



RIKU NANANO
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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

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The Inheritor of the White Star

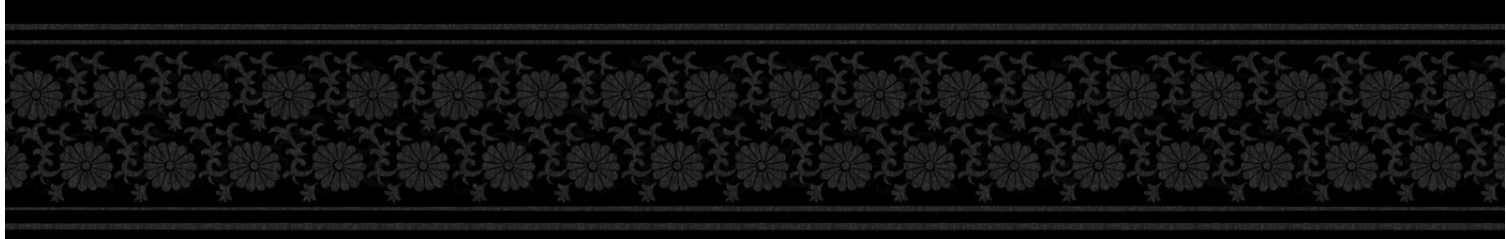
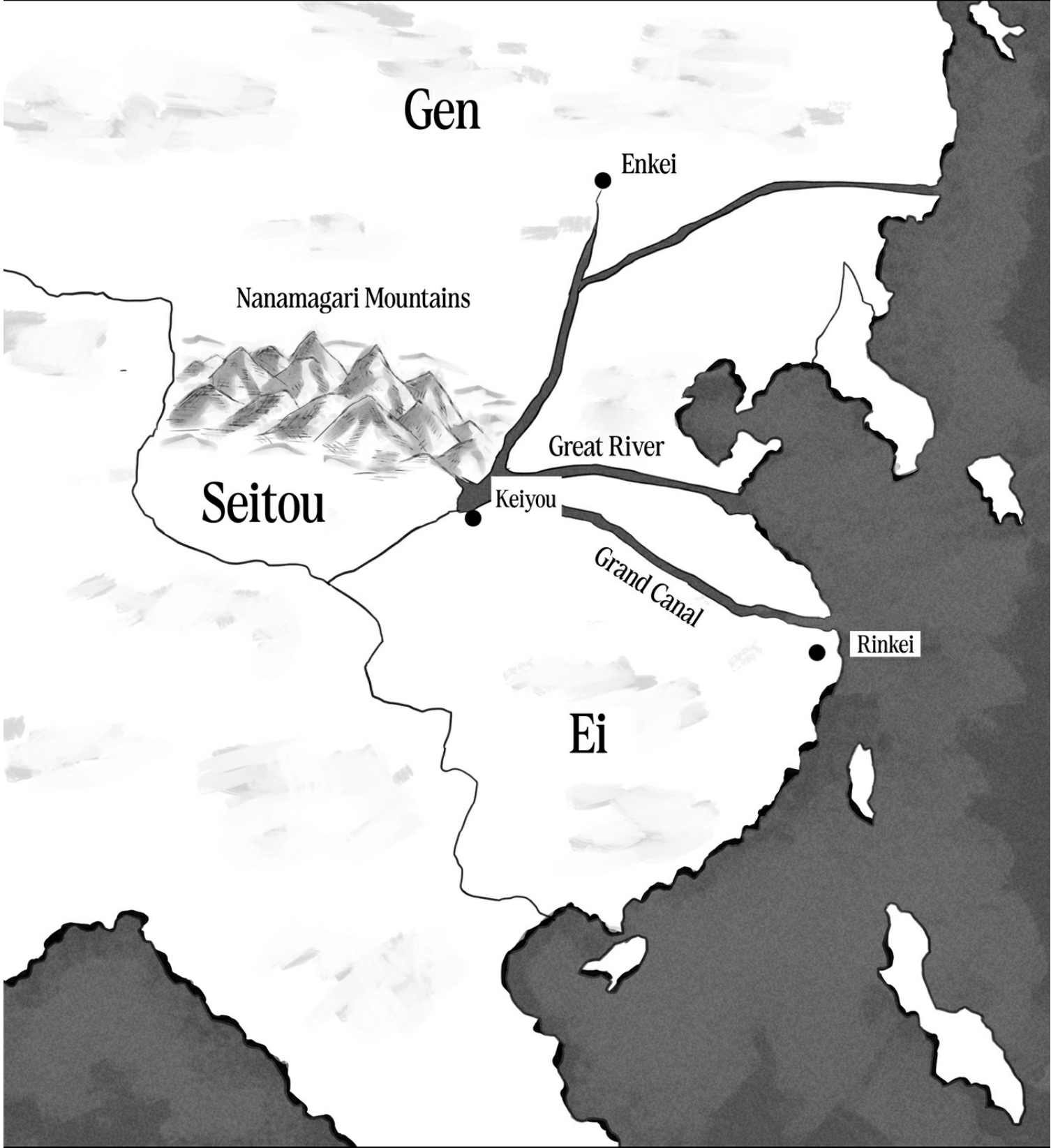
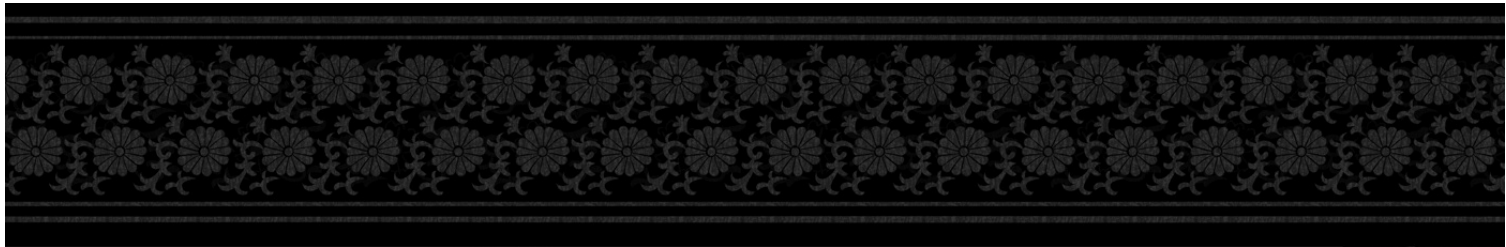
Chou Hakurei

The heiress of a family dedicated to protecting the border. Ever since she was a child, she's been a talented fighter and sharp student. Due to her beauty as well as her serious and kind personality, she's beloved by the populace. She maintains an honest and straightforward image thanks to her heritage, only letting down her guard and acting selfishly around Sekiei.

The Reincarnation of an Undeclared Hero

Sekiei

A young man who was rescued by the finest general of the land and grew up alongside his daughter, Hakurei. He boasts exceptional combat prowess from a combination of his training and his past life's experiences, but just wants to settle down as a civil official far away from the battlefield. Though he acts crude and laid-back, he is able to think things through in a calm and rational manner.



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*“I’m impressed
that you were able
to recognize me
in that mob!”*



The Merchant Prodigy

Ou Meirin

The daughter of the Ou family, an up-and-coming family of great merchants. Despite her small size—barring a particular pair of assets—she’s a natural salesman and has a sharp sense for potential investments. She has a life debt toward Sekiei, but she also highly values the cold and analytical part of him buried underneath his facade.

Prologue

“Stop running, you traitor! I’ll show no mercy if you continue to res— Gah!”

At the lead cavalryman’s yell from behind me, I, Kou Eihou and the former Great General of the Tou Empire, turned around while still atop my horse and in the same movement, released an arrow from my bow. It struck true, piercing through the left shoulder of the cavalryman at the front of the group of pursuers.

His scream rang out through the pale darkness of the waning night and the cold air of the northern lands. The man fell off his horse, along with the lantern that had been hanging from his saddle. If this had been the battlefield, my arrow would’ve pierced his skull. My vision was compromised thanks to the darkness, but that had no bearing on my aim. I simply didn’t want to kill a fellow citizen of the Tou Empire, even if he was trying to catch me.

I maneuvered my horse using only my legs and continued to shoot arrow after arrow at my pursuers. With every shot my cloak and black armor—both dirtied by the blood of my attackers—rippled, as did the twin swords hanging from my belt. One sword was sheathed in black, the other white.

The remaining cavalymen slowed down in surprise at the arrows suddenly digging into their arms and legs until they came to a complete stop. I heard someone cluck a tongue in irritation at being forced to give up the chase. It looked like none of them had learned mounted archery.

“To think the day would come where I would be regarded as a traitor...” I muttered to myself as I nocked another arrow on the heavy bow in my hands. The garrison captain of Routou, the northernmost city of the Tou Empire and the place where I had planned to spend the night, had shoved the weapon into my hands as I made my escape. Spring was close, but the wastelands were cold at dawn and my breath came out in clouds of white. If things had gone to plan, I would’ve been catching up on sleep in a nice, warm room...

Twenty years ago in Routou, my childhood friend Ou Eifuu—who now worked

as the imperial chancellor for the Tou Empire—and the previous emperor—who died seven years ago—vowed to unify the country. The last time anyone accomplished the task had been during the age of the gods.

I experienced my first battlefield at fifteen and upon my return, the former emperor granted me my swords. Before I knew it, I had become the Great General, running from one end of the country to the other while overseeing its military affairs. Eifuu had mostly been in charge of internal business. Together, through multiple perils and troubles, we became known as the Twin Stars.

The dream of unification that the three of us—the previous emperor, Eifuu, and I—vowed that day in Routou underneath the branches of a massive peach tree said to have lived a thousand years had been close enough to taste. Tou had grown so large that apart from En, in the far north, and Sai, which was just south of the grand river bisecting the country and barely managing to hold on to its independence, the empire had taken over all the other provinces in the area.

My twin swords had even started to be referred to as the Heavenly Swords—the swords that would unify the lands beneath the skies.

And yet, the empire had not seen growth since the previous emperor's death almost a decade ago. The current emperor had no intention of unifying the country. It had been a long time since I lost my position as the Great General, and I had not seen Eifuu for several years despite the close friendship we'd shared in the past.

Grief welled in my heart even as I continued to shoot arrow after arrow into the darkness. Screams rang out once again.

"H-How are the arrows hitting us?!"

"P-Put out the torches!"

"We have too many wounded! We don't have enough men who can fight!"

"Hide behind your shields! If he seriously wanted to kill us, then he would've already done so!"

I held my arrow on my bow and analyzed the enemy forces. The majority of them were greenhorns who had never experienced true combat. The few who

had had obviously never engaged in a mounted battle at this time of night, when the darkness would impede one's vision. None of them were capable of continuing the chase.

"They're weak," I murmured to myself as I lowered my bow. "I never imagined that the emperor's personal army would ever become this pathetic. They could've used any number of strategies if they wanted me dead for sure. Yet they didn't have the courage to assassinate me in the city, choosing instead to come up with a fake mission like 'Scout out the northern lands in preparation for next spring's invasion'? No, you sent me here on purpose... So this is how much you hate me?"

I couldn't finish giving voice to my thoughts and instead, I pulled on the reins. The twin stars shimmered in the northern skies as the night continued to fade towards morning. I turned my horse back around and hurried towards my destination.

I left my post as Tou's general the year after the last emperor died. His successor must've been tired of his advisors' insistence that he conquer Sai as soon as possible; he had implicitly requested my departure, so I first relinquished my title. Then, I gave up my military authority and the territory that had been mine to govern.

Officially, I was retired. Though Eifuu and I had once argued about my decision, the great imperial chancellor in charge of the empire's political affairs couldn't understand me, nor could I understand him.

I ran my fingers over the black and white sheaths at my belt. The Heavenly Swords were the only things left to me. These were the only belongings that I couldn't bear to part with.

"THERE HE IS!!! KILL HIM!!!"

A young man's voice rang out from before me, and scores of fresh cavalrymen descended from the hill.

An ambush!

As I urged my horse forward, I started to think from the viewpoint of an army's commander. This was, including the assassins, the fifth squad sent after

me. They could've simply overwhelmed me at the start with sheer manpower—I was only one man, after all. It seemed that the military's budget cuts over the past seven years had affected the commanders, as well as the soldiers' training. At the same time, I could be certain of the fact that these were not Eifuu's orders.

I considered the cavalymen's fast approach. The morning fog was starting to set in, but I would still have no trouble hitting them with my arrows. However, I shouldered my bow and instead held aloft the spear that was hanging from my saddle.

"Hyah!"

With the reins held in my left hand, I ordered my horse into a gallop. Routou's young garrison leader—whom I had apparently saved in the past—had chosen me a fine horse.

I can only hope that he won't get put on trial for this later...

With that thought in mind, I charged straight into the fog and towards my pursuers.

"Ah?!"

"Gah!"

"Ow!"

"Wha—?!"

I darted right through the front lines of the enemy squad and, using the shaft of my spear, knocked several of the pursuers off their horses when I passed them. One of them tried to counterattack with his sword, but I deftly dodged it, heeling my horse around. With the fog beginning to clear I could see the shocked faces of the soldiers, as if they couldn't believe what just happened.

"We'll unify this war-torn land and save the people suffering under the cruelties of the government, the foreigners, and the bandits!" That had been the vow we made under that peach tree. It doesn't look like we'll be fulfilling that dream, but even so!

With the spear still held in my right arm, I lifted the weapon into the air and

announced myself.

“I am the former Great General of the Tou Empire, Kou Eihou! If any of you greenhorns think you’re good enough to take my head, then come and try!”

“I suppose I can stop here.”

I’d finally reached my destination after using a hidden game trail that my friends and I had run during our youth. I stopped my horse, who was exhausted after breaking through so many blockades and skirmishes. It was already almost morning. Before me was a large peach tree, which had grown in such a way that it appeared to be consuming the entire cliff, along with a massive boulder covered in moss. In the distance, I could hear the roaring of several waterfalls.

It had been twenty years since I had last visited Routou, the birthplace of the Tou Empire. This was where the former emperor, Eifuu, and I made our vow to unify the country. Routou hadn’t changed a bit. The old tree’s pale pink blossoms bloomed year round and, along with the tree itself, were revered for their long life. This morning they created an ethereal sight in the pale dawn.

Back then, when we’d made our vow, we weren’t afraid of anything. The only thing on our minds had been our ambitious dream.

Now those days seem so nostalgic...

I got off the horse and removed its saddle. Hugging it gently around its neck I said, “Thank you, you truly saved me. Now go. They won’t hesitate to hurt you if you stay with me.”

The horse’s intelligent eyes narrowed before it nickered apologetically and turned back to make its way to the game trail. I watched the horse go and then placed my pack on the ground in front of the massive tree. My quiver was empty, my spear broken. Judging by the shimmering twin stars in the northern sky, dimmed with the setting moon, and the morning sun on the horizon, the night was almost over.

The pursuers were probably closing in on this location. But even so...

“This place is the only thing that’s still the same.”

Peach trees didn't have a long life span. However, despite that, *this* tree continued to stay standing. According to legend, it had lived for a thousand years without ever getting close to withering away. It only made sense that the area around it would be called Routou—old peach.

It didn't take long for the wind to bring with it the scent of new dirt. I looked towards the mountain path, which had grown broader beneath the feet of the soldiers.

"You're finally here," I said.

With shields at the front of the line, a group of soldiers cut through the morning fog to approach me. There were approximately a thousand of them in all. To think they would send out the empire's most elite forces in order to capture a single man, and one who was no longer even the general...

How impressive.

A young female general, still on horseback, was approaching the middle of the area we were in.

With a hand to my mouth, I called out. "Stop there! If you continue to advance, then this time, you'll be facing casualties on your side!"

The soldiers in the front lines stopped as if scared by the possibility. Their expressions were tight with nerves—they must've seen the large number of injured pursuers on their way here.

Like I figured, the majority of them lack real experience.

Still, once the female general in her ornate helmet jabbed her swagger stick forward and barked out orders, the line started to slowly advance. I wasn't able to hear her over the waterfalls, but her order was probably something like "Don't be afraid!" It had been a long time since the team of senior imperial guards, whom the former emperor himself had led, were forced to disband. So it seemed that more and more people didn't actually know what I'd accomplished on the many battlegrounds I'd survived.

"Aging is a sad aspect of life..." My lips twisted in a wry grin. "And here I thought I was still able to keep up with the youth." I could see the formation the soldiers were finishing setting up to keep me boxed in on the cliff, even

though they were some distance away from me. “How crude. You could’ve at least offered me the courtesy of using a formation with a bit more work put into it. Hmm, but what to do.”

The only weapons I had on hand were the twin swords hanging from my belt. The soldiers around me were technically on my side, so I couldn’t very well use the swords against them. However, the same did not keep the young general next to the battle flag from drawing her own sword.

“He no longer has anywhere to run, nor does he have any of his arrows!” she yelled. “Charge him and kill that traitor!!!”

The soldiers in formation, as well as the junior commanders, all looked uncertain. Their breath caught in their throats as they froze. I could see some of the senior soldiers I recognized blatantly twisting their faces in obvious distaste; *they* knew perfectly well what would happen to them if they went up against me in combat.

The general waved her swagger stick again irritably and bellowed, “What are you all doing?! Kill him! The traitor Kou Eihou *must* be killed!!! This is a direct order from His Majesty himself!!!”

I’d heard the words several times tonight, but they still felt like a stab to my chest. If even Eifuu’s right-hand general was saying it, then it was true: the emperor hated me enough that he’d tried to kill me.

Some of the soldiers who had hesitated before were now starting to bravely ascend from the mountain path. For half a heartbeat, I closed my eyes before bringing my right hand to the hilt of the black sword.

The first soldier to reach the top of the cliff raised his sword. “Prepare yourself! Wai— Huh?!” Before he could bring the blade down on me, I had kicked him in the armor shielding his stomach. He backed off, writhing in pain, and then proceeded to tumble down the path, crashing into the nearby soldiers. Still, more approached me from the sides. So be it.

“Don’t pass out, all right?”

They couldn’t avoid the swing of my black sword, the blade still inside of its sheath. Over ten soldiers flew through the air, screaming all the while, and fell

to the ground one by one. Their cries mingled with groans of pain and whimpers of fear. The soldiers who were about to follow up on the assault stopped, too shocked to continue. I stared at them.

“I’m waiting for someone. If you don’t want to die, then don’t come any closer. I don’t want to kill anyone,” I said, warning them off.

The soldiers’ eyes wavered and a large number of them started to back away. There were plenty of familiar faces in the small number of senior soldiers present, and they were the ones whose faces were especially pale.

“What are you doing?!” Despite the female general’s own face turning white, she still tried her best to encourage her soldiers. “He may be as strong as a tiger or a dragon, but he’s only one man. He’s all alone here! Kill the threat against the empire and His Majesty! You must kill him!” It looked like *she* was particularly interested in killing me.

Or...perhaps not. Perhaps her fervor was instead due to her strong loyalty to Eifuu, who had given her the chance to become a general even though she had once been a slave, and a need to make sure his hands remained clean.

I gripped my black sword and bared my teeth. “Very well... You leave me no choice. Take my head and with it, enough honor to elevate your line for generations—”

“WAIT!!!”

A man riding a horse in the most awkward manner leaped out from the game trail. His features were delicate though his hair, streaked with white, was messy, and his jacket was covered in dirt. Underneath her helmet, his general’s face went slack with immense surprise.

“Y-Your Excellency?!” Her voice was shrill. “Wh-Why are you...?!”

The man—Ou Eifuu, my best friend and current political opponent (apparently)—answered in an unbelievably cold tone. “Kougyoku, retreat. I’m ordering you, as the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire. I have something I’d like to discuss with the Tou Empire’s Great General, Kou Eihou. More importantly, this land is where we swore an oath with the great Emperor Hi Gyomei!!! I will not allow any of you to set foot here!!!”

“Understood! I-I apologize...” The general’s entire body shook as she lowered her head and gave a weak swing of her swagger stick. She, along with the grimacing commanders and injured soldiers, started to head back down the mountain and Eifuu continued to watch them go with a stern expression.

When we could no longer see them, he sighed and more or less rolled off of his horse. Then, he bowed his head deeply before me.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Everything that’s been happening, it’s all my fault...”

“Don’t worry about it. Kougyoku’s a nice girl and she had your best interests at heart.” I removed two cups from my pack and, after pouring wine into them, slid one towards my friend. “Let’s drink.”

Our positions in the empire had greatly changed after the former emperor’s death, but we’d spent almost our entire lives together, and the past we shared would never betray us. We were sworn brothers.

Eifuu took the cup from me and drained it. The dim morning light accentuated the bags under his eyes, as well as caught the silver in his hair, making it glow.

“You’ve grown old. Are you sure you’re only thirty-five years old, Your Excellency?” I teased him as I poured him more alcohol. “You don’t look it.”

“I’m in charge of some truly vexing work, unlike a certain great general I know...” Eifuu huffed irritably.

“Politics aren’t my forte. I’m nothing more than a blade.”

“Hmph.” Eifuu drank half of the alcohol in his cup and then roughly snatched the rest of the bottle from me. “You never change... You’re straightforward and don’t hesitate to follow through on your own convictions. That’s precisely why...”

The wind blew, causing countless peach blossoms to dance through the air, the petals reflecting the final vestiges of the night and the faint gleam of the morning sun. It looked exactly like it did back then, twenty years ago.

My sworn brother looked up and fat tears began to stream down his face. His cup fell from his fingers, hitting the ground with a *clang* and shattering. He grabbed me by my shoulders in a tight and painful grip.

“Eihou, my friend, run...! You...a man like you, who cares and fights for this country and its people more than anyone else, must not be killed as a result of false charges like this... You simply mustn’t!”

As soon as I saw the desperation of his face, I realized something.

Ahh... This man... My kind friend, smarter than anyone else in this empire—he must’ve been racking his brains after the emperor ordered him to assassinate me. He probably couldn’t even sleep for worry.

I looked up at the massive peach tree.

“His Majesty...I never thought that kid hates me this much,” I admitted, dropping the formalities just as I would have in the past.

The Tou Empire’s second emperor—the only son of the previous ruler—was a mediocre man in all aspects. I knew that well enough. However, I’d also believed that so long as Eifuu was around, he’d be more than capable of allowing the empire to grow.

My friend lowered his face and after a pause, he said, “You shone too bright. You were sent out to so many battlefields and yet always returned without a single injury, nor did you ever lose. The achievements you racked up as the former emperor’s ‘blade’ are unprecedented. You never change your mind, even when speaking with the emperor; you gave up your title and territory on your own. And though you relinquished your military authority, you refused to give up the Heavenly Swords when ordered to... The emperor never experienced the battlefield. From his point of view, it must’ve felt like you were mocking him.”

“These swords shouldn’t be called the ‘Heavenly Swords,’” I tried to joke. “We haven’t unified the country yet.”

Eifuu didn’t respond to the jest. Instead, he slammed his fist into the nearby boulder.

“Let me tell you the truth,” he said. “Even I...was jealous of you! I used to think to myself, ‘Why did the heavens place Kou Eihou and Ou Eifuu in the same generation?’ Go ahead, laugh. The country respected me as the imperial chancellor, but the only thing that has been pushing me in the seven years since

we lost our first emperor was my envy for you! And look, just look at where that's brought us! I can't even openly save my only friend..."

"I see..."

To tell you the truth, I didn't want to be a military general, someone who could only send my men to their deaths. I wanted to be a civil official like you, Eifuu, and save our people that way... It doesn't seem like the right time to say that, though.

I closed my eyes and slowly unsheathed the twin swords from my belt before walking to stand before the boulder.

The name of the obsidian sword was Black Star, and the name of the alabaster was White Star. They were the only gifts I received from Hi Gyomei —my and Eifuu's deceased best friend—before he became the emperor. They were apparently made during the age of the gods, using stars that'd fallen from the heavens.

My sworn brother blinked at me. "Eihou? What are you—"

"Hah!"

I ignored his question and I swung the swords down upon the boulder that Gyomei used to sit on. I performed the action without any proper form, but I felt the blades sink into the stone regardless. I cut the boulder into two and the pieces tumbled off the cliff and were swallowed up by the waterfall. A huge pillar of water rose up into the air. Droplets fell upon me as I sheathed the Twin Stars and then removed them altogether from my belt.

"Eifuu!" My friend was still standing there as if in shock. I tossed those blades, the twin swords destined to become the Heavenly Swords, to him. Then I opened my mouth. "These two still have work to do, it seems. I'll leave the rest to you!"

"Wait, what? Eihou? What are you talking about?" My friend's voice was shaking.

I stood at the edge of the cliff and winked. "Don't worry, I'm sure you can do it. Oh, that reminds me. It's about time for you to go find yourself a nice, pretty wife."

“A-All right. All right, I will! Just don’t do anything stupid!”

The white glow of the morning sun illuminated the clearing, chasing away the last of the night and causing the stars to fade. Eifuu’s desperate expression implored me to reconsider, but I shook my head.

“A blade is not what’s necessary for the empire’s future.” I smiled at my friend. He looked like he was about to burst into tears, much like he had twenty years ago, the first day he stood on the battlefield. “*You* are necessary, Ou Eifuu. Fulfill my—*our*—dream, and unify the lands under the heavens to create a country where the people can eat and sleep without worry. We went through a lot, but I had a blast. Well...see ya!”

“EIHOU!!!”

With my best friend’s cry ringing in my ears, I took a running start and flung myself into the air. I looked above me and watched as one of the twin stars fell from the sky. Then I was swallowed up by the waterfall, surrounded on all sides by frigid water.

It wasn’t so bad a life.

If I could live another one...I want to become a civil official like Eifuu rather than a warrior who kills on the battlefield, so that I can save people using politics. Heh, likely I won’t be able to attain a higher position than a local magistrate.

With those as my final thoughts, deep in the murky darkness, I, Kou Eihou, lost consciousness.



Chapter One

“Now then, we’ll start our mock battle. It may be one against three, but there’s no need to hold back. Does that sound all right to you, Lady Hakurei?”

“Yes.” The voice that rang out was sharp and cool. “I have no issues with that.”

The answer carried across the training grounds on the outskirts of Keiyou, capital city of Koshuu. Located in the north of the Ei Empire, Koshuu was situated south of the river that bisected the continent. The voice who answered the young and serious-looking captain’s question belonged to a beautiful girl who wielded a lovely sword. She was Hakurei, the eldest daughter of the famous general, Chou Tairan. Due to his accomplishments in protecting the Ei Empire from foreigners, he’d been given the title of National Shield.

Hakurei’s long silver hair, tied up with a crimson ribbon, reflected the sunlight. Though many outlanders came and went in Koshuu, very few had eyes like Hakurei’s—a deep azure that housed a keen intelligence. Her well-proportioned body was hidden away under white fatigues and armor and still she looked elegant and dignified. The soldiers watching over the training grounds from the ramparts and the turrets couldn’t suppress their sighs of awe.

I, Sekiei, was nothing more than an adopted son of the Chou family. Though we weren’t related by blood, I thought of Hakurei as my own younger sister. And even with my bias for her as family, I found her beautiful. Not once in over a thousand years, going back to when Kou Eihou was alive, had there been a girl as stunning as Hakurei. Not only was she hardworking, training every single day, but she was also kind to both the servants and the soldiers of the Chou family.

In the past, people believed in a superstition warning against women with silver hair and blue eyes, stating that they’d be responsible for toppling the country. These days no one thought much of such things, and the residents of Keiyou deeply respected Hakurei.

Is she really sixteen, just like I am? Could it be that she’s just like me, and has

memories from her past life?

That was what I secretly thought about her. Mostly because she'd always been weirdly strict to me and only me... Well in any case, it didn't seem like my impression about Hakurei was off the mark.

The soldiers watching yelled their support—while taking advantage of the moment to tease me, as well.

“Lady Hakurei, please do your best!”

“You're as beautiful as always today!”

“Please help Sekiei grow a backbone and stop him from prattling on about nonsense like how he's going to become a local magistrate!”

“It's so unfair how he got to stay in the city for half a year all by himself!”

“You're going to become an official in the army, right?”

“Young master, you're going to train after this as well, aren't you?”

The majority of the soldiers were male, but not all; there were a small number of females as well. Since Keiyou was at the border of the Ei Empire, both men and women had to bear arms.

Wait, what did they say? Training? Uh, yeah, in your dreams! I'm busy reading the books I got from the city!

I thought back to the words of the older girl I met while in the city. “Uh-huh, I see... So you want to get an office job in the future. In other words, you want to become a civil official! Then it's important for you to read some difficult books. Here, I'll sell you these ones for cheap! ♪” She had her fair share of personality problems, but I couldn't deny the fact that she had the insight to become a very skilled civil official.

I wasn't able to become a civil official in my past life, but I'll definitely make that dream come true in this one! Besides, I didn't even want to come out during training. I'm only here thanks to Hakurei.

“This is the bare minimum of responsibilities you must fulfill as someone living with the Chou family,” she'd said, and with such a cool expression that I'd had no choice.

As I finished my thought, the silver-haired princess suddenly turned around to stare at me with narrowed eyes. I looked right back at her. No words were exchanged between us. However, I could feel the unspoken pressure in her beautiful gaze.

“I’m the one training and you’re not even going to look at me? Hmm? I see...”

I couldn’t withstand it and looked away, awkward. It’d been ten years since my adoptive father, Chou Tairan, found me on a battlefield and took me in. It’d be a whole other matter if I had to face off against her in actual combat because at least thanks to my memories from my past life, I had some skill in martial arts. However, I’d never once managed to win against Hakurei’s silent pressure.

I played with my black bangs and flapped my hand. “Um... Isn’t it about time for you guys to start?”

After a long, frosty pause, Hakurei replied. “I suppose.”

She walked slowly towards the soldiers, taking one purposeful step at a time. The young captain serving as the arbitrator looked at me as if he wasn’t sure what to do, so I nodded slightly.

“Now then,” he called out at my mark, “begin!”

At the captain’s call, the mock battle between Hakurei and the soldiers started. The three soldiers held aloft their wooden spears and slowly approached their opponent. Judging by their movements, they were new soldiers, freshly recruited. Hakurei, however, stood completely still; the only thing moving was her silver hair, blowing in the spring breeze.

Yeah, she’s not gonna lose this one.

In the recent past, our empire, the Ei Empire, had unified almost all of the provinces—barring a single, remote piece of land. And then about fifty years ago, the Gen Empire suddenly rose to power. The people in the Gen Empire were mostly horsemen, originating from the old En province north of the river. The Gen Empire took land and territory from the Ei Empire, chasing us south, all the way to where the Sai province used to be.

The Ei Empire’s greatest desire was to see our lands reclaimed. Right now

there was a lull in the fighting, but I could say for certain that we would be back to war sometime soon. When that happened, it would be the Chou family's army that would be at the front lines. The only thing separating our land from the Gen Empire's army was the river, so here in Koshuu we'd been at a standoff for years.

"Come what may, we need to train our soldiers!" That was father's philosophy.

I happened to agree with it. After all, it would be nice if I could one day visit Routou whenever I wanted to again, since that was where my past life met his end. Unbelievably enough, that huge peach tree was still alive, in bloom.

As my thoughts wandered, Hakurei managed to corner all three soldiers against the ramparts with nothing more than her sword techniques. It seemed that she'd gotten in quite a bit of training during the six months I was away.

I knew my expression was softening against my will at the sight of her, and I resumed my reading while sitting in the shade of the tent. I was in the middle of reading historical records about the Tou Empire, from the time it unified the lands under the heavens to its eventual fall.

"The Twin Stars Vanquish Gyou Country in a Single Battle." That's right. That's right!

I could only remember bits and pieces of it. We'd managed to cross the Nanamyaku Mountains and succeeded in our assault on the enemy's capital. Eifuu had been the one to come up with the plan, and I had been the one to carry it out. It was a critical victory in—

"Ahem!"

From behind me, an old man loudly and deliberately cleared his throat.

"Young master, if you don't pay close attention, Lady Hakurei will get mad at you later. She's already unhappy with you for spending half a year in the city! *She* spent that entire time training at Lord Chou's orders."

"Raigen... Don't say such scary things. I even wrote letters to her, didn't I? Granted... I only wrote them once a month..."

“Oh yes? If I recall, you initially promised to write home once every two weeks.”

While still trying to come up with excuses, I placed a pretty feather that Hakurei gave me in between the pages of my history book. I hadn't even noticed the approach of the large, white-haired, and white-bearded man. Raigen was not only father's deputy commander, but he also served as protector to me and Hakurei.

“Yeah, well. You know, I was busy with my own things...” As I spoke, I looked back down to the training ground.

The soldiers were cheering Hakurei on as she attacked, moving as if she were dancing. The flash of her sword caught the sunlight, as did her long silver hair, and both shimmered like jewels.

It was a given that between a sword and a spear, the latter had the advantage thanks to its superior reach—plus, even if they weren't well trained, she was up against three opponents. In the majority of situations, quantity would win against quality. However...

“Too slow!”

Spinning on the spot, Hakurei parried all of the spears thrust towards her with ease. She was quick to turn the tables on them. Backed into a corner, the three looked shocked at what had happened, speechless.

“Ohhh!” I couldn't help but clap my hands and offer my honest praise. “She's really improved over these last six months!”

“Yes, she has,” Raigen said. “Lately, there have been bandits and the like appearing close to Keiyou's borders and the young miss has been quite concerned about them...actually, no.” He rubbed at his white beard, his gaze softening. “She's likely showing off for your sake, young master.”

What a weird thing to say. Seems like both Gramps and the other people working for the Chou family have misunderstood my relationship with Hakurei. Yeah, it's true that ever since I came back from the city, she's been monopolizing basically all my time, but...

I ran my hands through my own black hair, messing it up. At the same

moment, the beautiful, silver-haired girl on the practice grounds before me was delivering the final blow to the three soldiers. Their spears flew through the air along with their cries of dismay.

“Ah!”

“Gah!”

“W-We lose!”

“Stop!” As soon as the cornered soldiers’ spears landed tip-first in the ground, the young captain raised his left arm. “Lady Hakurei is the winner!”

The air was filled with the loud cheering of the audience, but the little princess’s chilly expression didn’t change an inch, nor did she put away her weapon. Instead she looked up, met my eyes, and smiled.

I have...a really bad feeling about this.

“Now then, Sekiei. It’s your turn.”

My bad feeling was right on the mark, then. She even made sure to call my name out in front of everyone.

I held my history book up higher and tried to reject her invitation by pretending that I didn’t hear anything. Too bad then that a practice sword, still in its sheath, was placed right onto my table. My head shot up and I saw the old white-haired, white-bearded general staring down at me with a wide smile on his face.

“Young master, please use this. The edge has been removed, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Wha— G-Gramps, I thought I could at least count on *you* to be on my side!”

“Oh, I’m on someone’s side, all right. In this case, it’s Lady Hakurei’s.”

“Y-You traitor!!!”

Despite my yell, I could hear the approaching footsteps of a young girl. They were light, as if she was in a good mood, but perhaps they only sounded that way because my ears weren’t working.

Hakurei reached out and placed a pale hand on my shoulder. “Remember

what father said. ‘Come what may, we need to train our soldiers’—so come when I call for you, jeez.” The last few words came out in a hiss.

“All right...” Forced to submit to the princess’s intimidation tactics, I slowly staggered to my feet, pretending to wipe tears away from my eyes. Together we walked to the middle of the training ground. Immediately, the officers and men started to jeer.

“Young master, this is punishment for playing around in the city!”

“Leaving Lady Hakurei here and going to the city all by yourself is surely a serious crime.”

“Thanks for all the yummy food, though!”

“That wasn’t him. That was thanks to the city’s Ou Commerce Guild...”

Unfortunately, no one in the crowd was willing to stand on my side. How cruel! Already some distance away from me and ready for the mock battle to start, Hakurei tossed her long silver hair, a prim look on her face. The crimson ribbon I’d gifted her before I went to the city flowed with the movement.

So this is what you’ve been plotting, dragging me out to the practice grounds!

I knew that I was making a sour face as I silently cursed my beautiful childhood friend. “Fine then,” I called. “It’ll be your responsibility if someone gets hurt!”

“Oh? How very confident indeed, Mister Freeloader. Do you really think that you can win against me, when I’ve been training every day for the past six months?”

She *looked* the same as she usually did, but she couldn’t pull the wool over my eyes. I had no idea why, but there was some reason for her good mood! I placed my hands on my hips and stuck my chest out.

“Hmph! Foolish little princess. The ‘someone’ who’ll get hurt is *obviously* me!”

“Did your precious books not tell you that fools are the only ones who call other people names? All right, hurry up and unsheathe your sword, please. Everyone’s waiting.”

She shut me down without even a second thought. Chou Hakurei was smarter

than me. Frankly, as far as talents went she had me beat, especially when it came to our potential as civil officials. My expression grew surly, and I puffed out my cheeks.

“Fine, fine...” I said under my breath. “You were so cute when you were just a brat, like a little sister should be...”

Hakurei’s shoulders twitched. She obviously heard my quiet muttering, but her expression was quick to revert to its usual calm.

“Let me say this.” The words spilled out while she fiddled with the crimson ribbon at the back of her head. “Cuter when I was small? Hmph. I believe that even now, my appearance would be considered quite attractive. Also, I’m your *older* sister, and I definitely do not need a younger brother such as yourself.”

I made an unfortunate sound at the back of my throat. “C-Could you at least pretend that you didn’t hear what I—”

“I could not,” Hakurei interrupted me sternly.

Y-You didn’t have to be that mean... And here I thought we’d been getting along pretty well.

“Um...can we start?” In the midst of my ruminations, the young captain serving as the arbitrator called out to me. In this, he was pretty similar to Raigen.

Turning to face each other once more, Hakurei and I answered at the same time.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, sure.”

“Yes, we can.”

My sister offered a brief smile. “For the past six months,” she said, “I’ve dreamed of this. Please hurry up and let yourself be defeated. One of the books in your collection included a story about a lazy freeloader who was beaten up; it helped me imagine this moment.”

“You force me to fight, and that’s all you have to say to me?! Also, who gave you permission to read my books while I was in the city?!”

She pressed a slender finger against her cheek and blinked her sapphire eyes.

Then, in a baffled tone, she asked, “What do you mean? Everything you own is mine. What’s the issue?”

“Th-Then...then, what about *your* stuff?” I asked.

Dropping the innocent act, Hakurei spun her sword and snapped back, “It’s *mine*, of course. Please refrain from asking such silly questions.”

“H-How tyrannical! Everyone, Chou Hakurei is a tyrant!”

“Don’t worry, that’s not an issue. I’m only a tyrant when I’m dealing with you. Now, the order to start, please.”

“Wha—?! Hey, listen, you—”

“B-Begin!”

Before I could even finish my complaints, the mock battle had started and Hakurei disappeared from my line of sight. Darting towards me, her body pressed so low to the ground that her chin was practically grazing dirt, she slashed at me. The move was sharp and direct.

“Whoa!”

I barely managed to dodge her sudden attack by twisting my body. I backed away, dodging her consecutive strikes, each one barely missing me.

“Practice as if it’s a real match, and fight a real match as if it’s practice,” Hakurei taunted, her smile growing even wider.

Hooray for father’s combat education!

The practice sword swung past my bangs and I sacrificed a few strands of my hair in order to avoid the attack. The problem was that even a weapon lacking an edge remained dangerous in the hands of a master. Hakurei was a perfect example of that. I jumped backward, putting a lot of distance between us, and tried once again to state my piece.

“Y-You’re way too serious about this! I’ll die if you hit me!”

Hakurei wasn’t swayed by my words. She wasn’t even out of breath. “This wouldn’t be good practice unless we’re serious about it,” she answered.

“Besides—”

Closing the gap between us in a single leap, she swung her sword in a merciless horizontal slash. I leaned backward and saw the blade pass above my face. I regained my footing and tried to get behind her, but she managed to stop me with her sword.

She offered me a beautiful smile. “It’s not as if I can hit you, right?” she said. “But for sure, today is the day I’ll make you unsheathe your weapon!”

All members of the Chou family had to go through combat training starting when they were young, but in all that time I’d never drawn my weapon in any of my mock battles against Hakurei.

“If I use it...” I muttered after a short silence, “will you let me off the hook—”

“I will not.”

“That’s so unfair!”

Hakurei resumed her furious yet elegant attacks, still looking as if she were dancing rather than fighting. I managed to avoid them all with only footwork, but unlike the mock battles we had six months ago, now I was forced to back up more and more.

This is why I hate prodigies! The speed at which they improve is simply ridiculous!

I had always had an advantage over her in terms of martial talent due to the experiences of my past life, but, much to my chagrin, she was close to surpassing that with sheer aptitude.

Well, seeing how happy Hakurei is when she gets to practice with me isn’t the worst thing in—

“Huh?”

My back met resistance and I realized I was cornered against the ramparts. Hakurei’s eyes sparkled. She flourished her steel, taking a single step forward before charging at me without mercy, both hands on the hilt and the tip of the sword aimed right for me. As she came on, she yelled.

“I win!”

Footwork alone isn’t enough to dodge this.

My body moved on its own and with my right hand, I grabbed Hakurei's arm.

"Huh?!"

I spun on the spot, reversing our positions. Lightly, I placed my left hand against Hakurei's neck. Her ponytail waved with the movement, as did its ribbon. Her sword was embedded into the stone of the ramparts.

Cold sweat poured down my face, but I managed a casual-sounding "Cool, I won again today. Are you not going to put on the floral ornament I sent you from the city?"

For a long time, Hakurei didn't say anything. "I will," she finally offered. "I've stored it away..." Her last words were muttered: "I wasn't able to make him draw his weapon yet again."

She had been in such a good mood earlier, but as she pulled her sword from the wall and sheathed it, nodding at my words, she seemed miffed. I turned my attention towards the young captain, who was staring at us with his mouth open. With a look, I signaled for him to do his job—this was apparently his first time seeing one of our mock battles.

Though his reaction was delayed, the arbitrator raised his left hand and, in a squeaky voice, yelled, "L-Lord Sekiei is the winner!"

The soldiers raised their voices in an excited roar and murmurs erupted from around the practice grounds.

