



# Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars



RIKU NANANO

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# Heavenly Swords Two Stars



"I'll become your war strategist.

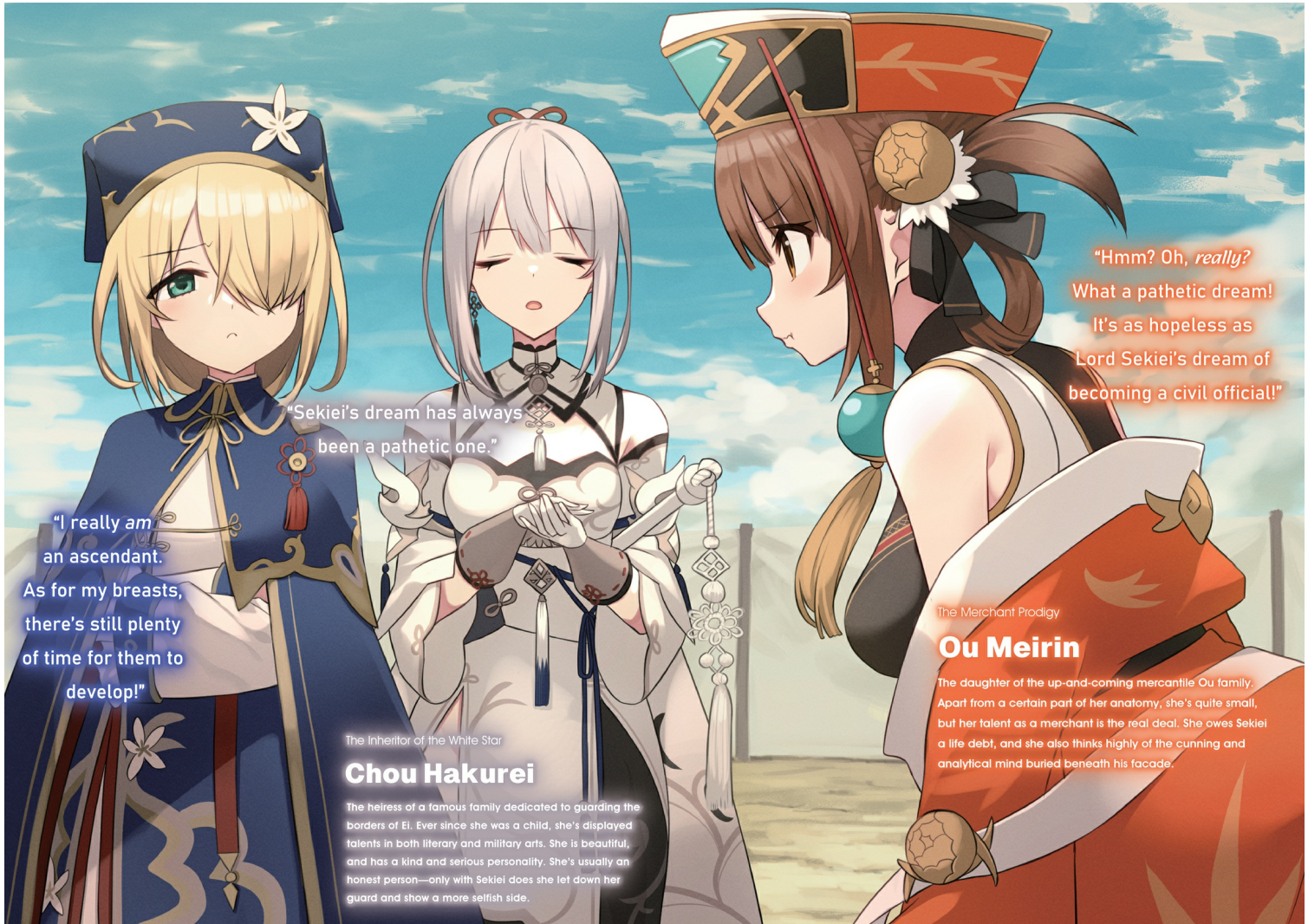
I'm sure you won't turn me down at this stage, right?"

The Cute Strategist with Godlike Intelligence

## Ruri

A young girl who claims to be an ascendant. She's Meirin's acquaintance, and was the one who discovered the legendary Heavenly Swords. Though she possesses an extraordinary mind for tactics and a keen eye for observation, she has a strong dislike of war.





"I really am an ascendant. As for my breasts, there's still plenty of time for them to develop!"

"Sekiei's dream has always been a pathetic one."

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 honest person—only with Sekiei does she let down her guard and show a more selfish side.

"Hmm? Oh, really? What a pathetic dream! It's as hopeless as Lord Sekiei's dream of becoming a civil official!"

The Merchant Prodigy

### Ou Meirin

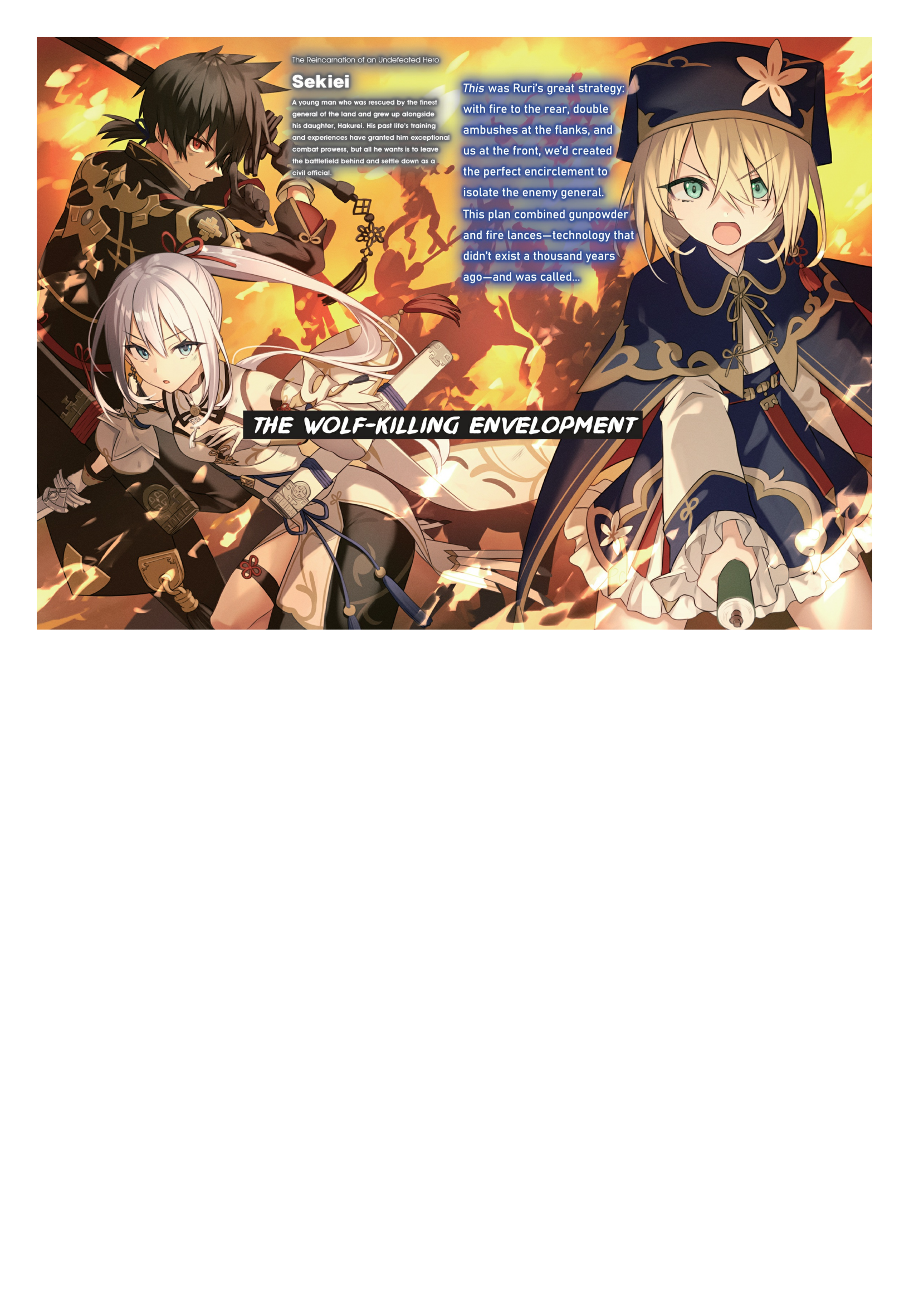
The daughter of the up-and-coming mercantile Ou family. Apart from a certain part of her anatomy, she's quite small, but her talent as a merchant is the real deal. She owes Sekiei a life debt, and she also thinks highly of the cunning and analytical mind buried beneath his facade.





"If I'm not around, then Sekiei will get into all sorts of trouble.  
I'm sure he's thinking that he'll do whatever he can to save me and the other soldiers.  
He's such a handful."





The Reincarnation of an Undefeated Hero

## Sekiei

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

*This was Ruri's great strategy: with fire to the rear, double ambushes at the flanks, and us at the front, we'd created the perfect encirclement to isolate the enemy general. This plan combined gunpowder and fire lances—technology that didn't exist a thousand years ago—and was called...*

## THE WOLF-KILLING ENVELOPMENT



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*“Chou Tairan’s son and daughter  
may appear as well. If they do, evaluate  
their strength and then kill them.*

*Tigers must be killed while  
they are still young.”*

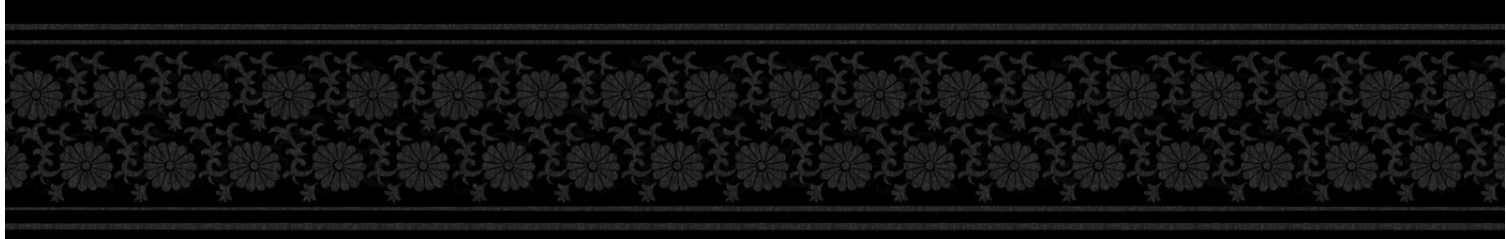
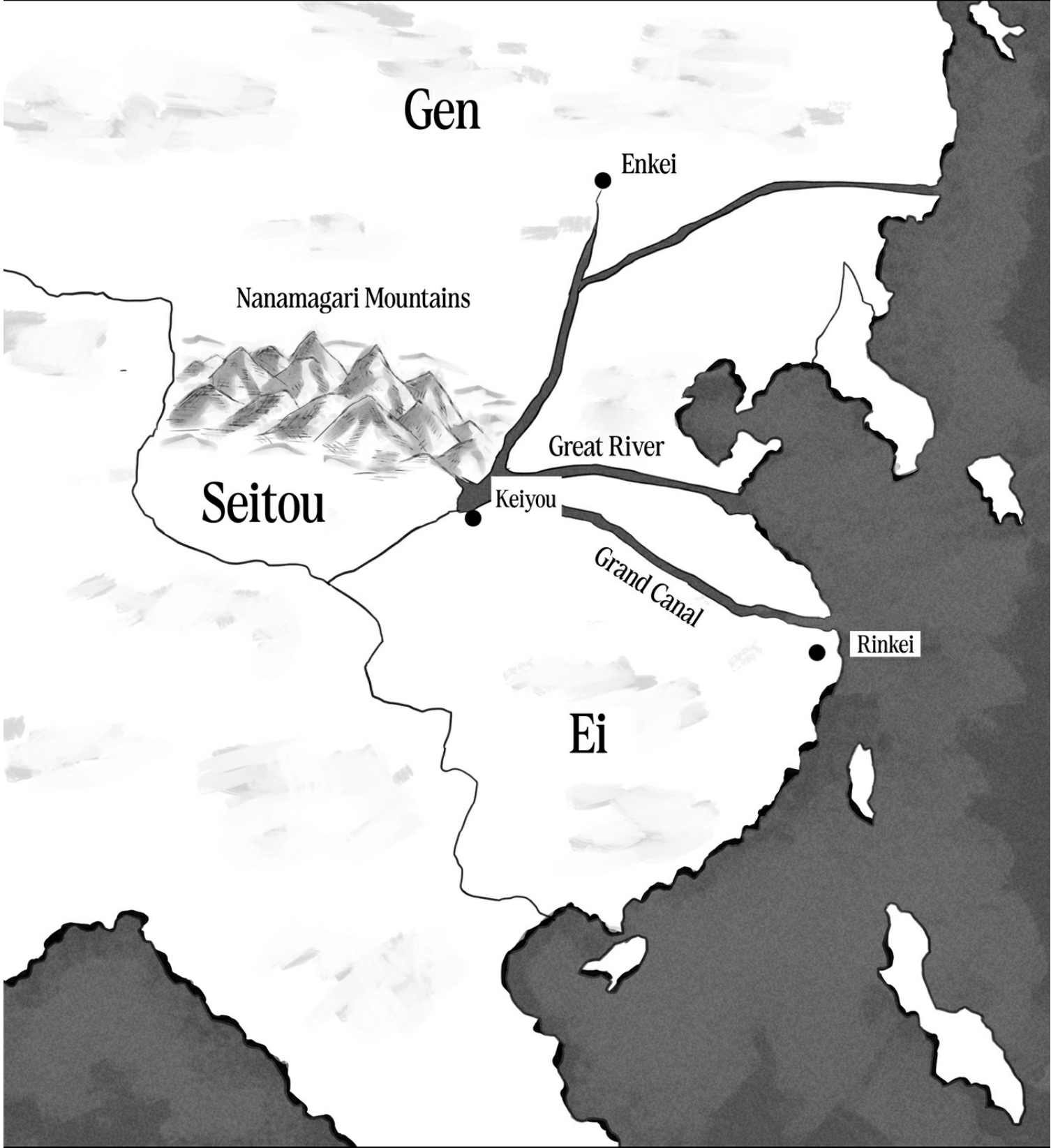
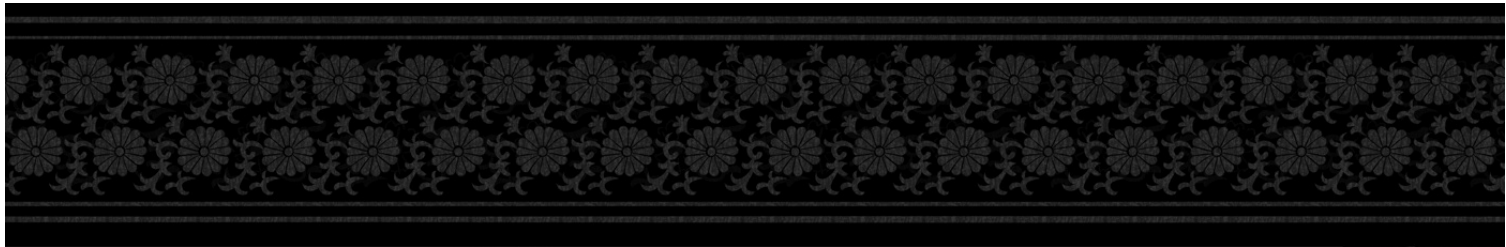


The White Wraith

## 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.







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# Prologue

The Ou family's manor had been built on the finest property that Rinkei, the capital of the Ei Empire, had to offer. Instead of the usual quiet that made it so attractive, however, today it was bustling with activity.

"The ships for Keiyou are leaving at noon, but they haven't been stocked with food or supplies yet. Where are the people who were supposed to handle that?!"

"Get all the free workers and carriages to the ports!"

"The National Shield never loses, but man, I feel like we're making a lot more money than usual!"

"Where's Lady Meirin? We need her orders."

None of the Ou family workers who walked by noticed that they'd just passed me, Shizuka, Lady Ou Meirin's personal attendant. They were too busy calling out orders and words of encouragement to each other as they transported the necessary supplies to the port. After Lady Meirin had her talk with the self-professed ascendant, it had been my job to see her off.

It'd been a month since Gen, which ruled over the land north of the great river, launched a large-scale invasion of Keiyou, Ei's largest, most northern city. Keiyou had managed to fight them off after a vicious battle, but it had not been the National Shield Chou Tairan—the greatest hero of the current empire—who had defeated them. It had been Lord Sekiei, left in charge of the city's defense in Chou Tairan's absence, who'd accomplished the task. Not only did Lord Sekiei share the same black hair I possessed, but he was also Lady Meirin's beloved.

Ever since first meeting him, I'd had the distinct impression that he was no average fellow. However, I hadn't expected him to be so powerful that he could kill one of the feared enemy generals, the Crimson Wolf, and protect Keiyou until General Chou's return! One could say that his triumphs rivaled those of a storybook hero. However, despite the victory, I heard that the city itself had



suffered a lot of damage thanks to the weapons called “catapults.” That wasn’t all. Seitou—a long-term ally of Ei’s—had revealed itself as a traitor, working with the enemy instead.

Since the victory, there had been no movement from either Gen or Seitou, but that didn’t change the fact that Keiyou needed to strengthen its borders now that it had to face enemies from both the north and the west. It was precisely why the merchant families of Rinkei—including the Ou family—were seeing a lot more business than usual.

“I’d say that from Lord Sekiei’s and Lady Hakurei’s perspectives, things went from bad to worse,” I murmured to myself as I thought of them. Through some strange twist of fate, I’d become acquainted with the black-haired boy and the beautiful silver-haired girl. I imagined that despite defeating a famous enemy general, their battles would only become more difficult from here on out. As I headed to my lady’s room, my thoughts on the two members of the Chou family in Keiyou, I heard someone call out.

“M-Miss Shizuka!” An apprentice attendant, her short brown hair whipping behind her as she ran, hurried towards me. She looked in a panic.

I handed her a paper bag filled with sweet sesame dumplings, a gift that I’d bought for my lady, and used my hands to tidy her. “Your hair is a mess. Calm down. What happened to helping Lady Meirin change her clothes?”

“Ah, thank you very much. Um, about the clothes, well...” The girl held on to the bag but looked down in embarrassment as she trailed off. It appeared that she hadn’t been successful. Normally Lady Meirin was a very lively girl who always kept an eye out on the workers in the house. Lately, though, she’d started to spend more time shut away in her room.

I placed a hand to my forehead and heaved a heavy sigh. “What am I going to do with her? Don’t worry, just leave it to me.”

“Th-Thank you so much!”

The apprentice attendant hurried off to her next task so I resumed my journey down the hallway, making my way to the inner sanctums of the manor. Along the way, I looked at all of the strange and bizarre items that Lord and Lady Ou had collected during their travels around the continent. From the



round windows I could see the bright blue sky, with nary a cloud in sight. What nice weather we were having today! Maybe I could take my lady out for a walk later.

I finally reached Lady Meirin's door, which was decorated with a number of intricate carvings. I gently pushed it open and poked my head inside. As I did so, I heard several groans and mumbled sleep talking from the bed.

"Lord Sekiei... Let me, Meirin, take care of you..."

*So, she took advantage of my absence to sleep in?* It was hard to believe that *she* was the one in charge of the family while Lord and Lady Ou were absent. As soon as the battle for Keiyou ended, Lady Hakurei, the heiress of the Chou family, sent us a letter stating: "*Sekiei received a wound on his left arm during the battle, but other than that, he's fine. I'll take care of him.*" Lady Meirin must have been really shocked about that last line.

I sighed and walked past the long table in the room. Upon it I could see the long, narrow wooden box that Seitou's refugees had given us through the ascendant. Inside, it contained a strange anti-cavalry weapon. I approached the bed and then—

"Lady Meirin, it's already noon! Wake up!"

I ripped the exquisite silk blankets right off of her and her pale orange pajamas. Her long and loose brown hair was sticking up every which way. Little Lady Meirin blinked her big eyes before she puffed out her cheeks and sat up.

"Whoa! What the heck, Shizuka!" she yelled, waving her fists about. "Announce yourself if you're going to come into my room! I'm *heartbroken* right now, you know? I want to go to Keiyou where my beloved future husband is, and yet I'm forced to stay here. Then, as if to kick me while I'm down, that terrible and flat-chested Chou Hakurei sent me a letter saying th— Oof!"

I picked up some clothes that had been folded on a nearby chair and pressed them against my lady's face. Then I pointed a finger into the air and started my scolding. "First things first: you need to get changed! If you don't do paperwork this afternoon, then you'll cause everyone a lot of trouble!"

"Okay," Lady Meirin replied, still looking a little peevish, before she started to



do as I told her.

*How come only her breasts have grown larger, but the rest of her body remains so small? Is this some sort of sorcery or magic that's been passed down through the Ei Empire?* This question had bothered me ever since I started working for the Ou family, and it bothered me yet again today. Though I burned with curiosity, I busied myself with tea.

*"After you wake up and make yourself presentable, you must drink a cup of tea."* This was a family tradition, according to Lady Ou.

Lady Meirin quickly changed all by herself, then brushed her teeth and washed her face with the cold water that'd been prepared in the corner of her room before sitting down. I'd served Lady Meirin ever since she was a child, so I was happy every time I noticed her growing or becoming more mature. It made me want to spoil her rotten. Granted, I never showed her that side of me; if she knew I felt that way, then she'd let it get to her head.

Maintaining my stoic exterior, I carefully poured the tea into the cup, breathing in the fruity fragrance from the steam. "Today's tea is from the southern regions. I hope you enjoy it."

In lieu of replying, Lady Meirin let out yet another unhappy groan. I walked behind her to comb through her hair as she picked up the cup and took a sip.

"Oh, this is good," she said. It was obvious from the tone of her voice that she wasn't just paying lip service. "But if I give this to Lord Sekiei, he'll probably be able to guess it from the taste alone. Hmm..."

*And she was so upset just a few seconds ago. How adorable.* I smiled and tied up her hair as my lady lost herself in fantasies about her next meeting with her beloved Lord Sekiei. Once I was done with that, I set a document I'd been given at the port on the round table.

Lady Meirin turned and blinked up at me with her big doe-like eyes. "What's this?"

"It's from Keiyou. I received it when I dropped by the port."

"Oh! Could it be from Lord Sekiei?!" Lady Meirin's face brightened immediately. The sight of her obvious joy and excitement made me smile wider



as well. Lady Meirin looked the best when she had a smile on her face. I didn't have enough words to express my gratitude to Lord Sekiei.

I sat down next to Lady Meirin as she started to read through the document and poured some tea into my own cup. I took my time enjoying it while listening to Lady Meirin's muttering—"Hee hee... Tsk! I knew it! Miss Hakurei really is my enemy... A cat?" Even just observing her filled me with warmth. As I smiled, I noticed Lady Meirin raise her eyebrows and she made a disgruntled sound.

"Lady Meirin? Is something the matter with Lord Sekiei?" I asked. As I poured more tea into her empty cup, I watched her slowly hand the piece of paper towards me. "May I read this?"

"Yeah. Since it's you, I don't mind."

"Thank you very much. Very well then." I smiled at the way she said it, as if it were a given that I'd be granted permission to look at such a sensitive document. Then, I started to read through the letter.

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*To the prodigal daughter of the Ou family, Miss Meirin,*

*I apologize that it has been so long since my last correspondence. I was injured on the battlefield and unable to hold a pen. I hope you will forgive me for my lack of etiquette...*

*You know, everyone I know keeps scolding me for how I write letters to you, so I tried to be polite in this one, but it just doesn't feel right. From here on out, I'll just write in my normal style.*

*For starters, sorry that it took me so long to thank you for sending father and the others to Keiyou. Sure, I injured my left hand, but that doesn't mean I can't write anything. It was impossible to sneak away, though, with the terrifying Lady Chou Hakurei watching over my every move. Sorry. As you know, my dream is to become a civil official in a small local office. I'm not prepared to throw my life away just yet. I'm even hiding out in a storehouse with a cat to write you this letter; that's how scared I am of dying.*

*She's been really overprotective ever since my injury. No matter how many*



*times I assure her that I'm doing fine now, she won't listen to me. In any case, Keiyou still stands thanks to you and your ships, so I'm truly grateful from the bottom of my heart. I'll repay you for this debt someday; father gave his word as well. My injury is healed up now, so please don't worry about me.*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*Sekiei, who is starting to suspect that the cat in his lap is Hakurei's spy*

*PS: I received the Heavenly Swords and they really saved my life. However, no one knows if these are the real deal and I only have Black Star with me. White Star's Hakurei's now. And you know, the Heavenly Swords are a pair of weapons, right? I'll help you out with most of your requests and lend you my strength if you need it, but you should take some time to think a bit more about the marriage thi—*

*Oh, crap! Hakurei found me! I'll write you another letter soon! See you!*

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"Hmm, I see. As I figured, Lord Sekiei's unharmed." Upon finishing the letter, I folded it up neatly and returned it to my lady.

About a thousand years ago, the Tou Empire accomplished the unprecedented feat of uniting all the lands on the continent under a single flag. The Great General Kou Eihou helped to accomplish this with his twin swords, and the Imperial Chancellor Ou Eifuu inherited them. Those swords were known as the Heavenly Swords.

Lord Sekiei had given Lady Meirin an impossible task: "If you can get me the Heavenly Swords, I'll consider marrying you." In order to locate them, she'd looked through all the historical documents and books she could get her hands on—and even asked the ascendant I'd seen off earlier for help—until finally discovering them in an old temple in the west. Apparently, people in this country believed that the one who held the Heavenly Swords would be fated to rule the lands and would gain unparalleled strength in combat.

*How does he know the names of the swords? And both he and Lady Hakurei were able to draw them from their sheaths? No one knew the name of those swords, nor could anyone—myself included—draw them.*

“Yep, he’s fine! I’m truly glad to hear that. Even after Miss Hakurei wrote me her letter, I was still anxious... Wait, no, that’s not what we’re supposed to be discussing here!” Lady Meirin shot to her feet, almost toppling over the cups of tea on the table. Then, in a serious voice, she muttered, “It’s so unfair.”

“Excuse me?” I replied, tilting my head even as I picked up the letter so it wouldn’t get wet.

I was waiting for the rest of Lady Meirin’s words when she suddenly looked up and slammed her palms on the table. “I...I...I also want to take advantage of Lord Sekiei’s injury and monopolize his time!” She practically roared the words.





“I see,” I replied, unsure of how else to respond. As Lord Sekiei wrote in his letter, Lady Meirin was a prodigy. Eventually everyone in Rinkei—no, in the Ei Empire—would know her name. However, love truly does make fools of us all. Not even Lady Meirin’s intelligent brain could overcome it.

Lady Meirin continued to slap her hands on the table as she yelled, ignoring the warmth with which I watched her. “She can’t trick me. I know exactly what she’s up to. The Chou heiress may look and act all cool and unaffected, but she turns pathetic when Lord Sekiei’s involved. She’s definitely taking the opportunity to get all up in his business! How unfair! What a dirty cheater! I also want to shut down any arguments with ‘Lord Sekiei is injured, you know’ and help out with his work, or feed him, or sleep by his side!”

“I’m sure that she’s not doing all of that.”

“She *is*! I know this because if I was in *her* shoes, *I’d* be doing all of that!”

From what I could tell of Lady Hakurei, she was able to control herself, and so I didn’t think that Lady Meirin needed to worry so much. However, my lady, her arms crossed, refused to be calmed.

“I even went out of my way to beg Ruri for help when it came to looking for the Heavenly Swords! Lord Sekiei is so stupid! Such a meanie! How can he treat me like I’m nothing?!”

“I don’t think he’s treating you like you’re nothing,” I said with a soft smile as I held my small mistress in an embrace. “Lord Sekiei is a very honest person. He was so adamant about writing a letter to you in his own hand that he even went and hid from Lady Hakurei to do so. Weren’t you happy to receive a letter from him?”

“Well, I, um, was happy, certainly,” Lady Meirin said, each word quieter than the last. Her cheeks flushed as she spoke. When it came to her work as the Ou family’s heiress, she acted much older than her age—but when it came to romance, she was the exact same as she always had been.

I stroked her thick brown hair and continued, “As for the Heavenly Swords we entrusted to Lady Hakurei, I believe that Lord Sekiei has a point. The only people who would know whether those swords were truly the Heavenly Swords



themselves are the legendary Twin Eis—Kou Eihou or Ou Eifuu. We'd have to ask them..."

"Shizuka? What's the matter?" Lady Meirin asked from within my arms. She must've thought it strange that I trailed off, my hand stopping in its soothing motions.

"Ah, nothing," I replied. "I was just thinking that the lady ascendant might have had an idea as to the swords' true identity."

"Oh, you're right! We can ask Ruri! She'll definitely be able to prove me right!" Her eyes sparkled as she curled her hands up into little fists.

I thought back to the port this morning. Even here in Rinkei, which was full of people from foreign countries, she stood out with her strange hair and eye color. I shook my head and said, "Unfortunately, Miss Ruri has already left Rinkei. She departed this morning, saying that she wanted to see with her own eyes how the Chou family was coming along. There has been some suspicious talk from the palace, so I believe we did the right thing in getting her a boat sooner rather than later."

"Huh?" Lady Meirin stopped moving and her eyes slowly widened. Predicting what was about to happen, I covered my ears with my hands. Lady Meirin took a deep breath and then... "LORD SEKIEI, MISS HAKUREI, AND RURI! YOU GUYS ARE ALL MEAN DUMMIES!"

Lady Meirin's scream echoed throughout the Ou manor and all of the little birds in the courtyard flew away as one.

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"There is no need for any further arguments! Seitou has spit upon our long years of friendship and for that, we must destroy them! I'm sure that morale among the northern horsemen is low too, after suffering a defeat at Keiyou!"

The bellows of Ei's fat lieutenant chancellor, Rin Chuudou, echoed through the imperial court filled with all the officials of the empire. The lieutenant chancellor was bald and his limbs were thick as logs, but though he was almost sixty years old, he seemed much younger than his actual age. His eyes, however, lacked any thought behind them, so clouded they were by the lust for

power. His clothes, too, were overly elaborate to the point of garishness.

He might have been a distant relative of the royal family and did have a few accomplishments when it came to domestic affairs, but he wasn't the kind of man who should be in charge of a large empire's politics. I supposed that he wanted to use this opportunity to take the position of chancellor from me, You Bunshou. His right-hand man, who was rumored to always wear a fox mask, must have been the one to plant this idea in his brain.

I glanced over at the dais where the emperor was. The young noble was dressed in bright yellow robes and seated upon a throne engraved with a dragon. He was watching over our debate with a troubled expression on his face. After the death of our wise empress several years ago, His Imperial Majesty had taken on Chuudou's daughter as his favorite concubine.

*If only I had raised an objection back then! That was my mistake.* But there was no time for regret. I stroked my white beard and, in a soft voice, chided my political rival. "Sir Chuudou, please calm yourself. I can understand how you feel, but it would cause this country a great deal of trouble if we were to invade Seitou. We would also need to talk things through with General Chou, who is out on the front lines as we speak."

"Hmph! What is there to discuss with the son of a commoner? That man has no loyalty to this country. He disobeyed His Imperial Majesty and left the capital of his own accord! Even if we were to invade Seitou, we can leave him in Keiyou and have him watch that border like he usually does."

Chou Tairan's father and grandfather had both been commoners, it was true. It was also true that until recently, he'd been in Rinkei due to His Imperial Majesty's summons. After receiving the news that the Gen army had crossed the great river and was invading Keiyou, however, he returned north and chased out the enemy. It hardly bore saying that Rinkei's citizens and the palace officials had all raised a glass to celebrate his heroics. And yet now, the lieutenant chancellor and his followers would dare to insult General Chou, despite the fact that he'd saved us from a Gen attack!

Though I wasn't able to keep my voice from getting lower at the sheer audacity of the lieutenant chancellor, I managed to remind him of the truth in



calm tones. “That ‘son of a commoner,’ if I am to borrow your words, is the only reason Keiyou avoided falling into enemy hands. He is also the reason we were able to kill one of the Four Wolves that Gen is so proud of.”

“Grand Chancellor, you are much too naive! Every time something happens at the front lines, the Chou army is all anyone can talk about! No wonder they’ve become so full of themselves!”

“So then, what do you suggest?”

Around fifty years ago, even before we lost the land north of the river, our country had been infamous for our weak army. The massively powerful Gen army was always looking for a chance to conduct a southern invasion, but it was the National Shield Chou Tairan and his army of elite soldiers who were keeping them in check.

Rin Chuudou turned to directly address the emperor, his folds of fat swinging about with his movements. “Your Imperial Majesty, I also acknowledge and respect Chou Tairan’s long years of service. However, at the same time, that man has constantly spoken of the need for a northern campaign, which is simply unrealistic. I am starting to suspect that this is due to his personal greed. He seeks the chance to gain more military achievements for himself.”

“Impossible! He would never think that!” I yelled as I stood up, unable to control myself in the moment.

If we suspected Chou Tairan’s true allegiance and intentions, then what other general could we trust in this country? I looked around, but every official in the imperial court was either looking down at their feet or making sure they didn’t meet my eyes. *Don’t they know that their philosophy of not rocking the boat can lead to disastrous consequences?*

The lieutenant chancellor wasn’t done. He continued to move about as he went on, “Please order me to destroy Seitou, that country of rats! According to my intel, none of the northern horsemen are stationed within its borders. If we don’t make our move now, then Keiyou won’t last either! I will push my own old bones to stand on the battlefield myself, destroy that vile country, and offer you peace of mind! We have the powerful Imperial Guard, stronger than any elite force! If we also include the soldiers stationed in the west and the south,

then we can easily amass an army of over a hundred fifty thousand! With that army”—for an instant, Chuudou turned to look at me, a gloating and mocking look in his eye—“we shall launch a surprise attack from Angan, to Seitou’s south!”

The Imperial Guard was a major military force that was under His Imperial Majesty’s direct command. As for the soldiers stationed in the west and the south, they were all highly trained fighters, even if they hadn’t seen any action these past few years. The lieutenant chancellor’s plan was to remove them from their positions so that they could launch an attack? And he didn’t even plan on using Keiyou as the base of operations?!

It was true that if we invested that amount of manpower in an invasion, we’d be able to overpower both the Gen and the Seitou armies. We might even be able to take them off guard with this unexpected attack. However, without the Grand Canal, it would certainly be difficult to transport supplies across multiple fronts. Horses weren’t able to bear as much load as a ship. Even with these difficulties...it was hard to deny the allure of an ambush.

*The way that the lieutenant general presented his plan seems off; I don’t believe he came up with this himself. I can’t possibly let this idea go thr—*

“Bunshou,” the emperor said in a curt voice.

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty,” I replied immediately, turning to face him and lowering my head.

For a moment, a heavy silence reigned over the room. I heard the emperor descend from the dais and walk towards me. I felt a weight on my shoulder. When I glanced at it, I saw the emperor’s hand.

“I believe in Tairan,” the emperor said. “He is not someone who would succumb to avarice. However, Chuudou has a point. Seitou is our enemy now and defeating them would be far easier than crossing the river to conduct a northern campaign. If we can smite Seitou now, then should we not take the chance to rid ourselves of a powerful enemy? I hope you will take charge of the military logistics for this attack.”

It took me a moment before I trusted my voice to remain steady.  
“Understood, Your Imperial Majesty. I shall do everything in my power to make



this campaign succeed.”

Up until this point, we’d used the river as a natural barrier to stave off Gen’s invasion. However, if Seitou, located northwest of Keiyou, was our enemy, then even Chou Tairan would have a difficult time in repelling them. Though it was hard to say if defeating Seitou was possible, I had to admit that the lieutenant chancellor had a point.

His Imperial Majesty removed his hand from my shoulder and sharply barked out, “Rin Chuudou, I order you to lead my army and annihilate Seitou! Do not let your guard down. You may take captains from the southern and western armies with you; they’re accustomed to the savages’ methods and strategies.”

“Y-Your Imperial Majesty, I am grateful for your concern, but—” the lieutenant chancellor started, looking and sounding off-kilter.

“Then may I recommend the Phoenix Wing of the southern army, Jo Shuuhou, and the Tiger Fang of the western army, U Jouko?” I cut in, speaking over Chuudou. I could hear him gritting his teeth, but I ignored him and pressed my fists together in a bow. “It’s been over twenty years since those two started their careers, and I’ve yet to hear of them losing a battle. It will surely boost our soldiers’ morale if they’re able to fight alongside two of the Three Great Generals, who are said to rival Chou Tairan in strength. May I suggest adding a team from the Chou army as well? This will be a major battle, after all. This is naught but the opinion of an elderly man, but I believe that giving Chou Tairan the opportunity to save face is the mark of a true emperor’s magnanimity.”

# Chapter One

“Wow, it’s only been a few days since restoration efforts started, but the city’s really coming along!”

I, Chou Sekiei, was the adopted son of the Chou family, defenders of the city of Keiyou. Located in the far north of the Ei Empire, Keiyou was the capital of Koshuu. I looked out over the eastern district of the city as I listened to the rhythmic thumping of wooden hammers coming from half-restored buildings. I was genuinely impressed.

A month ago, Gen had invaded from north of the great river and caused a great deal of damage to Keiyou. However, the holes in the roofs and walls were already closed up, and all of the pillars that had burned and collapsed had been cleared away.

“It is, isn’t it? We’re even ahead of schedule,” the beautiful girl next to me agreed with a nod. Her long and luscious silver hair was tied up with a red ribbon, and her striking sapphire eyes were narrowed. She was Hakurei, daughter of the Chou family. Despite her professional tone, however, her eyes were gentle. I couldn’t blame her for how happy she looked; every day we’d been visiting all the districts to check out the restoration efforts. She must be delighted to see how much progress everyone was making.

I grinned at my childhood friend, dressed in her usual white clothing. “It’s all thanks to father for personally leading the restoration efforts.” Though Hakurei’s father, National Shield Chou Tairan, was a famous general who’d protected the Ei Empire’s northern border from Gen for many long years, he was also a skilled governor. *Next time I have a moment, I’ll ask him for some tips.*

As I crossed my arms, my mind already set on seeking father’s advice, Hakurei gave me a distinctly unimpressed look. “What a weird expression you’re making. I bet you’re probably thinking about something foolish, like what you should do to become a local civil official. It’s an impossible dream, so you might



as well give it up sooner rather than later.”

“Wha—?! You know, sometimes, it’s better to keep your opinions to yourself!” I complained, unable to hold back. My dream was to become a civil official so that I could live a peaceful and relaxing life—I didn’t want to become a military official and go prove my bravery on the battlefield. I wanted to live a simple life with paperwork as my only daily duty. However, even though we’d spent over a decade together since Chou Tairan had taken me in, Chou Hakurei didn’t seem to understand my philosophy.

We were standing close to a bucket full of water, which had been placed there in case a fire broke out. I could see myself and my black clothes in the reflection, but Hakurei, her expression calm, dipped a slender finger into the liquid and disrupted the image. “I finished this morning’s paperwork before you did.”

“W-Well, yeah, but that was because you told me to avoid using my injured left arm as much as possible! If I were able to use it, then—”

“Oh, what’s this? Lord Sekiei, member of the Chou family and slayer of the great Crimson Wolf, making excuses?” Hakurei said, tilting her head to her side as she tapped her pale finger against her chin. It was obvious that she was doing this on purpose. The alabaster sheath of White Star—one of a pair of weapons known as the Heavenly Swords—swung slightly from where it was strapped to her belt.

*I can’t believe her! She only ever makes cute expressions befitting her age when she’s poking fun at me!* I jutted my lips out in a pout as I thought back to the recent battle.

Nguyen Gui—the Crimson Wolf and one of the most highly feared generals of the Gen Empire—had been a formidable enemy indeed. He’d led his army through the great forest, which no one had ever set foot in before, and crossed the Nanamagari Mountains. After forcing the commerce country of Seitou to surrender and join the Gen Empire as a vassal state, he launched an attack on Keiyou.

A thousand years ago, the Tou Empire became the first country to unify all of the lands in the continent. Back then I’d been known as Kou Eihou, the Great

General of the Tou Empire. With my twin Heavenly Swords in hand, I'd been undefeated. In this life I possessed memories—albeit rather foggy ones—of my time as Kou Eihou. Despite that, Crimson Wolf had almost managed to defeat me. We won only thanks to our soldiers' tenacity and the residents' assistance. It was also thanks to father's decision to leave Rinkei and come to our aid, bringing with him the strongest members of the family army. The biggest asset that contributed to our victory was...

I touched the obsidian sheath of Black Star, the paired sword to White Star, to disguise a wave of bashfulness. "I wasn't the only reason we won against Nguyen. You and father came to help us out too."

Hakurei sucked in a breath and her eyes widened before she quickly regained her usual cool demeanor and tossed her hair. The silver strands shimmered under the bright sunlight. "Well, of course we did. You're hopeless without me."

I shrugged, making sure the movement was exaggerated and theatrical, as I lamented, "Man, you're so mean. Where, oh where did the adorable Chou Hakurei of the past go?"

"That should be my line. Please give me back the cute and honest Sekiei of the past."

We glared at each other—a usual occurrence during our fights—when the soldiers fixing the roofs and the familiar residents transporting supplies started to call out to us.

"Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei!"

"Young master, has your injury healed up?"

"I'd heard the rumors, but I guess they're true."

"They're really going around the city together! ♪"

"That bullheaded young master has finally understood a woman's heart!"

I stared at Hakurei, and she stared right back at me. As if we'd rehearsed it, we each took a small step back and away from each other. I wasn't sure why, but I started to feel my face heat up. Running my hand through my hair,

messing up the black strands, I yelled at everyone, “You guys are all so... Ugh, never mind. Just make sure no one gets hurt, all right?”

After the soldiers and citizens waved their arms or slapped their chests with good cheer, they returned to their work. Ever since we’d fought off Gen, people had started talking to me a lot more—like what happened just now—and I was always a little unsure of how to respond to them. I was about to reach up and put my hands around the back of my head when Hakurei suddenly grabbed my sleeve.

“Don’t use your left hand,” she said.

I lowered my right hand as well, since it had just been hovering awkwardly in the air, and touched the sheath again. “So, what are we going to do after this?”

“After we finish checking on this district, we’re done with our inspections for the day.”

“Got it.”

We slowly made our way down an alleyway; I didn’t mind spending time like this. I glanced over at Hakurei by my side and suggested, “Why don’t we take this opportunity and go check out the market? I’m hungry after walking around so much. Thanks to a certain overprotective someone, I always get dragged back to the manor after inspections.”

Hakurei’s face twisted in obvious irritation. “It seems that there’s a difference in how we’re viewing the current situation.” She picked up her pace until she stood in front of me. With one hand on her hip and her other hand pointing at my face, she started, “Listen closely. You’re *injured*, and it’s an injury so severe that an ordinary person wouldn’t be able to hold anything for at least half a year. It’s bizarre that you were able to recover within a month. Please repent.”

“Why do I have to apologize?! If anyone is in the wrong here, it’d be you, because we can all agree that you are being overprotective—”

“Father is on my side about this, as he told me not to let you wander around by yourself. If you have any complaints, why don’t you go and raise them to him yourself?”

“Urk.” That was all I could say to her immediate rebuttal. Father was



surprisingly overprotective, even though he seemed the rough-and-tumble type of parent. They really were father and daughter. I looked away from Hakurei's glare and tried to calm her down. "Come on, it doesn't hurt anymore. I'm fine. I swear, I'm not always that carele—"

"You are. You always start to push yourself to perform all sorts of impossible feats. How do you think I feel, getting roped into your crazy stunts?"

"D-Do you really have to say it like that?!" *You're a cruel mistress, Chou Hakurei. Absolutely cruel.* It was hard to tell from how she acted nowadays, but she really used to be such a cute little girl. She followed me everywhere I went and— Wait. "Getting roped into my crazy stunts"?

Seeing me fall silent obviously made her curious, and Hakurei asked, "What's the matter? What's with that look in your eye?"

"Ah, um, I was just thinking that if I ever got into any trouble, you being by my side for it...is a sure thing?"

As I finished speaking a strong gust of wind blew past us, causing her silver hair and red ribbon to billow. Her cheeks and neck growing redder and redder was an obvious sign that she'd realized she misspoke. She had never been the type of person who would intentionally reveal her soft, inner core. Then, with a long growl, she started punching me with both fists.

"D-Don't aim for my left arm!" I exclaimed as I dodged her attacks. "Did you already forget I'm technically injured?!"

Hakurei puffed her cheeks out to show her disapproval and said in a flat voice, "Very well. Since you're healed up now, I'll no longer go easy on you. We will restart our horse races, as well as our swordsmanship and archery training. You won't say that you don't want to, will you? After all, your arm is all healed up, isn't it?"

*Wh-What a cheater!* Despite my chest burning with the injustice of it all, I knew that there was no point in arguing with her—that was a lesson I'd learned after dealing with her for these past ten years. In this kind of situation, I simply needed to do this!

"So! About those horse races—"

“You. Will. Do. Them. Right?”

“Yes...”

I’d tried to open up negotiations with her, but she was exerting so much pressure that it completely destroyed my plan. *Ah. So I won’t be able to sleep in anymore.* I was lost in my grief for a moment before I noticed the scent of flowers. “Hmm? Hakurei?”

She’d pinched my sleeve between her fingers, the action so sudden that I was taken aback. It was one thing for her to do this when we were alone, but she almost never displayed affection like this in front of others.

She must have noticed me staring at her because she explained in a hurried voice, “It wouldn’t do if you got lost in the market, so... Is the pain really all gone? You’re not lying, are you?” She seemed anxious that she might’ve been too harsh. I was reminded once again of her kind nature, that she would worry about something like that.

