of chaos. It would take too long to sort things out and restore order. This precise moment was what Chou Tairan had gambled would happen. He’d used his own life, his loved ones and soldiers, and even the fate of Ei as the chips.

I pressed my fingers against my own neck and ordered, “Gisen, Chou Tairan will be here very soon. Meet him in combat and take his head. As you can probably guess, I cannot wield a sword or ride a horse. I cannot die before I unify the lands, and I refuse to offer my neck in a battle that we’ve already won.”

“Understood.”

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From atop of Zetsuei, galloping at the very front of my unit, I shot arrow after arrow. I’d long lost count of how many enemy soldiers I had knocked from their horses. As I broke through enemy lines, my field of vision cleared for a moment, allowing me to take in the situation. Around me, at the very least, there weren’t

any Gen soldiers... But over a hundred thousand soldiers—enemy and ally alike—were fighting for their lives on the battlefield, creating a most chaotic scene.

Once I realized how the battle was going, I yelled at Hakurei next to me, “Hakurei, the hill on the right!”

“Got it!”

It took only an instant for my unit and me to race up a small hill and after ordering for them to take a breather, I looked around. My soldiers were tired to the bone and we’d lost many. The ones left took out their water bottles and dressed their wounds with scraps of cloth. Hakurei left my side to issue orders while offering praise to the older soldiers. She truly had the makings of a great commander.

The strange weapons Meirin had sent—the thunder crash bombs, earthenware spheres stuffed with gunpowder—were far more dangerous than the Golden and Silver Wolves could have predicted. “First,” Ruri had said, “we’ll set up the catapult in a really obvious spot, and have you and Hakurei act as the bait. The two generals at the front of the enemy line won’t be able to resist it, and that’s when General Chou will kill them and incite confusion within the ranks.” It looked like her gamble had paid off.

Gen’s front lines lost the Golden and Silver Wolves, which had been their commanders. Then, on top of that, father and the most elite members of the Chou army launched an attack on them. Due to this fearsome assault, the frontline Gen soldiers were forced to retreat, thus throwing the lines behind them into disarray. As a result...

“It’s Chou Tairan!”

“No, that’s not him! That’s a body double!”

“Where is he?!”

Ruri’s second plan— “We’ll split our army into ten teams and place a body double of Chou Tairan in each” —was working so well it was like she’d cast a spell on the Gen soldiers.

Before we’d set off for battle, Ruri, who had been holding on to Hakurei, spoke with tears in her eyes and an upset expression on her face. “We’ll incite



chaos in the enemy ranks and attack their headquarters with all of our troops while they're distracted. It's a simple plan, isn't it? I'm sorry, though. This was the only strategy I could come up with," she'd said. However, while the individual parts of her plan—combining those newfangled gunpowder weapons and catapults, using Hakurei with her eye-catching hair color as bait, and spreading body doubles across the battlefield to spread false information—were simple enough, not many people would think to put all of them together.

*If I hadn't appointed Ruri as our strategist, we would've already lost.* I pulled a bamboo flask from my pocket and took a sip. The coolness of the water spread throughout every corner of my body, leaving me feeling energized. "All right then, what to do next?"

The fighting was about to reach its peak. In every corner of the battlefield, I could see Chou flags fluttering in the wind, the soldiers who rallied under them still brimming with enthusiasm. In contrast, the Gen army's formation was a mess thanks to the frontline soldiers' reckless charge. The Chou army wasn't unscathed, though. Even if our soldiers were experienced and well trained, they were still human at the end of the day. Many of them were wounded and exhausted, and were still quite some distance away from the enemy's main encampment, which was marked by a towering Gen military flag. Judging by the voices from enemies and allies alike, I was sure that father hadn't reached the main encampment yet either. *If the situation doesn't change, then we'll...*

Hakurei rode up to me once she finished speaking with the soldiers and placed more arrows into my quiver. "Sekiei, these are the last of our reserves. Please hand me your water bottle."

"Sure." I tossed it at her and she drank from it without hesitation. Using a cloth to wipe away the dirt on her cheek, I complained, "I wish cavalry could use the fire lances too. At the very least, a thunder crash bomb would be nice."

"Without sufficient training, our horses will flee from them as well. If you want to use them, you'll have to dismount first."

"Yeah, I figured."

We were managing to fight them on even footing, but they still had far more soldiers than we did. This deep into enemy lines, we *needed* the speed and

maneuverability of our horses, or else we'd be dead. I looked down at Black Star. *Worst comes to worst, I'll distract the Gen soldiers myself—*

"Young master! Please leave everything to us!"

A loud voice interrupted my thoughts, dragging me back to the present.

"Sekiei?" Hakurei asked in a threatening tone.

I could see her glaring at me from the corner of my eye, but there was no time to pay her any mind. A score of old soldiers surrounded me, all on foot.

"Hey, where are your horses?" I asked. "And that's a—"

"We begged Master Strategist to let us help," the veteran soldier at the head of the group said. His face was a mess of blood and sweat, and there was a piece of cloth covering his left eye. He must have suffered an injury there over the course of the battle.

In his hand, he held a bamboo fire lance and when I looked around at everyone, I noticed that *all* of them were holding the same thing. When they spoke to me, there was a hint of desperation in their pleas.

"Our horses can no longer run."

"We shall keep the enemies here for everyone."

"The White Wraith's main encampment is within hailing distance. If you don't hurry there, General Chou will scold you!"

"If Sir Raigen were here, he would surely make the same decision we're making."

I felt a sharp stinging at the back of my nose and clutched the bow in my hand so hard that I could feel the material creak in my palm. "No way! Do you really think I'd let you all..."

"Young master." The one-eyed soldier gave me a bright smile. He and all of the other soldiers held a fierce determination in their eyes.

*Fine... I see how it is!* I closed my eyes for a moment before saying, "All right. But..."

"None of you are permitted to die," Hakurei said, joining in the conversation.

She had been storing my water bottle in the leather bag slung around her horse. As she drew up next to me, she used a cloth to wipe at my cheek. “If you fall here, then Sekiei will blame himself for the rest of his life. Don’t let him trick you; he’s quite the crybaby. So, please, return safe.”

“Wha—?!” I exclaimed. “Listen, you...”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

Before I could respond, some of the soldiers listening in on our conversation started to chuckle. Soon, all the veterans had burst into laughter. After they recovered, the one-eyed soldier gave us a sharp and practiced salute.

“I understand. We have to remain alive so we can attend your wedding, after all. Young master, Lady Hakurei, we wish you good luck!”

“Good luck!” the other old soldiers echoed.

“Good hunting,” I replied in a curt voice before I looked back over at the battlefield. There was less vigor in the Chou flags compared to earlier; there was no time left. I gritted my teeth and let out my anger in a sharp breath. They knew that this would be a suicide mission. “Those idiots!”

“Sekiei, it’s all right. I also...” Hakurei cupped my cheek with her hand, a sheen of unshed tears over her blue eyes.

*So you’re going to shoulder this guilt along with me?* A sense of peace returned to my heart and I nodded my gratitude. I looked into her eyes first before I turned around at the soldiers and yelled, “Everyone, we’re moving out! It’s time to exterminate the White Wraith!”

“Yessir!”

I took down cavalrymen in my path with arrows and cut them down with Black Star when I rode past them, slashing through their metal armor. The fire lances behind me had stopped roaring a while ago. However...

“Sekiei! Over there!”

Upon hearing Hakurei’s cry, I looked up. Chou Tairan was facing off against that black-haired enemy general in the dark armor—Blackblade Gisen—in a

mounted duel. The Green Dragon Crescent Blade and Gisen's great sword met each other in a bout so fast that I could hardly believe humans were wielding them. Every swing caused sparks to fly through the air and a fearsome sound to echo over the battlefield. Both Gen and Chou soldiers were watching from the sidelines, waiting for the chance to jump in and help, but with how ferocious the duel was, none of them could find an opening.

Father put some distance between them and pointed the Green Dragon Crescent Blade at the enemy general. "You're good! Gisen, was it? It seems that you truly are the strongest warrior in Gen!"

"Chou Tairan, I will not let you pass," Gisen replied.

"Then I shall force my way through!"

They approached each other once more, glaive striking against sword. This duel right here, right now, was pitting the most powerful soldiers from Gen and Ei against each other. I glanced over at Hakurei next to me to send her a wordless signal before we raised our bows and called out as one.

"Father!"

We galloped in, shooting arrows to keep Gisen at bay. Without uttering a single word, the fearsome monster of Gen dodged every one of them with a blank expression. Then, he straightened up and leaned his great sword against his shoulder.

"Sekiei, Hakurei!" Chou Tairan roared from behind us, his rage clear in every syllable. "Don't get in the way of our fi—"

"Father, *he's* not the one you need to defeat!" I interrupted, not letting him finish his sentence. He could kill Gisen here, but we'd still lose so long as Adai remained alive.

"Please, go on ahead!" Hakurei added.

I heard him draw a sharp breath before he replied, "Right. I'll leave him to you two. Everyone, this is our final battle! With me!"

With an answering roar, the elite riders followed father and began to charge for Gen's main encampment. The riders in black armor serving as Adai's final

guards met them and it didn't take long before the yells and screams of their skirmish filled the air.

Gisen turned his massive horse towards father, but before he could kick it into a gallop, Hakurei and I shot a volley of arrows at him. The soldiers who'd survived this intense battle followed suit, sending down a merciless rain of arrows upon Gisen.

"Where do you think you're going?!" I bellowed.

"We're your opponents now!" Hakurei yelled.

"Don't get in my way, Chou Sekiei!" Gisen snarled. He struck down all of the projectiles with that great sword of his. The scar on his face twisted as he bared his teeth and then rushed towards us.

Hakurei placed a hand on White Star's hilt, but I urged Zetsuei in front of her, blocking Gisen's attack with Black Star. The weight behind his sword was incredible. I barely managed to withstand and parry it.

"Hakurei, stay back!" I yelled. "The difference between his strength and yours is too great. Even if White Star can handle it, your arms will break trying to block his strikes! Support me with your arrows!"

Hakurei bit her lip before she replied, "Got it!" Then she retreated a few paces.

An old cavalryman who seemed like Gisen's lieutenant waved his swagger stick and his unit clashed with ours. Now, there were fewer people who could use long-ranged attacks to help contain Gisen here.

"I heard that you roughed up Jo Hiyou back in Seitou!" I yelled. "Let me pay back the favor!"

I charged at him and when I galloped past his horse, we exchanged several slashes. *Every time my sword meets his, the vibrations through the blade cause my hand to go numb! Is this guy even human?!*

Gisen knocked away an arrow from Hakurei with ease and narrowed his eyes. "That should be my line. I shall avenge the death of my master, Gray Wolf Seul Bato."

“In your dreams!”

The distance between us closed rapidly, but right before we met, a voice rang out over the battlefield. It was so loud that it sounded more akin to the roar of a monster, dominating this field of death and destruction.

“ADAI DADA, I’VE COME FOR YOU!”

Father—no, Chou Tairan, Green Dragon Crescent Blade in hand, had finally cut through the last enemy line and charged into the encampment alone. Gisen tried to turn his horse around again, but Hakurei stopped him with a barrage of arrows.

“You’re not leaving this place!” she snapped.

“Hey, don’t forget about me!” I swung my sword down on Gisen, who was finally showing some sign of panic, and forced him to back away.

Despite the situation the Gen encampment was in, someone was still seated on the throne. They were so slim that one could mistake them for a young girl.

“PREPARE YOURSELF!” Father’s glaive streaked towards Adai’s thin neck, prepared to take his head. But... “Ngh?!”

A sudden gust of wind blew through, knocking down the nearby Gen flag. While Father’s sideways slash cut through the fabric, it seemed to stop his blade from reaching Adai or the throne. He twirled the Green Dragon Crescent Blade and urged his horse forward to prepare for a second attack. I heard a wordless cry of surprise, followed by a deafening screech of metal.

Father had swung down his glaive with all of his might—and yet, someone had jumped in and stopped him. It was a female officer with long purple hair, riding atop a white horse. She’d leaped into the main encampment and slid herself between father and Adai, using a long spear to parry father’s attack. One after the other, more and more enemy soldiers poured in to surround Adai.

*Reinforcements? Now?!*

The mysterious female officer moved her left hand and in the next second—

“Gah!”

“General Chou!”

Droplets of blood flew through the air and the strength seemed to leave father's body. The injured Chou soldiers, expressions frantic, rushed into the encampment, gathered up father, and then escaped. In the smiling female officer's hand was a small metal cylinder, a dull light emanating from its frame.

My eyes widened. "A fire lance?! Wait, no, that's—!"

"Sekiei!" Hakurei called out the same moment a cold shiver ran down the back of my neck.

Gisen had raised his great sword high above his head with both hands, standing firm despite the arrows the Chou soldiers were shooting at him, and then swung it down at me, so fast that the blade whipped up a gust of wind as it traveled through the air.

"Hakurei!"

Though Hakurei tried to parry the attack with White Star, the force of it pushed her back and she toppled off her horse. My mind went blank at the sight of her body on the ground. I threw a dagger at Gisen and jumped off my horse, holding my sword in a ready stance, Hakurei's prone form at my back.

"You idiot!" I yelled. "What are you doing?!"

It took her a moment to reply and when she did, it was in a thin, weak voice. "See? I told you that I'd protect you."

"Everyone! Defend the young master and Lady Hakurei!" The Chou soldiers stopped their battles with the enemy riders and surrounded us. Gisen narrowed his eyes but didn't say anything. Instead, he retreated for the main encampment where countless Gen cavalymen were starting to gather.