"I knew you'd be able to do it, young master!"

"I can't believe Lady Hakurei lost..."

"Um, Captain, why does Lord Sekiei want to work as a civil official?"

"Becoming one is his childhood dream. I'm sure he'll give up on it soon."

"If we have those two *and* General Chou on our side, then there's nothing to fear from Gen!"

Ahh... I messed up again. If I wanted to become a civil official, then there was no need to win this match. Maybe I really was an idiot. Unsure of how I should feel, I looked down at Hakurei's head.

“I sent you a hair ribbon from the city as well, didn’t I? It was a white-and-blue one that looked like it’d suit you. You wrote me a letter to tell me that you received the floral ornament, but did you not get the hair ribbon?”

“I did. It’s just that Keiyou is quite dusty during this season and I...I didn’t want it to get dirty...”

“Hmm?”

I couldn’t really hear her words as she trailed off and blinked at her in confusion.

“It’s nothing,” Hakurei finally added. “In any case, yes, I received the hair ribbon.” She crossed her arms and turned away from me, managing to look both miffed and maybe pleased at the same time.

Women are an enigma... I never understood them, even in my past life. I sighed.

“Silence!” Raigen’s severe voice rang out over the spacious practice grounds. In an instant, everyone stopped speaking and straightened their backs. The veteran general looked over the soldiers and then grinned.

“You’ve all witnessed Lady Hakurei and Lord Sekiei’s skills, yes? The Twin Stars of the current generation fight for us—for Ei! In due time we shall surely conquer the north, and when that time comes, it shall be us, the Chou army, who will stand at the vanguard! Everyone, train hard so you don’t hold them back!”

All of the soldiers raised their arms in salute. “Yes, General Raigen!”

I expected nothing less from Raigen and his years of experience. *But, uh, I plan on being a civil official, not a military one, so it’s no matter to me...*

A slender arm reached out to me and grabbed the collar of my uniform.

“Hm? Hakurei?”

“Your clothes are rumpled. Please get it together. You are a member of the Chou family, after all.” Hakurei’s voice was as calm as it always was, and there was no hint of anxiety in her blue eyes. In my opinion, *she* was the one who should get it together and care a little more about what she was doing. I was a

healthy sixteen-year-old boy, and I could feel my heart start to beat faster at her proximity.

Will whomever she marries have to deal with her doing this every day in public? Surely, he'd die of a heart attack before reaching old age.

Even as I sympathized with my future brother-in-law, I changed the subject. “Uh... I can take a break later, right? I want to read my history book.”

“A book on the decline of the short-lived Tou Empire, the first country to unify all the provinces under a single flag? Did you purchase it in the city?”

“No way,” I said, “it’s too expensive for me. I managed to convince Meirin to let me borrow it from her. You remember her from my letters, right? I happened to rescue her when she was attacked by some pirates and...er, Lady Hakurei?”

The moment I mentioned Meirin—the daughter of a great merchant who helped me out during my time in the city—I felt the air grow tense. Gramps Raigen had been on his way to us, but he must’ve sensed the change in atmosphere as well, because he was quick to walk away. Hakurei’s hand on my collar tightened and she stared at me with eyes as cold as a blizzard. A chill ran down my spine.

“Yes,” she said. “I know. It was the story of how you had your first battle before I did, fought in a place I couldn’t have reached, wasn’t it? Now then, your break is over. It’s time to practice archery and after that, equestrianism.”

“Huh? No, I...”

“‘Yes.’ That’s the only answer you can give. Isn’t that right, Mister Freeloader, who broke his promise and only sent a single letter per month?”

I swallowed a strangled sound; she’d hit me right where it hurt. I looked around for someone to save me, but all of the soldiers were grinning at us and I was alone behind enemy lines. With a sigh, I held up my hands and closed my eyes. “Fine, fine. I just gotta go train with you, right?”

“You should have said that from the start. Let’s go.”

Too bad she didn’t let go of *me*. “D-Don’t drag me by my collar!” I followed

along next to Hakurei, listening to the generals laughing at me. After a moment I added, trying to be casual, “Make sure you wear the hair ribbon and the floral ornament!”

There was a long pause before Hakurei answered. “When the time comes, I will. I swear it.”

“All right.” I breathed a sigh of relief. Despite how cool her tone was, I could hear a bit of shyness behind her words.

The warm spring breeze blew, ruffling my black hair and Hakurei’s silver strands.

“At the hour of the Twin Stars’ separation, Kouei split apart a massive boulder and entrusted the Heavenly Swords to Ouei.”

That night, I sat by the window of my room in the Chou family’s manor and paged through *Book of Tou*. I wasn’t sure if it was thanks to the time I’d spent relaxing in the natural hot springs in the house—Koshuu had many natural hot springs—but I no longer felt the stress from the day. Every now and again a comfortable night breeze blew through the window.

As I looked at the reflection of the crescent moon in my tea, I considered. “The author described that night under the peach tree with such drama. It’s certainly odd, seeing how I’ve been presented to future generations...” I pushed myself to my feet and stood in front of the mirror in my room. Black hair, red eyes, and a slender body that had yet to reach its maturity. Over it, I was wearing simple black robes.

It’d been ten years since father found me on the battlefield and took me home. Ten years had passed since a fever had nearly killed me and, in doing so, allowed me to somehow recover the memories of my past life. Granted, the majority of my memories of that life were vague; it wasn’t as if I thought of myself as “Kou Eihou” at all. For the most part, I remembered events from his life like “Oh yeah, that sure happened.” The only thing that I’d fully inherited from Kou Eihou was his talent in combat.

I didn’t remember anything from before Chou Tairan adopted me, apart from

the fact that my parents were merchants. We'd been traveling outside the borders of Keiyou when we were attacked by bandits. They were killed in the attack—or so father told me, anyway. I picked up the history book and then sat back down in my chair.

“But to think that Eifuu actually fulfilled his promise and accomplished unification.”

Apparently, after I died in my past life, my sworn brother convinced the emperor to expand the Tou Empire. Once he had, it had only taken the blink of an eye to destroy En and Sai.

The book read: *“Though he carried the Heavenly Swords and stood at the front lines to command the Tou Empire’s forces, he never once removed them from their sheaths.”*

That sounded like Eifuu. He had always had a strong sense of duty and honor. The second emperor, however, never learned how to be a good ruler. Even after he'd unified the lands, he'd imposed heavy taxes on the people to collect more money for his own enjoyment and preferred partying over governing.

When Eifuu chided the emperor for shirking his duties, the emperor accused Eifuu of conspiracy—of all things!—and threw him in prison. Right before Eifuu could be executed, however, he was saved—saved by the same young garrison captain from Routou who'd helped Kou Eihou before his death. Before I could read further, I heard steady footsteps from the hallway.

“Hello.”

It was Hakurei. She must've just finished taking a bath and her silver hair was untied. Despite her flat chest, she gave a faint impression of sensuality with her damp hair and the pale blue nightclothes hugging the immature curves of her body.

I should really give her a lecture one day about why she shouldn't visit a guy's room at night...

Hakurei didn't notice my worries, walking into the room and sitting down on the ottoman as if her presence were a given. It used to be. We'd slept in the same room until we were thirteen years old; thanks to that, it had become

habit for her to visit for a short chat before we went to bed. I massaged my temples with my hand and tossed her a cloth napkin from my table.

“You’ll catch a cold if you don’t dry your hair. Want some tea?”

Hakurei picked up the cloth with a delicate hand and placed it over her head before she opened her mouth. “Only a little bit for me. I won’t be able to sleep otherwise.”

“I’d prefer it if you slept in, because then no one would be around to wake me up before the sun rises,” I replied with a small smile. I poured tea into one of our rare glass cups and walked over to give it to her. Hakurei murmured her thanks as she took it. Leaning against a nearby pillar, from which hung a light, I stared out the circular window. Countless stars shimmered in the sky; however, despite my room facing the north, the twin stars were absent.

“Did you have...” my sister started.

“Hmm?” I turned my attention to Hakurei, but she was staring down at the cup in her hands. I tilted my head and waited for her to continue, which she did in a quiet voice.

“Did you have more fun in the city?”

Rinkei was the capital city of the Ei Empire, and its name—literally “Temporary Capital”—reflected its history. The Empire had established Rinkei as an interim capital about fifty years ago, after losing the land north of the great river. Our Keiyou was northwest of Rinkei, the Grand Canal connecting the two cities together. Rinkei had become a major city with a large number of bridges and waterways and a population of over a million.

While still staring at the crescent moon outside, I gave my honest opinion. “It’s true that the majority of the continent’s people, goods, and money can be found in Rinkei. Foreign ships from the Touei Sea dock there too.”

Hakurei stared at me for a moment, her expression irritable, before she said, “You didn’t answer my question.”

I put down my teacup and thought. Then I clapped my hands and raised my voice. “Oh, I see! Lady Hakurei, are you still pouting about how I left you behind and went by my—”

“Please kill yourself right this instant.” She considered for too short a time before adding, “Actually no, I shall be the one to end your life. Have you said your prayers?”

What a frigid response. D-Does this woman not have a conscience? Maybe my eyes are fooling me, but I swear that silver hair of hers is puffing up as well... I shrank back and stammered, “C-Come on, don’t be so mad. That’s not how the heiress of the Chou family should talk...”

“You’re the only person I would say such things to, and I am not pouting. For the record, I don’t care at all about how you broke our promise to have our first battle together, nor do I think you’re a liar for only writing us a letter once a month. That’s the truth. I’m not pouting!”

Of course after Hakurei said that, she puffed out her cheek slightly and turned away.

I was gonna wait for a better opportunity, but...

I tapped my cheek. Taking out a cloth pouch from the leather bag I’d pushed to the corner of my room, I handed it to the grumpy girl. “Here you go.”

“Hmm? What’s this?”

Hakurei opened the pouch and took out a small box that was decorated in a raden style—intricate flowers and birds had been carved into each side and inlaid with iridescent shells.

“It’s an imported box that’s popular in the city,” I explained with a casual wave of my hand. “Apparently, it’s from a country island to the east. You can use it to store hair ornaments. If you don’t wanna use it, you don’t have to...”

I trailed off and stopped talking. Ever since we started sleeping in separate rooms, the beautiful silver-haired girl before me now had become a much calmer person. Yet, as she stared at the little box in her hands, her expression brightened, making her look far younger than her actual age.

“It’s beautiful.”

Despite myself, I was captivated by her. That was why I could never win against her.



I looked away and, in an attempt to hide my embarrassment, I said in a rush, “Father ordered me to go to Rinkei, so I did, but...I’m far more suited to life in Keiyou! I’m not interested in taking the imperial examination either. My goal is to become a local civil official!”

In the Ei Empire, a civil official whose job consisted of desk work had far more authority than someone in the military—even if they were the ones putting their lives on the line for the country.

So long as you passed an incredibly difficult test known as the imperial examination, your future was guaranteed to be a bright and successful one, since it would allow you to work in state bureaucracy. However, it also required so much study that most people physically weren’t able to handle it. Additionally, I simply didn’t have the talent.

That was why I was going to become a local official, and then live a slow and relaxed life!

Hakurei carefully placed the small box back inside the cloth pouch and tied it tight. Then she giggled, “You, a local official? It doesn’t suit yo—”

Before she could finish, she interrupted herself with a small and cute sneeze. I could see her ears and neck starting to turn red.

“Go back to your room,” I told her with a wave of my hand. “Father’s going to return from the front lines tomorrow, right?”

For a moment, Hakurei didn’t say anything. Finally she muttered, “I shall return to my room if you plan on going to sleep as well.”

“I was actually gonna read a little more,” I said, pointing at *Book of Tou*.

“Then I’m not going to bed,” Hakurei replied immediately. She hugged a cushion to her chest, hiding half of her face behind it.

I slapped my forehead and made a face. “Oh, come on... Fine. I’ll go to sleep too.”

“That’s...good.”

Hakurei’s expression morphed into one of triumph. She stood up with the cloth pouch held firmly in her grip and then skipped over to me. I was hit with

the scent of flowers. *Huh? The same smell as my bed?*

Though I was curious about that, I decided to ask about something else. “You can go back to your room by yourself, right?”

“Please stop treating me like a child. I *will* kick you.”

“You’re already kicking me!”

Actions spoke louder—and faster—than words. I dodged her leg and then saw her out of the room. Hakurei started down the hallway, her footsteps light against the floor, but she didn’t get very far before she stopped. “Tomorrow...”

“Hmm?” I said as I waited for her words.

The night wind played with her long silver hair as she turned around and suggested, “Tomorrow, after father returns, would you like to go on a ride with us? It’s been too long...since the three of us went together.”

I tilted my head. “Uh, yeah, sure...”

“Really?!” Suddenly, Hakurei was running at me, throwing herself into my chest like she used to when we were kids.

“Whoa!”

Thanks to how thin her nightclothes were, I could clearly feel how soft her breasts were. Of course the little princess clinging to me was so busy giggling that she didn’t even notice how I’d tensed up.

“Hee hee! ♪ You saw me this afternoon as well, didn’t you? I’ve greatly improved my horseback riding skills, so tomorrow let’s have a race. I’ll definitely win.”

“I see... Uh, before that...”

“Hmm? What’s the matter?” Hakurei stared up at me, a curious look in her eye.

Aren’t you supposed to be smart? How can you not notice? I scratched lightly at my cheek and since I had no other choice I explained, “You shouldn’t stand so close to me. Y-Your chest is tiny, but, you know...”

It felt as if it took a long time before Hakurei realized what I meant.

“Ah...”

Before my eyes, her pale cheeks and skin started to flush red. Slowly and deliberately, she stepped away from me and walked down the hallway, swinging the arm on the same side of her leg with each step. She took several deep breaths, her back still facing me, and even when she spoke she didn't turn around. “Good night,” she said, “please make sure you don't sleep in tomorrow.”

“Yeah, good night. And don't worry, I won't.”

“Hmph.”

It was clear that her last harrumph was to hide her embarrassment. Then, she was gone. As soon as I could no longer sense her, I returned to my room and threw myself onto my bed, *Book of Tou* in hand. My heart racing, I opened up the book again.

I gotta find out what happened to Eifuu next!

“Oh no! Oh no!!! OH NO!!!”

The next morning, I sprinted down the hallways of the Chou manor. I could hear the happy chattering of people and nickering of horses from outside. My father—Chou Tairan, the famous general who single-handedly shouldered the burden of defending the Ei Empire—had returned.

Considering I'm just freeloading at his house, it's extremely bad news for me if I'm not there to welcome him back just because I overslept!

“A-And of course, today of all days, Hakurei didn't come and wake me up... Is this her way of getting back at me for yesterday?!”

I could complain all I wanted, but for now, I had to hurry. I rushed down the hallway, constructed to reflect my father's austere, ungilded tastes. When I finally reached the modest entranceway, I saw Raigen already waiting there. The old man was wearing his military uniform and looked on edge.

“Young master! Hurry, hurry!!! Everyone is already in position!”

“R-Right!” I nodded to the old man and hurried out.

The first sight to greet me were rows of people who worked for the Chou family. I could see both anxiety and excitement on all of their faces. In Rinkei, the people didn't know the reality of what it was like on the front lines, but in Koshuu... Everyone who lived in Koshuu had nothing but respect and gratitude for father, who constantly protected us from Gen's invasion.

Pride welled up in my chest at the thought of him as I put myself next to Hakurei, who was wearing a pale green dress. Her hair was tied with a white-and-blue ribbon, and a floral ornament sat in her bangs. She glanced up at me.

"You're late," she said, voice cold.

"Th-That's because you didn't wake me up."

Hakurei's only reply was a sigh.

"Wh-What?"

Hakurei reached out and brushed my hair with her slim fingers. It was one thing for her to do this in front of people who worked in the house for the Chou family, but out here I could feel the collective gazes of the soldiers and guards.

"H-Hey," I said.

"Don't move. It's pathetic to show your face without brushing your hair first. I placed your formal robes next to your pillow, and yet you still managed to show up in your normal clothes." Hakurei continued to fix my hair without giving me the chance to respond or pull away.

Don't tell me the reason she didn't wake me up was so that she could do this in public?!

Raigen and the staff were staring at us warmly; I could practically hear their thoughts: *"I'm so happy to see how close they are! ♪"* I was enduring their attention as best as I could when someone stopped a black horse in front of the manor's front door.

The man who climbed from the horse had a severe face, an impressive black beard, and the burly type of frame you couldn't forget. A plain sword hung from his waist and a suit of armor covered in scratches protected his body. He was Chou Tairan, the guardian deity of the Ei Empire, who lived up to his title of the

National Shield.

Chou Tairan was a famous general, known for his military feats from seven years ago. The previous Gen emperor had spent the final years of his life on a large-scale invasion of the Ei Empire, yet Chou Tairan managed to fend off every attack. That was not to mention he was also Hakurei's father, and I owed him a great debt for adopting me from the battlefield and raising me.

Father handed the reins of his horse to one of his subordinates with a "I leave this to you!" just before rushing through the front gate and into the manor courtyard. As soon as he saw us, he called out, "Oh, Hakurei! Sekiei!"

Hakurei finally released me and turned around with an elegant bow. "Father, I would like to congratulate you on returning unharm— Ahh!"

Tairan ended Hakurei's welcome as he plucked up his daughter in his arms, the limbs thick like tree trunks. The strict expression on his face softened as he laughed. "When did you go and grow taller on me? You used to eat so little as a child that your late mother and I would worry about you every night. Good, good! This is fantastic. This must be thanks to Sekiei's return!"

"F-Father, e-everyone's staring!" Hakurei protested, unable to stand the embarrassment.

Father placed his beloved daughter back onto the ground and placed his hand on her head. "Hmm? Oh, sorry, sorry. It was force of habit. Forgive me!"

Hakurei fell silent, her face bright red as she flashed a glare at me. It seemed that she was unhappy about how I wasn't lending her a hand. Since Raigen was signaling at me with his eyes as well, I spoke up.

"Father, congratulations on making it home from the front lines."

"Hello there, Sekiei! How did Rinkei and my sister treat you?" The famed general released his daughter so that he could run a hand through his beard.

Hakurei hurried to step behind my back and whispered, "You were too slow."

I don't even wanna know how she'll get back at me for this later.

"Auntie put me through the wringer and the capital was as prosperous as always. However..."

“However?”

Tairan’s eyes seemed to pierce right through me. They gave the impression that they could see through any falsehood or deception—in fact, they reminded me of the first Tou Emperor’s gaze.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “It just seems that life in Keiyou far better suits my personality.”

As soon as father heard me say that, his face split in a wide grin. He walked over to me and smacked my shoulder several times with a large hand as he laughed.

“I see, I see! Well. From tomorrow I’ll have to discuss some complicated matters with the various commanders, but for today we can speak of happier things. You can tell us stories from your time in the city.” Father noticed Raigen. “Raigen, how have you been?”

“Sir! I am most pleased at your safe return.”

“It was nothing. The Gen forces holed up in their castle and we in ours, and we only glared at each other from across the water. The emperor of Gen is a frightfully careful and talented man. After the sudden death of the previous emperor seven years ago, he took command of the army and it was his skill that stopped our advance. Back then, he was only fifteen years old and if that wasn’t enough, I hear that was his first time on the battlefield. I assume that he’s only improved since then. We must find a way to get reinforcements from the city.”

Father stepped away from us to speak further with Raigen and the others. Despite my hope that I could return to my room now, I felt Hakurei pull on my sleeve. We’d known each other for long enough that I knew she was trying to remind me about what she’d asked me yesterday.

Well, a promise is a promise, after all.

Everyone was still welcoming the great general home, but I called out to him anyway. “Umm...father? There’s something I’d like to request.”

Immediately, the hero turned around, a surprised look on his face. “Hmm? What’s wrong? Is something...oh! Did you want me to hug you like I did Hakurei?! My apologies! I can’t believe I didn’t notice. Forgive me! Now, come!

Your father's chest and arms are ready to embrace—"

"No, no, that's not it," I said in a rush. "Unlike a certain princess, I'm not interested in— Ow!" Hakurei pinched the back of my left hand. I glared at her but continued, "Would you like to go on a horse ride with me and Hakurei? It would be just the three of us, like in the old days. Of course, we can wait until after you rest up and things calm down with work."

Tairan's eyes widened in surprise before he brightened. "Very well! I, Chou Tairan, might have gotten on in years, but I won't let my children beat me yet. Follow me! Don't get left behind!"

By the time my horse and I caught up to Hakurei and father, they'd already reached a nameless hill in the northern region of Keiyou. In the distance I could see my father waving his muscular left arm.

"Sekiei! Over here!"

I nodded and, after giving my mount a gentle stroke, urged it into a gallop to close the remaining distance.

"You're so slow," Hakurei said as I halted alongside her beautiful white horse, sounding dissatisfied with my performance. "Are you sick?"

"I'm doing my best," I replied with a light shrug as I narrowed my eyes. It was probably better to keep quiet about the fact that some of Koshuu's cavalrymen were following us as our guards.

In the far distance, I could see the outline of a gray fortress, the northern limit of the Ei Empire. Apparently, if you climbed to the very top of it, you could not only see Gen but Seitou as well. Seitou, situated northwest of Keiyou, had been our ally for a hundred years now. It was a country that focused heavily on trade.

Father stroked his horse and said to the apple of his eye, "Hakurei, you did fantastic!" He laughed. "To think the day would come when I'd lose to my daughter!"

"I *have* been training," she reminded him. "Has my performance convinced you to let me handle the bandits I wrote to you about?"

He made a thoughtful noise. “I shall make a decision tonight after discussing it with Raigen. You’re sixteen now, so I *have* been thinking it was about time for you to have your first battle.”

“Wait, subduing bandits for a first battle?! Then, I’ll also...come...” My words faltered as Hakurei shot me a cold look.

“It won’t be a problem. I don’t need your help.”

I could tell from her tone of voice and the look in her eye that I wouldn’t be able to change her mind.

But still, it feels a bit too early for her...

Ignorant of my uncertainties, father turned his gaze to the far northern sky. “Over fifty years ago now,” he said, “our parents and our parents’ parents lost to the cavalrymen of Gen, who came in such large numbers they resembled a thick fog. As a result, they took away the northern lands of Ei. Since then we’ve built a line of fortresses along the southern bank of the river to fend them off, but that’s not enough. There will come a time when we must find the opportunity to launch a northern campaign.”

A campaign to retrieve the stolen lands north of the river was the Ei Empire’s greatest wish. However, after living in the city for a while, I saw the truth—there was a huge difference in mindset between the people of Koshuu and the people of Rinkei when it came to the northern campaign. The citizens of Koshuu were constantly exposed to the threat of our enemies in Gen, and our generals and soldiers were always fighting on the front lines. Those living in Rinkei, meanwhile, had the luxury of enjoying the empire’s economic growth in safety.

This is exactly what happened back during the days of the Tou Empire too.

“Father,” Hakurei said in a quiet voice, “what do the generals at the front lines think?”

“They share my opinion. However, we simply do not have enough resources or funding. The final decision in regards to a northern campaign would fall on His Majesty’s shoulders, though I hear that within the court, the officials are split between those who support a northern campaign and those who prefer to maintain the status quo.”

If the only issue were the officials disagreeing with each other, then it wouldn't be so bad. The problem was that a rather large number of people wanted no war at all, and they would swallow any treaty conditions no matter how humiliating so long as they could maintain peace.

“The current emperor of Gen, Adai, rose to power on the battlefield. While keeping us in check at the river, he’s also been personally subjugating the various tribes and clans in the far north of the continent. He’s never lost a single battle.” As he spoke, my father’s stern face became even more severe. “I hear he’s obsessed with the idea of unification. If we show even the slightest opening, he will surely invade us.”

Adai—I’d heard that name several times while I was in the city. Parents would scare their kids into obedience with threats that White Wraith Adai would come for them if they didn’t listen. Everyone feared the foreign emperor.

“However, the wall of fortresses that we built is an impenetrable barrier!” My father roared his words, his entire voice overflowing with a lust for battle. “I doubt that there will be any movement at the front for the time being.”

“That may be the case for Adai, but what about the generals under his command?” I blurted out. “I hear that the commanders known as the Four Wolves have been exercising their might across the land, and that even Seitou is on guard...” I trailed off when I noticed Hakurei staring at me from my side.

My father stroked his beard and cracked his riding crop. “Oh? Sekiei, you know a lot about this. As I expected, you have what it takes to become a military official!”

“I-I just heard people talking about it in the city.”

Father laughed. “I don’t mind waiting for you to change your mind about your future! It’s true that Adai has four great generals under his command. Of them, I’ve only directly fought the Crimson Wolf, Nguyen Gui. I will never forget the fierceness of his blows. He was a difficult enemy, and brave, charging forward over and over again.”

Hakurei bit her lip, but she didn’t say anything. The Ei Empire placed little importance on its military and suffered from a consistent deficit of soldiers. In contrast, the Gen Empire had a large and powerful army. It meant that even a

force led by a single member of the Four Wolves had the potential to match the entire might of the Chou family's army.

Father turned his horse around to face us. "But, I hear that Nguyen has greatly offended Adai. He has already returned to the great northern plains of En, far from here. There's no need to worry."

I'd heard about Nguyen's retreat from Meirin in the city as well. It was strange, though; within Gen, Adai was so popular that people were even starting to deify him. Would someone like that be so petty? Turning, I saw the cavalymen serving as our guards in the distance. Father must've noticed them as well.

"We should return before it gets dark," he told us. "Hakurei, I will allow you to go and subdue the bandits. Don't be hasty! Spend a few days forming a team, and make sure you bring Sekiei with—"

"Hyah!"

Hakurei tugged on her horse's reins and, without giving father an answer, galloped off. She was lost to the distance in a blink of an eye, her silver hair whipping in the wind.

Father sighed—a rare occurrence for him—and twisted his lips in a bitter smile. "How troublesome. She's as stubborn as her mother was... It was your aunt's suggestion, but perhaps it wasn't a good idea to send you and only you to the city. I never expected you to find your first battle saving the Ou family's precious daughter, who's an up-and-coming merchant in her own right, from pirates. Hakurei must be desperate to not fall behind you. She's terrified to an obsessive degree by the idea of you leaving her behind."

"That's not..."

"It's true. I've gone through something like that myself, you know?"

The weight of my savior's words were so heavy that I couldn't say anything in return.

I should probably make sure that I can help her out against the bandits...just in case...

I didn't know how father interpreted my silence, but he grinned and said, "I won't say anything more on the matter. Now, let's head back! I look forward to hearing your anecdotes from the city."

"It's time for me to leave."

It had been a few days since our ride and we were standing in front of the Chou family manor in the early morning. My father was wearing formal clothing in preparation for a meeting with his generals. Though he didn't get off his horse, he couldn't seem to stop warning his beloved daughter, dressed in military garb, to be careful.

"Hakurei, it's true that I've given you permission to handle the bandits. However..."

"Please don't worry. I'll be careful, unlike a certain self-proclaimed civil official candidate I know."

Maybe I was being overprotective. Last night I'd also tried to discreetly change her mind, but Hakurei was determined to carry out this mission. I couldn't help but worry—my sister might seem calm at first glance, but I knew the hot temper of the Chou family ran through her veins.

Father gave me a discouraged look and said with slow deliberation, "Sekiei, if *anything* happens..."

"I'll let you know immediately," I said.

"Thank you."

Father left after giving me a final, solemn nod, with the most elite members of the family guard following after him. As soon as we'd finished seeing them off, Hakurei wasted no time turning on her heel and heading back to the manor.

"I shall depart right away as well," she said, her voice calm. "I'll likely be able to finish my task before evening."

"Yukihime."

Without thinking about it, I'd called her by her childhood name. She stopped walking and then turned to meet my gaze. Her blue eyes showed her firm

determination.

“There’s nothing you can do to change my mind. As the daughter of the Chou family, I cannot stand by and ignore ruffians who would harm the civilians. Please don’t follow me. Don’t treat me like a child just because *you’ve* already experienced your first battle.” Having said her piece, she stalked off towards the stables.

I pressed a hand against my forehead. When Raigen walked in, I asked, “Gramps, you did your job, right?”

“I’ve gathered about a hundred of our most elite cavalymen to serve as Lady Hakurei’s guard and as you ordered, I also have a rear guard on reserve. According to the scouts, there are only about twenty bandits—you have nothing to worry about.”

“Right... You’re right.”

I looked up at the azure sky. There wasn’t a single cloud in sight, so it was highly doubtful that the weather would change. I’d done everything I could and in terms of technique, Hakurei was more than ready for real combat. Surely she’d be able to finish her first battle without any issues and then she’d spend the rest of the night talking my ear off about it. After all, Chou Hakurei was such a lonely person that she’d been pouting just because her childhood friend had gone to the city and sent fewer letters than promised.

It was right after we finished eating lunch that things went south.

I was reading my history book in the outer courtyard when I heard a loud snap ring across the grounds, like wood breaking. Then I heard the screams of the servants.

“W-Watch out!”

“Catch it!”

“Isn’t that Lady Hakurei’s horse?!”

I placed my book on the table and stood. Almost immediately, a beautiful white horse ran into the courtyard and right up to me, looking panicked.

“Whoa! You’re...Hakurei’s Getsuei? Didn’t she take you with h— Huh?”

The white horse stared at me as if it was trying to communicate something and then took my sleeve between its teeth. This was not normal behavior.

Don't tell me something happened to—

Before I could finish that thought, I heard running and a pale-faced Raigen, along with a male soldier with a bloodstained cloth wrapped around his left arm, appeared. I recognized the soldier as the young captain who acted as the arbitrator the other day at the practice grounds.

As soon as Gramps Raigen saw me, he started to holler. “Young master! Lady Hakurei...Lady Hakurei...!”

“Raigen, calm down.” It was a levelheaded order and in response, both Raigen and the soldier swallowed and slowed their breathing. I took out a handkerchief to wipe down Getsuei’s neck and asked, “What happened?”

“Make your report to the young master, as concisely as you can,” Raigen ordered.

“U-Understood,” said the young captain. His entire body was trembling, but he hurried to give his report.

When he was finished, I nodded. “I see. So things went well up till your arrival at the abandoned fortress—when you charged in you found that the bandits who had been hiding out there had already been killed. Then around two hundred cavalrymen, who had been hiding in the shadows of a knoll, surrounded you and killed over half of your horses. You and several others managed to escape and returned here for reinforcements. Did I get all that right?”

“Yes, sir! I’m deeply sorry!” The young captain must have thought I was scolding him, for he prostrated himself upon the ground and pressed his face against the dirt.

Two hundred mysterious cavalrymen near Keiyou, where the Chou family resides? That doesn't sound like your run-of-the-mill bandits.

I crouched down and placed my hand upon the sobbing captain’s shoulder. “Good job on reporting what happened to us.” I looked up at Raigen. “Gramps, our enemies aren’t bandits; that’s obvious. If we don’t do something, Hakurei

and the soldiers will be in trouble.”

“Sir! B-But, then, who are...?”

“We can figure out the details later. Take command of the rear guard I had you put together. I’ll lead the way.”

I grabbed the sword I’d had leaning against my chair on the off chance that I’d need it. Though it had no name, it was well-made. Considering my current physical build, I still wasn’t strong enough to fight with dual swords from atop a mount, so one would have to do. I climbed onto the horse that had been saddled up while we’d been having our conversation.

As soon as Raigen—who had experienced countless skirmishes over the years—saw me ready to come along, his face twisted. “Young master!”

“Don’t worry. Please believe I’m more used to fighting than I am doing paperwork. Oh, speaking of...” I hurried to tell him my plan.

“Lord Sekiei, here’s your bow and quiver!”

Hakurei’s lady-in-waiting, Asaka—a slender woman with shoulder-length reddish-brown hair—handed me my weapons, which I gladly accepted. Asaka had been on my side when I’d protested against Hakurei being sent to deal with the bandits, so she hadn’t been part of the original subjugation team. But now she had donned a light suit of armor and placed a plain sword on her belt. Everyone who worked for the Chou family, man or woman, had to take up arms in times of emergency.

As panic continued to fill the manor, Raigen stared at me before offering a salute, his hand over his heart. “I understand everything you want me to do. This old general shall not fail you!”

“Then I leave it in your hands. Someone, hurry and take one of the fastest horses to tell my father about this. Teiha, I’d like you to lead Gramps and the others to where our soldiers are.”

Unable to keep up with the rapid turn of events, the young captain stared at me, eyes wide. “Y-You know my name?”

I huffed out a soft laugh and winked. “I make an effort to remember the

names of everyone in our family—even more so in your case since you’re a distant relative of Gramps. Now go!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Good! Everyone, don’t worry! I promise that I will save Hakurei! Everyone left in the manor, I’d like you to prepare a bath and some food, as well as first aid supplies!”

“Understood!!!” The servants had been watching us from afar, but as soon as I gave the order, they ran off like arrows from a bow.

“Lend me your strength,” I said to Getsuei as I stroked the horse’s neck. In response, it gave a shrill whinny.

We had just left the courtyard and barely reached the street in front of the manor when someone calling out to me made me turn.

“Young master!” It was Raigen, his white hair a mess and his face twisted in desperation. “Please...please don’t do anything too dangerous! If anything happens to you...”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “I already decided that if I’m gonna die, I’ll die in bed.”

“Lord Sekiei!”

I held Raigen’s gaze as I raised my left hand in the air and squeezed Getsuei with my legs. At my wordless command, the horse burst into a gallop. Pedestrians hurriedly threw themselves to the side to avoid my horse as I urged it through the streets.

“You’re such a troublesome little princess!” I muttered. “Who’s gonna stay up at night and chat with me if you die?!”

In the plains west of Keiyou there was an abandoned fortress atop a small hill. That was where I, Chou Hakurei—daughter of the National Shield, Chou Tairan—shot an arrow from the cover of a stone wall. The arrow pierced through the arm of an enemy cavalryman who had carelessly attempted to approach. He stumbled backward with a cry of pain.

“Men! What are you doing, making Lady Hakurei do all the work?!” One of the veterans gave a sharp rebuke. “Get it together!”

“Sir!”

Upon hearing that voice, deep with anger, my soldiers began to shoot their arrows—though another row of cavalymen only rushed forward and blocked every shot with their leather shields. None of the enemies fell, but that wasn’t all. The cavalryman I shot with an arrow earlier hadn’t even fallen off his horse. He retreated on his own without needing the aid of any of his fellow soldiers. Our enemies had been trained unbelievably well.

“These aren’t regular bandits. Oh no...” A terrible fear gripped my heart. “Don’t tell me they’re a scouting party from Gen?” It took me all I had to stop my teeth from chattering. The hand holding my bow started to shake and I gripped it hard with my other to stop it from doing so. I mustn’t let my soldiers, doing their best to hold the line, see me like this. It would affect morale.

Though we had managed to get the higher ground and we were protected by the stone walls, the advantage was slight and I knew that it would only be a matter of time before we were overpowered. I bit my lip hard enough I could taste blood.

Hakurei, you’re pathetic! This is no time for fear! You’re the daughter of Chou Tairan and... I fought back tears as I thought of Sekiei, carefree and aloof. *Is this all I’m capable of on my own?*

Even as I reeled in shock, the people around me were doing their best to keep the cavalymen at bay with their arrows. All of them were injured. They turned to me with desperation in their eyes and all began yelling at once.

“Lady Hakurei!”

“We’ll cut a path for you.”

“Please, you must evacuate!”

“We wouldn’t be able to look General Chou or the young master in the eye if we were to let you die here!”

“Please make your escape!”

Despite the armor over my chest, I felt a stab of pain in my heart. The abandoned fortress where we were was situated in an open field, making it easy to see across the whole area. However, the openness was deceptive. There were small knolls throughout the land and the mysterious enemy had been able to hide in the shadows of such protrusions, even though they had more men than us.

As the commander, it was my fault that I hadn't been able to see through the ambush that allowed them to surround us. As a result of that mistake, they'd rained down countless arrows upon us and killed over half of our horses. I had no other choice but to use the ones who survived to request reinforcements.

Who knows how many made it all the way back to Keiyou?

And now it seemed as if my foolish mistake was about to cost the lives of over a hundred of Chou's soldiers. I gritted my teeth and unleashed another arrow at the enemies, noting that they were much closer to us than before.

"Thank you," I said to the soldiers as I shot another arrow. The cavalryman who had dodged my first attack couldn't avoid the second one, and it pierced his thigh. This time, I managed to knock him off his horse. "However, I doubt I would be able to escape on foot. They clearly have no intention of letting any of us leave alive. This is my mistake and I'm truly sorry."

The soldiers around me tried to swallow their nerves and didn't say anything. The spears and bows in their hands trembled—we only had a meager number of arrows left.

"However!" I continued, raising my voice over the sound of the enemy arrows bouncing off the stone walls we were hiding behind. "I am the daughter of Chou Tairan. I shall choose death over humiliation. If such a time comes to pass, I would like to request that you all buy me enough time for me to complete my task."

A man with red hair and a red beard held aloft a spear decorated by a ribbon of the same color. He was right in the middle of the enemy formation and upon seeing his signal, the cavalrymen pulled out their scimitars. They were ready to charge.

"Also," I pushed on, "there is only one man—barring my family—in this entire

country that I permit to touch my skin. I hope you will all keep my secret.”

The soldiers’ eyes widened. For a moment, no one said anything. Then they started to laugh.

“That’s...”

“Well, we certainly can’t let you die after hearing that!”

“I totally agree!”

“He’ll hate us if we don’t protect you.”

“The young master sure stole your heart!”

It looked like this turn of conversation had helped with morale a little, but I was still in command and so I allowed myself only a soft chuckle before giving my orders. “They’re coming. Those who no longer have any arrows left, draw your weapons and prepare to engage in close-quarters combat!”

“Understood!”

Spears were held aloft and swords were drawn. Even the injured soldiers took out their daggers. Just as they did, though, the enemy commander’s voice boomed across the battlefield:

“Massacre them!”

The horde of enemy cavalymen rushed forward while the members of their back lines fired off a rain of countless arrows. They yelled as they engaged —“Kill! Kill!!! KILL!!!”

I gave a quick shout, “Don’t try to defeat them! If we can injure them enough to make them retreat, that’ll be more than enough to—”

“Lady Hakurei, look at what the enemy is doing!”

Before my eyes, the cavalry was splitting into multiple smaller teams, moving so smoothly and in sync it was as if their entire army were a single living beast. Like this, our forces were forced to shoot arrows in a more scattered pattern, making them less effective. In the blink of an eye the enemy had closed the distance.

I clicked my tongue. One of their cavalymen had managed to get so close to

the abandoned fortress that there was just a wall between us, and I aimed and shot an arrow at him. He blocked it with a leather shield.

They'd finally managed to invade our stronghold.

"I'll kill you!" the soldier yelled. Leaping over the stone ramparts, he swung his scimitar down at me.

I blocked the blow with my bow, but it wasn't able to withstand the weight or the polished edge of the oncoming blade; the wood snapped. I rolled away from the attack and, in the same motion, unsheathed my sword. Two enemies gathered...three...four... I was barely managing to fight off attacks from all sides.

"Ah!"

It was the fifth cavalryman who thrust out with his spear and knocked the sword out of my hand. All around me, my soldiers were fighting for their lives.

"Lady Hakurei!!!"

Every time one of them swung their sword to try and save me, an enemy cavalryman parried the attack. Confident in their advantage, the enemy's expressions were painted with barbaric satisfaction. Their complexions and hair were both dusky—too dark to come from the Ei Empire. Fighting back tears, I gripped the hilt of my dagger and whispered, "Sekiei..."

The cavalryman who had broken through my guard held the tip of his spear close to my face and said something to me in a foreign tongue. I couldn't understand but knew that guttural gasp that ended his sentence wasn't natural. The cavalryman fell off his horse, an arrow penetrating his neck.

"Huh?" I couldn't understand what I was seeing. More and more arrows were raining down from outside the abandoned fortress. The enemy cavalrymen had been gloating, proud of their imminent victory. Now they were all lying on the ground, arrows protruding from their foreheads, chests, and necks.

Wh-What is happening?

With a sudden *thunk*, an arrow landed in the wall right next to me. I stumbled towards it and saw that there was a piece of paper wrapped around the shaft.

My heart skipped a beat and I hurried to tear free the note and open it. I would recognize the hand that had written the message anywhere, for I was more familiar with it than even my father's writing.

"Gramps and Asaka are on the way with reinforcements. Hold the line until they arrive. You're in for a scolding tonight!"

Courage welled in my heart; he was such an idiot. I picked up the spear from the ground next to me and yelled to my soldiers, "Everyone, keep it up! Reinforcements—Raigen and his troops—will be here soon!"

Like me, the soldiers who had been taken off guard by the situation raised their voices and cheered. With new strength, they started to repel the enemies that still remained.

We can do this! Thanks to those arrows of his reducing their number, we can still do this! My will to fight burned, but before I even had a chance to move, a voice rang out over the battlefield—

"Listen, you scum! My name is Chou Sekiei, son of the National Shield, Chou Tairan! If any of you lowlifes think you can take my head, then come and get it!!!"

All of the remaining soldiers in the abandoned fortress looked at each other in shock, their breaths catching in their throats in an audible gasp. Then, one by one, we all turned our attention to the direction the voice had come from.

On the hill behind the enemy cavalymen, a young man with black hair pulled on the reins of the white horse he rode, a bow held aloft in his hand. We were still in a perilous situation—and yet I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of relief upon seeing him.

Of course, part of me was deeply angry with him. I couldn't endure the fact that he announced himself without hesitation, using his own life and head as bait without even a second thought. The joy at seeing him was so overwhelming, however, that it drowned out any negative emotion.

He must have been so worried about me and my stubbornness that he'd set up multiple plans in advance on the off chance that something happened. That way, he would be able to come to my aid without wasting any time.

Sekiei has always been this way. He always makes sure that I— I didn't have time to finish my thought.

Sekiei's white mount started moving, and as it did a young female soldier who had been scouting the enemy yelled, "It appears that about half of the enemy's forces are pursuing Lord Sekiei!"