I reached out and brushed off some dust from her hair. “I told you already, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“It was nothing.” With that, Hakurei’s gaze dropped, as if she was too embarrassed to meet my eyes.

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Keiyou was located at a strategic point on the river that bisected the continent into north and south. It was why the city was able to import goods from many different regions—as well as why the market was always a lively place to be. As per usual, countless stalls were placed out under the clear sky, and I could hear loud conversations from every direction.

Merchants sold large quantities of fresh food such as meat, fish, and vegetables. Some stalls had delicious-looking dishes and desserts on offer. Others displayed bolts of cloth and piles of folded clothing alongside animal pelts, china, pottery, and many rare items imported from overseas. *If we weren’t on the front lines, we’d be able to develop so much more as a city,* I lamented.

As Hakurei and I walked around the market and chatted, I noticed that the

crowd had drastically thinned—we'd wandered into a narrow alley without realizing. Here, I saw a young boy wearing a coat that covered his entire body, head and all. He was sitting on a bamboo chair and snipping at a white flower with a pair of shears.

"Oh, wow," I said.

We stopped and looked down at the bouquets that were stacked in a bucket.  
*Do these grow around Keiyou?*

"That's not a very common flower," Hakurei commented.

Curious, I looked down at the small storekeeper. "Hey, little boy, can I ask you a question? Where did you get these flowers from?"

The little boy looked up just before—*snap!*—he used his shears to bisect the blossom from the stem. He had light hair and emerald eyes, which was a fairly rare combination even in Keiyou. I couldn't see his left eye with his bangs over it. He looked like he hailed from one of the countries said to exist past the Hakkotsu Desert northwest of Seitou.

"I can't tell you because then I won't be able to make a living," he said, a hint of anger in his voice. "Also..."

Next to me, I could hear Hakurei mutter, "You idiot."

The little boy stood up from his chair, revealing how long his golden hair was, and glared at me. "I'm a girl. If you're not going to buy anything, can you get a move on? I don't like people who participate in wars."

*Shit! I seriously messed up.*

Now that she was standing up, it was more than obvious that she was a girl. Her long hair, loosely tied with a blue ribbon, was no longer hidden behind her body. I could see that she barely had any curves, though.

Feeling guilty, I clasped my hands together in a show of sincerity. "I'm sorry!" I exclaimed. "Please forgive me. I'll buy some flowers off of you."

The girl with her eye hidden by her bangs continued to stare at me. A cold and heavy silence stretched out between us.

*It's! So! Awkward!*



Hakurei sighed, sounding exasperated. “What am I going to do with you? I’m sorry,” she said, directing the apology to the girl. “He’s really slow. I hope you’ll forgive him. These flowers look really nice.”

The girl’s visible right eye blinked and she muttered, “A beautiful girl with silver hair and blue eyes? So then, that black sword is...” She trailed off, looking down at the ground, before she met Hakurei’s eyes again and said in a louder voice, “I think your hair and eyes are really nice, Princess of the Chou family.”

“Thank you very much.” Hakurei gave the girl a gentle smile.

Thanks to her unique appearance, everyone in Keiyou knew of Hakurei. Her polite apology and gratitude softened the atmosphere and I breathed a sigh of relief. *No matter how many memories of my past life I have, they’re never of any use in situations like this.* I smiled to myself before I noticed that the girl was staring at my waist—and Hakurei’s. Was that curiosity I saw in her eyes?

The girl fiddled with her hair as she said, “Those swords...”

“Huh? Ah, yes, this is my partner. It can cut through anything and is really sturdy to boot.”

According to the first emperor of the Tou Empire, the swords were crafted from a star that fell from the heavens and were capable of slicing through anything in the world. He hadn’t been exaggerating. They were able to withstand my strength—a feat no other weapon was capable of—without issue, and in the recent battle against the Crimson Wolf, it had sliced through even his metal armor.

The blonde girl put away her shears and asked in a quiet voice, “You were able to remove it from its sheath?”



“Huh?” I said. “Why in the world would I carry around a sword I can’t use? What an interesting thing to— Mmgh!”

“You keep your mouth shut,” Hakurei said, covering the part of me in question with her hand. She sounded frazzled for some reason.

Hakurei’s movement caused White Star to swing in its position at her waist and I saw the girl’s gaze flick over to stare at it. *She knows about the Heavenly Swords? Is she a spy from Seitou or Gen?* I gave Hakurei’s arm a light pat and shot her a look, signaling for her to move her hand away.

“All right, all right, I’ll keep quiet. Here.” I removed a flower from the bucket, wiped the water off the stem with my sleeve, and then placed it in Hakurei’s bangs.

“S-Sekiei?! Wha...?!” The young heiress of the Chou family was famed for her ability to stay calm and collected no matter the situation, and yet she was so startled that she began to touch and play with her hair, at an obvious loss for what to do.

I took out my wallet and gave the blonde girl money for the flower. Her green eyes widened when she noticed that I’d given her more copper coins than necessary. “Yep, as I figured, the flower looks good on you,” I said to Hakurei before looking at the girl. “You agree with me, don’t you? Wrap me a bouquet.”

The girl, holding on to the money with both hands, nodded. Then, she looked over at Hakurei, who was standing there with her hands pressed against her cheeks. “Is he always like this?”

Hakurei didn’t say anything for a while before she finally nodded. “He is.”

“It must be difficult.”

“It is. Thank you for your concern. I think you already know who I am, but allow me an official introduction: my name is Chou Hakurei. May I know your name as well?”

“I’m Ruri,” the girl said, her answer curt. She turned to me and pressed the bouquet into my hands. “Think through your actions a little more.”

*Did I do something that deserved such a warning?!* It didn’t seem fair, but I



accepted the flowers anyway. That was when I heard a deafening yell.

“THIEF! S-SOMEONE CATCH THEM!”

The three of us jumped and looked over at the main street. Two rough-looking men were running towards us at top speed. Their clothes were grimy and they didn’t look like locals of Keiyou. It appeared that they were running away from some patrolling soldiers.

“Hakurei, keep this safe!” I yelled as I tossed her the bouquet.

“Fine,” she sighed.

I ran and stood in the center of the alley with my arms spread wide.

“Move out of the way!” one of the men roared.

“You wanna die today, brat?!” Both of them pulled out their daggers as they continued to race at us.

*Looks like I don’t have a choice.* I clenched my hand in a fist, but before I could do anything, a young, sharp voice rang out from a nearby roof.

“I’ll take the one on the left! I leave the one on the right to you!”

Before I could say anything, a young man with brown hair jumped from above and landed a flying kick on one of the ruffians, his coattails swirling around him. With his darker complexion, he looked like someone from one of the southern regions. The man he’d kicked yelped and fell to the ground. He didn’t get up; it seemed that he’d been knocked unconscious.

“Y-You bastard! How dare you?!” The other ruffian, incensed at how his friend had been taken down, rushed at the young man and raised his dagger, prepared to use it. However—

“That’s enough,” I said, grabbing his wrist and twisting it behind his back. He screamed as he fell to his knees, dropping the single-edged dagger as he did so. I picked it up and spun it in my hand as I sighed at the pickpockets. “You guys know this is Keiyou, right? The land under the protection of *the* National Shield, Chou Tairan? Stealing in broad daylight is a one-way ticket to a jail cell. Where did you guys come from anyway?”

“Eek!”

“Hello?” I stared down at the pickpocket, but it seemed like he’d lost consciousness, his face pale. “He fainted?” I didn’t feel like I’d done or said anything *that* threatening. “Sorry. Thanks for your help.”

My final words were directed at the young man with the coat, who had downed the other thief. *Wait, he’s remarkably handsome. How come the heavens are so unfair?!* Without knowing what kind of inner thoughts I was having about him, he gave me a bright smile that gave his already young face an even more youthful appearance.

“Oh, don’t worry about it! I just did what anyone else would—” He stopped and then said, “Wait. Black hair and red eyes? Are you—” Just then a sharp whistle, the kind made by blowing through your fingers, rang out. It was the same kind used when issuing orders on the battlefield. The young man looked surprised before lowering his head in a deep bow. “I sincerely apologize, but I must hurry on my way. I’ll take my leave now!”

“H-Hey, wait!” But even though I tried to stop him, the young man ran off. In the distance stood a large figure also wearing a long coat. Just who were they? I was racking my brain when the patrolling soldiers hurried up to us.

“Lord Sekiei?! Why are you...?”

I recognized the young, earnest-looking officer at the front of the group as Teiha, a distant relative of the old general Raigen. Raigen—“Gramps,” I liked to call him—was one of our officers and a longtime supporter of Chou Tairan.

I handed Teiha the dagger that the pickpocket had been holding and gave him a pat on the shoulder. “I’ll leave the rest to you. I just need to know where these guys came from; I’m guessing it’s from west of here, though.”

Teiha’s face tensed. He offered me a salute and a “Yessir!” before he started barking out orders to the other soldiers.

*West of Keiyō.* The knife that the pickpocket used had a unique blade with only a single edge. They must have escaped from Seitō. I returned to where Hakurei was, still deep in thought. *Huh?* I noticed that she wasn’t holding a bouquet in her hands, nor did she have a flower in her bangs. I was curious as to what happened, but instead Hakurei started offering me her brutally honest opinion.

“You seem to have lost your edge.” As per usual, she never granted me any lenience in her assessments of my performance.

“Did you forget who’s to blame for me not being able to train properly?! Where’s your bouquet anyway?” I looked around but I didn’t see the little girl from earlier anywhere. “And where did the storekeeper go?”

“Miss Ruri said that she had somewhere she needed to be and she gave us back our money. You may not believe this, but the flowers and the bouquet all vanished. Who was that young man just now?”

“He wasn’t from around here, but he was a pretty good fighter.” What a weird day it had been, between meeting that mysterious blonde girl and the well-trained young man from the southern regions.

“Oh, yes, I saw. And...”

I waited for Hakurei to finish, but when she remained silent, I leaned forwards to get a closer look at her face. “Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“No, nothing. I think it was just my mind playing tricks on me. There’s no way *he* could be in Keiyou, after all.” Hakurei sounded like she was trying to convince herself. She gave me back my coins and then wrapped her arm around mine—it looked like the events of the day had put her on edge. “Let’s go back. I think we’ve proved how dangerous it is for you to wander around by yourself, so from now on, you have to accompany me everywhere I go, and vice versa. That is an order and I will accept no argument. Now, let’s buy another bouquet on our way home. You’ll be the one paying.”

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

Hakurei’s attendant, a brunette woman named Asaka, greeted us when we returned to the Chou family manor situated in the eastern district of Keiyou. She had a cheery smile on her face and held a bamboo broom in her hand; she must have been in the middle of cleaning.

“Thank you for greeting us,” Hakurei replied.

“Hi!” As we approached her, I held out the paper bag in my hand. “I bought



some fried dumplings for you and the other attendants to share.”

“Oh my! Thank you so much,” Asaka replied. The smile on her face became even brighter.

I waved off the gratitude and put my arms behind my head. Asaka was always taking care of us, so returning the favor with a gift like this was no issue.

“Asaka, could you prepare two vases for us?” Hakurei asked. In her hands, she was holding the replacement bouquet we’d bought at the market. As for why there was also a new flower in her hair, well, I suppose you could blame it on me succumbing to her silent pressure.

“Two vases, you say?” Asaka asked, blinking while still holding on to her broom and the paper bag. I was also unsure of where Hakurei was going with this so I just watched the conversation in silence. “Would you not only require a single... Ah, I see! I understand. Please leave it to me! ♪”

“Thank you.”

“Huh?” Apparently I was the only person present who didn’t know what was going on. Perhaps they planned on placing the extra vase in father’s room?

Hakurei turned to me and said, “I’m a little sweaty, so I’m going to take a bath. Please don’t go wandering off on your own.” Inside of the manor there was a natural hot spring, which meant that people could take baths anytime they wanted. It might have been thanks to the minerals in the water that I had been able to recover from my injuries with such speed.

“All right, all right,” I sighed. “Hurry up and go.”

Hakurei stared at me for a moment, obviously dissatisfied with my answer, but she didn’t say anything and simply made her way down the hallway. *Does she remember that she still has that flower in her bangs? Oh well, time to go back to my room and continue reading my—* That was when Asaka grabbed me by the collar of my shirt.

“Whoa!”

“Lord Sekiei, please follow me! ★” Despite her tone, when I looked over my shoulder at her I could see a serious expression on Asaka’s face. “Lord Chou is

waiting for you; there are matters he wishes to discuss. I have never seen him more troubled.”

Father’s room was in the back of the manor and when I arrived, I rang the bell by the door to announce myself. As soon as the light chime had started to ring through the air, a deep voice called out, “Enter.”

“Excuse me.” I walked into the barren room; it held only an old desk, a bench, and a bed. It didn’t look at all like the personal bedroom of the most powerful and famous general in the Ei Empire.

“Ah, Sekiei.” The National Shield, Chou Tairan, looked up from the letter he was reading and smiled. He had black hair and an even blacker beard, with a muscular frame that was obvious and formidable even hidden under his clothing. “Welcome back. How was the city?”

I met this man for the first time ten years ago, after bandits murdered my family. If he hadn’t saved me, I surely would have been killed as well, and it was a testament to his kind heart that he took me in and raised me as his own.

I sat down in an empty chair and crossed my legs. “The restoration efforts are coming along well. That’s not a surprise, though, considering Keiyou is home base of the great Chou Tairan.”

“You need to work on your flattery skills,” father said, grinning as he ran his fingers through his beard. “Sekiei, you’re already sixteen. If you don’t learn how to choose your words more wisely, you’ll never land yourself a woman.”

I gave him an exaggerated shrug and replied, “May I borrow a piece of paper and a brush? I’ll write down everything I say and show it to Hakurei for approval.”

Father boomed out a laugh. “Touché! I’m glad you’re already playing your part as a henpecked husband.”

It was true that I could never win in a battle of wits against Hakurei, but it was something that I wasn’t exactly happy to admit. “Give me a break.”

Behind father, outside of the round window of his bedroom, I could see a flock of small birds pecking at the ground of the inner courtyard. It made for such a peaceful sight that it was hard to tell that this city was at the very front

lines against Gen. With my gaze still focused on the courtyard and maintaining a casual tone, I breached the main topic I wished to discuss. “Asaka told me something happened, though not in much detail. I hear that there’s been trouble.”

Father massaged the bridge of his nose. After he tossed the letter he was holding on to his desk, he stood up and walked towards the window. When he spoke, it was in a gloomy voice that he would never use in front of the other officers. “Yes. It seems that after I left Rinkei, the imperial court decided upon a most bizarre course of action.”

“What do you mean by that?”

I had a bad—no, a terrible feeling. It was true that in the last battle, we’d killed the enemy general, the Crimson Wolf, on Keiyou soil. Under any other circumstance, defeating one of the Four Wolves would be considered a great victory in this long war. However, Ei had learned that it must split its attention between two fronts. We still had the powerful Gen forces to contend with to our north, and now we also had to deal with the traitor nation of Seitou, situated to our west. If we looked at the big picture, it was clear that our situation was worse than ever.

*“Even if we lose the battle, we must never lose the war.”* Eifuu used to say that a lot in my past life.

Father spread his arms wide and sounded bitter as he revealed the trouble we now found ourselves in. “Hold on to your hat for this one, Sekiei. Even as we speak, the imperial court is embroiled in a serious debate about whether or not we should invade Seitou.”

I couldn’t help but place a hand to my forehead as I digested the revelation. *You’ve gotta be kidding me.* “Are they serious? If you leave the front lines at such a critical time, the Gen army will take advantage of your absence and start crossing the river again. Adai is a levelheaded and determined strategist, and he’s keeping a close eye on our every move. I thought his actions after he lost the Crimson Wolf, his most loyal right-hand man, had made that abundantly clear.”

Despite his soft looks, the emperor of Gen, Adai Dada, was a war veteran with

years of experience under his belt. There was a reason why he was feared as the White Wraith, after all. As soon as he realized that the Keiyou invasion had ended in failure, he called everything off and ordered for his troops to return north. The Gen army had outnumbered us, and he had brought many famed generals and wise strategists, yet Adai had chosen to avoid a direct confrontation with Chou Tairan after his return from Rinkei.

Strategies were not my strong suit by any means, but even I could tell what his plan was. He wanted to slowly weaken the Chou army by forcing us to fight a two-front war. Once he had whittled down our strength, he would swoop in to deal the final blow. Adai's talents as a strategist rivaled those of Ou Eifuu's. In fact, I'd say that Adai even surpassed him. The Eifuu from my foggy memories would have chosen to save the Crimson Knights, even if that resulted in sacrifices on his side.

"No," father said, meeting me in the eye with a self-deprecating smile. "My army and I have been ordered to stay in Keiyou in case Gen invades us from the north. We will invade Seitou from Angan, located by our southern border with Seitou."

"What?!" The word came out louder than I intended and I covered my mouth with both hands in a hurry. After taking a few moments to steady my breathing, I shook my head back and forth. "Wait, wait, wait. No way. We're in no position for any attacks in the first place, but why wouldn't you take the general and army most familiar with the enemy? I-In that case, who's going to be invading —?"

"The Imperial Guard. I'm guessing that they'll also recruit officers who have seen real combat from the more peaceful regions, however."

My eyes widened. This time, I could think of nothing to say. The Imperial Guard was the central army that answered directly to the emperor. Father's ultimate goal was to conduct a northern campaign in order to take back land north of the great river. In order to do so, he'd requested that we be sent reinforcements from the Imperial Guard, but the court had turned him down every single time. Yet, under these circumstances, they would use their precious reserve army for an *invasion*?



“I’m going to say something that I’m sure you already know.” A migraine was pounding away in my skull as I gave father my honest opinion. “We will lose this battle. It will be a decisive loss.”

Father was a peerless general in the Ei Empire, considered a guardian deity by the populace. Instead of voicing his opinion, though, he crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes, signaling me with his gaze to continue.

I ran my hands through my hair and growled, “As far as I’m aware, the Imperial Guard hasn’t experienced a proper war in several decades. I heard that even in that great battle seven years ago when you protected Ei from another large-scale Gen invasion, they barely had to do any fighting. Even if they brought in officers and elite soldiers from the armies protecting our borders from barbarian tribes, they would not win. Not even the great Phoenix Wing or Tiger Fang will be able to score us a victory. We’re talking about enemies who are practically half horse with how much time they spend in a saddle, and they’re constantly embroiled in some conflict or other. Not only that, but the Imperial Guard wants to invade from Angan without even using Keiyou? That means they won’t be able to use the Grand Canal to transport supplies. Do they seriously think that they can maintain proper military logistics with a land route?”

“I’m painfully aware of all that. I’ve already sent a letter saying as much to the grand chancellor.” My father was a proud man who had never experienced defeat on the battlefield. But this was a whole other kind of war. From the deep sorrow in his eyes, I could see that our worst fears had already been set in motion. “They will not stop. His Imperial Majesty is well aware of how Seitou’s betrayal drastically changed the state of this war. He must have heard about the invasion plans from the lieutenant chancellor, who was the one to propose it in the first place. I hear that most of the court approved of this attack.”

“I see.”

The first emperor of the Tou Empire, whom the Twin Eis had sworn fealty to, had been a hero in his own right, but his greatest strength came from his ability to see the big picture. However, it was impossible to expect such standards from the vast majority of rulers. Gen was a massive empire, and it had not only stolen our territories north of the great river, but had also forced Seitou—our

longtime ally—to submit. Ei’s emperor was unable to deal with his fear of Gen and thus was agreeing to an unrealistic invasion that had little to no chance of success.

I clasped my hands together and, after thinking about it for a moment, stated, “It’s impossible to bring down Seitou’s capital. We simply won’t have enough supplies for that. Wouldn’t it be more realistic to drag the enemy out to an open-field battle so that we can have a secure front line?”

“I agree with that assessment. That’s why I’ve asked Rinkei’s Ou Meirin to prepare rations for a military expedition.”

“You asked Meirin?” I didn’t expect anything less from my father, the Ei Empire’s guardian deity. Even if he hadn’t made a grand show of it, he had already set his sights on our next battle. It looked like I would have to send Meirin yet another letter to express my gratitude.

“Sekiei.”

“Yessir!” As soon as father called my name, I stood up and straightened my back. His eyes were usually calm, but when I met his gaze now, I could see a storm brewing in their depths.

“This is a request from the grand chancellor himself. I...I truly apologize, but could you lead a team and join the Seitou invasion army? They’ll need someone familiar with the enemy. I’ve known some of the chosen officers for years now and if they die...”

Not even the great National Shield could finish that sentence. It didn’t matter if the elite Chou army remained in Ei. If we lost the Imperial Guard, as well as experienced soldiers and officers from the borders, then Ei would perish. I had no particular attachment to this country, but Chou Tairan was my savior. It wasn’t right for me to see him in such anguish and not lift a finger to help. Besides, Ei was Hakurei’s homeland.

I affected the most casual tone I could as I replied, “All right, I’ll go. It’s not exactly something I can ignore anyway. Oh, may I remove Hakurei from—”

“You still haven’t been granted the Chou surname, have you?”

Father and I both jumped as Hakurei entered the room without warning. She

must have changed, because she was dressed in light-blue clothing. She shot me a dirty look before she approached father and offered him a salute by pressing her fists together.

“Father, Sekiei and I will fulfill that mission for you. Please leave everything in our capable hands.” Her blue eyes burned with conviction. I knew from experience that when she had that look in her eye, nothing I said could sway her from her decision. Father stroked his beard for a moment before he gave me a meaningful look.

“Sekiei.”

“I know.”

He didn’t say anything, but I knew that he was telling me to keep Hakurei safe. *I’d do that even if I wasn’t ordered to.* Ten years ago, when everyone around me demanded my execution, Hakurei was the one who had fought through a crowd of adults and called on them to spare me. If it came down to my life or hers, I’d gladly—

Hakurei turned to smile at me. It was so startling that I took a few steps backwards without thinking, but she closed the distance between us in no time to hiss, “I can’t believe you were discussing something so important without me. Do you *want* me to get angry?”

“A-Aren’t you already angry?!” I whispered back. “Father’s requesting something seriously dangerous this time!”

“Dummy. Isn’t that exactly why I must accompany you? I hope you’re ready for a good lecture later.”

“Fine, fine.” I could never win against her. Instead of trying to argue, a better use of my time would be asking Meirin to investigate what was going on in the court.

“Sekiei? Are you listening to me?” Hakurei took yet another step closer to me, glaring at me more with dissatisfaction than genuine anger.

“I-I am! I’m listening!” I replied as I tried my hardest to shove her backwards.

Father was watching us with a soft expression on his face. Before we could

say anything further, we heard the bell ring from the entrance.

“Come in,” father ordered.

“Pardon me.” It was Asaka who entered the room. She offered us an elegant bow before giving her news. “Milord, you have a guest.”

“Ah, he’s finally here. Take him to the inner courtyard and prepare some tea for us.”

“Understood.”

*A guest? I don’t recall hearing anything about that.*

“Hakurei, Sekiei, I’d like you two to accompany me,” father said in a grave tone. “I wish to introduce you both to Jo Shuuhou—a close friend of mine, as well as the marshal of the southern army. You may be more familiar with his title: Phoenix Wing.”

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Two people were standing in the inner courtyard’s gazebo by the time we arrived. One of them had dark brown hair, tanned skin, and a green military uniform over a broad frame. The second one was a young man with handsome features.

*Wait, isn’t that the person who helped me to catch the pickpocket?*

I glanced over at Hakurei just as she murmured, “I knew it.”

The larger man—Jo Shuuhou, the Phoenix Wing—noticed us while I reminisced on our meeting and his face lit up in a bright smile. *So this man is one of the Three Generals, said to be on par with father and the great general of the western army: U Jouko the Tiger Fang.*

“Oh, Tairan!”

“Welcome, Shuuhou!”

The two of them bumped their fists together and clapped each other’s shoulders. Even after they stepped apart, Marshal Jo continued to laugh loudly.

“How long has it been since we last saw each other? Stories of your feats have reached even Nansui, you know. I hear that you chased away the northern

horsemen in the most recent battle. Very impressive indeed.”

“I still haven’t been able to fulfill my promise to carry out a northern campaign, though. Is this one over here your son?”

“He is. Hiyou, where are your manners?”

“R-Right!”

The young man, cheeks flushed crimson, offered father a salute. It was clear from how he moved just how nervous he was, and the way he talked and acted was a little childish, but thanks to his good looks, he didn’t give off an immature air. “My name is Hiyou, the only son of Jo Shuuhou! I’ve heard many stories about your countless accomplishments, General Chou the National Shield! It is a great honor to meet you!”

Nansui was located in the southernmost corner of the Ei Empire, and yet even people living there knew of father’s military exploits. I couldn’t help but grin, but Hakurei swiftly jabbed me with her elbow.

“Please don’t make such a silly expression,” she whispered.

“I-I’m not!” I hissed back.

Father must not have noticed our bickering because he looked at Hiyou and said, “The name’s Tairan. I’ve known your father since we were children. We drank together every night up until the day this one here said he would join the southern army.”

“You used to brag about your wife every time you got drunk. It feels like a lifetime ago now.” Marshal Jo smiled as he stared up at the sky, his eyes tracking a bird as it soared through the air with languid motions. I could see from the gray in his hair and beard that life in the southern regions was more difficult than he let on.

Father turned around and gestured to us. “Allow me to introduce you to my son and daughter. They make me proud.”

I ran the word “son” over and over in my head several times. *You’ll call me that, even though I’m just an orphan who’s not related to you by blood? Father, this is why I...* My chest burned, wholly unprepared for the rush of emotion.



Next to me, Hakurei bowed, her movements refined and graceful.

“My name is Chou Hakurei. I believe I met Marshal Jo and Lord Hiyou here in Keiyou when I was a child.”

“Ah, yes, I remember that,” Marshal Jo exclaimed. “My, but you’ve grown to be such a beautiful young lady! Hiyou, don’t you think so as well?”

“Y-Yes, I do!” Hiyou nodded, his face flushed. It seemed that these two didn’t believe in the old superstitions about how women with silver hair and blue eyes would bring calamity.

“Thank you very much.” The smile that Hakurei used in formal meetings was still affixed to her face as she turned to me and continued, “Now it’s your turn.”

“R-Right.” At first glance, Hakurei was as calm and quiet as she always was, but I could see in the way she spoke that she was quite proud of herself. *Yeah, I know that you’re one of the prettiest girls in all of the Ei Empire, let alone Keiyou!* Instead of snarking at her, though, I bowed and said, “I’m Sekiei. I, uh...”

“Oh, I know about you as well,” Marshal Jo said, saving me from my awkward introduction. “You’re the young hero who protected Keiyou and defeated the Crimson Wolf alongside Hakurei, aren’t you? I may be a lot older now, but my ears are the same as they’ve always been. Unlike in the cities, the south is fairly quiet, free of unnecessary noise.”

“Uh-huh...”

It was one thing for a general on father’s level to know who Hakurei was, but I didn’t expect him to know my name as well. When I looked over at Jo Hiyou, I could see him looking at me with clear admiration in his eyes. It was a little scary to see. Hakurei must have noticed my reservations because she once again jabbed me with her elbow and gave me a look that clearly said, “Hold your head high, Mister Hero.”

*Y-You little...! You know perfectly well that I can’t say anything back to you right now! Chou Hakurei, you play dirty!*

Marshal Jo was observing us with warm affection in his eyes. “I’d originally wished to request that you consider my foolish son for young Hakurei’s husband, but I see. You have a fine son there, Tairan.”

“And I won’t be giving either of them to you. Sit down. You went out of your way to sneak up here from the south. You must have something important to discuss. Asaka.”

“Yes, milord! ♪” The attendant, who had been waiting for orders the entire time, jumped into action and started to prepare everyone’s tea.

A relaxing air settled over us as we all sat down. Almost as soon as his butt touched the chair across from me, Jo Hiyou leaped to his feet and lowered his head in a deep bow at us. “Lady Chou Hakurei, Lord Chou Sekiei, I apologize that I wasn’t able to say anything to you earlier!”

“Please don’t worry about it,” Hakurei replied, sounding like she was used to the young man’s intensity.

In comparison, I leaned backwards as I stammered, “O-Oh yeah, it’s fine.”

Hiyou’s head shot up and he clenched his fists as if to try and contain his overwhelming emotions. “Though it shames me to admit, I have not yet had my first battle. I would like to take the opportunity to ask the two of you to regale me with tales of your military feats!”

*He was raised well.* It was clear that Hiyou was overflowing with ambition, but he had a humble disposition despite growing up in a famous military family. He didn’t hesitate to improve himself or go out to battle, and he was good-looking to boot. In other words, he was *very* similar to the quiet silver-haired girl at my side. If the two of them started talking to each other, they wouldn’t stop for hours.

I lightly shrugged my shoulders as I said, “Well, you heard the man, Hakurei.”

“Sekiei, please tell him about everything,” Hakurei said at the same time.

We growled as we glared into each other’s eyes, leaning in so close that our bangs brushed. We’d spent the past ten years growing up together so it wasn’t surprising that we had a deep understanding of the other. It wasn’t always a positive thing. Marshal Jo raised his cup as he laughed.

“My, it’s wonderful to see how well the two of you get along! There certainly doesn’t seem to be any room in your relationship for my foolish son.”

Hakurei and I immediately leaned backwards before we crossed our arms and looked away. Marshal Jo tilted his head, looking confused, before he clapped his hands and exclaimed, “Ah, I understand!”

*W-Wait, I think this guy just got the wrong idea about us!* Hakurei cleared her throat before I could say anything, unaware of the gentle way father and the Jo family were watching her.

“Father, please explain what we’re doing here.”

“Yes, I suppose. Shuuhou.”

“Right.” Marshal Jo straightened in his chair as he set his cup down on the table. The tension in the air grew thick. “I’m sure you already know about how we will soon be invading Seitou. The imperial court is still holding debates, but they’re about what strategies we will be employing. This attack is operating on the notion that the Gen army is *not* in Seitou.”

“I see,” father said as he pressed a hand against his forehead.

Hakurei and I drank our tea in silence. Asaka must have prepared it in the same way she always did, but for some reason, it tasted especially bitter. Among us, Hiyou was the only one who looked excited, his eyes glittering with determination.

Marshal Jo continued, “Ten thousand troops—about half of the Imperial Guard—make up the main force. The western and southern armies have chosen twenty-five thousand soldiers each for an additional total of fifty thousand. I will go to represent the southern army and U Jouko from the west will participate as well.”

“With such precise numbers and your presence, as well as Jouko’s... I see that the invasion will be carried out no matter what happens?”

“It will. While this may be due to the manipulations of Rin Chuudou, this order ultimately came from His Imperial Majesty. We have no other choice.”

Things had taken a turn for the worst. The National Shield and the Phoenix Wing looked resigned. *I have to make sure that I’m the only one added to the inva—* Before I could finish my thought, I noticed a frigid gaze boring holes into the side of my head. I gave a cautious look over in that direction to see Hakurei

staring at me with a piercing gaze.

“Wh-What?” I whispered.

“Just now, you were thinking about how you could best leave me behind, weren’t you?” she hissed back.

“Wha— No, of course not.”

“You were. I will extend your lecture tonight.”

“Isn’t that a tad too unfair?!”

I didn’t have the chance to protest against Princess Hakurei’s tyranny further because father’s voice called out, “Sekiei, tell everyone the thoughts you shared with me earlier. We don’t require any conjecture.”

I felt the concentrated gaze of everyone around me. *M-Man, you can really put a guy on the spot.* I threw back the rest of my tea to calm my nerves before I began. “On paper, it looks like we can overpower them with sheer numbers.” The image of Adai, who had pretended to exile his most loyal follower the Crimson Wolf in order to topple Keiyou, came to mind and I scrunched up my face. “But we must remember that our enemy is Adai, whose intellect and strategies border on the divine. I’m sure he has intel on our invasion, so I believe there is a high chance that one of the Wolves will intercept us. We can deal a blow to the enemy main forces if either father or Marshal Jo takes command and we face them in an open-field battle. Realistically, though, I believe that we can reach a compromise with the court if we propose that our strategy is to advance our army up to the border as a form of intimidation.”

Marshal Jo hummed, looking deep in thought, as Hiyou’s eyes widened. “Amazing,” he breathed, his voice trembling with his excitement.

Hakurei poured me some more tea, her expression softer than usual.

Marshal Jo straightened his uniform and grinned. “In truth, I was a little doubtful of the rumors when I heard that the son and daughter of the Chou family killed the Crimson Wolf. However, after hearing you speak... Sekiei, if you do not yet have a bride, what do you think about taking my daughter’s hand in marriage?”

“Huh?”

Before I could say anything else, father and Hakurei exclaimed, “No!” in unison. Hakurei even went out of her way to scoot her chair closer to mine.

“Shuuhou,” father scolded.

Marshal Jo dipped in his head in a shallow bow and huffed out a small laugh. “I was joking. My lovely daughter is still only seven years old. I do not yet intend on sending her out as a bride anytime soon.” Hakurei and I froze, though not at his words. The man was a renowned hero who had won countless awards for all of his military achievements and yet here he was, lowering his head to us. “Chou Sekiei, I thank you for your enlightening advice. I had been most eager to hear from someone who had practical knowledge of the enemies we are to face, as well as the front we are to fight. It was worth leaving Nansui incognito and making the long trip to Keiyou.”

Marshal Jo’s dark brown eyes met mine. In their depths, I saw the strength of his will. Such determination was something that I had seen many times in soldiers, both from my battles as Kou Eihou, and now during the most recent battle for Keiyou.

“U Jouko and I will be on the front lines of this battle. I hear that the lieutenant chancellor, Rin Chuudou, will be taking full command—even though he has almost no experience in taking control of an army.”

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“Lord Sekiei, thank you so much for telling me all about your exploits on the battlefield! The mountain peach wine was most delectable as well. Good night!”

“Yeah, good night.” I said it with a small smile. Jo Hiyou’s method of greeting and bidding farewell to people was always so dramatic.

Jo Hiyou’s nightclothes were similar to mine, albeit in a different color. I watched the beautiful young man practically skip out of the room, though he kept turning back to me, bowing his head every time he did. Eventually he disappeared from my sight. *He even looks good from behind.*

“Phew!” I didn’t mind chatting, but I was exhausted. He hadn’t stopped asking me questions even when we’d been relaxing in the bath.



I figured that father and Marshal Jo were probably drinking together right about now. I was zoning out while staring at the vase full of flowers when Hakurei, dressed in a pale pink nightgown with her hair loose, walked in as if this were *her* room. In her arms, she held White Star.

“Hello,” she said.

“Huh? Oh, hey,” I replied in a lazy drawl.

Hakurei and I had shared a room until we were thirteen years old and as a result it had become a habit for us to have nightly chats before we went to sleep. Tonight she glared at the imported glass bottles and cups on my desk before sitting down on my bed with a heavy thump.

“It looks like you really enjoyed chatting with the Jo family’s eldest son,” she said, disapproval clear in her voice. “You even let him drink the mountain peach wine that you’ve never allowed *me* to drink, no matter how many times I ask you for permission.”

“You’re still too young for alcohol! Did you already forget about how you got drunk not so long ago?! Speaking of which, isn’t Hiyou your childhood friend? ‘The Jo family’s eldest son’ sure is a cold way to refer to him.”

“I was so young when I met him that I don’t remember anything, so he hardly counts as a childhood friend.” With her hair down like this, Hakurei looked as young as her actual age. She leaned her sword against the side table and then lay down on the bed. *What a troublesome little princess.* As I took out another glass and water from the cupboard, I heard Hakurei crawl under my bedsheets.

“Sekiei,” she said.

“Hmm?” I turned around after I finished pouring her a drink.

She was hiding the bottom half of her face behind the blanket and staring at me with her beautiful blue eyes. “What do you think about the Seitou invasion?”

“Didn’t I explain everything earlier in the day? Other than all of that, I’m of the same opinion as you.”

Hakurei sat up with a growl, puffing her cheeks out like a frustrated kid. She

accepted the glass of water from me with both hands and muttered, “You always avoid my questions like this. Can you put your thoughts into words for *once*? The depths of my patience may rival the sea, but even I have my limits.”

“Your patience? Rivaling the sea? Who are you and what did you do to Chou Yukihi— Wait! Don’t throw that pillow at me! You’re gonna knock over my water!”

“Humph!” Hakurei scoffed, pillow in hand. Yukihi had been her childhood name before she received her courtesy name.

I sat down in a nearby chair, legs crossed, and heaved a heavy sigh. “This is why princesses are so troublesome.”

“And who’s to blame for that? So, what are your thoughts?”

*Maybe I should’ve had more alcohol.* It was hard to face our new reality while sober. “Well, this battle isn’t going to be as easy as the authorities in Rinkei think. They’re far more focused on gaining power for themselves than on the war itself.”

According to Marshal Jo, it had been Rin Chuudou—the lieutenant chancellor—who had suggested the invasion plan. Taking into consideration the court hierarchy that Meirin had detailed to me once, I could guess his plan was to take the spot that his political rival, the grand chancellor, held. *This is terrible!* I lifted my glass cup and the liquid inside rippled.

“You saw that huge elephant-like catapult, didn’t you?” I continued. “We’ll be attacking the very country that made it. Underestimating them will be to our detriment.”

The Seitou-made catapults that the Crimson Wolf had used during his siege had wrought terrible damage upon Keiyou. I couldn’t imagine what would happen if we were to face a large number of them on the battlefield.

“Yes, I agree. We’ll likely have to deal with the Gen army as well.”

“They may not be in Seitou now. But they managed to traverse the Nanamagari Mountains with a massive army not only once, but twice. Unless their commander is a total buffoon, they’ll probably be waiting for us.”

Earlier in the day we were told that the Seitou invasion plan hinged on the notion that the Gen army hadn't been sighted within Seitou. *How stupid.* At this point, I had to wonder if the lieutenant chancellor was secretly an enemy rat.

I chugged my water, then set the empty glass down on the table. "As far as I know, Marshal Jo is a great commander and has never lost a single battle. However, if a lieutenant chancellor spending all his time lounging about in the capital can randomly jump into war and win it, then father wouldn't be having as much trouble as he is. Fearing the enemy is dangerous, but underestimating them even more so. That's why you'll be staying in Keiyō."

"That's the third time you've said that. I've ordered Teiha to organize the teams; father and Raigen have already approved of this."

"Wha—?!"

My mouth fell open. *Wh-When did that happen? And Gramps, who's supposed to be holed up in Hakuhō Castle by the river, gave permission too?!*

Hakurei stepped off the bed, picked up White Star, and held it close to her chest. "I will watch your back," she declared. "So, I'd like you to watch mine as well."

Light from the moon and stars shone in through the window, illuminating the most beautiful silver hair and blue eyes I'd ever seen. She looked so happy that I didn't have the heart to protest.

I rested my chin in my hand and shook my head. "Why do you insist on volunteering yourself for battle? It's terrifying, you know? Both you and Hiyō are so strange. Why don't you two take a page from my book and aim to become peace-loving civil offi—"

"However, there's a problem we must resolve before we can go to battle."

"Hello? Are you listening to me?"

Hakurei ignored my warnings, a serious look in her eye. In contrast to the confident way she'd just been acting, now she was looking this way and that as she hugged White Star against her chest. "Sekiei, um..."

"Hmm? What's up?" I stood up and walked over to her, leaning down to peer

into her face. She seemed reluctant to speak her mind—a very rare sight indeed for Hakurei.

I was prepared to give her all night to answer me if that was what she needed, but after a long moment, she steeled her will and said, “To tell you the truth, I can’t unsheathe the sword.”

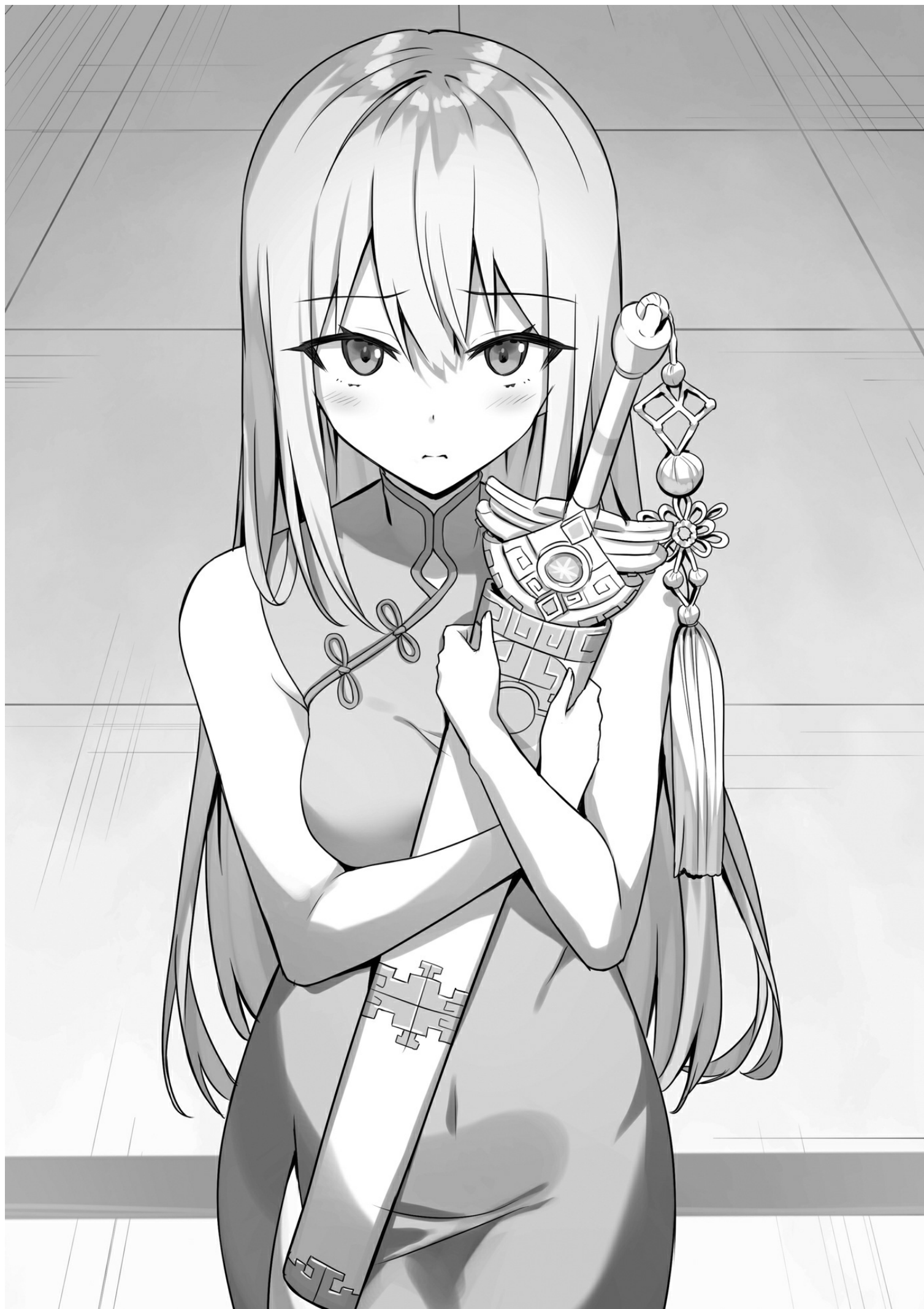
I couldn’t understand what she was telling me. I tilted my head to the side. “What?”

As soon as I said it, Hakurei straightened up. “I-It’s exactly as I said! I-I can’t pull the sword you gave me from its sheath, no matter how many times I try! I-I *did* want to ask you for help, but I... I simply couldn’t bring myself to say it.”

“Wait, how can that even be possible? Hold on a second.” I grabbed Black Star and slid the sword out from the sheath. The obsidian blade absorbed the light from both the moon and the stars, casting an otherworldly gleam on the walls and ceiling. The first emperor of the Tou Empire, Hi Gyoumei, used to love watching Black Star do this. I returned it to its sheath and told Hakurei, “I was able to unsheathe it just fine. Besides, weren’t you able to pull it out during the battle against Nguyen? Why can’t you use it now?”

“I-I don’t know either! After your injury, I often tried to unsheathe it in my room, but it’s as if there’s a lock on the sword. B-But, I’m not going to give this sword back to you! This is mine!” Hakurei tightened her hold on White Star and shrank in on herself as if she was warning me off.

*She’s usually a lot smarter than this.* I reached out and placed my hand on her head, giving her a gentle pat.



“I’m not going to ask for it back. In any case, let’s give it another try here. If you can’t use White Star as a weapon, then we’ll have to find something else for you. Let me have it for a moment.”

“You have a point,” Hakurei said, looking on the verge of tears as she gave me the sword. Then she muttered, “I *definitely* don’t want that.”

Black Star and White Star, as a pair, formed the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars. Memories from my time as Kou Eihou came surging back to me. *Ah, right, that’s how these swords used to be.* I picked up a lantern and winked at Hakurei. “Come with me for a bit.”

“Huh? Sekiei?”

I slid both swords into my belt and walked into the inner courtyard, Hakurei following me. After I hung the lantern from a pillar, I signaled to Hakurei with my hand, telling her to give me some space. Once I confirmed that she had stepped away, I closed my eyes, let out a quiet breath, and then in a single instant pulled both swords from their sheaths.

I swung them in the courtyard, the swords mere flashes of ebony and silver. One moment, they crossed paths; the next, they separated. *What a nostalgic feeling.* Wielding these swords brought me back to the past. Kou Eihou had also been the best when it came to the sword dance. After I returned the swords to their sheaths, I tossed White Star back at Hakurei.

“Here you go. Now, it’s your turn. After all, that’s *your* sword now.”

Hakurei caught the weapon with both hands and she made a low noise that sounded both happy and frustrated. She walked up to stand by my side and I gave her an encouraging nod. Hakurei placed her hand upon the hilt and then...

“Huh?” She tugged on the weapon, her anxiety clear on her face—and White Star emerged from the sheath, its blade so bright it was almost blinding.