*This was one of our best chances to end the war and we blew it!* Right when I lent Hakurei my shoulder and helped her up, the riders who had helped father escape entered the small circle of Chou soldiers.

"Father!" Hakurei and I exclaimed. We rushed over to him, ignoring the pain in our bodies, and gasped when we saw the damage.

When the soldiers helped father off his horse, we could see that his armor was stained with blood. The wound in his right shoulder was the most serious of

his injuries.

“Watch yourselves,” he gritted out. “That woman is likely a new Wolf. Don’t look at me like that, Sekiei, Hakurei. This is nothing more than a scratch. Again...we must try again!”

“It’s too reckless to launch another attack with those injuries!” I protested.

“Bring us some fresh bandages! Hurry!” Hakurei yelled.

Chou Tairan slammed the butt of the Green Dragon Crescent Blade into the ground and used it to push himself to his feet. His long beard was drenched with blood. The sorrow in his eyes was so painful that I could hardly bear to look into them.

“We’re so close...*so close*...to killing Adai! If we don’t defeat him here, then Keiyou...then Ei...! Come on, follow me!”

“Father!” Hakurei and I exclaimed, supporting his body from opposite sides.

We had no idea what to do. Morale was high. They’d be willing to try another charge if ordered to do so. *But if we do that, father might—!*

A lament rose from the enemy encampment, the words spoken in a poetic cadence. “Ahh, Chou Tairan! Chou Tairan! Take pride in yourself, for you truly are the greatest general in the Ei Empire! If only the Phoenix Wing and the Tiger Fang, who died at Ranyou, were at your side...if only you had ten thousand more soldiers in your army...if only that flag hadn’t fallen in front of me, and if only the White Wolf hadn’t made it back in time! You would have surely cut through my thin neck and taken victory for your country. However, it seems that even the heavens are on my side!”

*Is that the White Wraith himself?* Hakurei held my left hand in a death grip.

“As I predicted, you weren’t able to land the final blow on me. You are nowhere near the likes of Kou Eihou.”

We sucked in a sharp breath at how Adai’s tone changed into a firm declaration, so frigid that we shuddered as one. The strategist we faced off against at Ranyou had been skilled at utilizing Ouei’s strategies, but... I stared out at the enemy encampment, protected by dozens upon scores of Gen



soldiers.

The White Wraith Adai Dada, emperor of the Gen Empire, announced to Chou Tairan, “Goodbye and farewell, my rival and famed general of Ei. This place shall serve as a glorious—”

In that moment, from a gap between the enemy soldiers, I thought my eyes met those of that slender wraith with the long white hair. However, it only lasted for a moment, for the emperor was soon hidden again behind the Gen cavalymen. A strange silence passed between both armies before a horn sounded out from the Gen camp. The uniform rows of Gen cavalymen moved in unison, making their way back north.

“They’re retreating?” I breathed, unable to comprehend what was happening. “Why would they...?”

“Sekiei, we have more important matters to attend to right now,” Hakurei reminded me.

Before I could say anything in reply to her, father shoved us aside. The cloth wrapped around his right shoulder was stained bright crimson. “What are you all doing?!” he demanded. “This is our best chance to kill the White Wraith! No, this is our *only* chance! Everyone, lend me your aid! We must save our homeland, our Ei, and— Ugh!”

“Father!”

“General Chou!”

Chou Tairan collapsed and we all rushed over to hold him up, calling his name. When I saw him lying there, eyes closed and breath coming in harsh pants, I made a snap decision.

I turned to the soldiers and ordered, “We’re retreating too!”

“The war isn’t over yet. Take all of the wounded with you!” Hakurei added.

“Yes, Lord Chou Sekiei! Lady Hakurei!” the soldiers replied.

## Chapter Four

“Hmm, maybe we should add more food? I hear that Lord Sekiei and the other people in Keiyou are being besieged by Seitou while General Chou is gone, and I’d hate to hear Miss Hakurei or Ruri complain about the lack of provisions... All right, I’ve made up my mind! Shun’en, can you deliver these documents for me?”

The location was Rinkei, the capital of the Ei Empire, in one of the rooms of the Ou manor. Lady Meirin was sitting in an elaborate chair, pondering over what she wanted to place in the freights heading for Keiyou. She passed some papers over to a young girl with short black hair, who hailed from a foreign country.

Shun’en, who seemed quite mature for her age, accepted the papers with both hands. I—Shizuka, Lady Meirin’s attendant—had chosen a pale green outfit for Shun’en when she arrived here and she was starting to grow accustomed to the unfamiliar fabrics.

“Of course, Lady Meirin,” Shun’en said. “Would you like me to prepare you a cup of tea as well?”

“Yes, pleeease!” Lady Meirin had placed her brush on the inkstone and was already looking over a new document. But she raised her hand in a cheery gesture, the movement causing her chestnut brown hair, tied up in pigtails, to bounce. They weren’t the only things to bounce; her large breasts moved in the most eye-catching manner.

*Drat... Shun’en and I bit our lips discreetly. Lady Meirin never grows any taller, yet how come only a specific part of her body keeps getting larger? According to Miss Ruri, this could be the result of some ill-mannered curse. I’m so jealous!*

Ignorant of our envy, Lady Meirin looked over at the boy with the short black hair in the corner of the room and said in a casual tone, as if speaking with a friend, “Kuen, I’m starving! I’ll give you money, so go buy me some buns from that stall you showed me the other day! ☆ You know, the one manned by that

young boy. Make sure you go before it rains!”

Shun'en's twin younger brother jumped in surprise at the sudden order. Even the dagger hanging from his belt shook. He rolled back the long pale blue sleeves of his shirt and pointed at himself before asking in a nervous tone, “U-Um, you want me to go alone?”

Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei had been the ones to entrust this pair of siblings to us. They claimed themselves to be thirteen years old. We'd already shown them around the more major locations in Rinkei, but...

Lady Meirin nodded with a bright smile. “Of course I do! Don't worry! The capital isn't on Keiyou's level, but it's really safe!”

“Er, no, that's not...” Kuen stopped talking, looking like he didn't know what to do. He even shot us a pleading look, as if begging for help. We might have shown them around, but Rinkei was a large city on par with Enkei, the capital of the Gen Empire. He must be anxious about the prospect of going on an errand all by himself.

“Lady Meirin,” I started before she made a loud noise.

“Ohhh! I! See! Are you reluctant to go because you don't want to be separated from your darling older sister Shun'en? Hee hee, you're soooo adorable! ♪” Lady Meirin figured out the issue before I needed to say anything. She leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table and kicked her feet. There was a wide grin on her face as she looked at Kuen.

His cheeks flushed red and his mouth worked for a moment before he yelled, “I-I can handle this myself!” He raced out of the room like the very hounds of hell were upon his heels, so fast that the wind he produced from his sprint caused one of the coals in the furnace to tip over with a small crackling noise.

Shun'en placed a hand on her forehead and looked up at the ceiling.

“Ahh, wait, Kuen! You forgot the money!” Lady Meirin exclaimed, jumping to her feet with a frantic expression.

I took out Lady Meirin's wallet from the desk drawer and tossed it over to Shun'en, who received it with both hands.

She offered us a polite bow and said, “I apologize on behalf of my younger brother! Um, I’m...a little worried about him, so I was wondering if I could go with him.”

Lady Meirin and I exchanged warm looks. Shun’en was exactly as Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei had described her: a kind soul.

“Permission granted! ♪” Lady Meirin chirped.

“Make sure you bring an umbrella, just in case,” I urged.

“Thank you so much!” As soon as we gave our answers, Shun’en raced out of the room. We could hear her yells of “Kuen, you forgot the money!” echoing from the hallway. In comparison to her more reserved manner around us, she sounded like a normal youth when speaking with her brother. It was clear they were close.

I poured some tea from a kettle into Lady Meirin’s cup and handed it to her. “If I may, you went a little overboard when teasing Kuen.”

“Did I?” The young prodigy tilted her head to the side, resting a finger against her face. She was very cute like this, but the look in her eyes was that of a mischievous youngster. For some reason, seeing her like that sparked the urge to be a little mean to her, so I poked her soft and squishy cheek. “W-Wait a second, Shizuka! Stop thaaat! I mean, how can you blame me? They’re still so formal! I just want them to get used to life here. Don’t you?”

I took a comb out from my pocket and started to run it through her somewhat messy brown hair. “They’re no longer so shy around me. When we stand guard together at night, we often chat, just the three of us.”

“Wha—?! N-No way... Did you betray me?! *Me*?! Shizuka!” Lady Meirin’s eyes were wide as she punched and kicked the air. She kept moving her head, which made it difficult for me to tidy up her hair.

“Don’t move!” I scolded. “They told me that since you returned to Rinkei, you work from the early hours of the morning all the way until midnight. According to the twins, you inspire within them the same sense of fear and respect that Lord Sekiei does when he’s on the battlefield.”

“Ack... I-I can’t even argue against that because it’s true... But I can’t stop

working! Also, it makes me a little happy to hear that I have the same reputation as Lord Sekiei!” Lady Meirin replied, holding still for me.

That was when the room was suddenly plunged into darkness. It seemed that the clouds had blocked out the sun. It was still early in the day, but I should light some candles. As I was doing so, I heard Lady Meirin ask in a scared voice, “Hey, Shizuka, do you, um, have any news on the conflict in Keiyou?”

I returned to her side and got down on one knee in front of her, holding her small hands in mine. They were cold to the touch. “Unfortunately, the latest information we received is that a portion of the Chou army left Keiyou in order to attack the Gen unit that crossed the river. We’ve heard nothing else since then.”

“I see,” Lady Meirin said, looking down and slumping her shoulders. In her eyes, I could see fury and confusion, as well as a strong anxiety and impatience. “I don’t know anything about military strategy and I could never win a game of chess against Ruri, but... It’s strange that people who spend all day debating in the capital are the ones who can tell the commander in chief fighting on the front line, ‘You, go and defeat a separate unit from the main army!’ I thought that the soldiers in the city would go to Keiyou, but they’re still here. Is it really that we’re not sending them any reinforcements?”

“Lady Meirin.” I reached up to cup her cheeks and looked into her eyes. *What kind of attendant would I be if I couldn’t comfort my master in times like this?*

“Everything will be all right! Both Lady Hakurei and Lady Ruri possess extraordinary talent. Even if Seitou’s army has more soldiers than Keiyou’s, Keiyou’s defenses are impenetrable. I’m sure they can hold strong.”

“Shizuka...” Tears were gathering in Lady Meirin’s eyes, looking like they were about to roll down her face at any second.

I wiped them away with a handkerchief and continued with absolute certainty, “And most important of all, even if Lord Chou Tairan the National Shield has to leave Keiyou due to the capital’s orders, Keiyou still has Lord Sekiei. Before I ended up in Rinkei, I spent many long years wandering this capital and in all of that time, I can count on one hand the people with his kind of combat prowess.”

Lord Sekiei had been raised by the Chou family. Not only was he Lady Meirin's beloved, but we owed him a great debt after he saved us from pirates. He'd been the one to kill the Crimson Wolf—one of the greatest generals Gen had. He'd been the one who brought his soldiers back alive from that nightmarish Seitou invasion, which had ended in a horrible failure. It had been while retreating enemy territory, faced with perilous odds, that he even managed to kill the Gray Wolf. Chou Sekiei was the young hero of Ei. No matter who his opponent was, he could—

“Ahem!” Lady Meirin interrupted my thoughts with a sudden, strange cough. Her worries from earlier were no longer on her face and she leaned back, puffing out her chest. Those prominent breasts, which were far too large for her petite frame, bounced with the action. “Of course Lord Sekiei is amazing! He's my husband, after all, and he was even able to draw the Heavenly Swords from their scabbards!”

The names of the weapons, according to Lord Sekiei, were Black Star and White Star. Together, they were known as the Heavenly Swords. No one had been able to unsheathe them these past thousand years, and yet Lord Sekiei had no trouble wielding those legendary weapons. It was as if he were Kou Eihou, the hero of yore.

I thought back to the sword dance that Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei displayed for us back in Keiyou. “Lady Hakurei's capable of drawing one of the swords from its scabbard as well. The blade was most beautiful.”

“Agh!” Lady Meirin pressed a hand against her voluptuous chest, acting like she'd been struck by lightning. Then, she flopped forward onto my lap and gritted out, as if cursing me, “Grr... Shizuka, you're so mean... Aren't you on *my* side?”

“I, Shizuka, support you no matter what, Lady Meirin. But...”

“What is it?” Lady Meirin asked. She pushed herself up with an inquisitive look.

I thought back to my homeland, which no longer existed on any map, and gave her a strained smile. “Lord Sekiei is an amazing person. In my homeland, as well as in this country and the surrounding ones, it's said that heroes tend to

have multiple lovers. I can't imagine that Lady Hakurei would rescind her claim on him. Not only that, but Lord Sekiei tends to honor the wishes of those he likes."

"You're sooo mean!" Lady Meirin once again buried her face in my lap. My mistress was a smart girl. She should have been able to figure out something like this. But I should chalk it up to the complicated feelings of a girl's desire to monopolize her loved one's attention.

I giggled and placed a hand on my mistress's small head. "I was joking."

"You're *really* mean today!"

We shared a short laugh. *Ahh, such happiness! I'm able to smile and laugh in a land so far away from my homeland. If I told this to the younger version of myself, who'd been the sole survivor of the castle our enemies took, how would she react?*

As I indulged in a bout of homesickness, Lady Meirin stood up and said, "Father was worried about that too, you know? 'Lord Sekiei may be a great man, but you might end up leaving the Ou family if you become too attached to him. And if you leave, that'll mark the end of the Ou family.' Mother was laughing about it though. To tell you the truth, I don't really mind becoming Chou Meirin so long as I can remain at Lord Sekiei's side!"

