

Kana Akatsuki

Illustration by Suoh

Agents
of the Four
Seasons
DANCE OF SPRING

I



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CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

GUARD OF WINTER

Itecho Kangetsu

Rosei's retainer ever since childhood. Also Sakura's swordsmanship teacher. He blames himself just as Rosei does for not being able to protect Hinagiku and Sakura.

AGENT OF WINTER

Rosei Kantsubaki

Holder of the power of Life Coagulation. He blames himself for the kidnapping of Hinagiku, his first love.

AGENT OF AUTUMN

Nadeshiko Iwaizuki

Holder of the power of Life Putrefaction. The newest and youngest of the Agents. She is greatly fond and trusting of Rindo.

GUARD OF AUTUMN

Rindo Azami

He thinks he sees his Guard role as only a job, but it doesn't look so from the outside. Obviously overprotective of Nadeshiko.



AGENT OF SPRING

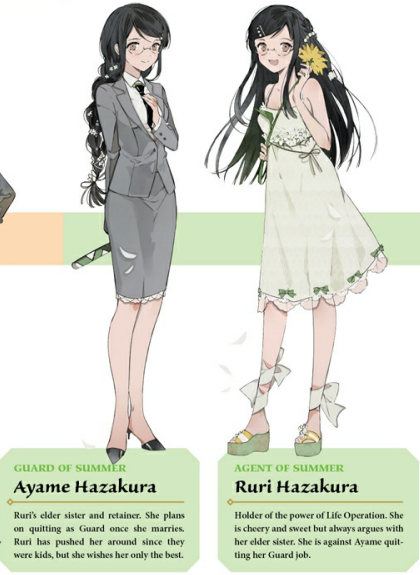
Hinagiku Kayo

Holder of the power of Life Stimulation. She went missing for around ten years after the enemies of the Agents kidnapped her. She's been in love with Rosei since childhood.

GUARD OF SPRING

Sakura Himedaka

Hinagiku's retainer, who tirelessly looked for her lady after she was kidnapped and laments her failure in her duties. She used to fancy Itecho as more than a teacher, but ever since a certain something happened, she has come to hate him deeply.



GUARD OF SUMMER

Ayame Hazakura

Ruri's elder sister and retainer. She plans on quitting as Guard once she marries. Ruri has pushed her around since they were kids, but she wishes her only the best.

AGENT OF SUMMER

Ruri Hazakura

Holder of the power of Life Operation. She is cheery and sweet but always argues with her elder sister. She is against Ayame quitting her Guard job.

Agents of the Four Seasons

DANCE OF SPRING, PART I

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Agents of the Four Seasons

1 Kana Akatsuki

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SHUNKASHUTO DAIKOSHA HARU NO MAI JO

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In the beginning, there was Winter.

Winter was once the only season in the world. When the loneliness of such an existence became too much to bear, it took a shard of its own life to create a new one. The new season was named Spring. Spring admired Winter as its teacher and trailed behind it day after day. Winter met Spring's esteem with guidance, and the two seasons cycled each other in intimate harmony.

But the land cried out in protest, demanding time to rest. The creatures would fall in love, then soon plunge into slumber; the trees would grow green, then freeze over. The land claimed endless Winter was better than the current state of affairs. The Winter was too excruciating now that it had known Spring.

Winter was disheartened to hear these grievances but listened to the land's wishes, once again creating new lives from its own. So came Summer and Autumn. The harsh heat of Summer was born from Winter's cries after being rejected by the land. Autumn was born from the hope that the gradual loss of life would let the land welcome Winter once again.

The land accepted these terms, and the four seasons were established. As they all followed one another, the world followed their cycle. Spring ran after Winter, with Summer and Autumn behind them. Winter could always turn around and find Spring there, but it wasn't the same anymore. Spring and Winter's honeymoon was over.

Winter loved Spring. It loved as the creatures of the earth loved and wed. And Spring, too, as if by fate, loved Winter back.

Summer and Autumn noticed their hidden feelings and proposed to let residents of the land assume the responsibilities of their roles.

These creatures would receive part of their power and cross the land over a year. Agents of the Four Seasons.

At first, they let cows assume the role, but they were too slow and let the winter stay winter year-round.

Then they tried with rabbits, but wolves devoured them.

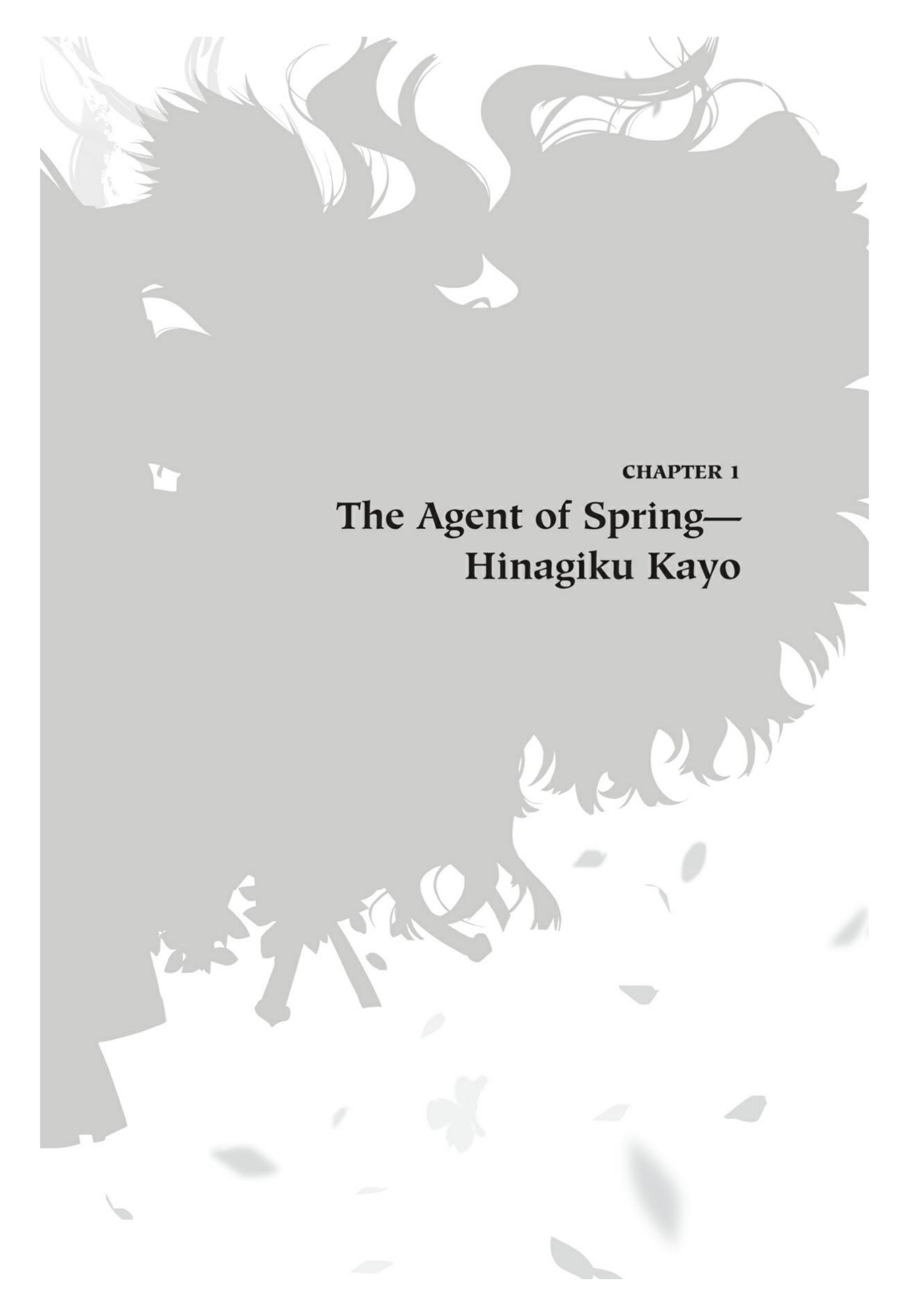
The birds did the job perfectly—until the next year, when they forgot all

about it.

As the four seasons began to despair, the humans volunteered themselves. They asked, in exchange for becoming Agents, that the land bring good harvest and peace.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter gave a piece of their power to the humans, and so Winter was permitted to indulge in its love for Spring forever.

So were the Agents of the Four Seasons born.



CHAPTER 1

**The Agent of Spring—
Hinagiku Kayo**

The Goddess of Spring in the form of a girl looked out the window.

Her eyes, a rare yellow color, took in the blue of a clear sky and the white covering the land.

The world was in winter. The soft sunlight fell across the whole country of Yamato, and the morning gently enveloped the mountains covered in silver snow.

“...” She let out a deep sigh.

The season brought about by the God of Winter lacked the colors of spring, but it was beautiful.

However, beauty was hardly the only thing it brought the people.

Winter was the season of death. Food became scarce, as did light and warmth. Yet without this time of rest, the land would eventually wither.

Winter was inevitable. The seasons brought constant change to the people everywhere, but they did not do so unassisted. They were the products of the divine skills of the modern gods incarnate.

The eternal cycle was built atop great miracles and sacrifices, though this was not common knowledge. Most had let those blessings dissolve into the ordinary.

Whether someone wished for tomorrow to never come or prayed for it to arrive safely, the four seasons always came for all. Ever since the age of the gods, since the beginning of time itself, the contract between the human and the divine had brought about the cycle.

“We’re arriving now, Lady Hinagiku.”

The girl, Hinagiku, was captivated by the silver world; her heart ached for it like a girl in love.

The view out the train window was nothing but white snow, an ordinary, unchanged panorama in the eyes of this world’s inhabitants. The world had already been held in harsh, lonely winter for a few months now.

Many took the scenery for granted and found nothing of interest in it, and yet

she could not look away. Did she rarely see the outside world? Did she simply like the snow that signified winter? Either way, she was too enraptured to respond to the one calling her.

She sighed again.

“Lady Hinagiku.”

The voice had an admonishing tone to it; Hinagiku’s consciousness was finally brought back to reality, and she looked at the one who had been calling her.

The train lurched, sending Hinagiku up in the air like a ball.

Immediately, thin arms reached out to keep her up as her retainer saved her from falling off her seat.

“Are you all right?”

Her retainer’s catlike eyes were wide with surprise at the sudden jolt. She was beautiful, with graceful lips and eyelids like petals on a flower. She wore her hair in a ponytail with a checkered ribbon, like a cherry blossom blooming in the night; her hair began a jet-black color and progressively turned a faded pink, curling in a spiral.

Once she confirmed Hinagiku was unharmed, she let her go with a “pardon.” She wore a suit jacket adorned with a lustrous dark-red necktie, a peach vest, and three-quarter *hakama* pants along with lace-up boots—the spitting image of a modern attendant. The katana by her waist drew as many eyes as her own beauty.

“...”

When the retainer tried to release Hinagiku’s hand, Hinagiku grabbed it back and stared deeply into her eyes. Wordlessly, she pleaded with her to stay.

The retainer’s eyelashes, long as a peacock’s feathers, brushed together. “The train is very shaky. Please be careful.” She smiled and gave her lady’s hand an affectionate squeeze in return. Soon, it was impossible to tell whose warmth was whose.

The local train running by the seaside rattled and clattered as it gently shook the two girls.

“Look... Isn’t it...beautiful?” Hinagiku glanced out the window again.
“Hinagiku...loves...winter.”

She faltered in forming the words, but still her voice was as clear as sugary sweets. Most people were unsure how to react upon first hearing her erratic, choppy way of speaking.

“Is that so? Personally, I find spring to be prettier.” The answering voice was strong and graceful.

“You...hate winter...don’t you...Sakura?”

“I loathe it.” The retainer just barely refrained from clicking her tongue, but she could not hide the anger in her voice. “For me...it’s repulsive.”

“But...” Hinagiku’s face fell. “That’s...all...Hinagiku’s fault.”

“No, it’s Winter’s fault. Do not blame yourself.”

“No... No... It’s Hinagiku’s...fault.”

“It is not,” Sakura whispered, her expression full of complicated emotions.

Hinagiku tried changing the subject. “Hinagiku is back...starting...today... Do you...think Hinagiku...could...meet Winter?”

“Now that the Four Seasons Agency has given notice of the return of spring, I imagine you’ll come into contact at some point.”

“When...will Hinagiku...go...apologize...to Winter? To...Lord Rosei?”

“Why would you...? Winter should be the one apologizing.”

“But...Hinagiku didn’t... Hinagiku should... Lord...Rosei...”

“Lady Hinagiku Kayo. You are this country’s Agent of Spring.”

“Hinagiku...knows... But...Hinagiku thinks...Rosei...will be...disappointed... And...Hinagiku should...say sorry...”

“It’s over now. How many times must I say that I want you?” Sakura whispered sadly as she held Hinagiku’s hand tighter.

Hinagiku squeezed back. Their conversation was incomprehensible to outsiders, and the mood was too heavy for anyone to even consider intruding.

Hinagiku anxiously fluttered her tiny feet, covered in boots peeking out from her *hakama* kimono.

“Will...the ritual...today...be okay?” she muttered.

Sakura noticed the diffidence in her words and quietly reassured her. “Yes, it will. I promise. I will make sure of it,” she said with pride, placing a hand on her chest.

Hinagiku frowned. “.....But...isn’t it...Hinagiku...doing the ritual?” she replied with a mixture of fondness and reproach.

Sakura grinned back at her.

“You...” She peered into Hinagiku’s yellow eyes, and Hinagiku stared back at her. “You would do anything to hold onto me, isn’t that right? You promised,” she said. The line sounded almost flirtatious.

“Hinagiku will. Hinagiku will...do anything...to not let go of you. Hinagiku will bring...spring...thaw...winter...anything.”

They were the Agent of Spring and her servant.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“Hinagiku will...”

Lady and vassal, with differing statures.

“And I will do anything to make sure you can fulfill your duties...even if I must sacrifice myself for it.”