A black cat that had been lounging in the garden took off with a protesting yowl. Hakurei was staring at the sword, too shocked to say or do anything, so I took it from her and placed it back into its sheath.

“Congratulations! You were able to pull it out. I’m very happy for you. Case



closed!”

“I-I really couldn’t pull it out! I’m telling the truth! I would *never* lie to you!” Hakurei rushed towards me, grabbing at my chest as she frantically tried to profess her innocence. She was still in her thin nightclothes and I could easily feel the warmth of her body.

My heart had started pounding, so I said, “All right, all right, I believe you. Since you can use the sword now, it’s not a problem anymore, right?”

“Yes, I suppose. Could it be because I had you by my side?” she muttered, cheeks flushed. One second, she was tilting her head as if she was lost in thought, and the next, she started to fidget, moving both arms and legs.

“H-Hakurei?”

“Eek! Wh-What is it?” It was clear that she had been focused on something else because when I called her name, she practically jumped out of her skin. She looked away, playing with her hair. Her ears were flushed crimson.

*Did something happen to her?* I didn’t understand her behavior, but I made a slight shooing motion with my hand. “Er, well, you should go back to your room and get some sleep. Morning training’s going to resume tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Yes, you’re right,” Hakurei said with a slow nod. She was acting a bit more like her usual self again. She took a few steps back towards the manor but stopped and turned to look at me with a beautiful smile, clasping her hands behind her back. “Then, I’m going to go back inside. Make sure you get some sleep soon, all right?”

“I’ll do my best. Good night, Hakurei.”

“Good night, Sekiei.”

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“I am loath to leave, but I really should get going, Tairan.”

“I agree, Shuuhou. Let’s meet again someday.”

Father and Marshal Jo exchanged a firm handshake in front of the front gate of the Chou manor. It had been five days since Marshal Jo came to stay with us and he was about to return to his base of operations in Nansui, where he would

prepare for war. Marshal Jo made his way towards the main street, but Jo Hiyou turned to give us a hearty salute. Between his coat and green military uniform, as well as the sword in his belt, he cut a handsome image indeed.

“General Chou, Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, thank you so much for everything! I had some confidence in my skills as a warrior, but I was made painfully aware of my own shortcomings! I will engrave your military accomplishments into my soul so that I can improve on myself and bring honor to the Jo family’s name!”

“I’ll leave Shuuhou in your hands, then,” father encouraged.

“Good luck,” Hakurei said.

“Right,” I stammered. In comparison to how Hakurei and father were able to give Hiyou a magnanimous nod, I was a bit taken aback by his words. It was amazing that he could say all of that and be completely serious about it.

Hiyou approached me, eyes sparkling, and whispered, “I hope that when you and Lady Hakurei get married, I’ll be the first person you inform. I’ll gift you the finest wine from the southern regions!”

I couldn’t say anything for a moment, my mouth opening and closing like a fish, before I managed, “Listen here, you...”

“Now then, I hope you all have a good day!” Hiyou gave us a final, childlike smile before he ran off after Marshal Jo. Oddly enough, he seemed to have grown fond of me.

As we walked back to the manor, I gave my honest opinion on Hiyou. “He’s a little overbearing and is prone to misunderstanding things, but he’s a good and earnest guy. I hope he doesn’t stress himself out.”

“Yes, I agree,” Hakurei said before she narrowed her eyes at me. “Well? What were the two of you talking about at the end?”

I looked away. The black cat we’d startled last night walked up to me and brushed against my legs. It had started living in the Chou manor a few weeks ago. “N-Nothing,” I said after a pause.

“You’re lying. You held yourself back from saying something just now, didn’t you? Come on, tell me the truth. I’m sure it’s nothing good anyway.”

*I can't tell her.* I didn't know why myself, but I felt like that I couldn't tell her what Hiyou said to me. I picked up the cat and waved its front paw. "Th-There must be some meow-stake! Lady Hakurei, you're overthinking things!"

For a long moment, Hakurei didn't say anything. When she did, her voice was significantly deeper than normal. "Sekiei?"

"Eep!" I hugged the cat closer to me, hearing the anger emanating from Hakurei's voice. The new way I was holding it must have been quite comfortable because the cat started to purr.

Asaka, who was standing behind us, clasped her hands together with a delighted look on her face as she giggled, "Lady Hakurei, I believe that Lord Jo Hiyou was—"

"A-Asaka!" I interrupted her as quickly as I could.

In response, Hakurei took a wordless step towards me. The only one present who couldn't sense the tension in the air was the black cat, who was blinking in confusion.

"Hakurei, Sekiei," father said in a severe voice.

Hearing him, I handed the cat over to Asaka and straightened my back. It seemed that someone had arrived before the front gate, and Asaka left to go greet them.

"Last night," father continued, "Shuuhou and I looked over the details of the Seitou invasion strategy. However, we couldn't find a way to improve it. According to a letter that the grand chancellor sent me, they will be using waterways and land routes instead of the Grand Canal for transporting supplies. Keiyou's only role in this is to offer support. The grand chancellor was vehement in his attempts to have them change their minds, but the other members of the court shut down his protests. The official reasons are that openly transporting boats down the Grand Canal would tip the enemy off to our plan, and that it would add a significant workload to the officers and the soldiers on the front lines. However, the real reason is most likely because they want me to participate as little as possible in this plan. I'm guessing that it's a scheme cooked up by those who are against a northern campaign."

Hakurei made a shocked noise next to me as I murmured, “Well, that’s just...”

The invasion plan already had a minimal chance of success; if the court was too busy with its internal power struggles, then we were definitely not going to win. The saying went “*Not even the heavens know what will happen on a battlefield,*” but in this case, our loss was a certain thing.

On top of all these problems, they wanted to set up military logistics without using the Grand Canal? It appeared that the authorities in Rinkei didn’t understand the difference between a boat and a horse when it came to how many supplies could be transported at once. Perhaps their plan was to pillage resources from Seitou, even though Seitou had been our ally for decades.

*It looks like this is going to be a nasty war.* Father’s and Hakurei’s expressions were dark, so I wasn’t the only one who had this suspicion.

As if trying to swat away something, Chou Tairan waved his hand in a wide arc and said, “On the bright side, I haven’t yet received any official orders. Let’s focus on organizing our troops and stocking up on supplies.”

“Yessir!” Hakurei and I said as one.

“I know this will be a burden, but I’m leaving it up to you.” With those parting words, he turned to the manor. His back as he went inside exuded a somewhat sad air.

Hakurei grabbed my left sleeve, a nervous look on her face. We had no idea how many enemies we could expect in Seitou. Though we had a formidable army when it came to sheer numbers, our supply line left much to be desired. Unlike father or Marshal Jo, I didn’t have the ability to command an army of over ten thousand, moving them about the battlefield like they were my own hands and feet. *Hakurei* was the one with that potential and that was something she would only awaken to in the future. We needed someone with the talent for looking at the big picture—in other words, a strategist—in the Chou family.

“Lord Sekiei,” Asaka said as she rushed back. She had been dealing with the visitor this entire time. In her left hand, she held the black cat and in her right, she held a letter. I had a bad feeling about this. In contrast, Asaka had a bright smile on her face as she handed me the piece of paper. “This is a letter from

Lady Ou Meirin in Rinkei.”

“R-Right. Er, thanks.”

It was hard to keep my voice steady when I could feel the temperature drop with the chill of Hakurei’s gaze. Hakurei and Meirin weren’t on good terms. I took the letter from Asaka and gave it a quick read. *Wait, what?*

“Sekiei, is something the matter?”

“Lord Sekiei?”

Both Hakurei and Asaka must have noticed how my expression changed.

I carefully folded up the letter again and gave a quick summary of the contents. “She said she’s going to drop by with Miss Shizuka. Apparently, she wants to supervise the defensive supplies being shipped in and show me something while she’s at it. This is confidential information, but according to Meirin’s letter, the imperial court already had its final meeting. His Imperial Majesty has given the official order for the Seitou invasion; it’s going to happen, no matter what.”

Hakurei tightened her grip on my left sleeve. Asaka, who was usually so easygoing, twisted her expression and murmured, “I can sense danger on the horizon.”

*It really is going to be dangerous.* What would the fearsome White Wraith Adai Dada do once he got hold of this information? I looked up at the sky and saw a massive white crane flying northwards.

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“O Emperor Adai, son of the great Celestial Wolf, I am honored and blessed to behold your visage. I, Gray Wolf Seul Bato, have returned from routing the northern barbarians!”

Enkei, the capital of the Gen Empire, was a massive city that rivaled Keiyou in size. In the northern district stood the imperial palace, where the lively voice boomed from the private garden at the very back of it. The speaker was so loud that the smaller birds took flight in surprise.

I, Gen Emperor Adai Dada, had named the young man before me as one of

the Four Wolves despite his young age of twenty-four. “Seul, there’s no need for such formalities,” I said. “We are the only ones here. I’m glad to see you have returned. Take a seat.”

“Yessir!” Seul seemed the type to be popular with women with his tall frame, gray hair, and handsome face. He sat down in the chair before me, though he was still brimming with energy. His gray uniform rustled with his movements.

His appearance was the exact opposite of mine. I had long, white hair and a delicate frame, which gave me a rather feminine appearance. As those thoughts swirled in my mind, I looked over at the massive man standing behind Seul. He had black hair and sharp eyes, and there was a deep scar on his face left behind from a blade. There was a crude great sword attached to his back. This was Blackblade Gisen, the strongest warrior in all of the Gen Empire.

I offered him a seat, but he shook his head with a grateful look. Even if it was a direct order from his emperor, he was more focused on carrying out his task to protect Seul Bato. Not only was he Seul’s vice-commander and guardian, but Seul was also the son of his deceased superior. Even though we were on palace grounds, I had granted Gisen permission to hold on to his weapon. I liked this brave yet stubborn fighter.

I turned my attention back to Seul and asked, “Have you heard about what happened to Nguyen?”

Even saying his name caused my chest to clench in pain. Crimson Wolf Nguyen Gui had been one of the truest and most loyal subjects I had. It was thanks to him that I was able to turn Seitou into a vassal state in such a short period of time. He had fallen to an enemy blade.

When Seul replied, it was in a quiet and dejected voice. “Yes. I still can’t believe it. I never imagined that *he* would die on the battlefield.”

“I am in the same boat as you. Perhaps his single-minded loyalty was his downfall. We lost a great man.”

When people spoke of Nguyen, they tended to focus on his reputation as a fearsome warrior. However, he was also capable of looking at the big picture. I had told him not to obsess over taking Keiyou and to attack the enemy forces along the river from behind. There was no way he could have misinterpreted



my order. The only reason I could think of for why he had was that there had been someone Nguyen had wanted to defeat, even if that meant going against his mission.

“Was Chou Tairan the one who killed him?” Seul asked, his voice filled with fear.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. The spy organization Senko had given me this intel. “Apparently, the ones who accomplished it were his son and daughter. Their names are Chou Hakurei and Chou Sekiei, and they’re both sixteen.”

Seul’s eyes widened at the same time Gisen’s narrowed. They must find it hard to believe. I couldn’t believe it either when I first heard the news, so I couldn’t blame them. Seul had looked up to Nguyen like a brother—now he jumped up from his chair and took a knee before me, pressing his fists together in a salute. Behind him, Gisen followed suit.

“Your Imperial Majesty, please order your humble servant to attack Keiyou! With my great sword, I swear that I will defeat our most formidable enemy and bring you his head!”

“Seul, I appreciate your straightforward and unerring spirit. However...” I smiled as I thought back to the spy’s message from this morning. “I’ve received a report from the rat in the south. They have officially decided on a Seitou invasion.”

“What?! Then, Chou Tairan will also...?”

I thought back to the enemy general I had seen on the battlefield seven years ago. Back then, he had been as fearsome as an ogre with his monstrous strength and iron will. The only ones worth fearing in the Ei Empire were him and his army. There was no need for us to give them a fair fight; the best way to hunt down a tiger was to weaken it before dealing the final blow.

I stood up and reached out with my arm, as frail and slender as a girl’s. “He will remain in Keiyou, exactly as I’ve engineered it. The only generals who will appear on the battlefield are the Phoenix Wing and Tiger Fang, who will bring their armies with them.” A little bird fluttered down to perch upon my hand, its feathers reflecting the sunlight. Seul was staring at me, looking like he’d been

overtaken by emotion. “Though the Ei army boasts impressive manpower, over half of them are sheep who know nothing of true combat. If a tiger like Chou Tairan were to lead them, then they’d have the possibility of being quite formidable indeed. As they are, they will be of no consequence to us. Let us take this opportunity to rid the Ei Empire of its limited pool of skilled commanders.”

*Ahh, Chou Tairan. Chou Tairan, you are strong—too strong—but you are no match for Kou Eihou. I could go as far as to call you a hero. But humans are foolish creatures; they fear not only their enemy, but their powerful allies as well. The more you win, the quicker the poison I’ve planted in the court of the false southern emperor shall spread. Unlike Eihou, you do not possess the Heavenly Swords. So what will you do once you have nowhere else to run?*

I closed my eyes and turned to face my young general head-on. “Gray Wolf, Seul Bato.”

“Yessir!”

I had to unify all the lands under the sun. That was my Heaven-mandated duty, and why I had been reborn a thousand years after my death.

“I command you to lead your Gray Lancers and head to Seitou. You will take orders from the strategist, Millenary Diviner Hasho, and destroy the imperious Ei army, who would dare to ravage our ally’s lands! Nguyen endured countless difficulties and challenges in order to set up a road to Seitou for us. Neither the forest nor Nanamagari Mountains will serve as obstacles.”

“Understood! I swear that I will bring you back victory!” Seul exclaimed as he clapped a hand over his shiny new armor, his face flushed.

Thanks to Nguyen and his subordinates, we were able to learn that although the metal armor of Seitou was fantastic when it came to defense, it greatly hindered the wearer’s movement. That was why we had made new prototypes and had the various captains and officers try them out. They could withstand any attack from your average weapon. Considering we still didn’t know the location of the Heavenly Swords, which could cut through anything, this was a valuable piece of equipment.

The thought of Chou Tairan’s children, said to have been the ones to kill

Nguyen, flashed through my mind. *This is the perfect opportunity.* I released the bird back into the air and said, “I value your enthusiasm, but do not let down your guard. Let us not forget the words of the Tou Empire’s great general, Kou Eihou: ‘Not even the heavens know what will happen on the battlefield.’ I do not wish to lose another one of my Wolves before I unify the lands. And Gisen, if the Chou family army sends troops to participate in the invasion, then Chou Tairan’s son and daughter may be among their number. If you encounter them, evaluate their strength and then kill them. Tigers must be killed while they are still young.”

## Chapter Two

“Lord Sekiei, we’ve finished setting up the catapult!”

In the open plains west of Keiyou, Teiha’s voice echoed through the air. He was wearing his armor and helmet. Before him was a catapult that resembled an elephant, and a score of soldiers were waiting next to it.

A few days had passed since the depressing news of an upcoming Seitou invasion. We’d finally finished repairing one of the Seitou-made catapults we’d scavenged from the battlefield and we were planning on testing it out today.

Hakurei wasn’t present, which was a rare phenomenon in and of itself. She had remained in the manor to greet Ou Meirin, who would be arriving as a guest from Rinkei. Normally, father would be the one to do that, but he had traveled to the front lines to pay them a brief visit, so Hakurei was acting in his stead. I hoped that they didn’t get into an argument.

I ran my fingers through Zetsuei’s mane. Zetsuei was the black horse that had done me such a service during the siege of Keiyou; of course I’d adopted it as my own. Stroking the dark strands helped calm me before I replied to Teiha, “All right, got it. Thanks, you guys.” Those last words were to the gathered soldiers, to praise and award them for their hard work. As soon as they heard me say it, they all started speaking at once.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“We were pretty curious about this thing too.”

“We can’t turn down a request from the young master.”

“Anyway, that’s enough of that.”

“Where’s Lady Hakurei?”

“Did the two of you get in an argument?!”

“You should apologize sooner rather than later.”

*These guys...* I huffed and retorted, “You know, Hakurei and I don’t literally

spend *all* of our time together. Let's hurry up and start our tests. Teiha!"

"Yessir!" He held aloft a large hammer as the soldiers and their horses backed away, putting ample space between them and the catapult.

The metal sphere on the catapult's launching pad was one that we had recovered from the battlefield. I remembered seeing the Gen soldiers lighting these things on fire, but we couldn't set the plains ablaze. So long as we got some information on distance and force, we could use this in future battles.

"Shoot it!" I ordered in a sharp voice, looking over at a nervous Teiha.

He used his hammer to hit the wood holding the launching pad in place. The next second, the top part of the catapult—the trunk of the elephant—spun in a half circle. The ball flew through the air, creating a perfect arc. It easily surpassed the small hill before us and landed with a thundering boom, causing smoke to ascend through the air. Teiha and the soldiers murmured among each other, and the horses let out sharp whinnies. I couldn't help but wrinkle up my nose; I hadn't expected it to be *this* powerful.

"I thought I had an idea of how powerful it was from seeing the damage it wrought upon Keiyou, but that was... Well, let's go and check out the damage up close. Teiha and anyone who's curious, come with me! Everyone else, prepare for a second launch." After I gave my orders, I hopped onto Zetsuei's back; the horse had remained calm throughout the entire test.

Teiha, who had been slack-jawed after seeing the force of the Seitou weapon, returned to himself when he heard his name being called and yelled, "L-Lord Sekiei, wait a minute!"

I ignored him and raced off on horseback; the wind blowing through my hair felt good against my skin. As we approached the hill, I noticed the sound of galloping.

"Hmm?" I looked behind me to see a group of soldiers led by a girl wearing a coat and a blue hat. She was keeping up with me quite well. I knew who she was. With her long blonde hair—tied in a loose ponytail by a blue ribbon—and her right green eye, I recognized her as Ruri, the girl I had met in a Keiyou alleyway.

I hummed to myself in admiration. Though I'd been of the opinion that she wasn't your average little girl, it was still impressive that she could ride faster than Teiha and the other trained soldiers. Though awed by her display of equestrianism, I didn't stop Zetsuei until I was atop of the hill.

As I waited for everyone else to catch up, Ruri pulled up next to me and I said, "Good job. So, what are you doing here?"

"I volunteered, du— I mean, I volunteered, sir. I am now a military engineer." Her reply made it sound like she didn't quite know how to talk to a superior officer.

Due to the long-running problem of a lack of soldiers, the Chou family was always looking for more manpower. Now, with the Seitou invasion coming up so soon, it wasn't a surprise that someone this good at horseback riding—and with engineering knowledge to boot—would be chosen to join the troops...but I felt something odd about this whole situation. *Didn't she say she disliked war?* I opened my mouth to say something to her, but Teiha caught up to us, panting.

"Lord Sekiei!" he managed to say between breaths. "P-Please don't race off so suddenly. If *anything* happens to you, I wouldn't know how to face General Chou or Lady Hakurei!" There was a desperate tinge to his voice as he kneed his horse close to mine. He sounded exactly like Gramps Raigen did when he was scolding me.

Ignoring us, the girl moved her horse towards the impact site. I'd lost my chance to ask her more questions.

"Sorry, sorry. Don't be so mad at me," I said to Teiha as I looked down at the crater from atop Zetsuei. "Now then, it's time for business."

We all peered into the crater caused by the sphere. It was so deep that a large man could enter it with lots of room to spare.

"This is truly..." Teiha started to say, his quivering voice giving away how frightened he was.

"Yeah," I replied. *If they use a large number of these weapons on us, then...* I watched as Ruri called out to the soldiers to have them bring a rope to measure the crater and then looked over to Teiha and said, "According to the prisoners,



this is a weapon they specifically use for sieges, but I'm guessing that in Seitou, they use this as a defensive measure too. Their metallic armor is already going to pose some serious problems. Teiha, do you have any detailed intel on our enemies?"

Before us, I could see the soldiers chatting away as they worked. *I can't let them be killed in a foreign land.*

Teiha's expression was pained as he answered, "Nothing has come in since the last battle. I believe that all of our spies have been wiped out. We will have to rely on the classified information from General Chou. As reported the other day, the men you encountered in Keiyou were stragglers from Seitou."

*I want information—accurate, up-to-date information—so badly!* The invasion plan was already a bad one, and on top of that, we didn't have any information on our enemies? This was the worst. Father might know something, but...

"Seitou's capital, Ranyou, is full of these weapons, but that's not all. They've been distributing them to all of the cities...sir." Ruri had suddenly joined the conversation. She was holding a pen and scroll in her hands.

I turned my horse to face her and gave her a quick wink. "Don't worry about formalities when talking to me, but make sure you ask Hakurei if you can speak casually around her. Now, about those weapons, are you telling the truth?"

"I don't lie. Though they differ in size and numbers, these catapults are a common weapon in Seitou." Ruri blinked her green eyes, looking perplexed, as she put away her brush. I couldn't see any hint of deception or uncertainty in her, so she wasn't trying to dupe us.

"How do you know about that?" Teiha asked, his face stiff. "Your name was...Ruri, right?"

"I grew up in Seitou and I have a habit of observing things around me. What, is that a problem or something?"

Teiha and I exchanged looks. I didn't expect there to be such a valuable source of information so close to home! And not only that, but her powers of observation must have been far beyond those of a normal person's. Most civilians didn't care about the size or numbers of weapons. *That reminds me,*

*Eifuu also had a habit of observing the things and people around him. The memory of my old friend's skills warmed my heart.*

“Thanks for the information. It's really useful,” I said to her. “I'm sorry to ask you this, but could you tell me one more thing? You can tell me what your guess is too, if you're unsure.”

“What's that?” Ruri asked, putting her scroll back into the leather bag she'd attached to her horse's saddle. She narrowed her eyes at me, not even bothering to hide the caution in them.

I didn't pay any attention to her attitude as I pointed to the impact site. “Do you think there's a chance they'll use these weapons in an open-field battle?”

Ruri didn't reply for a long time. She placed a hand against her hair, keeping it in place as the wind grew stronger. When she looked up at me and met my eyes, I recognized in hers a keen intellect—one which rivaled that of Ou Meirin or Chou Hakurei.

“I can't fully deny the possibility.” She spoke her mind in a calm voice. “There aren't many historical instances of them being used that way, but it's not as if there isn't any precedence. General Garou of Gyou Country, who once fought against the Twin Stars of the past, is a famous example. It's not impossible to transport weapons of that size and weight if you have a large army, and we've already seen the Gen troops transport these catapults into Keiyou. Who can say that there won't be a second time?”

I kept the surprise off my face. I had forgotten about Gyou Country until she brought it up. In the past, the strategic general of Gyou Country had given me and Eifuu a lot of trouble by using catapults in an open-field battle, wreaking havoc among our soldiers. *Just who is this girl, that she can speak about the distant past as if it only happened yesterday?*

I was starting to feel a sense of disquiet about who this mysterious girl really was. Even so, I dipped my head and said, “I see. Thanks, that really helps. You'll have to tell me more about what you know when we have the time. Your skills as an equestrian are impressive. I think you'd be fast friends with Hakurei... Do you want to come back to the Chou manor with me?”

The girl remained silent for a moment before she said, “I must help with the

second test, so I shall take my leave now, sir.” She didn’t bother hiding how she reverted back to her more respectful manner of speech. Without a second look back at us, she galloped off towards the rest of the soldiers.

I glanced over at Teiha and he took out a notebook filled with the names and basic information of our soldiers. As he flipped through the pages, I could hear the faint sound of hooves. “That girl volunteered and was recruited just the other day. She’s fifteen years old, and she’s talented in archery as well as equestrianism. I didn’t know that she was so knowledgeable, though. Is there something you’re worried about?”

“Yeah, a little. Put her with Hakurei’s team.”

“Understood!”

Putting her on Hakurei’s team was a way to appease myself. I took out a small leather bag full of silver coins and handed it over to Teiha. He was an honest man and so seemed surprised at the sudden gift. I gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Also, good job today. I should head on home now or Hakurei will get mad at me for how I left her alone with our guest. After a few more tests of that catapult, take the soldiers back and treat them to some good food and wine with that money. Of course, you should partake as well. Give me a more detailed report tomorrow.”

“Yessir! Thank you so much!” Teiha gave me a textbook salute, gratitude clear on his face. He returned to the catapult, guiding the other soldiers with us as he did so. He was like a completely different person from just a few months ago.

“My, oh my, Lord Sekiei! ♪ You’ve grown so mature!” As soon as Teiha had left, Asaka appeared from atop of her own horse. She was smiling as she praised me.

“Don’t tell Hakurei, all right?” I said, pressing my index finger against my lips. “If she finds out, then she’ll take my coin pouch away. So, what’s the matter? It’s not every day that you come out here...” There was only one emergency that could get Asaka to ride all the way out here. I had a sudden vision of Chou Hakurei and Ou Meirin glaring at each other and I tried to call back the young captain. “T-Teiha! Wait up, I’ll go with—”

“Lord Sekiei, don’t think you can get away from me!” Asaka giggled. In a

smooth motion, her horse approached mine and she grabbed my right arm, keeping her grip firm on my joints. Everyone working for the Chou family learned a martial art of some kind. Considering Asaka was *Hakurei's* retainer... I tried my best to wriggle away, but my arm was held fast!

“L-Let go! Please let me go, Asaka! I’m begging you! I have the *very* important mission of recruiting a mysterious blonde girl and becoming closer friends with the other soldiers!”

“Lady Ou Meirin and her attendant Shizuka arrived from Rinkei not so long ago. Here is something from both Lady Meirin and Lady Hakurei.” Asaka offered me a piece of paper, her motions refined and courteous.

I took it from her, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, and looked down at it.

*Hurry back. Now.*

*Oh, husband! I’m here!*

*Urk.* I could see the girls’ contrasting expressions—Hakurei’s frigid and angry one, and Meirin’s delighted and cheery one—in my mind’s eye and I wanted nothing more than to bury my face in my hands.

Asaka clasped her hands together as she urged, “Lord Sekiei, there comes a time when we must face our fears, no matter how much we don’t want to. Now, hurry up please! ★”

“Okay,” I said, slumping my shoulders and giving her a weak nod. Zetsuei offered me a quiet nicker, as if trying to cheer me up.

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“Weren’t you listening to a *word* I said?! I’m asking why *you’re* the one with that sword! I was the one who found it, you know? Give it back to me this instant!”

“With all due respect, I refuse. This sword is something Sekiei entrusted to me.”

The first thing I saw when I returned to the inner courtyard of the Chou family manor was two beautiful girls arguing. One of them was wearing orange and

had long brown hair, tied in pigtails, protruding from underneath her hat. Though she was shorter than the girl she was arguing with, her breasts were rounder and more shapely. The other girl had long silver hair tied up with a red ribbon. She was dressed in formal clothing, White Star hung from her belt, and there was a blizzard blowing behind her blue eyes. Was it mere illusion that I could see a dragon and tiger roaring behind these girls? I could recognize them anywhere—it was Ou Meirin and Chou Hakurei.

I stared at them for a moment, unable to say anything, before making my decision. *Yup, this is far beyond my expertise. I'm outta here.* As soon as I'd made up my mind, I turned on my heel, determined to return inside. Let sleeping dogs—or in this case, sleeping prodigies—lie. Only an idiot was willing to leap into a battle they were sure to lose. I'd brought a gift for Meirin from my room, but I could always give it to her some other day.

“Hello, Lord Sekiei. I leave handling those two in your hands.” A beautiful woman with long black hair and black-and-white clothing stepped in my way. It was Miss Shizuka, Meirin's attendant. Asaka was standing next to her and although she was holding a hand in front of her mouth, she wasn't doing a good job concealing her grin.

*Dammit!* Keeping my voice low so that Hakurei and Meirin couldn't hear me, I begged, “M-Miss Shizuka, I'm just not brave enough to go over there. M-My life...my life is in da—”

“You'll be all right,” Miss Shizuka interrupted me.

“We'll go and prepare tea for everyone, so hurry on over there!” Asaka said.

I groaned, but I'd already lost. They didn't have any trouble at all when it came to speaking over my protests. I dragged my feet as I made my way back into the inner courtyard. With every step I took, my body trembled with fright. *Ahh, how could this have happened to me?!*

The two girls glaring at each other must have noticed the sound of my footsteps, because they turned to face me as one. Their beautiful faces were twisted in anger as they stared at me in silence.

“Uh, hi, I'm home,” I tried as I raised my left hand in greeting. Their lack of a reaction was terrifying.

After I waved at them, Hakurei approached me and hid herself behind my back, with only her face poking out from next to my shoulder. “Sekiei, please tell this ignorant fool, ‘White Star is something that I, Chou Sekiei, gave to Chou Hakurei.’ Tell her that right! This! Instant!”

“C-Calm down, all right? We might have cleared the area, but your voice really carries.”

Hakurei made a dissatisfied noise as she pursed out her lips. Meirin must have really ticked her off with her insinuations about White Star, because she could no longer maintain her lofty persona as the Chou family heiress. I was using both hands to hold Hakurei back when I heard my name being called in a serious voice.

“Lord Sekiei.” Hakurei and I both turned around, confused, to see Meirin bowing her head low to me, her hands clasped together. It was so different from how she normally was that we found ourselves straightening up to look at her. “I’ve heard about your accomplishments in the previous battle. Though this is quite belated now, I would like to congratulate you, from the bottom of my heart, on your victory against the Crimson Wolf, one of the Gen Empire’s most fearsome generals. However, more important than that...” Meirin slowly lifted her head. Her eyes shone with unshed tears and I could see the depths of her concern for me. “I’m truly relieved to see that you’re unharmed. Your wound no longer bothers you, yes? You’re not pushing yourself to save the people around you from worrying, are you?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m perfectly fine, as you can see. It looks like I caused you to worry; I’m sorry about that. I already thanked you in the letter I wrote, but seriously, you saved us when you brought father and the others with your ships. Thank you,” I said, my heart pounding in my chest even as I waved my hand at Meirin.

Both my apology and my gratitude were sincere. Father and his elite troops had been staying in Rinkei, and it was this girl before me who had transported them all the way to Keiyou using her paddlewheelers, which didn’t rely on the wind. I dreaded to think what would have happened if Meirin hadn’t helped us.

Meirin gave me a gentle smile. “It’s nothing. I’m just glad that I was able to be of some help. Ah, that reminds me! There’s something I’d like you to know

about, as well as something I'd like to discuss with you. Come closer."

"Okay? What's up?" I tilted my head to the side and approached Meirin. Hakurei was glaring at me in silence, but she could come later. Since there was a significant height difference between Meirin and me, I bent down slightly and then—

"Hee hee! ♪ Lord! Sekiei! ☆" Meirin jumped at me and threw her arms around my shoulders. She was so forceful that her hat flew off her head and soared through the air.

"Whoa?!"

"You're far too naive!" In contrast to how I'd let down my guard, Hakurei jumped to her feet and grabbed Meirin, pulling her under an arm. In the same smooth motion, she tossed Meirin onto a nearby bench.

"Oof!" Meirin flew into a cushion so large and soft that her face and small body were buried inside of it.

Hakurei narrowed her eyes and shot me a cold look. "You shouldn't let down your guard!"

*I don't think I could've avoided that,* I thought to myself as I scratched my cheek.

Meirin's face shot up from the pillow before she started kicking and rolling in a clear display of frustration. "Tsk! And here I thought I'd managed to completely take advantage of his opening! Hey, you, little princess, I know that you're pretending to be so calm, but you're secretly aiming to keep Lord Sekiei all for yourself! Please stop getting in my way! You've gotten to monopolize his time for so long, so why don't you let me give him a hug?! It's not as if it's going to take anything away from *you*!"

*Where did the wise Ou Meirin from seconds ago disappear to?* I stared down at her, exasperated, as next to me Hakurei crossed her arms.

"What a delusional little girl. In what world would I grant that request?"

Meirin growled as she hugged the pillow to her chest, her cheeks puffed out in an angry pout.



*When I look at how she acts, it's hard to tell that she's technically older than me.* I smiled with that thought and gave Hakurei a wink. In response, she looked irritated, even if she understood what I was telling her.

“Well, in any case,” I said as I picked up the hat that fluttered through the air and placed it back on Meirin’s head. She looked up at me with a clear question in her big eyes and when I looked down at them, I smiled. “I’m glad to see you made the trip in one piece. Looks like you didn’t encounter any trouble on the Grand Canal this time.”

Meirin’s cheeks flushed and she cupped her face in her hands with a smile. “Nope! ♪”

Hakurei brushed her long silver hair over her shoulder, drawing our attention to her as she told me, “I’ll be back in a few. There’s something I’d like Miss Ou Meirin over there to see, so don’t do anything weird just because I’m not in the room!”

“J-Just what kinda person do you take me for?!”

“Huh?! You *won’t* do anything weird?!”

Hakurei ignored us and our contrasting reactions. She simply turned around to return to the manor. *“Something I’d like Meirin to see,” huh? I wonder what it is?*

I sat down in a nearby chair and gave Meirin a deep bow. “Let me say it again: I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for how you transported father and Hakurei by boat. If you hadn’t made the decision to do so, without question Keiyou would’ve fallen.”

“A wife’s duty is to help her future husband. Please don’t worry too much about it.” When I saw the beautiful smile on her face—much to my consternation—my heart skipped a beat. Sometimes her expressions betrayed her old soul. She didn’t realize what I was thinking, however, because her smile turned into an angry pout in the next second. “But! That has nothing to do with the matter of the Heavenly Swords! Lord Sekiei.”

“Y-Yeah?” I inched back a little as I felt the cold blade of Meirin’s scrutiny. I’d never felt this pressured, even on the battlefield. The black cat hanging out

around the Chou manor hopped onto my lap from a nearby bush; it didn't seem like *it* noticed anything wrong between us.

Meirin gave the cat a jealous glance before she clenched her little fist and said in no uncertain terms: "You told me in Rinkei that if I found the Heavenly Swords for you, you'd consider marriage. I kept my promise! I found them! Now, it's *your* turn to uphold your end of the deal, Lord Sekiei!"

She wasn't wrong; I'd said that and I remembered saying it as well. I just hadn't expected her to actually find items that had disappeared from the history books. *Ou Meirin, you're terrifying!* I brushed my hand against the black sheath hanging from my belt and gave her my excuse, no matter how pathetic it was.

"As you can see, I only have a single sword in my possession. They're only the Heavenly Swords when you have Black Star and White Star as a set. It's not as if you know they're the real deal either, right? Miss Shizuka wasn't able to pull the sword from the sheath."

"Grr, you managed to find a weak spot in my claim! But how did you know the names of the swords? Shizuka was confused about that."

"I read them in a book that father owns."

"Argh!" Meirin clasped her hands over her busty chest, which seemed far too large for a girl her size, before she fell backwards. Of course, I was lying about how I knew the names of the swords. She hugged the pillow again, puffing out her cheeks so much that she looked like a toddler throwing a tantrum. "You're so mean, Lord Sekiei. You're a villain. I love you so, so, so much and I think of you all the time. I even bowed my head to a self-professed ascendant—even though it's a lot of trouble to be in her debt—and found the swords after searching through so many books. You won't even throw me a bone?"

Meirin was so bad at seeking affection that even I could tell what she was doing, and I was on the slower side when it came to these kinds of interactions. She was a troublesome little princess in her own right. *But a self-professed ascendant? In this day and age?* I took out a small box from a cloth bag and placed it on the round table. Meirin sat up and when she saw the box, her eyes widened in curiosity.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Take it and open it up.”

“Okay! ♪” Even though she was older than me, the way her left arm shot into the air before she snagged up the box was quite the juvenile act. With meticulous care, she unwrapped the box and when she took out what was inside, she breathed, “Oh, it’s beautiful.”

The glass cup with a pattern engraved into it reflected the light and cast a shadow upon the ground. The black cat on my lap opened its eyes and pleaded with me, so I did as it requested and gave its belly a few rubs.

“A country beyond the Hakkotsu Desert made that, and it’s something that I use myself,” I explained. “I figured that the Ou heiress could get her hands on one without any issues, but still, I wanted to give you a personal gift as a show of gratitude. I hope you’ll accept it. I’ve also prepared for us some delicious mountain peach wine, so let’s drink it together tonight.”

The wind blew through the courtyard, playing with Meirin’s long hair. She stared at the cup for a few moments before carefully returning it to the box. “Let me take back my earlier words.”

“Hmm?” I stopped petting the cat. *Should I have spent more time choosing a gift for her?* I was in the midst of regretting my decision when I saw Meirin remove her hat and hold it in front of her face, hiding her mouth behind the brim. Her cheeks were bright red and she was twisting her body from side to side.

“Wh-When you throw me a bone, y-you have to throw them slowly. Getting something like this out of the blue makes my h-heart...you know... You’re such an idiot, Lord Sekiei! I love you!”

“Uh, thanks?”

“J-Just accept my affection, jeez! My goodness!” Still holding on to her hat, Meirin squeezed herself next to me on the chair and pressed her shoulder against mine. The cat was surprised but curled up once again. It must have judged Meirin as harmless.

Seeing how happy Meirin was made me give her a small smile. “You’re so...

Well, never mind. I hope you'll use that cup."

"Of course. I'll treasure it for the rest of my life. ♪" She waved her arms as if she couldn't contain her joy as she gave me a big nod.

*I'm going to have to talk with father about what kind of gift the Chou family should give her, since that was just a personal one.*

"What are you doing?"

As I thought about the near future, a frigid mutter reached my ears. I didn't want to turn around, but I knew I had to. I took my sweet time looking behind me and as soon as I did, I regretted everything.

"H-Hakurei?! I-I can explain..."

"Hee hee, my husbaaand! ☆"

Meirin didn't give a damn about the wintry glare she was being subjected to. She hugged my arm, uncaring of how I was panicking, and touched Black Star where it hung off my belt.

"You idiot!" I started to hiss, but Meirin cut me off with a whisper.

"The self-professed ascendant who found this sword hates war because of some things that happened in her past, but she's a really good strategist. I also hear that she was raised in Seitou, so I'll introduce you to her when we get the chance. To tell the truth, she's far more familiar with what I want to show you. Also, there are rumors that the Gen emperor is searching for the Heavenly Swords as well."

"Huh?!" Words failed me at all the information I was being given and I stared at the girl before me. *Adai Dada is also looking for the Heavenly Swords? Why? And a self-professed ascendant raised in Seitou and skilled in strategizing?* The face of the girl who wore a blue hat and hid her left eye behind her blonde hair appeared in my mind's eye. Before I could say or do anything, though, a slender arm reached out, grabbed Meirin, and once again tossed her onto the bench. Anything I was thinking about disappeared when I saw that.

"Eek!" Meirin squealed.

A furious Hakurei sat down and, with careful hands, took out the small raden-

style box I'd gifted her. Inside of it were all of the ribbons and accessories I'd given her over the years. Hakurei smiled and said, "Now then, let's continue our conversation. Ou Meirin, allow me to show you the difference between you and I."

Meirin adjusted how she was sitting in the chair. She crossed her legs, rested her cheek in the palm of her hand, and gave a villainous chuckle. *Whoa, that's the face of an unscrupulous merchant, all right.*

"Even after seeing what you did, you still think you have a chance of winning?" Meirin taunted. "I don't dislike foolhardiness. However! My victory is certain! Look at this glass cup! Lord Sekiei gifted me something that matches a cup *he* owns!"

Hakurei gave a triumphant huff and crossed her long legs. If Meirin had the same expression as an immoral merchant, then Hakurei's expression was that of a general cornering the enemy. "Humph. And here I thought you would have something far more impressive."

"Wh-What?!"

*This is scary. The best thing to do in a situation like this is to run.* I held the black cat close to my chest and said, "Um, so I'm going to take my leave right about—"

"You!" both girls barked at me. "Stay right there!"

"All right..." I muttered as I sat back down. *I'm...I'm so pathetic...*

After that, the two of them argued with each other while revealing things like how many gifts I gave Hakurei or where I visited with Meirin during my time in Rinkei. Even after Miss Shizuka and Asaka arrived with our tea, they didn't stop. *Embarrassment can really kill a guy.* That was why after they argued, ate dinner together, and walked back into the manor, the first thing I did was rest my body on the round table in the inner courtyard. Who could blame me for that?

*For all those two claim to hate each other, they seem like really good friends.*

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"I cannot accept this. Why did you summon Ou Meirin to Keiyou, father?"

Hakurei's sharp voice echoed throughout the office.

It was the middle of the night and Hakurei was wearing her nightgown, her hair hanging loose around her. Every time the fire in the lamps wavered, our shadows moved as well. Father set his brush down on the inkstone. Though he had finished both dinner and a bath, he was still dressed in his military uniform.

"Hakurei, lower your voice," he scolded. "You'll disturb everyone."

Hakurei's eyes narrowed and there was clear dissatisfaction on her face. Though she didn't seem happy about it, she said, "My apologies," before falling silent, waiting on her father's words.

Father massaged the bridge of his nose and, in a stern voice, started to explain. "I must return to Hakuhou Castle soon. However, it's clear that our more pressing concern is with strengthening the defenses of both Keiyou and the western regions. I deemed Lady Meirin's skills necessary to prevent any delays when transporting the necessary supplies. The Ou family has given its approval for her presence as well; this is something that has already been formally decided. Once the Seitou invasion starts, she will do her best to maintain the supply line."

Hakurei and I both fell silent. Saying that father had a point would be an understatement. Both strengthening our defenses and restoring Keiyou's infrastructure were tasks we absolutely had to complete, and yet didn't have enough time for. Plus, I'd heard that for the upcoming invasion, both Hakurei's team and mine would have to prepare supplies ourselves.

It was obvious that the commander made this decision just so he could inconvenience us. But since the great river flowed through Seitou as well, we could probably transport more supplies with the effective usage of small boats rather than relying on horses. Meirin being involved in military logistics would solve our biggest concern; that was how much power that girl had.

"Hakurei," I said.

"My apologies. I shall take my leave for tonight." She bowed her head and left the room. *She can understand the reasoning behind Meirin's presence, but she still can't swallow her emotions about it, huh?*

Father let out a deep and heavy sigh. “I don’t know what to do about her sometimes. Sekiei, I apologize, but—”

“I’ll talk to her later. I’m sure she understands. She took a bath with Meirin in the hot springs, after all.”

When I was younger, I often misbehaved. I liked to sneak out of the manor and walk around Keiyou. In contrast, Hakurei had always been serious and honest, which meant that she had trouble making female friends around her age. Meirin’s childhood was similar to Hakurei’s, thanks to her sheltered upbringing. Miss Shizuka told me in confidence that despite appearances, Meirin was happy about being able to spend that intimate time with Hakurei, but she was too awkward to let anyone see her true feelings. In a way, the two of them really were very similar to each other.

I lowered my voice and asked, “I know that I’m just repeating myself here, but is there truly no way to cancel the invasion?”

“Hmm.” Clouds hid away the moon and the darkness intensified as shadows engulfed the room. Chou Tairan closed his eyes and when he spoke, it was in a low voice that sounded as if he were trying to bite something back. “My sister-in-law in Rinkei sent me a letter. The emperor has put out the order for the invasion and they’ve started to officially put together an army. Soon, the troops will march upon Angan. The plan’s ultimate goal is a vague one: ‘Punish Seitou.’ No one even knows how far we’ll push... Though I hear that the commander plans to attack Ranyou, the capital of Seitou!”

There was no definitive goal in this plan, and they were sending an army of irreplaceable fledgling tigers into war? Back when I traveled from battlefield to battlefield with Eifuu, I often had to deal with difficult strategies and missions. Some battles were gambles that favored the opponent—such as when we defeated Garou—but I didn’t recall ever participating in an operation as foolish as this one.

Father crossed his massive arms. “The officers and number of troops are the same as what we discussed in the past. Jo Shuuhou, the Phoenix Wing, and U Jouko, the Tiger Fang, will be at the front. They’ll be leading the most elite members of the southern and western armies, each bringing twenty-five



thousand soldiers. After them will be Ou Hokuju leading the hundred thousand soldiers from the Imperial Guard. The supreme commander will be Rin Chuudou, the lieutenant chancellor. The operation's plan is impossible to understand, but that man's ambitions are easy to read. He wishes for military achievements that will grant him the title of king. If that happens, then not even the old grand chancellor can do anything against him."

The lieutenant chancellor's daughter was the favored concubine of the emperor—in other words, Rin Chuudou was part of the consort clan. He already had plenty of power from that position, but he wanted even more? It wasn't an uncommon story, even a thousand years ago. It seemed that humans would never change.

Faced with this cruel reality, I spat, "I've also heard my fair share of stories about the lieutenant chancellor's accomplishments in internal affairs; he's ultimately a civil official, isn't he? Marshal Jo was worried about this as well, but commanding such a large army is..."

"It's out of the picture. His hunger for power will only make the war worse. The old grand chancellor has his own concerns regarding the lieutenant chancellor."

*A battle between an old subject who's supported the empire for many years, and a fool who only wants power for himself?* During our time in Rinkei, Hakurei and I met a relative of the grand chancellor's and he, too, had been drunk on the swill known as Power.

I shook my head to chase dark thoughts from my mind, and chose to change the subject. "We tested out the Seitou catapults today."

"Hmm." Father stroked his beard, keen interest in his gaze. "What did you think?"

There were some things that simply couldn't be put into words. "I wouldn't want to attack a castle that's been fortified by a large number of those things. Once a shot is fired, there's nothing we can do about it. If it lands in the middle of our troops, then..." I spread my arms in a hopeless gesture. Those steel balls had pulverized even the sturdy gates of Keiyou. Death was all that awaited those in their path.

Father nodded. “I’d like you to put together a report on those weapons. I’ll send it to Rinkei at once. I doubt the lieutenant chancellor will read through it, but it will help Shuuhou and Jouko.”