"I can understand that feeling." But even as I nodded, I felt a cold premonition, warning me against becoming any closer to the Chou family under current circumstances.

Thanks to the great failure of the Seitou invasion, the reputation of the Chou family and its army was growing. They were the ones facing off against the Gen Empire, who ruled the lands north of the river, after all. "If Chou Tairan the National Shield falls, then so will Ei" had become the mindset of those within Rinkei. Yet, despite these circumstances, the patriarch of the Ou family discouraged, albeit in a roundabout way, his daughter from further associating with the Chou family.

Lord Ou Jin didn't believe that the grand chancellor You Bunshou and the National Shield Chou Tairan would win. I could only think of one reason: it was due to the hideous political struggles taking place in a deteriorating country. I

thought back to the tragedy that befell my homeland and gripped the hilt of my dagger. The image of the warriors who died protecting me, sliced in half—armor and all—by the fearsome techniques used by the enemy assassins, flashed through my mind.

“Even in a different country, what happens within the walls of the losing side doesn’t change,” I murmured.

“Hmm? Shizuka, did you say something?” Lady Meirin asked, leaning down to peer into my face.

I shook my head, banishing such ominous thoughts, and replied, “No, nothing. Ah, look, it’s starting to rain.” The ground outside the round window was dark from the heavy drops. *Did Shun’en and Kuen bring an umbrella?*

Lady Meirin made a dissatisfied noise. “We might not be able to send out our ships if the rain doesn’t let up.”

I was in the middle of observing her unhappy expression when a loud commotion sounded from outside the manor.

“Move! Get out of the way or I’ll run you over!” There was such fury in the voice that it sounded like they were ready to kill someone. Accompanying the yell was the sound of a horse galloping through the rain.

*It’s forbidden to ride horses through Rinkei, so why...?*

Lady Meirin, who’d donned an extra layer from the lower temperature, linked her arm with mine and asked, “What happened?”

“I can investigate the matter later if you wish, Lady Meirin.”

“Hee hee, I love you, Shizuka!”

“I love you as well.”

My mistress threw herself against my chest so I gave her a gentle embrace, all while my mind was still racing. *Something big must have happened, so big that someone rode a horse into the capital.* In the best case scenario, they might be here to report news of the Chou army defeating the Gen soldiers that crossed the river or that they defeated the Seitou soldiers attacking Keiyō. But what about in the worst-case scenario?



“There can only be one answer,” I muttered to myself as I soaked up the warmth offered by my mistress’s small body. In the worst-case scenario, the rider was here to inform of Gen’s main army attacking Keiyou. From outside, I could hear the adults shouting on the main streets, urging children playing outside to return home.

“The White Wraith and the Four Wolves are coming!”

“Run!”

“Hurry home!”

I closed my eyes for a moment before I smiled down at my lovely Lady Meirin. “It’s gotten quite chilly, hasn’t it? I’ll prepare some nice, warm tea. We may be in the spring months now, but the winter hasn’t passed us yet.”

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“Sir, I’ve checked the surroundings. We’re alone.”

“Mm. Good work,” I—the grand chancellor of the Ei Empire, You Bunshou—said, upon hearing my old servant’s report. I looked around the court, which was located in a building separate from the imperial palace; it was such a vast space that it gave off a frigid impression. On both my left and right were seats elevated upon platforms. In the middle of the space was the Dragon Jade, a massive obsidian boulder. The emperor four generations ago, who’d reached this land after leaving the great river, had been the one to discover the stone and it had remained here ever since. Even back then this place had been used to announce sentences for criminals and accused, which might be why security guards tended to avoid this place at night, and why very few people knew the existence of the secret underground prison located in the depths of the court.

I brushed my fingers through my beard, which had long turned white as snow. My servant remained silent, hand on his sword; he never let his guard down. Without looking at him, I said, “It’s about time we release Jo Hiyou from his cell and return him home to Nanyou. No one has gone to torture him? You’ve negotiated for his treatment, yes?”

“Yes, I have. I’ve even received documentation stamped with the lieutenant chancellor’s personal seal guaranteeing Jo Hiyou’s safety. There should be no

issue.”

“I see...” The very thought of that man—Rin Chuudou—caused a sense of disgust to well up within me. He’d been responsible for the deaths of so many soldiers and officers in the Seitou invasion, yet he returned safe and sound. In the direct aftermath of the invasion he had shown regret and repented for his actions. Now, however, he was back to his normal, pompous self.

The fact that he and Ou Hokujaku—the former marshal of the Imperial Guard—still possessed unbelievable political power despite their fatal mistakes was unbelievable. Their corruption and impotence were like cancer spreading through the Ei Empire. His Imperial Majesty’s most favored concubine hailed from the Rin family and she poisoned his judgment with her words. I would need to remove these three from power if the Ei Empire wanted to see any positive change...but that could wait until later.

The sounds of several footsteps broke through the silence of the night, followed by a voice emanating from the shadows made by the candles illuminating the hall. “I apologize if I kept you waiting.”

My servant and I tensed. The man who appeared had a lithe build, with a cloak thrown over his slender shoulders. I recognized him as the lieutenant chancellor Rin Chuudou’s right-hand man. *Even in a secure place like this, he’s still wearing that bizarre fox mask?* A tall man stood behind him in the shadows; we had agreed to a single guard each so I supposed he was the masked man’s. The hood over the guard’s head made his face impossible to make out.

For a tense moment, only the sound of oil burning in a nearby lamp broke the silence. I removed my hand from my beard and narrowed my eyes. “I never expected *you* to be the one to reach out first, and through that foolish grandson of mine, of all people. Even more stunning is the fact that you chose the Dragon Jade as our meeting spot. Is this your way of saying that you intend on telling nothing but the truth? Now that I think about it, this is the first time we’ve spoken to each other like this. If I recall, your name is...”

“It’s Denso, Grand Chancellor.” After introducing himself, he slowly removed his mask and I sucked in a sharp breath at what I saw. A horrible burn scar covered his left cheek. No wonder he always hid it away. After masking himself

again, he gave me a light bow. “As you saw for yourself, my face is on the hideous side. Though I understand that it goes against proper etiquette, I hope you will permit me to leave the mask on.”

I gestured my approval and then crossed my arms. A soft breeze blew through the court, causing the flames to flicker. “Denso, we are both very busy men. Though the people of Rinkei hold a deep fear and respect for this place, that does not guarantee our privacy. Let’s discuss the matter you wish to raise with me. The situation with Gen is far more serious than the people of the capital believe it is, thanks to that lieutenant chancellor you work for. He staunchly opposes sending any reinforcements to Keiyou or stationing guards along the lower reaches.”

“Indeed. Then, allow me to dive right into business.” Denso ignored my barbed words and looked down at his feet. “Milord, I regret to inform you that the imperial court will *not* accept your suggestion to send reinforcements to Keiyou tomorrow. Not only that, but they will not send any soldiers to the river!”

The wind picked up, the strong gust echoing through the vast space and causing a most fearsome sound. Unable to comprehend Denso’s statement, I asked in a cold voice, “What do you mean? Are you saying that you’ve already sabotaged my proposal to the emperor?”

The lieutenant chancellor Rin Chuudou had turned down my suggestions to send reinforcements to the front line several times now. On occasion, he even used his adopted daughter, the emperor’s favorite concubine, in order to sway His Imperial Majesty to his position. As for his motivation, it all had to do with his jealousy towards me and his strong lust for power. I’d been under the impression that the masked man before me had been working behind the scenes in order to help the lieutenant chancellor fulfill his dreams.

Denso shook his head vehemently. “It seems that you’ve misunderstood me, so allow me to take this opportunity to clear the air. I agree with you; we must send reinforcements to aid the Chou army against the enemy invaders. Keiyou is the cornerstone of the Ei Empire! In my opinion, Keiyou’s loss would be tantamount to *Ei*’s loss. I believed that the Seitou invasion was a precautionary measure to lessen Keiyou’s burden.”

Even through the mask, I could sense his burning passion. However, I found it hard to believe him. There were whispers among those in the imperial court that *Denso* was the reason Rin Chuudou didn't act as the commander in chief during the final battle at Ranyou and instead chose to return to Rinkei with a portion of his troops. That *Denso* had been the one to put the idea in the lieutenant chancellor's head.

Ignorant of my suspicion, Denso slumped his thin shoulders and continued, "However the lieutenant chancellor doesn't understand my way of thinking and sadly, he turned down my suggestions to send reinforcements. It's true that before the Seitou invasion, the lieutenant chancellor placed absolute trust in me. However, now..."

"So you'll have that concubine convince the emperor directly?"

Denso didn't reply with his words. His lips twisted before he gave a small nod. The sight of his agreement sent a small shiver down my spine. The idea of a consort clan using a young and beautiful maiden to manipulate the emperor wasn't a new one. Such a story was quite common in the annals of history and I'd warned His Imperial Majesty against such machinations. *To think that I'd have to experience such a problem myself, and at my old age too!*

After the Seitou invasion had ended in a devastating failure, the emperor stopped showing up to political meetings. He'd heard of the satirical ditty the Rinkei citizens came up with—"Chou Tairan's enemy lies neither north nor west. They're to the south, in Rinkei, lying in bed with a woman"—from somewhere and was quite discouraged by it. But I hadn't thought he was *this* fragile.

I placed a hand against my forehead and grumbled, "What could he be planning? What in the world is more important than sending soldiers to Chou Tairan at this critical point in the war? Even if he monopolizes the political situation in Ei, it won't be of much use if Ei no longer exi— Wait, don't tell me..."

A single answer rose to the forefront of my old mind. Rin Chuudou didn't plan on sending any reinforcements, but he wanted to avoid the destruction of the Ei Empire. In that case...

From behind the fox mask, I could see Denso's eyes glitter. "The topic Rin Chuudou wishes to breach in tomorrow's court meeting is a peace treaty with Gen. And that happens to be what the emperor wishes for as well."

My breath caught in my throat and my heart started pounding so fast that I clutched at my chest in an attempt to calm it. No longer able to stand, I fell to my knee. My servant called out to me and rushed over, supporting my shoulder and handing me a bottle of water and a pill. I forced both the medicine and water down my throat, and then panted for a moment to catch my breath.

Once I recovered enough to wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, I argued, "Surely, such a one-sided treaty could never come to pass. Two sides have to be in conflict for a war—"

"Please, take a look at this," Denso interrupted before I could finish. "I copied this from Rin Chuudou's documents."

He approached and handed me a piece of paper. Words failed me as I read what was on it. Though it was titled as a peace settlement, it was nothing more than an agreement of surrender. The conditions he wanted to propose were:

- Cession of Koshuu (including Keiyou) to Gen.
- Cession of the northwestern territories (including Angan) to Seitou.
- Upon the formal signing of this document, Gen and Ei shall become brotherly countries, with Gen as the elder and Ei as the younger.
- Ei shall send silver, horses, and silks to Enkei every year; the amount of each resource shall be determined at a later date.
- As the Chou, Jo, and U families have a high chance of rebelling against this agreement, Ei shall send Enkei hostages from these families.
- So long as Gen agrees to the above terms, Ei will discard its dreams of unification.

With my servant's help, I pushed myself to my feet and ran a furious hand through my hair. Yes, the White Wraith Adai Dada, emperor of Gen, would surely sign an agreement of peace if these were the conditions Ei offered. In fact, I was willing to bet that Rin Chuudou wasn't even the one who came up with this. *Gen* had, and he simply accepted whatever they wrote down. *But this is...this is far too...*

Rage boiled in my gut and my cheeks flushed with anger. “How does he plan on explaining this to the patriarchs of those three families, or to the people living in those regions? The U family to the west already distrusts the capital. After we arrested Jo Hiyou, there have been suspicious movements from the Jo family to the south! Even disregarding such internal strife, should Adai decide to invade us once again, we’d be done for!”

“I agree; it truly is a foolish idea. However, Ou Hokujaiku has already been chosen as the ambassador between the two empires. Milord, so long as the lieutenant chancellor is conspiring with the enemy, the only way to get His Imperial Majesty to change his mind is to use a more unethical approach—” Caught up in his impassioned speech, Denso started to approach me but my servant pushed him back.

“Please, leave us for tonight,” I said to the masked man. *The topic hasn’t even reached the imperial court and an ambassador has already been chosen? If I want to save my country, this is where I must use everything in my power, even if it costs me my life.* I closed my eyes and let out a long breath. “Denso, I’m afraid you have the wrong idea about me. I agree that this peace treaty is humiliating and can only lead to more conflict down the line. My name shall surely become synonymous with ‘traitor’ in future records, but I—” My eyes snapped open and I straightened my back. When I next spoke, it was no longer as You Bunshou, but rather, the grand chancellor of the Ei Empire. “I am a loyal subject of my emperor. If His Imperial Majesty wishes for peace, then I have no other option than to see that it comes to fruition.”

Denso took a small step back and his guard in the shadows tightened his jaw. It was clear that my answer shocked the lieutenant chancellor’s former advisor. “H-How could you say such a... Th-Then, you plan to trample upon the honor of the Three Great Generals—Chou Tairan, U Jouko, and Jo Shuuhou—and even destroy their families if they try to argue against this decision? All just to seek peace with Gen?!”