“Hinagiku doesn’t...want you...sacrificing...yourself.”

Both girls shared a name with spring flowers—daisies and cherry blossoms.

“If that’s an order, I will make sure to fulfill it.”

“Please...do.”

“As you say, my lady.”

As the local train arrived at the station, the odd pair stood up and stepped foot into the snow-colored land.

The island nation of Yamato floated in the middle of the ocean, at the eastern

reaches of the world map.

Also known as the Eastern Cherry Blossom, Yamato was an archipelago that got its nickname from the shape of its islands forming the crooked branch of a cherry blossom tree in full bloom. The archipelago was divided into five parts, beginning from the north with Enishi, Teishu, Iyo, Tsukushi, and Ryugu.

Enishi was abundant with natural resources, and most of the nation's food was produced here. Its lands were vast and its sights pastoral; when the people of Yamato imagined a rural scene, they imagined Enishi.

Teishu contained Teito, Yamato's imperial capital and primary point of contact with the rest of the world. Teito had Yamato's biggest airport and was considered the main entrance to the country. Many foreigners lived in this area as well.

Iyo was famous for its hot springs and had a long history of thermal-bath cures. In the modern day, it was an important source of tourism-based revenue. It was the most popular travel destination in the country.

Tsukushi had many famous volcanoes, sacred mountains, and historical buildings. Many had the impression that it was an old place, but the city was modern, and it had a good balance of tourism and industry.

Finally, Ryugu was an island at the southernmost point of Yamato. The flora and fauna found there were unique compared to what was found in the rest of the archipelago. The sea was full of beautiful coral reefs, and trees guarded the mountains from harsh winds. It was known for having the biggest resorts in Yamato, and in normal circumstances, it was warm year-round.

The lady-servant duo stepped foot into this southernmost point of Yamato: Ryugu.

"Ryugu...City...is so...full of...snow... Hinagiku thought...it was...only the...airport."

The Ryugu resorts had lost their appeal due to the snow.

"It should be...warm...like a southern...country...right?"

Sakura replied with a wry smile to Hinagiku's confused question. "The cycle of

seasons is a bit off-kilter at the moment. It's only natural the power of another season would become stronger. The balance is broken. Summer, Autumn, and Winter alone can't do the job."

A shadow cast over Hinagiku's expression as she hung her head.

"...Hinagiku is...sorry."

"There is no need for you to apologize. Besides...that's why we're here."

".....Right."

"Lady Hinagiku, you will see many places like this moving forward. Don't try too hard to take in the sights. The bright snow could damage your eyes, after all...so don't stare. If you must focus on something, let me be the center of your attention. That would be best. The snow is too dangerous."

Sakura spoke playfully, but Hinagiku shook her head.

"Hinagiku can't...just...rely...on you. Even if...it's...too bright...Hinagiku...will...look. This...is Hinagiku's...job."

"Are you sure?"

"...Yes."

It was February 10, Reimei 20.

Rumors of a goddess and her retainer visiting Ryugu soon spread throughout the island.

Sakura phoned the biggest town hall on the island, and, five minutes later, a government employee drifted to the station in a private car. The pale-looking employee took the two young girls to the town hall. As they arrived, the person in charge seemed to be desperately looking for someone to blame in case anything went wrong with the visit, the poor thing.

"Lady Spring! To think we would be receiving you today. I mean, we are exceedingly grateful the Agents make use of our island every year, but we are just so surprised, since we received no notice from the Four Seasons Agency... Oh, I see...Lady Hinagiku wished to travel incognito... No, I—I am not complaining... It's just, the visit is so unexpected, we weren't prepared to receive you... Oh, but you didn't need our support? I understand... Yes, I will

issue permission to enter the mountains right away.”

Sakura, annoyed by the implications of blame, cut the talk short.

Insect.

Irritated, she walked back to the room in which Hinagiku waited.

Right outside the door was a crowd; it seemed the rumors had made their rounds, and people coming to the town hall to submit a form or request a consultation were now trying to get a look at her. An employee was attempting to keep them away, but some of the gawkers were pressing against the door. Most of them were elderly, although some youngsters had their phones at the ready, waiting to get a glimpse of Hinagiku. Sakura rushed in.

“Lady Hinagiku! Lady Hinagiku!” She pushed her way through the crowd but still couldn’t reach the door. “Everyone back off! It’s not a circus in here!” Sakura yelled, and the people finally opened a path for her.

She barged into the plain reception room and found her lady huddled in a corner, holding her knees.

“Lady Hinagiku! Are you all right?!”

Hinagiku had curled in on herself like a pill bug. She got to her feet again only once Sakura was close enough to lay a hand on her shoulder.

“Sakura... Strangers... They’re...coming in...”

She was pale in the face, and her hands were shaking terribly.

“Oh, Lady Hinagiku...I’m so sorry. You must’ve been frightened. Did you give them handshakes or photos?”

Hinagiku shook her head. A town hall employee had come to protect her from the crowd after they got in.

“I’m sorry... Your position simply draws all kinds of attention...”

Hinagiku looked truly worried at the sound of that. Silently, she dove into Sakura’s jacket.

“Lady Hinagiku...are we playing hide-and-seek now?”

“Hinagiku...wants to...be by...your...side.”

“I’m glad to have you so close, but wouldn’t you find it hard to move around?”

“Hinagiku...wants to...be by...your...side.”

“Lady Hinagiku...”

Sakura caressed her trembling lady’s back.

She was already the kind to turn heads, and now...

Sakura observed her lady again.

Her beauty really was fit for a goddess. Her voluminous hair was the color of amber, and it undulated as though she were standing at the bottom of the ocean, and with her every move, it danced and swayed like a jellyfish. She carried herself like a fairy-tale princess come to life. A white flower ornament and ribbon graced her head, while a single braid fell by her right cheek. Every element of her appearance was overwhelmingly clean and pure. Were an experienced artist to create their masterpiece depiction of a “spring girl,” the result would be not far from this.

Her graceful body was wrapped in faint cherry-colored *hakama* pants and pure-white kimono, with a high-neck undershirt. Lavish ornaments covered her entire outfit, ranging from ribbons to cloth flowers to embroidery; the butterfly knot, like a large flower on her waistband, stood out the most. Her feet were covered by understated short leather boots, which tightened her overall look. She perfectly balanced the traditional garments of Yamato with a foreign flavor and modern twist.

She has a magnetic charm, even if she doesn’t want it. Time to swat these flies, I suppose.

It was Sakura who had dressed her lady up to this bewitching state, but no use worrying about that now. She had to act.

“Don’t worry. We have a taxi waiting for us out back. We can keep out of sight. I will be with you all the way, so no degenerates will approach you.”

“We’re...going...to the...mountains...already?”

“Yes, Lady Hinagiku. I’ve seized permission.”

“Seized? Is...permission...something you...seize?”

Sakura gave an awkward smile. “Well, that’s the best word for it. We forced our way here today, after all. Maybe I should apologize to the locals.”

“Hinagiku didn’t...think...things...through... Sorry.”

Sakura shook her head, then spoke carefully to ease her lady:

“No, this is nothing. Lady Hinagiku, think only about what it is you must do. Do not let any of the noise around you inside your head. That’s your duty.”

Having earned permission to enter the mountains, they took a taxi to the foot of Mount Ryugu. The driver offered to take them farther up, but Sakura declined.

We can’t have him follow us and post videos online.

There was a reason why they didn’t involve themselves much with the common folk. What this odd pair was about to do was to remain entirely confidential. The view outside the car window was nothing but snow; there was hardly any color at all. On the other hand, the mountain trail had a tourist attraction for the island at the end, Ryugu Shrine, so the snow was kept off the path.

It’s about forty minutes walking.

Sakura carefully checked the map on her phone. She was on top of everything for the trip. Her face didn’t show it, but inside, she was a bundle of nerves and fear.

It’s okay. There haven’t been any problems so far. It’s all going off without a hitch.

She whispered encouragement to herself before putting on the smile that was only for her liege and calling to her. “Lady Hinagiku, I will carry you to the ritual spot. Is that all right?”

She was trying to be considerate, but her lady seemed startled and refused.

“N-no. No.”

“You will walk all the way? But...”

“Yes. Hinagiku can...do the job.” She nodded, and it was so cute that Sakura couldn’t react for a few moments.

But soon she came to her senses. “No, we’re here without support from the Four Seasons Agency and without the litter. I will take on the role myself.”

“Li...litter?”

She didn’t know the word. The litter was a wooden box with wooden handles on the front and back that people would hold up to carry the person inside. It was an ancient vehicle commonly seen in period pieces.

Hinagiku’s eyes went wide at the explanation and refused even more vehemently.

“No...Hinagiku...will...walk. Hinagiku...needs...no...litter. That’s... embarrassing.”

“Even if you find it so, it’s important to keep up your strength. And we don’t have one, so I suggested carrying you. And it’s not all about fatigue. It’s cold, and if I carry you on my back...”

“Hinagiku has...heat...packs...under the kimono. And...if you must...mention fatigue...then what about you? Weren’t...you...going...to protect...Hinagiku?”

“I will protect you no matter what.”

“But you can’t...if you’re tired.”

Her delicate, pale fingers flicked Sakura’s nose, leaving her blushing silently for a few seconds.

“...Are you worrying about me?”

“Why...not? Hinagiku...loves...you...Sakura.”

“Oh, Lady Hinagiku... Those words are too good for me.”

“How about I take you up there, then?” the taxi driver interjected into the beautiful pair’s lovely conversation.

Of course, the conversation was taking place inside the taxi, but still, Sakura shot him a murderous glare.

“No. And don’t interrupt us. I’ll throw you out this window if you do it again.”

Sakura was acutely alert of anything that could disturb her and her lady's little world.

"Eep..." The taxi driver cringed under her glare. "Sorry. But...if we had heard the Agent of Spring was coming, then we could have gathered some townsfolk to carry her up there... We've cleared the snow on the path, but it's already snowed again since then, so it might be dangerous... Oh, if only you had told us! We would've cleared it again, at the very least..."

The driver kept lamenting and insisting until Sakura shot him down coldly.

"We're here now; the snow will go away soon. We should have signal up there, so we would like to call your company once again after we're done with the ritual. Is that okay?"

The driver immediately brightened up and agreed. He thanked them repeatedly, overjoyed that he would get to brag to his wife and children about giving the goddess a ride. When it was time for them to go their separate ways, he shook Hinagiku's hand and wouldn't let go until Sakura gently pried it off.

She helped Hinagiku into an inverness coat and wrapped her in a scarf with a ribbon, then put a coat and scarf on herself before getting out of the car.

"Well, then. It's time to work, Lady Hinagiku," she announced theatrically. One could nearly hear a drum in the background.

Hinagiku clenched her fists tight. "Yes. Hinagiku...will do the job...as the Agent of Spring."

Sakura mimicked her fighting pose.

Hinagiku had been transformed into a plump, fluffy creature, overdressed against the cold thanks to her worrisome retainer.

"Let's keep that enthusiasm up all the way there."

"Yes!"

"Although... Perhaps we should notify the other regions we'll be visiting after this ritual... The Four Seasons Agency must be searching desperately for us right now, too."

"..." Hinagiku's energy withered like a flower.

Shoot, I shouldn't have said that.

Sakura hurriedly added, "Oh, but I understand that you want to move incognito. Especially when this is your first ritual after being reinstated... Also..."

Sakura looked away as the loathsome past crossed her mind.

"I realize I was the one who lost my temper with the Agency for coming up with that ridiculous plan about gathering five hundred concerned persons and making it a public event... And I ended up ruining our relationship with the Spring staff...so...I'm sorry. I just hope it doesn't affect us going forward."

"N-no, Sakura, you...only...acted on my behalf. It's...not...your...fault."

Sakura was deeply touched by Hinagiku's defense.

"Also...the ritual is...supposed to be...confidential. Getting...five hundred people is just...weird. It's not...not a festival."

"Yes, you're completely right. The Spring staff simply want to make it bigger than it should be because it's been ten years. It's a festival to *them*, I suppose, but not for us."

"No...it isn't."

"It's something you give your whole life to. It must remain private."

"Yes."

And most of all, we need you to be confident about summoning spring. Now more than ever.

Sakura made sure her fear didn't show on her face as she said, "We follow this straight path and get to the mountain trail toward Ryugu Shrine. I will show you the way, so no need to worry. Let's go do this ritual."

"Yes... Um...uh...Sakura?"

"Yes, is something the matter? Do you want me to carry you there?"

"N-no. Is that...a person?"

Sakura frowned questioningly and looked in the direction Hinagiku pointed. Right by the fork in the path, a bit away from where they were standing, there was a yellow dot.

“...?” Sakura strained her eyes, trying to figure it out, and her 20/13 vision soon allowed her to see that the dot was, in fact, a person. “You’re right. Someone’s standing there.”

“A child...right?”

“Huh? That’s a child?”

“Hinagiku has...20/3.3...vision. Hinagiku...thinks...that’s a grade-schooler.”

This 20/3.3 vision was beyond outstanding. Sakura was impressed, at least until Hinagiku continued: “Sakura, they...may be...lost.”

“We just had them sound the alarms in the mountain. No one should be up here... It’s strange for a child to be here all alone.”

Where are their parents? A boar could jump out and eat them.

It wasn’t exactly an exaggeration; Mount Ryugu was famous for its frequent boar encounters. It was not uncommon to hear about late-night trains running over the poor animals.

“I don’t think we can ignore them. Lady Hinagiku, is it all right if I go over?”

“It’s...fine. Hinagiku’s...not...scared of...children.”

Her comment implied she was scared of everyone else. Sakura gave her a worried glance, but her lady looked back straight into her eyes. “Hinagiku would...like...to help...a...child in...need.”

Sakura nodded firmly at the gravity of her words. “Yes, of course. As you wish.”

Sakura ended up carrying Hinagiku on her back as she hurried across the snowy path. They had to get to the child as quickly as possible. Despite Hinagiku’s previous apprehension about being carried, her giggling suggested that she was enjoying the ride.