I took a sharp intake of breath and clenched my fist. *You idiot! Sekiei, you idiot! I'm going to have so many words with you when you get back!* I slapped my hands against my cheeks and looked back at my soldiers.

"Everyone, take up your arms! We must survive until reinforcements arrive!"

I managed to lure about half of the cavalymen surrounding the abandoned fortress away from it. I squeezed Getsuei's sides once more with my legs, pushing my sister's horse into the fastest gallop it was capable of.

Behind us was a horde of cavalymen who had obviously received plenty of training. Their weapons were of foreign make, but I couldn't make out the exact details of their origin. There were about a hundred of them and I had no intention of turning around to give them a proper fight. However...

"There's no point in being a man if I can't even save my childhood friend and one of the people who saved my life."

As I spoke, I withdrew three arrows from my quiver and, turning, shot them at the three cavalymen who made up the vanguard of my pursuers, forcing them off their horses. Though they didn't say anything, I could hear their muffled gasps of surprise and pain. My archery skills were far from my foggy memories of Kou Eihou's, but it was more than enough! I focused on shooting off arrow after arrow, trying to get as many people off their mounts as possible. Getsuei's fantastic stamina and speed were on display the entire time, maintaining the distance between us and our pursuers.

"Oh?"

The enemies split their formation. Instead of rushing at me as one, they would each try to take me down on their own. This sort of flexible strategizing wouldn't be possible without faith in each soldier's individual skill; the enemy

commander seemed like quite the experienced warrior. Well, that simply meant that I needed to start whittling down their numbers from whoever got closest.

“I’m already out?” Though my quiver had been full of arrows when I set off, it was empty now.

Charging at the forefront of my enemies was their red-bearded commander. His spear was wrapped with a red cloth and he raised it at me.

“He’s out of arrows!” he yelled. “Kill him!”

“Understood!”

The enemy soldiers raised their swords and their mounts picked up speed. Getsuei must have finally been getting exhausted, because the gap between us closed quickly. There was no time to think—I threw both bow and quiver to the ground and tugged on the reins to change Getsuei’s direction. I pulled the sword from my belt and charged towards the two closest pursuing cavalymen.

“We’ll kill you!” They yelled it in unison, identical cruel grins on their faces. They were absolutely certain of their victory.

The white blades of their scimitars glimmered as they swung them down towards me, ready to take my head. Instead when I passed by them, I slashed out with my sword, slicing right through their leather armor! Blood sprayed through the air. The two cavalymen only had the chance to splutter before they died, ignorant of what had even happened.

The rest of the enemies charging at me slowed, surprised at what happened to their two allies. I didn’t let that stop me. Gripping Getsuei’s reins tightly, I met the enemy commander’s eyes. They were as sharp and fierce as a wolf’s, and I could feel the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

He’s fearsomely strong!

An elderly cavalryman next to the enemy commander spoke to him. He was talking softly enough that I couldn’t hear him, but I *could* read his lips.

“Lord Nguyen,” he said...

Don’t tell me that this is the Crimson Wolf of the Gen Empire?! He’s one of the four famed generals! There’s the river, as well as the line of fortresses that

father and the others set up along it between Ei and Gen. How did he get through that line? Wait, more importantly, what are they even doing here?

I did my best to keep the shock from my face as I pulled on Getsuei's reins to stop the horse. Then I said, holding up my sword, "Sorry. I lied earlier."

"What?" The enemy general looked at me, confused.

There were around fifty cavalymen left on the enemy's side. Compared to that, my sword was reaching its limit. This had happened all the time in my past life as well; not many swords were able to keep up with my strength.

I winked and gave a casual shrug. "My name is Sekiei. Just Sekiei. I'm not a member of the Chou family. I figured that if anyone was gonna fall for that lie it'd be people like you, who suffered so many defeats at General Chou's hands. In other words—people like soldiers from the Gen Empire."

The enemy general's silence spoke volumes, and it looked like I was right on the money. I decided not to beat around the bush. "Hey... How *did* you cross the river? General Chou created a perfect barricade. It would be one thing if a few soldiers made it through, but there's no way the guards would miss over a hundred, especially if it's a hundred mounted men. Yeah, it's clear that you didn't come from straight across the river. So tell me, how did you infiltrate Ei, Sir Nguyen, the Crimson Wolf?"

Instead of answering my question, Nguyen gave a blunt order to his soldiers: "This time, make sure to kill him."

"Understood!" the soldiers at the front line answered immediately before they charged. There were five of them in total.

I kicked Getsuei into a gallop. "Whoa," I muttered as I parried the first attacker's spear thrust. Carrying through the same movement, I slashed horizontally across his stomach with my sword. I could feel the blade starting to give, so I snatched up the enemy's spear and threw it at a mounted archer, who was attempting to aim at me from the side. "Here you go!"

The spear easily penetrated the leather armor and I saw the archer fall, his mouth parted in a silent yell. The next instant, a mounted swordsman rushed forward and I blocked his attack with my sword. The sharp screech of metal

against metal rang through the air, and I used all of my strength to push him back, my blade slicing through both his sword and his body.

The remaining two tried to flank me from both sides, but I blocked the tips of their weapons. Left, right! I gave them each a single strike and they fell off their horses, silent and still. With the five cavalymen down, Nguyen himself charged at me.

“Die!!!”

“Yeah, right!”

Every time our horses passed each other, we were locked in combat. With each hit I blocked, I could feel my hand becoming more and more numb. *He’s way stronger than I imagined!*

“You’re good, young tiger!” Nguyen yelled as he turned his horse around to face me once again. His red beard whipped about with the motion. Though we hadn’t planned for things to turn out this way, it had become a duel.

I turned Getsuei around as well and said mockingly, “And you’re not as cracked up as the rumors made you out to be!”

“You talk too much!” Nguyen snapped. “After I part your head from your shoulders, I’ll shove it in the face of that little girl from earlier! Then I’ll introduce her to a world of pain!”

“You think I’d let you do that?!”

Both of us kicked our horses into a gallop. Sword met spear and sparks flew. Nguyen thrust his spear forward, aimed for my throat, and I blocked it. The moment I did, I felt an awful sensation from my sword. The blade broke in half and flew through the air with my gaze tracking its movement. Nguyen’s mouth twisted in a sadistic grin.

My body moved without conscious thought. I put all of my strength behind the broken sword and slammed it down against the shaft of his spear, snapping it in half. Then, I pulled a dagger from my belt and plunged it towards his neck.

“Wha—?!” Nguyen twisted his body and dodged the attack; blood flew through the air, splashing onto my clothes. He backed his horse up to get some

distance and was surrounded by his remaining men as he slowly raised his hand to touch his left cheek. Nguyen's eyes widened when he felt the deep gash I'd left behind.

I grinned and said, "Sorry about that. Compared to the bow, I'm far—"

"Sh-Shoot your arrows!" The old soldier next to Nguyen gave the order and the cavalymen responded without hesitation.

Even with just a broken sword and my dagger, I easily knocked down the dozen or so arrows that flew my way. "I'm far better with a sword!" I finished with a smirk.

Fear filled the enemy soldiers' eyes and the old soldier cried, "We are the descendants of the northern wolves, and yet— Yet, you've so easily overpowered us. Your skill on the battlefield and the way you ride your horse as if it's an extension of your body... It's as if...as if you're the Undefeated Kou of ancient times!"

The wind brought with it the scent of fresh soil churned up under the hooves of approaching horses. Overconfident, I replied with a sly laugh and a threat. "Looks like the jig is up. That's right, I'm the reincarnation of Kou Eihou, Great General of the Tou Empire. Come at me if you wish to die!"

"Wha—?!" The enemy cavalymen's faces twisted in obvious panic, and beneath them their horses started to whinny.

I hope this pays off. If the fight continues, then I'll lose.

Nguyen raised his spear high in the air and the red cloth tied around it whipped like a banner in the wind. Blood continued to drip down his left cheek, but he spoke in a calm voice regardless. "Silence! The hero of whom he speaks died over a thousand years ago."

He's a good commander. He's quick to recover from unforeseen incidents.

I stuck my tongue out and laughed. "You saw through my lie. However..." With my broken sword, I pointed at the hill behind the enemy troops. When they turned to see what I was pointing at, I saw panic—the most I'd seen from the army all day—spread through them. "Looks like my gamble paid off."

CHOU.

Even from a distance, we could see the name embroidered upon the standard. It blew in the wind and the golden thread that formed the frame shimmered. Rows of cavalymen lined up underneath it. A fearsome amount of dust blew through the air, kicked up by the horses' hooves.

I took the chance to continue taunting them. "You see that? The big, scary Chou Tairan is on his way. You better hurry up and get back to your own country or it'll be a massacre. If you die, then you won't be able to bring back whatever important intel you uncovered! Now, what are you gonna do?"

Nguyen didn't say anything, nor did his expression change—he simply turned his horse around. The sound of a horn rang out across the battlefield and, with impressive discipline, the cavalymen turned as one to retreat northward.

Phew. Looks like we managed to get through this. I could feel the strength leaving my entire body, but I couldn't let down my guard just yet. Nguyen had taken it upon himself to bring up the rear and when he reached the top of the hill, he wheeled around.

"CHOU SEKIEI!!!"

I wasn't one to talk, but he had an incredibly loud voice. It was akin to the roar of a beast.

He held out his spear, the red cloth around it dangling like rope. "I shall not forget your name! Next time we meet, I shall personally part your head from your shoulders!"

Without giving me the chance to respond, he disappeared over the hill. It seemed that he hadn't been using his full strength either.

"Ugh, I never want to face *him* again..." I looked down at the broken sword in my right hand and grimaced. Though it bore no name, it had been an impressive weapon. *I'm not going to be greedy and look for something rivaling the Heavenly Swords, but... I might need to ask Meirin in Rinkei to look for a sword that won't break. That reminds me. I'm going to need to check up on what kind of weapons those soldiers were using. If they were weapons from Seitou...*

As those thoughts swirled through my mind, I stroked Getsuei's neck and

thanked the horse for its help. The Chou family's cavalymen—there must've been about fifty of them—approached me at an impressive speed. At the front of the troops was...

"Young master!"

"Gramps, your timing was perfect. Everyone else, you did a great job as well."

"Sir!"

The Chou's cavalymen were all dragging along sticks behind their horses—the true culprit behind all of the dust earlier. It was a childish tactic, but I had my father's reputation to thank for its success.

To disguise the embarrassment I felt from this plan being the best I could come up with, I ordered, "Gramps, let's get back and meet up with Hakurei and the others. If we can get there in time, we can still rack up some military achievements."

By the time we got back to the abandoned fortress, however, the battle was already over. I didn't know why Teiha was staring at me with such respect in his eyes, but I entrusted Getsuei to him before heading inside the fortress. I was greeted by the sight of Hakurei, sitting on a rock and staring at the ground. Next to her, Asaka was wringing her hands, looking like she didn't know what to do. There was blood splattered all over her armor, so it seemed that she'd killed her fair share of enemies.

I gave Asaka a look to signal her to give us space and then, doing my best to maintain my usual tone, said to Hakurei, "Hey! Any injuries?"

"No." It took Hakurei a moment to answer. "Everyone... Everyone protected me."

"I see."

Though there weren't any corpses around us, blood stained both the ground and the walls. I couldn't blame her for feeling so dejected; no one wanted such a fierce fray to be their first battle. I crouched down next to her and took her clenched fist in my hand.

"Hakurei," I said.



When she looked up, I could see tears lingering in her azure eyes. Despite how intense the fighting had been, there were only a few losses on our side and this was all thanks to the hard work of the soldiers—and the strength of the girl before me. Hakurei had talent as both a combatant and a commander...but she was too kind for her own good.

“If you keep on looking so depressed, you’re gonna affect morale. You did a good job,” I continued.

Fat tears began to well once more in her eyes and she was slamming her fists against my chest. “But!” she said. “But then... What should I do with this feeling in my chest?! What can I do?!”

After a moment, I sighed. “You’re such an idiot.”

It took time for my words to register in Hakurei’s mind. She wiped at her tears and glared up at me. “What did you say?”

I took out a white handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed it against Hakurei’s eyes. Then I winked at her. “Isn’t that what I’m here for?”

Hakurei blinked her big eyes before she sighed. “You’re such a...” She trailed off and used the handkerchief to hide her expression as she looked up at the sky.

The sun was starting to set, and I could see the slow approach of night. If we didn’t get back soon, father would be worried about us.

Without standing, Hakurei extended her left hand towards me. “Your hand,” she said.

“Huh?” I didn’t know what she meant. I stood up.

With a loud noise, Getsuei trotted into the abandoned fortress. When the horse saw its mistress, its tail flicked happily. Hakurei untied her hair ribbon and looked up at me, something sweet hidden in her expression.

“My legs are shaking so badly that I don’t think I can ride a horse. Please ride with me—all the way back to Keiyou. You rode my horse without permission, so you can fulfill this small request in return, yes?”

“Uhh...”

“Or would you like me to recommend you as a military official to my father?”

“Oof!” That was my weakest of all my weak points, and I clutched at my chest. I agonized a little bit over the decision but finally picked up Hakurei and placed her on Getsuei’s back. Then I mounted behind her. “Are you happy now?” I grumbled after we adjusted our seating.

“Yes, this is good. Sekiei...”

“Hmm?”

For a long while as we began our journey home, Hakurei let her unfinished words linger. Then, in a voice so quiet I could barely hear it, she said, “Thank you for coming for me.” That said, she closed her eyes and fell asleep, a relaxed expression on her features.

I gently wiped away a bit of dirt stuck to Hakurei’s face and started to think. That reconnaissance mission from the Gen Empire was not something we should have come across. The one leading them was none other than the Crimson Wolf—who wasn’t even supposed to be in the south. I had no idea what father would do when he heard about this.

“I might have to return to Rinkei sometime soon...”

I wrapped my arms around the slumbering Hakurei’s waist so that she wouldn’t fall off the horse, and then looked up at the southern sky.

Chapter Two

“Ngh... What a nice day we’re having. It looks like we’ll be able to reach Rinkei on time.”

I sat down on the chair I’d brought up to the deck and looked at the birds flying above us. They seemed happy. The wind was comfortable thanks to our proximity to the river. The ship we were currently on was sailing towards the capital of the Ei Empire, Rinkei, and it was right on schedule.

It was hard to believe that the Grand Canal was man-made. Plans for its construction had started in the later years of the Tou Empire, and I heard that it took twenty years to build. The river cut its way through the continent, beginning in the north and reaching all the way to the southern border, as massive as a dragon upon the land.

Half a month had passed since Hakurei and I fought back the scouting party from the Gen Empire. My father had responded to the situation with an incredible seriousness and decided that he himself would head to the capital. His goal was to make the report of what had happened and to request the reinforcements he’d been wanting for years. He’d ordered for me and Hakurei to accompany him, along with three thousand of our finest soldiers.

Of course, I spoke to my father about the risk of removing so many troops from the front lines. He’d only replied, “This is what the elderly grand chancellor requested. Apparently the emperor is very interested in observing our forces, as well as seeing us train. You know, they originally requested ten thousand men? Though our only evidence is the vintage weaponry left behind on the battlefield, we should inform him of our plans to investigate Seitou—just in case.”

Politics were as still as annoying as they had been back in the day.

If we were to transport three thousand soldiers by boat at once, then our enemies would surely realize something was wrong. For that reason we’d split up the majority of the brigade into small groups and sent them ahead of us. We

planned to meet with the full brigade on the outskirts of Rinkei. Actually, we ourselves had been going to head there on horseback as well, but...

“Whoa!”

The massive sail that had been put up caught the window and the boat gave a dramatic rock. On the sail was the single character: Ou. This ship belonged to the Ou family, a new family of merchants who had recently started to become quite prominent in Rinkei. It had just so happened that as we were preparing to leave, that particular family had been heading back to Rinkei after transporting food to Keiyou, and they graciously allowed us to board their ship.

I took out a piece of paper that I’d stuck between the pages of my book and read it: *“I’m waiting for you in Rinkei. From: Your Meirin.”*

Just how did she know that we were heading to the city? I pressed a hand against my forehead when I remembered the sly smile of the girl I’d accidentally saved during my first battle, which had coincidentally happened right here on the Grand Canal. I was grateful for her help, but I somehow felt like it wasn’t a good idea to put myself in her debt.

Hakurei had never been on a ship before and as soon as she boarded to take a look, she’d exclaimed, “I didn’t mind riding to Keiyou, but... Can we take the boat?” She’d looked so happy at the prospect that I supposed owing Meirin wasn’t such a big deal.

After watching the people fishing from the smaller boats, I turned my attention back to my book. *“The emperor died, leaving behind his child to take over the country. After supporting the young ruler for over ten years, Ouei departed. No one saw the Heavenly Swords after that.”*

Eifuu—and the Heavenly Swords—had disappeared.

So... Right after the garrison leader of Routou rescued Eifuu from his imminent execution, the second emperor of Tou died under mysterious circumstances. Then the third emperor, despite his youth, was sat upon the throne. In the twenty-odd years that followed, Eifuu returned to supervise the government affairs of the unified empire, as well as oversaw the construction of the Grand Canal. And then, after doing all that he needed to do, my sworn brother returned his position, lands, and money to the third emperor—who by

that point had matured into a fine and wise leader.

My twin swords had finally become the Heavenly Swords, in the proper meaning of the title. With nothing more than those Swords and his wife, Eifuu departed the palace. No one knew where he went. *That sounds like something he'd do, all right.* I was lost in my solemn reminisces when I felt someone tug on my left sleeve.

"H-Hey."

"Hmm? What's up?"

Hakurei—today wearing light-blue clothing and having left her sword off her belt—had been enjoying the faraway sights from the deck with an innocent ease. Now, however, there was a nervous expression on her face as she searched the water near the boat. A moment later, a shiny-smooth gray beast with a long, thin mouth leaped from the water several times. The creature was swimming parallel to the ship and seemed to be enjoying itself.

Hakurei had left the gunwale and was hiding behind me, using me like a shield. "Did you see that?" she asked, her voice serious.

"Huh? See what?" I didn't understand her question. I stared down into Hakurei's blue eyes.

Perhaps she started to worry about the sailors or Asaka seeing her like this, because Hakurei began fiddling with her bangs and looked away. She leaned up to me and whispered into my ear, "Wh-What was that just now? I-I've never seen such a strange-looking fish. And...and it seems to be following us. Is it a monster?"

Her tone was dead serious. I wasn't exactly the smartest person in the world, but I was quick on the uptake when it came to matters like this. I immediately knew what the issue was: Chou Hakurei had never left Keiyou in her entire life and she was sheltered as hell! She didn't know about the rare dolphin that lived in the river, nor did she know about the superstition surrounding it. Apparently, catching a glimpse of the animal would bring fortune.

To be quite honest, I had asked the exact same question half a year ago. When I did, Meirin's knowledgeable attendant told me all about it. However, I,

Sekiei, would show Hakurei no mercy!

I spread an extremely sad expression across my face as I met Hakurei's eyes. "How unfortunate. What you just saw was a fearsome monster indeed... During my time in the city I underwent a warding ritual, so I'm safe. But you... Well, don't worry about it. You'll be fine—barring the fact that you won't be able to get married anymore."

Hakurei smacked her hands over her mouth before she could scream, but a squeak slipped out. She was normally so stoic, but she looked halfway to tears as she tugged on my sleeve. "That's not good... That's not good at all. P-Please do something about it."

"Hmm, I dunno. I guess you only have your normal behavior to blame..."

I was starting to have a lot of fun messing with her, but the sailors gathered at the stern of the ship had started to chatter.

"Oh, did you see that? The river dolphin just jumped out of the water."

"What a fortuitous sign."

"I wonder if it's trying to lead our guests to the city?"

Oh no. I glanced down at Hakurei.

Slowly she straightened herself and then gave me a beautiful smile. The strong wind played with her long silver hair and red ribbon. "Sekiei?" she asked in the sweetest tone. "Do you have any final words?"

A shiver went down my spine and I looked away from her. Asaka, dressed in her lady-in-waiting clothes and wearing a hat to keep the sun out of her face, met my eyes. She must have realized what my predicament was, however, and just smiled. "Oh my ♪," I could practically hear her saying.

This isn't good. Asaka's not gonna help me. I did my best to think of a way out of this, but I couldn't come up with a good excuse. So, I did the next best thing: I leaped backward to put some distance between us before yelling, "Good for you! You learned something new today, Chou Hakurei, you spoiled little princess!"

"Go kill yourself right now," she said. "Wait, no, in fact, I shall kill you on the

spot myself. Besides, if I'm unable to get married, aren't *you* the one who would..." Hakurei had been glaring at me with eyes as cold as a blizzard, but suddenly she hesitated and fell silent before looking away.

"Uh, what's wrong?" I asked. *D-Did I make her that mad?* I approached—with caution—and peered down at her.

"It's nothing," was Hakurei's brusque reply, covering her face with both her hands.

"It doesn't look like nothing. Your face is bright red..." I reached out and pressed the back of my hand against her forehead. "Whoa! That's a high fever! Did you catch a cold from getting all excited about traveling on a boat?" Not only was there a clear heat emanating from Hakurei's face, but for some reason it seemed to be getting hotter and hotter.

"I-I'm perfectly healthy. I'm fine, so please get awa— Ah!"

Hakurei tried to slap my hand away, but as she did, another strong wind rocked the ship. Without thinking I grabbed and steadied her so she didn't fall over. This close, I could smell the scent of flowers, as well as feel her soft body, which was so different from a man's. It was kind of embarrassing, but the priority right now was Hakurei's safety. I looked down at the girl in my arms to make sure she was all right.

"You good?"

"Y-Yes..."

Hakurei was acting so meek compared to usual that I started to panic. Before I could get anything out, though, laughter boomed out from behind me.

"Sekiei, you're gonna be in a world of hurt if you keep on messing with her! My late wife used to scold me so much whenever I joked with her."

"Uh-huh..."

"Father," Hakurei said, "I think the majority of the blame for that rests on your shoulders."

Father, his dark green clothing very eye-catching, had been talking about something with the ship's captain when he'd overhead and laughed at us. After

a moment, however, Hakurei and I realized that we had been hugging each other the entire time. We took three hurried steps back, but after a brief contemplation, took two towards each other again.

Father stared at us, running his fingers through his magnificent beard, which seemed to shine in the sunlight. He didn't say anything about us at all; instead, he looked straight ahead with a twinkle in his eye. Asaka had clasped her hands together and was smiling at us brightly. It was oddly embarrassing to have them react that way.

"Oh? It seems like we're close enough to see it now."

We followed father's line of sight. Far ahead, we could see the faint outline of something that resembled a tower.

"To think that we'd be able to see it even from this distance," Hakurei whispered, as if she couldn't believe what was in front of her eyes.

"That's the huge dam right in front of the city," I explained. "Since Keiyou and Rinkei are connected via the Grand Canal, they had to think of a way to defend themselves. The city itself is full of waterways and bridges, you know? So the dam is apparently their way of keeping themselves safe from cavalymen."

"You seem to know a lot about Rinkei," Hakurei muttered. "Yesterday, you told me that parents in the city threaten them with the White Wraith if they're being naughty. Who told you about all this?" She gave me a suspicious look.

I don't think it's a good idea to let her know that Meirin's attendant was the one to tell me. I used my hands to block Hakurei's gaze and replied, "I-I figured it out on my own! I was in the city for half a year, after all!"

"Oh, really..." Hakurei ran her fingers through her long silver hair. She didn't look convinced.

Seeing her reminded me of an old superstition from my past life: "*Women with silver hair and blue eyes will bring misfortune to the country.*" I doubted that anyone cared about those old fairy tales now—certainly not enough to try and hurt her to stop ill fortune from happening. Father didn't care, and the sailors were even besotted with Hakurei. But on the off chance that something bad happened, well, I would have to be the one to rescue her!

“Why are you making such a weird face?” Hakurei said—right before she started to tidy up my hair, which had been messed up by the wind. “Sheesh. No matter how old you get, you just can’t function without me.”

“What?! That should be *my* li—”

“No. It’s *my* line.”

I gritted my teeth at the pompous little princess’s words.

My father laughed at us. “I’m glad you two are so close. We’ll have our fair share of troubles once we reach Rinkei, but I want you both to study hard and play harder! I order you to do so, as Chou Tairan!”

Rinkei, the capital of the Ei Empire, was a city that thrived due to its proximity to the water. Fifty years ago, the Gen Empire invaded Ei and took over the then capital city of Eikei. Back then, the capital of Ei shared the same character as the empire. Gen’s attack cost Ei’s emperor the majority of his people and a large portion of his territory, so he established the temporary capital of Rinkei.

Due to the number of ships that would dock there, it had been a place of great prosperity ever since the days of the ancient Sai province. The emperor planned on biding his time and accumulating more funds in Rinkei—the one constant in war was how much money it cost.

Another reason the emperor had built a capital in Rinkei was due to it being where the Grand Canal ended. Because it was easy to keep the land around the city secure, the emperor apparently deemed it possible to expand the waterways in order for large foreign ships to come and go. In fact, a large ship was indeed in the waters outside of the capital right now.

The walls around the city were fairly low due to its lack of viability as a military base, but the countless waterways and bridges—as well as the piecemeal layout of the city itself—helped to keep it safe. Every time Rinkei expanded, the planners added more alleyways and footbridges, creating a veritable labyrinth of a city. This was on purpose, as such a design would prevent the Gen cavalymen from using their favored tactics: mounted archery and a full-on charge.

“You were right,” Hakurei hissed from my side. “A mother just scolded her child and threatened them with the White Wraith. Who was the one who told you about this?”

“You’re still going on about that?! Like I already told you, I, uh, read it in a book!”

“If you say so. I won’t press the issue for now.” It was obvious from Hakurei’s expression that she didn’t believe me. She walked ahead of me, stepping onto a stone bridge decorated with carved statues.

I’m gonna have to go to the Ou manor soon and tell them not to say anything... I added yet another task to my mental to-do list for this trip in Rinkei and then followed Hakurei across the bridge. As soon as I was on the other side, I could see a street lined with stalls of all kinds.

Merchants from all over the world gathered here to sell their wares, which could range anywhere from food to cloth to bottles of suspicious medicine. Numerous placards marketed the stalls’ goods, and rows of hanging lanterns illuminated all of it. The streets weren’t the only busy places either. From the footbridges above us, I could hear the energetic chattering of merchants discussing business and shoppers sharing gossip.

The emperor at the time was right to build here. Not even during the Tou Empire had there been a city as lively as this. Rinkei was the largest city of its time, and I doubted that it would ever lose the distinction. I was slipping through the crowd behind my father’s giant back when I noticed that Hakurei wasn’t behind me anymore.

“Lord Sekiei! ♪” Asaka said as she tapped my shoulder.

I looked around and saw, a short distance away, a beautiful girl looking around uncertainly. Thanks to her long silver hair and good looks, she stood out like a sore thumb. I waved to father and Asaka before walking over to Hakurei and grabbing her hand. I thought she’d try to struggle out of my grip, but she simply fixed me with a sharp glare.

She didn’t say anything for a moment, but then: “Please don’t grab onto me without warning.”

“I kind of had to, considering a certain somebody was about to get lost.”

“I-I would never. Please stop treating me like a child.”

“All right, fine, fine. If you don’t want us to treat you that way, then next time grab onto my sleeve or at least Asaka’s. You’re seriously going to lose your way around here.”

“Sleeve...no... I don’t mind this.” Hakurei pursed her lips and, with some hesitation, curled her fingers around mine.

With our hands still together, we returned to the entrance of the shopping district where father and Asaka were waiting for us. Members of the guard whom Raigen had picked for us would already be in the crowd, blending in. They’d shared our boat to Rinkei but separated from us on arrival.

“It’s only been three years since I’ve stepped foot in the city, but they’ve added on to the streets yet again,” father murmured as he played with his magnificent beard. “It’s even livelier than before. We must thank the emperor and the grand chancellor for their hard work.”

“You’re too modest,” I said with a lopsided smile. “It’s all thanks to you holding the line against Gen.”

I stood next to Chou Tairan with my back straight, but he was still much taller than me. In both of my lives, I had been an orphan. Honestly, I had no idea what it was like to have a father to look up to, but I was proud that it had been Chou Tairan who took me in. Despite how society looked down on military officials, he never once voiced his dissatisfaction and simply continued to protect his home from the powerful foreigners that threatened it. He was truly admirable.

“Seven years ago, you and the other northern generals foiled Gen’s plan to launch a large-scale assault on Ei. As a result, more and more people started to gather in Rinkei. You could say”—I released Hakurei’s hand and placed it over my chest as I looked around at the crowds—“that you were the one who paved the way for this prosperity! There’s no doubt in my mind about it. So take pride in your work; I certainly do!”

As I stopped talking, my father placed his large hand upon my head and gave it a rough pat, messing up my hair. “You sure know how to make your old man

happy,” he said with a wide grin on his face. “Come here. Let me give you a hug!”

“Uh, no, that’s not necessary.”

I respected him—and I *was* deeply grateful to Chou Tairan for saving my life—but that didn’t mean I enjoyed a huge, bearded man hugging me in the middle of the street!

At my firm rejection, the famous general known as the National Shield stumbled back a step or two. “Wh-What did you say?” he gasped, making it sound like it was a struggle for him to eke out even those four words. “Y-You won’t accept your father’s love? And yet I hear you let your aunt hug you every single day?!”

“W-Wait, how do you know about that?! Er, no, that’s a misunder—” I stopped talking when I felt the temperature drop around me, specifically to my left. “H-Hakurei?” Next to her, Hakurei’s lady-in-waiting had a bright smile on her face. *Oh no! Asaka’s little sister is auntie’s closest advisor—she must’ve told on me!* I gritted my teeth, cursing my own carelessness, and turned to face Hakurei.

“What is it?” she asked, a blizzard raging behind her sapphire eyes.

“It’s a misunderstan—” I tried again; Hakurei interrupted me before I could continue.

“So, you wouldn’t mind if I ask our aunt for confirmation?”

My argument had been shot down before I could even finish it, twice, and I closed my mouth with a grumble. I looked towards father for help, but he was watching us with a smile so bright I couldn’t even find it in me to be angry. “You can do it! I know you have it in you!” I could practically hear him saying it.

It was terrible of him to leave me on my own like this. But as I was wondering what I could do to get myself out of this dangerous situation, I smelled something good.

“Sekiei?” my father asked.

“Is something the matter?” Hakurei added.

“What a nice smell!” Asaka exclaimed.

Ignoring all three of them, I made my way to the stall nearest us. Large steaming pots made of bamboo had been placed upon the counter, clouds of steam rising from the lids. A piece of paper advertising steamed buns had been placed in front of the stall and it was manned by a preteen boy with a shaved head.

“Are these ready to eat?” I asked him.

“Yep! Wait, Sekiei?! When did you get back to the city?”

“Just now. I’d like to buy some buns.”

When I had last been in Rinkei, I’d bought food from this particular stall on several occasions. I didn’t know the name of the store, nor did I know the name of the boy, but we were familiar enough with each other that our conversation was casual.

“Here ya go! It’s piping hot, so watch you don’t burn yourself!” The boy opened up one of the steamers even as he gave his peppy reply. Hot air and steam burst out as he did so, and he quickly grabbed several large buns and placed them inside of a paper bag.

I handed him more copper coins than I actually needed to as I asked, “So how’s business been? Booming, I hope?”

“It’s been all right,” he replied. “There’s been a lot of foreigners coming in. Hope to see you soon.”

“Yeah, same.”

Foreigners, hmm? People from various countries came and went on a daily basis in Rinkei, but usually, a food stall on the very edge of the shopping district wouldn’t have been able to notice. I couldn’t think of a reason for the sudden influx in foreigners and turned the question over in the back of my mind as I took the bag of buns. Returning to the three waiting for me, I held it open to Hakurei first. “Here you go. Father, Asaka, you two should have some too while they’re still hot.”

“Are you trying to get back in my good graces with gifts? What a classic

tactic,” Hakurei muttered.

“Thank you so much! ♪” Asaka said with a smile.

“They look delicious!” father boomed.

Despite Hakurei’s complaints, she accepted a steamed bun and started eating it, her small mouth opening wide to accommodate how large it was. After taking a bite, she pressed a hand to her mouth and blinked owlishly.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” I asked as I handed the bag to Asaka.

“It’s delicious...”

“That boy’s stall has the best steamed buns, so I wanted you to have a taste. I wrote that in my letters, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did,” Hakurei said, after a long silence. She didn’t sound like she was happy to admit it, but after taking a second bite, her expression softened. It seemed like she wasn’t able to resist the allure of good food.

Satisfied with her obvious enjoyment, I started to work on my own bun. The complex and savory flavor hit my tongue and the meat juices filled my mouth. I’d thought that the boy used seafood as a secret ingredient for his filling, but it looked like he’d changed the recipe during my absence. Hakurei and I were only halfway done with our buns, but my father had finished his in a few bites and Asaka was already working on her second.

“It’s delectable!” father exclaimed. “Rinkei is truly a lovely place. After all, you can eat food like this any time you want!”

“I agree,” I said.

In this era, when people had access to and could eat as much hot food as they pleased, there weren’t as many meaningless deaths as before. At least in that sense, the current emperor and grand chancellor were doing a good job. Their decisions when it came to the military, however, were absolutely abysmal.

We crossed the bridge, still eating our buns, and I asked, “Father, what are we going to do now? Should we say hello to auntie?” I took out two scraps of cloth from my pocket and handed one to Hakurei, who was incredibly focused on the bun in her hand. I used the second cloth to wipe my own fingers.

“Apparently, my sister-in-law has taken a trip to the southwest,” father said, a furrow in his brow. “She was disappointed that she wouldn’t get the chance to see you two.”

“Is that so...” I nodded. “I’m disappointed as well.”

Yes! Yes!!! All right! I wasn’t scared of most things in this land, but my aunt, who took care of the Chou family’s various affairs in Rinkei, was a whole other matter. She wasn’t a *bad* person, per se. It was just a little hard to deal with her when the first thing she’d said after she took me in was “One day, I’ll make you into the new head of the Chou family!” She had somewhat extremist ways. It seemed like this time, I’d be able to enjoy my visit to Rinkei in peace.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, father started to tell us our plans. “Tomorrow we’ll visit the palace and have a private audience with His Imperial Majesty—he must be informed of the current situation at the front. However, the grand chancellor wrote us a letter and told us to meet him in his manor as soon as we arrived. Apparently, he wants to see Hakurei’s face. Sekiei, how about you? Would you like to come?”

“Don’t mind me. I’ll be fine on my own.” I gave a casual wave as I put the handkerchief back into my pocket.

As the one who offered counsel to His Imperial Majesty, the grand chancellor was one of the most powerful people in the country. One could even say that he was the person *actually* calling the shots. Then there was Chou Tairan, the savior of the country. Everyone from the youngest of children to the oldest of seniors knew his name. A meeting between such great men was no place for someone like me.

“I’m just some nobody staying at your house,” I continued in a breezy voice. “The Chou family is the cornerstone of the Ei’s army; we should avoid any unnecessary rumors. I’ll behave myself and enjoy the sights around the city.”

“Hmm...” My father’s face twisted with a grave expression. Next to him, Hakurei remained silent, but it was clear from her own face that she wanted to say something.

“Lord Sekiei,” Asaka murmured, her brow furrowed.

I should learn to say things in a more considerate way... Before I could lament my lack of social skills, however, my attention was caught by an orange hat in the periphery of my vision. Careful to be subtle and not let my family or Asaka know where I was looking, I turned my gaze to follow the flash of color. I could see the person with the orange hat glancing at me while hiding in the shadows behind a stall. *Did she sneak out of the manor again?*

“Sekiei?” my father said, worried about how I’d fallen silent. “Is something the matter?”

“No, nothing. Actually, I know what I can do to pass the time.” I winked. “I’ll go and visit the Ou family. They really helped us out with the provisions, so I figure it wouldn’t hurt to show our gratitude.”

“The Ou family?” Hakurei asked, while behind her my father hummed in thought. She folded up the handkerchief I’d given her as she continued, “The merchants?”

“Yeah. They’re legitimate too, traveling all around the continent. Every time I visit them they tell me all sorts of interesting stories,” I replied.

Hiding in the shadows just behind the person with the orange hat was a young woman with her long black hair tied in a ponytail. When our eyes met, she offered me a slight nod. *There’s no mistaking it. The young daughter of the Ou family has sneaked out of the manor again.*

“It’s embarrassing to admit it, but I don’t know the first thing about proper etiquette,” I said, keeping my expression blank. Everything I was saying was as much the truth as it was an excuse. “I’ll leave the meeting with the grand chancellor to you and Hakurei. Asaka, make sure they don’t get into any trouble. See you!” And with that—I ran off. From behind me followed the three’s responses.

“Make sure you return home before it gets dark,” my father said.

“Please leave everything to me.”

“Ah...”

Hakurei seemed like she wanted to say something, but I put it out of my mind. I wove through the crowds of people in pursuit of the person with the orange

hat, ducking into an alley. As soon as I was fully alone, I yelled, “I know you’re in here. Come out!”

At my words, a slender girl appeared with a cheery laugh. “I’m impressed that you were able to recognize me in that mob!”

From underneath the orange hat extended long chestnut-brown hair tied up in two pigtails. The girl’s clothes were mostly orange as well, and it was clear from a glance that they were of high quality. She had a sweet face that still bore the chubbiness of youth; it was hard to believe that she was already seventeen years old. Everything about her small body—save for her chest—was like that of a child’s. Her eyes, though, resembled shimmering stars in the sky and were impossible to forget. She clasped her hands together, an inquisitive twinkle in her gaze.

“I knew I could count on you, my husband!” she exclaimed. “Today is the day when we shall have our wed—”

“No. It isn’t. I know my place. Meirin, stop calling me your husband.”

“Wha—?!” The girl with chestnut hair—Ou Meirin, the heiress of the Ou family and a prodigious merchant in her own right—jumped, expressing her shock in the most theatrical fashion possible. She placed her right hand over her voluptuous chest. “Wh-Why?!” she cried. “I know it’ll make me sound arrogant, but on top of being rich and having a great personality, I’m beautiful too! I’d gladly be at your service and cater to your every whim. Not only that, but the daughters of the Ou family are very fertile. What else could you possibly want from a wife?!”



“So she says... Did you hear that, Miss Shizuka?” I sighed, already exhausted.

A tall woman approached from behind Meirin, her footsteps so quiet you could hardly hear her. A foreign sword hung from her belt, and she was wearing black-and-white clothing that was easy to move in. This woman, who had long black hair and memorable dark eyes, was Meirin’s attendant. She placed a hand upon her cheek and sighed, each motion exuding an elegant grace. Then, before Meirin could say or do anything, she had expertly grabbed her charge and held her in place.

“It pains my heart to hear it,” the woman, Shizuka, said. “It’s all my fault for not educating her enough. I’m terribly sorry, Lord Sekiei.”

“Sh-Shizuka?! Wha— Why are you here?! Let go of me! I...I was in the middle of a *very* serious conversation with Lord Sekiei! Let! Go! Of! Me!!!” Meirin struggled and kicked, but Shizuka easily lifted her up into her arms. Looking at them like this, it was hard to believe that Meirin wasn’t just a little child. Aside from her breasts, she looked every inch like a girl throwing a tantrum.

When I had left to stay with my aunt in the city, I took a boat from Keiyou to Rinkei. On the way, we spotted a ship—Meirin’s ship—being attacked by pirates. After we had saved them, Meirin invited me to her mansion, extravagant even by the big city’s standards. While there, she told me all about her ambitions for the future.

I stuck my index finger right under Meirin’s nose and wagged it. “I’m not the kind of man who can keep up with a woman whose ambition is to gather up the entire continent’s wealth in Rinkei. Plus...”

“Huh? What is it?”

Meirin’s body was more or less the same size and build as a little girl, so there was an insurmountable height difference between us. If I actually took her as a bride, then Hakurei would surely get the wrong idea and give me the coldest sort of glare. “Pervert...” I could practically hear her say in her frosty tone. The very thought of it made me shudder.

Shizuka, with Meirin cradled in one arm, sighed. “My lady is very smart, but she can be...”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “I know what you mean.”

“Wha—?! How come the two of you get it, but I don’t?! I’m usually the calm and collected type, but I’m starting to get a little mad. Actually, I already *am* mad! Shizuka, let me down! I have something very important I must discuss with Lord Sekiei!”

Shizuka frowned and after some deliberation, she said, “If I must.”

Once her attendant placed her back on the ground, the Ou family’s heiress tidied up her clothes, smiled slyly, and then puffed her chest out. She pointed a finger at me and yelled, “Have at ye, Lord Sekiei! Today is the day that I’m going to make the most handsome face in the entire empire turn ugly in humiliation!”

“Hee hee hee! ♪ So, what’ll you do now? No matter how smart you are, I doubt you can figure *this* one out. You can always surrender if you want! ★” Meirin taunted.

She was sitting across from me in an extravagant chair, a triumphant smirk on her face as she watched me struggle with her most difficult puzzle to date. It looked like she was having the time of her life, kicking her little feet and playing with her hair. Since Shizuka wasn’t here, she didn’t have to put on any airs. That she seemed a lot younger than her actual age probably wasn’t just a trick of my mind.

The Ou family’s manor was situated in the southern district of Rinkei. Their piece of land was excellent, and was especially close to where the imperial palace was. Though the Ou family was a family of merchants, their property was more spacious than that of a lower noble’s. Flowers bloomed all over their prized garden, and there was even a pond in the middle.

We were currently spending time on the small island in said pond. Upon the impressively beautiful marble table between me and Meirin were three porcelain bowls, each containing different flavors of tea. This was a game called the tea-tasting contest, in which competitors would try and guess the brand of tea using taste alone. This game was pretty serious business and it’d been trending in Rinkei for a while now. Shizuka had perfectly prepared the cups of tea, and I took a final sip from each of them.

“I got it!” I yelled, pushing any doubts from my mind.