The faces of those three younger officers flashed through my mind. In the past, we used to drink together. We’d promised that we would work hand in hand to protect our homeland. *And look at where we are now. We’ve come a long way from those times, haven’t we?* Despite my promises to them, I was

now the chancellor of the Ei Empire. Even if harm were to come to their families, I had to protect my emperor and country.

“I have no other option,” I replied. “Now that things have come to this, I have to think about what to do after the poison of this ludicrous peace agreement sinks into the veins of the Ei Empire. It’s true that the three families protecting our northern, western, and southern borders have grown too powerful over the years. It just so happens that I planned on a large-scale reformation of the Imperial Guard—the only military force the capital has complete control over. The time to move is now.”

Denso tensed as if he’d been struck by a bolt of lightning. In the small gaps of his mask, I could see cold sweat on his brow and shock in his eyes. “A-Are you saying that you’ve always planned on reducing the power those three families hold? You Bunshou, you...!”

I looked away from the small man to gaze outside the window. Droplets of rain cut through the night, illuminated on occasion by flashes of lightning. *Even the sky is weeping.* “You would never understand what it’s like to be a chancellor in charge of steering the country in the right direction. The safety of our homeland and the honor of three major families—it’s clear as day which is to be prioritized! I’m sure that if we tell Tairan and the other two patriarchs what’s at stake, they can be persua—”

Before I could finish, an intense clap of thunder rang out, causing such ferocious tremors that even the stone floor was vibrating. I stumbled, off-balance, but before I could find my footing again—

“Agh!”

“You bastard! Ch-Chancellor!” I heard my servant cry.

Denso’s guard had stabbed his dagger through me. I somehow managed to avoid a fatal wound. My servant drew his sword and raised it to prepare for battle, but Denso closed the distance between them in a heartbeat and pierced my servant’s chest with a knife.

My servant coughed and managed to gasp, “Y-You tricked us!” before falling to the ground, dead.

I reached out and grabbed my assassin's shoulder. "Wh-Who are you?"

"I can't say I'm surprised you don't recognize the person you threw into prison and tortured, considering you spend all day twiddling your thumbs in the imperial court," they snarled, hatred in their gaze, as they withdrew the dagger from my body. They removed their hood and when I saw my assailant's true identity, my eyes widened.

"H-How can this be? Y-You're... But how did you receive such injuries?"

My assassin was young, with tanned skin and brown hair. I could see horrible scars—the remnants of torture—marring his face. He held up the dagger again and said, "I'm Hiyou, the only son of Jo Shuuhou, who died at Ranyou after *you* betrayed him! The days I spent in that underground prison were nightmarish indeed on my mind and body. So not only are you satisfied with taking the lives of my father and General U Jouko, but you also want to destroy our families and General Chou Tairan's? It's exactly as Denso said! You bastard! How dare you?! Who gave you the right?!"

*Goddammit, I was playing right into his hands! To think that he would turn the Jo family's son against me!* Out loud, I tried, "W-Wait! This is a misundersta—Urk!" He stabbed me with the dagger again, forcing me to fall silent. The burning agony was unbearable.

"Go to hell and apologize to those who died at Seitou and Keiyou!"

With the last of my strength, I reached out and brushed my fingers against Hiyou's cheek, just like I used to do when he was a baby. "Y-You must... Ei..."

I didn't get to finish my final request. He backed away, removing the dagger from me with a loud, painful squelch. A rush of blood gushed from the wound and I fell to the cold ground, limp as a doll with its strings cut. Crimson poured out around me in a pool. My vision blurred and darkened. Yet Hiyou's eyes, dark with hatred and contempt, remained clear to me, as were the tremors in the ground from his footsteps.





“Hiyou, you must escape from Rinkei tonight. Return to Nanyou and protect the Jo family!” Denso said. “I’ll handle everything from here. Don’t worry; I won’t bring you any trouble.”

“Thank you for all of your help! For as long as I live, I will never forget the debt I owe you. Farewell!” With those parting words, Hiyou’s footsteps faded into the distance.

*Ahh, how could this have happened? How in the world will I be able to face Shuuhou in the afterlife?* I could no longer lift even a single finger. To think that I would fall for a trap laid by a rat such as Denso—his name was truly a good fit for him. My fading thoughts were interrupted by the approach of several people.

“Looks like you’ve completed the job. Your acting was phenomenal,” a young and unfamiliar voice sounded out.

*A girl? In a place like this?*

There was a rustling sound as Denso presumably knelt before her in a gesture of respect. “I apologize for the rather embarrassing display. It might have been to guarantee the erasure of the grand chancellor and to cause unrest in southern Ei with a fake treaty, but I fear I applied far too much pressure upon Jo Hiyou.”

*Not only did he plot to kill me, but he’s also planning to incite the Jo family to rebel? That’s—* But my thoughts were interrupted by a peal of childish laughter. Though I was more dead than alive at this point, the sound of it caused a deep and unsettling fear to well up within me.

“He’s a foolish and pathetic child who can’t even tell the difference between those who want to help him and those who want to guide him to self-destruction,” the young girl chuckled. “The Phoenix Wing must be rolling in his grave. I suppose I can’t be *too* harsh on him, though. Jo Hiyou’s fate was sealed when *he* set his eyes on him, and when the Blackblade was the one to give pursuit during his retreat in Seitou.” The girl started to leave, her footsteps fading, but not before she gave one final command. “Report to the White Wraith as soon as possible. Tell him that, as planned, Ei has been torn in half.”

*Ah, so that's how it is. I understand now. So this was all within the White Wraith's calculations. Ahh, I made a mistake—a fatal error in judgment, indeed. I apologize, Shuuhou and Jouko. I'm so sorry, Tairan! The light was fading fast. I felt like I was falling through an unfathomable abyss.*

*"I don't think I can ever see eye to eye with someone who can enjoy a false prosperity." The memory of that delightful conversation I once had in Rinkei's underground prison sounded through my head. Ha ha, you were right... Our peace was nothing more than an illusion. Chou Sekiei! Oh, Chou Sekiei, please, I beg you, please protect this country! Please help Ei...*

With those final thoughts, my consciousness—the consciousness of You Bunshou—faded away into darkness.

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"My apologies, could you repeat that? Just one more time? It's written here on this letter, but it would be terrible if there was some mistake in communications. What did you say the grand chancellor wants me to do?"

The location was Keiyou, in one of the rooms in the Chou manor. Father's voice was frosty, the edge of his words so sharp that Hakurei and I—his family—felt cold sweat break over our brows. Ruri and Oto both had nerves of steel, but I didn't miss the way they shuddered. The young Imperial Guard messenger from Rinkei paled in the face of father's clear displeasure. The deep injury in father's shoulder prevented him from moving his arm, but it did nothing to quell this great general's intimidating aura.

"H-His Imperial Majesty has chosen to n-negotiate peace with Gen!" the young messenger squeaked. "So he ordered the Chou army to avoid further conflict with them. Also, he requested that Chou Tairan make his way to the imperial palace as soon as possible."

Hakurei and I glanced at each other. Ruri fiddled with a chess piece and Oto, who was wearing the uniform of the female attendants, remained silent. It'd been five days since our fierce battle against Gen in the northern regions of Keiyou. The Gen army had retreated to Hakuhou Castle while the Seitou army returned to what was formerly known as Hakugin Castle. Since then, we'd seen neither hide nor hair of them; the quiet was unsettling. We'd dealt them a

severe blow so I thought they were busy patching up their soldiers and replenishing their resources—but it seemed that things weren't as simple as I'd imagined them.

Father brushed a hand through his beard, which had more white hairs than ever. "Thank you for delivering the message. Return to Rinkei ahead of me and tell His Imperial Majesty that his wish is my command."

"Y-Yessir! Um, if you'll excuse me!" With those parting words, the young messenger fled from the room.

Father turned his back to us, his eyes focused on the sights outside the window. The tension in the room was palpable. *If I had known the meeting would take such a turn, I would've forced Teiha to sit in as well.*

Hakurei slammed her hands on the table and started to yell, "Father! You can't seriously be considering—"

"Hakurei," I interrupted, grabbing her shoulder with a shake of my head.

Chou Tairan might have been a heroic general—perhaps one of the best generals in Ei's history—but he was still a mortal man. It was clear that the emperor's orders came as a shock to him. Hakurei didn't say anything, but she could pick up on that unspoken reminder. She twisted her beautiful face in a grimace, then moved to stand behind me, pressing her forehead against my back.

I sat down in a chair and looked over at our strategist, who was spinning her blue hat on her finger. "Ruri, what do you make of all this?"

She thought for a moment before standing up and pacing around the room. The black cat Yui trotted along behind her. "It's strange. I hear that the grand chancellor of the Ei Empire, You Bunshou, is a man of such high integrity that even foreign nations know of his reputation. Unlike some officials, he's also willing to leave the capital and discuss political matters in person with the National Shield."

She paused and picked up Yui, cradling it in her arms and stroking its fur. There was an absent quality to her voice, as if she were speaking her thoughts out loud. "Let's say that the Rinkei officials were unanimous in their decision to

negotiate peace. Now that Jo Shuuhou the Phoenix Wing and U Jouko the Tiger Fang are dead, the only general protecting this country at the front lines is the National Shield. Yet, they would order him to avoid battle and make for the capital without discussing anything with him first? Not only that, but the messenger they sent to deliver these orders was a junior officer of the Imperial Guard rather than a commander? Yes, he brought documents stamped with the emperor's personal seal, but it's still *weird*. It's utterly bizarre! It's as if they're trying to pick a fight with the Chou army and incite a rebel— Oh, er, I'm sorry! I wasn't trying to imply anything!"

"Don't worry, we know," I said. Our strategist could be too smart for her own good sometimes. I took her hat from her and placed it onto her head. Then, I entrusted her to Oto. After exchanging a quick look with Hakurei, I said to father, who still hadn't turned to look at us, "Father, I agree with Ruri. I believe that Gen and Seitou have a hand in why the peace negotiations seem to have been decided upon in secret. I have a bad feeling about all of this."

"Father, perhaps we should ask auntie how things are in the capital before we decide on our next course of action," Hakurei added.

"Hmm," father said, lost in thought.

The fact that Hakurei didn't suggest asking Meirin was because alliances were starting to shift within the Ei Empire. Aside from these sudden talks of peace, it was clear from the soldier they chose as a messenger that Rinkei had little respect for the Chou family. Relying on the Ou family would only bring trouble to their door. *Well, even if we explained the situation to that little prodigy, I doubt she'd heed our warnings.*

Suddenly, father clapped his hands and yelled, "All right, I've made my decision!" He turned around, his face as severe as if he were going to battle. "I shall make my way to Rinkei at once to ask the grand chancellor his opinion about all this. It should only take me two days to arrive at the capital if I take one of the paddlewheelers. I'd like you all to remain in Keiyou and wait for my return!"

"Father!" Hakurei and I exclaimed, rushing towards him.

"General Chou," Oto whispered, clutching Ruri's shoulders from behind. The

little strategist was hugging Yui close to her chest, a blank expression on her face.

Father waved his hand in a wide arc. “Sekiei, Hakurei, calm yourselves. If the emperor believes that peace is the best option for the Ei Empire, then our only choice is to obey his decision. I believe that’s also why the grand chancellor did nothing to prevent this.”

We couldn’t say anything to that. Though I had no real sense of fealty for the emperor in Rinkei, father was one of his most loyal subjects. The thought of disobeying probably never crossed his mind.

Father covered his eyes with a hand and said, “My apologies, but...could you give me some privacy? Only for a little bit.”

As one we left the room, and then, in the next second, we heard a long and prolonged roar much like the cry of an injured beast. Following it came the sound of objects being destroyed. It was so loud that it felt like the entire manor was shaking. We sucked in sharp breaths and Yui jumped out of Ruri’s arms, its black fur puffed out in fright.

Even on the battlefield, father maintained a stiff upper lip. But now, he—the National Shield, Chou Tairan, of all people—was weeping. I looked around me. The servants and attendants gathered in the hallway, drawn here by the sound of father’s lament, cried in silence. The soldiers were on their hands and knees, letting out their frustration by punching the ground.

“Father!” Hakurei gasped. “Sekiei, father’s...!”

“Yeah,” I breathed before Hakurei threw herself against my chest, tears rolling down her cheeks.

For years, a northern campaign—a military operation to take back the lands north of the river—had been the Chou family’s greatest desire. If we made peace with Gen, we would forever lose the chance to undertake it. *We’ve fought on the front line for years and years, and this is what we get?!* As I wallowed in my own grief, Hakurei pushed herself away from me. She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve before turning around.

“I’m going to go wash my face,” she said.

Asaka was standing at the end of the hall. If anyone could take care of the kind Chou heiress, it was she. I watched them until Hakurei's silver hair disappeared around a corner, and then called Ruri's name.

"We don't have enough information, so I can't answer any of your questions," she warned me in an aloof tone. "It's almost unnatural how little we know." She created white flowers with her ascendant powers, letting Yui bat at them. Though she acted like she wouldn't be of much help, this little strategist was so smart that even against ten thousand Seitou soldiers, she had never allowed them to even *look* at Keiyou's walls.

I turned to face her fully. "Then what do you think the conditions of the peace treaty will be? Cession of Keiyou?"

"That, as well as the other territories north of the Grand Canal and a province somewhere in the direction of Angan. I'm guessing they'd also want an yearly tribute of riches like silver or silks. Of course, they'll probably ask for an astronomical amount. What else? Perhaps something that'll give them the legal right to harass us on a political level and..."

"And an order for Lord Sekiei to leave for Enkei," Oto said, jumping into the conversation.

I scratched my cheek and smiled wanly. "Er, Oto, I don't think that'll happen. It's not like I have any value as a hosta—"

"Did I miss anything?"