Soon, the child’s figure became clearer—she was wearing cute winter clothes and a yellow knitted hat, pulling a sled along. She walked with purpose, as though having a clear destination in mind.

Sakura observed the child as she approached. Hinagiku was right: It appeared

to be a grade-schooler. This was risky. Someone so small and defenseless could be kidnapped easily.

“Hey! You there! Stop!”

Risky. Defenseless. Kidnapping. Sakura’s own thoughts made her queasy. She was too disturbed to call out in the friendly way she had hoped to.

The child, startled by the tall woman yelling and carrying another woman, immediately darted away.

A small chase began, until a chance for conversation finally presented itself.

“I’m going to clear some snow here.”

Hinagiku and Sakura finally got to hear what the child was doing here. Her name was Nazuna, she was twelve years old, and she lived right by the mountain.

“You’re...here...with a...sled...and shovel...to...clear...snow?”

“Can’t you play at home? You should go.”

Nazuna gave Sakura a confused look. This stranger was coming on very strong, it seemed.

Maybe she’ll listen if we tell her who we are, Sakura thought. “...I realize we haven’t introduced ourselves. I’m Sakura Himedaka, Guard of Spring. This is Lady Hinagiku Kayo. She is the nation’s Agent of Spring.”

She’d hoped that would shock her, but Nazuna didn’t seem to understand just how important Hinagiku’s standing was. She tilted her head and gave them an even more suspicious look.

“Sakura, she’s...just a...kid. She can’t...understand.”

“You’re absolutely right. I apologize.”

While Sakura thought about how to explain it, Hinagiku kneeled down to match Nazuna’s gaze. Sakura watched curiously.

“You see...Hinagiku...brings...spring.” Hinagiku smiled. Her voice was warm enough to thaw any heart.

“What’s *spring*?”

Nazuna seemed flustered with Hinagiku's beautiful face so close to hers.

Hinagiku was shocked, too, in the end. The kid didn't know the most fundamental thing.

"You...don't know...spring?"

"No."

The answer was like a frigid wind in her chest. Sakura was taken aback as well, just listening to the conversation.

"Really?" Hinagiku replied gently. "You see...spring is..." She explained as though reading Nazuna a fairy tale. "...It's...one of the seasons. It...hasn't come...for ten...years...now...but it's...coming back...this year. You must've...heard people mention...four seasons? Right now...there are only...three. But...it's...supposed to...be four."

"And you'll bring that fourth one? Spring?"

"Y-yes. It should be...spring, summer, autumn...and winter."

"It's winter now! The Agent brought it."

"You...know...a lot. Yes...that's true."

Nazuna blushed gleefully at the praise. "I learned it in school. Spring...spring... Ah!"

"Did you remember...spring?"

"Yes, but...spring was lost, wasn't it? Daddy said Ryugu changed after spring went away. He said it shouldn't be snowing and it was always warm."

Nazuna pointed at the snow around them, creating a white blanket in every direction.

"Yes. Up to now...Hinagiku wasn't here...so Hinagiku couldn't...bring spring to Yamato. But now...Hinagiku is back."

"...Are you really the Agent of Spring?"

"Yes...Hinagiku is...the Agent of Spring...in this country."

"Mmmm...I'm not sure. You look fake."

“Huh?”

“I mean, you talk weird. Why is it all choppy? Is it because you’re a fake?”

Hinagiku was overwhelmed by the barrage of questions.

“Hey, kid, who do you think you’re talking to?”

Sakura had stayed out of it until then, but she couldn’t let that comment slide—among plenty of other things. She had always had a short temper, but she mainly lost it in defense of her lady. And what she hated the most was when people made fun of her lady’s particular way of speaking.

“Look, kid, we don’t care what you think. She is the Agent of Spring. She’s doing the ritual for the first time in ten years, and you’re getting in the way of our job. So go away already.”

Her voice turned colder and colder, and Nazuna winced.

“Saku...ra.”

“You have to be stern with children or they won’t understand, Lady Hinagiku.”

“Don’t scare her... Um...Nazuna. Hinagiku is really...the Agent...of Spring. Hinagiku will bring spring...to Ryugu. And then...you’ll see...the snow thaw...and winter end...and there might be...an avalanche. We already asked...to have...everyone...stay away. So please...”

“Prove it, then. Show me you’re a goddess, and then maybe I’ll do what you say.”

Sakura and Hinagiku looked at each other. What a difficult child.

But she was gazing at them with such round, expectant eyes—they silently agreed it might be quicker to just show her.

“All right. Hinagiku will show you...Nazuna. But...Hinagiku has to...correct...you on something. Hinagiku is...not...a goddess.”

It was something hard to define. Everyone had differing opinions on it—not just in Yamato, but around the world. Some said they were deities; some denied it. Some said they were people; some denied it.

“I believe the precise term would be *goddess incarnate*. Lady Hinagiku?”

“Ummm... Hinagiku doesn’t...think of myself...as a goddess. We are...Agents... of the Four Seasons. Not...gods.”

“Is that different? Don’t the Agents bring the four seasons using magic?”

“Yes...that’s true.”

“But they’re not gods?”

Hinagiku smiled awkwardly as she took out a pouch from her kimono’s sleeve. She plucked a flower seed from it and closed her warm hand around it.

“Hinagiku has...godly...powers. But they’re...not...really mine.”

Hinagiku softly opened her palm and showed her the seed, which was now budding like a hatching egg.

“These...are not...our powers. But...we can...do things...like this. Otherwise... Hinagiku is...the same...as everyone else. We’re...not...so...different.”

The bud grew leaves, then petals until it became a rose in full bloom—one too beautiful to find in any forest or mountain. She had created it.

“The Agents...of the Four Seasons...signal spring...cross through summer... pour out autumn...and offer winter.”

Hinagiku wove her words like a storyteller in her soft voice, while the child was enchanted by the rose.

“But...we’re only...that. Agents. Substitutes. Representatives...of the...four seasons.”

How do the seasons change? The textbook answer was simply that it was the work of the Agents of the Four Seasons.

The world was created differently in each nation, but they all shared the seasons and the day-night cycle. Spring, summer, fall, and winter were brought about by the Agents, thanks to the powers granted by the Four Seasons, while the cycle of day and night fell to the Archers of Dawn and Twilight and the arrows they loosed into the sky. This didn’t change even in the age of electronic communications, computational predictions, and wars.

The Agents were the descendants of those who had been delegated the

responsibilities of the Four Seasons back in the age of the gods.

They crossed the mountains and valleys to the ends of the world, bringing the seasons to every corner of the globe. Each season had its own Agents, and in this far-east country, they were smoothly managed by the Four Seasons Agency.

In the early days, they would cross the continent on foot, but then the tours went from horseback to carriages, then from carriages to automobiles, then from automobiles to airplanes.

And although the travel had been modernized, the job itself hadn't changed from ancient times.

They cycled through the four seasons without rest, in accordance with their covenant.

After the Agent of Spring made the flowers bloom, the Agent of Summer would summon the green fields under the scorching suns, after which in a few months the Agent of Autumn would suck the life out of the same land and furnish it with red leaves and a carpet of ginkgo nuts. Finally, the Agent of Winter would turn the red silver with snow.

This was the role of the Agents of the Four Seasons.

"And why are you here, Miss Agent?" Nazuna asked innocently.

Sakura, irritated by the question, answered, "We've already said we're here to make spring bloom."

"Then do it now!"

"Ugh, you little brat! We only haven't because you keep taking our time!" Sakura yelled.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"You did, and you are! You shouldn't be walking around here all alone in the first place! An elder should be taking you away to safety! That's why we can't go! We have a sacred ritual to do, and you're wasting our time!"

"Sakura. Don't...raise your...voice... You're...scaring...her."

Sakura tried to smile at her lady, but she couldn't hide her fury. "Lady Hinagiku...you must be stern with children or they won't understand. Little girl, you should leave Mount Ryugu now. Why are you even here in the first place?"

"To clear snow."

"What? Why would you want to do that here and now? It's all snow. Did someone tell you to?"

"No."

"Then you're doing it just because? That's ridiculous. You're lying."

"I'm not lying!" Sakura's irritation was infecting Nazuna, too. She puffed her cheeks. "I'm here because I want to be!"

"If you like clearing snow so much, go do it at your house. Listen... We would be in the middle of the spring ritual right about now if it weren't for you. *Our* time is valuable. Go back to your parents already."

Sakura hauled Nazuna up under her arm like a sack of potatoes. The kid was small already, but she looked like a plush toy when carried by the five-foot-seven woman.

"No! No! No! No! No!" Nazuna fluttered her arms and legs as though she were swimming in midair. She arched her back, leaning far enough to land a kick in Sakura's side.

"Ow... What are you, a shrimp?"

Sakura released Nazuna, who landed gracefully and stuck her tongue out at her would-be captor.

Sakura twitched. "Stupid kid! C'mere, you shrimp!"

Hinagiku covered her mouth with her kimono's sleeve and shook a little; was she finding this funny?

"Lady Hinagiku!"

"Wh-what...is it? Hee-hee."

"This is no laughing matter! Time is a limited resource. We have to do the ritual before the sun sets!"

“O-oh...no... Hinagiku is...very...serious. Hinagiku is not...laughing. No. Look. Very serious.”

“You just giggled! Why are you lying? Oh, you’re too cute. I forgive you.” Sakura sighed.

But we must complete the ritual as soon as we can.

She realized then that Nazuna had escaped, now clinging to Hinagiku.

“Hey...Sakura. Could you...go...look for...her parents? Hinagiku will...stay with her...while you...bring...them here.”

“No! I can’t leave you unguarded.”

“Hinagiku will be...fine. It’ll just...be a...little while. You’re fast.”

“I can’t leave you, not even for a little while! You know that!” Sakura’s voice had risen to a shriek before she heard herself and covered her mouth.

“...Hinagiku knows. Sorry.” Hinagiku didn’t even flinch. “Sakura...you don’t... have...to worry...about that...anymore...you know?”

She spoke as softly as ever, and yet for Sakura, she was gently opening old wounds. *Why do you say that?*

“I’m with you. I must stay with you. Forever.” Sakura covered her own face this time. She couldn’t bear to look at the girl before her.

Hinagiku’s kindness and selflessness only made Sakura’s heart ache.

If only I could shut my eyes.

If only she could be spared...

If only I didn’t have to see her every move, hear her every word.

Perhaps she could be spared from hurting.

And yet, I cannot look away.

Her glance was helplessly drawn to her.

For the longest time, Sakura forbade herself from ever losing sight of her.

Hinagiku, aware or unaware of her retainer’s sentiments, still spoke with the warmth of the sun. “Yes... But see, Hinagiku...is here. We’re...here. So...don’t

worry.”

The person with the right to reprove and chastise her was always kind.

“...Lady Hinagiku.”

“Yes?”

“I am your pawn.”

“You...are...not.”

“Then your sword, let’s say. Your only trustworthy ally.”

“...Yes.”

“I’m sorry. I forgot it briefly. I am your sword and shield, and as such, I must help you do everything you must and want to do.” Sakura successfully recovered her usual cool. “I will protect you, and I will make an exception to protect this child as well. That is what you want, isn’t it, Lady Hinagiku?”

“Is that...okay?” Hinagiku gazed at her with the warmth of the sun, then smiled at her before turning that smile to Nazuna. “Thank...you! Nazu...na. Sakura says...we can...go...so...would you...let us...come with...you?”

“I’m fine by myself.”

“Nazu...na. Did you...tell...people at...home...that...you would...be...going out?”

“...”

“See, if we...come with...you, then...we can...help...you make...some excuse.”

“.....Really?”

“Yes...we...can,” Hinagiku murmured, her voice sugar-sweet. “You’re...still...too young...to be...out...here.”

Sakura glanced to Hinagiku. *Not that you’re much of a grown-up.*

In her eyes, Hinagiku was still a child, so whenever she spoke like an adult, Sakura remembered: *Right...she’s already sixteen.*

They had met many years ago.

“Lord —— Lord ——”

Every day, serving her little lady was fun.

“Sakura, thank you for always being with me.”

She was delighted by the honor of being chosen.

“Sakura, do you...also love Lord ——?”

She felt she could do anything if she worked at it, no matter how bad things could get.

“Sakura, Sakura.”

She felt she could protect her from anything.

"Lord ——! Lord ——! Sakura!"

Although she had no reason to believe she actually could.

"Please... Don't kill Sakura... Don't kill Lord ——..."

If she could go back in time, she would kill her past self.

"Sakura, run away."

How she wished to kill that girl.

"Run and live."

It's your fault *"Lady Hinagiku"* died.

“Sakura.”

The call brought Sakura’s consciousness back from the dark cloud in her mind.

“...Yes, Lady Hinagiku?”

Sakura noticed she was sweating, and it couldn’t be from warmth. The cool wind quickly dried it and chilled her skin, but she needed the little shock.

Get a grip. You have to do your job this time around.

“Hey, shrimp girl.”

“It’s *Nazuna*!!”

“Nazuna, we’ll be sparing some of our extremely valuable time for you, so tell us where you want the snow cleared. We’ll help you out.”

But...

Nazuna didn’t react the way Sakura expected, instead looking away and hiding behind Hinagiku. She stuck her tongue out unappreciatively.

Sakura’s face twitched. “Lady Hinagiku. Once we’re done with the shrimp girl’s job, we’ll get a taxi and throw her in there so that we can go do our ritual. Is that okay?”

“Yes... Let’s...do that.”

“Whaaat? Don’t come with us, old lady.”

“You insolent little—! I’m nineteen. We’re both kids to the country of Yamato.”

“You two...stop...fighting.”

And so the three girls walked the road side by side.

Before them was a path toward the Ryugu Shrine and another leading elsewhere.

Hinagiku and Sakura were supposed to take the proper mountain trail up, but Nazuna went in the other direction, and so they had to follow. Dried trees lay on the ground on top of one another, all covered in snow—not a pleasant path.

Few people visited in winter. The parking lot’s signboard was buried, with

only the broad road around cleared away for walking.