“Meirin brought us a new weapon that had been tested in Seitou, but its development was ultimately halted. Tomorrow, we’ll see how it works in a mock battle. I’ll make my report after those tests, since I want to include that information as well. I’m pretty sure that Hakurei and Meirin will pout at me again, though.” The only time that the two girls worked together without fuss was when they were yelling at me. Even if I tried to defend myself, both Hakurei and Meirin were smart. It seemed like there was a tough battle waiting for me.

For the first time all night, father’s face softened in a smile. “Watch your back when you walk around on moonless nights. I don’t know about Lady Meirin, but Hakurei is very similar to my late wife.”

“Father, that’s nothing to joke about!” For better or for worse, Hakurei didn’t put on any airs when dealing with me. Meirin was probably the same. I shuddered and changed the topic back to the coming invasion. “Do we have any intel regarding the enemy? I’d heard that a large number of spies had been captured, but...”

“You heard right. It’s been difficult, but to know thy enemy is to know thyself.” I could see a deep spark of intelligence in my father’s eyes. The most reputable general in the Ei Empire knew better than anyone just how important information was during war. “At this point in time, Gen’s giant army is not present in Seitou. However, one of the Four Wolves—the Gray Wolf—has already led his troops out of Enkei, making their way southeast. I figure that they plan on crossing the Nanamagari Mountains.”

The Crimson Wolf, Nguyen Gui, had mapped that uncharted land and opened up a road for the rest of the Gen army. We had killed the Crimson Wolf, but the danger had not passed; a general of his caliber was using that same road to cause us trouble. Pessimism stewed in my heart, but I didn’t dwell on it for long as father continued to speak.

“Not only that, but I hear that the mysterious strategist, the Millenary Diviner, has been spotted in Ranyou.”

I gaped my mouth at the unexpected words. “An actual strategist?”

Until Ou Eifuu became the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire, he’d been known as a strategist. Strategists appeared on the battlefield as well; some of the enemy commanders Kou Eihou faced off called themselves that. But in this day and age, no one took on that job anymore.

Father placed his hand upon his chin. “We know nothing about him, whether it’s his real name or his family name. He entered Adai’s services around seven years ago, but most of his time was spent in the north—I’ve never faced him myself. It seems that after the Crimson Wolf’s death, he’s been put in charge of both the military and political affairs of Seitou.”

“He beat out the marshal for that job, even though the marshal holds the highest position in the army?” In other words, Adai trusted this military strategist, whose name we didn’t even know, so much that he put him in charge of an entire country?

Father laid out a piece of paper on the table, his face more stern than I’d ever seen it. “I’d wanted to give you as many soldiers as we could spare, but we’ve encountered some trouble.”

I read through the paper as quickly as I could. At the bottom of it was a seal in the shape of a crimson dragon. I pressed a hand to my forehead and sighed. ““We will allow you to send a thousand soldiers to protect the logistics team. Any more than that will affect Keiyou’s defenses, and so we cannot allow it,’ huh?”

“I don’t appear to be very popular among those in the capital,” father joked in a self-deprecating way as he stood up. He turned his back to me and stared out the window. I could see faint tremors running through his broad back. “Even if I try to argue, His Imperial Majesty has already placed his stamp on these orders. At this point, there’s simply nothing I can do or say to override them. I’m truly...I truly apologize, but—”

“It’s all right. I’ll find a way.” I interrupted him in as casual a tone I could manage. “Under these circumstances, we can’t simply move the army around the river. Gen’s manpower would make a two-front battle easy for them. If we think of it that way, then Rinkei’s decision was the right one.”

“That may be so. But, Sekiei...” Father’s expression twisted. He knew his place, and was well aware that if he ever lost to Gen, then that would mean the end of the Ei Empire. Still, I suspected that all he could think about at the moment was how much he worried for me and Hakurei.

I spread my arms wide and plastered a smug grin on my face. “Besides, the orders only stated how *many* soldiers we could bring. It never said anything about what *kind*.”

Father’s eyes widened; it was clear he immediately understood what I was trying to say. He folded up the piece of paper and ordered, “Very well. If there is anyone or anything that you need, then tell me as soon as possible.”

“Thank you very much. There’s someone I’ve been rather curious about and I plan on recruiting her again.” I could hear a quiet sound from outside the room. *She’s back, huh?* I adjusted myself in the chair so I was sitting properly again before I lowered my head. “Now then, if you’ll excuse me.”

“I apologize for the burden I’m placing upon your shoulders, but thank you.”

I made my way out of father’s room and walked down the hall for a few moments until I encountered Hakurei waiting for me. She was leaning against one of the stone pillars and as soon as she saw me, she pursed her lips and pouted.

“You sure took your time,” she said.

“Oh yeah? Father worries too much. Let’s go.” I continued to walk down the hall and heard Hakurei fall in step behind me without fuss. As the moon shone down on us, I said, “Hakurei.”

“Yes?”

I stopped and turned around to face her. It seemed that she’d expected this, because she waited for my words without complaint.

“We’ll be picking up cavalymen to take with us to Seitou. We need a thousand soldiers capable of shooting from atop horses.”

“All right.” She nodded immediately, with no hint of confusion or curiosity on her face.

Granted, I didn't *want* her to argue with me, but... "Er, you're not going to ask me why?"

"I'm assuming that there's a limit to how many troops we're allowed to bring, yes? Since we're expecting a difficult battle ahead of us, we'll want our teams to consist mostly of cavalry—who can move quickly, even in emergencies. If I have to be more specific, I'm guessing that you want cavalry so that the soldiers and I have an easier time of escaping. Am I wrong?"

I scratched my cheek and averted my gaze. Ten years ago, Chou Hakurei saved my life. Now that the Chou family army was forced to participate in the invasion and I'd seen for myself how terrible the plan was, I wanted to make sure she, at the very least, didn't die. That was the only thing I cared about.

Instead of answering her question, I explained, "There's still plenty of time before all the soldiers are to meet up at Angan. Tomorrow, we'll pick out the soldiers and start training. I want to ask that Ruri girl to come with us. For tonight, let's hurry up and sleep so—"

"No." The firm rejection came immediately, and Hakurei rested her small head against my chest. Ever since she was a child, she had done this when she was trying to be selfish. "We haven't had our chat tonight. Is that...not allowed?"

As I expected, she raised her head to stare up at me—as if trying to butter me up. I wasn't so coldhearted that I could ignore her when she was looking at me like this. Meirin had fallen asleep after a single mouthful of the mountain peach wine, so she probably wouldn't find out about it.

I ran my hand through Hakurei's long silver hair and replied, "Man, what am I going to do with you? We can only chat for a little bit, all right?"

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"Ah, jeez! I've had this feeling for a while now, but Lord Sekiei, you baby Miss Hakurei way too much! 'It's our habit to chat at night'? I don't want to hear it! This is so unfair. It should be against the rules. You took advantage of me being asleep! Let me participate tonight as w— Eek!"

My beloved horse, galloping across the plains south of Keiyou, had jolted

somewhat and caused Meirin, who was sitting behind me, to squeak in fear. Her long brown hair, tied in pigtails, waved in the wind.

I looked at her—it was clear that she wasn't used to riding a horse at all—and warned, "It's dangerous if you don't sit closer to me. You were the one who said, 'I want to be there when you test the new weapon and hold a mock battle,' remember?"

"Yes..." Meirin's arms slipped around me again and she buried her face into my back in embarrassment.

I ignored the feeling of her ample bosom against me. Hakurei, who had gone ahead of us, would kill me if she ever found out. Miss Shizuka and Asaka were standing near the observation tower, and the soldiers guarding them were setting things up. A long and narrow wooden box was on a nearby horse, and it contained the new weapon.

Around one hundred fifty of the cavalymen Hakurei and I had chosen for the upcoming invasion were gathered on the plains as well. They were practicing shooting at scarecrows from horseback. I could also see Hakurei's silver hair and Ruri's blonde hair in the distance; they were chatting with each other while racing their horses.

"Meirin, let go. We'll start with the weapon test first."

"Okay." Meirin released me, though I could tell she was reluctant to do so.

I noticed the smiles of Miss Shizuka and Asaka as they watched us, but I ignored them. Instead, I hopped off my horse and extended a hand to Meirin. "Here."

"Wha—?" she squawked as her eyes widened.

I stroked my horse's mane for a moment before trying again, "You can't get off the horse by yourself, can you? It's dangerous if you're not used to it."

"Ah, r-right."

Meirin slowly reached out for me. I took her hand and pulled her into a one-armed embrace before setting her back down onto the ground. I removed her hat from the leather pouch attached to the saddle and placed it onto her head.

She didn't even seem to be paying attention, too busy giving me a blank look.





“Make sure you keep this a secret from Hakurei.”

“Okay! ♪” Meirin was looking happier and happier with every word. Did she really understand the gravity of the situation?

Miss Shizuka noticed how her mistress was acting and walked towards us. In her hands, she held something that looked like a spear, but wasn't. A bamboo cylinder had been tied to the tip and there was string poking out from the side of it. “Lord Sekiei, thank you so much,” she said. “I believe that she won't make any selfish requests for at least a few months.”

“Ah, no worries. It wasn't so bad riding with someone for once, and I'm always happy to fulfill your requests, Miss Shizuka.”

“Oh my! It's not good to make fun of adults, you know?”

“I'm telling the truth.”

As Miss Shizuka and I chatted away, I heard Meirin's furious growl of “Lord Sekiei? Shizuka?”

I reached out and placed my hand on top of her hat. “Come on, explain the new weapon to us. If we don't wrap up the test soon, the terrifying Chou Hakurei will start shooting arrows at us.”

“Grr, you're being so mean, Lord Sekiei! You're horrible!” After she got that out of her system, though, Meirin turned to look over at Miss Shizuka. “Shizuka, lend me the fire lance.”

“It might be too heavy for you, Lady Meirin.” Even as she said that, Miss Shizuka handed her small mistress the strange stick—the fire lance. As expected, Meirin stumbled backwards a few steps under its weight and seemed about to fall over, so I walked over and helped support her.

“Whoa! Oh, you...”

“Hee hee hee, just as planned! I knew that you would help me, Lord Sekiei, since you're such a kind person! I win!” Meirin leaned more of her weight against me, smiling like a child who'd succeeded in pulling a prank.

Miss Shizuka clasped her hands together in an apologetic gesture. From a distance, I could see Hakurei, along with Ruri and some other riders, making

their way towards us. She must've noticed our presence.

"All right, whatever," I said. "Hurry up and do a test shot."

"Ah, okay! Um, let's see." Meirin finally left me and, with Miss Shizuka's help, started to prepare for the weapon test.

As we waited, a white horse and a dapple-gray horse galloped up to us. Hakurei, in her military uniform, hopped off Getsuei while Ruri, wearing a hat and robes, dismounted from the dapple gray.

"You sure took your time, Sekiei," Hakurei said while Ruri made a somewhat disgusted noise next to her.

"Save your complaints for a certain heiress, who put off her paperwork until the very last minute. Oh, right, let me introduce you two. Ruri, this is—"

"Huh? Ruri, is that really you? What are *you* doing here?" Before I could finish talking, Meirin had looked up and blinked her large eyes in confusion.

"I could ask you the same thing, munchkin merchant. Why are you in the front lines when you're usually such a shut-in?"

"M-Munchkin?! H-Humph, and here I was wondering what you might say to me! This is why little miss self-professed ascendant will never have big breasts! Your chest will remain as flat as a washing board for all of time!"

Ruri's emerald eyes burned with irritation, but she looked away, crossing her arms. *A self-professed ascendant? So in other words, the one who found the Heavenly Swords was...*

"I'm not just going around calling myself an ascendant. I really am one. As for my breasts, I still have time to—"

"Hmm? Oh, *really*? What a pathetic dream! It'll never come true, much like Lord Sekiei's dream of becoming a civil official."

"Y-You unscrupulous little—"

"Uh, excuse me?" I couldn't help but interrupt. "Why did you have to drag *me* into this?"

Hakurei clapped her hands, drawing everyone's attention to her. "Sekiei's

dream has always been a pathetic one, so let's not waste any time calling him out on it. Meirin, please explain how you and Ruri know each other."

"Listen, you..."

"Ah, all right!" Ignoring my complaints, Ou Meirin walked behind Ruri and gave her a hug. Though Ruri's face scrunched up in obvious distaste, she didn't even try to shake Meirin off. This must be a normal interaction for the two of them. Meirin poked her head out from behind Ruri and said, "This is the self-professed ascendant who discovered the Heavenly Swords in an abandoned temple in the western regions! I'd heard that you planned on going to see Lord Sekiei, but don't you hate both war and the army?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I really am an ascendant? Look." Ruri shook her hand in a dissatisfied manner and then, from out of nowhere, a white flower popped into existence. She stuck the flower into Meirin's bangs.

*That's the mysterious art she used in the Keiyou alleyway.*

"This again? Well, it's pretty, so whatever..."

"What? Is there something you want to say to me?" Ruri glared down at Meirin from over her shoulder.

In response, Meirin skipped over to me and hid behind *my* back before sticking out her tongue. "Don't you think making flowers is a little boring for mysticism? I wanna see something more impressive and flashy, like changing the weather! ★"

*She has a point.* All of the ascendants and mystics who made their mark on history were akin to monsters with what they could do. Seeing the way we were giving her disbelieving looks, Ruri heaved a heavy sigh and walked towards Miss Shizuka.

"I told you this many times already too. I'm using magic. Mysticism isn't as omnipotent as you might think either. If I were an ascendant from way back when, like when the Routou peach tree was still a sapling, then maybe I could perform mysticism powerful enough to shake the earth and rock the heavens."

*From an era when the large peach tree in the northern regions of the continent, said to be over a thousand years old, was still a sapling, huh? I*

couldn't imagine it at all. In the end, mysticism was probably just the stuff of fairy tales.

Ruri took the fire lance from Miss Shizuka and then turned back to face Hakurei and I once again. "I apologize for keeping this information from you. Like Meirin said, I am the one who found the Heavenly Swords."

"Why?" Hakurei and I asked as one. What we really meant with that question was "Why did you want to see the owner of the Heavenly Swords so badly that you were willing to volunteer as a soldier, even though you hate war?"

Ruri narrowed her eyes at our question. Then, she adjusted the hat on her head before she looked up at me, a will so powerful in her visible right eye that I felt like she was issuing me a challenge. "Chou Sekiei, Meirin told me a lot about you. I want to know if you're worthy of wielding the Heavenly Swords. In order for me to do that, I will aid Hakurei in the upcoming mock battle. This will also count as a test for the fire lance. I believe that it will serve as a worthy challenge for someone of your caliber."

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"Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, everyone has finished their preparations. As ordered, we've split our troops into two teams of a hundred fifty, and we've handed out all the practice arrows as well." Teiha, who'd been picked out as the adjutant for this exercise, made his report while giving us a smart salute.

Still on horseback, Hakurei and I turned to look at the chosen troops. Ruri wasn't among them. She'd discussed something with Hakurei, said that she needed to make some preparations, and then disappeared with a score of the soldiers they'd been given.

*It wouldn't be very creative if her plan is a simple ambush.* Hakurei, a quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder, prompted me with a look, so I made a conscious effort to look serious.

"As you all know, we will be launching an invasion on Seitou in a matter of days. A thousand cavalymen from our army will be participating in this campaign. Everyone gathered here today are those who already know how to shoot an arrow from horseback. Teiha?"

“The arrows that we’ll be using for the mock battle are ones that we use for training. There’s a bag of red dye attached to the tip. Everyone’s got either a white or black cloth around their arm, right? If you get hit by an arrow, I’d like you to raise the cloth in the air, leave the battlefield, and head for the hill.”

“In general, you’ll only be allowed to use a bow and arrow,” Hakurei said, taking up the explanation. “The mock battle will end when either Sekiei or I—the generals—are taken out, or if an entire team is eliminated. Be mindful that you don’t fall off your horse, everyone. We will start the mock battle when the sun reaches its zenith, and Asaka should sound the signal when that happens. Now then, would my team please get into position?”

“Yes ma’am! Victory to Lady Hakurei!” All of the young soldiers hopped onto their horses and moved out, their anxiety clear on their faces.

Meanwhile, the fifty cavalymen playing the roles of the enemy were joking around without getting onto their mounts. These soldiers were all veterans and had survived the siege on Keiyou.

“I wanted to be one of the people protecting Lady Hakurei.”

“The young master is...yeah...”

“It doesn’t feel very good defending him.”

“Yeah, because he often rushes in on his own.”

“If we betray Lord Sekiei, then doesn’t that mean we’ll bring victory to Lady Hakurei?”

“Good thinking!”

*These idiots...* Well, I *had* been the one to order Teiha to split the teams so that the hundred relatively younger soldiers were on one, and the fifty veterans on the other. Since I was the one who came up with the teams, I supposed I didn’t have much room to complain about how my group was treating me. I shook my head with a small smile as I checked on the string of my bow.

Hakurei, from Getsuei’s back, had taken only a few steps away when she stopped. Without turning around, she said, “Sekiei.”

“Hmm?”

She drew White Star in a single movement and held it high in the air. As if on cue, light shone down from the heavens, illuminating both the blade and her beautiful long silver hair. All of the soldiers breathed out a quiet sigh of appreciation at the sight.

“Don’t you *dare* pull your punches. Both Miss Ruri and I will use our full power to bring you down!”

The moment she finished yelling her challenge, Hakurei kicked Getsuei into a gallop and chased after her soldiers. The other team had her leadership as well as the ascendant girl, who—according to Meirin—hated war and yet excelled in strategy. *How will things turn out?*

I ran my hand down the neck of my favorite horse, Zetsuei. “Teiha,” I asked the young officer, “what do you think they’ll do?” Hakurei and the others were already a good distance away from us. However, my eyes, sharper than a hawk’s, could clearly see a rider with a blue hat galloping up to Hakurei’s side, taking up position next to her.

After thinking for a few moments, Teiha replied, “We have fifty cavalymen, whereas Hakurei’s team has a hundred. Granted, her soldiers are far less experienced or skilled than ours. Your average opponent might decide to rely on their superior numbers and launch a head-on charge.”

Hakurei’s team was hidden behind the shadow of a small hill and I couldn’t see them from here. Using the terrain of the battlefield to their advantage was the mark of a good commander. Hakurei had her father’s talent; if given a few more years to develop, she’d surely surpass me when it came to leading an army.

Teiha adjusted his helmet and then signaled to the veteran soldiers to mount their horses. “However, Lady Hakurei knows your prowess in combat better than anyone else. I don’t believe she’ll decide on such a foolish plan of action. There are several hills dotting this area. So perhaps she’ll split her team into two and attempt a pincer attack.”

If I’d posed this question to Teiha a few months ago, he probably would have guessed that Hakurei would launch a head-on charge, but he’d been one of the people to survive that fearsome battle for Keiyou. Satisfied with what I heard, I

waved my hand at Meirin—who was sitting on a watchtower—as a signal.

“Yup, that’s probably it. The problem now is figuring out whether Hakurei is with the main or ambush team.” The sun was approaching its zenith and it didn’t take very long after that before the sound of a gong rang out over the fields. I turned to look at my soldiers, all on horseback, and smiled at them, showing my teeth. “Now then, let’s do it! Get your head in the game! If anyone loses to Hakurei, you’ll get double the training exercises!”

In response, my soldiers roared.

“Young master, that’s terrible!”

“Ah, but, Lord Sekiei, won’t *you* be the one that Lady Hakurei goes for?”

“So in other words, if we use him as bait, we’ll survive?”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

I knew every single one of these soldiers, and they knew me; the price I paid was that while all of them had raised their bows in a salute, they still said whatever they pleased. Before me I could see the telltale cloud of dust, kicked up from the hooves of the cavalry’s horses. Judging by the size of it, the team ahead of us consisted of about thirty cavalymen at the most. “Man, you guys should consider worrying about me for once,” I chuckled as I nocked an arrow into my bow.

Though this was a training bow, it was still a powerful one constructed in Seitou. If I shot it with my full strength, then I might injure one of the soldiers. *In that case!* I pulled the bowstring to its limit and then released it. The arrow flew, carried upon the strong wind, and knocked the quiver from the back of the cavalryman leading the charge. It fell to the ground, a red stain on it.

“Wha—?!” Shock rippled through both my allies and enemies.

I continued to shoot arrow after arrow, scanning the area for Hakurei. But all of the soldiers were wearing their helmets low on their heads, preventing me from telling them apart. *Did she choose to launch an ambush? I don’t see Ruri anywhere either.* I knocked down a quiver with every arrow I shot, using my legs instead of my reins to command Zetsuei.



“Charge them and take them down!” I ordered. “Teiha, watch the shadows of the hills on our left and right sides. If she’s going to ambush us, she’ll do so from there. Everyone, you’re free to fire as soon as you’re in range!”

“Yessir!” Teiha bellowed back.

“Understood!” The fifty soldiers followed my lead.

We were closing the distance between our two teams when one of the enemies raised their bow high in the air. Immediately, the enemy team split up into smaller groups of riders. Even though they had just entered shooting distance, they were already releasing arrows into my group. They were landing in the ground around me.

“Huh, that’s pretty good.”

The Crimson Knights used the same strategy when they launched their attack on Keiyou. Was this Hakurei’s or Ruri’s order? I directed Zetsuei through the rain of arrows, deflecting some of them with my bow while retaliating every chance I got. Our teams were so close that I could now see the faces of the other soldiers. A boy and a girl, very similar to each other, split up, charging at me in a pincer formation with identical determined expressions.

“Lord Sekiei!”

“Please lose for Lady Hakurei’s sake!”

*They’ve got heart. I’ll have to ask Teiha for their names later.* They both shot arrows at me at almost the same time. With two quick movements I had released arrows from my bow as well, knocking theirs out of the air.

“What?!” they exclaimed.

“Not bad, but I can’t give you a passing grade.” I shot the practice arrows into my brave challengers’ quivers, knocking them from their backs. *Now, what’s next?*

“Lord Sekiei! Ambush! From both hills!” Teiha warned. He and several soldiers under his command were fighting nearby.

I could see around thirty cavalymen pour out from behind the left hill, and around twenty from behind the right. *An attack from three fronts?! We’d*

already defeated around half of the soldiers from the head-on charge, at least. While our formation was a mess, we had barely lost any of our soldiers.

“Teiha, I’ll take the left!” I ordered. “While I do that, I want you to take care of the—”

That was when it hit me. *Hakurei and Ruri aren’t in any of the teams?*

“Lord Sekiei?!”

I could hear Teiha’s frantic voice in my ears, but I was already turning my horse around. There before me were around ten cavalymen, with Hakurei at their front. *They rode around us in a wide berth to attack from behind?!*

They hadn’t been split into three teams—they’d been split into *four*, and their goal was to surround us before attacking. When I defeated Garou in a nameless gorge, I had been carrying out a similar formation that Eifuu had come up with, which he’d named the Wolf-Killing Envelopment. I never thought I’d be on the receiving end of it in this life.

*Is this Ruri’s strategy? I already know how it works, though. I’m sure I’ll get reamed for this later, but if I shoot off Hakurei’s quiver, then it’ll be over!* I pulled the bowstring taut and aimed it at my childhood friend, who was charging straight at me. Our gazes crossed as she closed the distance between us in an instant. I could see Hakurei’s lips move slightly.

“Huh?!”

A high-pitched roar that I’d never heard before in my life sounded out over the entire battlefield. My veterans and I weren’t the only ones surprised to hear it; even the horses reacted, throwing everyone into chaos. When I looked over at the hill on the right, I could see ten soldiers on their feet, each holding a long stick with smoke wafting out from the split bamboo tube at the end of it. I recognized it as the fire lance. The bamboo tubes looked like a mess.

When I was in Rinkei, I got several opportunities to see fireworks with my own eyes and knew that they relied on something called gunpowder. *So this is a weapon that turns gunpowder into an anti-cavalry weapon?!*

“This time, *we’ll* be the winners!”

“Keep this in mind: overconfidence will only bring death!”

The second I heard Hakurei’s and Ruri’s loud voices, I ducked my body low, watching as two arrows shot past my head.

“Huh?!” Ruri exclaimed while Hakurei clicked her tongue.

I pushed myself back up and charged through the battlefield. Not all of the horses had recovered from the surprise of the fire lance, and there was confusion spreading through the crowd from the attack. I shot every enemy quiver I saw, and then pulled on Zetsuei to make him turn around. Both Ruri and Hakurei were giving me frustrated looks, so I winked at them.

“I’ll give you a passing mark.”

In my past life as Kou Eihou, my policy had been “A general must never display doubt in front of his soldiers.” This philosophy was carved into my soul, and it was one that I followed in this life as well. In truth, the match had been a close one. If Hakurei’s soldiers had more experience or practice time, then we might have already lost at this point. *Miss Ascendant is terrifying, as well. To think that she would add fire lances to the Wolf-Killing Envelopment!*

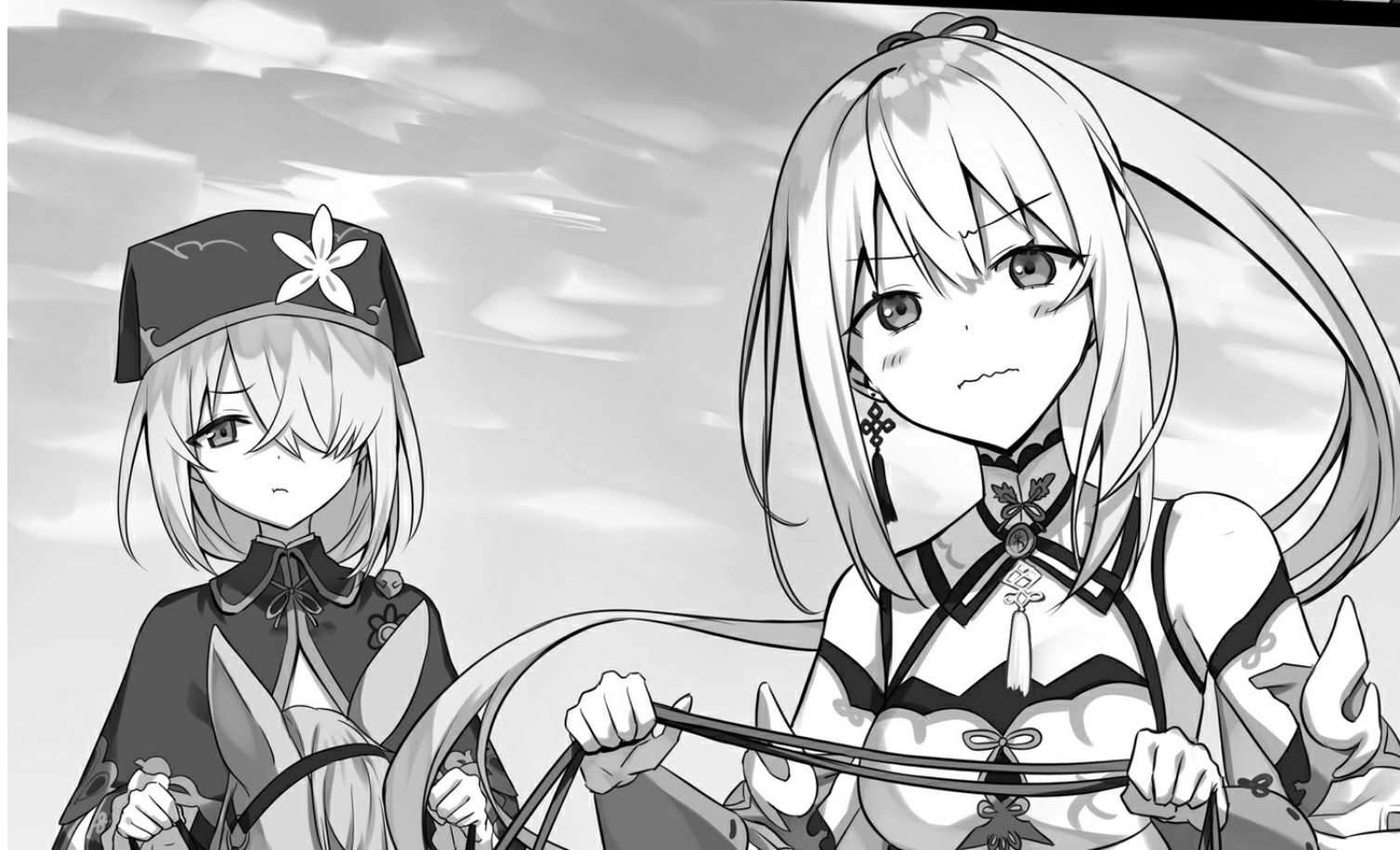
Hakurei, still a distance away from me, called in a dissatisfied tone, “You should have let yourself be hit by our arrows. This is why I find it so hard to consider you cute.”

“Hey, are you *really* a human?” Ruri—who hadn’t shown herself until the very last moment—asked, bewildered. She had shot her arrow from horseback while riding in Hakurei’s shadow, showing an impressive amount of technique and control. I’d been under the impression that war strategists weren’t very good at this kind of stuff, but it looked like I had to change my way of thinking.

“Sorry to disappoint, Miss Ascendant, but I’m fully human—a human who’s aiming to become a local civil official too, by the way.”

Ruri stared at me, the confusion on her face only becoming more pronounced. “Huh?”

“There you go again, being ridiculous,” Hakurei muttered.



During this, I was looking over the battlefield. Including Teiha, about thirty of my riders remained... Though Hakurei had a lot of soldiers as well, she still had around sixty. I could sense determination emanating from both parties; they both believed that their team would emerge the victor. *It's about time.*

I looked over at Hakurei. "By the way, wouldn't you have gotten mad at me if your arrow *had* hit?"

"Of course I would have."

Both of us lowered our bows and then bellowed the order as one: "Stop the battle!"

All of the soldiers heaved a heavy sigh, less due to relief and more due to dissatisfaction. "We were so close to winning!" they were practically saying. This seemed like the ideal way to end the practice.

A soft smile bloomed on Hakurei's face as she said, "Everyone fought so well. I don't believe there are any injured, but if you got any bruises or scratches from this exercise, come forwards. I've had Asaka prepare food and water for us, so please head back to the watchtower."

"Yes ma'am! Thank you so much!" The soldiers looked touched at her words as they rode off towards the watchtower.

*She really is far better at me when it comes to acting as the supreme commander of an army.* Ruri—who was currently lost in thought—could be her assistant and I could be in charge of cutting a path for the rest of the soldiers.

Satisfied at the results of the mock battle I looked over at Teiha, who was wiping the sweat off his face. "Teiha, I'd like you to put together a report of everyone's opinions about the mock battle, as well as the results of today. I'll use it as a frame of reference when putting together the teams. You can do this after taking a breather, of course."

"Yessir!" He saluted at me before hurrying off after the other soldiers. Despite his youth and different personality, he really did remind me of Raigen the Ogre.

I hopped off my horse and looked around. The only people remaining on the battlefield were me, Hakurei, and...

“I can’t believe that we still weren’t able to win even after I added fire lances to the Wolf-Killing Envelopment.” Ruri had hopped off her horse and taken out a short and bizarre metal stick, spinning it deftly in her hand as she muttered to herself. “Should I chalk this up to the strength of the one the Heavenly Swords chose? The way he fought was completely beyond the realm of a mortal man. Is this why I wasn’t able to draw the twin swords? Is he the real deal? The princess and the Chou army were amazing as well. New soldiers have a hard time working as a team, and yet we were able to carry out that plan so well...” She must have really been lost in thought, because she didn’t seem to notice the white flowers blooming, drifting, and disappearing around her. Even the dapple-gray horse at her side seemed unsure of how to proceed.

I found Hakurei’s name on my lips as she pulled Getsuei closer to the ascendant. She explained, “Miss Ruri was the one who came up with all of our strategies. When you nominate her to father, please say that I recommend her as well. She’s a trustworthy person.”

“Women with silver hair and blue eyes will bring misfortune” was such an old rumor that mold practically grew on it, but there were those who believed in it and persecuted Hakurei for her looks. She’d developed a keen eye for whom she could and couldn’t trust thanks to such experiences. So if *she* was saying that about Ruri, then Ruri was probably a good person. The girl in question was still lost in her own world. *She feels like a weirdo in a different way than Meirin is.*

“Lord Se! Ki! Ei! ♪”

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, I heard Ou Meirin’s voice, high in excitement and so loud that it seemed to drown out everything else. Ruri, Hakurei, and I turned to look at her, unsure of how to respond. Meirin was sitting behind Miss Shizuka on a horse, waving around a strange metal tube. It looked the same as what Ruri was holding. When they got to us, Miss Shizuka helped Meirin off the horse. The moment she landed she looked up at us, her cheeks flushed.

“That was amazing! Truly and genuinely spectacular! Ahh, I’m so glad I borrowed this weird antique from Ruri; it helped me see over long distances. Hee hee! ♪ My eyes ate their fill of my husband on the battlefield. That

motivated me to do a half day's work!"

I reached out and gave her a gentle poke on her forehead. "A half day's work? Don't say that. Come on, work a little more."

"Huh? I'm the type of girl who works harder *after* getting a reward! How did you like the fire lances?" Meirin's grin faded as she took on the expression of a merchant.

Ruri stopped creating white flowers, focusing her attention on me. It seemed that she was also curious about my thoughts.

Some flower petals had fallen into Hakurei's hair, so I plucked one out as I said, "Not bad."

"Then, let's start mass-producing—"

"If we're using them against cavalry, we—"

Both Meirin and Ruri started speaking at once, but they fell silent when I held up my hand. I reached for the second petal.

"Fine, very well," Hakurei sighed before she reached for my hair and started brushing out petals as well.

I glanced over at Meirin and Ruri and told them what I saw on the battlefield. "It's good that they make that roaring noise since it can scare both the soldiers and the horses, but the bamboo tube isn't going to work. I saw them turn into a mess after a single shot. On the battlefield, we'll probably mix pebbles and the like into the gunpowder. That means there's the chance that the fire lance won't shoot anything at the enemy and explode instead, causing injuries to our side. Would it be possible to use something like metal for the tube instead?"

"Metal, you say?" Meirin murmured before she fell silent, burying her face into Miss Shizuka's back as she started thinking.

Ruri, who had already displayed her extraordinary talents for me and Hakurei, turned to fix me with an exasperated look. "You really are strange. You *saw*? Does your strength come from that sword of yours? According to legend, those who wield the Heavenly Swords can gain unparalleled strength, after all."

"Unfortunately, this is all me. I don't know why my sword has legends like

that, considering it's just your average old weapon. So, can we say that I was the one who won our match? Can you tell me why you decided to volunteer for our army?"

Ruri didn't say anything for a moment before she replied, "Fine." She placed the metal stick back into her belt before she turned to pat her horse. In a calm voice, she explained, "I really am an ascendant. However, the only magic I'm capable of is creating white flowers that disappear after a few seconds. I don't know how many people like me are left in this world, nor do I have the means of finding out. It's already been over ten years since the last mystic vale was destroyed and the only things I possess now are knowledge of the past and antique tools. That metal stick the munchkin merchant is holding is one of those tools. Other than that, I'm just your everyday girl. I can be killed if slashed by a sword and I *hate* war! I only learned tactics as a means to live, and I never had any intention of volunteering to become a soldier."

If her only magic was to make flowers that disappeared, then yes, she probably wouldn't be able to do much with that.

Ruri reached up for her hat as she looked between my Black Star and Hakurei's White Star. "Then, one day, the Heavenly Swords suddenly appeared, a thousand years after the deaths of the Twin Eis. No one had been able to get their hands on these legendary, divine weapons since then—and yet suddenly they appeared on the main stage? It's a given that anyone who knows the legend of the Heavenly Swords would be curious."

"You're saying these are the real deal?"

*Divine weapons sure is an impressive title for them.* I asked my question on purpose because I was curious about the swords' reputation. White Star and Black Star were, without a doubt, my Heavenly Swords. However, I was now the only person in this world who could make that distinction.

Ruri's eyes narrowed. "Making sure that they are is *precisely* why I came here. Sure, it was because the munchkin merchant tricked me into looking for them, but I was still the one who found them. According to the legend taught to me in my childhood, 'the generation the Heavenly Swords are found in will descend into chaos.' Any other reason I'm where I am is a private affair."



Hakurei and I exchanged looks without saying a word. *A private affair, huh?*  
The wind blew over the plains.

Meirin, who had been deep in thought, suddenly entered the conversation with “I did *not* trick you! When I told you about the Heavenly Swords, you got all excited and said, ‘I’ll definitely find them’ and— Mmrgh!”

“Shut! Your! Mouth!”

Ruri had reached out and covered Meirin’s mouth with her hand. She put so much force behind the movement that both her and Meirin’s hats flew off their heads. Miss Shizuka watched over them with a motherly expression on her face. That was when Hakurei tugged on my sleeve, urging me to get to the main point.

“Ruri,” I said.

“What?” she asked, her hands still locked with Meirin’s from their wrestling.

I picked up Ruri’s hat from the ground, dusted it off, and handed it to her. “What are you going to do after this? Are you gonna go back to your homeland?”

She accepted the hat and then looked down at the ground. “Why in the world should I answer—”

I cut her off by patting Black Star where it hung off my belt. “Aren’t you curious about whether this is a genuine Heavenly Sword?”

“I...” She trailed off. It looked like she was having trouble making up her mind.

Meirin’s eyes sparkled and she huddled close to Hakurei, whispering, “When he’s being mean, Lord Sekiei is quite attractive from an objective point of view.”

Hakurei didn’t respond for a moment before she whispered back, “I do not agree with that.”

“Didn’t you think it for a moment just now?”

I pretended that I didn’t hear them. Instead, I clasped my hands together in a begging motion at Ruri. “Right now, the Chou family needs talented individuals more than anything. We especially need someone who knows Seitou as well as you do. Please lend us your strength.”

When persuading people, there was no point in trying to use their weaknesses against them. Doing so would only backfire. If Ruri refused, then that was it.

Ruri didn't say anything for a while, but then she shook her head. "I told you. I hate war."

"What a coincidence. I hate it too. I want to be a civil official for a small local office, after all."

"Miss Hakurei, is he being serious about that?" Meirin asked, pitching her voice loud enough for us to hear her. "He's mentioned it a few times now."

"Unfortunately, he's for real," Hakurei replied, equally loud. "However, in comparison to his potential as a military official, his talent as a civil official is..."

"Hey, you two prodigies over there." I shot them a glare. They were always fighting each other, yet they were as thick as thieves when it came to making fun of me.

"It's about time for you to give up your dream. Aren't you aware of your own limits?" Hakurei sighed.

"'A dream without a future should only be had at night.' That's a phrase Ou Eifuu left behind," Meirin added.

"Gah!" *D-Dammit, Eifuu! How could you have left behind such a quote?!*

I heard someone giggling and looked towards the source of it. With a smile on her face, Ruri looked like any normal fifteen-year-old girl.

"You're such a strange man," she said.

"I'm not as strange as a girl calling herself an ascendant, am I?"

Ruri placed her blue hat atop her head and then took out the metal stick, giving it a twirl. Still playing with her blonde hair, she blurted, "I can help you, but only as a guide. I refuse to fight. Do we have a deal?"

"Yeah, that's more than enough. Hakurei?"

"I don't have any objections. Miss Ruri is a very good person."

"Th-Thank you..." Ruri looked embarrassed at the praise and white flowers

bloomed in the air. Hakurei and Meirin stared at her, but they didn't say anything.

I went to Zetsuei and called out to the girls, "Let's go meet everyone at the watchtower. I need some food and drink in me. We'll throw a welcome party for Ruri tonight. Sure, the invasion's soon, but we should be allowed some fun before then, right?"

## Chapter Three

The office I walked into was quite simple for a room that belonged to a man in charge of an entire country. The moment I stepped in, I didn't wait for him to say anything; I offered a salute, smiled, and said, "Master Strategist, long time no see. I, Gray Wolf Seul Bato, have arrived and I'm reporting for duty!"

My teacher and vice-commander, Gisen, copied the salute from behind me. Since we'd just finished making the long trek from Enkei, our armor and uniforms were a little dirty. However, the war strategist was familiar with real combat and possessed far more experience than anyone I knew. I figured that he would understand.

We were in the capital city of Seitou, Ranyou, which was located to the southwest of the country. The land had come under the ownership of Emperor Adai, the great son of the Celestial Wolf, and it would soon become the backdrop of a battle so legendary that it would be forever recorded in the annals of history.

*I'm trembling with excitement! I vow to present His Imperial Majesty with a decisive victory!* As I reaffirmed my dedication and determination, the mountains of documents parted, revealing a slender man behind them. He had a pale face and his thin eyes were hidden behind light-brown bangs. He was wearing plain yet formal robes that were dyed a dark brown.

"Hello, Seul and Gisen. Ahh, I see that the time got away from me."

The slender man was Hasho, a war strategist who was the pride of the Gen Empire and had the absolute trust of His Imperial Majesty. He looked at the water clock on a side table and held a hand to his forehead. There weren't any personal effects in the room save for an old fox mask that looked like the kind that children might wear.

"My apologies," Hasho murmured, sounding genuine. "I have a bad habit of losing myself in my work. Both His Imperial Majesty and my teacher have scolded me for it several times, but, embarrassingly enough, I could never kick

the habit. Allow me to pour you some tea.”

He was about to stand up when I took off my coat and slapped a hand against my chest. “Please, don’t worry about us! We came here so that we could relieve some of the burden that has been placed upon your shoulders, Master Strategist! Give us any order that you wish! I’m sure that this would be what Nguyen would want as well.”

At the thought of my old war friend, dead before he could witness His Imperial Majesty unifying the lands, I felt my nose start to grow hot. The Crimson Wolf, Nguyen Gui, had been the bravest man I had known. Not only that, but he cared more about Gen’s future than his personal glory, and could do anything for the sake of his country. He was a man worthy of respect.

*I’ll avenge you!* Hasho must have shared my passion, because I could see the way he gripped his feathered fan with a pale hand. He rang a bell and a foreign-looking girl walked in. She must have been one of his servants who had been on standby just outside.

“Prepare tea for these two gentlemen,” Hasho ordered before he gestured for us to sit down. “Thank you very much. I feel much better after hearing that.”

Gisen and I nodded. After I sat down, Hasho placed a tactical map on the table and unfurled it. He used his feathered fan to point at Enkei, and then traced a line from the great forest to the Nanamagari Mountains, all the way to Ranyou.

“The reason we were able to take this country without spilling a single drop of blood was because Nguyen endured a multitude of hardships in order to travel through all of these unexplored regions, and because His Imperial Majesty was wise enough to permit him. Someone as untalented as I could have never made that decision. If only I arrived here sooner...”

“I used the military road that was set up. Though it seems too difficult to traverse with all of our nation’s soldiers, I’m certain that it can hold up for a single general and their troops.”

“I agree on all fronts,” Gisen said. It was rare for him to join conversations like this. He told me over drinks once that he, Nguyen, and my deceased father—the Gray Wolf before me—were war buddies who experienced their first battle

together.

I straightened my back and pressed my fists together with an audible *bump*. “Master Strategist, I know I’ve only just arrived in this country, but could you tell me more about Seitou’s internal affairs, as well as the newest information on the rebels to the south?”

“Gladly.” Hasho nodded. I could see that some of the color had returned to his face. His servant started to pour us tea, and a unique yet relaxing scent filled the room. “Let me start by explaining the current internal affairs of Seitou.”

“Please.”

Hasho lightly tapped the tactical map with the feathered fan, right where Ranyou was situated. “According to Nguyen, when he led the majority of his Crimson Knights in a surprise attack on the capital, they barely put up a fight. Have you already met with the king of Seitou?”

“Yes, I have. I was just at the palace.” In order to quell my rage, I chugged the entire cup of tea before spitting, “He had grown fat and complacent. When we arrived, all he could do was beg for his life while shaking and trembling. The way he looked while trying to curry our favor... To think *that* is the king of this nation. Are you certain that we can’t simply kill him?”

For many long years, Seitou had been known as a country of commerce and trade. Though it didn’t have a powerful military, it had been able to keep Gen’s invaders at bay with its unfathomable wealth and natural barriers in the form of the Nanamagari Mountains and the Hakkotsu Desert to the northwest.

*I guess this just means that not everyone can be like Emperor Adai*, I thought to myself as I scrunched up my face.

Hasho nodded. “We can reconsider our stance, and I personally agree with your opinion. However, His Imperial Majesty himself has forbidden us from murdering Seitou’s king.”

“What do you mean?”

For a moment, Hasho hid the lower half of his face with his feathered fan. This habit of his came out when he was deep in thought; I remembered seeing him do this when we fought together on the northern front. When he got like

this, he wouldn't answer anyone talking to him.

I didn't know for how long I listened to the dripping of the water clock—the only sound in the room—when Hasho, who favored reason above all else, opened his mouth. “This may sound unbelievable to the two of you, as you only arrived today, but there is someone named the Honorable One in this country. The Honorable One is the true ruler of Seitou, with the royal family serving as mere puppets.”

“The Honorable One? What kind of person are they?” *What a bizarre state of affairs. Someone who's controlling the king from the shadows?*

Hasho shook his head, his brow furrowed. “I don't know the details myself. However...”

“However?”

When I met Hasho on that fierce northern battlefield, my impression of him had been one of a strategist who could calmly issue his commands no matter the situation. He didn't know defeat, and had achieved many spectacular victories for the Gen Empire. This same man was now acting like he'd just seen a spirit of some sort.

“According to the Honorable One herself, she is a fairy who's lived hundreds of years. She is apparently capable of controlling the weather to a certain extent, and I saw her create flowers from thin air.”

I stared at Hasho for a moment before I let out a huff of laughter. I couldn't help it. Though Gisen remained expressionless at my side, I was sure that he was laughing on the inside as well.

“Master Strategist, surely you can't be serious? Controlling the weather? I heard that the founder of this country was an *ascendant*. Are you sure that this Honorable One isn't some common swindler?”