Meirin’s shoulders twitched slightly before she said, “Then, let’s hear your answer. If you lose then I’ll have you stay at my house for the night. Hee hee, I’ve prepared lots of interesting ingredients from both land and sea just for you, Lord Sekiei! Today, I shall emerge the victor!”

“I *am* pretty interested in the food, but...” I looked into Meirin’s eyes and, pointing at each cup as I spoke, gave her my answers. “The one on the very left is from Ryokukai, in the south of the continent—I can catch the faintest scent of fruits from it. The one in the middle is from Kuragejima. That tea tasted and smelled the strongest, which is probably because the farmers from that region dry their leaves longer than others. The last one was a foreign one... I assume you got it from Seitou?”

Meirin had been so confident in her victory mere seconds ago, but her eyes had grown wider with my every word. Now she bit her lip before tossing her torso across the table. “Y-You’re absolutely correct...” she managed to eke out in frustration.

“Yes!” I raised my fist in the air and then popped a sesame dumpling into my mouth. It tasted like the subtle sweetness of victory.

In contrast to my dignified restraint, Meirin was kicking her legs and pounding her fists on the table as she screeched. “I really thought I’d win this time! My husband is so amazing... But I’m so angry!” I couldn’t even call this childish anymore; it was downright toddler-like behavior. With her upper body still on the table, she raised her head and asked in a bitter voice, “How did you figure it out? I thought you’d never had these blends before! I never prepared these for you! Even the tea blend from Seitou was something I specifically ordered for today; it’s one that only the imperial family drinks!”

“Hmm... I guess if I had to give a reason...”

“Uh-huh?” Meirin puffed out her cheeks and narrowed her eyes. She was obviously pouting.

The tea cups Meirin used were of incredibly high quality. I picked one up and gave my honest reply: “I just guessed.”

Meirin's mouth hung open and she slowly stood up. Then she clenched her hands into tight fists and jumped up and down, her pigtails following her movements. "Jeez, I can't believe this! This is why you give me such a headache, Lord Sekiei! I put so much work into this tea-tasting contest and you just had to ruin all the fun! 'I just guessed.' Ha! What a convenient excuse!"

I cackled. "You'd be mistaken if you think I care what a sore loser has to say!" It was an obvious attempt to rile her up, and I followed it up by draining a cup of my victory tea.

To show her gratitude after I'd saved her from the pirates, the young merchant prodigy Ou Meirin had easily solved Keiyou's perpetual lack of resources by sending a large amount of provisions on a regular basis. It was hard to tell that Keiyou's savior was the same person as the girl before me.

She gripped her sleeves and growled, "Y-You're a cruel monster! Does toying with a young maiden's heart like this make you happy?! A normal person would let me win after seeing all the effort I put into the contest!"

"Oh, that reminds me. Since I won, I'd like you to find me a sturdy sword and a high-quality bow."

"Lord Sekiei... You're so mean!"

I ignored her playful insults and signaled with my hand for her to sit. Meirin obeyed, though there was still a dissatisfied look on her face. I reached out for a second cup of tea. "I have to say, I'm impressed that you were able to find so many rare teas."

"This was all in a day's work! ★" Meirin giggled, cupping her face in her hands and rocking her body from side to side.

The twin mounds on her chest, so out of place on such a small frame, bounced as she moved and I looked away, feeling awkward. Meirin could be so unguarded that I should probably warn Miss Shizuka about this later.

"And besides," Meirin continued, "it's not a hardship to put in an effort for the man I love." Meirin held up her fists as if willing me to understand. "I, Ou Meirin, have no qualms about exercising my authority, as long as it'll make you happy! What do you think about that? I'm adorable, aren't I?"

“You’re a little terrifying,” I replied with brutal honesty.

“Agh!” Meirin gritted her teeth, but there was a delighted sparkle in her eyes. “You have walls up like an impenetrable fortress! I wouldn’t expect anything less from my husband.”

“But I’m *not* your husband.”

“Grr... Would it kill you to be nice to me for once?”

“Nah. Here, you can have this.” I picked up a sesame dumpling and tossed it to Meirin. She had apparently wanted to import some from Seitou—which was famous for its delicious snacks—and was disappointed when she couldn’t get her hands on any, having to settle for ones made in Ei.

Meirin might have only been a merchant, but she had impressive reflexes. She caught the dumpling in her mouth and smiled happily. “It’s delicious!” she giggled.

She was a really weird girl for liking someone like me. I waited for her to finish eating and as soon as she did, I set my cup aside. “Meirin.”

“Yes?” she asked, blinking at me with her big eyes. Even though she was older than me, her face made her look so much younger.

I watched the breeze play with her hair and then lowered my head in a deep bow. “The soldiers in Keiyou were delighted to see all of the supplies you bought us. Thank you. I could’ve had a thousand years and I still would’ve never figured out a way to solve the problem. I’ve worked everything out with father and the other generals, so I hope that you’ll continue to provide us with aid in the future.”

My father had given me a mission: “There are fifty thousand soldiers at the front lines to keep Gen in check, but there aren’t enough rations to go around. I’d like you to solve this issue for me.” It wasn’t an easy problem to solve. I had to take into account how the changing seasons would affect crops, as well as how many ships would be able to use the Grand Canal. Everyone had been of the opinion that even coming up with the foundations of a plan would be difficult; everyone except for Ou Meirin, that is.

After Meirin had heard about the issue from me, she took to solving it with

surprising passion. Her solution had been for ships to depart on a sea route, and then return using the Grand Canal. The only thing I contributed was to suggest that we use the ocean and the Canal at the same time.

Though I kept my head bowed, Meirin didn't reply. The wind brought with it the scent of water, flowers, and dirt. It seemed like Shizuka had brought in another guest. After a long moment, Meirin heaved a heavy sigh. I looked up to see her glaring down at me, her face resting on the palm of her hand. There was a faint flush on her cheeks.

"All I did was take your ideas, combine them together, and then organize them into a workable plan. Shizuka was the one most familiar with sea routes, since she used to be a traveler. And also..."

"Uh-huh?"

Meirin's cheeks puffed out and she lay down on the table again, slamming the marble with her hands. "You shouldn't lower your head so easily! Debasing yourself if it would benefit your friends and subordinates... Are you Kou Eihou of ancient times or something?! How unfair! How unreasonable! A man who cares so little for his own pride as long as it'll help the soldiers at the front... Seeing a man like that only makes me want to help him even more!"

She waved her limbs like a child throwing a fit, but I was too busy trying to hide my surprise to say anything. It seemed like my past life was a lot more famous than I expected. I took a sip from my third cup of tea to calm myself down and then said, in as cheery a tone as I could muster, "And I'm sure you'll take the lion's share of the deal again, right?"

"Of course! ♪" she chirped. "I'll use that money to buy more things so that I can make even *more* money." Meirin looked up and smiled. In contrast to her usual childish expressions, this one was mature, akin to a flower blossoming. When it came to business, no one had as much raw talent as Meirin. She looked me in the eye and said in a firm tone, "That's how the world goes round. Please keep that in mind, my future hero."

It was a little embarrassing to hear her call me that. Instead of replying, I scratched at my face and looked away towards the manor. There was no sign of Miss Shizuka yet. I looked back at Meirin and shook my head. "I want to

become a civil official in a local government. The more rural the place, the better. Then I'll find myself a nice wife and have a kid with her. On rainy days, I'll stay inside and read some books. That's the sort of ideal life I want to lead; nothing more and nothing less!"

"You! Cannot! Weren't you the one who chased the Crimson Wolf—one of the Gen's four prized generals—back to the north? I don't believe Ei is so peaceful that the government would allow someone of your caliber to stay as a mere local official! ★ Especially if we consider the influx of rats disguising themselves as merchants from Seitou. They're even going so far as to prepare wares from there to make their story more believable."

Though Meirin sounded like she was making fun, the information she was giving me reeked of danger. No one should know about Nguyen's attack; it was highly confidential. Which meant that there were more Gen spies than ever.

"Meirin," I said in a low voice.

"I haven't mentioned this to anyone else. It's very obviously a scheme Gen cooked up to try and break the alliance we have with Seitou. I've no interest in conflict. The only thing I care about"—Meirin fixed me with a serious look and I met it head-on; I wasn't so pathetic that I would try to look away from her honesty—"is you, Lord Sekiei. However, if the war between Gen and Ei continues to drag on then there will be more and more witnesses until everyone starts to believe that Seitou is our enemy. If you truly wish to live a peaceful life, you should leave the Chou family while you can."

I didn't reply. Instead, I drained my third cup of tea. It tasted a lot more bitter than the others.

With an elegant hand, Meirin reached out and picked up a cup. "I suppose you're worried about that girl you talk about all the time. Chou Hakurei, isn't it?"

"Yeah..."

"Why? Why do you care about her so much?"

There was an odd strength behind Meirin's words, pressuring me to give an actual answer. I placed my cup on the table to give her my full attention. Even

as I did, I could hear a fuss being raised in the manor. Was the mysterious guest someone so important?

Meeting Meirin's eyes, I admitted, "To cut a long story short, I owe her a debt. She saved my life, after all."

A breeze blew in from the north, cutting between Meirin and I. Had the wind grown stronger?

Meirin blinked. "She saved your life?"

I nodded in a placid manner and looked up at the sky. "You're a member of the big, up-and-coming Ou family. You must have looked into my past. I'm an orphan. Like yours, my parents were merchants. Bandits attacked us and our servants just outside of Keiyou while we were on a trip—I was the only survivor of the attack. The Chou family took me in when my father happened to find me while on patrol. Though, I don't remember any of that myself."

My memories from that period of my life were foggy. I could barely recall the cold wind of the plains and the thick stench of blood. After that, when I next remembered opening my eyes, I was on a bed with a young Hakurei nodding off next to me. I'd tried to sit up, only to have a sharp agony run through my head and body. That was the moment I had suddenly remembered: "I am the reincarnation of Kou Eihou."

"I can understand that you're grateful to General Chou for saving your life," Meirin said in a quiet voice. "But you haven't answered my question. I asked why—"

"No need to rush me, Ou Meirin. I'm not done with my story yet," I said with a quick wink and a wave of my hand. Meirin fell silent, pursing her lips childishly. "After father saved me, I broke out in a high fever that lasted over a week. I was on the brink of death, so this next part could've been a dream. I was hardly conscious, after all."

I met Meirin's eyes. Her usual exuberance was nowhere to be found. Instead, she was looking at me with sincere interest.

"The entire time I was in the tent," I went on, "I could hear the adults calling me a 'child of misfortune' and urging Chou Tairan to get rid of me. I could also

hear her...hear Hakurei crying and arguing for my survival. 'We saved his life, so don't try to end it now!' she said. She's usually such a calm and composed person, but she always ends up yelling when she gets emotional." I popped a sesame dumpling into my mouth and smiled.

But Meirin's expression remained serious. "So in other words, that's your—"

"My debt to Chou Hakurei, yes. I doubt she remembers it, and there's always the chance I merely imagined the whole thing. It's not as if I ever asked her about it." I could hear Miss Shizuka talking to someone; it seemed like she and the guest were making their way to us. "I might not have received the education you did, nor do I have your natural smarts. But I know what a person should do if they wish to repay someone for their kindness. Until I see Chou Hakurei attain true happiness in her life, I can't leave the Chou family." I tossed back my cup of tea to hide my embarrassment after I'd finished talking, then added, "Oh, by the way, that's a secret. Don't tell anyone I said that."

The unique flavor profile of the tea was delicious. I wondered if I should have Meirin give me a bag of leaves as a souvenir.

"Anyway," I continued, "this is why you should give up on having me as your husband. You can't win against me in a tea-tasting contest anyway. You're brimming with talent as a merchant, so I'm sure you'll be able to find yourself a nice man or two."

I played the last part off as a joke to signal the end of my story. Not many people in the world were so easily able to come up with a plan to import enough food for tens of thousands of soldiers. Though Meirin made use of her family's resources and power, she was still only seventeen years old. Her talents reminded me of my past life's sworn brother, Ou Eifuu.

After a while, Meirin placed a hand over her chest and murmured, "State your conditions." Her eyes burned with an extraordinary determination.

Huh? Wait. Isn't this the part where she's supposed to give up? I wrung my hands at the unexpected turn of events and Meirin shot to her feet with a jerk.

"State your conditions!" she shouted. "I understand how you feel, Lord Sekiei. However, that's not enough to make me back down! I...I also consider you *my* savior! Did you forget that I, Ou Meirin, owe you a debt as well?!"

“Uh, erm, well...”

“Excuse me. What did you just say?”

At the sound of a third, cold voice, Meirin and I jumped as one and hurried to turn and look at the new arrival. I would recognize the figure at the edge of the pond anywhere.

“H-Hakurei?! What are you doing here?!”

“I’ve already finished my errands. I learned the location of the Ou family’s manor through a letter our aunt left behind. Now, please answer my question.”

Hakurei had crossed the bridge in a hurry to reach the island Meirin and I were on. She looked down at me, her gaze so cold that I felt goose bumps break out over my skin.

“N-Now, listen you...” My voice refused to cooperate. *A-Auntie... You’re not even in the city and you still manage to cause trouble for me!* Miss Shizuka, who was standing behind Hakurei, gave me an encouraging look. *How did things come to this?*

While I was busy pretending that the reality before me was a figment of my imagination, Ou Meirin stood up and offered Hakurei an elegant bow. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Meirin, and I am the eldest daughter of Ou Jin. I assume you are Lady Chou Hakurei? I believe that we’ll have many, *many* chances to get to know each other better in the future, so I hope we can become good friends. ♪”

“Yes, my name is Chou Hakurei. I’d like to express my gratitude to you for providing our soldiers with provisions. Thank you. However, I personally have no interest in becoming your friend.”

Hakurei and Meirin stared at each other before they smiled as one. Despite their sweet expressions there was fire in their eyes. I swore I could see the illusion of a tiger and a dragon behind them, locked in combat.

I ignored the droplets of cold sweat pouring down my face and tried to change the topic. “Uh, so, where’s Asaka?” I asked Hakurei.

“She’s with father. I’m not a child; so as long as I have a map, I can navigate myself through the city.”

“Right...”

It looked like I’d brought up the wrong topic. I could see Miss Shizuka offering me a sympathetic smile. After having been glaring at Meirin even while responding to my question, Hakurei finally turned to look at me. “Stand up. Now,” her eyes said.

I could feel my heart freeze in my chest. I hadn’t the foggiest idea as to why she was so angry, but I knew that there would be no reasoning with Hakurei in the state she was in. I raised my hands in surrender. “All right, I got it. Let’s go —”

“Oh? You’re already going to go home?”

“M-Meirin?!”

Meirin crossed her legs in her chair and accepted a cup of tea from Miss Shizuka. Then, she gave Hakurei a bright smile. Hakurei, her hand on my back, returned the expression with a thin smile of her own.

“My apologies,” Hakurei said. “My father is wai—”

“Would you like to hear how Lord Sekiei and I met?” Meirin interrupted.

“Wha—?!” Both Hakurei and I froze.

Without taking her eyes off us, Meirin said, “So, it’s safe to assume you two will stay for a while longer? Shizuka, prepare some tea and snacks for Lady Hakurei.”

“Yes, Lady Meirin.” With a delighted look on her face, Miss Shizuka started to prepare Hakurei’s refreshments.

This isn’t good. Out loud, I said, “H-Hakurei, we shouldn’t keep father wai—”

“I’m sure he won’t mind if we’re late by a little bit,” Hakurei replied in a firm voice. She sat down and then prompted me with a look to sit as well. I settled in the seat next to her, my movements slow with the sheer awkwardness of the situation.

Meirin recrossed her legs with a confident motion. “Now, let’s start the story of my destined meeting with Lord Sekiei!”

As the daughter of the Ou family—who are renowned even in the bustling city of Rinkei—I was forced to live an incredibly sheltered life. Both of my parents were skilled merchants and they traveled all over the country, from east to west. Even though I don’t have many memories with them because of it, I still believe that I had a fortunate childhood. However. My father, unlike my mother, is very overprotective.

I’m seventeen years old, and yet no matter how many times I begged, he wouldn’t let me out of Rinkei. *They* leave Rinkei all the time; they even go into all sorts of dangerous territories! That was when I came up with a plan—I would sneak onto one of our supply ships on the Grand Canal. The water of the Grand Canal is the lifeblood of the Ou family’s prosperity; without it, we wouldn’t be able to import our wares or sell our products. As the future head of the Ou family, I needed to have a practical understanding of what the workplace was like. That was the excuse I came up with, anyway.

My plan worked perfectly. Shizuka found out about it... And the captain of the ship welcomed me aboard with a too-bright smile... B-But, you know... It still worked out!

It was my first time aboard a ship and everything felt so new to me. I can still remember how I went around and asked the sailors so many questions. I’d ask things like “What’s this?” and “What was that monster that just jumped out of the water?” It was on the morning we were to arrive at our destination, Keiyou, that things took a turn.

I was asleep in the cabin. Shizuka came in to wake me and by the time I was fully conscious, the situation was already grave. I could hear the sailors giving each other orders, their voices tight and nervous.

“Pirates! There are pirates chasing after us!”

“Why are there *pirates* on the Grand Canal?”

“It must be people who can’t afford the salt tax.”

“The wind is too weak for the sails! To the oars! We must row the boat ourselves!”

“There aren’t enough people for that!”

I didn’t know much about the wider world, but it wasn’t hard for me to understand that we were caught up in something terrible. I clung to Shizuka as we went out onto the deck. From there, we could see a dozen little ships, all of them prepared to attack ours. Ever since the grand chancellor lowered the prices on salt, there had been a decrease of pirates and bandits along the Grand Canal, so most every ship had reduced the number of potential rowers on board, ours included. The sail upon the main mast wasn’t moving and the air was calm, absent of the usual wind—it was clear that we wouldn’t be able to escape unless we did something drastic.

“Lady Meirin, I will protect you no matter what happens.”

Even before Shizuka whispered her promise in my ear, I knew that we were backed in a corner. None of the sailors had any combat experience; they all held their weapons in awkward ways.

Upon a ship at the back of the enemy fleet was the pirates’ presumed leader—a barbaric-looking man wielding a broadsword. Before he could say anything or even give an order, however, I saw him fall into the water with an arrow protruding from his shoulder. At the same time the sailor in the crow’s nest yelled, “There’s a military ship coming up behind the enemy fleet! It bears the Chou family’s flag!”

For a moment, none of us said anything. But in the next, we raised our voices in a cheer. Everyone in the Ei Empire knew of the National Shield, Chou Tairan. Relief flooded my chest, and I can vividly recall how my knees almost buckled as the adrenaline ran out of my body.

“Lady Meirin?!”

I fought through the weakness and tore myself out of Shizuka’s arms, sprinting towards the bow of the ship. The reason for my action was simple: I wanted to witness the Chou family’s famous military might for myself. That was all. I could hear Shizuka following behind me and the moment I reached the front of the ship I saw it, clear as day, with my own eyes.

“Th-That’s...”

I saw a brave, black-haired warrior, his formidable technique on full display as he shot down the pirates. Each enemy required only one draw of his bow. He showed no fear, even though the pirates rained down countless arrows in return as a way to defend themselves. Yes, that warrior was none other than...

Meirin’s eyes sparkled and she puffed out her chest. “Yes, that warrior was none other than Lord Sekiei! I sometimes still dream about how he shot down pirate after pirate, hee hee! He looked so brave. Don’t you think it made for a dramatic meeting?”

U-Um... I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks as my gaze drifted towards Hakurei next to me. She was sipping her tea and when she put it down, she smiled at Shizuka.

“This tea has a very complex flavor. It’s delicious, Miss Shizuka.”

“You’re much too kind, Lady Hakurei.”

Hakurei and Shizuka were enjoying a peaceful conversation; it looked like they got along quite well. In comparison... When I looked back at Meirin, she was pouting.

“H-Hey!” she said. “Listen to—”

“I understand.” Hakurei placed her cup back down on the table and looked up to meet Meirin’s eyes. Once again there was the illusion of lightning striking down between them. “What you’re saying is, a ship from our army saved yours. During this meeting, you learned about our food shortage, which had been the reason we’d come to Rinkei. And then...” She glared at me right as I was reaching out for a mooncake. Hakurei’s frigid beauty was so intimidating that I leaned away from her. “You parents took a shine to our freeloader. Is that right?”

“You’re quite sharp. Yes, that’s exactly what happened.”

The entire time Hakurei and Meirin conversed, I made myself as small as possible. I felt like a frog under the menacing stare of a snake—no, a dragon.

Chou Hakurei was terrifying when angry.

A clap rang through the air so suddenly that Meirin, Hakurei, and I all jumped. When we turned to look at where it came from, we saw Shizuka standing there with a wide smile on her face.

“Lady Meirin, I believe that Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei still have errands they need to run. What do you think about letting them go for the day?”

“Huh?” For a moment Meirin gave Shizuka a blank stare before recovering to say, “Uh... Y-Yes! That sounds like a very nice idea. Lord Sekiei, you’ll still be staying in the city, right?”

“Hmm? Yeah, I will.” I nodded. We’d probably be hanging around in Rinkei until father returned from the grand chancellor’s house.

The next person Shizuka turned to was Hakurei. “Lady Hakurei, I have a gift for you to bring back with you,” she said with a cheery smile. “Please follow me into the manor. ♪”

“But...” Hakurei glanced at me.

“I won’t leave without you, don’t worry.” I gave a light wave of my hand.

Hakurei’s expression softened and she stood up. She offered Meirin a quick bow and then headed across the bridge, back towards the manor. After offering Meirin and me a nod, Shizuka swiftly followed; it seemed that we’d caused Shizuka to have to step in as mediator. I drank the last of the tea and smiled at Meirin, who still had a dissatisfied look on her face.

“That was Chou Hakurei. What do you think? She’s impressive, right?”

Meirin’s lips pursed and her brow furrowed. “I can tell that she’s smart,” she finally said—though she didn’t sound happy about it. She grabbed the last cake on the table and shoved it into her mouth as she said with a childish pout, “But I won’t lose! I’ll be the one to emerge the victor!”

“Is this even a competition?”

In lieu of answering me, Meirin chose instead to chew loudly on the mooncake. After she finished, she sat up straighter and placed one hand on her impressive bust. “Today’s tea-tasting contest ended in yet another loss for me.

However! The words ‘losing streak’ and ‘ungratefulness’ do not exist in the Ou family’s dictionary! Lord Sekiei, please give me an order! I swear on my name that I shall complete any task you give me, no matter how impossible it may be, and stand at your side as your wife! Oh, this has nothing to do with the sword and bow, by the way. I’ll look for them for you as thanks for the paddle steamer! ♪”

Ou Meirin was as talented as she was stubborn. Though we’d only known each other for a short while, I’d learned this lesson the hard way. One day I’d said as a joke, “Wouldn’t it be great if there was a boat that could move at top speeds even without wind?” Well, it looked like she’d actually gone and constructed such a ship. On top of building extravagant things, she could use those mountains of money to wiggle her way out of most problems in general. As sad as it was to say, it was money—not love—that made the world go round.

In order to make Meirin give up on me, I simply had to give her a task that was literally impossible to complete! But, coming up with one was easier said than done. That was when my eyes landed on my sword, propped up against my chair. *A sword, huh?*

Meirin was still waiting for my response, so I said, casually, “Then can you find me the Heavenly Swords that the Twin Stars of the Tou Empire were said to have wielded? If I can get my hands on those two swords, then I’ll seriously consider marrying you.”

Her eyes, big enough under normal circumstances, widened even further. “The Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars... The legendary twin swords used by heroes from a thousand years ago...” she kept murmuring. Then, in a searching tone, she asked, “What you promised, though... You’re telling the truth, right?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“And you won’t go back on your word?”

“Never.”

On the way to Rinkei, I’d more or less finished *Book of Tou*, as well as other history books covering the time after the Tou Empire’s collapse. In the millennium after Eifuu left the government, no one had ever found the Heavenly Swords. Not even Meirin could find something that simply did not

exist.

“I see. I understand. Very well, then.” Meirin stood up and spun once on the spot. She stopped, her hair bouncing next to her head, and then she slammed her palm on her chest, right over where her heart was. She declared in a loud voice, “I, Ou Meirin, swear that I will do *everything* in my power to find the Heavenly Swords and offer them to you, Lord Chou Sekiei! And then, when the time comes, hee hee, you’ll be my consort! ♪”

“I didn’t give you permission to turn me into a consort,” I pointed out, even as I was thinking back to the beloved swords that had protected me on countless battlefields.

However, Meirin, still in high spirits, held up her fists and exclaimed, “You didn’t! But, that’s what you’ll be in the future, so there shouldn’t be a problem! ♪” She suddenly turned her back to me and muttered, “The most dangerous love rival I have is a lot more pathetic than I imagined, so there’s nothing to fear!”

I smiled, though it was a strained one. “Just don’t do anything dangerous, all right?”

“Don’t worry about me! I’ll have Shizuka with me. And besides...” Her expression morphed into one more befitting her age. She walked over to me and gave me a hesitant hug. “If anything *does* happen, I’ll have you save me, my future husband!” Then she lowered her voice and continued, “More and more people within the court are of the opinion that we no longer need General Chou. That the conflict with Gen is going in our favor. There’s also something amiss in the story I told you about the rats. Please be careful.”

“Make sure you don’t stick your neck into anything too dangerous,” I returned. “Thanks for the information. Contact me whenever you learn something new.”

Hakurei was waiting for me near the front entrance of the manor, an unfamiliar cloth bag in her hands. It probably contained the gift that Miss Shizuka had prepared for us. I walked up to her and, without saying anything, held out my hand. Just as wordlessly, Hakurei passed me the bag and then turned on her heel.

When we walked through the front gate, I turned to see Meirin and Miss Shizuka watching. I waved. Next to me, Hakurei bowed. It looked like she and Shizuka really bonded during their time together in the manor. Despite how haughty Hakurei acted in Keiyou, she'd been quite reserved since arriving in Rinkei, so it was a little surprising how quickly Shizuka had gotten through her defenses.

The two of us left the Ou manor and walked down the street together. The sun had almost set and I could feel the approach of the night. The Chou manor was situated north of the residential area, so we had quite a walk ahead of us. Thankfully Rinkei was fairly safe and so I wasn't too worried about bandits or thugs. Asaka hadn't even bothered to come get us from the Ou manor.

One by one, the various stalls and stores lit their lights and lanterns. I idly watched the waterways, which were filled with sailors in small boats hurrying home. The bridge ahead of us scarcely had any people on it, and as I was about to step on it, I heard Hakurei's voice from behind me.

"Earlier..."

"Hmm?"

"After Miss Shizuka and I left, what did you and that girl talk about?" Hakurei walked ahead of me and stopped. With her back facing me, I couldn't see her expression.

I placed my hands behind my head and gave an honest answer. "I asked her to fulfill an impossible request. Oh, uh, about the first battle..."

"I'm not angry about it. By the way, Miss Shizuka gave us some rare Seitou tea. When we get home, I'll brew some."

"For me too?"

"Of course...not. I will only prepare some for father, Asaka, and myself."

"You're so mean."

We started walking again, even as we continued our lighthearted bickering. Hakurei was in a far better mood than earlier and there was a lightness in her step. I, however, couldn't stop thinking about the revelations of the day.

“Seitou, huh...” I murmured to myself as I stared at the light playing off Hakurei’s silver hair. Was their betrayal the truth or a lie?

Ever since an ascendant—a mystic—founded Seitou several hundred years ago, it had been a close ally of Ei. It was a commerce country famous for the metal goods it produced from a huge mine within its territory, where iron ore was extracted. Thanks to its trade deals with us and the countries in the west, Seitou boasted incredible wealth, which it put into developing and improving new technologies imported from other countries.

That was what I heard, anyway.

In terms of size, Seitou was only a small fraction of Ei. Its border with Gen, situated in the northeast, had a natural wall in the form of the steep Nanamagari Mountains. In the northwest of Seitou was the Hakkotsu Desert. Both terrains proved difficult for Gen’s cavalymen—which meant that Seitou had always been able to protect its lands without needing to draw arms. Eastern Seitou, which connected to Keiyou, was the only region with plains. That geography was why Seitou’s goods were so rare and valuable.

Even the Ou family, with their reputation and financial power, would have trouble getting their hands on special-grade tea. And yet, despite that, Hakurei’s bag contained those very leaves. In other words—more rats disguised as merchants than I imagined had infiltrated Ei. If *Rinkei* was like this, then Keiyou definitely wasn’t safe.

Meirin seemed to take this information, as well as what I’d told her about Nguyen’s troops’ weapons, to deduce that Gen was trying to sow discord between Ei and Seitou. But she hadn’t been completely confident in this theory. She’d felt like something was off. *Let’s say on the off chance that Seitou really has betrayed us...*

“Sekiei, what’s the matter?” Hakurei peered at me, a worried look in her eyes.

I’d gotten so lost in my thoughts that I’d stopped walking. “Oh? Ahh, sorry. I was spacing out. C’mon,” I said with a wink.

As I ushered Hakurei across the bridge, I steeled my will. On the off chance that my worst premonitions came to pass, I had to warn father about Seitou’s potential betrayal. Anything was possible in this world, after all.

“H-Hey, Hakurei...”

“You can’t slip out of this one, so why don’t you suck it up already? And you call yourself a man.”

I made an embarrassing sound at being called out, but my expression in the mirror as Hakurei fixed my black formal clothing was one of abject sorrow. The little birds singing from outside the window made me so jealous. *Ahh... If only I could fly away from here too.* Hakurei was wearing her white-and-green formal robes, a floral ornament decorating her bangs. She’d already finished her own preparations, so she was tidying up my outfit with a practiced hand.

“It’s one thing for *you* to visit... But someone like me going to the emperor’s palace?” I couldn’t help but grumble.

From the outside looking in, my position in the Chou family was quite bizarre. In the past, father and auntie had both said to me, “Of *course* you’re a member of the Chou family! Do you even need to ask?” As for the girl in front of me...

“Hmm? What’s the matter? Why are you making such a strange face? All right, you look presentable now.”

Hakurei was the same as the rest of her family. At least, I assumed she viewed me as her brother. However, that didn’t mean that society accepted me as a legitimate member of the Chou family. Chou Tairan’s nickname of “National Shield” had come from all the times he’d repelled Gen’s attacks. As the people praised his accomplishments, they naturally started to refer to him by that name. It eventually became so widespread that it reached even the emperor’s ears.

I was considered an outsider of the Chou family. Apparently father wanted to officially adopt me and grant me the Chou name, and he’d petitioned the court for this many times, only the attempts had always ended in failure. The Chou family was the most vocal supporter of a northern campaign—but not everyone wanted war. Those who were against such a campaign and held power within the government didn’t want more people who would be able to argue in the Chou’s favor.

With allies like these, who needs enemies? People didn't change, no matter how many years passed. I sighed, lamenting the despair of human nature.

"His Excellency, the grand chancellor, was the one who arranged for you to visit him. When we spoke with him yesterday, he said that he would love to see you on our next visit," Hakurei said. She was replying to my earlier complaints. "Isn't this a good thing? He's interested in you."

"Ugh." I could feel goose bumps on my skin and I shuddered. I couldn't see myself playing the mind games necessary when socializing within court.

Hakurei stepped forward so that she was standing in front of me and then reached out. "Your collar is lopsided."

"I can fix it myself."

"Don't move."

"Okay."

Surrendering, I looked out the lattice windows. My eyes found Asaka and the other maids. As soon as they noticed me staring at them, they moved their mouths to form words.

"Lord Sekiei, you look fantastic!"

"Please take good care of Lady Hakurei! ♪"

It looked like they were heading out to the south to discuss some business deals. I supposed they had auntie's teachings to thank for being able to go on this job. I sighed on the inside.

Booming footsteps rang from the hallway and then my father was entering the room, wearing a dark green military uniform. "Hakurei, Sekiei, have the two of you finished your preparations?!"

"Yes, father." Hakurei's reply was immediate.

"Father..." I said slowly. "Do I *really* need to go?" The wheedling tone I used as I pleaded to be left at home was, I admit, pretty pathetic. I could tell even without looking over at her that Hakurei was giving me an unimpressed look.

Father's face shifted to that of a noble general. "Sekiei, give up; this time

you're not getting off the hook so easily. You can simply kill some time in the waiting room near the front entrance of the imperial palace—I'm sure the sons of other nobles will be there as well if you get bored."

I sighed. *So it really doesn't matter if I'm there or not.* Father stared at me for a moment and then, the movement almost imperceptible, nodded.

Women with silver hair and blue eyes will bring misfortune to the country. An ancient superstition that had come about during a time when very few people were born in the western regions of the mainland. At this point, no one cared much about it... But. There were probably old geezers—like the nobility fighting for power within the palace courts—who still took the saying to heart.

So this way, Hakurei won't be left alone and if anything does happen, I can act as her shield. Thinking of things that way made the trip to the imperial palace seem a lot more bearable. "I understand everything you'd like me to do," I said to father. "Please treat me to some delicious food tonight."

"Of course! Leave it to me."

"Please stop telepathically communicating with each other. It's time to leave," Hakurei said, pointing to the water clock in the garden. If we didn't head out now, then we wouldn't make it in time.

And so, we departed for the palace!

The imperial palace, located in the south of Rinkei, was a massive building. We passed through the front gates upon which a dragon and a phoenix were engraved, and stepped foot into the palace. Immediately, a young soldier of the royal guard called out to us.

"Greetings, General Chou! Allow me to lead the way." Then he said to me and Hakurei, "If the two of you would be so kind, I'd like to request that you wait here."

Father turned and clapped our shoulders. "Hakurei, Sekiei, I'll see you soon. It shouldn't take too long."

"See you later," I said.

“Good luck!” Hakurei called.

Father nodded, a satisfied smile on his face, and then proceeded down the stone corridors with the royal guard. Glancing at Hakurei, I made my way to the waiting room. I sat down in a nearby chair, which already had a tea set and cup next to it. Normally in these situations, Hakurei would sit across from me, but to my surprise, today she chose the chair next to me instead.

Keeping the emotion off my face, I asked if she wanted some of the tea, but she shook her head. She seemed on edge. I took a sip of my own and scrunched up my face. “Gross...”

Perhaps it was because I’d drunk high-grade tea yesterday, but even so, the taste of this was unacceptable. The royal guard worked directly under the emperor and had to be ready at a moment’s notice to go to the front lines. If *their* tea was of this quality, then I couldn’t even imagine what other armies had to drink.

“Hey, you!”

As somber thoughts about the current state of the Ei army’s rations were swirling through my mind, a young man called out. He was slightly older than us and, with his delicate features, looked to be a noble. A ceremonial sword decorated with gold and jewels hung from his waist. Father—the National Shield himself—hadn’t even been allowed weapons, let alone Hakurei or me. So if this man was allowed to bear arms within the imperial palace, he must have been of significant status.

The young man walked right up to us, a smarmy smile on his face. Despite the sword, he moved like he hadn’t received much training at all. With several other young men behind him he stared down at me and said, “I’ve never seen you before. State your name.”

It looks like father’s worries were on the mark. I didn’t have to turn around to know that Hakurei was getting anxious.

“I’m Sekiei, a freeloader in the Chou family,” I replied, acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary. “Who’re you?”

The young man didn’t answer; instead, he pointed and stared at me as if I

were a dead bug on the underside of his shoe. “I’ve never heard of you before. And what did you say? You’re a freeloader of the Chou’s? Ha! You’re not even a noble! This is the imperial palace, where His Imperial Majesty resides; it’s no place for a mutt. Leave!”

“Yeah—leave!”

At the same time as the young noble yelled his final word, the entourage behind him joined in. I could tell right away that this man was the type who swaggered about and boasted as if he weren’t borrowing his father’s authority to do so. I wanted to smirk at him, but I bowed my head and hid the impulse. I couldn’t do or say anything that would hurt the reputations of my father or Hakurei.

“You’re absolutely correct. I’ll be on my way soon, so I hope you’ll suffer my presence for a little longer. I apologize. All right?”

I heard Hakurei swallow and knew she was biting back an impulsive outburst. The noble had planned on tormenting me but couldn’t do that in the face of my passive attitude. He harrumphed, disappointed. Then he turned to look at Hakurei.

With a twist of his lips, he snapped, “Hey, woman! State your name!”

For a long moment Hakurei didn’t answer, and when she eventually did, there was a slight tremble in her voice. “I am Hakurei, the eldest daughter of Chou Tairan.”

“Chou Tairan?” the noble repeated before he started to laugh. His mocking cackle echoed through the room and even after he stopped, there was a cruel smirk playing on his lips. He gave a theatrical shrug and said, “What a surprise... You’re the daughter of that country bumpkin of a general? The one up in the boonies who can’t stop yelling about a northern campaign just so he can beg for money under the guise of military funding? I’m shocked you and this mutt here would dare show your faces in the imperial palace!”

Hakurei bit her lip, obviously frustrated. I remained calm, but my mind was racing. There were only so many nobles who could openly insult Chou Tairan like this. This idiot’s family must hold quite a high position within the court. *Doesn’t look like the Ei Empire will last for much longer.*

As I was pondering on that cold truth, the man unsheathed his ceremonial sword and pointed it at Hakurei. “On top of that, your hair and eyes... Why, they’re the same silver and blue that’ll bring misfortune to the empire. Get out of my sight; scum like you will only invite trouble to the capital! Stop causing problems for my grandfather!”

“Your grandfather?” I asked, trying to get the heat off of Hakurei, who was starting to shake.

As I expected, the man turned his mocking gaze to me. “You don’t even know who I am? My grandfather is the imperial chancellor, one of the pillars of our great Ei Empire!”

“He’s the grand chancellor,” Hakurei said coolly before I could even start thinking about the man’s words. “Not the *imperial chancellor*. Historically, Ou Eifuu, one of the Twin Stars, was the only person to have held the title of imperial chancellor.”

The noble’s eyebrows furrowed and then, with a sudden motion, he snatched the floral ornament from Hakurei’s bangs. She yelled, but he just sneered. “Such insolence, showing up at the imperial palace and wearing cheap scrap like this!” Throwing the ornament down, the young noble crushed it under a foot.

“STOP!”

The sound of Hakurei’s chair falling to the ground was barely audible over her scream. She had jumped to her feet and stared blankly at the man’s foot before sinking to her knees. A single tear made its way down her cheek.

The man, apparently the grandson of the grand chancellor, grinned down at Hakurei. He swung his sword so that the wind from it would ruffle Hakurei’s bangs—but I was already leaping out of my chair and in the next second, had put my fist right into his face. Behind me, Hakurei gasped in shock. The ceremonial sword flew through the air as the man, who had screamed and then passed out from a single punch, fell to the ground, unable to kill the weapon’s momentum. He lay there, a bubble of blood starting to form from his nose.

“Weakling,” I spat. The sword dropped in front of me and I stamped it in half. As I did so, the noble’s groupies started to yell.

“Y-You bastard!”

“Wh-What in the world do you... What in the world do you think you’re doing?!”

“Do you have *any* idea who we are?!”

“Listen...” I looked towards them and despite their earlier aggression, they started to pale before my eyes. They took a few steps back. “I don’t care what you say about me. I already know that I’m out of place in the imperial place. However...” The men started to tremble and even the soldiers standing guard looked terribly shocked. “You disrespected my father and insulted Hakurei. Surely you don’t think that you’ll simply be let off the hook after that? I’m not the kind of person who would just stand aside and let someone insult my saviors. Have you said your prayers?”

And with that, I set to teaching the pale and frightened men a lesson. From the periphery of my vision, I could see Hakurei, looking seconds away from crying, hugging the broken floral ornament to herself despite the dirt it was getting on her formal robes.

“Over here, Lord Sekiei. I don’t want to get violent with you...”

“Yeah, don’t worry. I know.”

I obeyed the military officer, who looked to be in his midtwenties, and stepped into the underground cell. Actually, it looked like the prison was only *half* underground—I could see the crescent moon from the single window high above my head. The officer locked the door behind me with a *click*. I turned around. Even without the moon I would have been able to tell where he was since he was holding a lantern, as faint as its light was.

“So, when can I expect to know my verdict? Sure hope it’ll be before I starve to death.”

“I don’t know,” the officer replied, the cold answer his only response before he and his men were returning down the passage we’d come from.

I had fought and beat up the sons of several nobles in the imperial palace.

Idiots they might be, but they still held significant status within the Ei Empire. It was due to the respect father commanded that the soldiers in the palace didn't treat me with violence or anger, but there was a limit to their clemency. I leaned against the wall and then crouched down on the cold stone floor. More than half of the cell was covered in darkness and the only light source I had now was the moonlight barely managing to shine in through the window.

"Man, I really caused trouble for father and Hakurei..." I wondered if she was all right. Despite appearances, she was a crybaby.

I stretched, losing myself in thought before noticing that the moonlight had vanished. When I looked up, someone was standing in front of the window. Judging by the length of the shadow, the person was male. *Who would come at this hour—and to the imperial palace of all places?*

Despite thinking it weird, I yelled, "Hey, you're blocking the moon if you stand there! Can you move?"

"Why?" the shadow asked, ignoring my request. He sounded old. Was he a senior? Even as my mind raced to figure out his identity, the man continued his questions. "Why did you start a ruckus inside the court? I hear you're living with the Chou family. Are you just a fool who can't imagine how your actions will reflect upon General Chou?"

"You're a pretty strict one, gramps..." I laced my hands behind my head. "I wanted to avoid causing my father problems, but those idiots insulted him using nothing more than secondhand knowledge. Not just that; they also disrespected the one who saved my life. I'm not so mature that I can ignore scumbags like that."

I'd already died once. And in this life I would've been long gone if it weren't for father and Hakurei. Because of that I'd gladly put my life on the line if it meant I could keep my saviors safe.

"Though you were the one who threw the first hit, weren't you?" the old man said. "It may be true that they were at fault, but there's no escape from punishment if you physically harm them."

"Huh?" I rolled the words over in my head and came to a conclusion: the soldiers who'd been present in the waiting room hadn't reported the truth. The

person who'd gotten violent first had been the grand chancellor's grandson when he'd swung a sword at Hakurei. That certainly explained why the officer earlier was so polite; it must have been the result of his conscience. It looked like while father and the other members of Keiyou were fighting for their lives on the front lines, Rinkei's court had become nothing more than a bushel of rotten apples.