“Nazuna...are we...there yet?”

Nazuna gladly nodded to Hinagiku’s question. “Yes, almost.”

The next moment, though, she shut her eyes tight with a sour expression. The cold wind had blown across the mountain and into her face, nearly taking off her knitted hat.

“Hey, be careful.” Sakura instinctively held the hat down on Nazuna’s head.

Nazuna blinked in surprise. “Thanks, old lady,” she said. She must not have expected Sakura to try and protect her.

“Stop calling me that. I told you—I’m Sakura Himedaka.”

“Okay...Sakura. Thank you.” Nazuna smiled at her for the first time. She was finally opening up, if only a little.

“Nazuna...your hat...is very...cute.”

“You think so? My mom got it for me.” Nazuna’s smile widened. “I love it!”

She walked incessantly ahead of Hinagiku and Sakura, frequently looking back and holding her special hat and smiling. Hinagiku giggled at the sight of her.

“Aren’t...small...kids...adorable, Sakura?”

“Are they? They have nothing on you... But anyhow, aren’t you cold, Lady Hinagiku?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“The mountain is freezing. I’m worried you might catch a cold.”

“I’m warm. You made...me...wear so...many layers. So really...shouldn’t you be cold?”

“I need the range of motion in case I have to draw my sword.”

Nazuna slowed down, perhaps hearing them and wanting to join in on the conversation. “Hey, Hinagiku!”

“No, no. That’s *Lady* Hinagiku to you.”

Sakura’s overwhelming esteem for Hinagiku quickly shut down the attempt at

conversation.

“Sakura... Why...are you so...harsh?”

“But you are one of the most important people in the country...”

“That doesn’t...matter. Hinagiku wants...you...to be...kinder with...Nazuna! You’re...a bad girl!”

Hinagiku puffed her cheeks and pointed at her. It was not in the least bit intimidating.

“I’m a bad girl?”

“Yes. You...are...bad.”

Sakura couldn’t resist a smile at the sheer cuteness.

“Lady Hinagiku...please...keep saying that...” Her cheeks turned rosy in a mix of embarrassment and joy.

“You’re...not...sorry, are you?”

“I am. I am very sorry. So please, keep going. And also tilt your head like so when saying it.”

Hinagiku pouted even more at Sakura’s lack of regret. “Nazuna...don’t you...worry...about her, okay? What were...you...going to...ask me?”

Nazuna was also pouting, but at Hinagiku’s question, she opened her mouth again.

“I wanted to ask, Lady Hinagiku, why were you hiding away for ten years?”

It was like a chilly gust and sharp rain striking a peaceful site.

“...Huh?”

What was this odd pair doing here? Why did the child not know of spring? Where had Hinagiku been for the past ten years? The answers were grim for such sudden questions.

“It’s not in the textbooks, but everyone talks about the goddess hiding away—being spirited away. But why would a goddess be spirited away?”

Small shadows clouded Hinagiku’s kind expression, and Sakura did not allow

her lady to answer. “She didn’t want to go into hiding. It was an unfortunate accident.”

“What do you mean? She got hurt and had to stay in the hospital for ten years?”

“I can’t share the details, at least not to you. You have no reason to know.”

“I—I do.”

“Please. You’re only a child.”

Nazuna puffed her cheeks again at Sakura’s dismissive tone.

“I do too have a reason! My dad works in tourism. He’s always saying how bad it is that winter’s so long and how southern islands aren’t supposed to be like this! And that’s why we don’t have much money! So I have a good reason to know why there’s no spring! I can’t get them to buy me the things I want!”

Hinagiku’s face crumpled like a used tissue.

“I’m...sorry.”

The guilt was too much; her mistakes were laid bare, and someone she had hurt was standing right in front of her.

“...Do you just enjoy chastising people?” Sakura furrowed her brows in pain.

Nazuna panicked. “I—I—I wasn’t trying to be mean...”

“Nazuna. It’s okay. You’re...not mean. Hinagiku...understands.”

“I wasn’t... I wasn’t trying to...”

“Nazuna.” Hinagiku’s expression darkened further, but soon she shook her head to do away with the thoughts and replaced it with a peaceful smile. She spoke as comfortingly as she could.

“It’s...a secret, but Hinagiku...will tell you.”

“You will?”

“Hinagiku was...following...orders...for ten years.”

“What orders?”

“Hinagiku was...enduring. Waiting...for the...battle.”

“Enduring...? What battle...?” Nazuna tilted her head in confusion.

Hinagiku smiled softly at her. “Hinagiku was...told...this...by an...a-acquaintance’s...mother.”

Sakura watched Hinagiku’s smile closely.

“She told...Hinagiku that...even if Hinagiku...loses now...there would...come a day...when Hinagiku would...be able to...fight again.”

The girl with the citrine eyes, the incarnation of spring—she was right there, alive. Sakura couldn’t tear her eyes away from her. She had to make up for lost time.

“Are you talking about, like, a game? Or sports?”

“Ummm... No... Hinagiku means...that...if there’s a time...you can’t...fight anymore, then...you can...hibernate...like the animals do...in winter. Then...you wait.”

The small spring goddess was kind to anyone and everyone.

“But you can’t...give up.”

Yet Sakura knew that her kindness had been cultivated by hardship.

“As long as...you’re alive...then one day...the snow...will melt...and spring will come.”

Sakura knew that the wounds only made her kinder.

You don’t have to.

Sakura, however, was not so generous; she envied the kindness Hinagiku showed to everyone else.

“You mustn’t...give up. You must...keep on...living. The day...for battle, the day...for victory...will surely come.”

I should be enough for you.

Her wish was not only wretched, but impossible.

“That girl’s mother...told Hinagiku that. That she...wanted Hinagiku...more than...anyone...to keep that...in mind. That it was...a very...hard thing...to do.

That...not many...people...can do it. But Hinagiku...liked her...a lot...so Hinagiku is...doing Hinagiku's best...to keep our promise."

Few people in the world could completely understand what she had just said.

"And you did that for ten years?"

Hinagiku smiled wryly at Nazuna's question.

"Not just that. Hinagiku was...also fighting...in Hinagiku's own...way."

"I don't really get it, but you're saying you were having a rough time, right?"

"...Maybe. But Hinagiku...realizes...the people...of Yamato...have been...doing poorly... without spring. So Hinagiku...wants to...make up for it. Just keep...an eye...out."

Sakura couldn't bear to watch her feeble smile any longer and put an end to the conversation.

"Okay, that's it. So now you know she had her reasons."

"Why're you butting in?"

Sakura did not appreciate the objection. "The tourism problem is getting solved anyway, so stop making her talk!"

"Don't yell at me!"

"...I wasn't yelling."

"Yes, you were. You speak too loudly. Why are adults always yelling?"

Nazuna stamped her feet. Sakura finally realized she was getting upset with a small child and felt ashamed of her own behavior. She lowered her voice and apologized.

"I'm sorry... Also, as I just told you, I'm not even an adult according to the people of Yamato."

"I hate adults so much."

"I'm *not* an adult. I'm nineteen! Hey, listen to me!"

"I hate everyone back home, too, except for my mom... You're an adult, Sakura. Because you're mean."

Sakura raised both hands in surrender. She had no idea how to put a child in a good mood.

“Nazuna...do the...adults...treat you badly?” Hinagiku worried.

The emotion faded from Nazuna’s face. “They never pay me any attention.”

“Are your parents...always busy?”

“Yeah...I think.”

Desolation crossed the girl’s face, and she hurried ahead of them in what appeared to be an attempt to shake off the feeling. Sakura watched her small back move through the snow and thought.

Her situation back home must be fraught.

The girl’s account was likely skewed, since she was still just a child, but the situation involved an indifferent father, a busy mother, and a lonely daughter. Perhaps that was why nobody noticed she left her house by herself.

“Lady Hinagiku.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t really care what happens to her, but...”

“...”

“...maybe we should speak to her parents when we get her home, don’t you think? I feel we have a right to speak our part after how much trouble she’s caused us. Let’s just tell them she’s feeling lonely.”

“Hinagiku knows...what they...call...people like...you.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You’re...one of...those...*tsun...tundra*, aren’t you?”

Hinagiku looked proud of her own knowledge.

“...I’m pretty sure that isn’t it, Lady Hinagiku,” Sakura replied dully, imagining a barren, frozen land.

“Hinagiku means...that you...act so cold...but in reality...you’re a really...kind girl.”

“I-I’m not!”

“You are. And Hinagiku...agrees with...your...kind sugges...tion.”

“I’m really not,” Sakura muttered under her breath, red in the face. “I’m only kind to you... But in any case, I hope you can back me up once the time comes. I’m not good with people.”

“Yes... So...what do you...think...is Nazuna’s...goal...here?”

“She said she wanted to clear the snow.”

“But...that’s not...something you do...where...there’s...no people...around, is it?”

Sakura and Hinagiku whispered to each other as they followed behind Nazuna farther into the mountain. The path, certainly not cleared of snow, went up a steep slope. A car could hardly go this way, and an elderly person hiking here was inconceivable.

“Lady Hinagiku, there’s an incline. Take my hand.”

“Oop. Wh-wh-whoa.”

Hinagiku was wearing boots under her *hakama*, but she still had a limited stride; her pace was slow.

“Hurry up!”

Nazuna went up ahead without them, though, and she was getting farther and farther away.

“Hey, Nazuna! Don’t go too far!”

“But you’re so slow!”

Nazuna must have taken this path many times in the past; she dashed through the snowy slope like a little ninja. The Spring lady and retainer desperately tried to keep up with her.

After a bit of hiking, the path turned gentler.

Something’s off.

Sakura had already thought it was strange the moment Nazuna chose the

path, but this did not seem at all like the sort of place a child would go to clear snow.

What if she's a fox spirit? Is she tricking us?

The moment that thought crossed her mind, she couldn't help but feel they were being taken away to another realm. Still, she couldn't just up and leave the child.

Could she be involved with the insurgents?

Sakura kept an eye on Nazuna's small back as she reached for her sword—her anachronistic companion. Her only ally.

If she is...

If she is, then I'll have to cut her down.

She closely watched the path ahead of Nazuna until they reached an open space at the peak.

"Oh!" Hinagiku exclaimed.

It was a beautiful amalgamation of snow and light and trees, nature at its purest. Snowflakes glinted in the sunlight as they danced their way down. The trees around them created a lingering sense of claustrophobia, but the opening in the canopy overhead let the blessings of the sun through. It was a tranquil hideout in the middle of the mountain. A special place created by nature—a space where an angel might choose to descend.

"Sakura."

Hinagiku and Sakura, however, saw more than beauty here.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

Something unexpected was enshrined in this place.

What is going on?

The two girls anxiously called each other's names and came closer together.

Why were we brought here?

The child who led them there only smiled, beckoning them to get closer.

“...”

Sakura pushed Hinagiku behind her back. Her senses were sounding the alarm—Hinagiku needed protection. But before she could speak, Hinagiku popped her head out from Sakura’s back and asked, “Nazuna...what are you...doing...here?”

Her voice was far too gentle for the situation. There was something obviously wrong with this place, and yet, instead of criticizing, she thought to ask first.

The cause of their fear smiled blithely back at them.

“Can’t you tell? I’m clearing the snow,” Nazuna said cheerily. “I’m tired, but we’re here already. Plus, I got to meet you.”

Nazuna spoke as though everything she had done was normal. But her words felt cold to Hinagiku’s and Sakura’s ears.

There were small irregularities in the otherwise normal landscape. They could not ignore the way the snow swelled at regular intervals, even if they wished to. In a different location, this would not be frightening, but here...

With every scoop of her shovel, Nazuna revealed what was hidden beneath to the sunlight streaming through the gap in the trees.

“Nazuna... This is...”

A crumbling stone appeared.

“This is...a grave...yard.”

There was a barrier to understanding between Nazuna and Hinagiku and Sakura. Even after Hinagiku put a name to the strangeness, Nazuna showed no distress. If anything, she seemed confused as to why Hinagiku was stating the obvious.

“I know.”

“You...know?”

“Yes. I know.”

The girl’s voice carried in the silence of the mountain, along with a stabbing noise.

“Listen.”

The sharp crunch of her shovel over this person’s tomb made them think of a knife stabbing into the snow. She didn’t hesitate.

“My mom’s sleeping down here.”

Stab. Stab.

“Hiking all the way here takes a lot of effort, but...I have to do it for my mom.”

Stab. Stab. She uncovered it little by little.

Stab. Stab. Stab. Stab. Stab.

“Thank you for bringing my sled.”

The sled was for moving the snow around, while the shovel was for clearing it away.

“I don’t like leaving my mom in the cold.” Everything Nazuna said was the truth. This was why she had left her house in secret and come all this way. “So I’m here to clear the snow away for her.”

She spoke quietly with the most innocent smile on her face, standing before the snowy grave.

“...” Sakura opened her mouth, then closed it again. The words wouldn’t come out. Pity wasn’t the right response here, but she had to say something. After a while, she finally said, “You’re visiting her grave even in winter?”

“No. I’m here to clear the snow. I just told you—she’s cold.”

“...May I ask again? That is a grave, right?”

“Yes, that’s what it is.”

Nazuna’s reply was firm. She had been firm from the moment they met. She was young, but her words were clear. She was smart. And that made her frightening.

“Your mother is buried here...but you’re not here to *visit* her grave?”

“That’s right.” Nazuna kept shoveling with the full force of her small body.

Then what do you call this?

Visiting a grave in Yamato usually happened in summer, and traditionally, one cleared the grave of any weeds and litter. The meaning of the phrase was probably shared across the whole country. Cleaning was understood to be part of grave visiting.

But Nazuna denies she's here for that.

Something was off.

She could've said she was going to visit her mother's grave to begin with. Why insist on saying she's here to clear snow?

There was a big misunderstanding.

Could it be she doesn't understand death?

Sakura tried as hard as she could to keep her tone gentle and asked: "Hey... kid...you understand that...your mother is dead, right?"

"..."