“I don't know the veracity of her claims. However, I am sure that His Imperial Majesty has his reasons. We currently are on good terms with the Honorable One, and we're allowed to use the Seitou soldiers as we wish. Of course, there are some rebellious ones among them, but I'm sure they have their uses. Ah, I recall that after I informed everyone that Nguyen died in battle, there was a

kerfuffle with the rebels. They fell back in line after we quelled them.”

“I see.”

I felt a drop of cold sweat slide down my back as I read between the lines of what he was saying. When Nguyen died, there were only a few thousand soldiers remaining in Ranyou. Yet, he used that number to suppress an army of over ten thousand in revolt? Truly, the Millenary Diviner Hasho was someone to fear.

“Next, let’s discuss Ei,” Hasho said, gliding his feathered fan along the tactical map. It seemed he didn’t notice my fear.

I thought that he would stop his fan at Keiyou. It was an area that had been a thorn in Gen’s side for many years now, and it was at the center of the Grand Canal, which bisected the continent into north and south. However, he moved the fan all the way to the southwestern border before he stopped, right over a place called Angan.

“It seems that they’ll make their move here. They are currently gathering around a hundred fifty thousand soldiers in a small city near the border. The false emperor in Rinkei has already ordered an invasion. The Chou family army is the only one we need fear, and they are sending a mere fraction of their forces for this invasion. As for Chou Tairan himself, there are no signs of him leaving Keiyou. It’s as we were told in advance.”

I remembered what words His Imperial Majesty bestowed upon us before we left the capital: *“Chou Tairan is a fearsome foe and that is precisely why I shall not permit his presence on the battlefield.”*

He used the rat he’d slipped into Rinkei in order to seal away our most dangerous enemy. *I knew it. My master is the one who is best suited to rule over the unified lands under the heavens!* I trembled with excitement and smiled.

“So, Master Strategist, what do you intend on doing this time? Our enemy may be weak, but they are many. As for our troops, I have about fifty thousand Gray Lancers, and the capital has a few thousand soldiers defending it. Considering we cannot place our trust in the Seitou soldiers, I believe we have a disadvantage when it comes to numbers.”



“Isn’t it obvious what my plan is?” Hasho’s thin eyes widened—a sight that was rare indeed—and he took on the expression of an experienced strategist who’d implemented many sagacious tactics on the battlefield. He stood up and slammed his feathered fan down on the map before he said, in a cruel tone, “We will crush them. They will not leave this land alive.”

My smile deepened. Next to me, Gisen slammed his fist against his armor as a sign of agreement. Both of us enjoyed plans like this one, where we would take the initiative.

“The only enemy His Imperial Majesty fears is Chou Tairan,” Hasho continued. Though his tone remained calm, he could not fully suppress his lust for battle and I could hear it in his voice. “However, unfortunately for him, he is despised by the fools in Rinkei. His most critical disadvantage is that he does not have enough manpower. If we can liberate Ei of its forces here, then we can limit our casualties the next time we launch a major invasion.”

“Your mind remains as sharp as ever! I’m most impressed!” I lowered my head in praise of the prized strategist. I wasn’t flattering him; I was being genuine.

Everyone looked up to me as the Gray Wolf. However, I was nothing more than an average commander who could only run from battlefield to battlefield, swinging my sword and cutting down enemies. The big picture shouldn’t be handled by people like me, who could only calculate how to win a single battle. Those with the wisdom and foresight to plan out the next move—such as His Imperial Majesty and the sage before my eyes—should be the ones to take the reins.

Hasho moved his arm, his voluminous sleeve swinging with the action, ordering in a sharp voice: “Gisen, I will entrust two thousand Crimson Knights to you. They survived the previous battle and managed to make their way here. I wish to clear Nguyen’s regrets on the battlefield, and His Imperial Majesty has already granted me permission to do so.”

*The Crimson Knights?!* My eyes widened as I glanced over at my vice-commander to see how he was taking this order. Yes, they lost, but they were still an elite force that had once been led by one of our Four Wolves. *And they’ll*

*be under the command of my strongest fighter?* My heart rate picked up. I could hardly contain my excitement.

A sudden, loud noise rang out, and I could feel both the table and floor shake. Gisen had slammed his fists on the tabletop before dropping down to the floor, taking a knee and lowering his head.

“I am nothing more than a common, talentless soldier,” he rumbled, “but I will use all that I possess.”

“There is no need for humility here. The Crimson Knights are an experienced bunch and they would be honored to have you as their leader. Wield that black blade of yours well, and I promise I will prepare for you the perfect battlefield.”

“Yessir!” Gisen’s mouth twisted, determination coming off of him in waves. He was smiling in delight.

I couldn’t help but feel a small tinge of pity for the enemy forces. Blackblade, the Millenary Diviner, and me, Gray Wolf Seul Bato... With us as their enemies, none of them would make it home alive.

“Now then, allow me to explain our strategy. Seul, I’m sure you have your objections, but I plan on borrowing the Honorable One’s powers for this plan. No matter what her true identity is, I will use and abuse everything at my disposal in order to bring victory to the divine child of the Celestial Wolf, Emperor Adai! *That* was Nguyen’s wish, as well as the sole reason why we are here in Seitou.”

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“You’re sure that we have all of the rations?”

“What’s this thin piece of paper? Can I remove it?”

“Are you stupid? That’s oiled paper to protect the supplies from the rain. Our Market included it out of the kindness of their hearts.”

In the outer courtyard I could hear the attendants and servants fretting about the military logistics. A few days ago, the capital sent the Chou family an official decree: “Our army will subjugate Seitou, the country of traitors. The Chou family army must immediately send its forces to battle.” We were in the midst

of preparing to carry out this sudden order.

*I never imagined that they would actually make this decision without asking for father's advice*, I thought. I was sitting between Hakurei and Meirin, who were working at their desks. When I glanced over at the both of them, they were processing documents at an unbelievable speed.

"Miss Meirin, it seems that your brush has slowed down quite a bit. Would you like me to take some documents off your hands?"

"Miss Hakurei, pardon me, but do you need to get your eyes checked? I'm working far faster than you are!"

The girls glared at each other over the top of my head, growling. *Father's been sent to the southern shore of the great river, where Hakuhou Castle is. I have to be the one to handle these two!*

"All right! Since you two seem to have your hands full, why don't I help out with some doc—"

"Sit down, please."

"Lord Sekiei, I can handle all the paperwork for you! ★"

They turned down my offer without even letting me finish my sentence. I tried to protest, but the two girls shut me down even though their brushes never stopped moving.

"We'll ask for your opinion if we come across something we're unsure of."

"Please, just relax, Lord Sekiei!"

I sighed and looked down at my feet. "Fine," I replied in a weak voice. *It's only when they get to bully me that they work together*. I rested my cheek on my hand and looked out the window.

The last time I'd seen Ruri had been that morning. Ever since the recent mock battle, the self-professed ascendant had become one of Hakurei's attendants. That meant that she slept and ate in the manor, but she didn't have a specific job yet. While it seemed that she chatted with Hakurei and Meirin every day, I had the impression that she was keeping her distance from me. I *could* bring up the Heavenly Swords to pique her interest, but it seemed wrong to force

someone who hated war to participate in the preparations of it. I was at a loss of what to do; there were so many things I wanted to ask her about military strategy.

As I lost myself in thought, Asaka and Miss Shizuka walked over with new documents in hand. Miss Shizuka must have figured out what was happening when she saw how bored I looked while the girls next to me were focusing on their work, because she let out a quiet giggle. As for Asaka, it seemed that she'd finally calmed down; Hakurei had ordered her to stay here in Keiyou—"Instead of fighting in the invasion, I'd like you to help out Miss Shizuka and Meirin"—and she'd been in a rather bad mood since.

I let out a heavy sigh, no longer comfortable sitting here doing nothing, and pushed myself to my feet. I grabbed Black Star from where I'd been leaning it against the wall and headed towards the manor. Hakurei and Meirin, who had been writing something on their paperwork, looked up.

"Where are you going?" Hakurei asked. "I didn't give you permission to go anywhere."

"We'll punish you if you try to escape!" Meirin added in a sweet voice.

"I-I just want to get a drink of water," I replied. Their glares intensified, but I waved them off and stepped into the hallway. *Yeah, those two are definitely good friends now.* I sighed at the thought of how exhausting my life was going to be thanks to that, but then I heard the two of them laughing together. "Well, not like it's a bad thing." I smiled and made my way down the hall.

After getting a pitcher from the kitchen, I walked through the manor. Despite appearances, Hakurei was a worrywart, so if I took too long she might come looking for me. I had to hurry back to her. I was about to take a shortcut through the inner courtyard when I noticed someone.

"Oh?" I said.

"Ah," the person in the courtyard said.

It was Ruri. She was sitting on a rock, a paper bag containing a half-eaten mooncake in her hand. Our eyes met. She was dressed in a monk's robe, and she didn't have her usual hat on her head. Instead, there was a black cat curled

up in her lap. It seemed that she'd gone to the market. I was surprised at this sudden meeting, but I smiled at her.

"That looks good," I said. "Give me one."

"No. This is mine," she replied in a curt tone as she hid the paper bag behind her back. The movement woke up the black cat, which jumped off her lap and to the ground.

Since it came up to me and started rubbing against my leg, I picked it up and let it rest on my shoulders. Then I looked back to Ruri, making sure to exaggerate the sadness in my voice as I said, "Oh, that's too bad. I didn't know how stingy ascendants were these days. How tragic; ascendants and fairies used to be known for how helpful they were to humans!"

Even back during the days of the Tou Empire, people proclaiming themselves to be ascendants or fairies existed. I didn't know of anyone who used the bizarre magic that the girl before me once demonstrated, but they used to go out of their way to provide aid to the citizens free of charge.

Ruri scrunched up her face before she took a mooncake from her bag and threw it at me; I caught it with my left hand. "You talk as if you actually experienced that distant past," she said.

"What if I told you I *did*? Oh, this is good."

She didn't reply and looked away. Instead, she took out a second mooncake and bit into it. I sat down in a nearby chair, playing with the cat moving across my shoulders as I looked up at the blue sky. The sight of the birds flying around and enjoying the breeze was so peaceful that it was hard to believe that we were going to war soon.

The two of us spoke at the same time:

"What a nice day it is today!"

"What nice weather we're having."

I looked over at her and she returned my gaze; neither of us said anything else, feeling a little awkward. The cat had flopped onto its back, exposing its soft belly, so I ran my hand through the fur and changed the subject.

“Uh, oh, perfect timing. I have a question for you. Since you’re from Seitou, could you give me your honest opinion on this upcoming battle? Just so you know, I’m fully against it.”

Ruri didn’t say anything for a moment before replying. “I only grew up there. It’s not as if I was *born* there. As for the invasion, I only have one thing to say.” She balled up the paper bag and met my gaze.

*“I only grew up there,” huh? It sounds like she’s hiding something.*

“There’s no way the invasion is going to end well,” she continued. “It would be one thing if we were invading from Keiyou, we could use the Grand Canal. It’s closer to Seitou’s capital and major cities, and supply routes would be easier to set up thanks to the great river. However, we’re not invading from Keiyou. We’re going out of our way to invade from the south instead. The only things there are endless plains, the odd fortress or two, and some remote villages.”

If we launched an invasion from Keiyou, we would only need to proceed west in a straight line to hit Kotou, which was a central city for river trade. From there, we could launch a direct attack on Ranyou, the capital. It wouldn’t be free of difficulties, since we would still have to contend with the great river’s tributaries and the many valleys. However, in terms of military logistics, it was far more advantageous. We couldn’t use any large boats, but we could always use smaller ones.

Ruri took a small metal stick—a “telescope,” she’d called it—from her belt and started to spin it in her hand. “I heard from Meirin that aside from the three generals—Chou Tairan, Jo Shuuhou, and U Jouko—and the grand chancellor in Rinkei, Ei lacks people with talent. No one has even bothered to obtain a detailed or current map of Seitou, which means that we do not possess accurate information on our enemies. We don’t even have a clear goal in this invasion. It would be a miracle if we won this.”

I didn’t say anything as I popped the rest of the mooncake into my mouth. Unfortunately, she was right. The ultimate objective that Rinkei announced for this invasion was “Punish Seitou, the country of traitors.” It was unbelievable how vague it was.

“Placing Marshal Jo and General U in the vanguard was one of the few things

that Rinkei did right,” I said. “Under these conditions, we can’t drag the war out, so the only thing we *can* do to win is strike them hard and fast. The problem is —”

“The problem is that there isn’t a fast-moving unit capable of supporting those two generals, even though a common tactic among Gen’s cavalry in the northern plains is to ride around the enemy in a wide berth to attack them from behind.”

Ruri interrupted me to finish what I was saying. It was impressive. Not only did she study up on tactics from the past, but she was also familiar with strategies used in the present day. This girl, who claimed herself a mystic, certainly had an eye for war. This wasn’t something that you would gain from long years of education. She had a natural talent for it.

Ignorant of what was going through my mind, the girl suggested to me in a joking manner, “It’s not too late yet. Why don’t you and your troops act as that fast-moving unit to support the generals? Of course, the chances of death would be *far* higher.”

“I’ve already suggested it to father, who communicated it to the capital. However, they turned down the idea at once.”

Both the Phoenix Wing and the Tiger Fang boasted impressive service records, and they could stand on equal footing with father. However, our enemy was Gen, which possessed the most powerful army in the world. No matter how experienced or skilled our generals were, they were sure to have a difficult time against them, especially if we would be fighting them on unfamiliar soil.

I placed the cat on a chair and stood up. Ruri blinked and sucked in a loud breath. Ignoring how nervous she looked, I walked towards her and peered into the one beautiful green eye that was visible.

“Also, don’t talk about death in such a casual manner. I, at the very least, have no intention of letting anyone I’m bringing from Keiyou die. That includes you, as well as Hakurei, of course. I’m technically the wielder of the Heavenly Swords. I wouldn’t be worthy of them if I went to war with that kind of mindset. Right?”

Ruri’s eyes widened and it seemed like a shiver ran through her body. She

lowered her head and said, “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

I felt like I knew why Hakurei was so certain she could trust Ruri. She was a girl with a genuine and straightforward conscience.

This was the perfect opportunity to remind her that she wasn’t actually military. Keeping my tone light, I said, “Well, there’s no need for you to stick with us all the way to the end. Flee the moment you think that you’re in real danger. Though I’d appreciate it if you tell me and Hakurei about Seitou, as well as what kind of strategies the enemy might use, while you’re with us.”

Ruri relaxed her fingers, a look of gratitude on her face. She returned to acting like normal and, looking a little dissatisfied, messed with the telescope in her hand. “I’m just a guide, remember?”

“Then, from this moment, you’re both our guide and our strategist. Now, then, my strategist behind the scenes, what do you think our enemy’s plan will be?”

Ruri glared at me and muttered, “You suck.”

I wasn’t scared; I lived every day of my life getting glared at by *Hakurei*. Ruri’s glare was like a spring breeze in comparison. I lowered my head in a theatrical manner and gestured for her to continue.

“You really suck!” Upon hearing her yell, the black cat scurried away. Ruri made a quiet sound, looking guilty, before she turned away. After a moment, she said, “For starters, they likely won’t attack us near the borders of Seitou. It would be foolish to take on a large army in the open fields, where there aren’t any places to hide. Chou Tairan and the Gen emperor might not hesitate to launch an attack, but normal people would consider it insane.”

“So they’ll lure us into Seitou, so deep that we can’t escape, and then once we’re exhausted from the pursuit, they’ll launch a decisive attack on us? It *does* sound like a common tactic.”

“That would be the conventional thing to do,” Ruri agreed, but she didn’t sound convinced. It seemed that there was something bothering her, but then, people with this kind of talent always reached their conclusion out of nowhere, like a bolt from the blue. I knew that better than anyone—Eifuu had been like



that too, after all. I was sure that she would come to an answer in time.

Even though this was top secret, I affected a casual tone as I said, “This isn’t confirmed yet, but apparently, the one who’s actually ruling over Seitou is a nameless strategist whom Adai has utter faith in. I hear that one of the Four Wolves, the Gray Wolf, will be joining him in Seitou as well.”

“A strategist? In this day and age? Then they really must be planning something.” Ruri started to think, a serious look on her face.

As I watched her, I gave her my honest opinion. “Personally, I’m hoping that the inexperienced supreme commander gets so scared of the Gray Wolf that he calls off the entire invasion before it happens. I never want to deal with another one of the Four Wolves again.” The image of the Crimson Wolf, Nguyen Gui, whom I’d fought in the outskirts of Keiyou, was burned into my mind. Fighting against an officer of that caliber could be disastrous.

Ruri focused her attention back on me, fixing me with a glare so cold that I felt cold sweat break out on my back. “At times, hope is something to be crushed underfoot.”

“Even so, we all need hope, don’t we?”

“I... Well, that’s true.” For a moment, Ruri seemed to shrink back before her eyes started to burn once more. “But... But, even so, I—!”

She cut herself off, but I’d seen this look many times on the battlefield. Her eyes housed the same intense flames of vengeance of those who’d lost someone important to them. I felt that I could guess as to why she was so fixated on the Heavenly Swords.

“Jeez. Where did he go?”

“Lord Sekiei!”

I could hear Hakurei and Meirin; it seemed that they’d come searching for me after all. I looked at Ruri, who was clenching her telescope in her hand, and said, “Well, I’m gonna head on back. Thanks for the mooncake. Take care of that cat for me, all right?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, okay.” She bent down and picked up the black cat, who’d come

trotting back.

I took a few steps before I turned around and said, “Thank you for your advice. I hope you’ll chat with Hakurei whenever you two have free time. She’s really happy about having a friend around her age. Also, I’m serious about that strategist thing, all right?”

Ruri didn’t answer. Instead, she balled up the paper bag and held it back as if she was about to throw it at me.

“I’m joking, I’m joking,” I said, waving my hand to calm her down. “I’ll see you later. Tell me if you think of anything else.”

“Fine.”

Ruri didn’t say anything more as I walked back into the manor. I could see Hakurei and Meirin approaching from a corner of the hallway, so I waved at them.

“I have to do something about this,” I murmured. Just because we had more troops than our enemy didn’t mean anything; history was full of examples of armies boasting superior manpower, yet they still fell in battle. On top of that, our enemies included a mysterious war strategist and the Gray Wolf. The battle would be a tough one indeed.

It would be five days later when Hakurei, Ruri, and I, along with a thousand cavalymen, left from Keiyou for Angan to meet up with the other troops from Rinkei.

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“Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei! I’ve been waiting for you two!”

Angan was a small city in the northwest region of the Ei Empire, with a front gate that was of much poorer quality than the one in Keiyou. The man waiting for us next to it had dark brown hair and tanned skin. It was Jo Hiyou. It was hard to miss him, between his fair looks and his extravagant military uniform. The score of soldiers lined up near him were probably the elites from the southern army.

“Long time no see,” Hakurei said as she got off her mount.

I hopped off my horse as well and looked behind me. “Hiyou? I thought that the army had started to advance already?”

On our way here, with a thousand cavalrymen behind us the entire time, we’d received a personal order from the lieutenant chancellor: “The main forces have already started invading Seitou. The Chou family army will bring up the rear.” It was almost impressive how far he was willing to go to inconvenience us. In contrast to our position in the army, the Jo family army was in the vanguard, so I hadn’t expected to see Hiyou here.

I looked around until I saw Teiha and ordered, “Take our horses and the soldiers to the camp. After caring for the horses, you can break out some alcohol. Ruri, come here!”

“Yessir!”

Teiha, along with the Jo family army’s guide, started to make his way to the encampment with our troops behind him. Ruri, who’d muttered “fine” and put up her coat’s hood to cover up her blonde hair, dismounted and walked over to stand next to Hakurei.

After Hiyou was the only one left from the Jo family army, I asked him in a curt voice, “What’s the situation?”

“It’s going well. As you know, there aren’t any major cities in the southern region of Seitou. The only things there are a few fortresses and remote villages, as well as the vast, endless plains. At this point in time, the enemy forces are not trying to repel us, and we’re continuing our advance to Ranyou.”

“The enemy forces...” I started.

“Aren’t trying to repel us?” Hakurei finished.

Ruri didn’t say anything, looking lost in thought.

The original plan had been for all the armies to assemble in Angan. After that, the officers and generals would meet together for one big strategy meeting. This was what had been written on the royal decree that the emperor had signed, and I’d read it for myself back in Keiyou. I was sure of it.

It seemed that the problem was that the supreme commander of Ei’s army—

the lieutenant chancellor himself—having never experienced war, had gotten so excited upon seeing the giant army of a hundred fifty thousand that he didn't wait for us or some of the logistics corps to arrive. Even though father hadn't been able to help to plan a strategy with us, he had worked with the grand chancellor in Rinkei to make sure that the inexperienced commander couldn't do anything too crazy. Too bad then that the man had apparently yelled, "We won't wait for the stragglers. Start the invasion!" before heading off.

It was clearly insubordination. However, perhaps I should have expected it considering what I knew about the lieutenant chancellor. He couldn't stop obsessing over his spite towards father, and he didn't have any idea how important military logistics really were. Once a large army started moving, it was very difficult to get it to stop.

Hiyou's beautiful face darkened in melancholy. "Father and General U are on guard as well. I was put in charge of giving you two the latest intel, and so I've been waiting here."

I could sympathize with Marshal Jo's frustrations. This country valued civil officials more than military ones. As the marshal of the southern army and one of the generals in the invading forces, he likely couldn't refuse the lieutenant chancellor's order to his face. If he did, there was no telling what kind of accusations the lieutenant chancellor might hurl at him after the war.

Regret, shame, determination... I could tell that Marshal Jo must have had very complicated emotions about all of this if he chose to leave his son behind here. I couldn't blame him for going along with the lieutenant chancellor. Hakurei and I nodded imperceptibly at each other. During times like this, our long years of acquaintance were very convenient.

"They're not trying to repel us," Ruri murmured, cupping her hand in front of her mouth. "So that means we can expect the final battleground to be in Seitou. But..." She was still deep in thought, so I decided to give her more time to figure things out.

Hiyou had shrunk in on himself a little, so I slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Sorry to have kept you waiting. Technically we arrived on time—according to the date that was on the official decree we received, you know? I

never expected that they would go through the effort of sending a letter saying, ‘Those of the Chou family can take their time and hold up the rear. You don’t even need to participate in the invasion. We’ll topple the capital in your absence.’”

It had taken a considerable amount of effort to calm Hakurei down after receiving that letter. She never stopped complaining the entire time we were crossing one of the great river’s tributaries in a small boat.

Hiyou scrunched up his handsome face before he explained, “My apologies. Father and General U were against it, but the lieutenant chancellor had made up his mind. Ou Hokujaku, who is leading the Imperial Guard, agreed with him as well.”

“So General Ou is on the lieutenant chancellor’s side?”

An arid gust of wind blew through the air, and Hakurei descended into a coughing fit as she held her hair down. Out of nowhere, Ruri, who hadn’t participated in the conversation this entire time, asked, “What about food and water left behind after the other army? Has it been stolen or tampered with?”

“Uh, who are you?” Hiyou looked taken aback at her presence and glanced at me for help.

“This is Ruri, our strategist. She’s very familiar with Seitou,” I explained.

“She is very trustworthy,” Hakurei jumped in, sounding defensive. The two of them slept in the same tent on our entire trip here, so they had become very close.

Ruri looked away while fiddling with her bangs. It seemed that she was a bit embarrassed. “I’m just a guide. So, what about the food and water?”

Though Hiyou still looked uneasy, he said, “According to father’s letter, ‘All of the food and water in the fortresses and villages has been left behind, and no one has touched them.’ His Imperial Majesty was also firm that we not pillage anything in Seitou. He said, ‘The only ones we’ll punish are Seitou’s king and those connected to him. The citizens are not at fault.’ I agree with his line of thinking.”

Hakurei and I fell silent. Yes, the invasion was going well, but it was going a

little *too* well. We'd expected the enemy forces wouldn't attack us at the borders, and that they would retreat all the way to Ranyou. However, we'd expected them to burn down the villages so that we couldn't replenish our supplies.

"This isn't good," Ruri murmured, sounding serious.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Miss Ruri?" Hakurei said.

Ruri looked around at us. Her visible eye held an unfathomable level of wisdom. "It's simple." The wind became stronger, throwing sand and dry grass into the air. The gust blew back Ruri's hair, causing both of her eyes to become visible as she declared, "Our opponents have a plan that is guaranteed to score them a victory, even without resorting to measures that would garner them the populace's hatred. I'm thinking that Gen is trying for something like 'Sai and Tou sharing a boat.' This plan will win them the Seitou people's loyalty in one fell swoop. They'll make their move when the Ei army is about to reach the capital."

A heavy silence fell over Hakurei, Hiyou, and me. I had taken lessons on basic military strategies, so I could understand what Ruri was trying to say. "Sai and Tou sharing a boat" was a historical episode in which warring factions became allies because they shared the same goal. At this point in time, I could take a guess as to what the Gen army was aiming for. After we advanced our army so deep into Seitou that we could no longer turn back, they would use their cavalry to cut off the supply routes behind us. After that, they would avoid any battle in the open plains. They might even be thinking of holing themselves up in their capital in preparation for a siege.

What would happen to a large army, stuck in a foreign land without a supply route? Unless the chains of command were exceptionally strict, they would be left with no choice but to pillage and steal from the villages. Right now, because of our long years of friendship, the citizens of Seitou didn't harbor any hatred towards Ei—but if Ei's soldiers started stealing their crops and killing their animals, then the resulting rift was certain to cause Seitou's people to sympathize with and declare their loyalty for Gen. As a result, the two countries would truly become one.

If the mysterious strategist was the one who came up with this plan, then they were a far more difficult opponent than we'd expected.

Hakurei looked like she'd bit into something sour and she asked Ruri in a quiet voice, "What is the king of Seitou thinking? Does he truly not care if Seitou becomes a vassal state of the Gen Empire?"

"That man is nothing more than a figurehead!" Ruri yelled, her voice so loud compared to her usual calm. "The one who is making all the decisions in this country is—!" She made a small gasp, as if she just realized how she was losing her temper, before dipping her head and continuing, "My apologies. But, I believe that it's far too dangerous to make our way to the capital without coming up with some sort of plan first."

"Sekiei?" Hakurei asked.

"Lord Sekiei?" Hiyou echoed.

The heirs of the Chou and the Jo family were looking at me for advice. I took a swig from the water bottle, letting the warm liquid wash down my throat, before I said, "I'm guessing that Ruri has more or less the right idea. I don't have a good feeling about this at all."

Our soldiers weren't the problem—we didn't bring many, and we brought as much food and medicine as we could. We'd also set up a supply route between Keiyou and Angan. On top of that, *Ou Meirin*, the merchant prodigy, had been the one who did all that work back in Keiyou. We would be able to survive. The problem was the main army, who were about to walk right into Gen's trap. If the enemy strategist's plan was what Ruri guessed, then that meant we were sure to lose the battle at Ranyou.

I could easily picture what the hundred thousand people in the Seitou army would feel and think if they heard that Ei's army had killed their grandparents, parents, and children. We would be close to losing our sole advantage, which was our superior numbers.

I closed my eyes and ran a rough hand through my hair. "Hiyou, you plan on going right back to the vanguard, right?"

"Y-Yes! Exactly."

“I shall write the letter,” Hakurei interrupted, reading my thoughts. Marshal Jo was certain to read a letter if it had been signed by Chou Hakurei.

I nodded and then exchanged looks with Ruri, who seemed to know what I was about to say and didn’t look happy about it. “Then take Ruri with you,” I said to Hiyou, “and tell Marshal Jo everything we discussed here. He’ll understand without us having to explain everything.”

“A-All right! Thank you very much,” Hiyou said, his face turning red.

In contrast, Ruri’s expression grew even more sour. “So, you’re not going to ask for *my* opinion?”

I grinned and handed her a small bag full of silver sycees. “It’s part of your duties as our guide, and you were the one who figured out the enemy’s strategy, right? I’m sure you’ll need to use this on your way to the main forces. Don’t worry; you can use it all.”

Ruri took the bag before saying in a flat tone, “You suck.” Then, she looked over to Hakurei and said in a more cautious way, “Hey, princess, I’m sure this warning is already years too late, but I think you need to reeducate this guy.”

“My apologies. It’s something that’s been on my mind for a while now, but it hasn’t been going well.”

“Hey, you two...”

“What?”

“What is it?”

I could only give an annoyed growl in response to the two beautiful girls glaring at me.

Hiyou looked a little confused at this interaction, but then his expression softened. “Well then, Lord Sekiei, I bid you good luck!”

“Yeah, you too!”

We bumped our fists together and he gave me a happy smile before he rushed back to his subordinates.

As Ruri was about to follow him, I called out to her, “Oh, that reminds me,



Ruri. I have something else I want to ask of you.”

She didn’t turn back to look at me. Instead, she raised her hand and replied, “You want me to check out the fortresses on the way and see if there are any catapults left, right? Yeah, I’ll do that. It would be nice if the people of Seitou abandoned them, but if they didn’t...”

Ruri let her words trail off as she walked away. If the people of Seitou had taken the catapults with them, then that meant this retreat was a planned one rather than one done in the spur of the moment.

I let out a sigh and gave Hakurei a gentle push on the back. “We’ve also got work to do. We have to write that letter and give it to Ruri, after all.”

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“All right, well, I’m off to destroy the enemies’ rear guard. I’ll leave things here to you, Eifuu,” I said from atop of my horse. When I looked back and smiled at my friend, I could see him furrowing his brow.

He looked young, like he was in his early twenties. Around me I could see vast plains, and the flags my allies were carrying bore the character “Tou.” *Ahh, this is a dream. It feels so nostalgic.*

Ou Eifuu ran his hand through his hair before he replied in an irritated voice, “I don’t need you to tell me to do my job. Eihou, the civilians’ food is—”

“I won’t touch their food. I’m sure that my officers will be dissatisfied and complain about it being unfair, though.” In times of war it was a common strategy to pillage and steal within enemy territory. The Tou Empire was an outlier for its rule of putting to death anyone who did just that.

Eifuu, who had been the one to detail the basic rules of our army, muttered, “His Imperial Majesty’s...Hi Gyoumei’s path to kingship must be a just one. His vision is not that of a conqueror’s, stained with the blood of innocents.”

“Yeah, I agree.” We all used to be farmers. Destroying the common folks’ livelihood and causing them misery, just because we had gotten power? That wasn’t how we did things.

My friend sighed, a troubled look on his face. “I know that pillaging is the

easiest and fastest way to get supplies. However, in time, we will be the ones to rule this land. If we make the people here suffer...”

“Their suffering will be sure to return to us as trouble. Makes sense.” The sound of a gong rang out, signaling that we were to begin our march. As the great general of the army, I had to go. I turned my horse around, but then I thought of something. “Hmm? Wait, then what should we do if the enemy army is the one doing the pillaging?”

In response, Eifuu let out a heavy sigh. “The moment you’re not on a battlefield, you become a very slow person.”

“Sh-Shut up! Anyone would seem slow compared to the great imperial chancellor!” I yelled, embarrassed, before I prompted, “So? What’s the answer?”

Eifuu narrowed his eyes a little before he waved his feathered fan. “It’s simple, great general. Do what you already do on a daily basis. That’s all.”

“Huh? What are you talking—?”

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I groaned as I opened my eyes, my consciousness crawling back from the dream. *There’s someone patting me on the head?* I looked up. “Ah.”

My eyes met Hakurei’s. She was sitting on a stool, her back to the entrance of the tent, where the morning sun was shining through the fabric. She’d already finished tidying herself up and her right hand was on top of my head.

*Huh? Why is she in my tent?* My question must have been obvious on my face, because she removed her hand from my head and held it in front of her chest.

“I-I’m here because we weren’t able to talk last night,” she said, her words becoming softer as she pursed her lips.

“Ah, right.” Ever since we left Keiyou, we’d stopped chatting before bed, as was our habit. We couldn’t do that every night considering Ruri and the other soldiers were watching us. She must have wanted to get in some time before Ruri returned—it’d been four days since she left with Jo Hiyou for the vanguard.

Though Chou Hakurei seemed, at first glance, to be a perfect heiress who could maintain her calm in any situation, she had a soft and lonely side to her. It went without saying that Hakurei was faithfully carrying out father's teachings. Our advance through Seitou was going well because we were giving food and medicine to the people living here, and we camped our troops outside of the villages.

I sat up and kicked off my blankets before I placed my hand on Hakurei's head. She made a low, dissatisfied noise as she stood up. She was blushing so hard that even her neck was red.

"Good morning," she said.

"G-Good morning," I replied. It looked like she wanted to pretend none of that happened. I smiled and picked up Black Star from where it was next to my pillow.

Hakurei handed me a small towel and said, "Now, hurry up and make yourself presentable. Today for sure, I will have you participate in the morning training."

It seemed that morning training would serve as a suitable substitute for the nightly talks. I dunked the cloth in a nearby bucket of water and washed my face before I brushed my teeth. The thing that I was most thankful for during this invasion was that there was more water than I'd expected. According to some of the older people in the villages, the water came from the great river and it never ran out even during times of drought.

"You were talking in your sleep," Hakurei said as she tidied up my bedding and the stool. I squeezed out the excess water from the cloth as I rinsed my mouth. "You sounded like you were enjoying the conversation. Who were you speaking with?"

"I was? Hmm. Well, we're in the middle of a march, so I guess I've been a bit tired these days," I replied, changing the subject. I walked over the pack containing my change of clothes. This march wasn't very difficult at all, so I was feeling fine. That being said, imagine if I told her, "Oh, to tell the truth, I'm actually the reincarnation of Kou Eihou"? No way. Hakurei would be sure to worry about my sanity. I took out my clothes and said, "Er, Miss Hakurei?"

"Yes?" She narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously. I could hear the quiet

breeze and birdsong from outside of the tent.

“Uh, it’ll only take me a second to change. Could you wait outside?”

“Please, don’t mind me; I’m not bothered seeing you naked. Besides, we’ve changed around each other already, so what’s the big deal?”

*It is a big deal!* Yes, when we were kids, we used to take baths together. However, we hadn’t done that since we started sleeping in different rooms at the age of thirteen! I waved my hand in a wide arc when Hakurei still refused to move. “*I’m* bothered! Leave! Now!”

Hakurei sighed, looking very annoyed. “Very well,” she said as she finally took her leave. It looked like I should find some excuse to start up our nightly talks again.

After I finished changing, I left the tent. The morning sun of the prairies was piercingly bright. As for the hour, it seemed to be daybreak. The clouds in the sky were moving quickly, but the wind wasn’t cold. It might rain later in the day. Every once in a while, I could hear the quiet nickering of the guarding cavalry’s horses. The path we were traveling on was as Ruri had described it to me. There weren’t any walls or ramparts. Only poor villages dotted the road. Even so, we couldn’t let down our guard. No matter how peaceful it looked, we were in enemy territory.

Hakurei was standing near me, so I said, “Sorry to have kept you waiting. Let’s go.”

She didn’t say anything, but there was a slightly angry and a very sulky gleam in her blue eyes. She walked towards me and pointed, the tip of her finger grazing my nose. “Listen. We may be at the rear end of the army, but this is enemy territory. You must be taking things far too lightly if you didn’t even notice someone sneaking into your tent.”

“Oh, yeah? But...”

“But what?”

I put my hands behind my head as I walked out of camp. Keeping my eyes forwards so I didn’t have to look at Hakurei’s face, I replied honestly, “But *you* were the one who came sneaking in, right? Then does it really matter if I let

down my guard?”

Hakurei didn't say anything for a moment before I felt her give me a light punch on the back. “You idiot,” she muttered, but it sounded like she was in a better mood. She skipped forwards to stand in front of me and then twirled, her long silver hair swinging with the action. The movement jostled White Star, hanging from her hip, causing it to slap against her leg with an audible noise. “All right! Let's start our training before everyone wakes up. You can make the first move.”

“Fine, fine.”

I put some distance between us and then closed my eyes. I could feel my consciousness sharpen as I focused. In the next moment, my eyes snapped open—I drew my sword! I swung my black sword again and again, left and right. At the very end, I gripped the hilt with both hands, lunged forwards, and then swung it down with my entire strength. A blast of wind blew through the air from my action, scattering the dew clinging onto the grass. The droplets sparkled as they caught the morning sun.

“Same as usual. It's your turn,” I said as I returned Black Star to my sheath with a wink.

Hakurei, who had been observing my sword dance, replied with a solemn bow. “Understood.”

She closed her blue eyes as she concentrated. Chou Hakurei stood there, her long silver hair tied up with a red ribbon, dressed in a military uniform of pure white. She was truly a sight to behold. Her hand brushed against the hilt of her sword.

“Hah!”

With a determined shout, she swung her sword in a horizontal slash, and then twisted her wrist to swing it upwards. The white blade caught the sun, shimmering in the light, as her movements became quicker. Her sword dance was different from mine. It was far faster and more elegant. It looked as if after experiencing true combat she'd further improved on her skills, and the sight of it made me smile. At the end of her dance, she relaxed her stance and thrust her hands out. Sighing, she returned White Star to its sheath with an elegant

twirl of her wrist. The beads of sweat on her forehead shone under the light.

I clapped my hands and then took out a piece of white cloth from my pocket. It was something she could use to wipe her face. As I tossed it at her, I said, “It looks like you’ve gotten used to that sword. I guess you were wrong about not being able to draw it.”

Hakurei accepted the cloth with both hands, but she furrowed her brow and complained, “I wasn’t mistaken. Are you making fun of— Eek!”

“Whoa!”

A powerful gust blew between us, scattering dried grass into the air. I hurried forwards and held Hakurei in my arms. She made a quiet sound when my arms wrapped around her, and I asked, “Are you all right? The wind just now was really strong.”

The moment I let her go, she made an angry noise and then yelled, “Wh-Why are you always like this?! It’s unfair how you always do this out of the blue! Wh-Why don’t you ever put yourself in *my* shoes?!” She continued to growl as she punched at my chest with her tiny fists.

“Ow, ow, ow! What do you want from me?! My body moved on its own!”

“Wha—?! Th-That’s... Well...”

“Ahem.”

It was a very obvious cough, meant to get our attention. Ruri was standing there, a coat around her body and a mischievous smile on her face. The two of us sucked in a sharp breath and looked around, unable to meet Ruri’s eyes—or each other’s.

“Oh? Did I interrupt something?” She must have spent the entire night on horseback, because I could see a hint of exhaustion on her face. I also noticed fear and melancholy clouding her green eyes.

“Welcome back,” I said.

“W-Welcome and nice work, Miss Ruri. I’m glad you made it back safe,” Hakurei said as she rushed over and held Ruri’s hands in her own.

Ruri looked a little embarrassed, but she didn’t shake Hakurei off. She looked

over at me and said, “Let me give my report first. At the moment, Marshal Jo and General U have already set up their troops in the ruins of an abandoned castle. They’re waiting for the main army to catch up to them. The attack on Ranyou will start in a matter of days at the earliest.”

So they were already within hailing distance of the capital? It sounded like it was about time to strike.

I looked over at Ruri, who was wrapped up in Hakurei’s arms, and asked, “What did Marshal Jo say?”

“He listened to me with interest and said that he would discuss this with U Jouko as well. However...” Fury and resignation burned in Ruri’s visible right eye as she continued, “Even if it’s the Phoenix Wing and Tiger Fang, they won’t be able to change the main troops’ minds within a day. They’re all so optimistic about the invasion going well.” She narrowed her eyes.

“On the way here, I heard the villages talking about you and your troops. ‘The children of the famous General Chou are so young, but they’re both such splendid people. I heard that they were sharing their food and medicine with those from the poorer villages.’ In both the past and the present, those praised as great commanders are ones who help the people instead of trampling on them. Kou Eihou in the ancient times had a similar philosophy, but it’s not so easy to carry it out in enemy territory. The southern regions are so far away from the trading routes that they’re much poorer than the northern ones, so rumors about your charity will spread in a heartbeat.”

“Thank you. This was what father taught us.” Hakurei smiled upon hearing Ruri’s words.

*“Do what you already do on a daily basis.”* Gyoumei, Eifuu, it looks like my way of thinking is still valid. I was lost in my sentiments for a little bit when I saw Ruri break free from Hakurei’s hold and stretch. She started to make her way to the tents as she waved her hand.

“All right, then. I’m going to go get some sleep now.”

“Sure thing.”

“Thank you so much, Miss Ruri.”

No matter how fast a horse was, it would take at least three days to go from Ranyou to the rear end of the marching army. Yet, Ruri made the trip and returned in four days. She must have really pushed both herself and her horse. I had to give her some kind of reward after we made it back to Keiyou.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, I saw Ruri stop. She turned over her shoulder to look at me, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. Her eyes were like chips of ice.

“Every single catapult has been taken out of the fortresses, along with all of the weapons. ‘The extraction and aggregation of excess weaponry’ is a tactic that Ou Eifuu, the only imperial chancellor in history, liked to use. It looks like our enemy strategist plans on faithfully recreating the tactics of the Tou Empire’s Ouei.”

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“—And that concludes the strategy I’ve devised to deal with the matter at hand.”

In Ranyou, the capital of Seitou, the palace stood without its master. The military strategist Hasho’s voice echoed in the audience chamber. Though quiet, there was an unmistakable tinge of pride in his words. I couldn’t contain my excitement, clenching my fist. I looked over at Gisen and we nodded as one.

*“We shall drag the false emperor’s army deep into Seitou, and once they let down their guard, we will eliminate their supply corps.”* The strategist’s plan was a sound one and it was certain to bring us victory. As well as that, the blood of wolves ran through our veins. I was confident that our fangs could tear through the throat of any army we faced, no matter how large.

*I swear that I, Gray Wolf Seul Bato, will bring home a decisive victory in this battle! Everyone under the heavens will know of my and my Gray Lancers’ courageous feats!* The assembled soldiers clanged their fists against their armor in a display of determination.

Upon seeing that, Hasho—feathered fan in hand—smiled. “You have all done very well enduring until this day. In the past, our previous ruler and our homeland was betrayed by an arrogant and shameless man who went on to declare himself an emperor. Why do you think we have allowed those who’ve



sworn fealty to this trickster to live their lives for all this time?” A torrential rain could be heard outside, as if the very heavens themselves were offering us their blessings. Hasho swung his feathered fan in a wide arc and yelled, “It was all for an absolute victory! It was so that the glory of our great Emperor Adai, the child of the Celestial Wolf, could touch every corner of this world!”

It felt like he’d lit my heart on fire. My body trembled. *How resplendent! There is no greater honor than this.* I thought of my dear friend, who’d perished in Keiyou without ever seeing the culmination of our efforts. *Nguyen, Gisen and I will avenge you!*

Hasho smiled. “I have granted you all this gift—this plan that I’ve devised—in order to bring this dream to fruition. I will leave the rest to you, Sir Seul Bato, Gray Wolf.”

“Yessir!” I took a few steps forwards before I turned around once more to face my commanders. Their eyes burned with bloodlust. There was no doubt about it: we were sure to win. “You’ve all engraved our strategist’s words into your hearts, yes? Tonight, we will take advantage of the foul weather and depart from Ranyou.” I pulled out my dagger and stabbed it into the map on the table. “Tomorrow, we shall deliver a fatal blow to our enemy’s supply corps! Once we do, it will be child’s play to defeat and eliminate their forces in an open battle.”

Next to me stood Hasho and Gisen, the latter who was carrying his black blade on his back. Our eyes met before I looked back to my troops. In the next moment I roared, “Let’s bring victory to His Imperial Majesty!”

My soldiers raised their voices in a war cry before filing out of the audience chamber.

Once they left, I resheathed my dagger and clasped my hands together. “I shall depart as well, Master Strategist! Please await my good news here!”

“Yes, I look forward to hearing it.” Hasho then looked up at the most powerful warrior in my army. I could see a hint of worry in his expression. He must be thinking about what Gisen himself had told us. “It was because *you*, Gisen, were the one who proposed it that I accepted your plan to use a small team to defeat the Chou family army at the rear guard. I’m sure that their loss would be a

major blow to the enemy's morale, but it's unclear whether or not Chou Tairan's son and daughter—Sir Nguyen's murderers—will be present. Retreat if the situation becomes dire. We will need your strength in the final battle, Blackblade."

A flash of lightning cracked through the sky, illuminating the jagged scar marring Gisen's left cheek. He didn't say anything, but he bowed his head low in acknowledgment. There was no need to worry; Gisen was not the type who would ever underestimate his enemy. My Gray Lancers and I had a job dealing with another team, but that was hardly an issue. He was sure to return, our enemies' heads in his possession.

After all, there wasn't a single person in this world who could stop the Blackblade on the battlefield.

I was more than familiar with Gisen's strength. Not only was he my vice-commander, but he was also the one who taught me the sword. I bumped my fist against his and then smiled at Hasho. "Speaking of which, I didn't expect it to start raining. The so-called Honorable One's premonitions might not be so ridiculous after all."

Hasho didn't say anything for a moment before he narrowed his eyes. "It's fantastical." As if on cue, a rumble of thunder boomed and yet another spark of lightning crashed outside. "However, it is impossible for a mortal human to control the weather. I'm sure that there must be some sort of trick behind all this. In any case, we will gratefully accept their assistance and power now, as well as later, during our final confrontation with the enemy."

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As the morning sun rose, I walked out of my tent and saw that a thick fog had enveloped our campsite, which we'd set out in the outskirts of a village. Thanks to the thunderstorm last night, even with the sun shining down upon us, I couldn't see very far into the distance. Everyone except for the assigned guards were still asleep.

*"Sekiei, please don't go off training on your own, all right?"* Hakurei's beautiful face appeared in my mind as I thought back to her warning. Surely, though, this would be fine. It was just a walk, after all.

Three days had already passed since Ruri returned—more than enough time for the vanguard and the main army to have met up again. I wondered if they would go on to attack Ranyou, or if they would attempt negotiations with Seitou.