"Whoa!" I jumped when someone suddenly pressed a cold cloth against the back of my neck. When I turned around, Hakurei was standing there; she must have returned to us in a hurry. Even though I glared at her, she remained unfazed. *Wh-Why, you little...!*

"You all looked like you were having so much fun," she continued. "What were you talking about? Surely nothing like becoming a political hostage without first consulting me, right? If that's the case, then I would be *very* cross."

"What the hell, you heard every bit of our conversation. I'm not gonna be a hostage."

"Good, because you would invoke my wrath," she said. She leaned her

beautiful face close to mine and then wiped at my cheek with that cold cloth. I could hear our onlookers' quiet chuckles.

Ruri stopped making flowers and said, "Let's get back to the matter at hand. Oto and I aren't joking, by the way. It's not out of the question for Gen to want political hostages from the families of the Three Great Generals or other major Ei houses. I'm sure that it would only spread further discord in the empire though."

"Yeah, I figured," I said.

"They tossed Hiyou into jail, didn't they? I wonder if he's still in there," Hakurei murmured.

The thought of that young officer filled us with melancholy. I noticed that Oto was silent, looking deep in thought; she always maintained a cool head, though it was rare to see her like this.

"Is something the matter, Oto?" I asked. "Go get some rest if you don't feel well."

"Huh?" Oto looked up and blinked in surprise. "Ah! No, I'm, uh, feeling quite all right." She looked down in embarrassment, playing with a lock of her black hair.

I could feel Hakurei staring at me with narrowed eyes, but I ignored her. It wasn't as if I was doing anything wrong!

Ruri placed a hand on her hip. She must have been worried about Oto in her own way, because she affected an exaggerated angry tone to bully me with. "Excuuuse me. I know my attendant is cute and all, but could you *not* hit on her in broad daylight? I'll be the one who has to deal with Hakurei's pouts and complaints, you kn— Mrgh!"

"M-Miss Ruri!" Hakurei exclaimed, slapping her hand over Ruri's mouth. Then, she turned to point at me. "Sh-She's making things up! I'm fine! Sekiei, don't you *dare* get the wrong idea!"

There was such a fierce look in her eye that I could only say, "Uh, okay," in response.



Oto giggled; the soft expression made her look as young and carefree as she should be at her age. Then, she bowed her head. “Perhaps I *am* feeling a little under the weather. I shall go rest in my room for a little bit. Lord Sekiei, thank you for your consideration.”

“No problem! Rest well.”

“Yessir.” She turned and made her way down the hall, her steps light against the floor, but she didn’t get very far before a group of female soldiers caught up to her for a conversation. Their light armor was covered in scratches, indicating their years of experience.

“Well, she *was* once with the U army,” Hakurei said in a soft voice.

“Yep, she sure was,” I agreed.

“Do you think she’ll return to the west?” Ruri asked.

Since a messenger came to visit the Chou family, it stood to reason that the Jo and U families would have received similar orders as well. Oto used to work for the U family, so she was probably worried about how they were holding up. *Well, Hakurei and I don’t mind that.*

That was when I noticed Ruri and Hakurei staring at me, a disgruntled look in their eyes.

“Wh-What?!” I stammered. “Why are you two looking at me like that?!” I placed a hand on Ruri’s head and continued, “If you’re sad at the prospect of Oto leaving us, just say so. This is why we keep babying you, Master Strategist.”

Hakurei hugged Ruri from behind and said, “I feel the same way as you, Miss Ruri. Would you like to sleep with me tonight?”

Ruri’s face flushed crimson and she started struggling to escape Hakurei’s hold. “St-Stop messing with my hat and stop rubbing your cheek against mine! Do you *want* me to get mad?! I’m serious, you know?!”

“Sure, sure,” Hakurei and I said as we continued to mess with her.

“Grr! Y-You two are so annoying to deal with!”

Yui was the only one to answer Ruri’s wail, though all the cat could do was make an exasperated meow.

The next day, father set off for Keiyou alone. All the way until the final minute, he refused to let anyone accompany him and he seemed much more stubborn about things than usual. A week after that, terrible news reached us from Rinkei. Miss Shizuka, Meirin's personal attendant, delivered it in person.

"Chou Tairan has been jailed on suspicion of treason. I hear that he is to receive the death penalty."

*Father, loyal to a fault, committing treason? And the death penalty on top of that?! Something unprecedented is taking place in the capital.*

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As soon as I disembarked from the paddlewheeler Meirin had sent for me, I was greeted by the older girl's loud laughter.

"Welcome, my sweet! Do you know how long I, Ou Meirin, have awaited this da— Mrgh!"

"Stop yelling. And didn't you say your parents forbade you from meeting with me? It was dangerous enough sending Miss Shizuka to Keiyou! Lower your voice!" With my hand still over Meirin's mouth, I looked around. We were in an abandoned fishing village on the outskirts of Rinkei. From what I could tell, we were the only ones around, but it was better to be safe than sorry. After all, we were now the family members and associates of a rebel.

Behind us were Hakurei, Ruri (complete with Yui perched on her shoulder), Miss Shizuka (who'd been our guide here), Asaka, and Oto. Oto stood at the front of a unit of about two hundred soldiers. As for Asaka, she was standing with some of the other female attendants. They'd been so insistent on coming to Rinkei with us that we had no choice but to allow them. *I feel like Teiha and the other soldiers we left behind in Keiyou will bear a grudge against us for a long time.*

Meirin slapped my hand so I removed it from her face. As soon as I did, she sucked in a deep breath before she started fidgeting shyly. "L-Lord Sekiei, are you *worried* about me?"

"Of course I am. To tell the truth, I didn't want you to get involved at all. But

since father ordered my aunt and other relatives to evacuate Rinkei, you're the only one I can rely on now. I'm really sorry."

"I'm the only one you can rely on? Uh-huh, I see how it is!" She giggled and cupped her cheeks with both hands. Then, in a sudden burst of energy, she launched herself at me, wrapping her arms around my stomach.

"Whoa!" I managed to snag her orange hat from the air as it tumbled off her head.

The boards of the wooden pier creaked behind us and when I turned around, I saw Hakurei's cold glare piercing through me. *Uh, what do you want from me?* I used my hand to send a signal to the veteran soldiers. They'd insisted on coming with us, even threatening to kill themselves on the spot if I didn't allow it.

I looked down at Meirin, who was rubbing her face against my chest. "Anyway, can you summarize for me the different powers at play in Rinkei right now?"

"Ah, yes, we should get to business." With her eyes, she begged me to return her hat to her head, so I did so. After her expression softened into a delighted smile, she took a few steps away from me. Hakurei walked up to stand at my side. When Meirin turned back to look at us, she'd donned her persona as the prodigy of the Ou family. Her eyes gave off a cold yet intelligent light. "The situation is worse than you could ever imagine."

Thunder rumbled in the distance, causing ripples across the water. Birds took flight while fish dived lower. I could hear Miss Shizuka and Asaka discussing something behind me, but I figured they were probably talking about where auntie and the others were.

Meirin looked over everyone gathered. "Twenty days ago, someone assassinated You Bunshou, the grand chancellor. It happened in the early hours of the morning. We believe that the suspect, heir of the Jo family Jo Hiyou, murdered the chancellor after escaping from his cell."

Ruri, Hakurei, and I couldn't speak. The idea of Hiyou being the killer was inconceivable. I'd been under the impression that even though the grand chancellor had been the one to manipulate things and throw him into prison, he

wouldn't have let the guards rough up or torture Hiyou.

Meirin walked up to me and took out a scroll from her pocket. "The next day, a conference was held before the emperor in the imperial court. During that meeting, it was decided that we declare peace with Gen, effective immediately, and the lieutenant chancellor Rin Chuudou would act as the interim grand chancellor. He's the one in charge of negotiating the peace agreement. These are the conditions of our surrender."

We read through the document in silence. It was basically as Ruri had predicted... However, the only thing we didn't expect was that Gen would demand the execution of Chou Tairan. Adai didn't strike me as the kind of person who would order this just because he couldn't win his last battle against us, but like it or not, that was what Gen wanted from Ei.

Meirin hid herself behind Ruri's back, hugging the smaller girl close to her. Yui jumped off Ruri's shoulder with an annoyed look on its face. "While that was happening, the lieutenant chancellor's soldiers surrounded and broke into the Rinkei estates of the Chou, Jo, and U families," Meirin explained. "Granted, all of them had already fled."

"Then, after Rin Chuudou's dramatic rise to power, General Chou entered the court," Ruri finished for her, joining the conversation. "They didn't even give him the chance to speak, and arrested him on the spot. After the court made up lies to sentence him with treason, they approved his execution. I suppose that's what happened?" She didn't try to fight Meirin off, though she did glance at me with a troubled look.

I could relate to her feelings of unease, as well as predict what she wanted to discuss next.

"It seems like we'll be going up against a group of madmen. What do you plan on doing?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious? We're going to go save him." I brushed my black hair out of my face and then spread my arms wide, raising my voice. "Chou Tairan, a traitor? He would never turn his back on this country. Not in a million years! If he'd wanted to harm Ei, the country would've been destroyed ages ago! But..." I placed a hand on Black Star's hilt and bowed my head to the girls around me.

“Meirin, Ruri, I’m sorry. There might not be much of a future left for the Chou family. Hakurei and I are willing to go down with it, but there’s no need for you two to stay with—”

“Lord Sekiei! Don’t you agree that ‘Chou Meirin’ has a really nice ring to it? ♪” Meirin asked; despite the joking tone, there was a serious look in her eye.

“You’ll need someone to come up with an escape plan, won’t you? Did you already forget that *I’m* your strategist?” Ruri puffed out her flat chest, indicating that she had no intention of abandoning us in our time of need.

“You guys...” I said and, to my embarrassment, tears welled up in my eyes. Though I quickly wiped them away, the Ou prodigy and the ascendant didn’t miss a beat, leaning forward with teasing grins on their faces.

“Oh, what’s this? Lord Sekiei, are you *crying*? Looks like I managed to score a win against you!” Meirin giggled.

“I can’t believe how much of a crybaby our commander in chief is,” Ruri sighed. “Everyone’s made their peace. We already told Hakurei that.”

“Wha—?! M-Miss Hakurei, is that true?”

“I figured it’d be better for you to hear their decisions yourself,” Hakurei replied in a calm voice. Like me, she’d placed her hand over White Star’s hilt.

Dejected at being left out of the loop, I slumped my shoulders and shook my head with a sigh. “Oto?”

“The people of Keiyou saved me, as well as the surviving U and Jo soldiers, during the battle in Keiyou. We promise that we will repay our debt to you! My father, who is sadly no longer with us, was the one who taught us that philosophy.” After Oto’s short speech, the former U soldiers raised their fire lances with a roar of agreement.

*Man, looks like nothing I say can change their minds.* “Fine,” I said. “But, just make sure you don’t die out there. I want you all to join Asaka in protecting Ruri.”

“Yessir!” They offered me a smart salute before they hurried off to position themselves for guard duty. All of them looked enthusiastic about the upcoming

fight. Since they were all holding fire lances, they could let us know of potential threats in an instant.

Recovering my composure, I looked over at Meirin and said, “Considering your intel network, you probably know which cell father is locked up—”

“Hee hee hee... I, Chou Meirin, am always on top of things! Since I figured you would want that information, I had Shizuka, Shun’en, and Kuuen help me investigate and... Ta-da!”

She presented an old scroll to me and when I unraveled it, I saw a map detailing the maze of passages underneath the imperial palace. *I don’t think I want to know how she got her hands on this.* After I looked it over, I held it down so that Ruri could see.

“It looks like there’s a path from the underground to a hill in the west,” she observed. “Let’s make that the rendezvous point.”

“Roger that.” I rolled up the scroll again and handed it to my strategist. “I’ll be the only one who breaks in and—”

“Sekiei *and* I will go. Everyone, Miss Ruri will be in charge in our absence so please heed her orders.”

“Yes, Lady Hakurei!” the soldiers replied as one. They had absolute trust in both her and Ruri thanks to how they’d defended Keiyou against Seitou’s ten thousand soldiers. They’d done so well, not a single one of those attacks had ever posed a significant threat to the city.

I glared at Hakurei and said, “Hey—” but she interrupted me before I could get another word out.

“Please do not waste any time with your ridiculous statements.”

Meirin usually stuck up for me in situations like this, but even Meirin said, “Well...I can’t really blame Miss Hakurei for saying it...”

*Drat!* Before I could try to defend myself, Miss Shizuka, who’d finished her conversation with Asaka, walked over to me. She was wearing a coat over her black-and-white outfit, and her dark hair was as long as usual. Exotic-looking matched swords—one long and one short—hung from her belt, the blades

hidden away in vermilion-lacquered scabbards.

“Lord Sekiei, I will accompany you two as well,” she said.

“Miss Shizuka, I’m grateful for the offer, but this is much too dangerous—”

A flash of cold steel interrupted my words. The leaf that had been drifting through the air before me fell to the ground in two pieces. It happened in a blink of an eye, as if Miss Shizuka had cast some sort of spell. She returned the sword to its scabbard, sheathing it with a soft *clink*. I’d never seen anyone move that fast with a blade, whether in this life or the previous one. It was truly remarkable.

There was an air of absolute confidence in her obsidian eyes as she smiled at me. “I will not get in your way. Besides, I believe that the two of you would need someone to lead you through both the imperial palace and the underground passages.” Hakurei and I shared a quick look before we both offered her our thanks, lowering our heads in gratitude. The black-haired swordsman, who was far more experienced with combat than I’d assumed, added, “Please, think nothing of it. Lady Meirin had ordered me to go along, after all.”