After a moment of silence, Nazuna nodded. Sakura was relieved, but the tension remained. Somehow, she had fallen into a heavy role, like a negotiator for a major incident.

"One more thing. Is your mother telling you she's cold? Can you hear her voice?"

Nazuna kept on shoveling as she shook her head, and she sent a confused glance at Sakura.

"Then how can you tell she's cold?"

Instead of answering, Nazuna asked a question of her own. "Sakura, has your mom ever covered you with a blanket while you were napping?"

Sakura was taken aback. She'd never had much of a home life to speak of, so she couldn't offer anything from her own experience. After a bit of hemming and hawing, she said, "I'm not sure about my mother..."

Although she had no recollection of such an event, she understood the idea Nazuna was conveying.

"...but I often do it for Lady Hinagiku."

Lending her coat to her beloved lady was motivated more by her own desire to do so, rather than any sense of duty. She always wanted to do whatever would make Hinagiku happy.

“I want to make sure she’s taken care of.”

And there is no one else I want to care for.

Sakura felt a soft grip on her hand—Hinagiku. Her heart skipped a beat, and she squeezed back. Whatever was happening around her, this goddess holding her hand gave her a rush of courage.

“You do that because you love her, and because she looks cold, don’t you?”

“Yes...I would want to keep those I love warm. But this is a grave... Which means...”

The person underneath has no mouth. Most likely no soul.

The confusion remained on her face, and this was apparently too much for Nazuna. “I just wanna do for her what she did for me!” she snapped. Her frustration seemed to be aimed at the whole world.

“But...you don’t know whether she’s really cold...” Sakura understood why Nazuna was getting upset, but she couldn’t accept it. And Nazuna could tell.

“She *is* cold! And even if she isn’t...can’t I do this anyway?”

“No, I mean...”

Was it wrong to care for someone who was already gone?

“This is why I hate adults! You want to say it’s weird!”

Who could say it wasn’t?

Nazuna hated everything “right” and “normal” that might contradict her feelings, her actions, her longing.

“Dad says it, too. ‘*If you know she’s dead, then why do you do this?*’ It’s like he doesn’t even care anymore. And I know how it’s supposed to be, but...”

Tears were welling in her eyes, and she swallowed in an effort to keep them from falling. She wiped her face with her gloved hands, but they kept coming back.

“I know that. I’m not stupid. I’m not stupid!”

The gloves were likely a gift from her parents, and the tears wetting them were on her parents’ behalf, too. No one was there to dry them. The one who would was long gone.

“But I can see the mountain from my house.” She pleaded with these strangers in the hopes that someone, anyone, could understand what she was going through. “My house...is close to the mountain. Why would they build it in a place like that?”

This likely wasn’t the first time.

Sakura finally began to accept this unusual situation.

“When I wake up every morning and open the curtains...I can see where my mom is.”

She had snuck out here today, too.

“I can see Mount Ryugu every day. No matter what I do.”

She came to the mountain to see the person she could never meet again.

“I know it’s dumb, but I can see the mountain... I see the graveyard...”

Many times, Nazuna had asked herself if her actions meant anything, but she couldn’t stop. Others might be able to, but not her.

“It was fine in the summer. The flowers were pretty, and she didn’t seem so alone.”

She cleared the snow, digging and digging—with an empty mind, careful motions, and all her soul.

“It was fine in autumn. The fallen leaves made a bed.”

It wasn’t that she didn’t accept her mother’s death. She knew what lay beneath the ground.

“But winter...”

She knew her mother was no longer there.

“In winter, she looks so cold.”

But she couldn't stop herself.

"She looks so lonely in all this white."

She could never stop.

"And I see it all the time. I can't help it. When I go to school, when I come back home, when I greet Dad at the door—every time. Every single time."

Because, inside her, her mother still lived.

"My mom is here in the mountain. It's not weird."

She lived on. She was there. This wasn't about logic. It didn't matter what anyone said. To Nazuna, she was there. And nobody could change that.

But will you let that wear you away until you're alone yourself?

Sakura gulped down her own words. She couldn't say it.

"..."

She couldn't say it. How could she? She had been guilty of the same once. She had no right.

I never stopped looking even when they told me to give it up.

Sakura had also experienced loss. Ridiculing Nazuna would mean ridiculing her past self.

It's like a disease. You can't stop yourself.

To grieve was to love. Many people acted in similar ways, but not all exactly the same. Although it looked strange to Sakura, clearing the snow from her mother's grave was Nazuna's way to grieve. And it wasn't anyone's place to criticize her methods. After all, this was a war that happened only inside the griever.

Nazuna would always look at the mountain as long as she was home. Day or night, the mountain would be there, reminding her that her mother was there, all alone and cold and lonely. So she would go clear the snow from her grave.

Sakura couldn't say any more after picturing Nazuna's heartache.

Her lady spoke in her stead. "Hinagiku...understands, Nazu...na. You just..."

want...to do this...for your...mom, right?"

"Yes."

"You think...she might...be...glad, right?"

"...Yes."

"Even though she's...buried...she'd prefer...not to be...cold."

"She would!"

Sakura kept quiet as Nazuna glanced at her, silently asking what she thought.

"Sakura," Hinagiku called her name from behind.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

Hinagiku had taken off her inverness coat and scarf.

Sakura had no idea what the current temperature was, but she knew it was cold enough to make a huge difference.

"Hinagiku thinks...people have...different ways to...grieve...so..."

Sakura immediately realized why she had taken off the coat.

"Don't...disparage...hers. Nazuna...is just...doing the...best she can."

She felt her chest wrenching at the thought of what the goddess wanted to do.

"She just...wants to...show her love...to her...mom."

You always worry about other people only.

Sakura's chest burned at the resolute sight of her lady. And urged by her resolve, Sakura turned to look at Nazuna.

"Nazuna...I get it. You just love your mother that much."

Nazuna finally stopped showing anger at the sound of that.

"Yes. I do."

Her face relaxed as she continued shoveling away the snow. Quietly, without asking for help.

"Lady Hinagiku."

The other two looked at each other, knowing what should be done next.

“...Yes.”

Lady and retainer stared deep into each other's eyes and conversed, transported into their own world.

“She doesn't know. You were gone for ten years. Nazuna's lived most of her life without spring.”

“...Yes. That's...right.”

The sight of her small back shoveling the snow sent a sharp twinge to Sakura's chest.

“I'm sure that she...” Sakura thought about what they could do for the girl. “She...”

They could help her in her work and give her a moment of satisfaction. Then they'd take her back to her father. Then...

That won't solve anything.

It would give her no comfort. It wasn't their place to intrude.

But she did not want to be the sort of person who would stand there and do nothing.

“She needs what we're here to do, Lady Hinagiku.”

Sakura felt they needed to show her. Show her why the harbinger of spring existed and what sort of effect spring had on peoples' lives.

“Yes...Saku...ra. You're...right. Hinagiku...thinks the same.” The spring goddess spoke with a sunny, warm smile. “She...needs it. They really...needed me. They do, don't they, Sakura?”

“Yes. Of course they need you. We need you.”

Sakura respectfully took Hinagiku's coat and pulled a fan out of her bag.

“Lady Hinagiku, the time has come. Let us behold the cherry blossoms. Let us call for spring.”

A luxury folding fan of delicate craftsmanship. Not something a girl her age

would own, and yet it fit perfectly in Hinagiku's hand. She opened the fan, liberating the smell of spring.

"An Agent may not use their power thoughtlessly... But surely the Agency would pardon us for holding the ritual here, for the sake of one of our woeful children. The time has come, Agent of Spring. This is your entrance, Lady Hinagiku Kayo. If you so please...bring spring to Ryugu."

Hinagiku nodded at Sakura's words.

"It is...all right...my child." She spoke with the sweetness of candy, with a mix of luscious enchantment. "Spring...will come...once more."

After a shiver, Hinagiku steeled herself and walked up to the snowy grave.

Sakura gulped down as she looked over them.

"Nazu...na." She called her name as the child continued restlessly shoving away the snow. Nazuna stopped right away. "I'm...ready. I'll show you...spring. Here."

Nazuna let out a white breath, her cheeks frozen and nose red.

Her mother wouldn't want to see her like this. She would worry that it was her child who was getting cold. But she wasn't there anymore.

"When spring comes...the snow thaws. And so will...your mom. She...won't be cold...anymore. You won't...need to...clear...any more snow."

Her mother wasn't there to worry about her anymore.

"...Really?"

She wasn't there to pick her hat and scarf and gloves for her anymore.

"Yes...but...it'll be our...secret. The truth is...Hinagiku shouldn't...be showing...it. But Hinagiku...can tell...that you...need...this. And that's why..."

Only Nazuna was left behind. There was only so much mourning one could do, and it wouldn't change her reality. Relief came to those living who walked hand in hand to tomorrow.

"...I will...show you...the manifes...tation of...spring...here."

Hinagiku smiled the softest smile and decided to gift this girl her season.

Sakura picked Nazuna up from behind and took her away from the grave. She meant to hold her down so she wouldn't get in the way of the ritual, but the child showed no resistance. She looked up at Sakura and smiled. They hadn't exactly hit it off on their way to this place, but finally, she felt they had opened up to each other, if only a little. Sakura's voice softened.

"Listen, Nazuna. I'll explain to you what Lady Hinagiku is about to do."

Hinagiku evened out the snow at her feet, delineating the area of the open space she would be using for the ritual.

"The Agents of the Four Seasons were entrusted with the power to bring the seasons to the land."

Once Hinagiku finished leveling the ground, it was time for her to let her spirit level out, too. She took a deep breath, then slowly released it.

"The Agent of Spring has Life Stimulation. The Agent of Summer has Life Operation. The Agent of Autumn has Life Putrefaction. And the Agent of Winter has Life Coagulation. There are many types of rituals for the blooming of spring...and the one Lady Hinagiku showed me back when we met was only for making flowers bloom. Manifesting spring is something different entirely."

Her clothes fluttered as her body moved and she swung the fan.

"First, there's a verbal spell. Whenever we refer to *the song*, we're talking about the songs of the four seasons. Each Agent inherits one song for their corresponding season. The Agent of Spring sings the Song of Spring to bring sunlight and stimulate the development of life. Then there is the dancing spell. Dancing is a ritual honoring the Four Seasons, one that has given us power all around the world since ancient times. By combining both, they can extend their power to a wide area."

Singing and dancing was done in all countries, no matter the differences in language or customs. It was also occasionally done to honor the gods.

The Agents of the Four Seasons were able to use the powers entrusted to them without doing anything special, but in order to manifest the season across the land, they had to follow the system.

Meanwhile, Nazuna didn't seem to understand a third of Sakura's rapid

explanation. Her eyes were full of questions.

“I don’t get it.”

“...” How could she put it so even a child could understand? “Um...” She thought for a while, then gave up. “Lady Hinagiku’s gonna sing and dance; then spring will come, basically. You must have seen spring before...but maybe you don’t remember, since you would have been two at most.”

“You mean...I could’ve seen it with my mom?”

“The Agents bring the seasons to every corner of the country. And being in Ryugu, you must’ve seen it earlier than anywhere else. It’s a beautiful season.”

Nazuna nodded repeatedly in excitement.

“...It’s about to begin.”

The fan, decorated with silver bells and strings of all colors, opened before Hinagiku’s face. She gave a beguiling sidelong glance and swung the fan before kicking her heels on the ground. The bell chimed, and by the time Hinagiku’s feet touched the ground once again, the air around her had changed.

Sakura heard Nazuna gasp.

The girl wreathed in spring danced in prayer on the snowy graveyard. Her fluttering sleeves slashed through the air as her prayer reached the Four Seasons and her powers took form.

My eyes. My ears, my skin, my senses...

Her goddess left Sakura’s heart in disarray even on a normal day.

She’s taken hold of every part of me.

The sight of her as she pleaded for spring was astonishing.

“Sheathe your edge, O hazy Moon.”

Not a poem, but a song—a clear melody carried the recital.

The fan’s strings waved gently in the air.

Red, pink, green, and blue strings intermingled, wrapping and unwrapping around Hinagiku’s limbs as she danced.

“As mist shivers in the night...”

The angel danced with light steps, as though free from the confines of gravity.
Something had taken over Hinagiku.

She was Spring itself, calling for her season. And that something took over, ascending her to the divine.

The wind of spring tickled their noses.

“Endure your longing and let the Spring Banquet shine.”

The snow beneath their feet had already vanished.

Spring spread from the center of Hinagiku’s dance; flowers bloomed with her every step.

The Agent of Spring brought the world to life.

“Let the hills and fields spill over with wisteria; let the land dye itself with crucifers.”

And the earth followed her words.

The chill in the air that froze their breath dissipated.

Now this place was enveloped in the energy and sunlight of spring.

“No flower blooms forever, my dear Winter, but forever I will follow after you, as does the moon.”

Hinagiku jumped and twirled, glancing coyly to the side.

Lush cherry blossom trees bloomed all around.

Nature was in full bloom at the height of its splendor. This was spring manifest.



She did it.

Sakura let the emotion wash over her as she stood in a blizzard of cherry blossom petals.

You did it, Lady Hinagiku.

Sakura had been distressed, actually. The path they walked there had been long and steep; often she had thought this day would never come again.

But you did it.

Many times, they were ready to give up. Many times, the both of them had wept like children. They had no allies. No one to protect them. So they traveled alone.

It's a perfect manifestation of spring.

Sakura felt her chest tighten at the reminder of their past struggles.

"Nazuna, this is it. This is spring. Beautiful, isn't it?"

However, Nazuna's reaction wasn't the elated reply she had been expecting.

"...Sakura."

A drop of water, like melted snow, fell on the back of Sakura's hand. It took her a moment to realize it was Nazuna's tears as she held her.

"I know this..."

She was crying at the advent of spring, and the tears falling down her cheeks were as beautiful as diamonds.

"I knew about this...", she said in between sobs. Her tears didn't stop, and her voice was tight. "I've...seen this with my mom..."

Sakura could hear how frustrated she was with herself for forgetting.