According to a letter from Hiyou, debates among the commanders usually devolved into arguments. Rin Chuudou, the one with the authority to make the final decisions, was far more distracted with the horde of women he'd brought along with him from Rinkei, preferring to waste away his nights with hedonism rather than strategy. The silver lining was that—thanks to the grand chancellor's smarts—the supply corps were able to get to the main troops, albeit with some difficulty. No one had needed to resort to pillaging yet. Most of the soldiers involved with logistics ignored us and pressed on to the front lines, as they had been ordered.

*If the enemy's trying to copy Eifuu's strategy, as Ruri theorized...* As if to interrupt the pessimistic turn my thoughts were taking, I heard footsteps behind me. When I turned around, I saw Teiha making his way towards me through the morning mist. Both his helmet and armor were wet, and I guessed that he'd taken the initiative to patrol around the camp. I raised my hand to greet him and he returned it with a salute, a surprised look on his face.

"Oh! Good morning, Lord Sekiei!"

"Morning. Not quite sure what woke me up. Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary?"

"I haven't. However, some of the soldiers have been wondering how much longer we have to stay on standby for."

"I can't blame them. I wish I had an answer. The thing is, none of us are quite sure either." I brushed some grass out from my bangs and started walking. Every time I took a step, Black Star, hanging from my belt, made an audible thud as it hit my leg.

The sun was starting to rise higher into the sky, lighting up the surroundings more and more. As I continued walking, I noticed someone. "Oh, hey. You woke up really early too. You're alone?"

It was Ruri, standing under a tree that was alone in the middle of the field.

She usually slept in the same tent as Hakurei, but Hakurei was nowhere to be seen. In Ruri's hands, she held a closed umbrella and a telescope. She was wearing her usual outfit—a blue hat, a monk's robe, and a coat. It looked like she'd been standing there for a while now, and something about the glow of her blonde hair and green eyes in the dim dawn made her seem sad.

"I just happened to wake up. Hakurei's still asleep. You know she keeps hugging me at night? Thanks to that, I can hardly sleep a wink."

"I apologize for my little sister inconveniencing you like that."

"Little sister? I heard that if anything, *you* were the younger sibling."

"There appears to be a difference of opinion between us," I replied with a small smile and a quick nod. I walked over to stand at her side. I knew that we were standing in the middle of a vast field, but I couldn't see anything through the fog. "That was a crazy storm yesterday. Is that how Seitou usually is during this time of year?"

The wind blew, bringing with it the scent of fresh dirt. Ruri held her hair down with her small hand to prevent it from blowing into her face as she replied, "Hardly. Those storms happen only a handful of times a year, and there's no telling when they'll occur. The only thing I know for sure..."

"The only thing you know?" I asked, keeping my eyes fixed ahead. It might have been a trick of my mind, but was that a horse nickering I heard on the breeze?

Ruri scrunched up her face and shook her head. "Nothing. In any case, I don't think a storm of that proportion will happen again anytime soon."

"Sounds good. Teiha, it's time for the next watch to start their—"

The moment I was about to give my order, shrill whinnying and yells broke through the morning quiet, echoing through the fog.

"RAH!"

I could hear the voices of many people, raised in a singular war cry, as well as a stampede of hooves heading our way. I could hear Ruri's and Teiha's quiet gasps as well. Without hesitation, I drew Black Star. Through the morning fog, I

could see cavalymen wearing helmets and light armor that had been dyed a deep red. *The Crimson Knights?!*

“Kill!” they yelled. With fearsome speed and hatred in their eyes, they charged and thrust out with their spears.

*They’re aiming for Ruri?!* My body moved of its own accord, leaping in front of Ruri, who was frozen in place. I split the first spear in half with my sword and in my next swing, I slashed through the enemy’s abdomen as they rode past me. Blood splattered through the air as I jumped and kicked the next soldier I saw off his mount. He let go of his spear and I grabbed it. In the same motion, I flung it at yet another enemy cavalryman and sent it through his stomach, killing him before I landed on the ground.

Still facing the enemies, I yelled at Ruri, “You idiot! Don’t just stand there! Run! Teiha, wake everyone up and take command! I’ll hold them off here. Go!”

“I-I know that already!” Ruri exclaimed, finally coming back to herself from the shock of the attack.

“Yessir!” Teiha replied before the two of them ran off.

I could hear them retreating, but I kept my attention on what the enemies were doing. As the fog started to lift, I could see a large number of cavalymen—about a hundred of them—watching us from afar. Almost all were dressed in red armor. *Remnants of the Crimson Knights?*

One of them raised his spear and pointed it at me before he bellowed in a deafening cry, “Chou Sekiei!”

The enemies’ faces were twisted in extreme enmity and fear as they nocked arrows into their bows. It seemed that they had no intention of engaging me in close-quarters combat.

I adjusted my grip on my sword and grinned. “Ha! It looks like I’ve made quite the name for myself.”

Murmurs spread amid the enemies—bluffing was an effective tactic on the battlefield. I was in a desperate situation, of that there was no doubt. Even our army, at the rear guard of the invading troops, had become a target for attack. My guess was that all of the other supply corps were fighting off the enemy

right about now, as well.

*Dammit! Ruri had already seen through the enemy strategy too!* An old cavalryman with only one arm in the middle of the formation looked to be the captain. He raised a spear and immediately, the enemy soldiers drew back their bowstrings. *It's going to be tough to knock down all of these arrows, but I have to stay alive until Hakurei wakes up and takes command of the army.* I steeled my will in preparation for battle when I heard frantic voices from behind me.

“Young master, you mustn’t make rash decisions!”

“Protect Lord Sekiei!”

“Prepare the shields!”

“Shoot! Shoot!”

About ten of our veteran soldiers, not even wearing their armor and helmets properly, rushed up to me. Within seconds they’d set up a wall of shields and started shooting arrows to keep the Crimson Knights at bay. Even though we’d been ambushed, we were able to put up a decent defense. In response, the enemy cavalrymen drew back for the moment.

I looked over at my soldiers, who had been sleeping not so long ago, and complained, “You know, I would’ve preferred it if you prioritized *Hakurei’s* safety.”

“We’re acting on Lady Hakurei and Captain Teiha’s orders!”

“Please don’t throw away your life like this.”

“The other soldiers are setting up a counterattack as well.”

“The enemies have fewer fighters than us. We can chase them off once we finish regrouping ourselves!”

I didn’t expect anything less from those who’d survived the hellish battle at Keiyou. They were a gutsy group. I didn’t make any outward hint as to how impressed I was as I was handed a sturdy bow and a quiver of arrows.

“I’m going to have to scold that princess later, aren’t I?”

With that, I drew back the bowstring and let an arrow fly. It shot straight

through an enemy soldier, shield and all. The old captain twisted his face and yelled something and in the next moment, the enemy force split into two—an assault team, and a support team consisting of archers. They might have lost their general the Crimson Wolf, but their fangs remained as sharp as ever. With Black Star in one hand, I was attempting to release a chain of arrows when I heard someone yelling from behind me.

“Who’s going to scold who, you said?!”

Hakurei rode into battle atop of her white horse, an angry look in her eye. Her hair was loose, as she hadn’t had enough time to tie it up, and there was a bow in her hand. White Star hung from her hip. She managed to avoid the arrows flying through the air, her impressive horseback archery skills on display as she prevented the Gen cavalrymen from getting too close. The moment she entered our temporary position in the battlefield, she made her horse lower itself onto the ground and jumped off its back to stand at my side.

Keeping an eye on the enemies so that I knew what they were up to, I growled, “Focus on commanding the rest of the army.”

“I refuse. Teiha can handle that.”

“Tsk! What’s wrong with all of you people? Why do you all want to rush to your deaths?!”

I shot three arrows at once, knocking down three riders with them. Immediately, a score of arrows rained down in retaliation, but they sunk into the shields instead of hitting anybody.

“Listen,” Hakurei declared without looking in my direction, far too focused on the arrow she was shooting, “my place on the battlefield is *right here*. I will not stand for anyone trying to dissuade me from that!”

One of the enemy cavalrymen, standing close to the one-armed captain, twisted his face in fury. He straightened up, exposing himself to our line of sight.

“Man, you’re such a pain!” I said.

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from!” Hakurei snapped back.

We released our arrows at the same time and our aim was true. Both arrows pierced straight through the enemy's chest. In response, our soldiers raised their voices in a cheer while shocked murmurs rippled through the enemy. While our morale was rising, it was clear that the enemies were starting to panic at the turning tide. *Will we be able to pull through if we—* I had no time to finish my thought before I sensed an unbelievably cold presence.

"Hakurei!" I yelled. "Everyone! Retreat!"

"Huh?"

I grabbed Hakurei without waiting for her response and leaped backwards with all the strength I could muster. In the next second, the ally soldiers who hadn't been able to react fast enough to my command flew through the air. The enemy had thrown a spear at them, piercing straight through the shields, sending them to the ground.

"Wha—?" I wasn't sure who said it. Hakurei and the soldiers—all of whom had experienced surviving the hell of war—fell silent, shocked at the sight.

I placed Hakurei on the ground and ordered the closest survivor in a curt voice, "Take Hakurei and leave. Now." I gripped my sword even tighter as I walked forwards.

"S-Sekiei!" Hakurei screamed, but I couldn't risk giving her any of my attention or replying.

The enemy formation parted to reveal their commander riding in atop a massive horse. He was a man with black hair and eyes, and he held a black great sword in his hand. In addition to his all-black dress, he possessed a large scar on his left cheek which must have been made by a sword. There was no doubt about it—this was the man who'd thrown that spear earlier, piercing through shield and soldier alike. He dismounted from his horse and stalked forwards, resting his sword upon his shoulder.

*He's a real monster.* As impossible as it sounded, I doubted that even a score of soldiers could put up a fight against him. If I didn't stay here to buy everyone time to retreat, we'd be massacred.

"Gisen! Gisen! Gisen!" the enemy soldiers chanted.



The opposing commander remained expressionless as he swung his great sword, the sound of it cutting through the air so loud that I could hear it even over the Crimson Knights' cheers. Despite the weight of the huge weapon, he stopped its momentum in a masterful display of strength and glared at me with eyes sharper than a sword.

"The name is Blackblade Gisen," he said.

"The name's Chou Sekiei."

The moment I gave him my name, the fearsome general narrowed his eyes before he chuckled deep in his throat. In the next breath, he growled and swung his great sword down upon me. I blocked it with Black Star, sending sparks flying through the air and cutting through the drifting remnants of the mist.

His lips twisted in a grin, showing his canines. "Interesting."

"Gah!"

His attacks were far more powerful and nimble than I could have ever imagined. Every time Black Star connected with his great sword, the scream of metal against metal rang out, creating a symphony of death. If I hadn't been wielding Black Star, my sword surely would've broken when I blocked the first strike. I still couldn't kill the entire momentum behind his attacks, though—with every one I was forced to take a step back, pain racking my entire body.

I was barely managing to parry this monstrous commander's attacks. Taking advantage of a horizontal slash to get some distance, I asked, "Who are you, exactly?! Why are you leading the Crimson Knights? And that skill of yours... Are you a member of the Four Wolves?!"



In lieu of a verbal response, he held his great sword before himself like a spear and charged straight for me. I couldn't believe my eyes. Every step he took, I could see miniature craters forming in the ground underneath him. *Is this kind of strength really possible for a human?!*

"You don't! Even plan on! Enjoying a chat?!" If I tried to dodge the attack, he'd have killed me. I adjusted my grip on Black Star, holding it with both hands to try and better parry him, but with a piercing clang of metal—louder than any thus far—I was sent flying backwards, landing on the ground with a pained cry.

"You're good. But you'll die here!" Gisen was quick to turn and readjust his stance, holding his sword like a spear once more. He was so fast!

"I won't let you kill him!"

Hakurei leaped into the fray, her voice cutting through the oppressive air. She shot arrow after arrow at Gisen, her aim as impeccable as ever. Yet, despite her taking us off guard, none of her arrows hit the man. He swung his sword once, slicing through all of them and sending them clattering onto the ground.

Her attack hadn't landed. However, her determination had changed the entire mood of the battlefield. The Chou family soldiers were following Hakurei's lead, aiming their bows at the enemies, who held aloft their own bows and spears. Meanwhile, Gisen glared at both me and Hakurei before he smiled.

"A girl with silver hair and blue eyes—traits said to bring calamity... So you're Chou Tairan's daughter?"

Neither Hakurei nor I answered him. We were at a bizarre stalemate. However, a trembling yell broke through the silence. I recognized the voice as Ruri's!

"O-Our target is the enemy commander in black! Fire!"

"Huh?!"

A high-pitched roar rang out over the battlefield as the unfamiliar stench of gunpowder wafted through the air. Under a pale Ruri's command, the reinforcements she'd brought were clutching onto fire lances. They fired small

stones from the bamboo cylinders with an audible noise, hitting Gisen even when he blocked them with his great sword, breaking through his defense.

“We outnumber the enemy! Surround them and kill them! We must protect Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei!” Teiha yelled. More and more cavalrymen charged towards the Crimson Knights in the name of protecting us.

The enemies looked a little stunned as Gisen retreated towards them. He gripped his great sword so hard I could hear a grinding noise from his hands as he growled, “I will kill you all next we meet. Retreat!”

His cold eyes burned with emotion before he heaved his monstrous frame onto his giant of a horse and started to leave. It wasn’t an immediate retreat; I could see the Crimson Knights collecting their fallen. However, we couldn’t give pursuit or press our advantage. We couldn’t move a single muscle. It was only after we confirmed that the last of the enemy had disappeared beyond the horizon that I was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief and sheathe Black Star once more.

“Oh?” My knees felt weak and started to buckle. However, before I fell, Hakurei ran over to me and helped keep me upright.

“Sekiei!” She looked like she was about to cry.

As I looked at her, I said, “The world’s such a vast place. I never imagined I’d encounter someone as crazy strong as him.” That was my honest opinion on the enemy commander. “Are you all right?”

“I am,” Hakurei said after a moment. Her body was trembling. I straightened up so that I could get a better look at her face. There were tears rolling down her cheeks as she whispered, “I’m sorry. I wasn’t able to jump between you and the blade, even though I swore that I’d keep you safe.”

“Dummy.” I flicked her lightly on the forehead, making her squeak in surprise. “If you hadn’t arrived on the scene to help me, I would’ve died. Thank you. You saved my life yet again.”

Hakurei lowered her face before she pressed it against my chest. “Dummy.”

I was about to wrap my arms around her when I noticed the warm gazes of the soldiers around us.

“Young master, you know that this is where you have to hug her, right?”

“Don’t worry about us!”

“Go ahead, go ahead!”

“Sh-Shut up, all of you!” I yelled. “Go help the wounded and report the casualties to me! Now!”

“Yessir!”

They offered me a sharp salute before they all scattered. *I didn’t want to lose any of them when I set out on this mission.*

Hakurei looked up at me. “It was thanks to Ruri’s quick thinking that we survived. The fire lances work.”

“Yeah. The problem with them is that they don’t last for very long.”

The bamboo cylinders at the tips of the soldiers’ fire lances were burnt and heavily damaged. We’d lost all of the fire lances we’d brought with us, and I doubted that the improved versions of them would reach us now that we were so deep in enemy territory. I looked over to Ruri so that I could offer her my thanks when I noticed something strange.

“Hmm?”

“Miss Ruri?”

Ruri was staring, mouth agape, in the direction that Gisen had disappeared off to, standing there while clenching her telescope with both hands. Her face was still pale and I could see how she was trembling ever so slightly. Something was wrong. We were about to make our way towards her, but in the next moment, Ruri let out a shrill cry.

“Black hair and black eyes, with a scar on his left cheek and a bloodied black great sword... He’s... He’s...!” She gripped her hair with both hands as she sunk to the ground, weeping.

“Whoa!”

“Watch out!”

She looked like she was on the verge of collapse, so Hakurei and I rushed to

support her. It looked like Ruri had passed out. However, she was still murmuring, “I’m sorry, please forgive me... Father, mother, sister, I swear I’ll take revenge...” while fat tears continued to roll down her cheeks. A fearsome gust of wind blew over the plains, scattering the fresh blood of both Ei and Gen.

The next evening, we received a message and orders from our superiors: “The Imperial Guard’s supply corps have been attacked and we’ve suffered heavy casualties. The Chou family army is to advance to the front lines.”

## Chapter Four

After I finished my meeting with Miss Asaka, I returned to my office and saw my lovely mistress—Lady Ou Meirin—groaning, her small body slumped on the table. Every time she moved, her chestnut-brown hair, tied up in pigtails, moved with her. Her favorite hat had been placed on a chair, and the black cat that had started to live in the Chou family manor was batting at it. Keiyou had just experienced a heavy rainfall, so it might have been in search of a warm place to rest.

I ran my hand down the cat's back before placing some documents in a wooden box that had been marked "Undecided." The papers were proposals for sending small ships as reinforcements to the Seitou invasion forces and prototypes for improved fire lances.

"I've returned, Lady Meirin. I see that you've set down your pen."

Lady Meirin turned her face to look at me, though her head remained glued to the table. "More documents? Shizuka, you're being so mean! Are you having fun bullying your precious mistress, who's suffering in these Lord Sekiei-less times?!"

"Oh, yes, indeed! I am!"

"Grr..." Lady Meirin lowered her head once more.

It was rare to see Lady Meirin in such dire straits. However, it was likely because Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, and Lady Ruri had all gone to participate in the ongoing invasion in Seitou. Not only was Lord Sekiei the man she loved, but Lady Hakurei and Lady Ruri were two of the very few friends that Lady Meirin had. I slid a letter across the table to her.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a letter from Rinkei," I replied. "The house sitters are asking for you to return to the capital."

It had been Meirin's parents who'd managed to turn the Ou family into one of

the greatest mercantile homes in the Ei Empire within their generation. However, they spent most of their time outside of the capital. Lady Meirin—at only seventeen years old—was the one who conducted business for them while they were gone.

The wind blew through the window and I held my black hair down before it could whip into my eyes. The environment here was so different from my homeland, which had vanished years ago. I didn't have time to lose myself in my sentimentality, though, as Lady Meirin pushed herself into a proper sitting position.

"I don't plan on going back anytime soon. Not until I see Lord Sekiei return in one piece, at the very least."

"Lady Meirin." I placed my hand over my beloved mistress's and she stared up at me with determination in her eyes.

"I won't budge on this decision. Besides, I doubt it would be very healthy for me to breathe in Rinkei's air."

She was right. The long years of prosperity Rinkei enjoyed had transformed into corruption, insidiously spreading through the streets. Even this ridiculous Seitou invasion stemmed from a power spat between the grand chancellor and the lieutenant chancellor. It was the exact same as what had happened in my country. Despite the foreign threats encroaching on our borders, our leaders cared more for their internal power struggles. We were seas apart from my homeland, but I supposed that didn't change the fact that conflict and greed were in the hearts of all humans.

"Very well, then," I said. "Let's write a reply together later. I'm sure that your father and mother will understand how you're feeling."

Lady Meirin hopped off her chair and ran towards me, wrapping her arms around me in a tight embrace. "I love you, Shizuka!" she giggled.

"I love you too, Lady Meirin."

Warmth filled my chest. My mistress—smarter and kinder than anyone I knew despite her young age—had been the one to save me, a foreigner who'd lost her homeland. I returned the hug before I looked at the papers spread out over



the table.

Meirin noticed. “Sir Raigen delivered these to me. The map depicts the defensive network in the west of Keiyou.” A troubled expression appeared on her face.

She was likely thinking that the Gen army wouldn’t wait until we finished our construction to invade us. General Chou and his most trusted commander, Sir Raigen, were well aware of this fact, I was sure. It might have been all right in the past, before Seitou’s annexation. Now, our west side looked as if we were exposing our soft underbelly to the enemy’s claws. They must be worried about a possible attack on that front.

I looked down at the other piece of paper and asked, “What’s this?”

“It’s a letter from Miss Hakurei! She wants to evacuate the wounded and the sick.”

“Evacuate the wounded and the sick?”

Enemies weren’t the only ones who could kill a soldier in war—disease and injuries could prove fatal as well. However, it was odd that Miss Hakurei would suggest such a thing with the invasion still ongoing. Miss Meirin let go of me and sat back down in the chair, picking up the cat and cradling it to herself.

“I haven’t heard of a major skirmish with Gen,” I said. “Lord Sekiei and the other members of the Chou family army are at the rear guard. How could there be any wounded?”

“I don’t know the details myself.”

I thought back to the man that my mistress loved—that boy with black hair and crimson eyes—and her rival—the girl with silver hair and blue eyes. Despite their youth, their slaying of one of the most famous and dangerous fighters in all of the land—the Crimson Wolf—during the Gen’s siege on Keiyou had turned them into heroes. I doubted that they would make any meaningless decisions. In other words...

“They must have deemed that this is the only time they’d be able to send anyone back,” I said.

In contrast to my foreboding guess, Lady Meirin blinked her big eyes and asked, “What do you mean? I thought we had more soldiers than they did.” While Lady Meirin had an unprecedented talent as a merchant, she was a novice when it came to military strategy. It was hard for her to think of things beyond how they seemed on the surface.

Thinking back to my past, I explained, “On the battlefield, it’s possible for even a single powerful soldier to turn the tides. Our enemies are a mysterious strategist and one of the Four Wolves. Even if Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei are with them, there’s no telling what could happen.”

Fear flooded Lady Meirin’s eyes. She hadn’t reacted this way even when we were attacked by pirates on the Grand Canal several months ago. Back then, she’d been able to maintain a strong front no matter whom she was with. “Shizuka, it’s going to be okay, right? Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, and Miss Ruri... They’ll all be able to come back, right? I mean, they have the Heavenly Swords with them!”

I didn’t say anything for a moment before I smiled and replied, “Of course.”

There were many things we still didn’t know about the Heavenly Swords. We knew that they used to be wielded by the great general of the Tou Empire, who’d united all of the lands under the sun. If the legends were accurate, then they would protect their user. However...

Lady Meirin smiled mirthlessly as she petted the cat. “Shizuka, you’re a terrible liar! Your expression is so grim that even I can tell something’s wrong. It’s going to be a difficult battle, then?”

I felt ashamed of myself. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know how perceptive Lady Meirin was when it came to others’ emotions. “My apologies.”

“No! Apologizing! You’re falling back into your bad habits. Right now, we’re nothing more than guests of the Chou family, so there’s not much we can do.” Motivation and determination brimmed in her big eyes. “But in any case, let’s gather as many ships as we can. Back when we had tea in Rinkei, Lord Sekiei told me something *very* interesting. As for the improved fire lances... Hmm, maybe we can send them barrels of gunpowder? It’s *veeery* dangerous, but I’m sure that Ruri will figure out a way to handle it. She hates war, but she told me

that she's the best at, uh, fire attacks!"

*Ahh, my young mistress is using everything at her disposal to try and fulfill her own role in this. She can't use a sword or a spear or a bow, or even ride a horse. Yet she still finds a way to fight.* If only I had thought of this myself, back when I was a kid. I stood up straighter and lowered my head.

"I agree with you on all fronts."

"Thanks! ☆ All right, time to get through the rest of these documents!"

The pleasant sound of brush against paper filled the room once more. As I watched her work, I combed through her hair and took a deep breath. It took a moment for me to work up my nerve before I said, "Um, Lady Meirin."

"Hmm? What?" She stopped moving her writing hand and looked up at me, tilting her head to the side in an adorable gesture.

I looked away from her. Biting back my past regrets, I made sure to say in as clear a voice as possible, "Thank you so much. It's all because of you that I'm able to smile again, Lady Meirin."

She stared at me, confused for a moment, before puffing out her hefty chest with a proud expression on her face. "Of course! Aren't I the best mistress you could ask for?"

"Yes, you are! You're the finest mistress in all the land!"

"Hee hee! ♪ You're so cute when you're being honest about your feelings, Shizuka! Granted, you're always cute."

In a far better mood than before, Meirin returned to work while humming a jaunty tune. I smiled at my young mistress and sat down in the chair next to her. *It seems like I need to look into just what is going on in Seitou.* Even if Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei were part of the invasion, if they didn't have a solid plan in place... Ruri's face appeared before my mind's eye. She called herself an ascendant and was familiar with all of the stories and strategies from wars both past and present. I even saw her crush some of the best players in Rinkei when it came to military simulation games.

She despised war from the bottom of her heart. I didn't take her for the type

who would go to the battlefield and offer her services or smarts. “But, if Lady Ruri were to utilize her full talents on the battlefield, then, combined with Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei’s military strength, perhaps...” I murmured.

“Shizuka? Did you say something?” Lady Meirin looked up, staring at me suspiciously.

I shook away my daydream and smiled at her.

“No, I didn’t. Let’s see if Miss Asaka has an updated map of Seitou. I believe we’ll need to figure out a place to send the ships, as well as figure out a location to deliver the fire lances and gunpowder.”

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“Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, I apologize for having kept you waiting. I know you’ve just arrived, but my father would like to speak with you two before the meeting. I’ll have my soldiers show yours to their lodgings.”

We’d arrived in an encampment that had been set up in a nameless village about a half day’s march from Ranyou, the capital city of Seitou. Countless bonfires burned all over the site. The helmets and armor of Marshal Jo Shuuhou’s southern army were all dirtied, and Hiyou, who had been waiting for us near the entrance of the encampment, was no exception. His expression seemed sharper than before, and he was even talking in a more subdued manner. They must have gone through a lot in the ten days since the Gen cavalrymen launched a simultaneous attack on both our supply corps.

“Sounds good,” I said.

“I’ll leave our soldiers in your hands,” Hakurei added.

Hiyou led us down an unpaved road and I took the opportunity to look around the village. None of the constructs had been made of stone. The walls were akin to piles of dirt that had been crudely put together, and the houses were made of wood. None of the windows were reinforced by glass, and all of the buildings were only about a story tall.

The Chou family army had spent the entire invasion camping along the outskirts of villages rather than going inside, so it was a new experience for us. I couldn’t see any of the villagers; it looked like they had already heard the

rumors. I thought about all of the pillaged villages—courtesy of the Imperial Guard—that we'd passed by on our way here. Hakurei must have been thinking back on what we'd witnessed as well, because the grimace on her face matched mine.

Hiyou, still walking ahead of us, said, "I'm truly relieved that you all made it here in one piece. I heard that you were also attacked, and by the Crimson Knights, of all people."

"Yeah, we managed to scrape by. We already told Marshal Jo, but we sent all of our wounded and sick back to Keiyou. They're in no condition to keep fighting." It had been difficult to convince them to return. Everyone in the Chou family army was so eager to prove themselves on the battlefield that I sometimes had no idea what to do with them.

Hakurei's expression tensed and when she spoke, it was in a frosty tone. "On our way here, we saw that many of the villages had offered resources... No, I suppose there's no need to mince words. We saw that many villages had been pillaged. Is Marshal Jo aware of what's been happening?"

The reason father naturally garnered his nickname as the National Shield, as well as the reason our enemies held a form of respect for him, was because the soldiers under his command never plundered from civilians. Considering Chou Hakurei had grown up watching her father carry out this conviction, she probably considered what the Ei army was doing to be an inconceivable evil. I didn't care if people thought us naive and looked down on us for that. I simply hadn't wanted her to witness what atrocities some armies were capable of.

Hiyou stopped in front of a tent that had been set up in the town square. When he turned back to us, there was a dark expression on his face and he didn't say anything for a long while. "I believe my father will explain all of that to you. Please, enter."

When we walked into the tent we found Phoenix Wing, Jo Shuuhou, glaring down at a map on the table. He looked deep in thought, his brow furrowed. There were more gray hairs on his head and in his beard compared to when I met him in Keiyou, and his cheeks were sunken.

He looked up upon noticing us. "Ah, you're here. Hiyou, keep watch outside.

Don't let anyone approach this tent."

"Yessir!" The heir of the Jo family offered us a smart salute before walking out.

Marshal Jo sat down in a nearby chair and let out a long sigh. "My apologies. I'm quite exhausted after dealing with fools who still don't understand the danger they're in. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, Marshal," I said as I lowered myself onto a bench.

"Have you been getting enough sleep?" Hakurei asked as she sat down next to me.

Marshal Jo picked up his baton as he replied, "I appreciate your concern, but we have no time for that. I'm going to explain to you our current situation." His expression changed, becoming that of a seasoned general, and he tapped the baton against several points of the map. "The enemy's attack, taking the long route to ambush us from behind, has cost the Imperial Guard almost all of their supply corps. There are very few casualties among the soldiers. However, they've lost the majority of their horses. My eastern army and the western army were on the lookout for an attack, so our supply corps are fine in comparison. However, we are in no position to stay in enemy territory for much longer."

"And as a result of those losses, the Imperial Guard resorted to pillaging the villages, all so that they could earn a pittance of resources?" Hakurei asked in a flat voice. The question might have been devoid of all emotion, but I could see that her hands on her knees were trembling.

The baton in Marshal Jo's hands snapped in half with a dry crack. "Both my and the western armies prevented them from attacking any of the villages we were staying at. That didn't stop the Imperial Guard from sending soldiers to other ones to attack them instead! Not only that, but they're attacking on direct order from the supreme commander and the Imperial Guard's marshal!"

"That's..." I was so shocked that I could think of no further words to say.

"Are they insane?" Hakurei asked, her voice so cold that I felt a shiver run down my spine.

The Imperial Guard was the army under the emperor's direct command. It was possible that—no, I was sure that Seitou's people would never forgive the Ei Empire for these travesties. *This is awful!*

Marshal Jo placed his hand on the table and I could tell that it was taking him all his effort to contain his rage. "I cannot answer you; I don't know the answer myself. At the very least, Rin Chuudou, the fool who has deluded himself into thinking he's some wise sage, has not given up on attacking Ranyou. If Jouko and I hadn't been as firm as we were with our demands, we wouldn't even have been able to hold our final meeting tonight."

Hakurei and I didn't respond, exchanging glances with each other instead. Things were far worse than we'd imagined. Hakurei looked straight into Marshal Jo's eyes and asked, "Are you against a battle with Seitou?"

"Of course I am. I'd rather die than say that we'd lose, but as it stands, we've already turned Seitou's people against us. Under these circumstances, we would have a hell of a time holding on to the city after taking it. Miss Hakurei, we've lost our decades of goodwill with this country." Marshal Jo covered his face with his hands.

This man was such a powerful and well-respected general that he was often compared to Chou Tairan, and yet I could see the strong tremors racking his body. He understood that if we were to lose here, Keiyou would be the next to fall.

As Hakurei and I searched for what to say, we heard Hiyou say from outside the tent, "Father, it's time."

"Understood. Thank you." It had been twenty-odd years since Marshal Jo's name became known through the lands. In all of that time, he had never lost a battle. Now there was a resigned look of deep sadness on his face as he stood and picked up his sword. "Let's go, then, to the battlefield from which we must emerge the victors."

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A massive tent had been set up at the back of the Ei army's main encampment. An elaborate chair that resembled a throne had been placed inside of it, and I couldn't help but wonder why they'd gone out of their way to

bring *that* along. A fat and ugly bald man was sitting upon it, and I figured that he was Rin Chuudou. He was talking to a man who had hidden the top half of his face behind a fox mask, as well as a commander wearing a beautiful military uniform.

“Oh! Shuuhou!” The voice that called out for Marshal Jo was a deep one that traveled easily through the air.

Hakurei shrank backwards and took a half step towards me, hiding behind my back. The owner of that voice was wearing a suit of armor that had seen better days, and there was a small hat on his head. His dark eyes glowed something fierce, and he had both black hair and a black beard. Though he was quite short, I could tell that he was all muscle. The other people in the tent were, like this man, clearly powerful warriors.

Hiyou leaned closer to me and whispered, “That’s General U Jouko of the western army.”

“So that’s the rumored Tiger Fang?” I whispered back. “Then, that masked man and the fancy general are...”

“The masked man is Denso, one of the lieutenant chancellor’s most trusted officers. The other one is Ou Hokujaku, the leader of the Imperial Guard.”

*How sickening.* While Marshal Jo was conversing with General U, I could hear whispers from the other people in the tent.

“Hey, look at that girl.”

“She’s got silver hair and blue eyes.”

“What a bad omen to see before war.”

“She’s the daughter of the Chou family.”

Everyone who was staring at Hakurei with something like disgust in their eyes was dressed in the elaborate uniforms of the Imperial Guard, and they were clearly of high position within that army. *None of these people have even seen real combat.* If they weren’t our allies, I would have already thrown hands. Instead, I reached out and brushed my fingers against Hakurei’s, which were balled up in tight fists. Her sapphire-like eyes widened in response.



“Sekiei?”

“Don’t worry about them. I’m here for you.”

Hakurei replied with a happy smile and an imperceptible nod as she replied, “All right.” Next to me, she stood up even straighter.

“Ahem!” Marshal Jo coughed, so loud that it must have been on purpose.

“Oh? If it isn’t the National Shield’s daughter and son! Yes, I’m very glad to see you two here.” General U’s loud voice cut through the negative atmosphere. “Now then, Lieutenant Chancellor, let’s begin our discussions!” It almost felt like the two of them were intimidating the Imperial Guard’s officers into silence.

Rin Chuudou, still seated in his chair, shot me and Hakurei an irritated look before he hid his vexation behind a disgusting smile. “It looks like we’re all here. Well, then, let us begin our final meeting in regards to our attack on Ranyou.”

“Objection!” General U immediately bellowed, a resolute look in his eye as he glared at the lieutenant chancellor. “I believe you have the wrong idea about our presence. We cannot agree to an attack on the capital!”

“Tch.” My ears were so sharp that I could clearly hear how the fat lieutenant chancellor clicked his tongue.

The general of the western army continued, “Lieutenant Chancellor, it is the undeniable truth that Gen’s large-scale ambush has lost us the majority of our horses, and that the Imperial Guard is having difficulties maintaining military logistics. I believe that our enemies plan on holing themselves up in their city. Once that happens, we will not be able to fell Seitou. I believe that it is within our best interests to retreat *now*, while we still have the strength to.”

The officers of the western and eastern armies clasped their hands against their dirty armor and sheaths, showing their support for their leaders. In response, the officers of the Imperial Guard twisted their mouths in obvious dissatisfaction. The lieutenant chancellor whispered something into the ear of the fox-masked man—Denso—behind him before he looked back at us.

“Yes, it’s true that we have suffered some casualties.”

*“Some casualties,” huh? In this war, we have no choice but to rely on a land route for our military logistics. Yet we lost most of our horses, as well as turned the residents against us. This idiot doesn’t understand why those two details would be fatal.*

“We have a hundred fifty thousand soldiers!” the lieutenant chancellor continued. “In comparison, Seitou’s army only has a pitiful fifty thousand. We simply need to charge them and crush them under our superior might! We’ve already finished getting all the resources we need. If we don’t launch an attack now, then when, pray tell, do you suggest we do? General U, Marshal Jo, such cowardly comments are unthinkable for soldiers of your reputations.”

The temperature in the room dropped by several degrees. I could see fat veins throbbing on General U’s forehead as he glared murder at the lieutenant chancellor. “What was that? The pillaging that *you* ordered is why—”

“Jouko.” Marshal Jo reached out to grab General U’s hand before he could reach for his sword. Then, he turned his sharp gaze over to General Ou, whose expression had remained placid this entire time. “Ou Hokuju, what are your thoughts on the matter? Does the Imperial Guard wish to carry out this attack?”

“On order of His Imperial Majesty, we will do whatever the supreme commander tells us.” It was a disappointing answer. Hokuju brushed his annoyingly long bangs from his face as he continued in a confident tone, “However, I suppose there’s no helping it if the western and eastern armies have no interest in this invasion. My Imperial Guard will take down Ranyou alone, and we shall show them the consequences of betraying our empire.”

“Impressive! Now this is what I consider a great general! This is why *you* are the one leading the Imperial Guard, General Ou!” The lieutenant chancellor’s praises came from out of nowhere, causing the officers from the western and eastern armies to glare at him. It was clear he was mocking them.

“And there you have it,” Hokuju said. “We shall take Ranyou while you cowards tremble in fear. You can sit on your thumbs here and wait for news of our victory.”

Someone growled, low and angry. *This is bad. This is really bad.* Unlike the Imperial Guard—which had little experience in warfare—the western and

eastern armies had never stopped fighting to repel foreign soldiers and barbarians who would try to invade the Ei Empire. Calling them “cowards” was a surefire way to incur their wrath. Even Hiyou’s eyes were narrowed with murderous intent.

With a thundering noise, General U slammed his fist upon the table, breaking it in half. “You... You dare to insinuate that I, U Jouko, am afraid?! I will not let that insult stand!”

“Jouko, stop! All of you, calm down,” Marshal Jo snapped. He turned his sharp, hawklike gaze over to the lieutenant chancellor and Ou Hokuju before he tried again, “If your plan is to enrage us into participating in the attack, it’s no use. Ranyou’s army wants to draw us in, fighting only when the time is right for *them*. We’re not even sure if the enemy army really consists of only fifty thousand soldiers. Now that we cannot gain the citizens’ assistance, we have no way of confirming this piece of intel. Seitou’s army, which we know nothing about, has not even shown itself yet. There’s a high chance that their soldiers may make an appearance as Ranyou’s reinforcements.”

“It would be ideal if those traitors dared to show their faces,” Ou Hokuju said. “Seitou’s soldiers are all weaklings, and they’re no match for us. I’m sure that the Three Great Generals are proud of their great military achievements. However, I will prove to you that we soldiers of the Imperial Guard are also capable of such feats if given a chance to go to battle.”

I couldn’t believe what I just heard from the Imperial Guard’s marshal. *He’s going through with the attack on the capital for no reason other than to show up father and his compatriots?!* I was so horrified by this that I almost missed how Denso removed a scroll from a lacquered box and offered it to Chuudou with a respectful flourish.

The fat lieutenant chancellor stood up and the mocking smirk on his face became even more pronounced. A sense of deep foreboding struck me. When he opened up the scroll, we could see the mark of the dragon on its back. The tent became filled with the murmurs of the gathered officers.

“Marshal Jo, General U, His Imperial Majesty *wants* us to take Ranyou for Ei.”

*They got us dead to rights. I never expected them to have convinced the*

*emperor of this.*

General U exhaled, long and slow, before he replied, “Understood!”

*Oh no.* I could see Denso’s mouth twist in a smile.

Marshal Jo also pressed his fists together and bowed his head low.

“Lieutenant Chancellor, please forgive us for our discourtesy. We, as well as our armies, will participate in the attack tomorrow. I promise that we will make up for tonight’s poor display.”

Even though the other officers were glaring at the lieutenant chancellor with murder in their eyes, they bowed as well to show that they acquiesced to the orders. Rin Chuudou had gotten what he’d wanted. He wiped away the greasy sweat from his face and nodded several times. There was a pleased smile on his face.

“Good. All you needed to do was listen to orders. Was that really so hard?”

General U squeezed his eyes shut and Marshal Jo placed his hand on the handle of his sword. I could see the way his arm was trembling.

Ignorant of the generals’ fury, the foolish lieutenant chancellor announced, “Tomorrow, we will bring home a glorious victory. I trust that you will all fight your hardest for your homeland. As for those of the Chou family, I would like you to act as Marshal Jo’s reserve. I hope you appreciate the kindness I’m offering you.”

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*“Oh? You’re placing your piece there? Then, for my next move... How about this?”*

*“Ah!”*

The young man with his bangs hiding both of his eyes reached out with a slender arm and slammed a major piece upon the chess board. His piece cut right between my forces, and it was clear that I was at a disadvantage. Despite the fact that we were in the shade, I could feel sweat dripping down my cheek, causing my blonde hair to stick to my skin in the most uncomfortable way.

Watching the match was an old man wearing a fox mask and an enchantingly

beautiful woman. The woman—the Honorable One—had long purple hair and was wearing the robe of a monk. The old man made an impressed hum before he said, *“Today’s player is quite good. Ruri, was it? I can understand why you didn’t kill her and instead, chose to raise her. Well, she’s still no match for my Hasho.”*

*“Oh, be quiet. There’s no telling what can happen in a match. You’d do well to remember that instead of spending all your time staring at the stars’ movements.”*

*It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. This is just a dream from eight years ago, back when I was in Enkei.*

*“We are seeking the truth and nothing more,” the old man said. “It stands to reason that we would lose to you. After all, to fulfill your own selfish desires, you’ve been burning down the few remaining boundaries surrounding the mystics and kidnapping the inhabitants, all to raise them to your liking.”*

*“What an awful way of putting things. I have never once swayed from my original goal. Even a droplet of water can pierce through a boulder with time. I swear that I will revive the art of mysticism in this world. Now then, Ruri, finish him.”* The beautiful woman—the woman who’d killed my parents—snapped her fan shut as she gave me her order in a frigid tone of voice.

I shuddered violently before I stammered back, *“Y-Yes ma’am.”*

The young man—Hasho, he’d been called—tilted his head to the side with a confused look on his face. *“I don’t understand why she would order you that. There is no way for you to win from—”* While he was still talking, I used my small hand to push one of my pieces towards the major one he’d put down. His narrow eyes widened. *“What?!”*



His piece, which had been dominating the board only minutes earlier, had been taken out. There was a frantic look in his eye as he ran his hands through his hair, staring at the board as he tried to figure out his next move. After a few minutes, though, he gritted out, *"I've lost!"*

I let out a long breath and pressed my right hand against my left to stop it from shaking. If I'd been the loser, the Honorable One would have given me a most ferocious beating.

The old man twisted his lips in a scowl even as he expressed his surprise. *"I can't believe it. I made Hasho study the strategies of the great Ouei, and yet this child was able to defeat him?"*

The Honorable One chuckled, low in her throat. *"Of course she was. I've made Ruri study all of my army's strategies. Plus..."*

*Don't say it! Don't make me remember it!* I wanted to cover up my ears, but my body was frozen against my will. Back then, I hadn't even been able to move without the woman's express permission. That was how much of a hold she'd had on me.

She opened up her fan again and laughed, sounding as if she was having the time of her life as she revealed, *"I've already had her participate in war! That boy of yours never stood a chance."*

The old man bowed his head low. *"I'm impressed."*

When I looked over at the young man, I saw that he was glaring daggers at me. *"Eek!"* The small cry escaped me and I hurried to cover my mouth with my hands. Luckily, the old man and the Honorable One weren't paying any attention to us.

*"Honorable One, may we have that girl? Gen's emperor is sick and I doubt he has much longer to live. I believe that some time in the near future, he plans on crossing the river to launch his final attack on Ei."*

*"He won't win. The Chou family's brat is a true tiger. His fangs will tear out your throat if you're not prepared."* I knew they were talking about Chou Tairan. He was one of Ei's most famous generals, and the Honorable One often brought him up to praise him. He was sure to stand in the way against any invader that

dared to cross the river. The Honorable One used her fan to hide the way her lips were pulled in a sly grin. *“So, you’re saying that you want to give Ruri to the next emperor?”*

*“Yes. In the beginning, I’d wanted to recommend Hasho. However, if he’s going to be losing to a seven-year-old... Well, I doubt that he’d be fit for that responsibility. Gen must be the one who unifies the lands.”*

The young man’s breath caught in his throat and I saw the way he tensed up. Perhaps he was in a similar situation as I was—if he didn’t prove himself useful, he’d be thrown away.

The Honorable One’s resplendent yet terrifying amethyst eyes sparkled with interest. *“My, you’re very taken with him. Is the next emperor truly a man with such potential?”*

*“He is. It’s hardly a surprise, though, considering the fact he’s—”*

I couldn’t hear the rest of his words due to a sudden gust of wind. While they continued their conversation, I decided on a course of action—when we returned to Ranyou, I had to escape. If I stayed, my strategies would be used to kill an unimaginable number of people. After hearing what the masked man had to say, the Honorable One stared at him, mouth agape, before her lips curled in a cruel smile.

*“How interesting if that’s the truth. How interesting indeed! I suppose we’ll be needing the Heavenly Swords very soon. The legend of Kouei using his last breath to cut down the massive boulder in Routou is probably nothing more than a tall tale. It’s hardly a surprise, though. If you’re serious about ruling all the people under the heavens, you’ll need to exaggerate the truth a little. In any case, even if we find the Heavenly Swords, I doubt we’ll be able to use them.”*

The beautiful woman narrowed her eyes and cast a wistful gaze upon the peach sapling growing in the garden. *“In all of history, only Kou Eihou had been capable of wielding those two swords. I’ll think about your suggestion for Ruri. It doesn’t matter to me if I keep her or not.”*

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I shot up in bed, panting. *What terrible luck. I was finally starting to be able to sleep without dreaming about my past. I’ve been feeling off lately too.* I knew



the reason for both. It was because I met that man with black hair and eyes, that man with a scar on his left cheek who wielded a black great sword—Gisen, his name had been. He was the man who'd killed my parents and older sister.

I reached out to the side table and picked up a piece of cloth, wiping away the sweat on my face before I looked around the room. It was empty save for the bed I was lying on, and the small candle on the wall was flickering. Sekiei and Chou Hakurei had gone out of their way to secure this empty house for me. They were a lot kinder than Meirin had warned me.

As I continued to sit there, blankly staring at the wall, the beaten-down door swung open to reveal a beautiful girl with silver hair and blue eyes, dressed in a military uniform. It was Chou Hakurei. She walked in, a bamboo bottle in hand. I could see one of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars hanging from her belt.

"Miss Ruri, how're you feeling?" she asked, leaning towards me. Even though I was the same gender as her, I still couldn't help but stare at her unbelievably beautiful face.

Since she'd handed me the bottle with a worried look in her eye, I looked down and replied, "I'm fine. Thanks." Drinking the water calmed me down in increments. Keeping my gaze focused on the moon outside the window, I asked, "Is *he* not with you?"

She sat down in a chair. "If you mean Sekiei, Marshal Jo and General U have roped him into a discussion. Older people have always enjoyed his company. By the way, I'm not with him all the time, you know?" The response was smooth and though she seemed calm on the surface, I could see from the way she was fiddling with her sword's hilt that she was clearly unhappy with Sekiei's absence.