“Ahh! Sh-Shizuka, that part was supposed to be a secret!” Meirin exclaimed, rushing over to her attendant. Despite the tense situation, she was as peppy and energetic as ever. Seeing her act like that put a smile on our faces.

The group of us reached out with our fists and bumped them together. “All right,” I said. “There’s no time to waste. Let’s go save our father, Chou Tairan!”

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Hakurei, Miss Shizuka, and I raced through the imperial palace, keeping to the shadows. The security here was far inferior to the Chou manor’s. In fact, most of the guards were even drinking alcohol while on duty. I could hear some of them cheering about the upcoming peace treaty and others shouting about how they’d impress the White Wraith with their swordsmanship.

*What the hell? It’s like a whole different world from the front lines.* It was little wonder that Hakurei had been able to sneak in here without any effort. We followed Miss Shizuka for a bit until we reached the court, which led to the

underground cells where father was being held. When Miss Shizuka sent us a signal, we slowed down to a walk.

Unlike the palace, the court was deserted and there was an oppressive weight hanging in the air. In the middle of the room, illuminated by the dim candles on the walls and pillars, was a massive obsidian boulder. On our left and right were the chairs for the judge and magistrates.

“It’s awfully quiet here,” Hakurei murmured, looking around. Since her hair color stood out in the darkness, she’d pulled the hood of her cloak over her head.

“I believe it’s due to the presence of the Dragon Jade. People in the capital bear a strong sense of fear and respect for this rock. Of course, we must also consider the fact that this court sees criminals sentenced every day; it’s hardly a place people would like to visit,” Miss Shizuka replied in a calm tone.

As I listened to their conversation, I looked up at the Dragon Jade. At the end of my past life, I’d cut through a boulder right about this size. “Hmm, it reminds me of that massive boulder in Routou.”

Hakurei tilted her head to the side. “When did you get the chance to visit Routou?”

*Oops!* I started walking again and replied in a nonchalant tone, “I read about it in a book.”

“Really? Or did you make a trip there during your stay in Rinkei and keep it a secret from me all this time?”

“Wh-Why don’t you ever believe me when I— To the right!”

Upon hearing my shout, Hakurei sucked in a breath and threw herself to the right while I dodged left. We managed to reach the safety of the pillars’ shadows just as a sharp dagger landed tip-first in the ground, right where we’d been a second ago. Miss Shizuka was safe as well; she was hiding behind the Dragon Jade.

“Oh? I thought that this would be a waste of my time, but it seems that rescuers really did make it before the execution,” an unfamiliar voice rang out.



From the shadows, a small person with a fox mask emerged. They were dressed in a tattered cloak and from their belt, they'd hung four swords. I'd never seen anyone like them before. It was impossible to tell from their voice whether they were a man or a woman, and I couldn't even see what color their hair was under their hood. A group of men—all wearing matching cloaks and fox masks—poured into the court and surrounded us.

I placed my hand on Black Star's hilt and glared at the small fox-masked person. "Who are you? My name is—"

"Chou Sekiei. That girl with the silver hair and blue eyes is Chou Hakurei, right? I feel no need to announce myself, but I suppose it would be rude not to if I'm facing the current wielders of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars. My name is Ren, a member of the Senko. The organization I serve works with the White Wraith, emperor of Gen. The man you seek—Chou Tairan—is in the underground cell just over there, but I have no intention of letting any of you through to him. The Chou family stands in the way of unification and thus, you must die here!"

The masked person—Ren of the Senko—yelled the final words. As if on cue, the masked men around them whipped out their single-edged daggers and leaped at us from all directions. Hakurei and I drew our swords, blocking the first wave of attacks. The scream of metal scraping against metal echoed in the space. A disgusting, thick liquid slid from the blade of one of the masked men and fell onto the ground, emanating a foul stench.

"There's poison on the knives!" I warned.

"Their weapons are unusually hardy!" Hakurei shouted back.

We unleashed a flurry of strikes against our opponents. Our enemies consisted of seven...no, eight fighters. Meanwhile, Hakurei and I were only two people. Of course, we also had...

"Gah!"

A dagger flew through the air before it landed in the ceiling, stuck there by its blade. Miss Shizuka had swung her sword in a beautiful arc, slicing through an attacker's face, mask and all. She twirled her sword as if it were a prop for her deadly dance, scattering the blood from the blade with the motion. Upon

seeing her ruthless counterattack, the masked men hesitated, uncertain of how to proceed.

“Oh?” Ren said, sounding impressed.

Miss Shizuka held her exotic sword at the ready as she called out to us, “Go on ahead; leave the small fish to me. Even demons can be killed if you lop off their heads.”

“Thanks!” Hakurei and I shouted as one.

Miss Shizuka threw a dagger at the masked men and then, bending her knees to lower her body to the ground, charged them. We ran past her fight with the assassins to face off against Ren, who was standing before the Dragon Jade. Eerily enough, they didn’t move to draw their weapons; they must have been confident in their abilities. From behind us, I could hear the intense clangs of combat, as well as pained screams. Miss Shizuka was amazing with that sword of hers.

I adjusted my grip on Black Star, never letting Ren out of my sight, but then a question came to mind. “I’d like to ask you something. Were you the ones who lied to and manipulated Jo Hiyuu?”

Ren’s slender shoulders twitched. When they next spoke, the disgust in their voice was so palpable it could only be genuine. “How offensive. Unlike Adai, I haven’t discarded my humanity!”

Hakurei and I jerked back as Ren charged towards us. It was similar to Miss Shizuka’s attack, in that Ren had lowered themselves as close to the ground as they could. They’d chosen to target me first, but they hadn’t even drawn their sword.

*What kind of technique is th—* I got a bad feeling and jumped backwards. Relying on instinct, I used Black Star to block and then parry their attack. The *shing* of Black Star’s blade hitting metal rang through the air. *They drew their sword and attacked in the same motion?!*

Ren backed away, sheathing their sword with an elegant flourish. Under their mask, I could see their mouth twisted in a mocking smirk. “Oh? You managed to survive that attack. How interesting!”

They charged again, their face and body close to the ground—but this time, they aimed for Hakurei. “The same trick won’t work twice!” Hakurei yelled. She started to swing White Star, her long silver hair billowing behind her.

“Hakurei!” I yelled and then jumped at her, pushing her to the ground.

I could feel the wind from Ren’s slash above our heads, as well as hear the sound of the sword slicing through a candlestick. Fire and oil landed on the ground around us. If we hadn’t ducked down in time, we would’ve been killed. *Their range is much wider than before! And they’re using their other hand to wield the sword this time?!*

“I saw through their reach earlier,” Hakurei whispered. “So how...?”

“How should I know? Run!” I snapped back. I urged Hakurei to her feet and into a dead sprint.

Even when I turned around to fling a dagger at Ren, they dodged it with ease. I jumped to my feet right as Ren resumed the offensive, darting from left to right and slashing with their sword all the while. Desperation fueling my movements, I parried every one of their attacks. They started to kick off from the walls, pillars—even the Dragon Jade, continuing their ferocious assault. *This feels beyond the scope of a mortal. Are they an ascendant or something?!*

“They’re way too agile!” I yelled. “They switch up their range and dominant hand with every attack!”

“They’re terribly fast as well!” Hakurei replied.

I gritted my teeth. My right hand was numb from parrying all of Ren’s heavy attacks, but I managed to push them back, sending them flying into the air. The guards in the castle weren’t serious about their duty, but surely the sound of our swords meeting in battle would attract their attention, especially when they were echoing in such a spacious room. We didn’t have any more time to waste!

Miss Shizuka, who’d cut down her third masked assassin, saw us struggling and yelled, “They’re using iai, which is a rare technique from my homeland, but they’ve elevated it to a completely different style of fighting! No one can match an iai practitioner’s speed!”

“No one can...” I echoed.

“Match them in speed?” Hakurei finished.

We looked down at the black and white swords in our hands.

“Let’s do it, Hakurei!”

“Yes, let’s, Sekiei!”

We raced behind the Dragon Jade. *This is the only way we can beat them!* From the other side of the boulder, we could hear Ren’s derisive laugh.

“Do you plan on using the Dragon Jade as shelter? Fools! You’ve only extended your lives by mere seconds!”

Hakurei and I nodded at each other and then, without a word, we raised the Heavenly Swords above our heads. With a great yell of effort, we slashed downwards at the boulder before us, putting all our strength into this final attack.

“Huh?” Ren’s voice sounded awfully young.

In the next second, with a rumbling roar, the Dragon Jade split in half and fell off its platform. The entire imperial palace seemed to shudder under the force of it hitting the ground. Candlesticks toppled over and the fire spread even farther. In the midst of the destruction, Ren, whose cloak had been slashed apart, stood still as if in shock. Now that they weren’t moving, I could see that two of the swords on their belt were shorter than the others. The differing lengths were the secret behind their bizarre technique.

With a dry *crack*, the fox mask fell to the ground and shattered. Their hair tie must have snapped at some point in the battle because their long, beautiful hair flowed down behind them, the silky strands reflecting the flames around us.

Hakurei and I widened our eyes and we murmured in unison, “A girl with silver hair and blue eyes?”

Even with Ren’s right eye hidden away behind her long bangs, we could make out those damning physical details. She used her hand to cover up her face, but I could see through the gaps between her fingers that she was glaring at us, hatred burning in her eyes.

“You saw my face, didn’t you? And my eyes and my hair?!”

We couldn’t respond, goose bumps breaking out over our skin at the pure venom in her voice. For a moment, we were at a bizarre stalemate, but it was broken by the sound of multiple footsteps and voices from outside the building. *The guards!*

The masked assassins gathered around Ren, who was still covering her face with her hand. Then they stepped back into the clouds of smoke which started to rise around us.

“You lucked out, Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei. I will be the one to kill the both of you, but it seems that your deaths will come another day. Witness how Chou Tairan has fallen with your own eyes and despair! Scurry around the continent like the pests that you are and pray that the White Wraith doesn’t kill you first!” With those parting words, Ren and the other masked men disappeared. Even the ones Miss Shizuka had killed were gone.

*The Senko, huh? An organization dedicated to seeing the lands united?*

Miss Shizuka approached us, swinging her sword to get rid of the excess blood before sheathing the weapon. Even though she’d been facing off against multiple opponents, there wasn’t a single scratch on her.

“Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, we must hurry!” she warned us in a sharp voice. “The guards are coming!” The flames continued to rise around us.

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After we left the court where the Dragon Jade once stood, we raced down the stairs leading to the secret underground prison. There was little to fear with Miss Shizuka holding up the rear, but even with her watching our backs we had to hurry; the sound of the soldiers’ voices was getting closer with every passing second.

It didn’t take us long to reach the lowest depths of the underground prison and as soon as we got there, I caught a familiar scent. It was the stench of blood, steel, and death. Though there were a few lit torches on the stone walls, there weren’t enough to illuminate the entire room, keeping it rather dim. According to the map, father’s cell was at the very back of the prison and to

escape, we'd have to take the passage on the left.

"Sekiei? Hakurei? Is that really you?" a raspy voice echoed in the prison, along with the jangling of chains.

*It's father!* But before I could run to him, I saw Miss Shizuka looking at me, her dark eyes filled with a deep sadness.

"Father!" Hakurei called out. She started to make her way to his cell, no longer able to contain her excitement; I reached out and grabbed her hand, forcing her to a stop.

"Sekiei?"

"Hakurei, stay here," I ordered. This was only guesswork, but I'd wager that father would've wanted me to do this. Hakurei knew of battle and war, but she had little idea of just how cruel people could be.

She turned on me with a furious look. "Wha—?! Why must I?!"

"Just listen to me!" I snapped.

"S-Sekiei?" Hakurei froze, shocked. Tears were welling up in her big blue eyes.

I handed her a handkerchief and then turned to lower my head at the black-haired swordswoman accompanying us. "Miss Shizuka."

"She'll be safe with me, but do keep in mind that time is not on our side."

"I owe you one."

"Huh? S-Sekiei?" Hakurei stammered, her grip tightening on the piece of cloth I'd given her.

I ignored her questioning look and made my way forward. The farther I went, the stronger the stench of rust was. In the cells on my left and right, I could see broken bones and mummified remains lying there, forgotten. When I reached the room at the very back, I looked inside at the chained-up man and called out to him: "Father."

He looked up at me. The torture he endured must have been intense. The National Shield's bare upper body was covered in blood. Even in the dim lighting, I could see the deep wounds on his four chained limbs. In particular,

the injury on his right shoulder was horrifying to look at.

“So you actually came,” he said in a slow and halting tone. “I failed...in how I raised you two. You should’ve...abandoned your foolish father... You told Hakurei...to stay behind, yes? I don’t want her to see me like this.”

It took me all I could to keep the emotion out of my voice as I replied, “Of course.”

*Of course I couldn’t let her...let Hakurei see you like this, father!*

He must have read my thoughts from the expression on my face, because father smiled, swallowing back his pain with an effort. “My apologies, Sekiei. I keep causing you trouble.”

“Father! I’ve never...that’s not... I should be the one apologizing to you!” Words failed me as tears streamed down my cheeks. Even so, I forced a smile on my face. “I’m going to break you out now. Don’t worry! This sword’s quite sharp, you know?”

“You mean the Heavenly Swords that Kouei, the Tou Empire’s commander in chief, once wielded?”

I blinked. Father had never mentioned my sword by name before. “You knew about Black Star?”

“Who do you take me for? I’m your and Hakurei’s father, remember?”