"I've seen this pink stuff."

She reached out for a petal in the air, but she couldn't catch it. She laughed through her tears.

"I've breathed this warm air."

The sunlight illuminated her glossy hair and skin. The child, only twelve, wailed at the sight of the sun thawing away the snow.

The layers of snow covering her mother's tomb melted away.

"This..."

Nazuna's voice rose with excitement as long-gone memories came back to mind. That time would never return, but the memories were here.

"I've seen this... I've seen spring with my mom."

She didn't know where she had been back then.

That vision was already faded in her mind. Likely, it was a popular spot they had visited for viewing the cherry blossoms.

"It's so crowded. Will we find somewhere to sit?"

The world had been bright and beautiful to her baby eyes. There were many adults there, but she could not tell who they were. Rows of stalls surrounded her, as the people around all laughed and the birds flew overhead. The largest silhouettes in her unsteady field of vision were her mother and her father.

"I don't think the baby can even tell what she's looking at."

"Don't say that. It's all about the experience. Right, Nazuna?"

They talked to her every day; they gave her warmth and sweet words whenever she felt uneasy. They were her guardians.

"All right. Come here, Nazuna."

After a while, her mother took her away from the stroller and into her arms. With her sight unobstructed, she saw crowds of people walking by the cherry blossom trees.

"Look!"

All around her were images and colors she couldn't experience in her closed little world. Nazuna usually fretted whenever they took her out, but on this day, she was in high spirits. She reached out to try and catch a petal, and although she failed, it was fun.

"See? She's so happy. She wants to grab a petal. Let's help her out."

Her mother raised her up high among the dancing cherry blossoms. The blue of the sky, the white of the clouds, and the pink of the petals looked like something out of a beautiful dream to Nazuna.

“Hee-hee. She won’t stop giggling.”

Though unable to name the emotion welling up inside her, Nazuna engraved it into her heart. Amazed and delighted, she couldn’t help but heartily laugh at the vibrant colors and overflowing hope in the world around her. Her father joined and held her. He raised her higher and rougher than her mother.

“Nazuna.” Her mother called her name, peering into her eyes. *“Look. This is spring,”* she explained, as she no longer could in the present. If only she could have taught her so much more.

Back then, her family’s future was protected. There was nothing to harm them.

“Nazuna, listen carefully to what I’m about to say. Your mother...was coming back. She came back in the middle of her work. But... something happened before she could. Now...she’s sleeping. And she’ll keep sleeping. She won’t wake up again. She went to sleep... before even I could get to see her again. So now... From now on, we’ll be...”

Back then, her family's future was bright. Nothing was supposed to harm them, and yet...

“I’ve...seen spring.”

Nazuna whispered in a trance.

“I saw it...with my mom.”

She felt as though she’d found a hidden treasure chest.

“It was when I was a little baby.”

Her voice rose with jubilation.

“There’s gotta be a photo of this in my house. I need to ask my dad to find it.”

There were no more new memories to make with her mother, and she’d believed the only ones she had left were sad ones—but she still held on to some happy ones, too. It was the most precious gem she could have found.

“Sakura, Sakura.” Nazuna pulled her arm.

Sakura couldn’t answer right away. “...Wait a second,” she finally replied, her voice trembling. “...Just wait a second. Lady Hinagiku’s been working hard...for people like you.”

Sakura was struggling not to cry, and Nazuna was taken aback.

“She didn’t want to do it, but she put in the effort...for the sake of others.”

She could hardly believe an adult would cry, but then she realized.

“It’s finally paid off...and it hurts.”

This was spring.

“Just seeing it hurts here, in my chest...”

This was what the season of spring did.

“Your happiness makes me so happy, too. Spring is here.”

It thawed the ice in people’s hearts; it melted away the snow in people’s souls.

“...Yes, I am so happy.”

And indeed, Nazuna felt the ice in her heart completely melting away. At first, she couldn’t have imagined getting along with Sakura, but now she felt so close.

She was the most at peace she'd ever been.

"It's weird," she said. "Why did I forget? I had these precious memories with my mom and my dad, when I was a baby... So why couldn't I remember?"

Her words melted into the spring vista like prayers.

"Will I forget it all again?"

Nazuna never wanted to forget this image for the rest of her life. The color of the cherry blossoms, so beautiful, so dreamlike. A color unlike any marble or toy ring—the color of spring. She was overcome with emotion. Tears overflowed in her eyes like ocean waves. Was this part of spring, too?

"I want to show this...to my dad, too."

She blinked, and the waves ran down her cheeks. They touched her lips, and they tasted salty. Her throat tightened, and then more waves swelled and broke, and the whole cycle repeated itself once again.

Why did crying make her chest hurt so much? Why did it drench her body and soul like the rain? If only stopping tears was as easy as opening an umbrella.

"Hey, Sakura..."

Nazuna stared at the scenery, impressing it upon her memory, and spoke as the thoughts came to mind.

"...I want to be an Agent of Spring." Now she knew the warmth and color of the morning sun. "Then I could melt the snow on my mom's grave even when it's winter."

The lonely void inside her was filled with this moment and nothing more.

"And then my dad would also be happy. He'd be so proud."

The warmth and gentleness wouldn't last forever, but they would stay with her for all eternity. The warmth of spring that made the miracle unfolding before her eyes possible.

"Can I...?"

"...No," Sakura answered. "There is only one Agent per season per country," she said clearly but with regret.

Nazuna's shoulders slumped.

"But you can be proud of yourself..." Sakura continued encouragingly. "Lady Hinagiku brought spring to Yamato for the first time in ten years for your sake."

The beautiful sound of Sakura's voice would stay in Nazuna's ears for the rest of her life.

"Be proud. You may feel lonely now, but the world loves you."

Even when she felt down, good tidings would come. The unconditional love of the seasons remained by her side.

Hinagiku finished her dance and bowed deeply.

"Thank you...for...watching. Spring...has...come."

And so spring manifested in Ryugu.

Spring came with color.

Summer came with cheer.

Autumn came with tranquility.

And winter came with silence.

"Although it didn't take place at the specified location, spring has manifested across this land. Congratulations, Lady Hinagiku."

In the beginning, there was Winter.

Winter was once the only season in the world. When the loneliness of such an existence became too much to bear, it took a shard of its own life to create a new one.

"Thanks... Good thing...we sent...Nazuna...home."

Spring admired Winter as its teacher and trailed behind it day after day. Winter met Spring's esteem with guidance, and the two seasons cycled each other in intimate harmony.

But the land cried out in protest, demanding time to rest.

"...I hope she grows up healthy."

The creatures would fall in love, then soon plunge into slumber; the trees

would grow green, then freeze over. The land claimed endless Winter was better than the current state of affairs. The Winter was too excruciating now that it had known Spring.

Winter was disheartened to hear these grievances but listened to the land's wishes, once again creating new lives from its own. So came Summer and Autumn.

"Lady Hinagiku, I just realized...there's a helicopter. It's the Agency's. They must be here for us. Shall we run?"

The harsh heat of Summer was born from Winter's cries after being rejected by the land. Autumn was born from the hope that the gradual loss of life would let the land welcome Winter once again.

The land accepted these terms, and the four seasons were established.

"But...it's spring...already. Hinagiku feels...bad...for them. How about...we let...them catch...us?"

As they all followed one another, the world followed their cycle. Spring ran after Winter, with Summer and Autumn behind them. Winter could always turn around and find Spring there, but it wasn't the same anymore.

"Very well, Lady Hinagiku."

Spring and Winter's honeymoon was over.

Winter loved Spring. It loved as the creatures of the earth loved and wed. And Spring, too, as if by fate, loved Winter back.

"Your ritual was wonderful. Please be confident in yourself, Lady Hinagiku. You've proved that you can manifest spring by your own will."

Summer and Autumn noticed their hidden feelings and proposed to let residents of the land assume the responsibilities of their roles.

These creatures would receive part of their power and cross the land over a year. Agents of the Four Seasons.

"Only because...you asked Hinagiku...to show you...spring."

At first, they let cows assume the role, but they were too slow and let the

winter stay winter year-round.

Then they tried with rabbits, but wolves devoured them.

The birds did the job perfectly—until the next year, when they forgot all about it.

“And if...it’s for...you...”

As the four seasons began to despair, the humans volunteered themselves. They asked, in exchange for becoming Agents, that the land bring good harvest and peace.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter gave a piece of their power to the humans, and so Winter was permitted to indulge in its love for Spring forever.

So were the Agents of the Four Seasons born.

“Hinagiku can...do it...when it’s...for you. Hinagiku can...do it all...for you.”

Sakura covered Hinagiku from the wind of the helicopter approaching the spring-covered mountain, shooting it a defiant stare.

No matter what comes next, I have to protect her.

“Do you have any regrets, Lady Hinagiku?”

The spring goddess tilted her head.

“...Ten years ago, when you were kidnapped, spring vanished from this country.”

Sakura was being deliberately blunt.

“Now you’re returning. You will be the center of attention. People who don’t know what happened will say their piece without any thought or consideration.”

She paused to bite her lip in pain, then continued.

“They’ll say, Poor girl. She must be disheartened. Will someone so damaged even do her work properly? Can she do it? What did they do to her? Their words will sting.”

Every word she said was hurting her, too.

“They’ll sting even more than today. Can you bear all that?”

The interrogation sounded harsh, but this was Sakura’s wish.

Can you take it?

She prayed to her goddess, pleading to fight fate together with her.

“...” After a moment, Hinagiku replied, “Yes.” The small spring goddess nodded firmly. “Hinagiku can...take it. No matter what...anyone...says.”

She nodded, her eyes set on her retainer. No lies. She was ready.

“You sure about answering that so easily?”

Sakura smiled, misty-eyed, with the joy of a girl whose offer of a date had been accepted.

“It’s...fine.” Her goddess smiled, too, and spoke with full confidence in her. “After all...you’ll be...there...protecting Hinagiku.”

Her trusting eyes glittered like the morning sun.

“And you...won’t...leave...right?” she asked.

“I’ll be here with you, Lady Hinagiku.”

I would die for this woman, Sakura thought.

My goddess.

Bells sounded in her head. She felt as though all the pain she had endured across her life had been for this day.

In this moment, she knew once again that her loyalty to this goddess was real.

In sickness and in health.

It wasn’t because of a feeling of responsibility.

In joy and in sorrow.

You could hardly call it a sense of duty.

For richer or for poorer.

If she had to name it, she’d call it fate.

I promise to cherish and respect you.

In truth, it was faith.

I promise to comfort you and encourage you.

It just so happened the object of her faith was indeed a goddess.

So long as I live, I vow to fight for your sake.

She was granted another opportunity to make up for her failure to give her life back then.

And she would do anything. For this was her faith.

“Lady Hinagiku... If I ever fail to protect you again, it will be because I am dead.”

I bear the sin of failing to rescue you ten years ago, and I will carry it until my last day on earth.

“And I’ll gladly give my life for you.”

The Agents of the Four Seasons were gods incarnate, holders of supernatural powers originating from spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The four seasons would not come to places they did not visit.

The seasons came equally everywhere, to everyone. Whether it be a village in a valley, a big city brimming with lights and people, an old, abandoned battlefield, or a mountain inhabited by a single hermit. They all received the gifts of the powers granted to the Agents by the exalted Four Seasons.

This is a story about these Agents. A continuation of the myth. A tale of murder, of salvation, of friendship—of spring, of summer, of autumn, and of winter.

A story of love like any other.

And a story of the interweaving lives of the people in this odd little world.

The story finally begins now.

This is a dream.

Hah. Hah. Hah.

I'm dreaming. I can't breathe.

Hah. Hah. Hah. Hah.

I'm dreaming, and yet I'm gasping for air.

A sprawling, snowy field. I can barely see. My legs are weak.

"Rosei!"

Itecho screams.

It's a horrible sound. My nerves are shot.

I want to stop running.

"Rosei! Keep it up! Run!"

I know.

My throat is closing, and my breath comes in wheezes.

Run. Even if it rips my throat apart.

"They'll kill us!"

Run. Even if my lungs collapse.

Stop running and it's over.

"Run around, around, get ahead of them! The boy's the Agent of Winter! Kill him!"

The men are hunting us.

They just want us dead. Life means nothing here.

I'm forgetting something. Someone.

The memory grips my chest.

Yes. It's ———

"Run! Rosei!"

I know. I have to keep running, or I'll lose.

My eyes lock onto the girl in Itecho's arms.

I want to be sure. But the snow, the freezing cold, everything coming from inside gets in the way.

I want to see her face.

My body won't listen to me, even here in a dream.

The fear is like shackles on my mind. I can't do anything but run.

I want to see ——'s face.

"Look out!"

Then a gunshot.

I'm shoved away. My vision is spinning. What happened?

"Take care of Lady ——!"

Someone took the hit for me. More anxiety.

My back hurts from the blow.

"Go! Quick!"

Sakura, you don't have to protect me. Stop.

The same dream unfolds. The same one I've seen a thousand times.

I hate this. I hate this. I hate this.

"Sakuraaa...!"

—— in Itecho's arms, crying.

I'm going crazy. How did this happen?

We'd been chatting peacefully just moments before.

Now strangers have destroyed our lives beyond repair.