I decided to poke fun at this lovely girl. "But, you *wish* you could be with him all the time, right?"

"Well, that's...not *not* true," Hakurei muttered, reaching out to play with her hair. When she puffed out her cheeks in a pout, she looked a lot younger than her age. Without changing her expression, she leaned closer and asked, "Miss Ruri, you're so mean. Have you been spending too much time with Meirin?"

"Don't lump me in the same category as that munchkin merchant! I *guess*

she's been taking care of me, though. Anyway, how was the meeting?"

Every time I visited Rinkei, Meirin would beat me in a tea-tasting contest and then force me to go through the trouble of finding things for her. I wasn't exactly *happy* about the way she treated me sometimes. However, as someone without any family left in this world, nor acquaintances I could trust, she and Shizuka had become my beloved friends and saviors.

Hakurei let out a quiet laugh before she crossed her legs and looked at the window. When she next spoke it was so casual, as if she were informing me that she was going on a shopping trip: "First thing in the morning tomorrow, all of the armies will be marching upon Ranyou to try and take it."

I blinked, mind racing to work out what she'd said. I took a very slow sip of water before I looked into her sapphire-blue eyes. "Are you serious? They're going to launch an attack on the capital, even knowing that we no longer have a supply route and that there is an army within Ranyou's walls? Have they considered the possibility that the enemy might draw us into an open battle instead of letting us engage them in a siege?"

"The lieutenant chancellor seems to believe everything will work out."

I sighed. "He's an idiot."

We had the advantage when it came to numbers—the Ei army had around a hundred fifty thousand soldiers, whereas the Gen army only had around fifty thousand. However, as a result of the Imperial Guard pillaging villages all across Seitou, Seitou's army was no longer content to sit on the sidelines to see what would happen. They, as well as Seitou's civilians, all bore a grudge against Ei's army. If they chose to hole themselves up in Ranyou, we would have difficulty taking the city within a short span of time. The "Sai and Tou sharing a boat" strategy had succeeded.

I looked down when I felt Hakurei put a small but heavy pouch in my lap. "What's this?" I asked.

"It's money for the road. I've also prepared you a horse and some rations. Please leave tonight. Sekiei agrees with my decision. 'We can't involve our strategist since she despises war' were his exact words."

“What about you and the rest of the Chou army?! In the worst-case scenario —” I couldn’t give voice to the rest of my thoughts. Even if I wanted to, my mouth wasn’t working. I could guess the enemy strategist’s plan was something like “We will allow the massive Ei army to attack the capital before annihilating them in front of the eyes of the citizens of Seitou...” That would explain why they’d carted out the catapults from the various towers and fortresses.

Hakurei shot me a grateful look before she gracefully rose to her feet. There was a resolute and determined look in her eyes as she said, “I am the daughter of Chou Tairan. I cannot abandon my soldiers. More importantly...” She smiled. Though it was small and troubled, I could see a hint of genuine happiness in the expression. The moonlight illuminated her silver hair as she continued, “If I’m not around, then Sekiei will get into all sorts of trouble. I’m sure that even as we speak, he’s thinking that he’ll do whatever he can to save me and the other soldiers. He’s such a handful.”

*Ahh, she truly, from the bottom of her heart, loves that boy.* Her love for him was so strong that if it meant she could help him or remain by his side, no matter where he went in this world, she wouldn’t hesitate to put her life on the line. I had to admit, I was a little jealous—but at the same time, I didn’t want to see her die. All I needed was a reason to stay.

After a few moments of silence, I pointed at the sword hanging at her belt and asked, “Hey, you’re able to unsheathe that sword, right?”

“Yes, I am.”

Hakurei took a few steps back and pulled it out in a smooth movement. She swung it three times, the pure-white blade glowing in the dim light, before she returned it to the sheath with a gentle click. I gaped at her, unable to find the words. *Does she realize what an impossible feat she just pulled off?*

*“Only those who can wield the Heavenly Swords have the right to conquer the lands.”* Those were the words left behind by Ou Eifuu, the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire, which had once unified the continent. Since then, many people in power had scoured the lands in search of the Heavenly Swords. I had been one of them, though my aim had been revenge. *There’s something up with her and Sekiei, but what?*

Hakurei's expression softened. "In the beginning, I couldn't pull this sword from its sheath. But I was finally able to master it."

I swallowed. "May I ask you how you did it?"

It was true that I was interested in the Heavenly Swords. If I weren't, then I wouldn't have taken on Meirin's request. However, that was nothing more than an excuse. It seemed that I enjoyed the time I'd spent with this girl and the man she loved far more than I had expected. I wanted to help them in any way that I could.

Though Hakurei was normally so cool and collected, she started to look around in an uncomfortable manner. "Er, well, that's..."

"Hmm? What's the matter?" I tilted my head to the side.

After inspecting the room with a careful eye, she leaned forwards and whispered in my ear, "*Don't* tell Sekiei, but using this sword comes to me naturally whenever I think about him."

Taken aback, I stared at Hakurei, looking for any hint of falsehood, before I spluttered out a laugh.

"D-Don't laugh at me!"

"S-Sorry, but... Hee hee, if Meirin heard that, she'd get so mad at you."

The face of the munchkin merchant we'd left behind in Keiyou flickered through my mind. If she learned that she'd ended up helping her greatest rival for Sekiei's affections, she'd throw a tantrum. I could practically hear her voice: "Ruri! Next time, you have to help *me*!"

After I finished laughing, I said in a casual tone, "I'm all alone in this world. My parents, my older sister... Everyone in my family was killed by Gisen, the man who attacked us the other day. Oh, and by the way, I really *am* an ascendant." Hakurei had been pouting but upon hearing me speak, her expression turned into one of worry. "I was born in Kobi, a mystic vale in the Hakkotsu Desert, far west of Seitou. In the past, there were so many ascendants and sages capable of amazing magic. However, their numbers dwindled to the point that by the time I was born, there were fewer than a hundred residents in Kobi. None of them could use magic either."

My father had been firm, yet caring. My mother had always been kind to me. My older sister had died trying to protect me. Even though ten years had passed since then, I thought of them every single day. I would never forget them.

“We were attacked on my fifth birthday and I was taken away. The people who kidnapped me forced me to take lessons on military strategy every day until I had my first battle at the age of six. We were up against mountain bandits, and I had to watch as they all died to the strategy I’d come up with. The woman who taught me all of that told me that she did it so that she could win a bet. So many times I thought I would go mad, and yet I never lost my grip on my sanity.”

Hakurei’s eyes widened. “Six?” she whispered at the same time as I heard a creaking noise from the hallway.

“The one who ordered my capture was the Honorable One, who’s slithering around in the depths of Seitou. She is a woman obsessed with reviving the art of mysticism. There were over ten kids other than me there, forced to read books or train. Sometimes, they would simply disappear.”

Back then, none of us understood where the kids who disappeared went. But now, I knew that they had either died or been sold off. The Honorable One put us through all of that training just so that she could get what *she* wanted.

I tightened my hand into a fist and created a single white flower. “When she saw this power of mine, that woman became ecstatic, screaming about how she was so close to bringing back mysticism. However, I never managed to improve in my abilities. Even though she’d been the one to put expectations on me, she ended up feeling disappointed at my lack of progress and lost interest in me. Thanks to that, I was eight when I managed to escape from her clutches. Since she didn’t send pursuers after me, she probably didn’t care what happened to me. I managed to escape to Rinkei, but I was in an awful state. I surely would have died if I hadn’t run into Meirin.”

As I told Hakurei my tale, I could see fat tears starting to collect in her eyes. I huffed out a self-deprecating laugh and handed her the white flower I’d created.

“Chou Hakurei, you’re such a strange girl,” I said. “Ou Meirin is weird too. Normal people wouldn’t give a damn about me, you know?” I was telling the truth. Meirin was the only one who went out of her way to help me. People in this day and age—even those who lived in Rinkei, the largest city in the world—were far too used to the deaths of others.

Hakurei looked down at the white flower and her expression softened. “Miss Ruri, you remind me, just a little, of my past self before I met Sekiei.”

“I remind you of yourself?” It was hard to believe. Was it because of those rumors surrounding women with silver hair and blue eyes, and how they would bring calamity to their surroundings?

“Ever since I’ve been cognizant, my father, Chou Tairan, was a hero,” she explained. “As his daughter, no one my age wanted to be friends with me. My mother died when I was very young, so I’d always been very lonely, even if I didn’t let others see it. A part of me even despaired at my lot in life.”

It was easy to forget that her surname was Chou. Everyone who lived in the northern regions of the Ei Empire knew of her family.

She placed her hands on her hips and turned around. The clouds parted, letting in the brightest beam of moonlight we’d seen all night. “But, ten years ago, when Sekiei came to the manor, I became sure of a single fact: I’m going to live out the rest of my life with this boy, so I’ll never be alone again. That ended up coming true. My instinct tends to be right on the money.”

When I saw the look on her face, the breath caught in my throat. The image of that boy with black hair and red eyes appeared in my mind’s eye and I thought to him, *If your girl is making that face because of you, you need to take responsibility.*

Hakurei turned to smile at me as she continued, “Miss Ruri, this world still has many things to live for. I have loved talking to you every day. Until I met you, Meirin was the only friend I had who was both a girl and around my age.”

*Friend?* My vision clouded as tears rolled down my cheeks. I hurried to wipe them away and, in order to disguise the embarrassment I felt, I said in a teasing tone, “Yeah, you really are a weirdo.”

“You think you’re one to talk, Miss Ruri? You’re about as strange as Meirin is.”

“Pfft!” Both of us spluttered at the same time. It seemed that my decision to stay had been the right one.

“Oh? It looks like you two are having a great time.” Pushing the door open, Sekiei walked in. “What’s going on here?” In his hand, he was holding a rolled-up map.

We looked at each other and said as one, “It’s a secret!” We even stuck our tongues out at him at the same time.

Sekiei placed the map on the side table and shrugged. “Sure, sure. Oh, Ruri, has Hakurei given you the news yet? You should hurry up and make your way out—”

“I hate war, and I have no interest in who becomes the ruler of the unified lands,” I interrupted him. I got out of bed, picked up my hat, and walked over to the window. I turned to look at the boy who would one day inherit the Chou name, as well as the girl who made her way to his side as if it were the most natural thing in the world. With a confident smile, I said, “However, as wielders of the Heavenly Swords—which were supposed to be impossible for anyone to unsheathe—you two are of great interest to me. I can’t have you dying on me until I figure out your secrets.”

My talents would likely lead to many deaths. However, at the same time, they might save the lives of my friends and my savior. In that case, why was I hesitating? My hands were already drenched in blood. I didn’t mind dirtying them further if it meant I could take revenge for everyone.

I brushed my bangs out of my face and placed my hat on my head before turning to face them with a smile. “So I’ll become your war strategist. I’m sure you won’t turn me down at this stage, right?”

“Er, well, that’s—” Sekiei said, but he didn’t get very far before Hakurei interrupted him.

“We look forward to working with you.”

He turned to glare at her. “Hakurei!”

“I have to protect you on the battlefield. We need someone who’s able to see the greater picture. Besides, I know that we can trust Miss Ruri.”

Sekiei thought for a moment before he reached out and picked up the white flower on the side table. Then, he turned and placed it in Hakurei’s bangs. “Fine. I’ll entrust our army’s moves to you, Miss Strategist. Allow me to formally introduce myself, then. I am Sekiei of the Chou family.”

“I am Chou Hakurei.”

Bathed in the moonlight, I spun my telescope—the last physical reminder I had of my family—in my hand and replied, “I am Ruri of Kobi. Don’t worry; I’ll see you through this. No matter what kind of traps are waiting for us, I swear that I’ll return you both to Keiyou alive and well. This is a promise.”

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“Wh-What in the—? Where’d the enemy come from?!” I heard Teiha exclaim from behind me.

We were at a small hill near Ranyou. Even through the morning fog, I could see the enemy forces as they moved about through the mist. At the back of their formation, beyond the vast plains, I could just barely make out the rather low walls of the Seitou capital.

Even though Ranyou had far fewer forces than we did, they held strong with their backs to the city. Back in my old life, I’d pulled a similar stunt under Eifuu’s orders—however, according to him, he hadn’t had a plan or strategy in mind. He’d simply hoped that the difficult battle ahead would fire up the Tou soldiers.

Hakurei, riding her horse, approached me from my left. “Sekiei, can you see any of the catapults we heard so much about?”

“I don’t see any of them outside the city. As for inside... Damn, I can’t make anything out through this fog.”

Ruri, still peering through her telescope, urged her mount forwards as she said in a calm voice, “Their backs are against the wall—or, in this case, against the city. They must be very confident in their strategy if they’re willing to throw away their defensive advantage and challenge us to an open battle. I don’t see any enemies in the middle of their formation; however, if their plan is faithful to



history, there should be soldiers lying in wait in the ditches. When Eifuu used this plan, he'd combined it with the Crouching Fox strategy, which aims to launch a psychological ambush against the opponent."

"I just hope that the Imperial Guard will control themselves," I sighed, pressing a hand against my forehead. As I did so, I noticed several thin trees in the distance. *Hmm?*

Ruri noticed them as well, though she didn't seem to know what they were. She put away her telescope and said in a cold voice, "If our intel is correct, the enemy's main forces are made up of the Gray Lancers, led by the Gray Wolf. The enemy has around fifty thousand soldiers...as well as the Seitou army, though we don't know where they are. In comparison, we have around a hundred fifty thousand soldiers, but for some reason, fifty thousand of them are in the rear guard and not allowed to move. Under these circumstances, we'll lose if we charge."

Our formation consisted of fifty thousand soldiers from the Imperial Guard in the center. The U family army made up the left flank while the Jo family army was the right, with each one consisting of twenty-five thousand soldiers. Rin Chuudou had about fifty thousand soldiers with him in the rear guard, and they should be advancing from the far back of the formation. That the supreme commander of an army would be absent from the front lines before the final battle was unthinkable.

I turned my horse around and started issuing orders. "Hakurei, I want you with me when I go see Marshal Jo."

"All right."

"Ruri, I want you in charge of reconnaissance."

"Sure thing."

"Teiha, keep your eyes peeled."

"Yessir!"

Hakurei and I galloped down the hill, making our way through the Jo family army. Every single one of them was burning with murderous determination. I could see Jo Hiyou a short distance away, giving a rousing speech to some of

the other soldiers. He seemed far too busy for conversation. It didn't take us long before we found who we were looking for.

"Impossible! You're telling me that he chickened out after we came so far?!" Jo Shuuhou, clad in old armor, was yelling at a man in an elegant military uniform. I recognized him as a messenger soldier from the Imperial Guard.

"N-Now that I've passed along the message, my work here is done. E-Excuse me," he said, looking terrified as he hopped onto his horse and hurried off, passing by me and Hakurei.

We approached Marshal Jo, who looked beside himself with rage. I called out to him at the same time Hakurei asked, "He was a messenger from the Imperial Guard, wasn't he?"

Marshal Jo turned to look at us, deep lines creasing his face. His distress was palpable. "Sekiei and Miss Hakurei? My apologies. I didn't mean for you to see me in such an unsightly state."

At that moment, a roar sounded out from the western army. The Tiger Fang, U Jouko, was probably going around and delivering motivating speeches to his soldiers.

Marshal Jo glared at the enemy cavalymen riding their horses on the plains. "The Imperial Guard's messenger just came by to say that Rin Chuudou plans to stay at camp with half of the Imperial Guard—around fifty thousand soldiers. Apparently he said, 'No dragon would ever use its full strength to hunt a rabbit.' Ou Hokujaku is the one in command now."

Hakurei and I were so shocked that we couldn't even say anything. I felt like I was going to pass out. *"A foolish ally is a greater threat than any foe!"* That was what Eifuu used to complain about every time he got drunk. *This is worse than I could've ever imagined!*

I took a deep breath, steeled my will, and then urged my horse before the marshal. "Marshal Jo Shuuhou, I'd like to give my thoughts on the matter!" I could see his eyebrow twitch, but I continued as if I hadn't, "We should retreat! It won't be too late if we move now!"

The morning mist was starting to fade, and I could make out more of the

enemies. Their left and right flanks consisted entirely of those wearing gray armor. They were the Gray Lancers, an elite force from the Gen Empire and led by the Gray Wolf himself.

As Ruri said, I couldn't see soldiers in the middle of the enemy formation. However, they were giving off such a powerful bloodlust that I could practically feel the heat from here and I was sure that they were hidden, just waiting to ambush us out there. The Imperial Guard and its leader, both lacking in real combat experience, wouldn't be able to handle them.

Hakurei also kicked Getsuei into action, moving next to my mount as she exclaimed, "I, Chou Hakurei, agree with that statement. This is a trap. If we attack, even *if* we win, we will suffer irrecoverable casualties to our forces! If my father were here, he would share our opinion, I'm sure of it!"

Marshal Jo squeezed his eyes shut and when he spoke, the words sounded like they were being forced out of him. "Tairan has been blessed with two truly great heirs. I appreciate your candid suggestions. However—"

At first, the rest of the answer was only a roar and a cloud of dirt—then, I felt the ground shake before it split in two. The marshal had picked up his spear and swung it against the ground in an almost casual stroke. His massive mount, as if sensing its master's determination, reared up. In the next moment, a metallic sound cut through the air, echoing over the entire battlefield.

"Th-That gong..." Hakurei said, looking around. Her silver hair swished with the action.

Realizing what was happening, I clicked my tongue. Through the dissipating mist I could see the Imperial Guard's military flag starting to move forwards, billowing in the wind. *They're launching an attack without even giving orders to their allies on their flanks?!*

Marshal Jo started to move forwards as he said, "It's exactly as the young strategist who visited my encampment the other day said. I believe that this invasion was an elaborate trap of the White Wraith's, with an entire country serving as the bait!"

I pictured what I knew of the Gen Empire's emperor in my head—long white hair, delicate features that made him look like a young girl, with a body so weak

that he could neither ride a horse nor swing a sword. *Have we been playing into his slender hands this whole time?*

When Marshal Jo next spoke, it was in a roar that held no sign of his earlier hesitation. “Now that it’s come to this, our hands have been forced! We have no choice but to tear our enemies apart or die trying!”

“But—!”

“Hakurei.” I prevented her from trying to stop her father’s friend from going to battle, even though she was bearing witness to his indomitable determination. I recognized the glow emanating from his eyes. He was prepared to die in this war.

Hiyou, his horse galloping fast with his approach, raised his sword, his cheeks flushed. “Father!” he yelled. “I’m heading out!”

Marshal Jo didn’t say anything for a moment before he replied, “Hiyou! Go and bring honor to the Jo family!”

*A son who has no doubts about his allies’ victory, and a father who understands perfectly well what kind of bloodbath we’ll see soon and yet can still talk about honor.* I felt my heart clench at the sight.

Hiyou clapped a hand against his armor and shot us a bright smile. “Please leave everything to me! Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, I’ll be going ahead!”

“Hiyou!” His name flew out of my mouth. He was a great soldier, but Jo Hiyou had only just had his first battle. I met his eyes and said in a serious tone, “Be careful out there. They’re planning something.”

“I appreciate the warning! I’ll see you in Ranyou!” Hiyou replied with a bright laugh before returning to the front lines he was in charge of.

*“I’ll see you in Ranyou,” huh? I sincerely hope I will!*

Still with his broad back facing us, Marshal Jo ordered, “I would like the Chou family army to move as a squadron separate from the main forces. Under the name of Jo Shuuhou, I permit any action you take. In the worst-case scenario, leave us behind and retreat all the way back to Keiyou.”

From the front lines I could hear the screams of over ten thousand soldiers. I

could hear the sounds of horses and people running, and I could feel how the ground was shaking with it.

Marshal Jo looked down at us over his shoulder as he continued, "I'd feel awful if I couldn't return you to Tairan in one piece, and it would be a blemish on the Jo family's reputation for generations. I'm sure that we will face a difficult battle ahead. I pray for your survival." He held his spear aloft in the air and then, right before he kicked his mount into a gallop, he raised his voice in an unflinching bellow, "Let's go, my soldiers! Do not fall behind! We'll stampede forth, as we've done so many times before!"

The soldiers of the southern army responded with a fearsome cheer of a roar as they followed their brave leader. I remained standing there, disheartened by the turn of events, until I heard Hakurei speak to me in a quiet voice.

"What should we do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I could see the Imperial Guard rushing for Ranyou in a clear attempt to hog all the glory for themselves. Unable to quell the swell of emotion in my heart, I waved my hand in an exaggerated manner before I exclaimed, "I'll do as I please, much like I've always done! Jo Shuuhou and U Jouko are generals that Ei desperately needs. We can't have the entire country resting on father's shoulders now, can we?"

"Well, no, but..." She trailed off, still looking pensive. Despite her inexperience, she had a natural talent for leading troops. She must have felt the same sense of unease I did.

"Sekiei! Hakurei!" When we turned around, we saw Ruri racing towards us, her blonde hair whipping behind her. She was with Teiha, who was leading the rest of our cavalymen. Ruri looked to be in a frazzled state, moving the hand clutching her telescope up and down as she yelled, "I figured it out! I figured everything out!"

"Calm down, Ruri," I said at the same time Hakurei urged her, "Take a deep breath."

As soon as Ruri reached us, she took a few seconds to steady her breathing before her face twisted. "I saw several dried-up trees! They must have been planted, but weren't able to get their roots into the dirt. I also found signs

indicating that someone had buried rocks under the ground!”

“What does that...?” I started before everything clicked into place. “Oh no.”

At the same time, I heard the sounds of something slicing through the air. *I heard this a few months ago, back in Keiyou! I know what this is!* In the next moment, hundreds of rocks soared through the air, piercing the thinning fog and smashing into the rows of Imperial Guard soldiers. The entire field shook under the impact. For a brief moment, I could see soldiers and horses, along with clumps of earth, soar through the air.

“Wha—?!” We all gasped, shocked at the sight as thick clouds of dust enveloped the entire battlefield. Soon after we could hear the sounds of screaming and groaning, as well as pained yells and sobs begging for help.

Hakurei held her hand up to her face in an attempt to protect her eyes and when she spoke, it was in a quivering voice. “Are they using the trees as a sort of measuring stick for their catapults? Th-The amount of ammo they have...”

She trailed off and I continued for her. “They must have had all their soldiers collect them from all the cities! I didn’t expect them to use *trees* as a ruler, though!”

This was the diversion and concentration of assets that had been a military philosophy of Eifuu’s. The enemy strategist must have truly respected him. If only there hadn’t been any fog, we would have been able to figure things out before the battle started—but it looked like even Lady Luck wasn’t on our side. Thanks to the strong winds that at least we had now, the clouds of dirt were starting to clear and we were able to secure our line of sight again.

“Was the Imperial Guard the only ones that got hit?” I demanded.

“Yes,” Ruri replied. “The enemies know perfectly well that they’re the weakest link we have in terms of experience. Our sole advantage is our superior manpower, but”—she raised her hand and pointed it directly at Ranyou—“we’re about to lose it.”

Emerging from the mist and dust was a vast army of heavy infantry, the light catching their armor. They were wielding long spears and large shields. Even at a glance, they seemed to have over a hundred thousand! My eyes could clearly

make out the massive “SEITOU” that had been embroidered upon their war flags.

*So everything is as Ruri predicted?!* I gritted my teeth as the enemy cavalymen joined the charge. Despite all the chaos and confusion, the soldiers in our flanks were still raring for battle. The enemies descended upon them with the vicious ferocity of a wolf pack.

Ruri adjusted her blue hat and said, “The ultimate goal of the enemy strategist is to completely annihilate the Jo army and the U army in our flanks. They may be powerful and experienced, but the sudden loss of the Imperial Guard in our middle will have a deeply negative effect on morale. The enemies will be able to surround us with ease.”

“Yeah, I bet,” I replied to the cruel fate my strategist was foretelling.

The generals of those armies could fight with as much strength and bravery as a lion, but it would all be over the moment the enemies had us surrounded. To that end, the Chou family army only had about a thousand soldiers. It was hardly enough to change anything on the battlefield. *What should we do? What’s the best way to get out of this?*

“Miss Ruri, Teiha,” Hakurei said. Unlike my own inability to control my anguish, Hakurei was maintaining a stoic expression and gathering everyone’s attention to her. “I will leave half of our army under your command. Please secure us a withdrawal route! I promise you, we will catch up to you later.”

“Understood!” Both Teiha and Ruri replied immediately without trying to argue against Hakurei, and they jumped into action. We didn’t have even a second to spare.

*I’ll say it as many times as I need to: our little princess has what it takes to be a great general.* Despite the destructive battlefield we were on, I felt a sense of satisfaction at seeing Hakurei’s competency. I urged my mount over to Ruri and said, “Ruri, I need to ask a favor.”

“What?”

I leaned in close to offer a quick explanation of what I wanted after the battle. *In war, when do the most casualties happen?* I pulled my horse away and

dipped my head, never taking my eyes from hers. “Sorry, but I’ll leave it to you. I believe in you and your ability to tell when opportunities arise in battle.”

Ruri’s eyes widened before she replied, “All right!” Then, she and Teiha turned to leave. Right before she disappeared from our line of sight, she yelled, “Sekiei, Hakurei, I’ll be waiting for you!”

I checked the string of my bow and winked. “This isn’t a bad place for our strategist’s first battle.”

“Please stop acting like you think you’re so cool,” Hakurei replied. After a moment, she added, “You better cough up what you were saying to her.”

“L-Later, later,” I assured her when I saw the way she was glaring at me. Drawing Black Star, I looked over the remaining soldiers. “Everyone, listen to me! We will be heading out to that corpse-filled battlefield to risk our lives and save our comrades!”

“Yessir!”

After me, Hakurei, White Star in hand, raised her own voice and yelled, “None of you are permitted to die. We will all live to see Keiyou once more!”

“As you please, Lady Hakurei!” The soldiers raised their weapons and then, without us having to order them to, started to form into lines.

*They’re a lot more obedient than when I had to order them around*, I couldn’t help but notice. The enemies were no longer shooting the boulders, and yet still, our casualties were great. The Imperial Guard’s flags continued to fall. Blood stained the grass where the soldiers in the flanks were engaged in combat, fighting for their lives. The air reeked of death.

Hakurei looked over at me and said in a scolding tone, “That goes for you as well, you hear? If you’re going to die, then do so after m— I mean, do *not* die, no matter what.”

I felt like she saw right through me. However, I could see an intense fear and anxiety in her sapphire-blue eyes. *Ah, princess, I never know how to handle you.* I leaned towards her and murmured, “Don’t worry about it. I won’t die, and neither will you. Right?”



“Yes, of course,” Hakurei replied. We shared a smile and then held our Heavenly Swords together before we urged our horses forwards.



“Let’s go, Hakurei!”

“Right behind you, Sekiei!”

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I shot arrow after arrow, downing countless soldiers standing in our way and cutting a path for our cavalry. It seemed that they hadn’t had time to change their gear to the sturdier armor that Nguyen and some of his Crimson Knights had been using. Ever since we started *our* attack, I’d been too focused on killing enemies to count them. However, I’d killed enough that I’d run out of arrows.

Tossing aside my empty quiver, I called out, “Kuen, next!”

“This is the last one!” The young soldier doing his best to keep up with me tossed me a replacement quiver.

As I snagged it out of the air, Hakurei, galloping at my side, released an arrow, downing an enemy cavalryman and knocking him off his horse.

“Shun’en!” she called out.

“Yes ma’am!” A young girl who looked quite like the young male soldier—Kuen—handed her a quiver in an instant.

I looked behind me and saw the rest of the Chou family army, led by Teiha. “Everyone, to the hill up front! Don’t fall behind!”

“Yessir!”

The horses we’d brought with us from Keiyou were some of our fastest. They didn’t seem bothered or panicked despite the chaos, confusion, and death dominating the battlefield. They simply raced for the low hill that I’d pointed out. As soon as I reached it, I stopped Zetsuei and took in the situation, grimacing as I did so.

The Imperial Guard in the middle of the formation had completely collapsed. The Seitou army, hungry for vengeance, had destroyed them and broken them apart. One would be hard-pressed to tell that they used to be an army with how few stragglers were left. Countless corpses littered the plains, so much blood flowing from them that the soil couldn’t even absorb it all. Ou Hokujaku, who had been so confident last night, was likely dead by now.

“I didn’t expect the Imperial Guard to be routed so easily,” Hakurei murmured, her fear palpable as she clenched her bow tighter.

*He may be a giant idiot, but we lost this battle the moment that the supreme commander didn’t show up on the battlefield.* The Jo and U family armies in the flanks were putting in a valiant effort. However, their enemies weren’t just the Gray Lancers before them. The Seitou army was starting to approach from their sides, as well as behind them. It didn’t matter how glorious or accomplished their generals and officers were—now that it had come to this, it was only a matter of time before they lost. I had no idea if I would be able to meet up with Marshal Jo before that happened.

“Everyone, load up your quivers. As soon as we’re all finished, we will annihilate part of the enemy formation surrounding the Jo army. Those whose horses are at their limit, leave *now*. I forbid you from making a false report about your mount’s remaining stamina,” Hakurei ordered the group as I was distracted by my anxieties.

My expression softened as I watched her. *There’s the younger sister I’m so proud of!*

The soldiers closest to me noticed.

“Hey.”

“Yeah, I saw.”

“L-Lord Sekiei actually smiled?”

“The young master was like that back in Keiyou too. That’s just how he is.”

I felt like my soldiers had gotten the wrong impression of me. How strange.

Hakurei handed me a water bottle and said, “Stop making such weird expressions while everyone is watching you. And by the way, I’m your *older* sister!”

“Wha—?! Hey, I didn’t even say anything!” I shot back as I took the bottle from her. After I took a swig from it, I tossed it back. She was about to take a sip when—

“Sekiei, to your left!”

“Thanks!”

The same moment she issued her warning, I shot an arrow at the cavalrymen rushing up the hill. There was about a score of them, and they were wearing dirty crimson armor and helmets. *Remnants of the Crimson Knights?! Judging by their number, they must be scouts.* All of the opponents I’d faced until now fell to a single arrow. However, these were some of the Gen Empire’s best soldiers, who’d once taken orders from the Crimson Wolf himself. They skillfully maneuvered their horses, breaking apart their formation to avoid the arrows and holding up their shields as they continued to charge us.

*This is a suicidal attack. They must be willing to do anything—even throw their lives away—if they could kill Hakurei and I, since we were the ones who murdered Nguyen.* Soldiers like them wouldn’t stop just because they were hit by an arrow. We couldn’t take them on anyway; wasting our stamina and weapons here would cost us the chance to rescue Marshal Jo and Hiyou.

“Hakurei! Back me up!”

“Sekiei!”

I shoved my bow and quiver into Kuuen’s arms and, ignoring Hakurei’s cry, kicked my horse into action. Closer and closer, the Crimson Knight at the front of the charge approached me.

“Die!” he yelled.

I dodged the spear he thrust at me and as I passed by him, I swung my sword with all my strength, slashing through his armor and cutting him down. I didn’t stop to wait for the sound of his body hitting the ground. Black Star in hand, I made my way for the next soldier. Despite the nervousness starting to appear on their faces, five Crimson Knights continued to race towards me and showed no signs of backing down.

“Sorry. I can’t die yet,” I said. I slashed through swords, spears, helmets, leather armor, and shields, ignoring the surprised and pained cries I could hear from them. I turned my horse around and yelled, “Hakurei!”

“Everyone, shoot!”

Countless arrows rained down upon the Crimson Knights, who’d stopped in

indecision after losing so many of their own in a blink of an eye. They must have been unsure as to whether they should try to go up the hill, or if they should target me, as I was alone. Despite the fact they'd survived even the retreat from Keiyou, these experienced veterans fell, unable to lift a finger against the arrows digging into them.

A small portion of them still managed to escape, though. I watched them leave, swinging Black Star through the air to get rid of the blood on the blade. *These guys were obviously looking for us.* As Hakurei and the rest of the Chou family soldiers raced down the hill together, I heard a scream and panicked cries before a piece of terrible news sounded out through the air.

"I, Gray Wolf Seul Bato, have killed the enemy commander, U Jouko!"

As soon as the Gray Wolf finished speaking, I could see how the Gen flags picked up speed and the Jo flags started to waver. *The left flank has fallen!*

"Sekiei," Hakurei said as she came up to me.

"Let's hurry. We have to meet up with Marshal Jo," I said, kicking Zetsuei's sides. *Please, let us make it there on time!*

We fought through Gen's cavalymen, as well as the Seitou army attacking the back of the southern army. I asked one of the fleeing allies as to where Marshal Jo and Hiyou were, but couldn't get a clear answer. For a brief moment, we could do nothing but run back and forth on the calamitous battlefield until Hakurei raised her sword and pointed at somewhere in front of us.

"There, I see him!"

A large number of Gen cavalymen were surrounding something, or someone. Between them I could see a massive, albeit tattered, military flag. It must've been from the Jo family army's base of operations. I could see Hiyou, leading a team of his own, trying to break through the encirclement, swinging his spear with increasing desperation.

*There are over a thousand soldiers there, but none of them are trying to run away. Why is that?* However, I had no time to ponder it anymore. Some of the Gen soldiers noticed our approach and had stepped away from the encirclement, preparing to fight us. All of them were wearing gray military

uniforms. *They must be the Gray Lancers!*

“Get out of the way! Don’t throw your life away here!” I yelled, but they barely paid my words any attention as they ran towards me. Their morale was too high for them to consider retreat. I gritted my teeth. So long as I could get to Hiyou, it wouldn’t be impossible for us to make our retreat. However, considering the enemies were also on horses, they managed to get to me before I could even start thinking about the best way to go about it. “Move it!”

Every time I swung my black sword, more blood splattered onto the grass.

“Sekiei, enemy reinforcements on your right!” Hakurei warned me. She was at my side, pulling her sword from an enemy cavalryman’s leg, with the injury causing him to fall from his horse.

Upon seeing their allies in trouble, several hundred enemy soldiers, their armor stained red, were starting to turn towards us. *We’re in big trouble if we don’t do something fast.* I slashed through an enemy, poleax and all, before picking up a spear from the ground and hurling it at the person who looked most like an enemy commander.

“Gah!”

My aim was true. It slammed straight through his chest and he fell, causing a slight break in the encirclement.

Hiyou, who had been struggling against the countless waves of enemies, noticed me and yelled, “Lord Sekiei! My father...my father...he protected me and...”

“Hiyou! Get your soldiers out of here!” I screamed back, cutting him off. He shook his head frantically even as he continued to swing his weapon. He was close to tears. I parried an arrow that had been aimed for Hakurei, and watched as Hiyou continued to move away from me. “You goddamn idiot! Are you *trying* to get your entire army killed?!”

As soon as I saw what was going on behind the encirclement, however, I understood just what the situation was. Jo Shuuhou was having a duel with the enemy commander in black who’d recently attacked us—Gisen!

“You’re good, I’ll give you that! What’s your name?!” Marshal Jo asked, a

confident smile on his face. His armor was bright red with both his and his enemy's blood, and he swung his spear as he stared down his opponent.

I could see that Gisen's massive black great sword had lost the tip of its blade. When he replied, it was in a quiet yet rumbling tone that reached my ears even through the chaos. "I'm Blackblade Gisen."

As Hakurei prepared for our army to charge the Gen soldiers, I could see, from between the enemies forming the encirclement, Marshal Jo holding his spear out, pointing it at Gisen. "So you're the strongest warrior in Gen? You are indeed a worthy opponent for my final battle!"

*So this is the Phoenix Wing! His courage is remarkable!*

Marshal Jo's gaze was brimming with determination, but he glanced away from Gisen. Our eyes met and I saw his lips move. "Sorry. Take care of my son."

"M-Marshal Jo!" I yelled, but the encirclement closed, preventing me from seeing more. I could hear the metallic clangs of their weapons meeting each other, the sound of their battle echoing through the air.

Jo Shuuhou—friend of Chou Tairan, the National Shield, and of U Jouko, the Tiger Fang—had served as a solid rock for the Ei Empire. Now, he was using the last of his strength to fight against Gisen in order to stop him from killing the rest of his army and us. I clenched Black Star in my hand. Despite all of the people I'd cut down on this battlefield, its blade was as pristine as ever.

In a tight voice, I gritted out, "Hakurei, I want you to meet up with Hiyou and retreat with everyone. I—"

"No!" Hakurei pulled out a piece of cloth and pressed it to my cheek, wiping away blood. Our cavalymen surrounded us, using their remaining arrows to keep the enemies at bay. When I looked down at her, I could see the steel will in her blue eyes. "I will never—*never*—allow you to go by yourself! If you insist on going, I will accompany you! I can't let you shoulder all the responsibility."

I clenched my fist so tightly that my nails dug into my palm, drawing blood. As I was now, I couldn't save both Jo Shuuhou and Jo Hiyou. I took out a piece of cloth from my pocket and wiped away the blood staining Hakurei's own cheek. Then, I turned around to the Chou army soldiers, who were awaiting their



orders.

“Rescue Jo Hiyou and retreat! Listen, do not die. Got it? None of you will die in this idiotic battle.”

“Yessir, Lord Chou Sekiei!”

Hiyou’s team was being pushed back by the enemy and I could see them slowly approaching us. Thanks to that, it wouldn’t be too hard to meet up with them. *The problem is...*

In as casual a tone I could affect at this moment, I said to Hakurei, “Hey.”

“No.” It was an instant rejection.

I scrunched up my face and shot back, “I haven’t even said anything yet.”

“You don’t have to. ‘I’ll hold up the rear so you escape first.’ That’s what you wanted to say, right?”

The sound of metal against metal was still ringing out as I heaved a heavy sigh.

“Man, this is why I don’t like dealing with little princesses!”

“The person I spent the last ten years with was a negative influence on me. It’s far too late for me to grow out of it.”

*Not cute at all. Chou Hakurei isn’t cute at all in these moments!*

They’d held up well, but at last, I could see Hiyou’s team starting to fall apart. Hakurei and I held up our swords and issued the order as one: “Forwards!”

“YEAAAH!” After letting out a war cry, our allies began to charge for the enemy soldiers attacking Hiyou’s team. In the meantime, we adjusted our grips on the Heavenly Swords.

“Hakurei,” I called out to her.

She glared at me, anger burning in her eyes. “What now?!”

I rested Black Star against my shoulder and told her my true feelings: “I’m glad that you’re next to me right here and right now. Thank you.”

“Wha—?! I... That should be my line.” Her face scrunched up and tears welled

in her eyes. “Dummy,” she added in a soft mutter.

I waited for her to wipe her tears away and when she was done, we nodded at each other.

“Good. Let’s go!” I yelled.

“Right!”

After that, we managed to save Hiyou in the nick of time and, thanks to Ruri’s timely support, we escaped from the battlefield. When we left, I could still hear the metallic clanging from the duel between Marshal Jo and Gisen.

Jo Shuuhou, Phoenix Wing, managed to score a brilliant victory in the final battle of his life.

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“The enemy army’s rear guard has abandoned camp, and the Seitou army is currently giving pursuit. My apologies!” After he gave the latest report on how the battle was proceeding, the messenger soldier hurried out of the tent.

I, Seul Bato, placed a few pawns on the tactical map on the table and thought for a moment. It had been three days since the major open battle. All of my troops were constantly reporting their victories.

According to the strategist, who was in the capital and dealing with the cleanup, I was to focus on commanding and to stay away from the front lines. To tell the truth, though, this was an exceedingly boring task. Attacking the fleeing army was surely a snore as well. After all, we’d killed most of their officers, as well as the majority of their soldiers. I already missed the wounded enemy general that I’d faced off against on the battlefield. *Will I ever have the chance to go up against an enemy as powerful as him again?*

*“The enemy’s supreme commander, as well as the Imperial Guard, seem to be on bad terms with the other armies. We’ll take advantage of that. I’d like the Gray Lancers to destroy the Imperial Guard’s supply corps but go easy on the supplies of the others. I can guess what the inexperienced enemy general will do after that—no doubt he’ll start pillaging. Once that happens, victory is within our grasp.”*

*Everything is as Master Strategist said.* Jo Shuuhou and U Jouko were amazing generals who would have surely been difficult obstacles to overcome in the grand invasion we were planning next year. After putting up a truly remarkable fight, they died there on the Ranyou plains. In particular, Jo Shuuhou had managed to duel Gisen and buy enough time for the remnants of his army to withdraw. *They lost an amazing general.*

Only the Undefeated Chou was left of Ei's Three Great Generals, but no matter how powerful or skilled he was, he couldn't go up against an entire army on his own. One could say that we'd accomplished unification at the Battle of Ranyou. What I didn't like, though, was that we had to borrow the so-called Honorable One's power not once, but *twice*. We'd had to ask for her assistance in bringing in favorable weather. *I didn't expect her to guess the days that there'd be fog, though.*

"R-Report, sir!" A new soldier rushed into my tent, eyes bulging.

I could see some of my subordinates open their mouths, prepared to scold this fellow, but I stopped them with a gesture and asked directly, "What's wrong? Calm down and then give your report!"

"Y-Yessir," the messenger soldier panted. He rested his hands on his knees, bending over to catch his breath before he said, "The enemies have counterattacked one of the teams sent to the east, causing them to retreat. We've lost around a thousand soldiers!"

"What?" I could hear everyone else in the tent murmuring among each other. It was impressive how Ei's remaining soldiers were able to hold on to their morale considering how major their defeat at our hands was. "Who was the enemy general?!"

"Th-They didn't see. But according to the reports, the enemies were holding both Jo and Chou flags."

The murmuring grew even louder. Gisen, who was standing behind me, twitched his brow.

Looking down at the map, I muttered to myself, "It's either a member of Jo Shuuhou's family, or a remnant from his army. And they're with the Chou family army, who are the ones who killed Nguyen." This was not good. The latter, in

particular, was bad news. Though they had fewer soldiers than we did, they'd managed to cause significant casualties among my soldiers—even forcing some of them to retreat. I glanced up at the messenger soldier and asked, “Do you have intel on where they went next?”

“Yessir! After defeating our allies, they split into two groups, with one heading south and one heading east. They're starting to retreat. The team heading south had much greater numbers.”

It was one thing to let the Jo soldiers escape, considering they were the surviving remnants of that army, but I couldn't let the Chou family army leave like this. It seemed much too obvious that they would be in the eastern group, which was smaller. In other words...

I grabbed the spear leaning against the wall and called out for the officer I trusted more than anyone else in the war. “Gisen, we're moving out!”

“Lord Seul, please wait a moment.”

“What?” I turned around to stare at him and recognized a strong sense of caution in his eyes.

He shook his head and replied, “In the battle the other day, we killed the best generals and officers in the enemy army. The majority of them won't even make it back home. However, our horses and soldiers are depleted as well. If we force a pursuit...”

“You're saying that they might take advantage of our weakness?”

“Yes.”

Though we'd secured a major victory, the enemy army hadn't rolled over and let us win—we'd lost quite a bit during the battle, as well. That was why we'd gotten the Seitou army to pursue the fleeing soldiers. How many soldiers and horses *they* lost had nothing to do with us, after all.

I thought about it for a moment before I made up my mind. “All right.” We should have utterly destroyed both the Jo and Chou armies. They were powerful enough to survive that devastating battlefield and were surely powerful enough to face us again. “Gisen, take twenty thousand with you and chase the team in the south. I'll take five thousand with me to attack the one in

the east!”

They still had the will to fight us, but they couldn't make up for inferior numbers with determination. I would be able to crush them with just half of the Gray Lancers' numbers.

The deep crease in my mentor's brow never softened, however. “At the very least, let us ask Master Strategist for his—”

“If we wait for him, we'll lose this opportunity! The strategist has already told me that, though the Seitou forces will be doing the bulk of the work, we can also take the initiative in times of emergency in order to kill as many enemy soldiers as possible!” I met the eyes of the man I'd spent the past decade with and continued, “If we can kill the remnants of the Jo family army and rid ourselves of the nuisances from the Chou family army, then we'll have an easier time in the invasion next spring. Our officers won't have to deal with as much resistance, and it'll soothe some of His Imperial Majesty's concerns. Gisen, please, I'm begging you, let me go! I promise I won't do anything reckless.”

None of what I said was a lie; everything was from my heart. At the same time, I felt myself burning with vengeance. I would not let the murderers of the Crimson Wolf—my friend—continue home when I had the chance to kill them with my own hands. The gathered officers watched us, eyes wide, until Gisen sighed.

“Fine.”

“You have my thanks! Don't blame me if the enemy team I'm chasing happens to be the Chou family, okay?” I grinned at him and that was when his expression finally softened. I patted him on the shoulder and promised, “Once we're done with everything here, let me treat you to something in Enkei. I managed to get my hands on some delicious Routou wine.”

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“Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, we've finished all of our preparations! We've also given the *presents* from Miss Ou Meirin to the brave soldiers our strategist personally picked out!” Teiha, gouges from swords and spears still visible on his armor, reported to Hakurei and me.

“Roger that!” I said as I hopped off my horse.

Next to me, Hakurei was doing the same. “Thank you very much. I’ll leave them in your care,” she said, handing off the reins of our horses to a nearby soldier.

Though it was almost nightfall, the soldiers had lit most of the torches, so we were able to see everything quite clearly. We were located in the eastern regions of Seitou. There was a side road here called Bourou Gorge, or Dead Wolf Gorge. The reason it was called that was because this was where the Twin Ei’s of the Tou Empire defeated the foreign general Garou, despite having a numerical disadvantage.

I looked up at the cliffs around me and saw the soldiers who’d survived the retreat hiding among the rocks. With the help of survivors from the Jo army, we’d dealt with the scouting teams that had come after us. These victories had helped to restore some morale. Father’s reputation had reached beyond Ei’s borders. As well, our decision to avoid pillaging as we escaped from the battlefield helped keep us safe. Upon seeing our Chou flag, the civilians didn’t try to attack us, which meant that we didn’t have to expend energy or resources to fight them off.