"Humans never change no matter what times we live in, do we?"

"What?" The old man sounded seriously confused. "What are you talking about?"

I didn't feel like explaining anything to him, so instead, I crossed my legs and started to think. *Even if there are witnesses to their crimes, they can use their parents'—or grandparents'—authority to hide the truth.* Then once they became proper adults, they'd likely attain a position in the state government for themselves.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this after you came all the way here," I said to the old man, "but I've got no interest in your opinion. I don't think I can ever see eye to eye with someone who can make fun of the people fighting on the front lines. With someone who can enjoy a false prosperity, eating good food and drinking delicious wine, safe within the walls of the capital."

For a moment, the shadowy figure didn't respond. When he finally did, there was, for the first time, deep anger in his tone. "A false prosperity, you say?"

I shrugged. "I mean, that's what it is, isn't it? It's because of my father and his army doing their best on the front lines that Rinkei and its people can pass the days in peace. Nothing more, nothing less. But..." I looked up and glared at the shadow outside my window. "Do you know the number of enemies on Gen's front lines, just past the river? Even if we're being optimistic, they have three times more men than the Chou family's army. Do you hear that? *Three times.* And yet, as far as I know, there's never been a single person—soldier or official—sent from the capital as reinforcement. Even the walls of our northern fortresses were built using funds straight from the pockets of my father and his generals. Do the people in Rinkei think, 'Sure, the enemies exist, but there's no way they'll be able to cross the river'?"

The old man didn't reply. There was something heavy in the silence and it was clear that he knew something. After a while, he said, "That's the truth, isn't it? General Chou is able to keep all the enemies at bay." He sounded like he was barely managing to push out the words.

I sighed. "Surely, you must be joking." With how dark it was in the cell, I was sure that my black hair was melting into the shadows. I ran my hand through it and said, "Chou Tairan is an unparalleled general. However, he's not invincible and he's constantly being slowed down by his own allies. Compared to that, the young emperor of Gen has full authority over his army and I hear he's an extremely talented commander. We can win battles, but we can't win the war—the difference between our manpower is too great. Gen needs only one victory, whereas we cannot afford a single loss. Do you get it? We're at a serious disadvantage."

That was the reality this shadow apparently couldn't, or didn't want to, see. A cold wind blew into my cell and I heard faint footsteps from the window. Someone had been approaching but stopped, maybe after a brief moment of surprise.

"I'll keep what you said in mind, as well as your name, Chou Sekiei," the shadow said in a weary voice. "You've a guest," he added before he turned on his heel and left.

Almost immediately after, something fell down from between the bars of the window. I snatched it out of the air to find that it was a small, warm leather bag. Inside were zongzi and a bamboo bottle, along with a folded-up piece of paper. I strained my eyes and noticed a shadowy figure wearing a jacket peering in at me from outside. It was Hakurei. Her expression was blank, but her silver hair reflected the moonlight, shining like the stars.

"Wha... Listen, you," I said, half in disbelief. "You shouldn't have come all the way here. We may be in the capital, but it's still dangerous for a woman to walk around at night by herself! How did you even get here in the first place?" The doors and gates into the imperial palace were all locked at night, so it should have been impossible.

Hakurei sat on the ground and explained, "I had the Ou family's daughter tell

me about a secret passage. Miss Shizuka was the one who led me down it.”

“Those two...” I pressed my fingers against my forehead as a migraine started to build. The Ou family consisted of highly influential and powerful merchants, so it wasn’t a surprise that they knew about a secret passage or two. I complained about them and their inability to leave well alone under my breath as I unwrapped the sticky rice dumpling.

“Before you eat...” Hakurei said in a cold voice.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not even going to thank me for bringing you that food, Mister Freeloader? Even after you tarnished my father’s reputation?”

Damn. She’s seriously angry. I looked around as if the cold walls of my prison cell could save me from my predicament.

“Th-Thanks. Oh yeah, that reminds me. You and father didn’t get in trouble, did you?”

“We didn’t.”

I breathed out a sigh. “That’s a relief.” With worry out of the way, I bit into the dumpling. As soon as the salt hit my tongue I could feel my strength returning. *Ahh... That sure hits the spot.* Within seconds I’d finished and I washed it all down with water.

“Why?” Hakurei’s trembling voice came from above. It was unlike her, who was normally so calm and collected, to sound like this. I set the bamboo bottle aside and looked up at her. “Why did you go that far? You’ve always been an idiot, but...”

“Hey, I resent that.”

“But you aren’t an idiot who’s ignorant of your standing. Back there, I only needed to hold my tongue and bear it.”

“Well, no, not quite,” I said, easily shooting down Hakurei’s interpretation of the events. I licked a grain of rice off my finger. Might as well tell her my honest feelings. “‘Women with silver hair and blue eyes will bring misfortune to the country.’ Except I’ve been with you for about ten years now and nothing bad

has ever happened to me. In fact, I'd say that you bring *good* fortune. I won't let you get hurt just because of a superstition."

Hakurei fell silent. I didn't need to see her face to know that she was pouting. I had started working on my second zongzi when Hakurei spoke again, her words rushing out.

"The first young man you knocked out hadn't been lying. He truly *was* the old grand chancellor's grandson. It wouldn't be a surprise if they charge you with a felony."

I hummed, focused more on the delicious zongzi in my hands. I was far more interested in eating than hearing about the potential ramifications of my actions.

"Do you have no sense of danger?" Hakurei said, her voice starting to regain its usual chill. "Things could get out of hand."

"I'm sure it won't be a big deal. If His Excellency is someone of low caliber like that, then I'd say it's a relief since father can handle someone as pathetic as that in his sleep. What would the people say if they learned that the grand chancellor in charge of managing the entire country couldn't keep his own grandson in check?"

Everyone, even those outside of the country, knew that the old grand chancellor of Ei was someone of great importance. He belonged to no specific political party and, for three generations over the course of the last fifty years, had contributed to the empire's prosperity. I chugged the last of the water in the bamboo bottle and placed it, along with the leaves that had been around the zongzi, back inside the leather bag.

"But..." Hakurei said, sounding unconvinced.

"Besides... Catch!" I flung the bag into the air and Hakurei caught it with ease. I leaned against the wall of my cell and smiled. "Besides, if that idiot had continued to make fun of me, I'm sure *you* would've been the one to punch him."

The night wind blew, making Hakurei's jacket billow about her. With the cloth rippling, I could see a faint flush on her cheeks before she made a quick turn

away from me and muttered, "You think too highly of yourself."

Not that I'm surprised, but this little princess has no soft bone in her body. Instead of saying that, though, I waved my hand in acknowledgment. It was hard to tell if she caught the movement through the darkness.

Hakurei fixed her coat to make herself presentable again and stood. "I'm going back. By the way, I heard your verdict will be announced tomorrow morning."

"Sounds good. Be careful on your way back and say hi to Miss Shizuka for me. And sorry to father," I replied. *Tomorrow morning, huh? That's a lot sooner than I thought.*

"Sekiei," Hakurei said, quietly.

"Huh?" I tilted my head and waited for her to continue.

She hesitated for a while but then was quick to say, "No, it's nothing. Good night."

"Sure. Good night."

Finally, for sure this time, I heard her footsteps fading away into the distance. I huffed out a wry laugh and held the piece of paper from the bag aloft, letting it catch the moonlight. I could barely make out the words, "Thank you." *What an awkward girl.* Whoever ended up her husband would lead a very difficult life indeed. I could feel my mood take a turn for the better and quietly I closed my eyes.

"Lord Sekiei, come out."

At dawn, a military officer in his midtwenties called to me from outside the cell.

"Wha...?"

The dim morning sunlight was starting to peer in through the window and it wouldn't be long before the roosters started to crow. I yawned as I stood up. "Sure is early in the day. They hand out verdicts at this hour?"

Instead of replying to my question, the officer only said, “Please hurry.”

I was a little confused by the whole thing, but I obediently left the cell and followed after him. He took me down an underground tunnel that didn’t seem like it’d been used in a very long time. *Another secret passage?*

Halfway through our journey, the officer handed me a bottle of water and a cloth along with the order to “Please wash your face.” I took the items from him and used them without worrying about propriety. We walked down, and then up, until eventually I saw the exit. The officer was just ushering me through as I heard a loud booming voice ring out.

“You’ve finally made it, Sekiei! That underground cell was cold at night, wasn’t it?”

“F-Father?! Wait, why are you here? And with Hakurei to boot?”

The people waiting for me on the other end of the passage were a laughing Chou Tairan, an expressionless Hakurei, and a smiling Asaka. Miss Shizuka was even present as well, standing behind those three. Father was in his usual outfit, but both Hakurei and Asaka were wearing light traveling clothes. They had the reins of three horses in their hands. I looked around and saw Rinkei, covered with the morning fog, far below me. It seemed that we were standing on a hill to the north of the capital.

The officer gave my father a salute. “I’ll return to my duties, sir!”

“Good work. You really came through for me.”

“That’s far too high a praise. No one who experienced the front lines would turn down a direct request from you, General Chou.” After that, the officer saluted me as well before he returned down the passage we came from.

I had no idea what was going on. Seeing my confusion, father grinned and handed me a piece of high quality paper. “Here’s the verdict that was handed down to you. Read it well.”

I sucked in a nervous breath and took a moment to collect myself. “Yes, sir.” Then, I started to read the contents of the paper.

To Sekiei, who grew up in the Chou family,

No matter the reason, one shall not rampage on the grounds of the imperial palace. However, I understand you endured insults to your own person and only lifted your hand in violence when your adoptive father and sister were disrespected. I commend your filial piety and your sense of justice. Given these, this is the verdict I pass upon you...

As soon as I had read it all, my eyes widened. *What?* I looked up at my father, who beamed down at me.

“After you’re freed from prison,” he said, “you are to ‘immediately leave Rinkei and make up for this disgrace with achievements on the battlefield.’ The grand chancellor’s seal is even on this letter. He praised you! When did you have the chance to meet him?”

“W-Well, I didn’t— Ahh.” *The old man from yesterday... Man, he got me good.* I lowered my head and sighed. “I gladly accept my punishment.”

My father’s expression turned serious. “Good. Then I leave Keiyou in your hands; guard it well until my return.” The man standing before me was no longer Hakurei’s father but Chou Tairan, the famed general of countless battles. “Also, as you suggested, I had my men hurry and carry out an investigation. The rumors about suspicious going-ons in the west are true.”

“So then, Seitou really has...?”

Chou Tairan valued intel above all else, and didn’t ignore even the vaguest of warnings. If Seitou had truly become an ally of Gen, then...

“The details are unclear,” father said, interrupting my thoughts. “However, I can’t return to Keiyou until I finish my talks with the pacifist party. That’s why I want you and Hakurei—”

“Please, wait a moment.” I looked over at Hakurei, who was gently stroking the head of her horse. *It’s times like these that I truly find her beautiful.*

“Hakurei’s going back with me?”

“Of course she is. Do you *want* my daughter to hate me more than she already does?!”

“Er, no, that’s not what I’m saying at all. I— Oof!”

“Here, for you,” Hakurei said. She’d thrown a piece of paper at my face; when I pulled it away, I saw her looking at me with an irritable expression.

“Apparently, the person who wrote that letter has a very difficult time getting up in the morning. Consider my debt to you from yesterday repaid.”

I glanced over at Shizuka—who nodded—so, cautiously, I opened up the letter.

To Lord Sekiei, the bravest and coolest warrior in the land,

Congratulations on getting thrown into prison after protecting the honor of your adoptive father and sister! I didn’t expect anything less from my future husband. It may not be much, but I have prepared some horses and traveling gear. Please don’t hesitate to use them.

I’m sure that I won’t be able to make it to you to say farewell. Please, please, forgive me! Yesterday, someone from my family returned from Seitou. According to them, there were no Gen soldiers within the capital. However, as I have said to your father, goods were being traded at an unusually fast pace. Also, it seemed as if they were secretly testing new weapons. Please be careful.

PS: Make sure you do not forget about that promise we made. I look forward to the next time we meet. As soon as I find the sword and bow, I’ll send them your way.

With love,

Your future wife, Ou Meirin.

It was the start of the day, but after reading that, I was already exhausted. Meirin had so much raw talent and yet only used it on ridiculous things.

Hakurei handed me my sword and dagger. “Now, it’s time for us to leave. We’ll be going back by horse rather than boat, so I suppose it will take us that much longer. Everything that girl says and does infuriates me, but I admit that she has an eye for quality. She chose wondrous horses for us. Make sure you don’t fall behind! The loser of the race has to obey everything the winner says. How’s that sound?”

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open as I struggled to keep up with the rapidly changing developments. I hooked my sword onto my belt. Hakurei

looked like she was having fun, so I hoped she would show me leniency and grant my simple request: “Can you go easy on—”

“No.”

Father burst into laughter. “Stay sharp, you two. Asaka, I leave them in your hands— Oh, that reminds me. I almost forgot the most important thing! Sekiei.”

“What is it, father?” I asked as I took a rucksack from Miss Shizuka and tied it to my saddle.

Beaming at me, he placed both his hands on my shoulders. “Thank you. Good job for protecting Hakurei! I’m truly so proud of you. I’m honored to have you as my son.”

Words failed me. I could feel something hot form in my chest and start to well up my throat, but the only sound that came from my mouth was a quiet gasp. *That’s right. How could I have forgotten? This man, Chou Tairan, who found and saved me in this life, is a man among men.*

“Your face is bright red, you know?” Hakurei teased.

“Sh-Shut up!” I snapped back, using my hand to hide my eyes. I jumped up onto my horse and stroked its neck. Even with the best horse in the empire, it would take about seven days to ride from Rinkei back to Keiyou. Lowering my hand I looked at Hakurei, who realized my intention immediately. We turned as one to look at Chou Tairan. “Well, then, father...”

“Father.”

Then we said in unison, “We shall await your return in Keiyou!”

My father nodded magnanimously as he ran his fingers through his well-groomed beard. “Very well. Hakurei, don’t take your eyes off of Sekiei. Make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble.”

“F-Father?!” I yelled it, uncaring of how pathetic I sounded at that moment.

“Of course, father. Hyah!” Without waiting for me, Hakurei kicked her horse and sent it into a gallop, with Asaka close behind her.

You play dirty, Chou Hakurei! You cheater! You’re the same, Asaka! I lowered my head and squeezed my horse’s sides, following after the women. *The west,*

huh? I sure hope nothing comes to pass.

Chapter Three

“Good morning, Sir Raigen!”

“Good morning, Teiha. You’re up early.”

In the north of Keiyou, right at the edge of the river, stood Hakuhou Castle. Hakuhou had been built with high ramparts, mainly used to keep an eye on Gen. This morning as I stood at the height of one of such ramparts, Teiha—my distant relative and a young man for whom my lord, Chou Tairan, had high expectations—joined me.

Teiha used to be overconfident to a fault, but ever since meeting the young master he’d become quite humble; Lord Sekiei had the uncanny ability to push others to better themselves. We’d first met the young master just after he killed the bandits who’d murdered his parents and servants... I still remembered the way he’d stood there on that plain, covered in blood from head to toe, dagger in hand. Back then I’d insisted on his immediate termination.

I’d been a fool.

The morning mist concealed the opposite side of the river. Teiha looked at me, his expression tight with anxiety. “It doesn’t look like there’s any movement this morning either.”

I hummed and nodded in agreement as I stroked my beard, which had turned bright white over time; fifty years had passed since my first battle. My eyesight was still the same as when I was a young man, though, and I could only barely make out the massive war flag on Gen’s side of the border. The river bisecting the continent was so wide here that one could mistake it for the sea.

Teiha’s face turned serious. “When will General Chou return? It’s been three months since he made for the capital.”

“It will take him some time still. They’ve finished the joint practice with His Imperial Majesty’s soldiers, but the emperor hasn’t reviewed our troops yet. General Chou also has yet ahead of him the difficult task of convincing the

pacifist faction.”

My lord Tairan, who had protected the Ei Empire for the past twenty years from the front lines and served as the cornerstone of its national defense, was not in Keiyou at present. Three months ago he’d made his way to Rinkei. He had wanted to inform the emperor of the dangerous cavalymen from the northwest whom Lady Hakurei and Lord Sekiei had encountered, as well as to request reinforcements.

Under his helmet, Teiha’s expression darkened. “Do the people in the capital seriously plan on making peace with Gen? They must be mad.”

“I’m merely an old man; I cannot fathom what goes through the minds of the great magistrates in the capital. But the young master, upon returning to Keiyou, said the same thing as Lord Tairan—that the people of Rinkei view the world in a different light than we on the front lines do.”

“The young master said that?” There was a fearful awe in Teiha’s voice. He was starting to realize what kind of person the young master really was.

The morning mist was beginning to clear. “The young master is truly a mysterious person. Despite his youth, he already grasps the importance of military logistics and he brims with a talent for battle, no matter how much he tries to hide it. I have no doubt that he—along with Lady Hakurei—will help to support the Chou family and Lord Tairan in the future. In fact, they already do. The veteran soldiers have all taken note of the young master’s true worth.”

Beneath the ramparts I could see the Chou soldiers bustling about. Thick clouds of steam rose from the kitchen; they were burning bamboo charcoal so that they could prepare a nice, hot breakfast. Lord Sekiei had been able to hold an audience with a merchant family so powerful that even I, as ignorant about the world as I was, knew of, and struck a deal that would provide us with rations for cheap. Food shortages had dogged Keiyou for years and yet Lord Sekiei had managed to provide a solution.

A general who endeavored to provide the soldiers on the front lines with warm food every day was a rare and valuable one; this was something that only veteran soldiers could fully understand. Ours would surely give their lives for both Lord Tairan and the young master, for the sake of Keiyou and Ei’s future.

“But doesn’t Lord Sekiei want to be a local civil official?” Teiha chuckled. “A while ago, I’d heard that General Chou permitted Lord Sekiei’s trip to Rinkei to try and make him give up on his dream. It was to make him realize he wasn’t cut out for desk work.”

The soldiers inside the ramparts who had been listening in on our conversation snickered. I also grinned and smacked Teiha on his shoulder. “The young master’s wish is one that will never come true; I’ve never seen anyone else with as much potential as a warrior. Besides, Lady Hakurei would never permit him to take up the pen. Ever since she was a child, she’s dreamed of going to war with the young master and Lord Tairan at her side.”

The only thing the young master lacked was the ability to navigate the subtleties in a relationship with a woman. I was old, with little time left to me. It would be a weight off my shoulders if he would marry someone soon.

I picked up my coat from a chair and put it on. Then, I turned to Teiha. “Has anyone found the location of Gen’s emperor or the Four Wolves?”

“Unfortunately not. However, the spy we sent northward hasn’t made a report for several days now. If he hasn’t been captured or killed, then it’s likely that Gen has tightened its security. The general thought to be the Crimson Wolf—the one whom Lord Sekiei encountered—is likewise unaccounted for. Information from Seitou has been slow to come in due to the bad weather and sandstorms.”

“I see...”

I thought back to when the young master, just returned from his last trip to Rinkei, had unfurled a map of the continent and said, “The enemies will eventually find out about father’s absence. Hopefully, he and the soldiers will return before they do. But what’ll happen if Gen decides on an invasion? If I were him...”

The plan he’d detailed could only be described as eccentric; his talent was practically a gift from the heavens. It was hard to believe he was the same person as the young boy who’d survived that hellish battlefield, the air thick with the stench of death, all by himself. That he was the same boy who’d been feared as a demon child. In retrospect, Lady Hakurei had been the only person

who insisted that we spare him. They were bound together by a curious fate—no. Surely they had been destined since birth to meet.

“Sir Raigen?” Teiha said, a curious look in his eye. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing; I was just lost in my memories. Construction on the defensive line west of Keiyou has finished, yes? The one that Lord Tairan ordered?”

The wall of fortresses along the river was impenetrable. The land east of Keiyou had several points where the river was more shallow and made it possible for soldiers to cross, but the generals guarding those areas were all formidable warriors with years of experience. If Gen launched a straightforward attack, no matter how powerful their army was, those generals would be able to repel them. Which was—according to Lord Tairan—precisely why there was a high chance Emperor Adai would employ a different strategy. He’d also sent letters from Rinkei warning us about a possible western threat.

To the west of Keiyou were plains as far as the eye could see, with gently sloping hills marking the landscape. Beyond those plains was the mercantile country of Seitou. Seitou might have shared a northern border with Gen, but between the two countries were the steep Nanamagari Mountains and the deadly Hakkotsu Desert. Gen’s forces consisted mainly of cavalry, and horses could cross neither mountain nor desert.

I’d heard that a Gen scouting party had tried to enter Seitou three months ago, but they’d lost plenty of men and horses to the elements on the way there; on the way back they’d been forced to take a longer and more difficult route in order to avoid Seitou’s defensive lines. It was impossible for a large army to get to Seitou from Gen. Over the course of the continent’s long history the only ones who’d been able to achieve that miraculous feat were the Twin Stars.

Teiha slammed his fist against his armor, making a noise loud enough that my attention turned to him. “We’ve made some major renovations to the abandoned fortress and placed about two hundred soldiers in it. Lord Sekiei has named it Hakugin Castle!”

“Hmm...” I couldn’t leave the front lines until Lord Tairan returned. I might have grown old, but the barbarians were aware of the legends of how I’d earned myself the name “Raigen the Ogre.” It would serve to deter them from

invading. I placed my hand on Teiha's shoulder. "I'm sorry, but could you check on something for me? Then, go make your report to the young master in Keiyou."

"Yessir! Oh, that reminds me, I've a letter for you from Lord Sekiei."

"Oh?" I took the folded piece of paper from Teiha and looked through what was inside.

"Gramps! Hurry back before I drown in the mountains of documents! Also, please put a stop to Hakurei! Every morning she forces me to go riding or training with her!!!"

I chuckled. My wife and son had already died and, barring Teiha, I had no one left in the world to call family. *Is this what it's like to have a grandchild?* I showed Teiha the contents of the letter and then stroked my beard. "It looks like the young master is having his fair share of troubles. However, I've lived enough years to know a thing or two about etiquette, and I most certainly cannot get in Lady Hakurei's way. Granted, it would be another thing if the young master would give up on becoming a civil official and decide to work in the military."

Teiha, as well as the other soldiers, knew what I was talking about and laughed with me. "I wholeheartedly agree," Teiha said. "I'll return as soon as I finish my report."

"Good. I leave it in your hands."

The young master might not enjoy it, but we needed him to suffer through some trials and tribulations now so that in the near future, he'd be able to carry on the Chou name.

"Summer may be drawing near, but the days are still cold," I said to Teiha, closing my eyes. "Let's go back inside and have breakfast."

"Ugh... It never ends. It just never ends..." And yet despite my groaning, I didn't stop running my pen over the papers in front of me.

Today I'd decided to do my work in the garden as a change of pace, but it was

slow going and the mountain of paperwork hadn't seemed to grow smaller at all. My eyelids got heavier and heavier in the gentle warmth of the afternoon sun, even though I knew if I fell asleep now then I'd have to work into the night.

The words "SEKIEI - CONFIRM" were written in red ink on the wooden box next to me; she'd gone out of her way to use that color. The mountains of paperwork that people kept putting into the box were staggeringly high, and were causing me stress just as immense. These weren't even everything. The civil officials were in charge of over half of the paperwork and I'd heard that only documents that needed final confirmation were sent to the Chou family.

"Gramps sure was amazing."

It'd been three months since we returned from Keiyou. Though Raigen—currently at the front lines in father's place—was well-known as an experienced and brave warrior, I only now realized how skilled he'd been at internal affairs as well. *Being a civil official sure isn't as easy as I imagined.* I sighed and started to look at the next document when, from the corner of my eye, I saw an arrow pierce a straw dummy in the shape of a person. It completely missed the target on the chest.

Hakurei, her silver hair tied up with a ribbon, thought for a moment before she nocked a second arrow. "He was, yes," she said, her tone as calm as always. "You didn't know?"

"You were listening? Yeah well...he's just more impressive than I imagined. He's been getting up in years, so I guess I'll be a bit nicer to him once he gets back." I scratched my head and reflected on my actions. Instead of letting Raigen coddle me, I should show him that I'd grown and matured so that he could retire without worries. I signed "Representative of Chou Tairan" at the end of the transportation report from the Ou family and placed it back into Hakurei's box. We'd decided to both look through the documents on the off chance one of us missed something. "What about the paperwork you were supposed to handle? If you don't stop practicing your archery soon, *you* won't fin—"

"I finished everything this morning. We're waiting on you."

"What?!" I placed my pen on the inkstone. The second arrow found the straw

dummy again, but hit the arm instead. I sighed, raising my voice in a theatrical lament. “I-Impossible! Why oh why do the heavens pamper you so, Chou Hakurei?! You have a talent for desk work on top of your gift for combat and natural good looks?! Ahh... This is a serious matter. I must object! But where...where should I even go to file my complaints?!”

“Instead of moving your mouth to tell your stupid jokes, please try moving your hand or else you’ll never finish that pile of paperwork. And here I thought you *wanted* to be a civil official.”

“Grr...” I couldn’t even say anything back because she was right, even if I didn’t like it. So with tears in my eyes, I went back to work. Though it was something I both took pride in and found frustrating, Chou Hakurei rivaled Ou Meirin when it came to raw talent. A third arrow hit the straw and this time it sunk into the dummy’s shoulder. While signing off on another document, I said, “It’s rare for you to miss the center of the target so many times. You feeling sick or something?”

Hakurei didn’t reply. Instead, she pulled back on the bowstring and then released it. The arrow struck true, landing right in the center of the target where the heart would be.

Huh? I noticed something. “Er, Miss Hakurei?”

“What is it?” Hakurei replied in a nonchalant tone. With the bow in one hand and her other hand busy untying the ribbon from her hair, she walked over and sat in the chair across from me.

Feeling slightly awkward, I lowered my gaze to the documents on the desk. “U-Um... I kind of get the feeling that, uh... Ah, no. Never mind. Yep. It was just a trick of my mind.”

“‘If one plans on effectively reducing the enemy’s manpower, then one must focus on increasing the number of wounded.’ One of the Twin Stars, Kou Eihou, was said to often repeat those words. If memory serves me right, someone I’m *terribly* familiar with does the same on both the practice grounds and the battlefield. Since you’re a better equestrian than me as well, I don’t think it’s so strange to copy the way you handle a bow?”

“O-Oh... Yeah, I suppose...” I managed, my gaze darting this way and that. It

looked like she still had a grudge about how I'd won this morning's race.

Hakurei has more cumulative wins than me, though. She's such a sore loser! As I struggled to come up with a way to worm out of my predicament, I saw Asaka walking towards us, her brown hair flowing behind her.

"Lady Hakurei, are you about ready?"

"Yes, I am. Please start the preparations."

"Understood! ♪"

"Uh, what?" I had no idea what they were talking about, but I really didn't have the time to be confused before other attendants came rushing over.

"Excuse me."

"We'll move this away for a little bit."

"Lord Sekiei, please move out of the way!"

Before I could even bat an eye, they'd cleaned up the surface of my work table. In place of documents and pens, they put down a teapot decorated with cute flowers and birds. They set down cups with the same pattern as well, along with two small plates of sesame dumplings. All of the tableware were items that I'd sent to Hakurei from the capital. *But she's never used them before...* I gave Hakurei a curious look, but her expression gave nothing away.

"I was getting thirsty. Don't expect a share of tea. We didn't prepare any for you."

"And why's that?!"

"Do you think you deserve to drink tea when you haven't even finished your work for the day?"

"Grr... Y-You little..."

"I'm joking. Here you go," Hakurei teased as she poured tea into one of the cups and handed it to me.

I thanked her with a nod of my head and took a sip. The taste was refreshing and helped me relax, putting me in a better mood. Birds flew overhead and the weather was nice. I looked back at Hakurei and saw her eating one of the

dumplings, her movements elegant and refined.

“It looks good.”

“It is.”

“Could you spare me one? I haven’t had sweets in so long.”

“Oh, very well,” Hakurei sighed, her tone as cool as usual. She skewered a dumpling with a small bamboo stick and held it out in front of me.

I narrowed my eyes at her without thinking. “Hey. Chou Hakurei.”

“You were the one who wanted to eat one,” she replied calmly.

“Damn!” I didn’t have a comeback for that. Maybe if we had still been kids...

Her sapphire eyes housed an indomitable strength. Once Hakurei got like this, she wouldn’t budge until she got her way. Even though I could see Asaka and the other attendants smiling at us from behind the pillars, I gave up. Hakurei immediately popped the sesame dumpling into my open mouth and I chewed it.

“How does it taste?” she asked.

It took me a moment to swallow before I muttered, “It’s good.”

“I see.” Hakurei smiled, the expression subtle but sweet, as she picked up her cup of tea. She seemed awfully happy. “That’s good.”

She’s pretty as a picture. I used my hands to pick up a second dumpling and popped it in my mouth. “The taste of sesame is different from the usual fare. It seems more fragrant.”

“The sesame for the dumplings is from Seitou. We bought them since they’ve recently appeared on the market. Before you ask, we purchased them from actual merchants.”

“Oh, that’s not something you hear every...day...”

I tilted my head to the side. Something felt off. *What was I about to notice just now?* Considering the geography of the continent, more Seitou merchants came and went in Keiyou compared to Rinkei. It was still rare for Seitou to export sesame, however, since they consumed the vast majority of the seeds

themselves. Not even Meirin was able to get her hands on them.

There weren't any obvious changes in Seitou. It was the first thing I'd made sure of after returning from Rinkei. Even if there were Gen spies within Seitou's borders, there wasn't any need to be too cautious of them.

Hakurei placed her cup on the table and gave me a curious look. "Is something the matter? You're making a strange expression. Well, stranger than normal."

"You didn't have to add that last, you know?! Ahem, well. There's something bothering me."

"Please, feel free to voice your thoughts. I don't mind listening to them."

I tried to verbalize my suspicions...and gave up immediately. Instead, I scratched my cheek and hummed. "I appreciate the offer, but I can't put them into words. It's like...how should I put it... I have an uncomfortable feeling, but it's not taking any particular form."

"You'll fail as a civil official. It's like you're not even trying."

"You're so mean! Chou Hakurei, you cruel mistress! Okay sure, I may not have any talent, but I'm doing my best over here! Won't you spare your poor older brother some pi—"

"I've never once thought of you as my older brother. Didn't I already tell you that? If anything I would be your older sister, but since I have no intention of having you as my younger brother, this discussion is moot."

She left no room for argument. I chugged my tea in silence and then glanced at the wooden box. The name "Ou Meirin" was written in an elegant hand on the cover of an envelope. I rested my cheek upon my hand and muttered, "I'm not exactly jumping for joy about it, but maybe I should write Meirin a letter. I'm sure if anyone can describe this feeling of unease, it's her. But I don't exactly want to be in her debt..."

Hakurei had been in such a good mood, but all at once her expression became stony and she stared at me in silence. Goose bumps broke out over my skin as I realized something: I'd seriously pissed her off.

“M-Miss Hakurei?” I managed to eke out.

“What is it, Mister Freeloader?”

Yikes! What did we even talk about that would make her this angry?! I had no idea as to why her mood had suddenly soured, but I had to ask. “Um, if I may, what made you so upset?” I knew from past experience that if I didn’t acknowledge and ask about her mood, then when she came to my room tonight she’d just sit in silence. On top of that, she wouldn’t leave until morning.

“I’m not upset at all. Your eyes must have gone bad.”

“Ah, okay...”

Her words were so harsh that they came all the way around to being impressive. She was also very clearly pouting. As I waited for her to continue, Hakurei lowered her head and muttered, “Tell me...”

“Hmm?” I tilted my head.

Hakurei’s cheeks puffed out, making her look like a little kid; it was rare for her to act like this. She poured more tea into my cup and said, “Tell me why you go out of your way to ask for that girl’s help?”

“Oh. Well, the reason’s simple,” I replied with a wry smile and a shrug of my shoulders. I took the cup from her, thanked her, and continued, “It’s because Meirin’s a genius in a different way than you are. She’s read a ton of books and documents, so she’s knowledgeable—she’s the one who ended up solving our rations issue. Plus, the Ou family does business with foreigners who also have dealings with Gen, so there’s a chance that they found something out. Now that father’s left Keiyou in my care, I plan on using everything at my disposal.”

“I see...” Hakurei nodded, though she still didn’t look too happy at my answer.

I picked up a third dumpling and joked, “Besides, it’s about time that I replied to her letter. You don’t want her to cut us off, do you?”

Hakurei’s lips parted, but she didn’t say anything—so I tossed the last dumpling into her mouth. The snacks were delicious and exactly to my taste. The Chou’s attendants were great at their jobs.

Hakurei chewed, swallowed, and crossed her arms. “Very well,” she said,

giving her approval in a solemn tone. “I shall allow you to pen your letter.”

“Th-Thank you very much?” I had lost to the pressure she was exuding and ended up thanking her. *Oops...*

After Hakurei used a wet cloth to wipe her fingers and mouth, she said, “There’s still plenty of sesame dumplings left, so eat as many as you want. And put some backbone into your work. Make sure you finish everything before evening and get to sleep on time. So long as I’m around, there will be *no* staying up all night.”

“You’re late. Did you take a nap in there?”

That night, after taking a bath later than usual, I returned to my room only for Hakurei to greet me. She was lying down on the bench, reading an old book and relaxing. She’d let her hair down and was wearing light-pink sleepwear.

I’d long since given up on her actually paying attention to my warnings, but I tried again anyway. “I was just dozing off a little in the bath. That’s not important, though! This is *my* room! I can’t believe how casual you are about acting like it’s yours. You’re almost seventeen, you know?”

“This is hardly the first time I’ve lounged about in your room, so I don’t see why you have to make a fuss about it. And besides...”

“What?” I sat down in a nearby chair and crossed my legs.

Hakurei sat up. “I believe *you’d* be the one feeling down if I started to put too much distance between us.” Despite her calm tone, there was a delighted sparkle in her eyes.

“That’s not...” I poured some tea from the pot decorated with flowers and birds, then took a sip to calm myself. It’d been ten years since we’d started chatting at night like this and I couldn’t disagree with her. The thought of times like these suddenly being taken away from me was... As soon as I imagined it I was running a hand through my hair, messing it up, and I glared at Hakurei. It was the least I could do to express my displeasure. “You’re really not as cute as you think you are, princess!”

“That’s strange. I could have sworn that earlier in the day, a certain freeloader said I had ‘natural good looks.’”

I growled. *I can’t win. No matter what I do, I simply can’t win. Why must humans suffer through such adversities? And this isn’t even the first time I’m going through life.*

I walked, meandering this way and that, towards a nearby shelf and took out an angular glass bottle and cup. They were overseas imports that I’d purchased in Rinkei. I liked their dark blue hue.

“What are those?” Hakurei asked, keen interest clear in her voice.

“It’s bayberry wine. There’s a winemaker near Keiyou who came up with this last year. He sent a few samples of his product to the capital and I had him give me some as well.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean for father.” Hakurei nodded.

Military affairs weren’t father’s only passion. He was also interested in promoting the various industries of Keiyou. The winemaker in question was a retired military officer and he was determined to sell his products in the capital. According to Meirin’s letter, reception to the samples had been quite positive.

I held the bottle up to the light. “Indulging in liquor once in a while won’t hurt anyone. Want some?”

Hakurei had shifted in clear anticipation and nodded with a “Yes.” I sat down next to her on the bench by the window. Removing the lid from the bottle, I handed her the intricately designed glass.

“What a beautiful cup,” she said.

“Meirin sent this to me a while back. Apparently, it’s from a country to the west—one farther than Seitou and across the desert. She’s got a pretty keen eye, even though she acts the way she usually does.”

“I see.” Hakurei’s tone was cold again. She couldn’t conceal her emotions at all.

I poured some bayberry wine into the glass and said in a soothing tone, “C’mon, don’t take it out on the wine. It didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know. I’m not a child.” Despite saying that, Hakurei’s lips jutted out in a pout as she picked up the glass. It was probably best not to point out the irony in her claim.

“To father, doing his best in the capital,” I said as I picked up my own glass.

“To the generals carrying out their duties on the front lines.”

“Cheers!” we said in unison as we clinked our glasses together. Then, we drank. A mouthful of the wine carried the sweetness of a year’s worth of fermentation and it had a sharp yet unique fragrance. Hakurei, holding the cup in both hands, widened her eyes but didn’t say anything.

“How is it?” I asked. *That reminds me... Has Hakurei even had alcohol before? Don’t tell me she got drunk from a single mouthful...*

Before I could really start to worry, Hakurei gave me a wide smile. “It’s a lot sweeter than I thought. It goes down very easily.”

There wasn’t any change to the color of her cheeks. Considering father also had a high tolerance for alcohol, she might be all right thanks to her genetics. *What a relief.* The moon was reflected in my cup, but I swallowed the rest of the alcohol without taking time to admire it.

“That’s good. I’m sure the winemaker would be glad to hear you say that. Oh—make sure you don’t drink too much, though. It’s apparently quite strong, so drink a glass of water for every glass of wine!”

“I know,” Hakurei said, extending the vowel with a childish inflection. “Please stop treating me like a kid.” Still, with an unhappy pout playing on her lips, she drank the entire glass in one go.

This could be a trick of my mind, but it looks like she’s having a hard time focusing her eyes. Not to mention last time I’ve heard her talk like this was back when we actually were kids too. Realizing the state she was in, I slowly stood up. Hakurei looked up at me with a curious expression.

“Where are you goin’?”

“I’m gonna go get some water and snacks from the kitchen. I’ll be back soon, so don’t move, all right? And don’t drink any more wine until I get back.”

“Okaaay.” Hakurei gave a happy nod as she raised her left hand in the air. “Come back soon, please!” With that she stood up, made her way to my bed, and grabbed my pillow. Hugging it to her chest, she buried her face in it.

Yup, already too late. I better go get her some water.

The attendants I ran into in the kitchen teased me but prepared some cold water and snacks regardless. I hurried back.

“Hey, I’m ba— Oh...” I realized how wrong my judgment call had been as soon as I saw what awaited me in my room.

Only half the bottle of wine remained. Hakurei was sitting on the bench with her feet up, the glass in both hands. Her cheeks were puffed out in dissatisfaction and as soon as she saw me, she slammed a palm down on the bench next to her and said in a sulky tone, “You sure took your sweet time. Hurry up and sit down over here.”

“S-Sure.” I placed the tray laden with plates of fried beans and a porcelain bottle of water down onto the table, then awkwardly sat down on the bench next to Hakurei. As soon as I settled, she leaned against me—just like she used to do when we were kids. *She smells so sweet...*

“This wine is delicious. I would like to drink it again in the future.”

It took me a moment to get the thunderous beating of my heart under control enough to say, “The winemaker said he’s going to gradually start increasing production. Do you want to go with me when I buy some more? I sent some to Meirin and Miss Shizuka, and they enjoyed it too. Same with Asaka.”

I did my best to find a topic we could talk about. Books never taught me how to handle myself in these kinds of situations, and my foggy memories from my past life were of no use. I was able to sort of deal with Meirin, but... I noticed Hakurei glaring at me.

“It’s one thing to bring up Miss Shizuka and Asaka...but you’re talking about the Ou daughter *again?*”

Is it just me or do her eyes seem a lot darker than usual? I’m scared. I removed the lid from the porcelain bottle and poured water into a cup as I worked up my nerve to ask, “Miss Hakurei, pardon me if I’m wrong, but are you dr—”

“I am *not* drunk. I am acting the same as I usually do.” After a beat, Hakurei said, “Sekiei.”

“Y-Yes?” To my dismay, my voice cracked. *Why do I feel more pressured in her presence than I do on a battlefield?*

Hakurei ran her fingers through my black hair and looked up at me with her beautiful jewellike eyes. “What am I to you?”

“Huh?” I blinked. *What is she?* The answer caught in my throat. Was she my childhood friend? My little sister? My savior? To me, she was all of them.

Hakurei buried her face into my chest. “You went to Rinkei for half a year without even telling or asking me about it, and then you almost never replied to my letters. I was all alone without you... Well, I admit I did enjoy the souvenirs you sent me...”

“I’m sorry.”

I remembered how Hakurei used to do this a lot in our childhood. When she wasn’t able to suppress her feelings anymore, she’d lose control and come to me to vent. She looked up at me, cheeks puffed out to convey her displeasure.

“I don’t believe you are. You won’t stop complimenting the Ou daughter; you only have nice things to say about her, but you’ve never said anything like that about me. This is a most serious felony indeed. I object to this unfair treatment and demand that you praise me more. That’s right. You should say nicer things about me.”

I scratched at my cheek and looked away. She was normally such a cold and unapproachable beauty, but when she acted like this she looked every inch her actual age. It was unfair how cute she was when she let her true self through.

“Do I really not give you compliments?”

“You don’t. You didn’t say anything nice about the snacks I prepared for you earlier in the day either.”

I seriously didn’t know what she was talking about. “The snacks?”

Still with her face against my chest, Hakurei shook her head. “You’re so dense. Dummy. I’m glad that you enjoyed the dumplings. I was really, really happy to

see it. But I want to *hear* you say it too.”

Apparently, *Hakurei* had been the one who made the sesame dumplings. That was a shock. Chou Hakurei was capable of anything—anything except cooking! So while I was shocked, I had to admit that I really appreciated the effort she put in.

“Yukihime,” I said, giving her a pat on her back. It seemed appropriate right now to call her by her childhood name. “You sure ask for a lot.”

“Only from you. If it bothers you, then I won’t ask you to praise me again. I’ll just pout.”

“So you’ll still pout?!” I joked, but smiled and ran my fingers through her long silver hair.



Hakurei squirmed a little under my ministrations and then murmured, “You’re so mean, Sekiei. You’re a bully. You never tell me to my face that I’m cute even though I always...I’m always complimenting you...”

“Er, no. You’ve never complimented... Hakurei? Hello?”