I didn’t reply to that. No matter how much time I’d spent with him as his son, I had never once managed to pull the wool over his eyes. He was truly a better man than me in every way.

Father shifted his body slightly and even that movement was enough to make him groan in pain. After he recovered, he said, “I believe the swords themselves have no special power, but those with authority have a different opinion about the validity of the old legends. So long as the Heavenly Swords remain in your possession, you invite calamity upon yourself.”

“Like the old rumors about women with silver hair and blue eyes? Unfortunately for those old wives’ tales, *she’s* only ever brought me happiness.”

It was strange how easy it was to say those words. Granted, it wasn’t

something I'd ever say to her face. When I turned around, I could see Hakurei staring at me, clutching the handkerchief tight in her hand.

Though father tried to bite back his laughter, his chuckles still echoed throughout the underground prison. "I take back my earlier words. You are a wonderful son, Sekiei, and far better than what I deserve. I have no more regrets keeping me tied to this world."

"What are you talking about? Father, we need you to go and exterminate that scary White Wraith haunting the north. All right, I'm gonna open up your cell—" But the sound of chains stopped me before I could draw Black Star.

Father was shaking his head at me. "It's unnecessary. You know as well as I do that escaping Rinkei with me in tow is impossible. I can barely move my arms and legs. Chuudou's underlings were quite zealous about their task."

"Father!" I shouted, no longer able to hold myself back. I could hear the rumble of the soldiers running a floor above us. We only had less than a minute before they'd arrive.

Acceptance and contrition were clear in father's eyes. "It's fine, Sekiei. I've made my peace with my fate. This is my punishment for harboring an impossible dream...a dream of accomplishing a foolhardy northern campaign after I saw the talent you and Hakurei had as small children."

I didn't say anything as I lifted my hand from Black Star's hilt. Father's dearest wish was to see the lands north of the river returned to the Ei Empire. However, he never let me or Hakurei get too involved with those plans.

Father's voice started to break; he was shaking so much that the chains were rattling. "There was so much I could've done to prevent this from happening. But we—Shuuhou, Jouko, and even Bunshou—were so elated at the false prosperity of Ei that we failed on too many fronts. And this is how we all ended up... This is the price we had to pay!"

"Father..." *I can't say anything to him. I don't have the right.*

For a moment, father cried in silence. Then, he closed his eyes. "Sekiei, Oto is in Rinkei as well, isn't she? Let me tell you the truth. Her real name is U Torahime and she's Jouko's daughter by blood. Due to some personal



circumstances, he never revealed that to the public. For now, I want you to flee west with Oto's help. If what Chuudou said the last time he was here is accurate, then the Jo family does not have much time left—but the U family still stands strong. They're sure to help you."

"West, huh?" We could no longer return to Keiyou. I had no idea what we were to do from this point forth, but if we could get the U family's help, then... But my thoughts were interrupted with Hakurei and Miss Shizuka's warning shouts.

"Sekiei! The soldiers are coming!"

"Lord Sekiei!"

"Now, go," father ordered in a quiet but firm voice. "The guards will be here any moment."

I gritted my teeth and sucked in a sharp breath before kowtowing before the National Shield. "Lord Chou Tairan!" In a shuddering voice, I managed to show my gratitude with, "I owe you...a great debt for taking me in seven years ago. And..."

Before I could apologize for my uselessness and inability to save him, father laughed. "You idiot! My foolish son! You've repaid that debt years ago!" There was an unfathomable kindness in his eyes. It reminded me of when I developed a high fever as a child and was forced to stay in bed. Father had spent the entire night at my side, changing the wet towel on my forehead and looking at me with this exact gaze. "Along with my impossible desire for a northern campaign, I actually had one more wish. I wanted to see the day you and Hakurei became husband and wife. You'd be a civil official and Hakurei would spend her days with a smile on her face, even if she'd continue to nag you. I'd retire from the army and hold your child in my arms. Is there any greater happiness than that? That future could've come to pass. It could've come to pass."

I didn't—couldn't—say anything in response. If I tried to open my mouth, I wouldn't be able to hold back my sobs.

"But now, that desire is but a pipe dream," father continued in a soothing voice. "The only thing I wish for is that you all live a happy and peaceful life after you flee this prison. You don't need to become a great warrior or a hero,

Sekiei.”

“Yessir.” I stood up and wiped away my tears. The small flames on the candles were beginning to flicker. The very air was moving as a result of the pursuers’ approach.

Father smiled. His final wish, spoken with a blood-flecked mouth, was but a simple one. “Take care of Hakurei.”

“With my li—”

“Life is something to treasure, not throw away. Never forget that. Got it? Engrave those words in your mind.”

“Father!” No matter how many times I wiped away my tears, they just kept flowing. *Dammit! Dammit! DAMMIT!*

As I continued to cry, father looked a little unsure of how to comfort me. But then, he winked. “Oh, that reminds me. Pass along a final message to Hakurei for me, will you? It’s a little embarrassing to say it to her face.”

After hearing father’s final words, I left his cell and returned to where Hakurei and Miss Shizuka were. We had to hurry and make our escape. Hakurei, who had been standing guard by the stairs, widened her eyes when she saw me.

“Sekiei! Where’s father?”

“Father’s...”

“HAKUREI! SEKIEI! GO!”



Where did he have the strength for such a mighty yell? The final roar of the dying Chou Tairan didn't just echo throughout the underground prison—it sent reverberations through the darkness of Rinkei.

Miss Shizuka turned around and said in a sharp voice, “Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, our pursuers have arrived. I’m guessing from the sound of their footsteps that there are around fifty of them!”

“Got it,” I replied. Hakurei was frozen next to me, so I grabbed her hand.

“Sekiei? Are we...are we really going to leave him behind?” Hakurei’s sapphire eyes stared at me as fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

I pulled her close to me and wrapped my left arm around her shoulders. “I’m sorry,” I whispered into her ear. “I’m really sorry! If you want to blame anyone for father’s death, then blame me.” Then, louder so Miss Shizuka could hear me, I said, “Let’s go!”

# Epilogue

“Sekiei! Hakurei!”

“Lord Sekiei! Miss Hakurei!”

As soon as we got through the underground passage and made our way outside, Ruri and Meirin rushed over to us. They had been standing next to the entrance, discussing our future plans. The sky was already starting to pale with the coming morning. I’d had to practically drag Hakurei—who’d stopped crying halfway into the journey—through the passage, so I was exhausted. Pathetic as the display was, I collapsed in a heap. Miss Shizuka, on the other hand, hadn’t even broken a sweat despite guarding us from behind the entire escape.

“Hey Ruri, Meirin,” I managed to rasp. Hakurei remained silent.

“No injuries on any of you, from what I can tell,” Ruri observed slowly.

“I-I’ll fetch you some water!” Meirin added. The two of them must’ve figured out what happened from our faces and the fact that father wasn’t with us, and were trying to be considerate.

*Thanks, you two.* Hakurei sat down next to me. She didn’t say a word and her expression remained dark. *At the very least, I wish she’d yell at me.*

As I wallowed in my gloomy thoughts, Ruri asked Miss Shizuka in a steady voice, “Shizuka, what of the pursuers?”

“We defeated a few of them on our way out. I don’t know if they’ll chase us all the way here.”

“Got it. Oto, we’ll do as we discussed. Destroy the exit with the explosives.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Oto moved quickly and efficiently, stacking little barrels near the underground passage we’d walked through. They’d come up with a plan to shake off any potential pursuers.

*When I find some time later, I have to talk to Oto—no, to U Torahime, the Tiger Fang’s daughter. We have to discuss our escape to the U family’s*

*territories in the western regions.*

After giving out orders, Ruri returned to us and said, “You two need to do something about your expressions. It’s bad for morale.”

“Yeah, I figured,” I said, trying my best to smile though I probably failed miserably. Hakurei still didn’t say anything.

Ruri crouched down in front of her. “Hakurei.”

“Miss Ruri?” Hakurei asked, looking up from the ground.

In the next moment, Ruri pulled Hakurei into a tight embrace. She stroked Hakurei’s messy silver hair and said in a gentle voice, “It’s all right. What happened wasn’t your fault and it wasn’t Sekiei’s either. Of that, I can assure you.”

Hakurei didn’t say anything for a moment before she burst into sobs, tears streaming like waterfalls from her eyes.

I met Ruri’s gaze and nodded my sincere gratitude to her before I pushed my heavy body up into a standing position. After exchanging a few words with the veteran soldiers who already had an idea as to our next move, I made for the top of the hill. From there, I could see the entirety of Rinkei, covered as it was in the pale morning fog.

There was a pillar of dark smoke rising up from the imperial palace; it must have been the remnants of the night’s fire. The only thing that differed between now and a few months ago was the presence of a giant wooden stand in front of the palace.

It was the scaffold that would serve as Chou Tairan the National Shield’s execution site.

*Are the emperor and Rin Chuudou truly so scared of father that they’d go build such a contraption?* I swallowed my emotions as I felt someone hesitantly tug at my sleeve.

“Lord Sekiei, um...”

“Meirin?” I turned around. Meirin was standing there with a water bottle in hand. Before she could do or say anything, I knelt down before her.

“L-Lord Sekiei?! What’s gotten into you?!” she exclaimed.

Ignoring her surprise, I said in a solemn voice, “Thank you. With your and Miss Shizuka’s help, we were able to meet father...for the final time. I owe you so much! Even if you forget what you did for me here, I’ll repay this debt some day!”

“Lord Sekiei.” She held my hands in a gentle grip and smiled, looking exactly the same as she did the day we met. “Please don’t think that way! Did you forget that *you* were the one who first extended a helping hand to us? I’m only paying back the interest of *my* debt.”

I blinked as Meirin pushed the bottle into my hands. After drinking half of it, I said, “Meirin, you’re a great woman.” I meant it too.

“Grr, did you only realize that *now*?! Yes, I am! I’m an amazing woman who’s *perfect* as your wife, Lord Sekiei!”

“Please get out of my way,” Hakurei said, appearing from out of nowhere and pushing Meirin away.

“Eek!” Meirin exclaimed as she stumbled, but Hakurei paid her no mind as she leaned in close to my face.

When I looked past Hakurei, I met Ruri’s eyes. “Tell her the truth,” they seemed to be saying. *I figured that my strategist would see right through me.*

Hakurei snatched the bottle out of my hand and chugged its contents. Once she finished, she looked down at me with a severe expression. “In the underground prison, why didn’t you free—”

“Hakurei, father left a message for you,” I interrupted before I tugged her close and let her rest her head on my shoulder. This was the girl I swore I’d spend the rest of my life protecting and she needed me now more than ever. Leaning in close to her ear so that Hakurei would be the only one to hear father’s will, I whispered, ““All I want is for you to be happy and healthy. Treasure your friends.””

The wind, unusually cold for spring, blew, ruffling her beautiful silver hair. Hakurei stared at me, mouth agape, before she punched my chest. Tears flowed anew. “This is so unfair! This is so unfair! This is *so unfair*! I also wanted to

Speak to him before...before... Father! Father! FATHER!” She couldn’t say anything more as she started to wail. I wrapped my arms around her back as the morning sun illuminated the hill. Dawn had arrived.

Oto and the others set off the explosives near the underground passage. I could feel the ground shaking under my feet.

Yui still on her shoulder, Ruri said in a melancholic tone, “Ah, the time has finally arrived. The false golden age that the Ei Empire has enjoyed since its people traveled south of the river is about to come to an end.”





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"It's dawn. Release the criminal Chou Tairan from his cell."

The door to the underground cell swung open and several jailers bustled in. They freed my chains and held me up by my arms. Even this small movement caused waves of agony to travel through my body and I groaned. The jailers laughed and jeered as they dragged me towards the surface.

"Humph. What, did we go overboard with the beatings?"

"Finest hero of the country, my ass."

"Where do you see a hero? All I see is a filthy criminal."

"Chou Tairan, you know you're about to die, right? How do you feel?"

I ignored them. None of them understood what my death meant in the negotiations between Gen and Ei. I had no way of being certain, but I doubted the White Wraith would be pleased to hear of my sudden demise. I chuckled. My body could barely move and I was climbing the very steps that would lead to my end...and yet it was at this moment that I finally gained insight into the grand picture. *Ha ha, humans are such fascinating creatures!*

"Wh-What the hell? Stop laughing! You're creeping me out!" one of the jailers said, trembling even as he punched me. However, it wasn't enough to quell my mirth.

Once we emerged from the ground, they made me march all the way to the scaffold. They could push my weakened body all they wanted, but I'd long since reached my limit. Every few steps, I stumbled and fell. And every time I did, one of the jailers would swing his whip.

"Stop messing around! Get up there!"

Screams rose from the Rinkei citizens who'd gathered to spectate my execution. Their cries lingered in my ears as, step-by-step, I climbed the scaffold. *How long did it take me to get here?* I wondered. By the time I'd realized it, I was tied down at the top of the stand. Next to me were the two executioners and Rin Chuudou. He'd only become fatter and uglier after gaining more political power in Ei. The magnificent robes he was wearing didn't suit him

at all.

The arrogant man swept his gaze over the gathered crowd and said, “I am Rin Chuudou, the chancellor of the Ei Empire! As this case could very well change the course of the country’s fate, I shall personally preside over the proceedings here!”

Murmurs broke out in the crowd. It was impossible to tell if this was a positive or negative reaction; it hardly mattered at this point in time. I opened up my cloudy eyes to gaze down at the civilians and observe them.