The young soldier who had followed me on the battlefield, Kuuen, used a small mirror to send a light signal to me and Hakurei. Seeing it, I turned to look at Teiha. “Looks like they’re on the way. Just because we’re in the Bourou Gorge doesn’t mean that we’ll have to deal with wolves, but...” I winked at Ruri, who was sitting atop a horse. There was a grumpy look on her face; she didn’t like that Hakurei and I were the ones who had to act as bait. “Teiha, I’m leaving the rest to our strategist. Listen to her orders. If the plan fails, then don’t worry about me. Just—”

“Don’t worry about *us*. Just retreat. We will not require assistance,” Hakurei interrupted me.

“Hey, what was—”

“Our plan will not fail. I trust Miss Ruri.”

Our young strategist bit her lip and readjusted the blue hat on her head, nudging it even lower. In her hand, she held a green scroll. She took several

deep breaths before she raised her head once more, a keen look of concentration in her eyes.

“They were able to score a grand victory at Ranyou,” she said.

Our enemies had destroyed both the Imperial Guard and the western army, and the southern army was on its final legs. The officers and generals either died at Ranyou or were killed during the retreat. Rin Chuudou—lieutenant chancellor and commander—hadn’t participated in the battle itself, but I doubted that he escaped unscathed. Of all the armies that participated in this invasion, we were the only ones who were able to retreat while dealing a blow to the enemy army.

Ruri grinned, an aggressive look in her eye as she continued, “However, during their chase to finish us off, they suddenly started to lose—and to the survivors of the Chou and Jo armies, of all people. ‘We’ll catch those insolent fools who put a mark on our perfect victory, even if it’s the last thing we do.’ It was hilariously easy to predict they’d react that way.”

Sometimes this girl reminded me so much of Eifuu. He, too, seemed to possess the eyes of a hawk that could soar above the battlefield—that was how clearly he was able to see the greater picture. Of course, she was still far from reaching *his* level.

“You’re a fearsome one,” I said in a purposefully joking manner. “But are you sure it was the right idea to let Hiyou and the others go? I know that they were the ones to put in the request, but...”

After defeating one of the enemy scouting teams, Ruri split our allied forces in two. We, along with some volunteers, were heading eastwards for Keiyou with about two thousand soldiers in total. Hiyou, along with the remaining five thousand, went back to the south. Splitting up our forces like this was a dangerous decision, especially considering we were at a disadvantage.

Ruri pressed her water bottle into Hakurei’s hands as she explained, “The scouts let their guards down, so they were easy to defeat. However, even if we gathered all of our remaining soldiers, we would still have less manpower than the enemy. In that case, we’ll use each other as bait to split up the enemy as well. In the past, the Twin Ei’s defeated a large army of foreign soldiers right

here with this exact same method. Let's take a page from their book."

I slowly ran my fingers down the sheath of my sword. Back then, Eifuu did indeed split the army into two teams. He put me in charge of the smaller team and set me here in this very gorge, which had been nameless at the time. It was here that I waited for Garou and then killed him.

"Fine, fine. I'll leave everything to you," I said. "If we're going to pull this off, let's do it with a bang!"

"Yeah, you can count on me."

"I wish you good luck!"

Both Ruri and Teiha raced off on their horses, making their way to their stations. The only one left was...

"—Hakurei."

"—Sekiei."

We ended up calling out to each other at the same time. *Jeez, what bad timing!*

"What?"

"What is it?"

We both fell silent at that, unsure of how to proceed. I hesitated before I held up my hand. "Oh, you know what? Never mind. What I wanted to say wasn't my style anyway."

"Is that so? Very well. Then I shall be the one to speak." Hakurei walked over to me and reached out with her slender fingers, resting them upon my dirtied cheek. She smiled, her beautiful face radiant with the expression. "I shall protect you, so please, make sure you watch my back as well."





*She got to say it first.* I placed an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief hug. I felt the way her slim body trembled as I leaned down and whispered into her blushing ear, “Leave it to me. I’ll protect you.”

I let go of her and, drawing Black Star, I stood right in the middle of the road. Hakurei, too, drew White Star and stood at my left. The wind brought with it the stench of beasts, as well as the thunder of countless hooves. Darkness approached in the form of a horde of cavalymen. Upon seeing them, I raised my voice in a roar.

“STOP RIGHT THERE, WOLVES!”

“Wha—?!” The Gray Lancers came to a screeching halt and I could see the obvious shock on their faces.

Both Hakurei and I smiled as one as we raised our swords and announced ourselves.

“My name is Chou Sekiei, the son of Chou Tairan!”

“My name is Chou Hakurei, the eldest child of Chou Tairan!”

The Gray Lancers’ murmuring grew even louder. Never in their wildest imaginations did they think that we would try to stop them with only two people.

I stared at them—easily several hundred soldiers—and said in a mocking tone, “Come on, now. We, the members of the Chou family, went out of our way to name ourselves and yet we don’t hear an introduction from your leader? Is your general some kind of uneducated barbarian? Oh, or could it be that he’s *scared* of us, even though we’re only two people?”

Fury twisted the Gray Lancers’ faces and I could hear them grip their swords and spears. The horses pawed at the ground, kicking up clouds of dirt. An older rider who looked to be a captain held up his hand, but he was interrupted by a sharp rebuke.

“Wait!” A handsome man rode forwards. He was holding a great sword similar to Gisen’s in his hand, and he’d dyed his entire suit of armor an ashy gray.

*Wait, could he be...?*

The enemy officer glared down at us from his horse. “It appears that the son of the Chou family does not possess any manners. The girl has silver hair and blue eyes. You two do seem to be related to Chou Tairan. In other words...” I felt goose bumps break out over my skin as he pointed his great sword at us, hostility burning in his eyes. “You two are the ones who killed my dear friend, the Crimson Wolf! My name is Seul Bato. The great Emperor Adai himself bestowed upon me the title of Gray Wolf! I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance, as short-lived as it’ll be!”

Next to me, Hakurei swallowed, and I couldn’t blame her. We didn’t think that one of the Four Wolves would be leading the pursuit team, nor did we think he would target such a small unit like us. His massive horse’s whinny pierced through the air, echoing off the rocks, and Seul charged at us with a roar.

“It’s laudable that you two waited for me here! As a show of gratitude, I’ll kill both of you at once!”

“Who do you think you are?!” I yelled at the same time Hakurei at my side snapped, “Thanks, but no thanks!”

He swung out with his great sword, a gust of wind kicking up from the momentum of the motion, but we slammed Black Star and White Star against the blade to block it. Countless sparks danced along the steel in a flash of a second before Seul retreated. Sweat dripped down Hakurei’s cheek. When Seul turned his horse around to face us once more, I could see surprise on his face.

“Oh? You managed to survive that attack? You two fighting in tandem might be as strong as U Jouko was! I sincerely offer you my compliments. You’re as powerful as I imagined!”

I tightened my grip on my sword and shook off the lingering numbness from the strike. I grinned, taunting, as I replied, “Thanks for the praise.”

“However, your skills in combat are nothing compared to those of the black-haired officer we fought against,” Hakurei continued, sensing what my plan was.

Seul’s brow furrowed. “What did you say?!”

*He fell for the bait!*

Seul held his great sword out before him and bared his teeth as he glared at us. “It’s true that my vice-commander Gisen is the best warrior in all of Gen! However, I have never once considered myself his inferior! Stop with your mocking— Huh?!”

A giant log rolled down the cliff, landing behind the enemy cavalrymen, who reacted with surprise. With a loud roar, the entire log went up in flames. A barrel of gunpowder had been stuffed inside of it. Meirin had been the one to organize its transportation, and Ruri had been the one who’d ordered the explosion. In the face of a sound and stench they’d never experienced before, as well as the spreading flames, both soldiers and horses started to panic and their formation fell apart. I could see Seul’s face slowly contorting with anger and he turned to stare down Hakurei and me.

“You bastards!”

The torches lining the edges of the cliffs around us lit up and the Chou flags—tattered yet still whole—rippled in the wind. A girl with blonde hair so bright we could see it even from this distance held her telescope in the air before bringing it down in a swoop.

“Now! Shoot!”

Arrows rained down upon the enemies, defeating them without giving them the chance to launch a counterattack. Of course, with time, they’d be able to fight their way through this choke hold, but that attack just now had killed at least twenty percent of their army.

*All right, the first part of our plan went well!*

Our soldiers and the enemy riders, who’d recovered from the surprise, started to engage in combat. Upon seeing that, Seul smirked. “Humph. I admit, your strange fire tactics were shocking. But this is nothing more than a mere ambush. Don’t think you can stop us with such a petty strategy!” A score of arrows shot towards him, but he knocked them all from the air with an easy swing of his great sword. It was a genuinely impressive move. “How insolent! Did you truly think we didn’t know about your lack of arrows?! You’ve already used up most of your supply and soon, you’ll run out. The story of Bourou

Gorge was nothing more than a myth. Surrender now and I'll make your death easy!"

He charged us again, weapon held at the ready. The dwindling arrows would not be enough to stop him. However, Hakurei and I remained unmoved.

"You really think so?" I asked.

"You underestimate our strategist," Hakurei said.

*"The fleeing Ei army lacks arrows." Ruri had already predicted that the enemy had gotten hold of this information! The trap's closed!*

"Foolish—?!" Seul raised his great sword above his head, but his expression turned into one of confusion when a sound like thunder boomed through the ravine and yet the sky remained blue, with nary a cloud in sight. "Wh-What's this?!"

Seul's massive horse reared, surprised at the unfamiliar sound. It bucked its rider off, but Seul managed to land safely on the ground with a roll. The impact knocked his helmet from his head. With one knee on the ground, he glared up at us. Behind him, half of the enemy cavalymen had been thrown off their horses either as a result of the sound or because they'd been hit by the small rocks that had been launched at them. They were left groaning on the ground.

From atop the cliff, Ruri held a war flag with both hands and waved it around. The arrows, which had lessened in intensity, picked up pace once more as the veteran cavalymen rode down the cliffs. Hakurei and I closed the distance to Seul in an instant.

"Gray Wolf, you were an amazingly powerful enemy!" I yelled.

"We knew that a cavalry team would be the only one capable of catching up to us!" Hakurei added.

Seul clicked his tongue loudly as we attacked him in a pincer formation. Though a great sword was disadvantageous in close quarters, he wielded it dexterously, parrying our strikes despite the flames that surrounded us.

"As you know, horses are cowardly animals, even if they're used to the sound of war music and gongs!" I continued.

“It seems that they weren’t able to bear the sounds of the fire lances that Seitou had been developing in secret!” Hakurei concluded.

*This* was Ruri’s great strategy. She’d placed fire to cut off their escape, set up double ambushes at their flanks, and then isolated the enemy general for us to fight. It was a perfect encirclement. With gunpowder and fire lances—technology that hadn’t existed a thousand years ago—she’d created an evolved version of the Wolf-Killing Envelopment.

Though Ou Meirin hadn’t managed to make it in time for the battle at Ranyou, I still had to wonder what kind of magic she used when she came up with the enhanced fire lances. She’d improved on the bamboo cylinders by using copper instead, and even managed to send a hundred or so of these new fire lances all the way from Keiyou. In the same shipment, we’d also received rations and arrows. *Meirin might be the one who’s actually an ascendant!*

Hakurei and I fought like we were performing a sword dance. In one moment, we’d be moving in tandem. In the next, we’d swap positions. At times, we even altered the timing of our strikes, moving slower or faster than the other. Slowly but surely, we were chipping away at Seul, causing him to bleed more and more.

“You bastards, you bastards, you *bastards!*” He roared, and then unleashed a fearsome horizontal slash that forced both Hakurei and me back a few steps. Illuminated by the fire, he continued to yell, “I won’t lose. I won’t *ever* lose! Not until I surpass Gisen and see His Imperial Majesty unify the lands with my own eyes! I will *not* lose here!”

*I can’t believe we didn’t defeat him with that flurry of attacks.* Our allies were doing their best to hold off the enemies, who were still recovering from their confusion. However, if they managed to get around the barrier we’d set up and help Seul, this situation would turn right on its head. *We’d* be the ones in trouble instead. The improved fire lances could be shot more than once, but they still required time to reload. *I have to gamble for this win.*

Hakurei was holding White Star at the ready, her chest heaving as she fought to steady her breathing. I signaled at her with my eyes and then, before I could see her confirmation, I rushed at Seul alone and swung down my sword with all

my might.

“I’ll defeat you with this!” I yelled.

“You underestimate me!”

My black sword met his cracked great sword, causing sparks and dust to fly through the air!

“Hakurei!”

“HAAAAAAH!”

With a fierce war cry, Hakurei leaped forwards, her silver hair trailing behind her in the wind. Just in time—without even a second’s delay—her sword came down in a flash of white. The great sword, pushed far past its limit, snapped in half and flew through the air.

“Wha—?! You broke my steel blade?!” Seul was shocked, but his surprise only lasted a moment. In the next he had pulled another sword from his belt, prepared to slash out at my abdomen with it.

“Sorry! Looks like we were the winners of this bet!”

A split second before he could move, my obsidian sword pierced his stomach with ease. Both his great sword and secondary sword slipped from his fingers, the blades landing in the ground, tips buried in the dirt. Blood spilled from Seul’s lips as he coughed.

“N-Nguyen, Gisen, my emperor... My apolo...” Before he could finish voicing his regrets, he fell to the ground.

We’d won by just a hair. The difference wasn’t in our skill. It had been in our weapons.

I sucked in a deep breath before I yelled, “Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei have killed the enemy general, the Gray Wolf!”

A roar of victory sounded out over the flames that were beginning to consume the entire area, and I saw the enemies start to drop their weapons, no longer eager to fight. Hakurei and I stared at the sight and then, without a single word shared, we held out our fists and bumped them against each other. We knew what the other was thinking with that one action.

“Both of you, hurry!” Ruri yelled from the cliffs. “Retreat immediately!”

We held the Heavenly Swords high in the air. Our mission to defeat the pursuing enemies by snaring them in a trap was complete, even if we’d accomplished it by a narrow margin. The only thing left for us to do was to return to Keiyou.

I bent down and closed Seul’s eyes. He was a formidable enemy. I could see Teiha and our soldiers approaching, our horses with them. Hakurei and I shared a deep nod before we waved our hands to Ruri.

“Let’s retreat at full speed!” I yelled. “We’ll be using Meirin’s boats to cross the river! If they’re not there, we’ll have to swim!”

“Please don’t jinx us like that,” Hakurei sighed. “If it happens, you’ll have to carry me.”



## Epilogue

“Young master! Lady Hakurei! I’m so...I’m so glad you’ve returned!”

After escaping from Bourou Gorge, we had reached the great river in the far east of Seitou, which would be our greatest obstacle in returning to Keiyou. However, when we got there, we saw an old man with white hair and a white beard waiting for us with an army behind him. It was Raigen. He was openly sobbing, unashamed about the streams of tears pouring down his face.

“Gramps, stop crying. We’re still in enemy territory. Hakurei and I are alive and in one piece.”

“Raigen, thank you for your support. But what is all this?” Hakurei asked, looking around in confusion. Her attendant latched on to her and she exclaimed, “Asaka, give me some space!”

Before us were three bridges—bridges that, by all accounts, shouldn’t exist. All of them used little boats as their foundations, with planks leading across the water. Being blessed with good weather, all of our horses and soldiers were able to cross without issue. Hakurei and I were the last ones to cross, and at no point did we worry about the bridge collapsing underneath us. Truthfully, I’d been prepared to spend a lot of time crossing the river here, and even expected to have to fight off enemy soldiers to buy everyone time to leave.

Raigen ran his fingers through his beard. “Oh, these are—”

“Couldn’t you tell? I was the one who set them up!”

Suddenly, the voice of a young girl who had no business being here rang through the air. Ruri, sitting on a nearby rock, murmured something like “Oh no” under her breath.

A young girl who looked no older than a child, her brown hair bouncing underneath her orange hat, skipped over with a sly smile on her face. It was Ou Meirin, who stretched up to stare into my face as she laughed. “I figured that something like this might happen! So I set up a temporary bridge using boats!

This is an idea you mentioned in the past, Lord Sekiei. Now, then, please feel free to hug me and say, ‘Wow, amazing, Meirin! I can’t believe you followed me all the way to enemy territory! You’re the perfect bride for me!’”

“I never said I’d make you my bride.” I couldn’t believe she took something I came up with during teatime and turned it into reality. It was just like what she had done with the paddlewheelers. Oh Meirin was truly a genius. I looked over to Shizuka to include her and said, “From the bottom of my heart, thank you. Your fire lances and gunpowder were a great help as well. You two saved our lives.”

I placed my hand lightly against Meirin’s cheek. In response, she blinked a little before her entire face softened with joy and she started to fidget, twisting her body back and forth as she giggled.

“Lord Sekiei! ☆”

“Whoa!”

Ignoring Hakurei’s soft growl, Meirin closed the small gap between us and gave me a tight squeeze. I had no choice but to accept it. However, I was covered in dust, as well as my own sweat and blood.

“H-Hey, get away. You’ll get all dirty.”

“That’s no big deal! I don’t care about that!” she replied brightly, burying her face into my chest. She closed her eyes as if in prayer as she continued, “I’m so glad you’re all right. Welcome home.”

She must have been the one commanding the creation of the bridge. I could see branches and leaves in her hair. Even though she wasn’t on the battlefield, she fought to bring us victory and take us home. I removed the foliage from her hair, careful not to dirty it even further. But then, a slim hand shot out and stopped me.

“All right. That’s enough.”

“Oh?”

Hakurei, who had escaped from Asaka’s hold, dragged Meirin away from me. She, too, ignored the way Meirin was making dissatisfied noises as she plopped

the other girl onto the ground. Then, she lowered her head. “Meirin, please allow me to thank you as well. Because of you, I didn’t have to swim across the river. I had even resigned myself to clinging onto his back as we crossed it.”

*Uh, you’re thanking her, right?* I looked over to Asaka for help, but she was busy talking to Shizuka. Neither of them would be of much use. Ruri did not seem inclined to step in and was eating a fresh peach that had been brought to her.

Ou Meirin smiled and stood up on her toes to meet Hakurei’s eyes. “I’m glad you’re all right as well, Miss Hakurei. How! Ev! Er! I cannot ignore what you just said! Clinging onto Lord Sekiei’s back, you said? Please explain what you mean by that! I’m sure you took advantage of the lulls in combat to get all up close and personal with him!”

Hakurei was silent for a long moment and when she spoke again, it was in her usual calm voice. “Where did you get that ridiculous notion from?” However, I could see her eyes darting back and forth.

*You dummy! That’ll only make her suspicious!*

“Uh-huh. So you say. Well, Ruri? You were with them the entire time. What did you make of their relationship?” Meirin crossed her arms as she turned to interrogate the poor ascendant.

Ruri, who’d finished her peach, looked annoyed at being pulled into the conversation, but she approached them anyway. “She slept with me at night, but in the mornings, she’d happily rush out and chat with him while training. In the day and during combat, she was almost always at Sekiei’s side.”

“M-Miss Ruri?!”

“Ruri?!”

Both Hakurei and I couldn’t believe that someone who’d fought at our sides the entire invasion would betray us like this.

Meirin clasped her hands together as she smiled. She looked like a villain from a story. “Miss Hakurei, do you have any excuses for yourself? I’m a *very* generous person, so I don’t mind listening to them! ★”

Hakurei brushed her hair out of her face, her irritation clear in the rough movement. There was a small pout on her face as she replied, “You have no right to say anything about my relationship with Sekiei. This is a private matter.”

Meirin shrieked, sounding remarkably similar to a monkey, before shouting, “Why did you say it like you’re trying to imply there’s an unbreakable bond of trust between you two?! I’m sure that Ruri was also fed up with you both the entire time! Right, Ruri?!”

“Miss Ruri is on my side. We became very good friends during this war. Right, Miss Ruri?”

Meirin and Hakurei turned to look at Ruri at the same time. In response, she raised an eyebrow and then looked at me. “Hey—”

“I’ll leave things to you, my strategist.”

“W-Wait a second!”

I walked over to Raigen, who was still standing at the shore, ignoring Ruri’s attempts to call me back. Our army was bigger than when we started, since we’d taken in the survivors from the other armies. If there were people who wished to return to their homes, we would have to send them back. Teiha, who’d managed to survive yet another deadly battlefield, noticed me and offered me a salute before he walked away.

I gazed out at the river, watching as the water babbled peacefully over the rocks before I ordered in a quiet voice, “Gramps, I’d like you to destroy those temporary bridges as soon as possible. It’ll be a disaster if our enemies use that to cross the river.”

“Of course. We prepared them expecting to tear them down.”

I didn’t expect anything less from my father’s vice-commander. I placed my hand on Black Star’s hilt as I asked, “How much information about the war do people know?”

“They know the gist of things. Both the Imperial Guard and the U family army have lost their generals and have been destroyed. The remnants of the Jo army, led by Jo Hiyou, were attacked while retreating. They managed to escape, but not without incurring severe casualties. Lord Hiyou was one of the survivors,

but I believe it will take quite some time for the army to be rebuilt.”

*I see. So the Jo family army headed south and then got caught.* I thought of that young man, who tried so hard to stay positive and look to the future even after losing his father. If I had to guess, the idea of simply turning tail and running away didn’t sit right with him.

I pressed a hand to my forehead and closed my eyes. “I told Hiyou to flee east with us, and I also warned him to avoid combat. We fought against the Gray Wolf and, thanks to a strategy Ruri over there thought of, we managed to win. She’s going to be working as our military strategist from now on.”

Raigen raised his white eyebrows in clear surprise. It seemed that the more recent news hadn’t reached this side of the shore yet.

“Oh my. You defeated yet another member of the Four Wolves?”

“We were just lucky. Besides...” I trailed off when a strong gust of wind blew through the air, causing ripples to form on the water.

“Lord Sekiei?”

The memory of that black great sword flashed through my mind. We might have killed the Gray Wolf, but there was always a chance that *he* would inherit that title. I shook away the thought and removed my hand from my sword.

“Nothing,” I said. “Send a messenger to Hakuhou Castle for me. I’d like to talk with father about our future defensive measures as soon as possible.”

“Of course. Young master, do you believe that our situation will worsen even more than it already has?”

“Yeah.” Despite myself, my voice came out cold. In order to calm myself, I looked over my shoulder at Hakurei and the others.

“How many times do I have to repeat myself?! Ruri is like my younger sister!”

“No, Miss Ruri is *my* younger sister. I won’t give her to you.”

“I’m not the younger sister of anyone here, though.”

Ruri, stuck between Hakurei and Meirin, looked a little confused at the situation, but I could see white flowers drifting through the air around her.

Shizuka, Asaka, and even the soldiers were watching the three girls with a soft look in their eyes. I let go of a quiet huff of laughter and with it, the worries weighing down my heart.

I turned back to Raigen and said, “In this battle, we gained Ruri, an ascendant of rare talent. Hakurei, Teiha, and the other soldiers have become more experienced as well. But the losses... The losses were just too great. Adai has surely noticed as well and he’s not the kind of person who would ignore such a ripe opportunity. The Phoenix’s wings have been broken and the Tiger’s fangs have been crushed. The only people left to protect this country are the National Shield and the grand chancellor.”

\*\*\*

In Enkei, the capital city of the Gen Empire, Gisen and I—Hasho—knelt in the palace’s inner courtyard as we gave our reports. We’d returned from Seitou together. Cold sweat dripped from my cheek and onto the ground, and I couldn’t stop the fearful tremors racking my body. It was hard to admit, but I was absolutely terrified of the waifish figure before me.

“That was everything that we accomplished in this battle, Emperor Adai,” I said, concluding my report.

Ever since I was a young boy, I had been aware of my own intelligence. It was a given that the leader of the Senko would recognize my talents and suggest me as the military strategist for the Gen Empire. The only living person who’d managed to surpass me was a girl whose name I didn’t know—and she’d only managed that because she’d taken me off guard. I had been certain that in a battle of strategy, I’d even be able to defeat the emperor. *Yet, how did this happen?!*

I bit my lip and lowered my head even further. “In regards to Gray Wolf’s death, neither he nor his vice-commander Gisen were at fault. If anyone is to blame, it was me for neglecting to take command.”

*“General Seul Bato lost to Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei, dying as a result!”* When news of his death reached me in Ranyou, I thought it must have been some sort of terrible joke. The fearsome Four Wolves were the pride of the Gen Empire and yet, after killing the Crimson Wolf, the brats from the Chou family

defeated yet another one?

His Imperial Majesty stood up. My body refused to stop shaking. I could see his long white hair enter my field of vision as his chilly voice rang out through the room.

“The Ei Empire boasts three generals: Chou Tairan, Jo Shuuhou, and U Jouko. During this most recent war, your tactics allowed my army to kill two of them.”

Upon hearing that, I sucked in a breath. I bit my lip as hard as I could to prevent any further sound from leaking out. The emperor placed a small but heavy hand upon my shoulder.

“You killed a hundred thousand soldiers, as well as earned us the loyalty of Seitou’s people. How could I punish someone who has accomplished as much as you have? Hasho, I have no intention of becoming a foolish ruler.”

“Y-Yes, Your Imperial Majesty! My apologies. You honor me with your praise!”

The words flowed from my mouth like water, but there was a storm brewing in my heart. Gray Wolf had fallen to the enemy’s tactics. There was some strategist in the Chou family who’d played me for a fool! *I won’t let this humiliation stand. I’ll get my revenge!* I remained prostrate on the ground as I vowed my vengeance, and then I heard the emperor speak again.

“Gisen, how were the young tigers of the Chou family?”

“The daughter is no match for me. However, the boy wielding the mysterious black sword...” He raised his head to stare up at the emperor. “He will turn into a threat rivaling Chou Tairan himself.”

The emperor thought for a moment before he replied, “I see.”

I couldn’t say anything in response. Chou Sekiei was not only the one who’d repelled Gisen, but he’d also been the one to kill Seul. *Just who is he?*

The emperor closed his book and said, “You did well. For the time being, I reward you with the title of the Black Wolf. You may refer to yourself as that in the future.”

“If I may—”

“Sir Gisen!” I hurried to get out, stopping him before he could say anything

else. He might be the best warrior in our army and the emperor might be a generous ruler, but refusing such words might very well lead to our execution.

The emperor held up his small, pale hand and said, “I will not allow any arguments to the contrary. Very soon, we will once again start our southern invasion. Don’t you think my Four Wolves would be lonely if only two of them were present? If you bear guilt for Seul’s death, then wash it away with the blood of our enemies. Do you understand?”

“Very well.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Gisen and I lowered our heads, and I clenched my fist. I would never forget this humiliation, nor would I forget the pain of losing a dear comrade. *Chou Hakurei, Chou Sekiei, and that strategist, I promise I’ll be the one to kill you!*

In an imperious voice, Emperor Adai said, “Our next battle will be the one to unify all the lands once more. We shall rest our soldiers and horses in preparation for that. Hasho, Gisen, you two did well. You may leave. Feel free to refresh yourselves before you return to Seitou.”

\*\*\*

After the inexperienced strategist and the silent warrior left the room, I—Adai Dada, the emperor of the Gen Empire—sat down in my chair and murmured to myself, “Yet again, Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei have foiled my plans. And to think that the place of his death was Bourou Gorge... Seul had what it took to become an amazing general. It’s truly unfortunate.”

Both the Crimson Wolf, Nguyen Gui, and the Gray Wolf, Seul Bato, had been loyal subjects, brave fighters, and skilled generals. They were not people who could be easily replaced. Of course, they were nowhere in the same league as the Undefeated Kou, but who could blame them?

I’d read through all of the history books I could get my hands on and that was why I could say this for certain: no one who could surpass my erstwhile best friend had been born in the past thousand years. Not a single person.

Even Gisen was nothing compared to Eihou at his prime. If Eihou were here, we would have completed unification years ago. The world was truly an unfair



place. *I was given a second chance at life, so why wasn't he?* Pointless thoughts swirled through my head as I touched the petals of a Routou flower in its vase.

“So?” I asked quietly. “You’re saying that the black and white swords that the young tigers from the Chou family wield are the Heavenly Swords that I’m looking for?”

“We do not have any definite proof. However, the circumstances do point to that, and the Honorable One shares this opinion.”

A small person wearing a fox mask and a coat appeared from the edges of my vision. He was a member of Senko, a spy organization that operated from the shadows. *So this isn't the only Senko operative? The suspicious, mysticism-obsessed woman who's the true ruler of Seitou is one as well?*

The spy tossed a piece of metal onto the table. It seemed to be a shard from a great sword. “Both Blackblade Gisen and the Gray Wolf’s great swords were famed weapons, known throughout the land. The former’s weapon is chipped and damaged, and the latter’s was cut in half. It’s rather unbelievable.”

I could say nothing in response. In my past life, I had witnessed Eihou using the Heavenly Swords to bisect the massive boulder at Routou. It was a feat that no human could have accomplished.

I picked up the sharp metal and said in a soft voice, “Even knowing that Chou Sekiei swings a black sword, it is difficult for me to believe that they possess *the* Heavenly Swords. However, it is also the truth that my wolves are falling one after the other. If their wielders are Chou Tairan’s children, then we will need to be even more cautious.” I stabbed the metal through the tactical map on the table, right through Jo Hiyou’s name. “I shall use Phoenix Wing’s poor little orphan boy and set up a trap. The foolish lieutenant chancellor and the rat both survived this invasion, just as we planned.” Dark clouds covered the sun and thunder boomed through the room. “If all goes well, we can rid ourselves of the troublesome old men in Rinkei.”

The Phoenix’s wings were broken and the Tiger’s fangs were crushed. The only ones left were Chou Tairan and the grand chancellor, You Bunshou.

The spy turned away from me. “What a fearsome man. I don’t understand how Kou Eihou could have left the unified lands to you. When we next meet, it

shall be spring. If Hasho's talents prove lacking—"

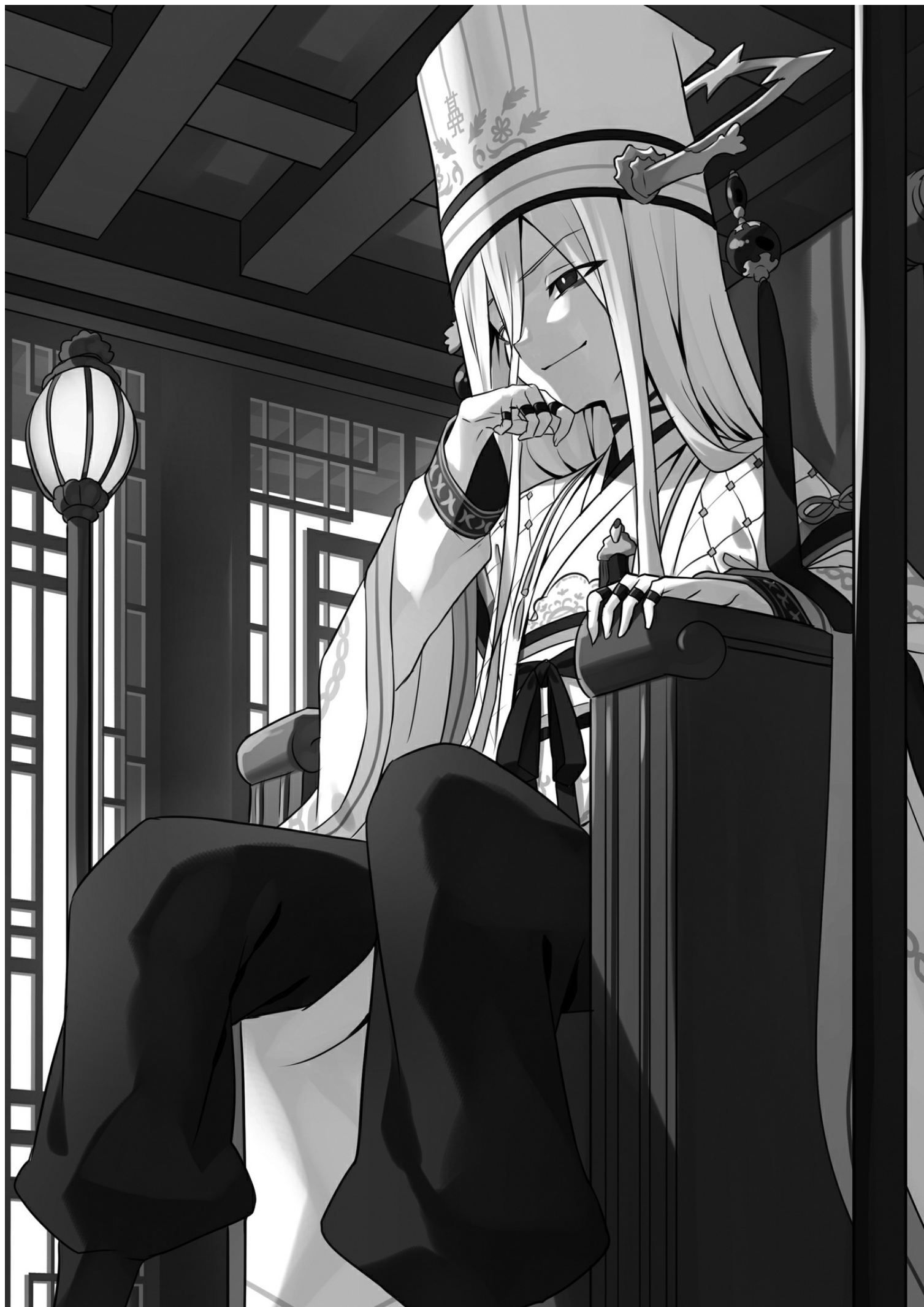
I slowly shook my head and smiled mirthlessly, setting my elbow upon the arm of my chair. "It is unnecessary. His childishness amuses me. He is so self-absorbed that he believes no one can beat him when it comes to military strategy, and yet all he's doing is copying tactics I came up with in the past. Hopefully, Seul's death inspired some growth in him."

"You truly are a fearsome man."

The spy walked deeper into the inner courtyard until he was swallowed up by the shadows. I gazed down at the metal embedded into the tactical map. Even in my past life, I hadn't been able to use the Heavenly Swords. I'd only kept them at hand. Those swords chose their masters, and only the truly heroic could wield them. It was ludicrous, but if the Chou brats *were* really wielding the Heavenly Swords...

I thought back to how the blades had been absent from the shrine where I remembered leaving them, and hatred started to fester in my heart once more. "It should be impossible to draw Black Star and White Star from their sheaths, and yet there are those who wield them on the battlefield?"

The heavens answered my murmur with yet another clap of thunder. The black clouds still hung in the sky, hiding away the twin stars in the north.



## Afterword

Hello! It's Riku Nanano. It's been three months since I last greeted you like this. Things got really close and I almost couldn't make it, but I managed to make my deadline in time. The morning sun on a due date is like the devil. I can still remember the feeling of turning to sand...

Anyway, let's forget all of that and talk about the contents of this book! Yes, we introduced a cute little strategist. In history, the strategist job disappeared surprisingly (in my opinion) quickly. Today, the images that people have of strategists come from things like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*. I believe that the idea of military strategists using some sort of supernatural power comes from the accomplishments of Zhou's Zhang Ziya, Western Han's Zhang Liang, and the Ming dynasty's Liu Ji. They were so amazing (along with the other heroes) that their legends became exaggerated over time. At least, that's what I think. That's why I decided from the beginning that I would introduce strategists for both the good guys and the bad guys.

Not that they can use any magic or special powers.

Ruri's power is completely useless on the battlefield. On the other hand, from Sekiei and the others' point of view, her talent should become more and more reliable as the series goes on. Ruri will be doted upon by Meirin and Hakurei, and she'll be depended upon by Sekiei. Please look forward to what she does.

And now for some advertisements! Volume 14 of *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter* will be the newest one, and it'll come out soon. It's still a work in progress as I'm writing this, though. I-I'll continue to do my best while drinking some coffee.

Now, I would like to thank the people who helped me. To my editor, thank you again for this volume. I will be relying on you once again. To cura, your Ruri is perfect! I was really unsure about things like her hair and eye color, but I'm really happy with what I ended up going with! I would also like to thank all of the readers who got this far in the book! I look forward to seeing you all again

soon in the next volume, “Beyond the Bloody War.”

Riku Nanano



RIKU NANANO  
[illust] cura

2



# Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars



# Heavenly Swords Two Stars



"I'll become your war strategist.

I'm sure you won't turn me down at this stage, right?"

The Cute Strategist with Godlike Intelligence

## Ruri

A young girl who claims to be an ascendant. She's Meirin's acquaintance, and was the one who discovered the legendary Heavenly Swords. Though she possesses an extraordinary mind for tactics and a keen eye for observation, she has a strong dislike of war.





"I really am  
an ascendant.  
As for my breasts,  
there's still plenty  
of time for them to  
develop!"

"Sekiei's dream has always  
been a pathetic one."

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 honest person—only with Sekiei does she let down her guard and show a more selfish side.

"Hmm? Oh, *really?*  
What a pathetic dream!  
It's as hopeless as  
Lord Sekiei's dream of  
becoming a civil official!"

The Merchant Prodigy

### Ou Meirin

The daughter of the up-and-coming mercantile Ou family. Apart from a certain part of her anatomy, she's quite small, but her talent as a merchant is the real deal. She owes Sekiei a life debt, and she also thinks highly of the cunning and analytical mind buried beneath his facade.



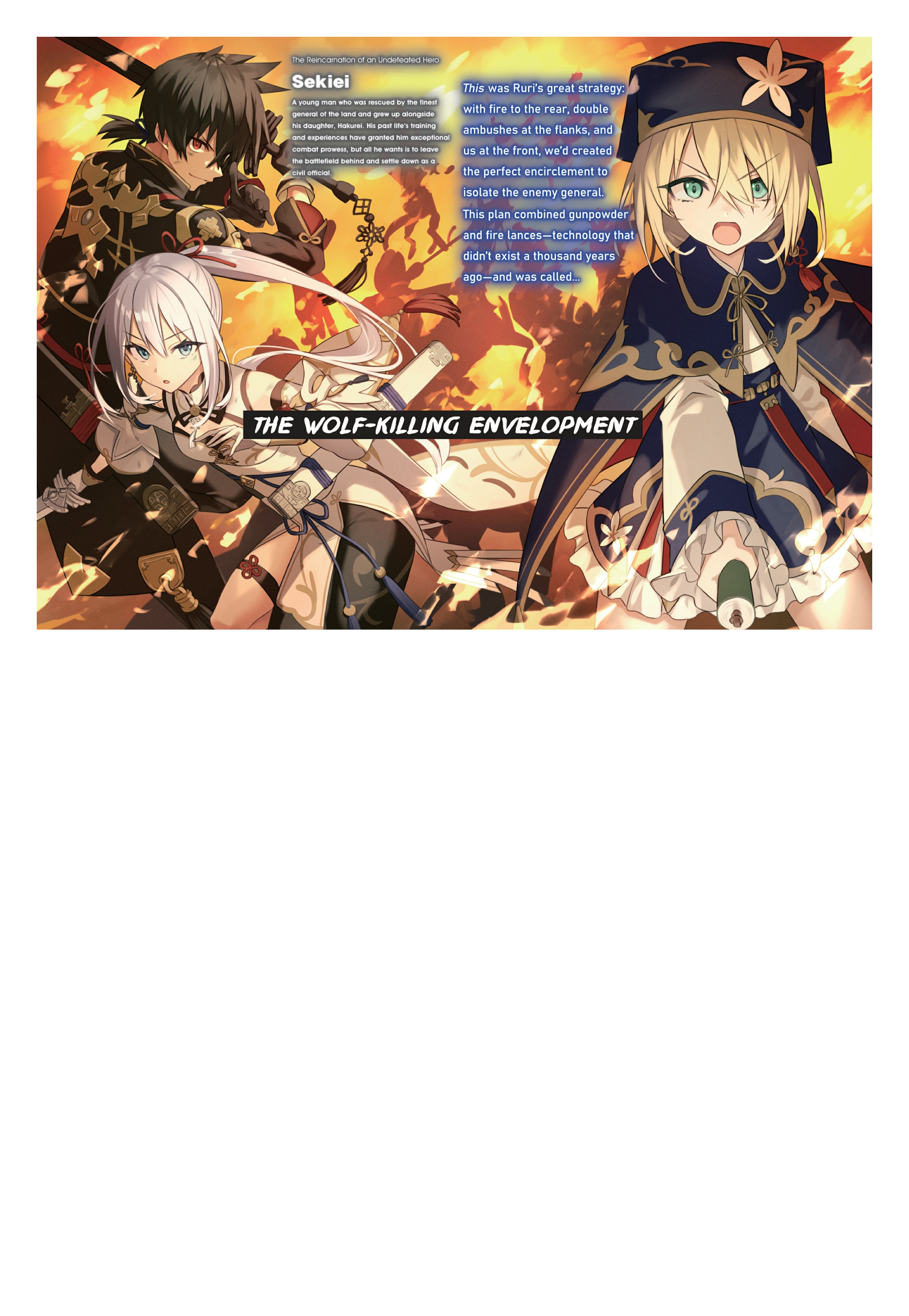


"If I'm not around, then Sekiei will get into all sorts of trouble.

I'm sure he's thinking that he'll do whatever he can to save me and the other soldiers.

He's such a handful."





The Reincarnation of an Undefeated Hero

## Sekiei

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

*This was Ruri's great strategy: with fire to the rear, double ambushes at the flanks, and us at the front, we'd created the perfect encirclement to isolate the enemy general. This plan combined gunpowder and fire lances—technology that didn't exist a thousand years ago—and was called...*

## THE WOLF-KILLING ENVELOPMENT



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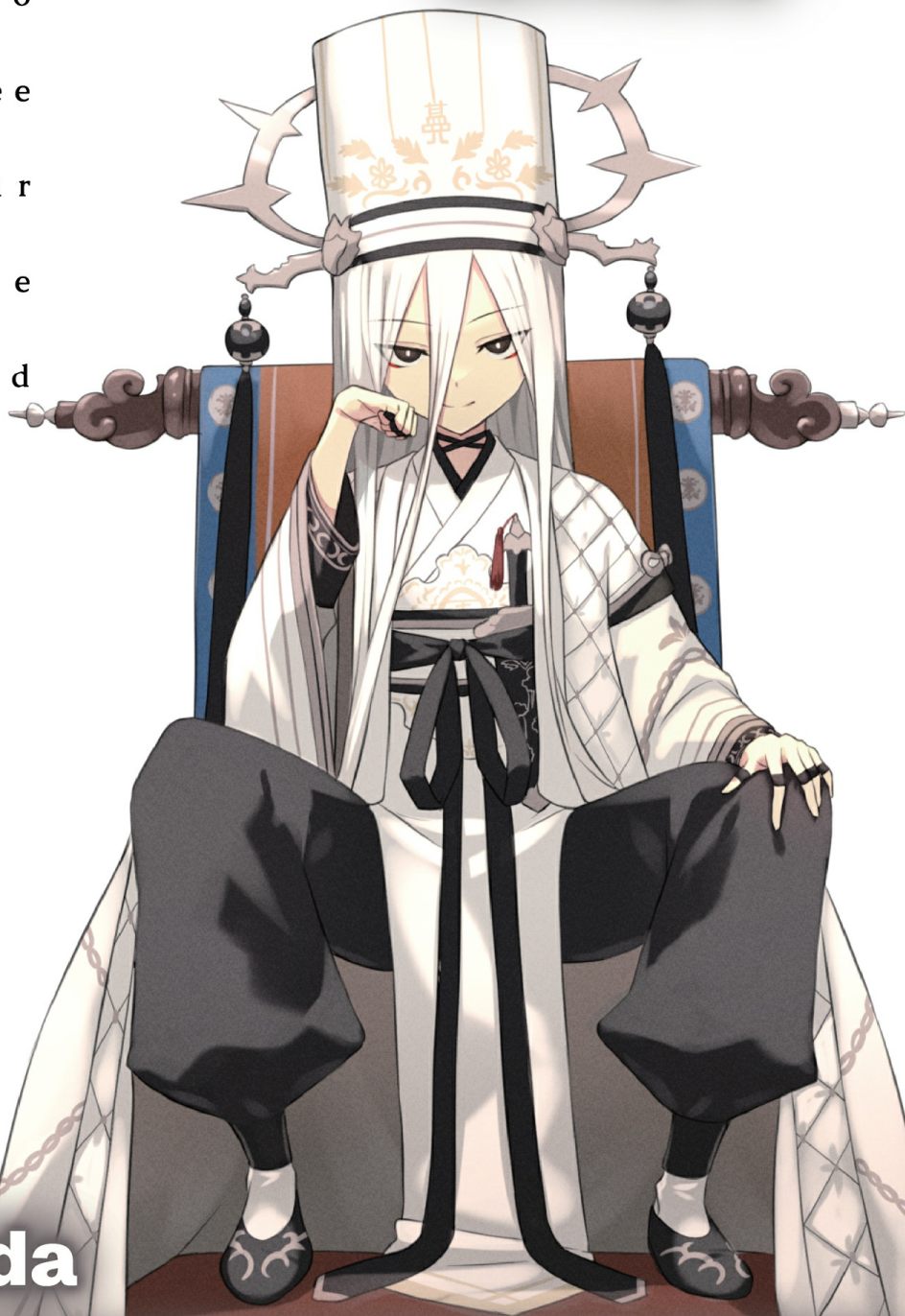
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*“Chou Tairan’s son and daughter  
may appear as well. If they do, evaluate  
their strength and then kill them.*

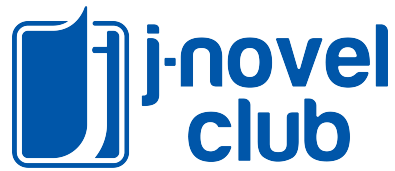
*Tigers must be killed while  
they are still young.”*



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.



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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars: Volume 2

by Riku Nanano

Translated by Stephanie Liu Edited by Suzie Paige

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