Hakurei hummed but didn’t answer. She had closed her eyes and started to fall asleep while leaning against me. I could feel the soft warmth of her body against mine. Even when I gave her a gentle pat on the back, she only reacted with a pleased smile that made her look far younger than her actual age. Her face, slack in sleep, was exactly as I remembered it from when we were kids.

“No alcohol for you in the near future,” I sighed. I bundled her up in my arms and stood. *I should take her back to her room.* I didn’t get the chance, though, before she opened bleary eyes. “That’s enough drinking for tonight,” I said.

In response, she made a groaning sound and started to move around.

“H-Hey, stay still!”

I hurried to place her on my bed and she rolled onto the mattress, crawling under my sheets. With only her eyes peeking out she said, “I’m sleeping here tonight.”

“Listen, you...” I reached out to try and physically haul her out of bed, but she looked up at me with the same tearful expression that she’d use on me after a fight back when we were kids.

When she spoke, it was clear she was having trouble moving her tongue enough to form words. “We used to always be together. I always want to be with you, Sekiei.”

I gave up on trying to convince her to get out of my bed. “Jeez...” I could practically hear Meirin stomping her feet in my head. “You’re too soft on her! Why aren’t you ever that nice to me?!” Ignoring my imagination, I turned off the lights and lay down in bed.

Without a word, Hakurei reached out and touched my cheek. “Good night, Sekiei.” She giggled, looking truly happy.

“Good night, Hakurei.”

Hakurei's body relaxed and not a moment later, I heard her breath even out in sleep. I covered her up with my blanket. We were still nowhere close to being a worthy replacement for father or Raigen; she must be pushing herself to reach such a standard. There shouldn't be any harm in coddling her a bit, just for tonight. The problem was...

"Am I gonna be able to fall asleep?"

Only the night heard my words. I looked up at the full moon outside the window and, in spite of my worries, felt my eyelids grow heavy.

Warm. Soft. Was my bed always this nice? Faint birdsong coming from outside the window told me it was already morning. I was still half asleep, but as I opened my eyes, Chou Hakurei's face, slack in sleep, filled my entire field of vision. I was awake in an instant. She was clutching my right hand even as she continued to snooze.

When did this happen? I could've sworn that I pressed myself to the very edge of the bed when I went to sleep. Wait, that's not important right now—I have to hurry up and make my escape! Slowly, carefully, I tried to extract my arm from Hakurei's hold without waking her up, but her grip didn't budge. *N-No way?! She's got me by my joint!*

I must have woken her during my struggle; her eyes slowly opened, and she looked at me with a soft expression.

"G-Good morning," I said.

She stared at me, taking a long time to process my words, before she said, "Good morning..."

Yeah, this is hopeless. She's still basically asleep. What should I do? I didn't have time to come up with a solution, however; light footsteps from outside my room were my only warning before Asaka walked in. Her brown hair and attendant robes billowed about her with each movement she made.

"Lord Sekiei, good mor— Oh. Oh my. Oh my goodness! ♪ I'm so sorry I intruded. I will bring you two breakfast in your room! ☆" She turned on her heel and hurried out.

Oh no! This is bad! I sat up as best as I could as I tried to stop her. "W-Wait!

This is a misunderstanding! Hey, Hakurei, say someth— Whoa!”

Hakurei groaned as she tugged on my arm and pulled me back down onto the mattress. “Shut up. My head hurts.” The alcohol from last night was still working its way through her system. She looked at me with a somewhat annoyed expression and continued, “I’m going to sleep for a while longer. You should too.”

This was a battle I had no way of winning. The only course of action I could take was to instantly surrender. “All right.”

Hakurei looked satisfied as soon as I said it and—after readjusting her grip on my right arm—closed her eyes. With a look of complete relaxation on her face, she fell asleep. I always ended up giving in to her. After stroking her silver hair, I closed my eyes as well.

For now, just for this moment, at least we can enjoy some peace and quiet.

After eating a much later breakfast than usual, I began my day with yet another round against the mountain of documents. Rain was pouring from the black clouds that permeated the sky and I’d moved my work station inside. Even though this was how my days had been going ever since I’d returned to Keiyou, there was something different about today.

Hakurei was sitting next to me with her long silver hair hanging loose behind her. Ever since she’d woken up in my bed, she hadn’t once looked me in the eye. Sure, I was signing off on document after document and I could see the mountain of paper growing ever smaller before my eyes, but... *The atmosphere is way too tense!*

“Er, Miss Hakurei?” I was nervous, unable to handle the awkwardness between us any longer.

As soon as she heard me call to her, the hand holding her pen stopped. Then, as slowly as a piece of machinery that had rusted over, she turned to look at me. “What is it?”

“Ah, no, I...”

“Please refrain from talking to me if you have nothing to say.”

“All right...”

She was in no mood for conversation. I could guess the reason: it was probably because she was regretting getting drunk and sleeping in my room. Now that I thought about it, some girls Hakurei’s age had already gotten married; she was definitely at the age when she would be worrying about the opposite sex. Maybe I should’ve taken her back to her room, even if she hadn’t wanted to leave at the time. I gazed out at the rainy garden, wallowing in regret, when Asaka walked in with a wooden box full of additional documents.

“Lord Sekiei, please don’t worry about it! Lady Hakurei is simply panicking about how she embarrassed herself in front of you and is nervous that it’s ruined your image of her! ♪”

Her words added more fuel to the fire. Quivering, I peeked over at Hakurei next to me and instantly regretted my choice to do so. There was a beautiful smile on her face as she looked at her lady-in-waiting.

“Asaka?”

“I still have some work left, so I shall return to my duties! ♪”

“Wha— H-Hey!”

Without taking responsibility for her actions, Asaka left the room with a skip in her step. *Th-That was on purpose! She totally said that on purpose!* My mind raced to find a new topic of conversation but drew a blank.

I took a moment to steel my resolve before saying, “Hey, listen...”

“What is it?” Hakurei glared at me with such sharpness I could feel her gaze pierce me like arrows. But—there was no anger in her eyes. All I could see was embarrassment and shame.

I scratched my cheek and looked away as I gave my advice. “It’s no problem if you drink with me, but you should avoid alcohol with other people. All right?”

In an instant, Hakurei’s face had turned as pink as a peach. She must’ve known it too because she cupped her cheeks with her hands and replied in a churlish voice, “Y-Yesterday was my very first time having alcohol, so I let my

guard down. Besides, if you had only taken me back to my room...”

“Lady Chou Hakurei, *you* were the one who rejected my offer to do so.”

“Y-You must be joking!”

She was serious about not remembering. I looked her dead in the eye and shook my head. “Unfortunately not.”

Hakurei groaned and, at her limit, placed a hand to her forehead before she slumped down on the table. She was normally so calm and collected that the people in the Chou manor compared her disposition to ice. Considering that, this was a rare sight indeed. I had a new story I could write to father about.

I could see Asaka hiding behind one of the pillars outside, watching us with a somewhat worried expression on her face. I signaled her with my hand and, after nodding a few times, she returned to her duties for real. Everyone in the manor loved and cared for Hakurei.

Happy about this fact, I looked down at the girl in question and saw that she was still holding her head in her hands. “Don’t worry,” I said, “an embarrassing moment every once in a while won’t kill anybody. Besides, people will find you a lot cuter if you let your guard down instead of being perfect all the time.”

“P-Please do not lump me in the same category as you! I have a reputation to uphold!” Then, in a much quieter voice, she added, “I already get teased enough as it is...”

“Huh?” She’d muttered that last sentence with her face still in her hands, so I wasn’t able to catch it.

Straightening up, she started working on her documents again as she said in a harried tone, “It’s nothing. Forget about it, please. Oh, speaking of which, I didn’t say anything strange last night, did I? I’m positive I didn’t, but just in case.”

I looked away. “You didn’t.” *How much of our conversation does she remember?*

Still in her chair, she scooted it so that she was right next to mine and then peered into my face. “Why are you averting your gaze? If you tell me the truth

now, I won't get mad. Did I *really* not say anything strange?"

I guess this is it. I held up both of my hands and obliged. "You didn't say anything weird. You remember how you pressed your head against my chest, though, right?"

"Y-Your chest?!" Hakurei's face flushed bright red once more and it was clear from the way she stammered, "Um...I...well..." that she had completely lost her composure.

N-No way! She barely remembers anything from last night! I stared at her, mouth agape. Seeing my reaction, Hakurei shot to her feet and turned away, taking such deep breaths that I could see her shoulders moving with each inhale. After she collected herself, she turned back to face me. She was doing a good job at seeming unbothered despite the fact that there was still a slight blush on her neck and ears.

"It seems that I need to hear the details about last night. Tell me *everything*! Right now!"

"Um, don't you think you're acting a bit too tyrannical?"

"I am simply exercising my rights." She stalked closer and glared down at me with her hands on her hips. I could tell from the determination burning in her eyes that she wasn't going to back down until she got what she wanted.

Y-You want me to tell you all about how you were cuddling up to me, Chou Hakurei?! I signed off on a document agreeing to fortify Keiyou's defenses as I racked my brain to come up with a way out of my predicament but came up with nothing. My murky memories of my life as Kou Eihou were absolutely useless in times like these.

"Sekiei," Hakurei said in a cold voice.

"Fine, just don't take it out on me if you regret it. Wait, do you hear something?"

Hakurei blinked at me in confusion before her gaze sharpened. "I do."

After we exchanged a look, we grabbed some umbrellas from a nearby clay pot and ran outside to the courtyard. Now that we were outside, it was clear

that what we heard was no trick of our minds.

“The sound of hooves?” we murmured in unison.

It was illegal in Keiyou—as well as the Ei Empire as a whole—to ride a horse through the city streets. The only time when someone was allowed to do so was in emergencies and for Keiyou, emergencies usually meant an enemy invasion. Still underneath an umbrella, Hakurei grabbed my left sleeve and drew closer to me. After a moment we heard a horse’s whinny, which caused an uproar within the manor behind us.

Asaka raced out from the corridor and into the courtyard, moving so much faster than I’d ever seen her do. She normally acted so flighty, but now her face was pale and there was a document in her hand. “Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, something terrible has happened!”

“Calm down, Asaka,” Hakurei ordered. She must have regained some of her composure after seeing the way her lady-in-waiting was panicking.

Asaka sucked in a breath before she took a knee and bowed to us. “I apologize. Lord Sekiei, please take a look at this. It is a letter from Lord Teiha, who had been sent to Hakugin Castle west of Keiyou.”

“A letter from the citadel?” I took the piece of paper from her and looked through it.

The words were a mess, and there were dried patches of blood here and there. *“Hakugin Castle has been surrounded by a horde of cavalrymen in red armor. Considering that their flag is red as well, we suspect that their commander is the Crimson Wolf Nguyen, one of the Four Wolves of Gen. Hurry and increase the defenses around Keiyou. We require no reinforcements.”*

I could hear the breath hitch in Hakurei’s throat as she covered her mouth with a hand. Teiha was such an idiot!

Hakurei’s grip on my left arm tightened until it started to hurt and she exclaimed in a tight voice, “A large-scale enemy invasion has breached our walls?! There were only two hundred men in Hakugin. If they’re going to try and put up a fight against Nguyen’s army... We must hurry!”

“Yeah, I agree. Tsk.”

Teiha had made the right call; it would be ridiculous to send out reinforcements to protect a small number of defensive troops, only for all of them to be defeated by the sheer might of the enemy forces. Father and the most elite members of the Keiyou army were still in Rinkei and the majority of our soldiers were at the river with Raigen. Keiyou was located near the center of the river bisecting the continent—the city was key to protecting the Ei Empire, but because Keiyou itself was defended by a line of fortresses, there weren't a lot of soldiers stationed here.

Like the other cities in the empire, we were surrounded by walls and ramparts. However, at most, only three thousand soldiers were capable of jumping into action. We couldn't waste a single fighter. If we lost Keiyou, then it would become possible for Nguyen and his men to launch a direct attack on Rinkei.

One had to lose a leg to save one's life. That was what Ou Eifuu would have done. Shoving my umbrella into Hakurei's hands, I returned to my room. I could hear both Hakurei and Asaka following me, saying my name, but I grabbed the sword that Meirin had sent—along with a bow—from Rinkei. Only then did I turn around to look at them.

"I'm going to go rescue them," I said. I sounded casual. "I'll take five hundred cavalymen with me. Hakurei, prepare for a sie—"

"I'm going with you," Hakurei cut in. To her lady-in-waiting she added, "Get me my bow."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

At her mistress's orders, Asaka raced out of the room. I watched her disappear into the corridor before I looked down at Hakurei and glared at her with as much irritation as I could muster.

"Hey."

"I *will* go with you. I'm the only person who can protect you, considering you aspire to become a civil official." Her tone was firm. *It's no use.* I could debate her for a hundred years and Hakurei would never back down.

I closed my eyes and said, "We need to send a letter to Gramps on the front

lines. The sooner the better. Tell him to stay put for now.” Hakurei nodded in agreement. Unlike with the previous invasion, this time a huge number of enemy forces had appeared from out of nowhere—and I doubted that this would be the only wave we would have to deal with. “After we figure out the situation, send the fastest horse to Rinkei. We also have to tell the civil officials to organize the evacuation of children, the elderly, women who aren’t soldiers, and those who can’t fight.”

“You think we shouldn’t pull the soldiers back from the front lines? If Raigen were here, then—”

“We can’t do that,” I said in a sharp voice, putting an end to the discussion.

With Hakurei by my side, we started to make our way to the stables. Pulling Raigen back from the front lines was *exactly* what the enemy wanted. Father and Raigen told me about who Emperor Adai was as a person, and I’d done as much research as I could into his past battles. Emperor Adai was cruel, but the most frightening thing about him was his intelligence. *That* was the enemy we were up against.

“This is the second time that they’ve managed to get through our defenses,” I reminded Hakurei. “Do you really think that they would try again without a plan of action?”

Hakurei didn’t reply. Instead, she looked down in thought. She was only sixteen years old and yet I knew she had the potential to eventually surpass our father. I couldn’t let her die. It was with that resolve in mind that I continued to explain the situation to her.

“The first time they came, they were sounding out our defenses. This second attack is the real deal. In fact, we should approach this as if the opposing army is the entirety of the rumored Crimson Knights.”

Hakurei’s face tensed and she sucked in a sharp breath. Currently, thirty thousand of the Chou family’s soldiers were stationed at Hakuhou Castle, right along the river. *If we can’t move those men, then...* The attendants in the hall called out to us, waiting to hand us our bows and armor. We didn’t stop walking, preparing for war as we continued down the hall.

“Their goal is to take Keiyou for Gen, as well as to surround the main forces

holed up on the front lines and then take them out. If we remove soldiers from Hakuhou Castle, then the Gen army will immediately cross the river and begin a full-scale invasion. This is exactly what father was worried about, and why he was so desperate for reinforcements.”

“Then what should we do?”

As soon as we arrived at the stables, we saddled up our horses. Some of the veteran soldiers told us to hurry with the worry in their gazes as they took their own horses outside. Even during times of emergency we were able to communicate details of the situation to each other. The people working for the Chou family were all well trained.

I turned back to Hakurei and raised my hand. “What we should do— isn’t it obvious? We fight. If we hold out for long enough, then the invincible Chou Tairan will return from Rinkei with his army of elites. As soon as he arrives, it’ll be our victory!”

Hakurei tied her quiver to her belt and tightened her grip on her bow. “Understood. In that case, I must insist that I go with you to help our soldiers.” Her eyes narrowed as she stared straight into mine. “Even *if* you’re stronger than father.”

I froze, caught off guard. “Hakurei...”

We were about to head to a battle that could cost us our lives. Despite that, Hakurei was looking at me with the same expression she always wore. She held up her hand and said, “You’re thickheaded, mean, and slow at your job even though you want to be a local official.” With every insult, she put down a finger. “You’re a horrible man who made me drink alcohol so that I would embarrass myself to the point that I’m not fit to be a bride. Not only that, but despite your terrible personality, you’re a pervert who led on a little city girl with breasts even bigger than mine.”

“Hey, every single one of those is a false charge,” I argued, scrunching my face up. She was being totally unfair with her accusations.

In response, Hakurei smiled, the expression so pretty it was akin to the blooming of a flower. “However, we’ve spent these past ten years together. It’s only natural that I would want to protect you despite all that, don’t you agree?”

She got me good. How could I possibly leave her behind after hearing that? I was suddenly reminded of Eifuu. It was strange that I would find someone in this day and age trustworthy and capable enough to watch my back. Granted—Eifuu had never set foot on the battlefield. With that thought in mind, I gave Hakurei a small shrug. Once we finished our preparations, we went outside. The soldiers were already lined up in the rain.

Hakurei and I got onto our horses and I shot her a grimace. “You stubborn little princess!”

“Yes, I am. And I’m sure you’re aware of that fact, more than anyone else in Ei.”

Getsuei, Hakurei’s beloved horse, nickered as if in agreement with its master.

“Jeez.” I turned then to address the soldiers. “We’re moving out to save those suicidal idiots in Hakugin Castle! Follow Hakurei and I! Don’t let us out of your sight!”

“Yessir!!!” Five hundred cavalymen raised their weapons as one and let out a fearsome battle cry.

I met Hakurei’s eyes and we nodded. For the moment, our first goal was to prevent Nguyen from scoring an easy victory against us. The worst was yet to come.

“Everyone, stop! The enemy will notice us. Lower the flags too.”

We were west of Keiyou, on a plain with grass slippery from the rain. I stopped our forces on a small hill far away from Hakugin Castle. It was already close to dusk, and the rain continued to fall.

A large number of cavalymen and foot soldiers in red armor were surrounding the castle, but it seemed that they’d put a halt to their attack—for now. Surrounded by an innumerable number of enemies and stained wet from the rain, the once-abandoned fortress looked like a small island floating amid a lake of blood.

I narrowed my eyes as I stared at the military flag flapping in the distance. “A

golden border with a wolf in the center... Yep, it's him. The Crimson Wolf."

From behind me, I could hear my soldiers start to murmur among each other:

"Hey..."

"Can you see anything?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I can see a flag, but..."

"He was able to perceive the details from this distance?!"

"The young master wants to be a civil official, right?"

I raised my hand and halted their discussion.

Next to me, Hakurei bit her lip and murmured, "So those are the Crimson Knights? There are only about three thousand of them, so I assume that it's a reconnaissance team. If they're using traditional methods of war, then the main forces should still be somewhere in the back. Even if it's only a fraction of their army, what can we do against so many of them? I can't imagine how they were able to get through Seitou's defensive lines..."

"At this point, there can only be one answer to that." I spat it in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. No matter what era we lived in, the most difficult enemies were the smartest ones. "Seitou actually betrayed us. I should've noticed something was up as soon as more of their wares appeared in the markets. *They* were the ones gathering intel, not Gen. They know everything from how many men we have to where we've placed them."

Eyes widening, Hakurei made a disbelieving sound. I could see her shock reflected in the soldiers as well. Seitou had been our ally for close to a hundred years—but now they were our enemy. From this day forth, the Ei Empire would have to guard itself from a northern *and* a western threat.

Hakurei gripped her bow tighter and shook her head. Her face, wet from the rain, twisted. "That's impossible! How could they have gotten through the steep Nanamagari Mountains with cavalrymen?!"

"It's possible. The armies back in the days of the Tou Empire had been able to do it. Back then, we even brought elephants," I said, tracing my distant memories.

“Young master!” one of the veteran soldiers interrupted with a laugh. “You’re talking as if you were actually there at the time!”

Quiet chuckles broke out among the ranks. The rain stopped. I winked and said in as light a tone I could muster, “Oops, must’ve read too many books. I wanna become a civil official, after all.”

The soldiers’ faces relaxed, looking at me in mild exasperation as if they were thinking, “*Here he goes again.*” Even though we would soon be facing down a powerful enemy, morale was still high. I expected nothing less from the Chou army that father had trained up. Most of the soldiers with us were veterans, so they weren’t so easily cowed under the circumstances. They were a reliable lot.

I met Hakurei’s eyes and then raised my hand for order. “Attention!” Every soldier turned to me and I looked around at them before I started to explain my strategy. “First, I will go in and disrupt their formation. Hakurei will lead you all in to help save the men from Hakugin Castle. Then, return to Keiyou. Do not abandon a single ally, not even the wounded.”

No one raised their voices, but I could tell that there was some murmuring going on. Still, no one opposed my plan. The enemy were the famed Crimson Knights—aside from the thousand already surrounding Hakugin Castle, there were two thousand foot soldiers waiting to swoop into action. In contrast, we only had five hundred cavalymen on our side.

In order to overcome the difference in manpower we were going to have to use unconventional methods that the enemy would never think of. My soldiers all knew this from experience—as well as the fact that they had no choice but to place their trust in me, as their strategist. Things didn’t always go according to plan on the battlefield and the number of men an army had was an asset powerful enough that it could turn any tide.

Three times out of ten, my attempt at drawing the enemy fire would end with my death. However, that still meant I would survive seven times out of ten. The odds weren’t the worst.

Hakurei approached me, still on horseback, and glared. “Sekiei?”

I shook my head and replied in a firm voice, “We can argue later. If both of us charge in, then who will lead the army? As a freeloader of the Chou family, I

better take any chance I can get to show off my worth. It'll only be for a little while and I trust you to watch my back! As soon as you finish evacuating Hakugin Castle, signal me with a whistling arrow." Then, in a softer voice so the soldiers didn't hear, I added, "Don't hold it against me if I die. Just live. No matter what you have to do."

"I understand," Hakurei said before she added in a voice as quiet as mine, "I will *never* forgive you if you die. If you do, then I will simply follow you."

For a moment we glared at each other and then, aware of the soldiers watching us, looked away in unison. *Looks like I won't be able to die in peace anymore.* The soldiers were smiling, looking like they were enjoying themselves for some reason. I slapped my palms against my cheeks to focus up. The rain had completely stopped.

"All right! Now then."

I nocked an arrow on my bow and pulled the string back. We were out of range, but with this powerful bow, sent from Meirin... I closed an eye, held a breath, and then let go. Even in the fading light, I could see as clear as day when one of the enemy flags surrounding the fortress snapped in half. The wind carried the faint cries of the enemy soldiers. I held my bow above my head and raised my voice.

"CHARGE!"

I kicked my horse into a gallop and led my army's advance on Hakugin Castle. Shooting arrow after arrow along the way, I killed as many soldiers as I could while still out of *their* range. From behind me, I could hear the surprised shouts of my allies.

"Young master?!"

"N-No way..."

"Ha ha ha, I knew it!"

"That's amazing! *He's* amazing!"

Their cheers and compliments mixed with the pounding of the horses' hooves against the dirt. We were closing the distance fast. I could see the enemy

commanders trying to calm their soldiers and get them to go back into formation, so I took aim at them—but before I could release my own arrow, another landed in their midst. I watched as a Gen commander pressed a hand to his shoulder, from which protruded a familiar arrow, and toppled off his horse.

“Good job!” I called to Hakurei. Her aim was so true that I was genuine in my compliment.

“That was nothing!”

The both of us raced along at the head of our army and rained down a merciless shower of arrows, knocking soldier after soldier from their mounts. It was clear that the enemy was frightened by the sudden ferocity of our attack.

“Don’t let the young master and Lady Hakurei take all the glory!” one of the veteran soldiers yelled.

“Yessir!”

Now that they were in range to use their bows, the cavalymen on our side started shooting arrows as well. Though the enemy had been in disarray before, they were starting to gather their shields and pull back their wounded. The foot soldiers formed a line, their spears at the ready, while the cavalymen gathered together. They were quick to recover from the shock of our ambush. Not only that, but I remembered that Gramps Raigen once told me how Gen’s cavalymen were all capable of firing arrows from horseback. If it came to a straightforward archery competition, we would be at a disadvantage.

I held three arrows in my hand and shot them all as quickly as possible. For a moment, my attack pinned down the enemy cavalymen and forced them to defend themselves. I took the chance to yell, “Now, Hakurei! Go!”

“Sekiei! But...I...” Her hesitation was clear. As a member of the Chou family she could not bring herself to abandon an ally. However, we needed Hakurei to both think and act like a commander—otherwise Gen was going to annihilate us.

At that moment, four of our soldiers caught up to us. All four were veterans and they were all wielding a different weapon—one a broadsword, one a spear,

a halberd, and a war hammer.

“Lady Hakurei!”

“We shall accompany the young master as his guards.”

“General Chou saved our lives.”

“Ha ha ha! This is the perfect opportunity for us to repay our debts!”

“Hey! Shut up, you idiots!” I yelled. I shouldered my bow and unsheathed my sword as I tried to stop them. “I’m the only one who needs to—”

“Thank you...” Hakurei spoke over me. “Please, all of you, you need to hurry to the castle!” She bowed her head.

“Yes, ma’am! Leave it to us!” the four soldiers exclaimed as one.

Hakurei nodded and in an impressive show of leadership, took command of the remaining forces to resume the charge down to Hakugin Castle. Panic started to spread among the enemy troops and I could see the allies holed up in the fortress begin to shoot arrows as well. Taking advantage of the lull in the battle, I slowed down my horse and clucked my tongue at the veterans.

“Seriously, you guys...”

“Oh no, you don’t.”

“You’ll make the young Lady Hakurei cry if you die.”

“We have to repay General Chou for all the kindness he’s shown us. And the food he’s fed us.”

“Ha ha ha! Sir Raigen has given us orders as well!”

The veteran soldiers grinned at me and, with the hands holding their weapons, offered me a salute by pressing them to armor.

“We would be honored to die as your shield, Lord Sekiei! Please allow us to accompany you to hell!”

That reminds me. Things like this happened in my past life all the time too. Why does everyone jump at the chance to die? I ran my hand through my hair, uncaring of how messy I made it. Then, adjusting the grip on my sword, I tilted the blade so that it reflected the setting sun’s light. The red of the dusk

glimmered off the pale white of the steel like blood.

“So this was all Gramps’s doing? This is why I can’t deal with you veterans!”

“He spoke highly of you.”

“And said that Lady Hakurei needs you.”

“*We’re* the ones who’ll suffer if people like you or General Chou die.”

“Ha ha ha! I look forward to witnessing the birth of a new hero!”

Idiots, all of you! I pointed my blade towards the dozen enemy soldiers charging towards us, their swords and spears held aloft. “Fine. Don’t fall behind; make sure you follow me at full speed! Also, none of you are allowed to die! You have to live so that you can help me come up with an excuse for Hakurei.”

“Understood!”

I kicked my horse into action and started my advance.

The enemies must not have expected us to put up a fight with nothing more than five cavalrymen. The soldier serving as their vanguard widened his eyes before smirking. He thrust his spear towards me as he yelled, “Kill them!” The wavelike tip of his weapon—a design unique to the Gen Empire—stabbed forward, but I parried the attack, knocking it away.

“Too easy,” I said. I took advantage of the opening I’d created and swung my sword in a horizontal slash, slicing through both his leather armor and his abdomen.

He fell off his horse, dead. Both his eyes and mouth were wide in surprise, as if even in his final moments, he hadn’t realized what had happened. The Gen soldiers continued to charge at us.

“Each and every one of you is a suicidal fool,” I said in a cold tone as I continued my advance, cutting them down as I passed them. The enemy soldiers screamed wordlessly, their cries tapering off in the silence of death. I could barely hear them over the surprised exclamations of my allies behind me.

“Wh-What?!”

“Amazing!”

“A tiger’s child is a tiger in his own right, I see!”

“Ha ha ha!”

The veterans pushed their horses until they were riding alongside me. It seemed that all of them had survived the attack without major injury. I cut down an arrow with my sword as it flew towards me and then paused for a breath as I looked over the enemy formation.

There he is.

A young man, with a baffled expression on his face and eye-catchingly bright red armor, was waving a swagger stick. The stick was made of metal rather than leather.

“Young master!”

Two Gen soldiers who had managed to survive the veterans’ attack charged at me from both sides—only to be struck down by my sword. I swung my weapon through the air to clear the blood from the steel and then glanced at the castle behind me. I could see the enemy army starting to disperse.

“That’s their general!” I yelled. “Let’s go!”

“Yessir!” Even though I knew the four men behind me weren’t without injuries, their answering yell was still formidable. Of us five, I was the only one left without a scratch.

The young commander pointed his swagger stick at us, his face twisted in fear. The cavalymen around him, serving as his guard, were wearing different armor from the rest of the Gen soldiers. I could tell from the way they handled their horses that they were well trained and experienced. The heavy cavalry—wearing metal armor that had been painted a deep red—split into two and galloped towards us in a pincer movement.

I urged my horse to go faster and shouted, “Don’t slow down or stop! Defeat all of the enemies you see!”

“Yessir!”

I parried arrow after arrow as we barrelled through, using the same motion to slash at a bearded cavalryman who tried to rush me, forcing him off his horse. I

slowed down my mount and roared, “Move! Make way or I’ll kill you!”

The formation of the enemy trying to protect their general wavered. A path—a slim one, but a path nonetheless—formed. *This is my only chance! But...*

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

I could hear the fearsome battle cries from behind me as the Gen cavalrymen started to close in. Unless we changed our tactics, we would be surrounded and killed before we could defeat the enemy general. The veterans fighting by my side turned their horses around to face the threat despite their injuries.

“Young master!”

“Leave this to us!”

“Get their general!”

“Wait, you guys!” I yelled, but to no avail.

The large soldier wielding a war hammer flung himself from his horse and bellowed, “We will gladly serve as your shield, young master!” He raised his voice in a fearsome war cry as he rushed towards the enemies.

“Lord Sekiei, go!” the other veterans ordered before they, too, joined the fray.

“You idiots,” I muttered, gripping the hilt of my sword so hard that I could almost feel the metal twist. “Wait for me on the other side. I’ll join you soon.”

“Yessir!”

As soon as I heard their replies, given in a laughing tone, I urged my horse into a gallop and rode through the path opened in the enemy formation. I rushed straight for the Gen general. Screams and yells rang out from behind me, as well as the violent screech of metal upon metal. Then, amid the cacophony, I heard the sound of someone falling to the ground and the final cry of the war-hammer-wielding veteran—

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha! This...this was exactly what I wanted! It was an honor to watch the back of a new hero... We’ve attained glory!”

Even though I could no longer hear his voice, I didn’t look behind me—

instead, I broke through the enemy lines. They were so stunned that they barely put up a fight; the enemy general stared at me, frozen and pale as I swung my sword down straight for his head.

However, the final guard standing taunted me as he blocked my attack with his sword. “In your dreams!” I could see white hair peeking out from under his helmet. We exchanged blows for a little bit before I backed off to gain some distance. He was strong. He must have lived through and survived countless battles. In fact, he reminded me a little of Gramps Raigen. But...

“Prepare yourself!” the old cavalryman yelled as he closed the gap between us. I dodged his attack by leaning my torso backward and then slashed out, lopping off his left arm. “I-Impossible! H-How could someone this powerful...” He fell off his horse, blood spurting from his missing limb.

I pointed my sword at the pale-faced enemy general, who wailed, “Y-You monster! What are you?!”

“I’m just a man who wants to be a civil official.”

“Wha—?!”

Before he could finish his sentence, I slashed out with my sword and sent his head flying from his shoulders. I raised my voice above the din of the battlefield, yelling, “I, Chou Sekiei, have killed the enemy general!”

I could see the news travel through the sea of enemy soldiers, the shock and panic spreading like a wave. At the same time, the high-pitched scream of the whistling arrow rang through the air. Hakurei had succeeded in evacuating the soldiers holed up in Hakugin Castle, and had started to depart from the battlefield. Father’s blood ran true through her veins. She might be better than me when it came to commanding troops.

My expression relaxed a little and I swung my sword to get rid of the excess blood coating the blade. Then I turned my horse back the way I’d come. At the very least I wanted to collect some locks of the veterans’ hair to serve as keepsakes to their memories.

“Damn! Everyone who tries to watch my back ends up dying in front of me...” My horse must have sensed my sorrow. It shook its mane as if it was trying to

comfort me as we raced along the plain as fast as the wind. *You're right.*

"Hakurei will cry her eyes out if I die!"

With those words as motivation, I threw myself into the horde of enemy cavalymen, who looked lost and confused at the sudden death of their commander. By the time I got through them and returned to Keiyou on my own, it was already midnight. Hakurei had been waiting for me at the gates to the city and as soon as she saw me, she dragged me inside.

It was while she was tending to my wounds that we received the bad news.

"Gen Emperor Adai has arrived on the northern shore of the river, accompanied by a large number of enemy forces. It looks to be the start of a large-scale invasion."

The battle that day had been nothing more than a prelude. We only realized it the following morning.

Chapter Four

“O Emperor Adai, son of the great Celestial Wolf! I am honored to behold your holy visage. Our men, all two hundred thousand of them, are in position. Please give us your orders!”

On the northern shore of the great river stood Sansei Castle, which served as a base of operations for Gen’s southern campaign. Though it was midnight, the old general’s voice was so loud as he gave his report that it echoed through the spacious meeting room. All of the generals and commanders—veterans with countless battles’ worth of experience under their belts—lowered their heads in respect. Still, the air was thick with their excitement and bloodlust.

It had been three years since I, Adai Dada, emperor of Gen, personally stood on a battlefield and I had taken a warship to get here. A strong sense of satisfaction welled up inside me as I leaned back in my throne. In my hand I held a tribute that my new vassal state had offered me: a cup made of gold, its surface so polished that I could see my own long white hair and dark eyes reflected in it.

Seven years ago the crown passed to me and at the age of fifteen, I ascended the throne as the emperor of Gen. My appearance was barely changed from that day; my features remained as soft as a young maiden’s and my body was slender and petite. I could wield neither sword nor bow, nor even ride a horse. Under normal circumstances I would be a target of scorn—the Gen Empire valued individual strength and military might above all else. Even so, everyone gathered in the room had nothing but fear and respect for their emperor. They knew that none of them had a chance of winning against me.

I crossed my legs and held up a hand. “Lift your head and take a seat. I am glad that all of you are raring to fight. However, in this invasion there is no need for haste.” The generals looked at me in confusion. No matter what battle I took command of, I had always made sure that we ended things as quickly as possible and, ever since my first battle at fifteen, I had never lost. I signaled for

the child soldier attending me to pour me some kumis—a light, fermented milk—and then continued, “Our men and horses are tired from the long voyage across the river. Until reinforcements arrive, let us take this time to relax and recuperate.”

The people of my country originated from the great plains in the north. In the past, the land had been known as En. I could not fault my soldiers or my horses for being fatigued after sailing here, for such large bodies of water were not a common fixture in Gen. Our plan was to use the vast fleet of convoy ships we’d built in the northeast—an area that even Ei’s spies could not infiltrate—and take advantage of the strong northern wind to traverse the Grand Canal. It worked too, as it was clear that we’d taken the Chou army off guard. As well, we’d blocked off the mouth of the river with yet another convoy, so it would be hard for them to move their troops along the water.

“I am most grateful for the consideration you show our troops, Your Imperial Majesty,” the general said as he bowed his head low. “However...” And yet he did not voice the rest of his thoughts, remaining silent instead.

I drank half my cup of kumis and finished his words for him. “‘However if we do not hurry, then that irritating pest, Chou Tairan, will return from that city of ungrateful fools.’ Is that what you wanted to say?”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Seven years ago, knowing that he did not have much longer to live, my father in this life led his final military expedition to try and invade Keiyou. It ended in failure, thwarted by the Ei’s greatest general, Chou Tairan. The man was a highly skilled fighter who was able to duel the Crimson Wolf to a standstill. I had nothing but praise for his talent as a commander as well; if anyone other than my father had been his opponent, then his vicious pursuit would have routed our army as we retreated.

If only Chou Tairan did not exist, then we would have long since claimed the lands past the great river. Rinkei would have fallen. The ungrateful snakes hiding inside its walls—those who betrayed us, their allies, and claimed our territory in the following confusion—would have been forced to surrender. Barring the age of the gods, when the old peach tree of Routou was said to

have been planted, it would have been the first time since the days of the Tou Empire—the first time in a thousand years—that the lands were unified under a single flag yet again. If only Chou Tairan did not exist, then the previous emperor of Gen might not have died in a fit of rage.

Over the course of countless skirmishes these past seven years, Chou Tairan had dealt a significant amount of damage to my army. He was a difficult opponent to face on the battlefield and I doubted that it would be easy to defeat him.

He was, however, nothing compared to Eihou.

I disguised the prick of pain I felt at the thought of him by draining my kumis before I said, “Do not fear. I’ve already put a plan into motion. He won’t be able to leave that den of snakes anytime soon. We will have plenty of time to achieve our goals.”

The men around me murmured excitedly; they were all well aware of Tairan’s strength. I rested my elbow upon the arm of my throne. On the map before me, Chou Tairan, symbolized with pieces that resembled a general and his men, was placed over Rinkei. As I stared down at it, I smirked.

“I assume you all wish to know why Chou Tairan will not be able to return,” I said. “It’s been over fifty years since my grandfather forced our enemies south of the river, to the land once known as Sai. However, fifty years is not enough time for a person to change.” My generals did not seem to understand what I was trying to say. The ones who were good at strategizing had either been left behind in the capital or were on their way to our new vassal state. None of them were present. “Chou Tairan is a peerless general—one who will be spoken of for generations to come. However...”

No matter the day and age, there would always be people who despised the strong and the noble. That fool, Ou Eifuu, was a good example. I grimaced at the thought and signaled for my attendant to pour me another cup of kumis.

“However, Chou Tairan has made himself an enemy of those in his capital who wish to offer us tribute in exchange for peace. I’ve already told them that if Chou Tairan wins against us then there would be no room for any treaties. He has sworn fealty to the false emperor of the south and so, until they’ve come to

some sort of agreement—an agreement that will never come—I doubt he and his handpicked troops will be able to return to the river anytime soon. On the off chance that he *does* return, he will only be endangering his own political standing.”

The generals bowed their heads low once again. “We are impressed at your shrewd strategies, Your Imperial Majesty!”

“Enough. I’ve no need for praise. This plan is naught but child’s play.” I drained my second cup of kumis and looked down at the elaborate tactical map on the table. “Raigen” was the name of the enemy leader stationed at the southern shore. I searched through my memories for a moment before I clapped my hands. “Ah, this is the old man who charged into my predecessor’s base camp all by himself. What a strange, but unwelcome, twist of fate. He is deeply loyal to the Chou family and won’t easily give up his absent master’s castle. Attacking him will cause an unnecessary number of casualties for us.”

I could feel my generals staring at me, giving me their full attention so as not to miss anything. I was still unused to my position as the emperor, but acting was second nature to me and I knew perfectly well how to command.

“A general mustn’t let his subordinates see fear. He has to radiate confidence. That’s all you need to do, Eifuu.”

My lips quirked in a smile. After I placed my empty cup into my attendant’s hands, I stood. “Our only task is to rest our soldiers and horses as we wait for the Three Wolves to return from routing the barbarians in the north.” From my scabbard, engraved with a large old peach tree, I drew my dagger and stabbed it into the tactical map, right over Keiyuu. “My loyal subject, Crimson Wolf Nguyen Gui, will take care of everything else.”

“Victory to Emperor Adai! Long live the empire!” my generals roared as one.

I smiled and nodded, showing my appreciation for their fervor. It had taken me three years to get here and there were no holes in my plan. I’d had help, of course; Nguyen had even sacrificed his honor and reputation for my sake. We had more than enough men, as well as plenty of ways to transport troops and supplies. I shot a glance at my attendant and he, understanding my unspoken command, handed out golden cups of kumis to my generals.

There was no need to worry. We'd won the moment Seitou surrendered to us. If we looked at the grand scheme of things, it mattered little whether or not we conquered Keiyou at this point. Nguyen knew that very well and...

I paused, suddenly reminded of a letter that he had sent me. In it, my loyal general had mentioned Chou Tairan's daughter. In the same way that a tiger's cub was still a tiger, she was not to be underestimated. However, I was confident Nguyen would be able to destroy her. She was young, immature, and inexperienced. Kou Eihou, his Heavenly Swords in hand, was the only person I knew who had been born a full-fledged tiger.

I plastered a smile on my face and looked around at my generals. "Men, drink well tonight and keep your strength up. Let us enjoy the show that the Crimson Wolf shall put on for us."

"What's the situation with our food and water reserves?!"

"We've got plenty, thanks to General Chou and the young master's orders! What are they called, biscuits? They're great stuff."

"Tell the soldiers in charge to hurry up with the evacuations! In order of importance, it's children first, then women with infants, then the sick and wounded, and *then* the elderly!"

"The riders from the north are approaching at a fearsome speed. Hurry! Hurry!!!"

"Make sure we don't take our eyes from the west. If you see *anything* amiss, report it to Lord Sekiei immediately."

A night had passed in Keiyou since our confrontation with the Gen Empire's forces. Ever since the initial news about the approach of the enemy forces, people had been entering my room nonstop with reports about the situation. I sat down in my chair, a letter from Raigen in hand. It had been delivered from the front lines first thing this morning.

"We're under a sudden attack from many enemy ships. It seems that more and more of their generals are arriving on the battlefield. Though we don't know the exact number of their forces, I'm sure from past experience that they have

over two hundred thousand. I implore you to request reinforcements from the capital immediately.”

This was a large-scale invasion that could have only been launched had Gen known of father’s absence in advance. Raigen was an experienced general, and everyone in our army was well trained, but even so...

“Lord Sekiei!”

I was in the middle of racking my brain over what we could do when Teiha ran in. There was blood staining the bandages wrapped around his head, and his armor was covered in scuffs and dirt, but he had managed to survive the battle at Hakugin Castle. I blinked, shaking myself from my thoughts.

“Are you all right?”

“These are mere scratches. Thank you so much for yesterday!”

“Hakurei was the one who saved you. Besides, I didn’t do it out of the goodness of my heart.” I waved my hand as he approached as if to brush away his gratitude. From outside the manor, I could hear horses whinnying and children crying. Evacuations to get the civilians out of the city were under way. “I’m a freeloader of the Chou family. What do you think people will say behind my back if I abandon my soldiers at the very beginning of a war? When it comes to a siege, morale is the highest priority. Considering we’re going up against the fearsome Crimson Wolf and his Knights, I wouldn’t be surprised if people lost their will to fight—the mere thought of his reputation is terrifying. It was my time to put my life on the line. Besides, even if I had died, Hakurei would still be around.”