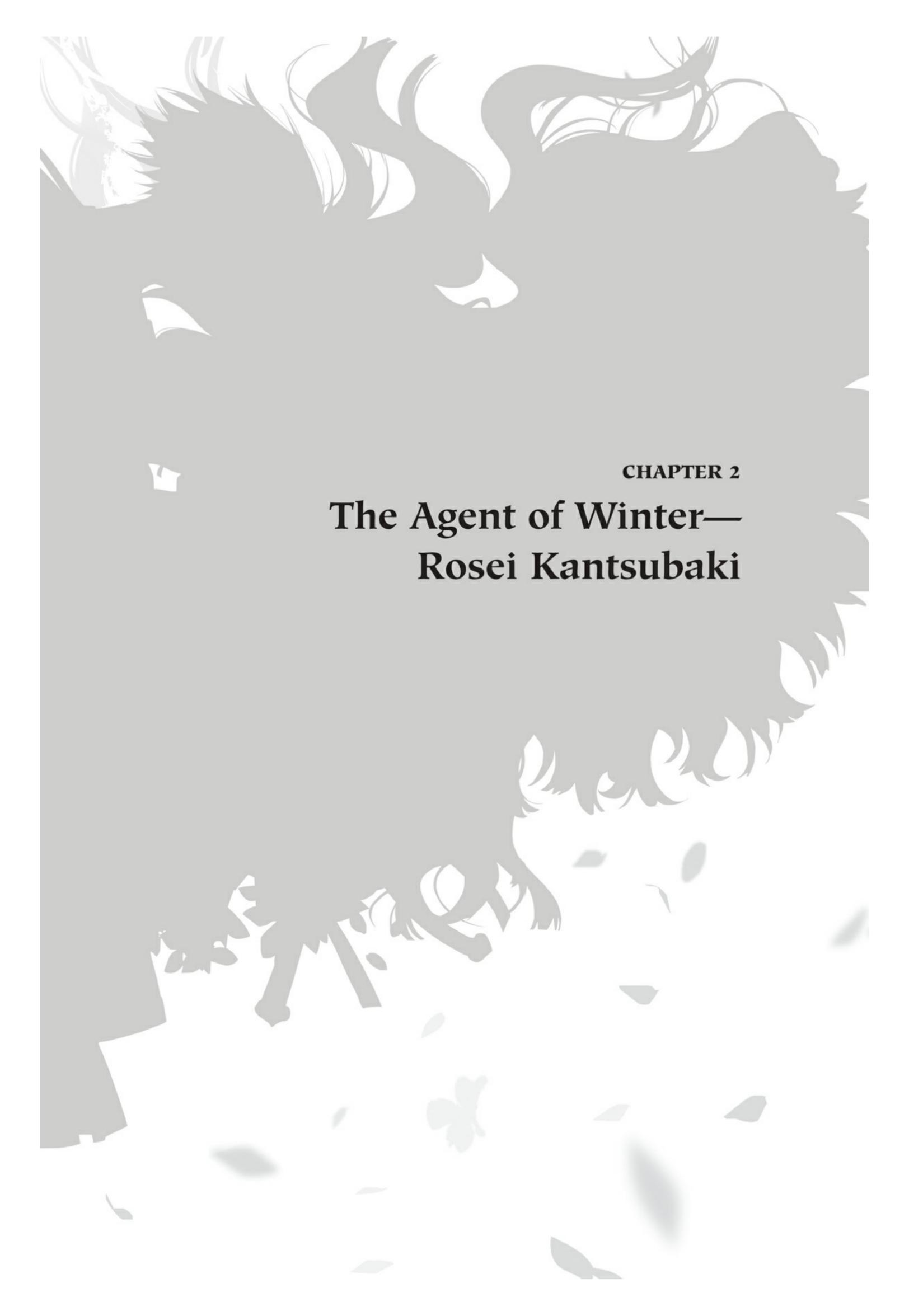
Why? What do they get out of this? Do they enjoy it? What did we do?

This isn't right. What did we do to deserve this?

Oh, but that's not the worst of it. Not by far.

Why won't anybody say it?

Why won't anybody tell me I was better off dying back then?



CHAPTER 2

**The Agent of Winter—
Rosei Kantsubaki**

“ ”

The young God of Winter awoke from his slumber and hoarsely muttered something, not yet fully awake.

From inside the black luxury car, he stared at the view out the window like it was a friend he hadn't seen in a long while.

He had a shapely, if intimidating face. He had shadowed eyes, thin lips, and raven-colored hair.

His profile looked boyish still; the relatively mature air about him emanated from an internal poise. There was a certain grace to the way he blinked his eyes and rested his hand on the window. His kimono was something no common man would have the luxury to wear—a purplish black *nagagi* on top, a black *juban* with golden embroidery underneath, and a light gray *haori* coat. His shoes matched the color scheme as well. One could tell at a glance it was all custom-made. The young man was a work of art himself, and the aura around him made him hard to approach.

The car was quiet, like a funeral, until he opened the window. The sound of the wind rushed inside, as did the chirping of the birds and the rustle of the trees.

Around them was a breathtaking, dreamlike view.

The location was Tsukushi. The date February 28, Reimei 20.

Two weeks had passed since the Agent of Spring, Hinagiku, brought her season to Ryugu.

Everyone all over Yamato celebrated the first coming of spring in ten years, and flower-viewing festivals were held in every corner. The luxury car was stuck in traffic due to such an event, so the sounds of nature were joined by voices from several radios.

“We’ve received well wishes from all over the world for the first appearance of spring in ten years here in Yamato—”

“The sudden increase of spring tourism has stock prices rising across the board —”

“The US president has sent us a personal word of congratulations. Presents from the Agents of Spring all around the world are arriving at Yamato’s Agency —”

“The question is, though, where was Yamato’s Agent of Spring for the past ten years? Experts weigh in—”

The young man closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the spring air. As he let it out, a rare sense of peace surfaced in his normally grave expression.

Spring blessings were coming from everywhere.

“Rosei, close the window.”

The moment of tranquility ended when his retainer, sitting beside him, interrupted his pleasant reverie.

While the young God of Winter’s beauty was smooth and clean, the retainer had an unruly charm about him. He looked to be about in his late twenties, early thirties.

He had black hair with silver highlights, like snow embraced by the night. He attempted to hide his raw attractiveness beneath a pair of sunglasses, but it managed to overflow anyway. From afar, his clothing looked like a simple three-piece suit with a black jacket and dark-gray vest, but up close, you could notice the fine golden embroidery that matched his master’s design. His tall, lean figure in his tailored outfit was envied by men and women alike. The only incongruous element of his appearance was the katana he carried on his waist. When quiet, he seemed like a serene butler whose every action oozed seductive charisma.

“What if they shoot at us? Shut the window.”

But when he opened his mouth, he sounded like a mother. Or father.

“Shut up, Itecho.”

Meanwhile, the young master sounded like a rebellious teenager.

“...”

His retainer tried closing the window himself, but Rosei elbowed him.

Itecho adjusted his sunglasses and sighed. “That’s enough mischief,” he admonished in his pleasant voice. Itecho’s sharp eyes were particularly stern, but Rosei only glared back.

The car was stopped, but if it moved now, they were close enough for an undignified accident.

“Move, Itecho.”

“I will not, Rosei.”

“...”

“...”

“Who would shoot us out here? We’re in a mountain pass.”

“Perhaps, but the car is stopped. It’s the perfect chance for anyone who wants to assassinate you.”

“I don’t see anyone within range. Are they gonna climb a tree or something?”

“It wouldn’t shock me to learn the extremists got their hands on long-range sniper rifles. We must keep all possibilities in mind. You think we’re spending extra on the bulletproof glass just for show? This is for your safety.”

“Just give me a second, okay? It’s been ten years since I last saw spring.”

“Since anyone in Yamato saw spring.”

“I can feel it: Hinagiku’s...Hinagiku’s back. Just give me two seconds.”

He seemed to struggle after saying her name. He was speaking so quietly that Itecho could barely hear him from inches away. Itecho stared at his master and sighed.

“You’ll get to meet Lady Hinagiku soon. We’ve an Agency Council coming up.”

“...I know. Did we get a reply to our letter?”

“No. They probably don’t want to see us. But we won’t let that stop us. It’s thanks to her that we’re alive now... We must say our thanks face-to-face. A letter won’t do.”

“...”

“You don’t want to see her?”

“...I do. But I don’t think she wants to see me.”

Rosei wanted his retainer to deny it, but Itecho grimaced.

“...I don’t know if that’s Lady Hinagiku’s opinion or her retainer’s...Sakura’s... but it does look that way. It’s not that surprising. Lady Hinagiku would be disturbed to see you, and she might even say to stay away forever.”

Rosei lowered his head, his faint hopes shattered. But he didn’t want to give up entirely. “At the very least, we’ll meet at the Agency Council. She might yell at me or even hit me...but I’ll still get to see her. Let’s keep hoping until then. I wanna do anything I can to help. Okay, Itecho?”

“Of course. I will arrange for anything we can do.”

“So on that note, you got any reports from the guards we sent? Like...how’s she doing?” he asked with a hoarse, lonely voice.

Itecho opened his mouth to answer, but after a bit of hesitation, he closed it.

“...” He tried again, his voice low. “There is. But it’s not good news.”

“...Did she notice we’re protecting her in secret? Sakura would be furious...”

“No, it doesn’t seem they’ve noticed. That’s not it... The report says...that she’s been acting differently from before she was kidnapped.”

Fear surfaced in Rosei’s expression. “Different...how? Is she hurt? Is she disabled?”

Itecho chose his words carefully. “No, that’s not it. Objectively speaking, she’s grown up well, but on the inside, she seems like a different person...”

Pain prickled Rosei’s heart.

Wait. He wanted to know how Hinagiku was doing, but a voice in his head asked him to stop.

“They say it’s as though it’s a different child in the vessel.”

Wait, please.

It was far worse than he could have imagined.

“It also seems likely her mental age stopped in early childhood. Maybe it’s a kind of PTSD. I sent survivors from the village, people who’ve been watching over us since back then. So you can take it as truth.”

Rosei let out a muffled scream. He squeezed his eyes shut.

I knew someone would tell me something like that one day.

He wallowed for a while, but he couldn’t ignore reality forever. He opened his eyes again and asked Itecho to continue. “What else?”

“It seems she has a hard time speaking smoothly now. Not stuttering, exactly, but pausing a lot.”

“Did they say anything good? Anything?”

“She successfully brought spring to Ryugu.”

Rosei let out a pained sigh. “Keep the guards on her. Let’s wait and see for a while before meeting her.”

“All right.”

“If I’d thought about it more, I would have realized...” Rosei’s voice was suffused with guilt. His hair fell over his eyes, hiding the way they shone with sadness. “The notice of spring’s return came in too abruptly. It manifested in Ryugu as soon as we heard about it. It’s strange.”

“Yeah...”

“That means her return was kept hidden from the Agency after we searched for her for ten years. There must have been a problem. If she’s still mentally a child, then it’s likely they’re forcing her to do her job. She’s probably on thin ice right now.”

“Sakura appears to be protecting Lady Hinagiku, but I also heard she might be overexerting herself... We’re the only ones who can help, Rosei.”

“...And I want to. Funny how the biggest reason I can’t is because of me, huh? If only someone else could take over as Agent of Winter, maybe the world would be a better place for her... I’d do it right this moment if she wanted.”

“Rosei...”

Itecho placed his hand on Rosei's cheek, and their faces drew even closer. Itecho gave him a comforting gaze, and when the distance between them was nearly gone...

"Gwah!"

...Itecho dealt him a violent headbutt.

The impact shook the car itself. The tremor and scream made the driver frantically lower the partition window. When he saw Rosei in pain and Itecho adjusting his sunglasses, the driver realized it was business as usual and closed it again.

"Never say that again!"

Rosei was seeing stars and groaned at the impromptu lesson. "Why couldn't you just say that?! Did you need to hit me?!"

Rosei was getting teary-eyed from the pain, but Itecho's face remained cool.

"Yes. Words don't get through to you, hence why you didn't shut the window. And why you speak so poorly of yourself. You have such a gift for making me sad, I just had to use my head."

"That's not what using your head means! How about I get someone else to take over as my retainer, huh?"

Itecho frowned and reared back for another headbutt, but Rosei quickly put his hand out. They struggled against each other in silence.

After a few moments of brotherly roughhousing, someone knocked on the door on the opposite side of the rear seats. Rosei and Itecho glanced at each other, while the driver opened the partition again. "It's Lady Ishihara from the Agency. She looked into the reason for the traffic jam."

The member of the Security Department of the Maintenance Division of the Four Seasons Agency had accompanied them on the trip. Itecho opened the door, and TV-announcer-looking Ishihara was standing there with a nervous expression.

"It is awful out there."

"What's the matter, Ms. Ishihara? Will it take more time?"

“No... Lord Itecho, your fears were correct. There’s a traffic accident right by the turn on the road ahead. A truck coming this way hit a car right by the cliff, and it’s about to fall off. It’s over if the guardrail breaks.”

Rosei sat up straight. “Is there anyone in the car?”

“A family. I don’t know how many, but I heard a small child crying. The people behind them want to help out, but there’s not much they can do without a lifeline.”

“...Understandably so. I imagine someone’s called the authorities already, but I doubt they can get here soon. I’ll do something with the tools we’ve got in the car. We’ve got most things needed for emergencies. Ms. Ishihara, you take care of Rosei...”

“Got it.”

Itecho froze in place as he heard Rosei open the door.

“...Rosei?” He turned around, but his charge was no longer there. “Rosei! Stop right there! Ms. Ishihara, stop him!”

“Y-yes!”

Itecho scrambled out of the car. Many drivers were standing around, tired of the mysterious traffic jam, smoking or talking on the phone to pass the time. The one person in odd clothing grabbed the attention of everyone as he made his way across the cars.

“Rosei!”

A young man clad in traditional dress was already an unusual sight in Yamato, not to mention the extravagance of his black-and-gold attire. He looked like a mage tearing apart the colors of spring. The panicked man and young woman in suits chasing after him and yelling at him to stop gathered even more attention.

“Rosei! For pity’s sake!”

“Lord Rosei! Please wait! You can’t just go rubbernecking!”

“I’m not rubbernecking.”

Itecho caught up to Rosei and grabbed his arm, but he quickly let go as snow

crystals cracked on the surface he touched. Upon escaping, Rosei switched from a fast walk to a run.

“Rosei! Dammit! How could you use that against a friend?! And how come you’re so fast in a kimono?!”

“Lord Itecho, Lord Rosei covered the ground with ice! I’m wearing pumps! I-I’ll slip!”

“You think you can stop us, Rosei?! Rosei!”