“Hear your crimes, Chou Tairan! Despite your oath to protect Keiyou, you conspired to rebel against His Imperial Majesty! Not only that, but you also formed an alliance with the Jo family to the south and the U family to the west, coordinating with them to launch an attack on Rinkei. This is a most unforgivable sin indeed! And thus, I condemn you to death!”

*Rebellion, huh?* When I considered what would happen to the people of Keiyou, including Hakurei and Sekiei, I realized I should’ve followed Gi Heian’s example and surrendered myself to Adai. Granted, that man was unusually strict to those who refused to fight. It reminded me of how Ouei became after he lost Kouei at Routou. Accusatory voices rose from the crowd, interrupting me from my thoughts.

“Impossible! General Chou just returned from protecting Keiyou—no, protecting Ei from the great armies of Gen and Seitou! What evidence do you have of his wrongdoings?!”

*To think that someone would raise their voice to defend me here at this moment! Humans are such fascinating creatures indeed.*

Rin Chuudou’s face flushed red and he shouted back, “Sh-Shut up! Guards, seize that man!” He paused for a moment. Then, when next he spoke, he sounded as if the words were being extracted from his mouth like teeth. “Evidence *might* have existed.”

He didn’t even finish speaking before part of the crowd rushed towards the guards, shouting at the emperor. *A general killed on evidence that may or may not exist? Why, that’s exactly what happened to the great Kou Eihou! Ha ha ha, what a fantastic fate this is.*

I was in the middle of enjoying this unexpected reply when Rin Chuudou leaned his chubby face close to mine. “Now then, Chou Tairan. Seeing as you’re about to die, do you have any final words? Hmm? As a show of mercy, I will allow you a single sentence.”

“You have my thanks. Then, I shall take you up on your offer.” I raised my upper body and looked at the hill to the west. *Sekiei, I entrust Hakurei and everyone else to you.* I took a deep breath and shouted, “The heavens know the truth!”

I made sure to yell it with every bit of air in my lungs so that these words could reach my beloved son and daughter, as well as all the people in the Ei Empire. The executioners shoved me to the ground before I could even hear the echo.

Rin Chuudou gritted his teeth. “Y-You bastard! Even in your final moments, you...! Kill him!”

The sky darkened as if storm clouds had appeared overhead. I could hear the sound of a sword slicing through the air, though it was barely audible over the thunderous roar of the imperial palace crumbling under a bolt of lightning.

*Hmm, I’ve led quite a good life, I think. Shuuhou, Jouko, Bunshou, I’m on my way, so save me some delicious food and a nice cup of wine. I’ll tell you all about my beloved children!*

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“...and with those as the conditions of the agreement, we would like to humbly request peace with your great empire, Emperor Adai.”

Adai remained silent in his throne. At first glance, with his slender frame and long white hair, he looked like a young girl. But he was, without a doubt, the ruler of the horsemen to the north.

I—Rin Chuudou, chancellor of the Ei Empire and the one tasked to negotiate peace with Gen—prostrated myself on the ground. A bead of cold sweat rolled down my cheek. *Dammit. Hurry up and give me your answer!* However, in this meeting place the Gen Empire had specifically built in the northern regions of Keiyou, the only people from Ei were myself and a turncoat officer. Everyone

else present reminded me of a beast hungering for human flesh. I felt like my heart would give out at any second.

*Maybe I should've followed Denso's advice and made Ou Hokujaku come here. No, no. It would be a bad idea to let that man gain any more accolades. Oh, if only we could have this meeting inside of Keiyou. What did he mean by "paying respects to the late Chou Tairan" anyway? Bah!* As I continued to insult the barbarian emperor—who was exactly as the rumors described him—in my mind, his slender hand paused in the middle of flipping through the papers.

"Hmm? Hasho."

"H-Here, Your Imperial Majesty!" A man with delicate features, light-brown hair, and thin eyes walked out from the line of officers and stood next to the throne.

Adai handed the papers over to him. "I'd like your opinion on this peace agreement. Does it not appear as if there's something missing?"

"Allow me to look it over for you. Let's see... Oh?" The man—Hasho—put on an exaggerated display of surprise before glancing at me. For a moment, I could see an icy glint in the depths of those thin eyes. A shiver ran down my spine, for those eyes registered the exact same contempt that You Bunshou used to look at me with. "Your Imperial Majesty, I believe one of the conditions in the copy we'd received beforehand is missing in this version of the agreement."

"So it was as I figured," the emperor hummed.

"Wha—?!" I looked up and stared at the emperor in shock. *A condition is missing?!*

Adai placed his elbow on his throne's armrest. "What is the meaning of this, ambassador? Is your country trying to play me for a fool?"

"O-O-Of course not, Your Imperial Majesty! I s-swear, we're not—"

"Then..." Adai's voice was not loud by any means, but my body's trembling grew more intense and a wave of tension ran through the assembled officers. The monstrous emperor tapped the arm of his throne. "Then why do I not see the condition that would call for appointing Chou Tairan as a Gen marshal? I do not understand how this mistake could've been made. Your false emperor is

operating under some misunderstanding, I see.”

*A-Appoint Chou Tairan as a Gen marshal?! What in the world is this horseman emperor talking about? Wasn't he your mortal enemy?! I went out of my way to dispose of someone you couldn't in battle, so why...? Wait, why are you glaring at me with such cold eyes? What's going on? This is too bizarre! I'm the chancellor of the Ei Empire, you know?! Both You Bunshou and Chou Tairan are dead. All that's left to do is to make peace with the horsemen and everything will be perfect. In fact, that's the only logical conclusion to everything that's happened thus far!*

I remembered Denso's warning about how I should reconsider killing Chou Tairan. Resisting the urge to grit my teeth, I protested, “I-If I may, there was never such a co—”

“Ambassador.”

“Eek!” The scream escaped my mouth upon hearing Adai's quiet voice and I took a few steps back. *How terrifying! H-He isn't... No, this isn't a human! You're telling me that Chou Tairan spent years of his life facing off against a creature like this?*

“I suggest you watch your tongue,” Adai said in an almost lighthearted tone. “Why, it almost sounds like you're accusing me of *lying*. In any case, I ask that you send Chou Tairan to Enkei. Until his arrival, there will be no peace between our nations.”

I gaped at him. *What did he just say? Unless we send Chou Tairan to Enkei, the war will continue? What is he... How could he demand such a ridiculous thing?! As if we don't have enough to deal with between the Jo family's rampage in the south and the U family's suspicious movements in the west! W-Wait, that's not important right now. How in the world can I get out of here and return to...?*

Despite how he'd sounded like he was jesting, Adai's eyes remained as sharp as flint. He gave a slow wave with his hand and asked, “Oh? What's the matter with you? You look like you've seen a ghost. Ah, right. It's not as if you can resurrect a man you murdered a month ago, can you? Ha ha, I do have some measure of gratitude towards you and your false emperor. After all, you did me a great favor.”

*I have to run away. If I don't, I'll die here. They'll kill me.* But my body remained motionless.

Cold fury appeared on Adai's face. "You killed the one general in the past thousand years who had even a fraction of Kouei's talent. Who in the world ordered you to do that? I never had any intention of killing Chou Tairan. How dare a hideous, worthless worm such as yourself claim to act in my place?"

"Pl-Please, wait a— Ack!" Before I could even begin to explain, a muscular Gen soldier pushed me to the ground and pinned my arm behind my back.

Adai pushed himself to his feet with a graceful motion and all of the gathered officers took a knee. In a calm voice, he delivered his nightmarish sentence: "I no longer have any use for this idiot. More scum who wish to tarnish Chou Tairan's name are sure to appear in the coming days. Allow him to experience the kind of torture that they likely put Tairan through and repeat it at least a hundred times. Keep him alive and conscious to feel the whole thing. After a reprieve, we will resume our invasion of Ei. Until then, rest the soldiers and horses."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty Emperor Adai, child of the great Celestial Wolf!"

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That night, I—Adai Dada and emperor of the Gen Empire—returned to my tent in the main encampment. As soon as I settled in my throne, I lost myself in thought. Usually, Gisen or the White Wolf remained at my side as a bodyguard, but tonight I was alone. I'd asked everyone around my tent to take their leave as well.

*I've already basically achieved unification.* Ei's greatest generals, officers, soldiers, veterans, and chancellor were dead. The only ones left were fools like the one I'd sent to the underground cells earlier today. My initial plan was to incite rebellion within Ei's borders and then resume the invasion after weakening them. It had been going swimmingly until—

"Dammit!" I slammed my small fist against the armrest of the throne.

*No, that's not right.* A forceful invasion could have achieved unification as well. Now that Chou Tairan and You Bunshou were dead, Ei didn't have anyone

who could stand in my way. But this method would increase the number of unnecessary casualties. It would be a brutal strategy—one that didn't befit me, Ouei, at all!

“Why?” That I'd been reduced to such a pathetic state was because I realized that the one person I cared about in this world resided in that pitiful country. “Why?!”

During my last battle at Keiyou, Chou Tairan, along with that silver-haired and blue-eyed girl said to bring misfortune, were at the head of their army...but one more person had been there as well, leading the charge to cut a path through my forces. He had been a young black-haired swordsman, making his way to my encampment with Black Star in hand.

I shoved everything off my table and yelled, “Explain yourself, Eihou!”

Our eyes only met for a moment. The fighting had gone on for so long that there was always the chance Eihou had been too exhausted to notice me. I'd planned on assigning the Chou children—the ones who currently possessed the Heavenly Swords—to lofty positions within the Gen army after the war was over. Now that Chou Tairan was dead, that would never come to pass. The opportunity of reunion had slipped away from my fingers.

I buried my face in my hands. “How could you point a weapon at me? How could you give White Star to a woman of the Chou family?!” Kou Eihou was the only one who could wield the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars. That was the way things had to be. It *had* to be! I hadn't been able to use those weapons at all in my past life, so how could that woman...?

“Ah, I see.” I stood up from the throne. *So that's how it is.* I exited the tent and stared up at the stars above me. The twin stars to the north shone brighter than anything else. I reached out for them, certain in the conclusion I'd come to. “So *she's* the cause of your insanity in this life? In that case...”

In that case, there was only one thing for me to do. Burning with new determination, I pressed my fist against my chest, right above my heart.



## Afterword

Hello! It's Riku Nanano. It's been four months since I last greeted you like this. This volume concludes the first part of the story. Things got really close and I almost couldn't (rest omitted). Lately, I feel like I'm withering away to sand every time I finish a manuscript. I gotta be careful about that!

Now, let's talk about the contents of this volume. Ever since I came up with the overall structure of the series, I'd decided that the third volume would turn out this way. The common folk suffering as the result of the upper class's unfair treatment is something that happens a lot throughout human history. The same goes for China's lengthy history. I don't think many famed generals or imperial subjects kept their positions all the way until they died of old age.

Chu's Hegemon-King Xiang Yu died after a betrayal, surrounded on all sides by an enemy. His final moments even became an idiom in Chinese to describe that exact situation. Han Xin, the god of war in the Former Han Dynasty, was also executed after achieving some of the greatest feats at the time. Survival was quite difficult back then. And I'm sure that the sentiment you all felt reading this volume—"If only the government were a bit more competent!"—was a common one. I want to keep these points in mind as I write the second part, so please look forward to the counterattack from the west.

It's time for an advertisement! The newest volume of *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter Volume 14*, is now in stores. I plan on releasing volume 15 some time in the summer so I hope you give that a read as well.

Now, I'd like to move on to acknowledging and thanking everyone who helped me! My editor worked very hard on this volume as well and helped to make the third volume more interesting. Cura, thank you once again for your art! The Sekiei and Adai on the cover are perfect. They look so cool! I'd also like to thank all my readers for getting this far.

I look forward to meeting you all in the next volume, *In the Temporary Peace*.

Riku Nanano



RIKU NANANO  
[Illust] cura

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# Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

*“My name is Hiyou,  
the only son of Jo Shuuhou!”*

A Pleasant Young Man

## Jo Hiyou

The eldest son of the Jo family, which is led by one of the Three Great Generals of the Ei Empire. His first experience with battle was the Seitou invasion. However, it was a great disaster, resulting in his father's death.

## C O N T E N T S

Heavenly Swords  
of the Twin Stars

P r o l o g u e

C h a p t e r O n e

C h a p t e r T w o

C h a p t e r T h r e e

C h a p t e r F o u r

E p i l o g u e

A f t e r w o r d





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 talents in both literary and military arts. She is beautiful, and has 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.



The Cute Strategist with Godlike Intelligence

## Ruri

A young girl who claims to be an ascendant. Meirin's acquaintance, she was the one who discovered the legendary Heavenly Swords. Despite possessing an extraordinary mind for tactics and a keen eye for observation, she detests war.





“Adai Dada, I’ve come for you!”

“You truly are nothing compared to Kouei.”

“Prepare yourself!”

The White Wraith

**Adai Dada**

The emperor of the Gen Empire, which is at war with Ei, where Sekiei and the others live. Despite his waifish appearance, his sharp mind can conjure many fearsome tactics and strategies. In the seven years since he took the throne, he’s never lost a single battle. In his past life, he and Eihou were only a step away from unifying all the lands under the heavens.

The National Shield

**Chou Tairan**

Hakurei’s father and the man who took in Sekiei. He is the greatest general of his generation and is in charge of guarding the lands in northern Ei.



“You saw my face, didn't you?  
And my eyes and my hair?!”

The Mysterious Girl

**Ren**

A mysterious girl who appears alongside the Gen emperor, Adai Dada. She normally hides her face behind a fox mask and covers her head with a raggedy cloak.



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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars: Volume 3

by Riku Nanano

Translated by Stephanie Liu Edited by Suzie Paige

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