Teiha didn’t reply, though he scrunched his face up in an unreadable expression. I could feel all of the attendants and soldiers staring at me as well, but I ignored them.

I cleared my throat and, in the brightest voice I could muster, continued, “So don’t worry about it. Since you survived, I’m going to put you to work. Gramps and his army won’t be able to return from the river. I don’t have enough commanders, so I’m going to need you to step up. Make sure you don’t sully the great name of Raigen the Ogre now.”

Teiha's expression twisted even further and he seemed paler than usual. He took a few moments to collect himself before he asked, "Is it true that Adai Dada has arrived at the enemy's main camp? Do you suppose that's a lie Gen concocted in an attempt to scare us?"

"They're telling the truth, in all likelihood."

I could hear a young woman's voice—Asaka's voice—echoing from somewhere within the manor. It sounded like she was trying to stop someone. *Did she fail in the task I gave her? Was she unable to convince her?*

Since Teiha was still standing before me looking nervous, I extended my hand and explained, "When I was a kid, I had father and Gramps Raigen tell me all about their war stories. Apparently, this Adai fellow is so small and petite that you could mistake him for a little girl. He can't even swing a sword or ride a horse—and yet, he survived a battle against them. Those two weren't able to take the head of a fifteen-year-old emperor seven years ago, nor could they rout Gen's army even though it had just suffered an enormous defeat. Adai is a monster. Of that, I'm certain. The intel about him sending away the Crimson Wolf was probably a part of his strategy."

Instantly, the room filled with the murmurs of the soldiers and the attendants, their expressions troubled by what I'd said.

"S-So, Gen did all of that just to trick us?" Teiha asked in a trembling voice. "Impossible. That can't be..."

"That's the only way to explain how they prepared enough ships to transport two hundred thousand soldiers. It doesn't change the fact that the wall of fortresses we built along the river is impenetrable. They may beat us in terms of manpower, but it would still be an extremely difficult task to break through from there. So that's why..."

I tapped my finger against the map on my table and drew the path I suspected Adai would take: past the forests in the southwestern region of Gen and the harsh environment of the Nanamagari Mountains; past Seitou, which was beyond the two natural barriers; at the end, I pointed to Keiyou, where we were, and the river bisecting the continent. The room had fallen silent. Everyone was staring at me, waiting for my next words.

“The Crimson Wolf led his army through the unexplored region in the southwest. Gen put its plan to attack Keiyou into place only after Seitou surrendered. They must have wanted to wait until the strong northern wind started to blow. The soldiers Gen sent to the northern shore of the river are acting as bait to keep Raigen and his troops there. The Crimson Knights will make up the bulk of the invasion force. They plan on claiming Keiyou and then destroying us after they’ve got us surrounded. Adai’s careful; there isn’t a single weak point in his plan to take advantage of. I can understand why father speaks so highly of him.”

“So you’re saying that we can’t expect reinforcements anytime soon,” Teiha said in a strained voice, his fists trembling at his side. “About a thousand soldiers—old ones, greenhorns, and volunteers—are protecting the evacuees, which means that we’re left with fewer than two thousand. That would be an optimistic estimate too. In comparison, the enemies in the west number...”

“Easily more than ten thousand,” I finished for him. “I hear that Adai doesn’t ever do things in half measures. For all we know, he might have brought ten times the number of our soldiers.”

Everyone in the room fell silent, their gazes fixed on the ground. Keiyou was the Chou family’s base of operations and as such, had steadily strengthened its defensive measures over the past fifty years. Even so, trying to hold out against such a difference in manpower would be an arduous task.

I clapped my hands and made sure I was using a casual tone as I said, “Don’t look so down, everyone. Rinkei knows well enough that they’re next if Gen crosses the river and takes Keiyou. They’ll send reinforcements. In order for us to hold out long enough to receive them, we have to—”

I was interrupted by a horse whinnying, followed by Asaka’s scream of “No, Lady Hakurei, you mustn’t!” Getsuei, Hakurei’s beautiful white horse, was announced by the thundering of hooves as it galloped into the courtyard. Hakurei, her long silver hair tied in a ponytail, leaped from Getsuei’s back in such a smooth movement that it was hard to believe there was any weight to the armor she wore.

As soon as I saw the fury of her expression, I desperately wanted to flee.

Hakurei stalked into the room with her hair swishing behind her like the lashing tail of a cat before it strikes. The crowd of soldiers and attendants in my room parted to let her through before they left, escaping the worst of Hurricane Hakurei.

The moment we were the only ones left in the room, Hakurei slammed her hands down on my desk. “Sekiei, I demand an explanation!” Her bellow echoed off the walls.

Asaka, dressed in light armor and surrounded by other female attendants, poked her face out from behind a stone pillar outside. When our eyes met, I saw her mouth at me, *“I’m sorry! I gave her the letter, but...!”*

“We leave the rest to you!” one of the others added, similarly silent.

And you guys were so confident this morning. I loosened my collar. Hakurei was still glaring down at me, anger radiating off of her entire body. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “What’re you in such a hurry for?”

“What was the meaning of that order?” She reached out and grabbed the front of my shirt, gripping the fabric with so much strength that her pale knuckles grew even paler. “Why are you sending *me* to Rinkei to inform them of the attack? Give me a detailed explanation, *now!*”

She must have come straight to me instead of listening to Asaka’s explanation.

I looked Hakurei in the eye, maintaining my calm, and explained, “It’s simple. All of the ships have either fled or been captured, and I’m sure that Gen has sealed off the sea route. That leaves horses as the only way we can move in or out of the city. Objectively, you and Asaka are the best riders left in Keiyou. We’ll send ten teams, consisting of twenty people, with you. I handpicked them based on their riding technique. Keiyou’s not going to last without reinforcements and if Keiyou falls, Rinkei’s next. We *have* to tell the capital what’s happening.”

She didn’t respond, looking away instead. Chou Hakurei was no fool; in fact, she was one of the most talented women I knew. So she understood that my reasoning was sound.

“If it’s riding skill, then you’re—” she tried, but I cut her off.

“I can’t enter the capital, remember? It’s part of my punishment.”

She looked up and glared at me. I could see her sapphire eyes starting to shimmer with unshed tears. “This is no time for your jokes!”

“Yeah, and I’m not joking. Let go.”

Hakurei did, though it was clear that she was reluctant to do so.

I straightened out my clothes, stood up, and stepped in front of her. Then I raised a finger in the air to explain my excuse in the most reasonable way possible. “Listen closely. Riding a horse day and night until you reach Rinkei is as difficult a task as staying to fight an enemy force several times larger than your army. There’s also a high chance that Gen sent out some assassins to stop messengers from leaving Keiyou. You’re going to suffer through the first option, and me the second. It’s fair, isn’t it?”

“Do I...” Hakurei pressed her face against my chest, though there was so little force behind the action I could hardly feel it. I could hear the quiet gasps from our audience. She spoke in a weak voice that I hadn’t heard from her these past few years. Her hot tears soaked the front of my shirt. “Do I not have the right to watch your back?”

Is she talking about how I didn’t let her charge into the enemy’s forces with me? She must’ve been more torn up about it than I initially thought. Hakurei’s shoulders were shaking and I gave her a few gentle pats on the back.

“You’re as dumb as always. Of course you do. It’s just that...”

“Just what?” Hakurei repeated when I trailed off. She looked up at me, her eyes puffy and red.

I thought for a moment before I said in a quiet voice, “Everyone I entrust my back to dies an early death, just like those veterans yesterday. I even ordered them not to die, again and again. I don’t want that to happen to you.”

Hakurei didn’t reply. She simply started to cry, fat tears rolling down her face. I never liked it when someone cried in front of me.

I took a step away from her and mustered the brightest tone I could. “In any

case, I need you to report all of this to Rinkei, on the double! Bring back father and his three thousand soldiers—as well as reinforcements, while you’re at it.”

“Is that an order?” Hakurei asked, back to her usual cool tone as she glared at me.

I grinned and shook my head. “Nope. I’m simply exercising my right, since I miraculously won the race we had when we returned to Keiyou. You *do* remember what you said, right? That if I won, I could ask anything I want from you?”

“You scoundrel.” Hakurei’s eyes burned with fury as she slammed her fists against my chest, over and over again. “You never play fair! You always do this to me! You always... I want to... I also want to help—”

I let her take out her frustration for a moment before I wiped the tears from her eyes. “It’s unlucky to cry before going to war, you know?”

“I’m not crying,” Hakurei muttered in a shaky voice as she stepped away from me. She held her hand up to her ponytail and pulled the red ribbon from her hair. Then, she held it out to me. It was the one I used when I was a kid. “This is my treasure. I’ll leave it in your care until I return. Make sure you give it back to me, all right?”

“Sounds good. Then, here, I’ll give you something as well.”

“Huh?”

I stepped away to take a small cloth bag from my drawer. Hakurei was staring at me, her hair hanging loose around her, and she accepted the bag when I placed it in her hands.

“What’s this?”

“It’s something I was going to give to you on your seventeenth birthday. You should really tie your hair up since you’re going to be riding a horse.”

Hakurei opened it up and took out an intricately embroidered red hair ribbon. It was one that I had personally commissioned from an artisan who lived outside Keiyou. Hakurei didn’t say anything and instead, pressed the ribbon against her chest for a moment. Her beautiful face was scrunched up like she

was fighting back more tears, but she still managed to tie her hair back up in a ponytail, the motion so familiar to her she could do it in her sleep.

It looks good on her. Satisfied that I'd chosen right, I cleaned the rest of the tears off her face and nodded at her. She returned the nod, standing up straighter.

"I, Chou Hakurei, will accept the duty of delivering your message to Rinkei." Her sharp and elegant voice echoed throughout the room with the announcement. "Do not go and die on me, Sekiei. I won't stand for it." With that, she held her fist out towards me. There was a strong sense of conviction in her eyes, almost as if she was offering me a challenge.

I smiled and pressed my fist against hers. "Of course, you can count on it! I have no plans to die just yet—I already decided in my past life that in this one, I'd die in bed."

Something seemed to crumple in Hakurei's expression, but she turned around before I could get a closer look.

"You idiot," I heard her mutter before she raised her voice and called, "Asaka, let's go!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Asaka ran out from behind a pillar and hurried to stand in the garden. She looked up at me, so I nodded at her. Asaka gently tapped the dagger in her belt. "You can leave her to me!"

Getsuei whinnied as Hakurei leaped back onto its back. "Hyah!" she yelled and in the next instant Getsuei was gone, along with Asaka's chestnut horse.

She didn't look me in the eye at the end. I was in the middle of tying Hakurei's ribbon around the hilt of my sword when Teiha returned.

"Was it truly all right to send Lady Hakurei away?" he asked, sounding nervous.

"It was." I made my reply sharp enough to cut off anything else he might say.

On the off chance that Keiyou fell and Gen took Hakurei prisoner, I knew that hell would await her. She had a lot of value considering she was Chou Tairan's daughter. *Maybe I should've given her a hug before she left.* I didn't get the

chance to wallow in my emotions for very long, though, since the soldiers and attendants who left the room along with Teiha were shuffling back. They certainly had no qualms about making their thoughts heard.

“Lord Sekiei, to think that you wouldn’t offer Lady Hakurei a hug after that conversation! You’re such a meanie!”

“I’d heard rumors about how slow on the uptake you could be regarding feelings, but...”

“It’s dire. It’s as if you have some sort of illness.”

“She’s probably crying right about now.”

To my shock, none of them were sympathetic towards me. Everyone loved Hakurei.

“Shut up, all of you!” I yelled, though it was clear from my dramatics I wasn’t really mad. “Go back to work! Chop chop! We don’t have any time left!”

“Yessir!” They saluted as one as they responded, grinning the whole time, before returning to their stations.

The pessimistic air from earlier had lightened a bit. I had to survive until Hakurei made it back; I couldn’t break my promise, after all. With that resolution in mind, I brushed my fingers against the red ribbon I’d tied around my sword.

The morning after Hakurei left for Rinkei, we woke to find Keiyou surrounded by Gen, their number so great the army seemed more like a thick red fog. I estimated that there were thirty thousand soldiers around us—far more than I’d expected. We could hardly see past them. All of the cavalymen and foot soldiers were dressed in crimson armor, and the character “Gen” was proudly emblazoned upon their war flags. In front of them was the Crimson Wolf himself, the same general who had attacked us three months ago. He looked like he was barely managing to keep himself from leaping for our throats.

“Wow, what a view,” I said as I leaned a leg against the ramparts. The tension before combat was a unique one, heightened by the reflection off the enemies’

weapons and the dull thudding of their war drums. “I gotta say I’m surprised. The Crimson Wolf himself came all the way here instead of leaving everything to his underlings! He’s a good commander. Or maybe it’s because he still harbors a grudge over what happened three months ago? In any case, it makes for an impressive sight.”

“L-Lord Sekiei, please step down! You’re making yourself a target!” Teiha exclaimed as he pulled on my left arm. Much like the other soldiers behind him, his face was pale and stiff.

This isn’t good. I tried to maintain my usual tone as I asked, “Teiha, the soldiers are all in position, right?”

“Yessir. They’re stationed at all sides of the city. It’s just that...”

“Uh-huh, got it.”

I wouldn’t let him finish voicing his worries. I knew what he wanted to say: there were more enemies than expected and we wouldn’t be able to last if Gen used its superior numbers to overpower us. If Teiha’s fears came to pass, then Gen would annihilate the Chou army stationed at the river with a pincer attack. It was commendable that he was able to calmly assess a hopeless situation; he had the makings of a good commander.

We couldn’t roll over and die just yet. I looked around at the soldiers gathered around me and smiled. A general could not let his subordinates see his fear. He had to radiate confidence. “All right, I’m gonna go and say hello to the enemy general. Do you want to come with me?”

Teiha and the soldiers didn’t say anything for a moment—but as soon as they realized they *hadn’t* been hearing things, they all gave me disbelieving looks.

“Huh?”

“Lord Sekiei,” Teiha said, the expression under his helmet tight with anxiety, “I don’t know if this is the right time for jokes...”

“I’m not joking.” As soon as I said it, I leaped from the ramparts and landed on the stairs below. Ignoring the confused shouts of the soldiers above me, I ran to the west gate and yelled, “I’m going out! Get me a horse!”

“Y-Yessir!” One of the new soldiers, who appeared no older than an adolescent, looked surprised at my sudden order but led a black horse to me nonetheless.

I leaped onto its back, ran my hand down its neck, and then bellowed, “Open the gate!”

“P-Please wait!” Teiha, eyes wide, practically tumbled down the stairs in his haste to get to me. He grabbed onto my mount’s reins, his expression frantic. “You mustn’t give up hope just yet! The enemy army is powerful, but we still have a chance of victory if we all work together. If *anything* happens to you, then Keiyou will—”

“That’s precisely why I have to go.” The west gate was slowly opening and I lowered my voice so that only Teiha could hear me. “Our enemy is the Crimson Wolf and thirty thousand of Gen’s finest. Unless we do something about our morale, we aren’t going to last until father returns. Words won’t do anything. In order to inspire his soldiers, a general has to show his willingness to fight, even if it’s just an act. That’s what I believe anyway.”

Teiha’s eyes widened and he sucked in a breath. “Y-You...”

I gave him a few encouraging pats on the shoulder. “Don’t make that face. I’ll be back before you know it. Hyah!”

“Lord Sekiei!”

The gate opened a crack and I kicked the horse into a gallop, slipping through the small exit. The drumming picked up speed and the rows of cavalymen knocked their arrows, the deadly tips all pointed directly at me. The next moment, however, the drums stopped. The cavalymen lowered their bows and backed up their horses.

I narrowed my eyes. “No music and no arrows? He’s an honest one.” I stopped my horse in between Keiyou’s walls and the Gen army and then, unsheathing my sword, held it aloft. The ribbon around the hilt flashed scarlet as it billowed in the wind. “My name is Sekiei, and I am the man left in charge of Keiyou! I call upon the enemy commander to show himself! Where are you?!”

At my demand, murmurs buzzed through the air from both enemy and ally. I

was calling for a duel. In their wildest dreams they couldn't have expected this. For a short time the Gen soldiers looked at each other, unsure of what to do, before they started to step aside to form a path. A general who looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, seated upon an impressively massive horse, made his way forward. He was dressed in deep crimson armor and in his hand, he held a giant halberd which had been engraved with a wolf.

I could see the large scar on his left cheek. *I knew it. It's the same general I fought against three months ago.* Sword still in hand, I flung out my arm to signal to my allies—no matter what, don't shoot.

The general stopped his horse a short distance from me and then roared, "My name is Nguyen Gui, the Crimson Wolf of the Gen Empire! I apologize that I kept you waiting, Chou Sekiei!" The Gen soldiers cheered while the Chou soldiers groaned. Even from this short exchange, I could tell that my opponent was a fearless fighter. He undoubtedly had thousands of battles' worth of experience.

I pointed my sword at him. "Nguyen, I commend you! You led your formidable forces through danger and peril to arrive before us today—a feat only a seasoned general is capable of. As a show of respect to your skill, I promise that if you and your men retreat now, we will not give pursuit. You escaped with your life three months ago. Don't squander it here!"

Nguyen's eyes widened slightly before he burst out laughing, the sound so loud it was akin to a clap of thunder over the battlefield. In the next instant, though, he had stopped, eyes narrowed. He swung the halberd above his head several times before he aimed it at me.

Then, he charged. I followed suit immediately, my black mount's mane whipping through the air.

"You are a brave one indeed to stand before me without any fear," he yelled. "However!"

In the second that our horses galloped past each other, Nguyen struck with his halberd. I managed to parry the terrifying blow with my sword. The screech of metal upon metal was deafening and my hand went numb from the impact. *What strength!*

Though no one said anything, I could hear from the quiet buzzing of our audience that they were taken aback that I survived Nguyen's furious attack. There was distance between Nguyen and me now, but Nguyen charged me once again.

"Your bluster borders on delusion. Die, Chou brat! I swear on this scar you left upon my face that I will offer both your head and your sister to Emperor Adai!"

"Ha, who's the delusional one here? No villain will ever lay their hands on our adorable little princess!"

One strike, then two... The speed at which we swung our weapons increased with every attack and sparks flew through the air with each parry. I could hear the sword Meirin had chosen for me scream under the pressure. I directed my mount away and put some distance between us.

As I tugged on the reins to turn my horse around, I taunted, "You know, father saw through Gen's plans a long time ago! We're the ones who'll emerge the victor!"

"That's enough nonsense out of you, brat!"

We charged at each other for the third time. I dodged his thrust and, taking advantage of the opening, I slashed out with my sword. He managed to block it. We ran, neck and neck, across the battlefield, never letting up on the offensive. I aimed my sword at his throat, but he used the flat of his blade to protect himself.

"You're good!" I exclaimed even as I tried to break through his defense. "If you worked for father instead, then Ei would've long since unified the land. And you're telling me there are three others as strong as you?!"

"I should be the one saying that!" Nguyen's eyes sharpened and I could see suspicion in the way he looked at me. He swung his halberd irritably, knocking my sword away, and backed up his mount. Pointing his weapon at me he bellowed, "Just who are you, brat?! Why do you possess such skill, yet you've never shown your face on the battlefield until now?"

"Ha! Do you even need to ask?" Thanks to the furious barrage of attacks it had been made to contend with, my sword was at its limit. *If only I had the*

Heavenly Swords...if I had even one of them... Stop. That's enough complaining for now. I had to end this duel quickly, otherwise I'd lose from the difference of quality in our weapons. "My goal in life is to become a civil official! That's literally all I want! Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't even be standing here right now. I'd be peacefully living out my days in some countryside town. So stop messing up my life's plans!"

"Utter nonsense!" Nguyen snarled. With his face twisted in fury, he charged. He swung his halberd above his head, both hands wrapped around the shaft. It was his biggest attack today.

I held up my sword to try and parry it away, but... "Tsk!" The blade snapped in half. Its tip spun through the air before sinking into the ground.

Nguyen grinned, confident in his victory. "Luck was not on your side. Now die!"

"You dummy. It's not my time yet!"

"Huh?!"

With the little bit of blade still in the hilt, I barely managed to deflect the attack. Then, I turned my horse around and raced for the gate. "Teiha! My bow!"

He had returned to the ramparts with the other soldiers to watch over my duel. My sudden order took him by surprise and he hesitated for a moment, but recovered quickly. "R-Right!" He grabbed my bow and quiver and tossed it at me with all his might. "Lord Sekiei!"

It's too far!

I could hear the thunder of hooves behind me as Nguyen closed in. "It's no use, prodigal son of the Chou family! I'll kill you where you stand!"

"No, thanks!" I leaned over, nearly toppling out of the saddle, to grab the bow. I managed to snag a single arrow from the falling quiver and in a smooth movement I nocked it, turned, and shot.

"Argh!" Taken by surprise, Nguyen wasn't able to react. It sank into the bracer on his left arm.

Damn, not deep enough to injure!

“L-Lord Nguyen!” the enemy cavalymen cried as they charged forward. At the front of the line was a commander who had covered the lower half of his face with a demonic mask.

I adjusted my position in the saddle so I was sitting properly again. Then I galloped back towards the gate.

“Chou Sekiei!!!” Nguyen roared from behind me.

I turned around and yelled back, “Sorry! We’ll have to finish our fight later!” The moment I dashed back into Keiyou, the gates closed with a boom. I shoved the broken sword back into its sheath, leaped off the horse, and took a deep breath. “Jeez, I almost died just now.”

The greenhorns were staring at me in disbelief while the veteran soldiers smiled. So long as the soldiers’ morale recovered—even a little—then it was worth it. As I stroked the black horse on its head, Teiha ran down the stairs so fast his feet hardly touched the steps.

“L-Lord Sekiei, are you all right?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Oh, you’re just the man I was looking for, Teiha. My sword broke. Get me another one.”



As I untied Hakurei's ribbon from the hilt, one of the veterans approached me, sword in hand. Behind him were the other soldiers, excitedly clamoring for attention.

"Young master!"

"This one! Use this one!"

"It probably won't break so easily."

"It's of truly sturdy make."

I took the sword from the soldier and held it in my hand. It was thicker and heavier than a regular one, likely designed for real combat. "It's a good weapon. Thanks, I'll take it."

"What an honor," the soldier said, smiling as he pressed his hand to his chest, right over his heart. I could see the other soldiers around him copying the movement.

Hmm? Wait...

"Lord Chou Sekiei." It was Teiha, who broke the short silence to attach the Chou name to mine. His face was flushed as he continued, "Though we all acknowledged your martial talent, there was a part of us that looked down on you. We thought of you as a coward who wanted to be a civil official and not a military one despite being a member of the Chou family. We thought of you as nothing more than a freeloader. Until today. Now, we realize it was wrong of us to do so. None of the guards stationed in Keiyou could have lasted in a duel against the Crimson Wolf. You are truly and unmistakably the son of Lord Chou Tairan."

Teiha, along with the thousands of soldiers gathered, offered me a salute as one. "Lord Chou Sekiei, we pledge to fight alongside you until the bitter end! Please give us our orders!"

I widened my eyes as the memories rushed through me, clear as day. *Ahh, that's right. How could I have forgotten? Even in my past life, I loved to fight alongside soldiers like them.* Feeling strangely abashed, I ran my hand through my hair before tying Hakurei's ribbon around the hilt of my new sword.

“Idiots,” I said. “But thank you. No one is allowed to throw their life away! We will protect Keiyou until father and Hakurei return—until this battle ends—no matter how many days it’ll take!”

“Yessir!!!”

As soon as I arrived in the capital city of Rinkei, I made my way to the Chou family manor in the northern district. Tugging on Getsuei’s reins, I skidded to a halt on the main street.

“L-Lady Hakurei?! Asaka?” One of the older servants, cleaning up as part of her nightly duties, shrieked when she saw me.

Instead of giving an immediate reply, I stroked Getsuei’s neck. It had taken us five days of riding to get here, with only small breaks now and again. “Thank you,” I murmured to the horse. Then, pushing my exhausted body, I got off the saddle and turned to the servant. “Is father present?”

“Yes, he is!”

Some of the other servants hurried out; I handed Getsuei’s reins to one of them and Asaka and I entered the manor. Enemy cavalymen, sent to stop messengers leaving Keiyou, had attacked us several times on our journey, but Asaka looked the same as always. We walked down the hall and entered the inner courtyard where, underneath the stone roof, a man in military garb was sitting across from a young girl. Her long brown hair was tied in pigtails and she was wearing a fancy orange outfit. Behind her was a woman with beautiful, long black hair. I recognized the woman as Shizuka, who was said to have come from an island country in the east.

Father and Ou Meirin? As I wondered what they could possibly be talking about, my father noticed me and his eyes widened. He shot to his feet and hurried towards us.

“Hakurei! What’s the matter?!”

“Father...” I was about to tell him the situation when he wrapped me up in a strong and warm embrace. I rested my head against his muscular chest and felt the strength leave my body.

Father's face scrunched up. "I get the picture. There's only one reason why Sekiei would send you here. Adai made his move, I presume?"

"Yes. Here, take this." I took Sekiei's document from my pocket and handed it to father.

Father let Asaka take over in holding me up as he gave the letter a quick read. "Understood." His eyes shone with determination. The man before me was no longer just my father; he was Chou Tairan, the National Shield of the Ei Empire. "Lady Meirin, please accept my apologies for making you come all the way here, but I must return to Keiyou immediately. This issue affects the future of our country, you see. Would you be willing to continue our discussion about expedition rations with Sekiei as our proxy?"

Wait, this little girl is the one who's making business deals with father instead of the head of the Ou family? She has that much power? And what does father mean by "expedition"? One of the elderly servants brought a chair for me, so I gratefully sank down in it. My legs were so weak I was on the verge of collapse.

The Ou girl nodded upon hearing father's suggestion, her face severe. "We have no qualms with that. I pray for your success, General Chou." She paused for a moment before she added, "Ah, since we're on the topic, I would like to make a single request."

"What is it?" There was something menacing in father's voice.

The Ou girl simply smiled in response, unafraid. She placed her hands together and said, "It's about Lord Sekiei. May I have him as my husband? My parents have already agreed to letting me be his wife. I hear that he hasn't officially received the Chou name either, and in that case, I believe that such a union would benefit both of our families."

As the meaning of the words sank into my head, an intense wave of emotion erupted within me. "Wha—?! J-Just what are you—?!"

"Lady Hakurei, please don't push yourself!" Asaka placed her hands on my shoulders as if worried I'd leap from my chair at the Ou girl.

Sekiei? Her husband? She wasn't kidding about that?!

Father crossed his arms and hummed. "And why would you want that?"

The Ou girl's smile deepened as she looked up at the sky. There was a slight flush to her cheeks, as if she was thinking back on something. "It's simple, really. It's because that man saved my life. There is no greater debt than a life debt, wouldn't you agree?"

I'd heard that this girl and those in her employ had been attacked by pirates when Sekiei saved them in the nick of time. I agreed that "he saved my life" was an important enough event that it would make anyone fall in love, but... When I looked back at her, the Ou girl was looking at me and my father with the face of a calculating adult. Her eyes were chips of ice.

"Objectively," she said, "this country is very wealthy. It's to the point that Ei's power and influence rival that of its past, when it ruled the lands north of the river. However, it's precisely because of its wealth that it's rotting from within. Under normal circumstances, you should've already been on your journey back to the front. Yet you are forced to remain in the capital. Why is that? It's because those parasites in the Peacemaker Party are preventing you from leaving. My dear Lord Sekiei will eventually have to deal with those fools as well. To tell you the truth, the mere thought of it makes me wish to hurl. I hear that he has been forbidden from entering the city on a false charge—and not only that, but one of the people responsible for this was the grand chancellor's grandson? I simply want to see Lord Sekiei smiling at my side."

"The grand chancellor? So that was..." Father stood next to me, silent, as I trailed off. When I had gone to give food to Sekiei in prison I had passed by someone, though I couldn't get a good glimpse of them because of the darkness. Even the grand chancellor, who was known for his wisdom, wasn't able to completely control his own family?

The Ou girl stood up with a twirl, her robes billowing about her with the movement, before lowering her head in a deep bow. "Let me guess: the letter was informing you of a large-scale invasion by the Gen Empire, yes? And I suppose that it also told you of how Seitou has submitted to Gen? Now our country must deal with enemies from two sides of the border. However, over these past three months the only debates that have occurred in our courts were over trifling matters hardly worthy of attention. Just how many people *actually* understand the prickly reality we're in? I doubt that even the grand chancellor

can make a move.”

Seeing she still had our attention, she went on. “Those in the palace must be aware that Rinkei and Keiyou have both seen an increase in business from Seitou. They are also aware that there are many bizarre incidents involving these sales, such as the existence of Gen spies and the mass imports of rare products. However, none of them were able to face the facts, writing it off by saying, ‘A longtime ally such as Seitou would never betray us,’ or ‘Cavalrymen can’t pass through the Nanamagari Mountains or Hakkotsu Desert.’ They cling to their baseless optimism. Under these circumstances, the imperial guards—the emperor’s personal army, with the most manpower of any military faction in Ei—will only be deployed after Keiyou falls and when the enemies are on Rinkei’s doorstep. I guarantee it. Your highest priority is to leave Rinkei *immediately*. Once you have made your decision to do so, I can prepare all the ships that you’ll need.”

My father let out a sharp breath as he swallowed all of the Ou girl’s words.

“You...” I said before words failed me. She was so much shorter than me and, aside from her sizable breasts, she looked as young as a child. Yet her intelligence! She seemed to have an endless wealth of it. No wonder Sekiei praised her so often; I reached up and brushed my fingers against the ribbon in my hair.



Father sighed. “I’d heard rumors about you, you know. They say that the Ou family’s daughter is a prodigy. And yet I simply can’t wrap my head around something—why do you favor us so? Our victory will not offer you any tremendous benefits. I’m sure you’re aware of this, but the Peacemaker Party is the majority in the palace.”

Father was right. If the Ou family wanted to turn a profit, then they would prefer it if the war *wasn’t* going in Ei’s favor. They could jack up the prices of products during times of emergencies, after all.

The girl, however, looked up and offered us a cool smile, as if she’d expected father’s question. “I am a merchant’s daughter. I wish for the world to be at peace and I despise war, for it doesn’t help me make a fortune. I wish to make business deals with not only the countries to our south and our north, but also with the regions around them. My dream is to become the greatest merchant in all the lands! In order for me to accomplish that, I need you to win this war. Gen is not the only place to look down on merchants, and while Seitou bustles with opportunities and has made truly wonderful progress with its technological advancements, it’s quite the bizarre country. They claim to have been founded by an ascendant—mystics!—after all. Another reason is that *if* we were to submit to Gen, it’s us—the merchants and the common folk—who’ll be paying the tribute.”

Father and I had no arguments. She made sense. I couldn’t believe it, though; to think a girl younger than me would have such a firm grasp of both the internal and external affairs of this country.

I glared at Ou Meirin. “I don’t understand. In that case, why do you want Sekiei? Yes, he has some talent, I admit, but not so much that he can impose his will upon others. I don’t believe he’s necessary for your ambitions, so please, find another man.” Sekiei wasn’t suited for a desk job; he was far more talented in combat. This girl had such grandiose dreams, but there was no place in them for Sekiei.

The moment I finished talking, Ou Meirin tilted her head to the side and giggled at me. She sounded like a completely different person than before. “Huh? Lady Chou Hakurei, isn’t it obvious? ★”

I mulled it over for a moment. “What do you mean?” My words were a lot sharper than I intended.

“Lady Hakurei,” Asaka hissed as she grabbed onto my sleeve. I could see Miss Shizuka looking apologetic.

It's times like this that I have to keep my cool. I took a deep breath.

Before me, Ou Meirin tilted her small body from side to side, her large breasts bouncing with the movement. She looked like she could hardly contain her excitement. “I don’t believe it’s such a strange idea to want to spend the rest of your life next to the one you love,” she said. “Lord Sekiei is *such* a marvelous man, after all! ♪”

“Wha—?!” I gasped in a strangled tone.

“Oh?” Father sounded like he was biting back laughter as he stroked his beard.

“There, there,” Asaka said in a poor attempt at comfort.

“Lady Meirin,” Miss Shizuka sighed.

I was thrown seriously off-kilter by Ou Meirin’s words but still managed a reply. “H-He’s not someone you can handle. I will repeat myself one more time: please find another man.”

“Huh? It’s one thing if it was General Chou telling me that. Who are you to tell me what I can and can’t do?”

I saw red. *Who am I, you say? I’m only the woman who’s been at Sekiei’s side all these years!* I shot to my feet and stalked forward until I was standing right in front of Ou Meirin, glaring into her eyes. “I *can* tell you what you can or can’t do to him b-because I... I am the only one who...”

“Oops, sorry! I can’t hear you! ♪”

“Y-You little...!”

Suddenly, two loud bangs rang out through the inner courtyard. The birds took to the air in surprise. I spun around, but it didn’t take me long to find the source of the sound: my father. He’d clapped his hands together and when he saw Ou Meirin and I staring at him, he cleared his throat.

“That’s enough, you two. You can continue your conversation *after* the war.”

“Yessir...” both of us mumbled, looking away in embarrassment. *Yes, we’ll pick up from right here after we deal with Gen.*

“Lady Meirin,” father started, his expression stern, “I have about three thousand men with me—do you think it’s possible to transport them all to Keiyou via boat in one trip? This would include their horses and all of their equipment. Considering we’re facing off against Adai himself, we can assume that the sea route has been taken out.”

We would be facing down a veritable horde of enemies with a little more than three thousand. However, those three thousand were no ordinary soldiers—they were skilled and experienced veterans who had survived many battles with father and would surely, just like him, have their names recorded in the history books. If we could take the enemies by surprise with a back attack, then we would be able to overturn the situation in an instant.

“Please leave it to me,” Ou Meirin said, clasping her hands together with a bright smile. “I figured that you would want to ask that of me and so I’ve already made preparations!”

She reminded me of Sekiei a little—*just* a little—and I felt my chest clench uncomfortably. I fiddled with my bangs and pointed out, “It’s true that with a boat, we would be able to transport a large number of soldiers at once, but how’re we to do that? We can’t use the Grand Canal this time of year on account of the strong northern winds. There’s no other way.”

“If we return to Keiyou on foot or on horseback then we wouldn’t be able to put up a decent fight,” father retorted. “Our enemy is the Crimson Wolf, remember?”

He was right. Father wouldn’t stand any chance of defeating one of the Four Wolves if he was exhausted after a lengthy trip back. Or at the very least, he wouldn’t be able to defeat one of them without the battle being a difficult ordeal. Father and I stood in silence, racking our brains, when the merchant girl who should really look more her age puffed out her impressive chest.

“Yes, I’m more than aware! My husband...*ahem*, I mean, Lord Sekiei and I designed the perfect ship. It has no flaws! We thought of it together while we

were enjoying a cup of tea! ♪”

I didn’t—couldn’t—reply. It felt like there was a storm brewing in my heart and I desperately wanted a way to let out my jealousy. *That’s so unfair. I want to have tea with him every afternoon too, not only at night. There’s so many things I wish to talk to him about. Once this battle is over... Wait!*

“Hakurei?”

“Lady Hakurei?”

I shook my head rapidly as I came back to the present. Father and Asaka were giving me strange looks while Miss Shizuka smiled at me. *I must be more tired than I thought. I have to forget about all that right now. And I’m going to ignore the way Ou Meirin hummed at me just now!* I looked over at my father as a signal for him to continue speaking.

“Then, let’s make our move,” he said, pressing his hand against his chest. “Hakurei, I must inform the grand chancellor of what was in Sekiei’s letter. We’ll meet later! Asaka, I know you must be exhausted and I apologize, but accompany Hakurei for me. Lady Meirin, I leave the ships to you.”

“Yes, father.”

“Please leave everything to me!”

“Understood, sir.”

After hearing our responses, he turned and walked back towards the manor. Halfway there, however, he stopped and said, “Ah, that reminds me.” Turning around he gave me a wide smile, his eyes warm with affection. “Good job on making the trip from Keiyou in a mere five days! Don’t fret. We won’t abandon Sekiei. He’s my son, no matter what people say.”

“Father!” Tears almost brimmed in my eyes as emotion overwhelmed me. Had I fulfilled a measure of my duties as Chou Tairan’s daughter? The weight on my chest lessened slightly at the praise. I watched father disappear into the house before I turned to Ou Meirin. She was fiddling with her hair, wrapping locks of it around her finger. “Just what are you planning?”

“I was telling you the whole truth, you know? Or were *you* not being honest

with *me*?”

I didn't reply. She spoke in such a calm voice, with no frills or embellishments. It didn't seem like she was lying. *So then that means she actually wants Sekiei?*

“Oh, that reminds me.”

“Hmm?” I watched as Ou Meirin returned to the table, picking up a long, thin cloth bag. She opened it up and took something out. “What's that?”

She placed upon the round table two swords. A pure white scabbard hid away the blade of one sword while an obsidian black scabbard held the other. The intricate design on the hilts looked like a large tree underneath a star. It looked like a picture that Sekiei drew me once when we were children.

Ou Meirin sat down in her chair and poured herself a cup of tea. “These are the swords that Kou Eihou used before he passed them down to Ou Eifuu. They're the Heavenly Swords, the swords that unified the land.”

“What?!” It was the only word I could manage to choke out. Unbelievable! In the thousand years since the great hero himself swung these swords, countless emperors had scoured the land for these weapons, desperate to get their hands on them. *These are the Heavenly Swords? The real ones? How did she find them?* I stared in disbelief at what she had just taken out as she took a sip of her drink.

“They were incredibly difficult to track down. I really, truly, spent a great amount of time and effort finding them. I studied all of the books I could get my hands on and traced Ou Eifuu's steps, since he was the last one to possess them. I even had to bow my head to ask a suspicious self-professed ascendant soothsayer from Seitou to get information until finally, I discovered these swords in an abandoned temple just outside the western regions! Apparently, Ou Eifuu spent his final years there. Hee hee, I've never lost a game before, you know? ♪ Please hand these swords to Lord Sekiei and remind him to keep his promise. ★”

I started to get a bad feeling about what she was saying. I thought back to what I saw the last time I visited the Ou family and said, “Didn't you lose to him in a tea-tasting contest?”

The moment I asked her, clear panic appeared on the girl's face and she waved her hands frantically. "I was just playing around. Y-Yes, that's right, I never lose. Lord Sekiei is a little different, that's all!"

When she acted like this, she looked every bit like a harmless little girl. If only she could act like this all the time. "I agree with your assessment that he's 'a little different.' So, are these swords usable?"

"Um, I don't know."

"Are you serious?" There was no point in wielding a useless sword. If Sekiei was here, he'd agree with me.

Ou Meirin looked away and said in a rush, "I-I wanted to check out the blades too, you know? If the legends are accurate then these were made a thousand years ago. According to that self-professed ascendant, the weapons and the scabbards were both created during the age of the gods—the problem is that I can't draw them from their sheaths!"

"You can't draw them?" I stared down at the twin swords. They were so beautiful, and without a single hint of rust on them it was hard to believe they'd been crafted over a millennium ago. However... Just to make sure Ou Meirin wasn't lying, I looked over at Miss Shizuka behind her. The moment our eyes met, she gave a slight nod. *Looks like it's the truth.*

Ou Meirin shook her head and slumped her shoulders. "In any case, I couldn't find anyone who could unsheathe them. Legend has it that the only people who were able to draw the Heavenly Swords were the Twin Stars, Kou Eihou and Ou Eifuu."

"I see." I placed the swords back into the cloth bag and said, "I swear that I will deliver these swords to Sekiei. I promise."

Ou Meirin gave me a suspicious look and said slowly, "Are you sure about that? I'm sure you've figured it out by now that if you give those swords to him, then Lord Sekiei and I will—"

"This is an emergency. Since you're the one who possesses the ships to return father and his men to Keiyou..." *My personal feelings on the matter have no place in this discussion.* That was what I wanted to say, but the words caught in

my throat. It must have been due to exhaustion. Nothing else.

The girl stared at me for a moment longer before she winked. “Hmm, well, all right then. I’ll be the winner between us anyway. Now then, we still have plenty of time before the boat is ready to depart, so why don’t you go take a bath, eat, and sleep a little? You’ll be of no use to anyone if you’re tired, Lady Chou Hakurei.”

“I see, so once again that Chou brat has thwarted my plans.”

“Yes. I apologize, General Nguyen.”

To the west of Keiyou was the main camp of the besiegement team. Ten days had passed since we started to attack the walls of the impenetrable citadel. My men were likely all dead asleep in an attempt to recover even a little after their exhausting day.

The young strategist who was reporting the situation to me and my generals trembled as he continued. “That man... Chou Sekiei is inhuman. No matter where we are and no matter what time of day it is, he appears, swinging his sword and shooting his arrows. As per your orders the captains take command behind shields during the day and avoid torches at night. However, even with all these precautions, there are many casualties. The men are spreading rumors that Chou Sekiei is the reincarnation of the Undefeated Kou.”

“A tiger’s cub is still a tiger. If I were an ordinary soldier, I might wonder the same thing. To think that our spies were able to grasp details on Keiyou’s manpower and positions before we launched our attack, and yet we’re still unable to take the city...” I stared down at my left arm. The arrow wound from the other day had almost completely healed.

Chou Sekiei was only one man. Yet he alone was able to boost our enemies’ morale while lowering ours. *If only I hadn’t suffered such a disgraceful injury during our first battle!* I listened to the sound of the kindling crackle in the fire; it was early summer, but the nights were still cold. Biting back my anger at the Chou brat, I turned to the strategist. “What does the damage look like on our side?”

“Fortunately, we’ve not lost that many soldiers. However, there is an unusual number of wounded. We’re running out of medicine and bandages. They’ve also taken the men we sent to prepare for an evacuation.”

“Tsk, that cursed brat! This is his plan to buy himself time?” In a fit of rage, I knocked all of the pawns off of the tactical map. Under normal circumstances we would’ve long taken Keiyou by now. However, ever since our duel on the first day, the enemy had closed the gates and—despite the clear difference in forces—resisted our every attempt with a fearsome level of passion. *If we don’t change our tactics soon, then...* I looked down at the letter in my hand and felt my face twist.

There was fear in the strategist’s exhausted eyes. He must not have been able to get much rest. “What did His Imperial Majesty say?” he asked in a hushed voice.

I pressed my fingers against the bridge of my nose and tossed the letter onto the table. “‘Leave a defending force at Keiyou and use your army to charge the southern bank of the great river.’ The rest of the letter contains words of encouragement and praise.”

The generals and the strategist fell silent, their faces severe. The emperor’s judgment was sound and they were all well aware of that. Even if we failed to take Keiyou, we had Seitou now, which meant that we’d gained infiltration routes from both the north and the west. We had a strategic advantage over Ei. Three years ago, my friend and I approached the emperor with a plan: *“Get the army through the Nanamagari Mountains and the great forest, force Seitou to submit in one strike, and then attack Keiyou.”* Emperor Adai had accepted the plan and it was thanks to him doing so that we had gotten to this point.

But the enemy has fewer than three thousand soldiers. We have over thirty thousand! If we can’t even take down a single city on our own, then my—our—reputation as soldiers would be dragged through the mud. How could I bear such humiliation? What would I tell the families of the soldiers who’d lost their lives on this expedition? I could see determination on everyone’s faces; it seemed that they shared my opinion.

My lieutenant general, the lower half of his face hidden away behind the

mask of a demon, spoke up. “What shall we do? Should we launch a full-scale attack without worrying about possible casualties?”

“No.” I shook my head and gazed down at the fire. In order to defeat the Chou brat with my own hands, I’d not been giving the emperor regular updates on the situation. I *had* to win. “Keiyou’s walls are tougher than what the intel suggested and our enemies’ morale is high. We will not be able to take the city with our usual siege weapons. We do not have enough time to starve them out and we will surely lose His Imperial Majesty’s favor if we lose any more men.”

I looked around at my subordinates. We’d survived the trip through the great forest and the Nanamagari Mountains together. They were akin to my family. I could not drag their names down with my own bullheadedness. I had to make a decision, even if I was reluctant to do so.

“We will use *that*. Make sure the shock troops are wearing heavy armor and helmets. This is an order.”

All of the subordinates fell silent and looked down at the ground. We were all well aware of just how powerful the new Seitou weapon was. Our usual leather wouldn’t be enough to protect ourselves and so we’d been training to fight in metal armor, which was far better at shielding us. However, we were the Crimson Knights. Our true power had always come from our cavalymen, who would charge into battle and emerge victorious within minutes. This was how we had defeated all of our enemies—even those more powerful than us.

Would it tarnish our honor to use a new foreign weapon and clad ourselves in such heavy armor? I didn’t allow myself to dwell any further on that question. Instead, I slammed my hand on the table and spoke through gritted teeth. “We *must* win. It is far better to resort to tactics that we may disapprove of as warriors than it is to lose. Chou Tairan may be stuck in the capital, but we risk him returning if we spend too long here. We will take Keiyou tomorrow morning! We will put Chou Sekiei’s head on a stake and murder everyone in the city except for Chou Tairan’s daughter!”

“Yessir!” With that, my subordinates filed out of my tent.

Now that I was alone, I looked over at my suit of crimson armor. Shadows from the flames danced over its metallic surface. “It’s true that even a tiger’s

cub is a tiger, but even so, he is far too strong. Just who is he?"

No one was present to answer. The only sound I heard was that of the final remnants of kindling crumbling away in the fire.

On the morning of the tenth day since the siege began, the ground shook as a sound like the world was ending rang through the air. I had been asleep in the Chou manor in the northern district of Keiyou when it happened. Leaping out of bed, I grabbed my sword from next to my pillow just as the sound thundered once again. In both my past life and my current one, I'd never heard anything quite like this before. The ground shook again and I could hear screams and yells accompanying it. A bell tolled through the city, warning people of the emergency. As it did I had an incredibly bad feeling, as if I'd lost a part of my body.

"Don't tell me..." I started to murmur when Teiha, his face drenched with sweat, ran into the room.

"L-Lord Sekiei, the west gate...the west gate has been breached! We're doing our best to engage with the enemy, but they're armed with giant shields and are wearing armor made of metal. We can't stop them!"

The breath caught in my throat for a moment before I let it out in a sharp sigh. "Now I get it."

It had been a hopeless battle from the start. The Crimson Knights weren't the best when it came to besiegement and we had been able to hold out for this long thanks to all my soldiers' hard work, but we were at our limit. Three more times, the sound of destruction shook the room and from the window I could see what looked like a bright red ball fly through the air before disappearing.

I racked my brain, thinking back on the foggy memories of my past life, the various books I'd read in the capital, and the conversations I'd had with Meirin. If I had to guess based on the unusually loud sound and that round ball, the enemy was probably using something like an immense catapult.

It must be a new weapon that Seitou was developing in secret! I attached my sword to my belt and started to take off the armor I'd been sleeping in. I had to

make sure I could move as fast as possible, with absolutely nothing weighing me down.

I looked over at Teiha, who was covered in blood and dirt, and barked, “Gather as many soldiers as you can and evacuate with the remaining citizens from the southern gate. I’ll have the troops stationed at the west gate follow you in a bit.”

“Wha—?! Lord Sekiei, what do you plan to do?!”

I grabbed a bow and shouldered a quiver. Out of the corner of my eye, the ribbon around the hilt of my sword flashed crimson and the memory of Hakurei’s teary face flashed through my mind. *She’ll probably get mad at me.* I closed my eyes for a moment. “The Chou family has always been at the very front of the charge and at the very rear of a retreat. Now go! Stop wasting time!”

“Y-Yessir!” Sensing my determination, Teiha slammed his fist against his chest.

I placed my hand on his shoulder and then started to make my way down the hall. The sound of the enemy’s attacks and the shaking of the ground didn’t let up.

“Lord Sekiei, I pray for your success!”

My only response to Teiha’s pained cry from behind me was to raise my hand in acknowledgment.

I managed to find the black horse from the first day of the invasion and rode it through the city. Every time I found a shaken soldier, I ordered them to go to the southern gate before speeding on. There was a crimson shadow sticking out from a nearby building. Fire spread through the city and the sound of destruction continued to roar through the air.

Using one hand to block the dust falling down on me, I muttered, “This is insane.”

The buildings I’d grown up with were crumbled to the ground and the trees were smashed into splinters—every time one of the burning metal balls landed in Keiyou, it spread fire through the city. I managed to make my way to the west

gate, however, avoiding the obstacles and flames. The massive and sturdy barrier that had protected us from so many enemy onslaughts had a giant hole and enemy foot soldiers were pouring in from it. All of them were clad in heavy red armor. It looked like they'd given up on any pretenses.

My allies, covered in blood, noticed me and called out:

"Young master!"

"Lord Sekiei!"

"The gate! The enemies!"

I took the bow from where it had been slung over my back, nocked an arrow, and released it. It landed true—right in the forehead of an enemy cavalryman giving orders at the front of the invasion. All of the soldiers, friend and foe alike, murmured in shock and I raised my voice to be heard above them.

"Everyone who can move, retreat to the south gate and listen to Teiha's commands! I'll hold up the rear!" The Keiyou soldiers looked surprised and stared up at me. I shot arrows as fast as I could, aiming at the gaps between the shields where the commanders were hiding. "Save your protests. You've all fought well, and I've written down everyone's exploits in my records. Don't worry about that. Now go!"

"Yessir!" All of them—veterans, greenhorns, volunteers—had tears pouring from their eyes as they, slowly but steadily, started to retreat. With every step they took, they fought back against the Gen invaders.

One of the Gen cavalymen, his body clad in metal armor, heard my yell and pointed the tip of his spear at me. "Chou Sekiei!"

Fear and anxiety ran through the enemies at my name. It looked like I'd become quite famous over the past few days. *That reminds me. My first battle in my past life was a siege too.*

A middle-aged man wearing an elaborate red helmet—seemed like he was a commander—pointed his sword at me and bellowed, "Kill him! Whoever can manage that shall be awarded the highest honor from this battle!"

"Sorry but—" I drew back the bowstring as far as it could go and then

released it. The moment I did so, the string snapped. As for that final arrow...

“Gah!”

Ignoring the commander’s armor, it pierced right through his heart and he fell from his horse, dead. I threw both bow and quiver to the ground and spared a cold look down at his corpse.

“I don’t have time to deal with you. Now then.” I drew my sword and glared at the enemy soldiers, who were staring, mouths agape, at the cooling body of their commander. “Whoever wants to die first, bring it!”

The enemy soldiers, shaken, backed off. There was no formation for them to uphold anymore. *This is my chance.* I kicked my horse into a gallop and chased the enemies out of the gate. One of the commanders, recognizable from his circular helmet, stood nearby swinging his swagger stick in a desperate attempt at maintaining some form of order over his soldiers. My horse, sensing what I wanted to do, picked up speed, getting closer and closer to the commander.

“What are you maggots doing?!” he was bellowing. “Go back inside! Go back and fight! We’ve already destroyed the gate! All that’s left is to besiege it and —!”

As I raced past I beheaded him before he could even react, just a flash of my sword. “That’s the second commander down!” I said as I swung my weapon, flicking the blood from the blade. “Now Nguyen should be—”

But before I could begin to look around for their leader, a bald general wielding a poleax charged at me, roaring the entire way. I barely managed to block his heavy strike and back away.

“Chou Sekiei!” he yelled. “I shall have your head!”

They’re quick to recover morale. I was alone. If the enemies surrounded me, I’d be dead. I needed to last long enough for my allies at the southern gate to make their escape, but the only way I’d be able to do that was if I reached and killed Nguyen.

I didn’t have any more time to think. The enemy commander galloped towards me, his poleax slicing through the air with a swoosh. I managed to avoid it, but only barely.

“What’s wrong?!” he taunted. “Is this all you’ve got?!”

I ignored him and narrowed my eyes at the enemy formation. *There he is.* I could see atop a small hill a war flag, bigger than the other ones, with the image of a red wolf upon it. Surely, that must be where Nguyen was!

“Die!” the commander screamed.

“Shut *up*! You’re in my way!” Before he could bring his large poleax down at me, I swung my sword several times, aiming at the minute openings in his armor.

“I-Impossible!” he choked, his eyes wide open as blood dribbled from his mouth. “You monster...” With those final words, he fell from his horse. The enemy soldiers who were in the middle of joining the fray froze upon seeing his death, fear in their eyes and the spears in their hands trembling.

“That makes three,” I murmured. Taking advantage of the confusion, I rode my mount through the battlefield until I saw a massive wooden structure. It looked like some sort of beast with four ivory tusks protruding from it. “I knew it. It’s a catapult from Seitou. They’re already providing Gen with their weapons?!”

The enemy soldiers who invaded the city earlier were all wearing metal armor, which wasn’t something Gen was known for. Adai Dada, the emperor of Gen and the White Wraith, was certainly a fearsome foe. Even if his weapons were of foreign make, he’d gladly use them in war if it would give him an advantage.

“Shoot him! Take him down! Don’t let him get anywhere near General Nguyen!” a young commander cried, waving his swagger stick as he asserted command over the terrified soldiers. As if to make up for the string of good fortune I’d experienced thus far, a countless barrage of arrows rained down on me.

“Tsk!” I held up my sword and deflected them before charging into the enemy troops. The archers, fearful of hitting their own, stopped shooting, and I pulled on my reins to stop my mount.

An enemy was blocking my path. He wore a demonic mask that covered the

bottom half of his face and even his horse wore red leather armor. There was an ancient-looking broadsword in his hand.

“I didn’t expect you to come this far on your own,” he said. “Combined with how you shot my sworn brother in the arm at the start of the invasion, I can see why the soldiers rumor you to be the reincarnation of the Undefeated Kou. However!” When he galloped past me, he swung his sword and I dodged the formidable blow. He ended up hitting a steel shield that had been abandoned on the ground, splitting it in two. If I had chosen to parry his attack instead, my sword surely would’ve been sliced in half. His horse was a fast one, closing in on mine. “I will not let you get anywhere close to General Nguyen! We are the Crimson Knights, led by the Crimson Wolf! We’ve killed countless young tigers, and today will be no different!”

I could hear my horse’s labored breathing and could feel it slowing down. *I have no choice.* With my mind made up, I spun around and faced him head-on.

“Chou Sekiei, prepare yourself!” He roared the words, holding his sword high above his head before swinging it down. But then— “Ah?! I-Impossibly fast... C-Could you really be...?”

“Lieutenant general!”

My blade flashed like a strike of lightning, slicing clean through his right arm. Limb and broadsword flew through the air as the enemy general, eyes and mouth wide, fell off his horse, unable to bear the agony. The young commander screamed and panic once again took hold of the enemy formations.

“Four down!” My sword was covered in blood and the blade was heavily chipped. I gave it a look before I raced up the hill, weaving through the Gen soldiers. They barely put up a fight; the chain of command had been thrown into chaos after losing so many commanders in such a short amount of time. My horse collapsed the moment I reached the top of the hill. I leaped off and ran my hand gently down its neck. “Thank you. Don’t die, all right?”

I stood, turning to look at the enemy leader. He was wearing armor and helmet, both of metal and dyed deep vermilion, and I could see a scar on his left cheek. The large halberd in his hand glowed like the half-moon in the night sky. Nguyen’s lips twisted in a grin and when he spoke, it was in a deep growl.

“I was waiting for you, tiger cub.”

I swung my sword to clear the blood off of it and held it in a ready stance. The enemy soldiers were gathered around us in formation, cutting off my escape route. Nguyen spun his halberd in one hand, standing as if the weight of the armor meant nothing to him.

“You’ve killed many of my men,” he commented.

“Sorry about that,” I replied.

Our voices were calm. Through the stench of blood thick in the air, I could smell something faint—the scent of fresh dirt. *Impossible. It’s far too early for them to arrive.* I didn’t realize just how much I had been anticipating Hakurei’s arrival until that moment.

Nguyen shook his head, a pained expression on his face. “This is all because of my hesitation. If all I wanted to do was kill you...” He pointed at the colossal catapult with his halberd. Behind it were several refined metal balls. “Then I would’ve used that vile weapon from the start to destroy everything in your city. The reason I didn’t was because I underestimated your strength and obsessed over a conclusion to our duel. Thanks to my foolishness, I killed my soldiers. How could I ever face them?!” Emotion burned in the depths of Nguyen’s eyes as he slowly held his halberd in both hands. “But enough. I will hesitate no more. Chou Sekiei, I will kill you and put an end to this!”

“To battle!” we yelled as one.

It took us no time at all to rush forward, our weapons screeching as we swung them against each other. Sparks flew with each strike. My body felt heavy; this was not my first battle of the day. With every blow, I could feel myself backing down. Nguyen’s attacks were swift and true, and I was unable to dodge them all. Blood spurted from my arms and torso, slowing me down even further.

“What’s the matter?!” he yelled. “Your movements are easy to read! Is this your full strength?!”

My sword was screaming, the blade at its limit. My blood stained the scabbard, dirtying Hakurei’s ribbon. Nguyen raised his voice in a bestial roar and swung his halberd in a horizontal slash. I dodged under it and then thrust

forward with my sword, aiming right for the small opening between the plates of armor.

“Gah!” I felt a horrible sensation in my arm as the scream of metal rang through the air.

“Too bad.”

Nguyen had twisted his body at the last second and deflected my sword with the metal plating around his torso. Unable to handle my strength or the armor’s, my sword had snapped in half. I was carried forward by my momentum, but Nguyen slammed the shaft of his halberd down on my back, striking me to the ground. Agony shot through my body. A second later, the broken blade fell to the ground. I tried to push myself up, but a sharp pain stopped me. My left arm was broken.

“This is where you’ll die!” the Crimson Wolf crowed as he pointed the halberd in my face.

I said nothing as I gripped onto the hilt of my dagger with my right hand. The scent of fresh dirt, carried upon the southern wind, was drawing closer.

Nguyen narrowed his eyes, but when he next spoke there was genuine praise in his voice. “Chou Sekiei, you were truly a man to be feared. Perhaps—no, surely, given a few more years, you would have surpassed Chou Tairan as our greatest foe. Your claws and fangs might have reached Emperor Adai as well.”

I still didn’t reply. I could hear the faint sound of racing horses. Not one or two, but a hundred. Maybe even more. The southern wind blew stronger.

Nguyen swung the halberd above his head, the weapon cutting through the air with an audible sound. “That’s precisely why I’ll kill you here. You are far too dangerous! If you live, you’ll kill many of our men. But I will show you some mercy—I will soon send your sister to hell with you.”

I stood up and wiped the blood off from my hand. “Ha! Well, aren’t you a gentleman, Crimson Wolf?”

“What are you talking ab—?” Nguyen started to say, a suspicious look in his eye, before he paused. “Hmm?”

Suddenly, the sound of bells rang through the battlefield. And then, from behind a southern hill, countless cavalymen started to charge into the enemy lines. I could see the character emblazoned upon the war flags billowing through the air: *Chou*. They were all the elite members of the Chou army that had accompanied father to Rinkei!

Nguyen looked around and gritted his teeth. “I-Impossible... He’s already returned from Rinkei? That’s far too early, even for Chou Tairan! According to the scouts, he—”

Part of the enemy formation fell apart, horses whinnying as they ran. The shields that they’d been using to deflect our arrows flew through the air. I clenched my right hand into a fist to see how much strength I had left and then grinned. “You wanted to know what I was talking about, right? I was talking about how I was going to defeat you, Crimson Wolf Nguyen. Hakurei!”

“Understood!”

“Huh?!”

Hakurei, on Getsuei’s back, rode straight up the hill and broke clean through the enemy lines. She was dressed only in light armor—likely so that she didn’t slow down her mount. Without any hesitation she aimed an arrow at Nguyen and let it fly. She must’ve had the same idea as I did.

“Don’t underestimate me!” Nguyen roared, a fat vein throbbing on his forehead as he slashed the arrow out of the air. Her sudden attack had taken him off guard, but he wasn’t the Crimson Wolf for nothing. The Ei cavalry was slicing through the Gen troops, cutting them down one by one. Nguyen’s eyes widened and his entire body trembled with rage as he bellowed, “Just what kind of sorcery did you use?!”

“It wasn’t magic. It was technology,” Hakurei replied as she halted Getsuei next to me and then hopped off its back. She handed me a long cloth bag before drawing her bow. “That’s from the Ou girl!” she told me as she shot several consecutive arrows at Nguyen, forcing him to stay where he was.

“From Meirin?” I replied, mystified. I was about to open it up before I stopped and said, “Sorry, Hakurei. I can’t move my left hand.”

Hakurei didn't reply, but I could hear her breath catch in her throat and pain slid across her face, but only for a brief moment. After letting loose yet another arrow she undid the string keeping the bag tied up in one quick motion. I inhaled sharply the moment I saw what was inside. It was a pair of swords—one white, one black. They were my precious Heavenly Swords, which I had entrusted to my old friend.

I was shocked, but I took up the black sword—Black Star—and called out, "Hakurei!"

"What?" The second she met my eyes, she knew what I wanted from her. "Leave it to me!" She tossed aside her bow and grabbed the white sword—White Star.



Nguyen, face crimson with fury, roared, "You bastards! You and your clever tricks!"

I tightened my grip on my beloved sword's hilt, relishing in the familiar sensation. There was a hint of anxiety on Hakurei's face, so I called out to her, "Hakurei, don't worry."

"Of course."

We nodded at each other and then turned to face Nguyen. Without unsheathing the swords, we charged in a pincer formation.

He spun his massive halberd above his head and yelled, "Foolish! Did you think that if you two worked together, you could defeat me?! Die!"

"Hakurei!"

"Sekiei!"

As Nguyen swung his halberd with all his strength, we both yelled, ducking at the last second and letting the blade sail over our heads. Our swords were unsheathed in a single movement! White intersected with black as we slashed out, cutting through the metal armor straight to the Wolf's flesh underneath.

Blood poured from his mouth and the halberd fell to the ground, its tip stabbing into the dirt. His helmet tumbled from his head and I could see his eyes were wide with surprise. "Swords of black and white that can cut through steel... I-Impossible... The Heavenly Swo..." In the next moment, Gen's Crimson Wolf collapsed onto the ground.

With the last of my strength, I raised my voice and roared, "Chou Hakurei and Chou Sekiei have killed the enemy general, the Crimson Wolf!"

Cheers, sobs, and screams filled the air. The enemy lines were in complete disarray and the soldiers threw their flags onto the ground. Most of them ran for the north. They should have headed for the west if they wanted to avoid Raigen capturing them, but the enemy no longer had a commander capable of such rational decisions. I almost pitied them.

Somehow I managed to return my sword to its sheath and then I lowered myself down onto the ground with a slow exhale. I hadn't noticed the approach,

but I found myself surrounded by a small mob of ally cavalrymen, protecting Hakurei and me from any attack. I recognized the combination of admiration and fear in their eyes. *This might be a problem in the future.* “Hmm?”

Sensing something odd, I turned towards the hill in the north, narrowing my eyes to try and get a better look. I thought I felt someone’s gaze on me, but maybe it was just a trick of my mind. Hakurei finished barking out orders and returned her own sword to its sheath. She turned to Getsuei and took a bamboo bottle from the pack tied around its saddle; the moment she splashed water from it onto my left arm, white-hot pain shot through my body.

“Don’t move,” she said as I twisted my face and bit back a scream. “Is there anything you’d like to say?”

“You returned sooner than I expected,” I managed to force out through the lancing agony. “How’d you do it?”

No matter how fast your horse was, it would take at least seven days to travel from Rinkei to Keiyou. You could, of course, take a sailboat and travel via the Grand Canal—but not with the current strong northern wind.

Hakurei sat down next to me, clear dissatisfaction on her face. “That’s not it. Now, try again.”

I scratched my cheek for a moment and then lowered my head without a fight. “Th-Thanks. You saved us.”

“Good.”

Hakurei nodded, happy with my answer, and wrapped a piece of cloth tight around my left arm. Blood soaked through the fabric immediately. I could hear our allies’ triumphant cheers from the base of the hill.

“We won, huh?” I murmured.

Hakurei didn’t reply for a moment, busy wiping the dirt from my face—but then she smiled, looking truly happy. “Yes, we did. Mister Freeloader, you were the one who guided us to victory, you know? And you still wish to become a civil official?”

“I’m not really the hero type. I’ll let you and father take all the credit and—

whoa!” Getsuei licked my cheek and nickered, sounding like it was scolding me. I sighed and shook my head in theatrical disappointment. “You’re not gonna let it slide either? Don’t I have any allies here?!”

“Dummy. You have an ally right in front of you. Most people are your enemy, though, yes. Here you go. I’ll return it to you while I remember.” Hakurei handed White Star to me, still in its sheath. I was about to answer when—

“Huh?” I fell forward, leaning my weight onto Hakurei. *Shoot... I’m losing consciousness...*

“Whoa! Wh-What are you doing?! I need some time to prepare myself, so you should tell me in advance when you... Sekiei? Sekiei! Someone, please help! Sekiei’s—!”

Ahh, I’m fine, all right? So stop...crying so much...

I lost consciousness with the panicked screams of my childhood friend echoing in my ears.

Epilogue

“Hey, can you tell me why I can’t give Eifuu one of my swords? I don’t mind Black Star being the only sword I wield.”

“Huh? Oh, Eihou. You didn’t know?”

I knew that I was dreaming of the past—and it was one nostalgic memory. It was a dream of when the Tou Empire still had power and I was visiting the first emperor. He had fallen sick and so I went to pay him a visit; we were deep in the depths of the palace, where the emperor’s bedroom was.

My friend, his face pale and drawn, smiled, though it wasn’t a happy expression. *“Eifuu’s always been jealous of you, you know? Jealous that he had his first battle after you did, and of both your popularity with the soldiers and your accomplishments on the battlefield. He doesn’t even realize that he has no reason to feel that way. That’s why no matter what happens, you’re the only person Eifuu will never bow his head down to. As long as he’s wrapped up in his envy, he’ll never be able to mature.”*

“Jealous of me?” I scrunched up my face as I brushed my fingers against the twin sheaths. On one hand, we had the imperial chancellor, who had power over the lands. On the other, we had a general who commanded the common folk. I couldn’t understand how Eifuu was the one racked with jealousy.

The emperor’s smile widened as he continued, *“Eihou, just be yourself. If Eifuu ever approaches you after I die and asks for your help with a bowed head, I hope you’ll extend a hand.”*

“I’ll help him even if he doesn’t bow his head. He’s an old friend of mine, after all.”

Pained laughter echoed in the bedroom as my companion nodded several times. *“That’s precisely why, my dear friend. You’ve always helped Eifuu and me, never stopping to weigh the pros and cons of doing so. The people may praise us and look down on you, but Kou Eihou, you’re a true hero. Those swords*

were said to have been forged by an all-knowing sage who despaired over the constant wars plaguing our lands, using metal from a star that fell during the age of the gods. You should be the one to have these swords, for—

“Ngh...” I woke up slowly. The room was dim, illuminated only by candlelight. From the round window, I could see the large moon hiding behind a veil of clouds. If I recalled, the battle had begun in the morning. I pushed myself up and looked around. “This is...”

It seemed that I was in my room in the Chou manor. Luckily, it had survived the destruction from the catapults. I was wearing light-blue sleeping clothes rather than my armor, and there was a thick layer of bandages around my left arm.

“Oh? You’re awake?”

“Hakurei.”

Hakurei, in pale blue night robes and with her long silver hair loose, walked in with a tray. The moment I tried to get out of bed, she snapped, “Don’t move!”

“All right...” Feeling a little sad from the sharp rebuke, I stopped and lay back down. My bow, the string still snapped, was leaning against a nearby wall, so someone must’ve picked it up for me. Hakurei placed her tray down on the round table at my bedside and then sat down. As soon as she settled, I asked, “How did the battle go?”

“A small portion of the Gen army fled for the west, but we chased the majority of them towards the river. I hear that the main forces, led by their emperor, had set up a camp on the northern shore, but they’ve retreated as well. Father has sent some scouts to Seitou to check on the situation there.”

“Got it.”

Even after the enemy lost Nguyen, father showed them no mercy—he had chased them all the way to the river and annihilated them there. Hakurei slowly began to unpeel a sticky rice dumpling—zongzi—from its leaves. It must have been freshly cooked; it looked delicious, with clouds of steam wafting from it. My stomach growled as I realized just how hungry I was.

Hakurei's expression softened and with a quiet chuckle, she handed me the zongzi. "Here you go. So you're feeling up for some food?"

"Yeah, I'm fi— Ow!" The moment I tried to reach for the zongzi, pain shot through my arm.

"Your arm's not broken," Hakurei said calmly. "However, you shouldn't move it until it heals. Here you go."

"Huh? Uh, Miss Hakurei?" I stared down at the zongzi held in front of my lips.

Hakurei's cheeks flushed pale pink as she spoke, the words quick. "You're hurt and father told me to take care of you. This is the only way we can get you to eat, isn't it? This is part of my duties in the military and I have no ulterior motives."

"Uh-huh..." My right hand could move without any issues, but oh well. It looked like I didn't have a choice in the matter. I leaned forward and took a bite out of the zongzi before giving my honest review: "It's good."

"I'm glad."

I continued to eat from Hakurei's hand, occasionally removing grains of rice from my mouth with my uninjured limb. "Ahh, that reminds me! Hey, how did you and father get back so soon? D-Don't tell me you really used some kind of magic or sorcery?!"

"Idiot. Of course not. Here, have some water."

I accepted the bamboo bottle and drained it in one swig. My dehydrated body practically wept in relief.

Hakurei busied herself with preparing a second zongzi as she revealed, "The Ou family allowed us to use their giant paddle wheeler fleet. I never knew that ships could move so fast; it was a little frightening."

"A giant paddle wheeler fleet?" I had never heard of that term before; I tilted my head to the side. Well, I knew what paddle wheelers were. They were boats with a wheel of sorts attached to the outside. Moving the wheel through man power would allow a boat to travel even when there wasn't any wind. I'd also heard that Meirin actually went and constructed one. However, what did

Hakurei mean by “giant” and “fleet”?

Though Hakurei’s fingers continued to deftly peel away the bamboo leaves covering the zongzi, she looked up at me with something like disbelief in her eyes. “I heard that *you* were the one who came up with the idea.”

“I did, but I never told her to go and make a giant one, let alone a whole fleet of them!”

Hakurei sat back down on the bed and leaned towards me. “I don’t want to hear your excuses. Can’t you keep your thoughts to yourself for once?”

“W-We were just having a conversation over tea. Our aunt happened to tell me about some foreign ships that were able to move without wind, so I brought it up. They say that there’s a fine line between genius and, uh, something else. But I guess the saying’s true.”

“I agree with the latter part of your statement,” Hakurei said with a nod, her expression still pinched. It looked like something had happened in the city between her and Meirin.

By the time I finished eating all the zongzi Hakurei had brought, a night breeze had started to blow in from the south. The full moon peeked its face out from behind the clouds. As I gazed up at it, I asked, “Are father and the others at the river?”

“They are.”

Adai might have lost Nguyen, but I doubted that he would give up on the invasion. We would likely start to see the massive catapults and heavy metal armor on the northern battlefield as well. We needed to prepare for anything that Seitou might pull. From the moment Seitou broke its neutrality and allowed the Gen army to pass through, they had become our enemy. This most recent battle had proved how much of a threat their technological advancements were—which meant that we *had* to find a way to deal with them.

The northern front was no longer the only one father had to contend with. Now not only would he also have to prepare troops in the west, but the Peacemaker Party was yet another threat we would have to face off against,

even if they were an internal one. Hopefully, they'd lay low after receiving news of our most recent victory. The only thing I could say for certain was that war had broken out again—a war that would result in the deaths of hundreds of people. And I had gotten involved in it.

Damn. This is why I wanted to become a civil official in some backwater village as soon as I could.

Hakurei peered into my face and reached out to brush her fingers along my cheek. “Father and the others had nothing but praise for you. They said that you’re the only reason Keiyou still stands.”

“Sure. That’s the opinion of the ones who made it.” I looked away and sighed. I hated war, and yet I was only ever good at fighting. If only I had been blessed with the talent necessary to command an army...

“Sekiei.”

Suddenly, Hakurei grabbed my right hand with both of hers and placed it against her chest. “Huh?!” I could hear her heartbeat under my palm. “H-Hey, what are you—”

“Please don’t blame yourself so much. You did your best. You did so well and I know you tried your hardest, no matter what anyone else says. So...” Fat tears welled up in her beautiful sapphire eyes, shimmering like stars.

An unbelievably soft emotion stirred in my chest. “Turn off the waterworks, crybaby Yukihiime,” I teased.

“I’m not crying.” Hakurei let go of my hand and stood up, wiping at her face with her sleeve. She held out a pure white sword—White Star—to me. “Here. I’ll give this back to you now.”

“O-Oh, thanks.” I accepted it, unable to turn it down. The weight was a nostalgic one and it fit right in my hand. That was when I noticed Hakurei staring at me, an anxious look in her eyes. “What is it?”

She turned away, her gaze drifting this way and that as she played with her bangs. Then, bizarrely, she asked, “So, what will you do?” I tilted my head; I didn’t understand what she wanted to know. When Hakurei spoke again, there was slight panic in her tone. “I-I mean, you made a promise with Meirin, didn’t

you? She found the Heavenly Swords, so what will you do?”

“Hmm. I don’t really plan on marrying anyone right now, so...” *How did she find the swords anyway? Also, did Hakurei call her by her name just now?* I thought for a moment as the image of the genius merchant girl’s triumphant smile danced through my head. “Oh, I know. We can just do this.”

“Wha—?”

I had just received White Star from Hakurei, but now I pushed it back towards her. She took it with both hands and blinked, looking as gobsmacked as I had a few minutes ago. “S-Sekiei, um...”

“As you can see, my left arm is injured and it’s not going to heal up anytime soon. Hold on to that sword for me. Maybe you’ll end up liking it as you use it,” I told her with a wink. *I’ve made mistake after mistake, whether in this life or my past one. This decision, at the very least, is the right one.* I grinned and waved my uninjured hand. “Black Star and White Star—together, they form the Heavenly Swords. But what I told her was that I’d consider marrying her if she found the Heavenly Swords and gave *them* to me.”

“That’s exactly the sort of excuse a swindler would come up with,” Hakurei scoffed, though she wasn’t able to contain the joy in her eyes as she looked up at me.

In any case, I’ll have to thank Meirin for her help. But that’s for another time. Right now I wanted to be absolutely sure of this loophole in my promise with her, even if I had to add in a lie or two. “Besides, the Heavenly Swords are from a thousand years ago. Who can prove that these are the real deal? The only person who could would be a reincarnation of one of the Twin Ei’s.”

Hakurei’s cheeks were a little red as she hugged White Star to her chest and smiled. “You’re such a cheat.”

Yeah, her smile is a lot cuter than her crying face.

She gently pushed me and I fell back down onto the bed. Before I could say or do anything, she placed the blankets over me and leaned in close. “Now, please get some rest.”

“Wait, I’m not sleepy yet. I was going to get *Book of Tou* and—”

“No.”

In the face of her terrifying pressure, I had no choice but to surrender. “All right.”

With no other option, I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep. I could hear Hakurei leave the room, tray in hand, and I could tell that she’d turned off the lights on her way out. She seemed absolutely determined for me to get some shut-eye.

I must’ve been more tired than I thought, though, because drowsiness set in immediately. I was on the edge between wakefulness and slumber when I heard a quiet voice call out to me.

“Sekiei.”

“Hmm?” I opened my eyes, but I couldn’t see anything except a silhouette.

After a long silence, the female voice asked something unexpected. “Would you like to take on the Chou surname?”

I thought about it. I would no longer be a freeloader of the Chou family and instead, I’d be properly and formally Chou Sekiei. To be honest, for the longest time, I’d never really thought about it, but now...

“Well, yeah.”

For a long while, there was no answer. *Did she leave the room?* I sat up in bed.

As if on cue, Hakurei’s calm voice rang out. “I see. I understand. I’ll keep that in mind.”

She didn’t sound any different from usual, but there seemed to be a hint—*just* a faint hint—of something gentle in her voice. Staring at her outline in the darkness, I said, “Hey, why did you ask me that?”

She giggled, the sound soft and refined. “You don’t have to worry about that; it’s for me to know. I’d like to ask you another question. You told me that everyone who watches your back dies. In that case...” The clouds parted, allowing the moonlight to breach my room and illuminate it. Hakurei, the most beautiful girl I knew, stood before me with her sword in her arms, staring down at me with her shining blue eyes. “I will not watch your back, nor will I walk by

your side. I will guide you by your hand, leading you from the front. That's all right, isn't it? You'll watch *my* back, won't you?"



I stared at her, tongue-tied. In both this life and my previous one I was considered a powerful individual, powerful enough that no one had ever said something like this straight to my face. *She's something else, all right.* My lips twisted in a smile as I dipped my head in an imperceptibly small yet clear nod.

As soon as I did, she smiled in delight and spun around with a dancer's grace. "Good night, Sekiei."

"Good night, Hakurei."

This time, she really left; I could sense her walking away. I settled back down on the mattress and looked out the window. In the north sky, the twin stars that were supposed to have vanished twinkled by the moon. *New stars?*

"Ah, I get it."

It looked like the times had once again provided a reason for the Heavenly Swords to exist. *I'll protect everything until the end this time.* I closed my eyes and finally allowed sweet slumber to carry my consciousness away.

"So it's true? Nguyen was killed?"

It was midnight; earlier in the day the main forces of the Gen Empire's army had been forced to make a retreat after failing to take Keiyou. In the cabin of the empire's flagship, I, Emperor Adai Dada, looked up from the detailed report of my army's defeat. I could hear my question still echoing in the room.

Since my most trusted advisors were all resting, the only person in the room apart from myself was one of my spies. They were leaning near the window, dressed in a raggedy coat. They had a slight frame and, with a fox mask over their face, it was impossible to tell their gender.

"Yes. Even if it was from a distance, I saw it with my own eyes," they replied in a courteous tone. "The Chou army killed many of the Crimson Knights' officers and the few survivors escaped to Seitou."

Just before the previous emperor died he had handed me the reins to the Senko, a spy organization cloaked in shadows. They were apparently capable of bizarre techniques and had supported Gen in matters of espionage since the

early days of the empire. I didn't know the details of that history; I'd only met Senko's leader once, right after I ascended the throne.

"Does our true identity matter that much? We'll lend you our strength if you focus on unifying the lands—and only that. It's a fair deal, isn't it, Imperial Chancellor Ou Eifuu?" he'd said.

He was right. My goal in this life was the same as what it had been in my previous one. I had to unify the lands! I had to accomplish it and make sure it stuck, for that was the dream that my fallen friends entrusted to me. In my previous life the empire that I'd helped to create had only lasted for fifty years after my retirement. I would not repeat that foolishness in this life.

I twirled my white hair around a finger so slender one could mistake it for a girl's. "I still can't believe it," I murmured. "We had ten times as many troops as Keiyou did and they were able to fight us off? So, which one of them killed Nguyen?"

The Crimson Wolf had been a fierce fighter; there was no doubt about that. He might have struggled in an open battle against Chou Tairan, but he wasn't the type to die a disgraceful death. He wouldn't have gotten killed on the battlefield.

There was something like bewilderment in the spy's voice as they replied, "Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei."

The southern wind blew in through the window and the candle flame flickered. I made no effort to conceal my confusion as I asked, "I know he has a daughter, but when did he get a son? Nguyen's report made no mention of him."

"They're not related by blood, apparently. If the rumors among the soldiers are correct, then they're both sixteen years old."

"Hmm."

A boy and a girl of sixteen managed to defeat the Crimson Wolf? Sure, they had worked together, but it was still an incredible feat. It reminded me of a similar feat that my previous life's best friend had accomplished—the first time Eihou killed a famous officer, it too had been during his first battle. He had been

only fifteen years old at the time. The Senko were the best when it came to intelligence gathering, however, so as much as I didn't want to believe it, this was probably the indisputable truth.

I never thought that Nguyen would die on the battlefield. I fell silent as I grieved at the loss of my loyal subject. The Senko spy glanced at me and then, agile as a cat, leaped to balance on the sill of the window.

"I've concluded my business here. Your Imperial Highness, do not forget your duty. We've already waited a thousand years for this. You *must* unify the lands before the arrival of the northern storm."

"I know. It'll be trouble if they organize themselves. Ah, that reminds me. How goes the search for the Heavenly Swords?"

"No progress to report. We didn't find anything resembling them in the temple you mentioned." There was a slight bitterness to the reply the Senko spy gave before they disappeared into the night.

Left alone in the cabin, I looked at the vase on my desk. Inside it was a sprig of peach blossoms, plucked from the ancient tree in Routou. *"Impossible." Kou Eihou's dead. It's unthinkable that he managed to attain a second chance at life like I did...* "No, I should look further into it. The Crimson Wolf died and I'm forced to put a hold on my ambitions. It's crucial for the empire that I investigate the boy and girl who managed that."

No one except the night air heard my murmuring. From the window I could see the twin stars, those stars that were supposed to have fallen on that fateful day a thousand years ago, sparkling in the northern sky.

Afterword

I'd like to greet all of my first-time readers, as well as reintroduce myself to familiar ones. I'm Riku Nanano. I debuted at the tail end of 2018 with *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter*, but I still can't stop thinking of myself as a new author. I'm a writer with a clover mark. (My sprout mark got taken away from me.) It's very nice to meet you.

Let's talk about the contents of the book. My hobbies are reading and writing. In other words, I'm like the classic image of someone with no hobbies. The story for this book is a plot that I've thought of for a while now, but never talked about in public. To tell the truth I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about whether or not the idea works as a story.

The reason I was worried about it is because there are so many stories being published every month, but none of them are a pure Chinese-style fantasy story about swords. Granted, some do exist, but they're modeled after *Records of the Three Kingdoms*...

Well, all that worry was for nothing.

Once I started writing, Sekiei turned out to be a cool hero and Hakurei turned out to be a cute-heroine-slash-dependable-partner. I'm also really enjoying the antagonists. Sword and sorcery fantasy stories are good, but how did you like this kind of fantasy?

Now, it's time for some advertising. Volume 13 of *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter* comes out on the same day, so to readers who picked up *Heavenly Swords*, I hope you'll also give that a try. Cura is the illustrator for that series as well.

I'd like to thank everyone who helped me on this journey. To my editor: I did it! I'll do my best with the second volume as well. To Cura, I'd like to thank you for taking on the illustrations for this series on top of *Duke's Daughter*. I really liked seeing your art of Sekiei, Hakurei, and Meirin!

I'd like to thank Yu Shizumi, Tarou Hitsuji, and Myojin Katou for taking time out of your busy schedules to write recommendation letters for me; it was my first time ever having someone write a recommendation letter for me. So even at this point in time, when I'm writing the afterword, I'm really nervous. There are still so many things in life I have yet to experience.

I'd like to thank all the readers for making it this far. I look forward to seeing you all again. Until next volume, *Punishment to the Traitors*.

Riku Nanano



"Excuse me,
what did you just say?"

"State your conditions!

What would make you accept my proposal?

I consider you my savior, you know?!"

"H-Hakurei?!

What are you doing here?!"

Warm.

I was still half asleep as I opened my eyes, but what I saw woke me in an instant. Chou Hakurei's face, slack in sleep, filled my entire field of vision.

She was clutching my right hand as she continued to snooze. When did this happen? I tried to free myself, but she slowly opened her beautiful eyes and looked at me, her expression soft.

"Good morning..."





"CHOU SEKIEI AND CHOU HAKUREI—"

"—HAVE KILLED THE ENEMY GENERAL, THE CRIMSON WOLF!"

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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars: Volume 1

by Riku Nanano

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