Rosei skated across the frozen ground. “No, I’m just warming up,” he replied. “If that makes sense. I can see it now.”

Rosei came to a sudden halt, making Itecho and Ishihara bump against his back. Itecho grunted as he was sandwiched between the other two, but his protests quickly died.

“...This is terrible.”

The first thing that caught his eye was the large truck that had overturned, blocking the road.

The driver had been rescued; he lay on the road, receiving treatment. As for the car, it was just barely up thanks to the guardrail, which was bent in a U shape. Cries could be heard from inside. The driver’s face was covered by the airbag, but they weren’t moving. Probably unconscious—maybe even dead. The front glass was shattered, covered in blood.

Can we help them?

Itecho was intent on being strong, but he couldn’t help doubting. The car was just barely keeping its balance, but it was only a matter of time before it slid off the cliff.

The slightest touch could send it over.

Any motion from the occupants was risky, too.

Everyone watching the catastrophe was doing so from afar.

Meanwhile, Rosei had come to a sudden halt. He took a fan out of his kimono’s sleeve and opened it, and cold air spread around it.

“Rosei, are you serious?” Itecho asked.

Rosei nodded.

Itecho wrinkled his shapely brow and snatched the fan away from him. “That’s against the Four Seasons Code.”

Rosei forcibly took back the fan. “No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is. Even if our people are in danger, you must not use your divine powers for reasons other than to manifest the season. That’s clause number one of the Code. I know how you feel...but we can’t act lightly. I’ll...I’ll help the people inside. You go back to the car.”

“...Hey, Ishihara.”

Ishihara had been holding her breath, listening to their conversation, and she jumped at hearing her name all of a sudden.

“Y-yes, sir!” Ishihara was floundering in the middle of this argument.

“Recite clause two of the Four Seasons Code.”

And now she was being rudely ordered around.

“...Huh?”

“Recite it, Ishihara!”

“Y-y-y-yes!” She was confident in her own memory; despite her agitation, she quoted it right away. “Clause two of the Four Seasons Code: ‘When an Agent of the Four Seasons finds themselves in trouble, they may use their divine powers on others!’”

“Good job, Ishihara.” Rosei slapped the small woman hard on the back, and she stumbled forward.

“Th-th-th-thank you.”

“Listen to me, Itecho. We’re stuck in traffic and running away from the radicals. The insurgents could attack at any moment, don’t you think?”

“Which is why I told you to close the damn window.”

“And the traffic jam isn’t clearing up anytime soon. Look at the truck blocking

the way. We can't go back, either. There are loads of people coming to see the cherry blossoms back there. If the insurgents struck now, we'd have nowhere to go, not to mention the collateral damage to the people if a battle starts at this location. This whole road is a giant traffic jam."

Itecho got a headache from listening to him. *How did I get stuck with such an unruly master?*

Rosei wouldn't listen anymore, no matter what anyone said.

"We could leave the car behind, but going down the mountain on foot from here would be unwise. So we need to clear this up. What I'm about to do is purely to get myself out of danger and, as the Four Seasons Code states, I can use my divine powers on others if I'm in danger. So I'm going to save...er, get the car out of the way. The people inside are also in the way, so I'll get them out of there, too. That'll be faster than waiting for an emergency response team to get here. The traffic jam will be gone, and I'll bring myself to safety—"

"Fine, I get it."

Itecho covered Rosei's mouth with his hand. Rosei grunted and glared at Itecho until finally, he let him go.

"Look, Rosei. I'm only a nag because I care about you more than anything in the world. You understand?"

The sheer force in his voice lowered Rosei's defenses slightly.

"...I know."

"No, you don't." Itecho sighed. "What you're about to do could put you in danger later on. You'll put the people protecting you in danger. And I'm not talking about me. Don't worry about me; I'm your retainer. I'll gladly give my life for you, because I love you more than anything else... But think about your other guards. They have their own families. You'll risk them all? Honestly, I'd rather you not."

"..."

Itecho's words stabbed at Rosei's conscience. He had already been through a dreadful experience that would never let him forget what consequences his

own actions could bring. But...

“...Sorry, I’m still doing it.” He didn’t back down. He pointed at the terrible scene. “There are lives there I could save.” Even as he spoke, he could hear the cries. “There’s a kid inside there and their parent. Maybe more.” It was his turn to attack Itecho’s conscience. “Their lives will go on if I save them. You understand what that means, don’t you?”

“...That’s not fair.”

“You did the same.”

“Only to help you remember your own standing.”

“I do remember. I know there’s a risk.”

“Then...”

“I can’t save thousands, not even hundreds. And I won’t. I’m not in that position. I don’t want to be a hero. Please understand that. I’m not letting the power go to my head.”

He gave Itecho a defiant glare.

“But there’s a parent and child right there who I could save.”

There was a weight to his voice that made it impossible to dismiss his convictions as a child’s sense of justice.

“...”

“Are you going to let them die, Itecho?” he entreated.

Itecho sighed a few times before looking at Ishihara with a complicated smile on his face.

“...Ms. Ishihara, I’m sorry for all the documents you’ll have to write up...”

That said it all. Ishihara grinned and nodded firmly. “Don’t worry about that, Lord Itecho! There’s a kid crying out there!”

“Well said, Ishihara. You’ve got promise.” Rosei slapped her back again, but this time, she smiled.

“Rosei. This is an exception, got it? Do it fast.”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you the plan. Ishihara, you wait right here. You have a nurse’s license, don’t you? I want you to take care of them once they’re out. Itecho, you and I are the only ones who can walk on ice. It’s time to put your overgrown body to the test.”

“Understood, Lord Rosei.”

“...Got it. Just don’t do the dance, okay? Keep it to the verbal spell. We wanna avoid attention...though I guess that’s impossible.”

Rosei opened his fan, decorated with a beautiful winter landscape.

“It’s not like I’m bringing winter back. This is a delicate task, so I’ll need the extra power from singing, but I’ll stay quiet.”

Itecho and Ishihara pushed through the crowd to the scene of the disaster.

Rosei heard two children crying from the rear seats. A boy and a girl asking for help, saying only one thing: “Please save Dad... Help...”

Both of them asked for someone to rescue the unconscious driver, even though they had to be scared for their own safety.

I have to save them, no matter what.

Rosei took a deep breath and aimed the fan at the car. Everyone around observed the young man in the black kimono, wondering what he might do.

“Thrust the snow blade into the ground and dye the moon in white.”

A thin layer of ice emerged at his feet, spreading like waves all around until it reached the car hanging off the cliff.

“Eternal slumber is the dream of snow, moon, and flowers; solace for the ill.”

Shapes arose from the ice.

Ice vines, bushes, weeds, and sprouts grew into trees in the blink of an eye.

Life grew and reproduced.

The ice coiled around the guardrail and latched on to the car.

The vines reached out for the back of the car, hauled it up back to the road and away from the cliff.

Somehow, the colorless ice looked a lush green.

“Death to Autumn and death in Spring.”

Flowers bloomed in the green field of ice, beautiful and aromatic as spring itself.

“Give death to all the abominable.”

They were all spring flowers.

The Agent of Winter sketched the scenery of spring with ice.

He had other choices. He could have used winter flowers for his own season.

“And dye your laments in white.”

And yet he chose the flowers of spring.

He deliberately made a choice not to sully the land his fellow agent had dyed pink.

She wasn't here; she wouldn't receive them. But there was meaning in his choice to honor Hinagiku.



Karin—the flowering quince.

Yamabuki—the kerria.

Shoubusuisen—the freesia.

Rurikarakusa—the baby-blue eyes.

Mokuren—the magnolia.

Sumire—the violet.

Ukonkou—the tulip.

Araseitou—the stock.

Hiyashinsu—the hyacinth.

Ume—the plum blossom.

Shakuyaku—the peony.

Omoto—the sacred lily.

Kakitsubata—the iris.

Harujion—the fleabane.

Karatachi—the trifoliate orange.

Momo—the peach blossom.

Kinsenka—the marigold.

Satsuki—the azalea.

Anzu—the apricot blossom.

Gekkeiju—the laurel.

Shakunage—the rhododendron.

Suzuran—the spider lily.

Botan'ichige—the moutan.

Hanamizuki—the dogwood.

Hinageshi—the poppy.

Yabutsubaki—the camellia.

Murasakihashidoi—the lilac.

Kunuesou—the lavender.

Fuji—the wisteria.

Bara—the rose.

Sakura—the cherry blossom.

And the daisy—*Hinagiku*.



It was a scene out of a fairy tale.

A flower garden made of ice.

Everyone looked with bated breath.

Everybody was enraptured by the Agent of Winter's divine work.

Sheesh. Trying so hard to be thoughtful.

Except for Itecho, who was smiling sadly. He knew why these ice flowers were in the image of spring flora.

That's supposed to be a present for her.

And that was why it made his heart ache.

"Everything melts to alabaster snow," Rosei murmured, and the stage was complete.

He snapped his fan shut, and the spring flowers opened a way among the icy field. Rosei stepped forward, and the vines opened a path for him.

"Hey, everyone okay?"

The children's breath was leaving puffs of fog on the windows of the frozen car.

They were no longer crying but still terrified—more so about the magic in front of them than the possibility of death. Rosei reached out to them, and they shrank back.

This was one of those times Rosei hated his naturally intimidating appearance. He raised the pitch of his voice a little to not scare the children.

"Don't worry—I'll save you. The car is stuck to the ground thanks to the ice now, so it won't fall. It's all right... Itecho, could you help out?"

"I know. I'll get the driver," Itecho replied as he broke the window with his sheathed katana.

The sheath looked far more fragile than the glass, but it didn't crack.

Itecho stuck his hand through the hole he had made and unlocked the door before yanking it open as easily as a box of candy.

Ishihara watched on with a straight face, but the audience found this jaw-dropping.

“...What’s with that guy?”

“No human could do that...”

“And what’s with all the ice? You think...he’s one of the seasons’...?”

Itecho adjusted his sunglasses, embarrassed at the rising chatter around them. Despite his attention-grabbing appearance, he did not like standing out.

“Hey, open the window,” Rosei told the stunned children. He knocked on the glass, but the children, apparently about ten years old, made no move to help him out.

“ ...”

Rosei waited for a moment before holding his hand up against the car. The icy vines wriggled in response, then wrenched open the door.

“I’m here to help you. It’s okay now.”

He meant to calm the kids down, but once the words left his mouth, he felt a pain in his chest. Not a wound, but a pain similar to a dagger stabbing his heart.

What?

Why would the words hurt him? After a moment of confusion, he finally realized.

“ ...”

Shit. I just said it.

Those were the words he wanted to tell her the most. The words he lived to say once the day of their reunion finally came. The words meant for her, the words he had saved all these years, had just left his mouth.

And it wasn’t for her.

A dark cloud fell over his heart.

“...I’m here...to help you...”

He hadn’t had a chance to say those words, and yet life went on.

There was someone else he was meant to be doing this for.

Idiot. Stop thinking about that.

This was painful and embarrassing.

He was ashamed of himself. Burning guilt and remorse whirled into a vortex within him.

Just think about the kids in front of you, you shameless prick.

Rosei knew the disease he was suffering from. There was something people described as a Cinderella complex, and in a similar vein, he had a hero complex.

His head was trapped in a fairy tale—climbing the tower, holding the princess close, and telling her she would be okay now.

But it was only fantasy. Of course, fantasies of heroism were nothing strange. People dreamed of it for a reason. The problem in Rosei's case was that it was becoming more than a dream. And he found that ridiculous. In reality, scenarios of saving someone dear to him happened only inside his head. The real world was far harsher, and tragedy did not wait to strike. Salvation coming as he imagined it was nothing short of a miracle, and Rosei realized this.

Hinagiku, I will...

And that realization was why he kept on dreaming.

Hinagiku.

He dreamed of saving the Agent of Spring when she had been kidnapped ten years ago.

Why didn't I kill myself at that very moment?

"Sakura, don't worry. It'll be fine. I will protect you."

That was the easiest way to salvation. No one said it, but it was.

"Lord Rosei..."

I should make the decision. Or everyone else will die, too.

"Thank you for hanging out with me."

I should just die now. That way, Itecho and Sakura and Hinagiku will be safe.

"Thank you for the ice flower."

Do it. Point the ice blade at your throat. Slash it open.

"Thank you for all your kindness, Lord Rosei."

That will satisfy them. Maybe they'll go. Do it.

"And I'm sure I'll be saved, too. So please."

Die already. Now. Quick. Die, die, die, goddammit.

"So please, Lord Rosei, will you pass the time with me again?"

My hand was trembling, but I had made up my mind. Then I heard my first love say...

"Will you please live?"

She protected me with her piercing kindness.

“ ... ”

Rosei came back from his reminiscence.

The world around him was still drenched in regret, just as it had been before the memory.

Ah, right.

Still, the long winter had ended. The world was tinted in spring.

It's spring now. She's back.

Beautiful spring.

I should do this in a way worthy of the season.

Rosei smiled, albeit weakly. “It’s okay. The nightmare is over.”

The girl, upon seeing his smile, finally chose to grab his hand.

“I won’t let you die,” he said.

The boy also reached out from behind, and Rosei grabbed his hand as well.

“Don’t be scared. It’s over now.”

The children let out a sigh of relief—but it didn’t last long.

“What about Dad?” the boy asked.

It was a reasonable question, after he had just been crying and begging for help for his father.

“ ... ”

Rosei didn’t have the confidence to give them a sure answer. Itecho was taking care of the father, but the man already seemed to have lost a lot of blood and couldn’t even speak. Rosei couldn’t say anything lightly.

But I have to say something.

Rosei could tell them he would be all right, but that was just an optimistic platitude.

Rosei swallowed down the gastric acid surging and lowered his eyes.

“...I don’t know,” he said truthfully. “An ambulance is coming, but it depends

on how fast it gets here.”

“He...won’t be okay?”

“...”

The girl, who appeared to be slightly older, asked, “You’re the...the God of Winter, right?”

She understood what he had done and who he was.

“Why can’t a god say that he’ll be all right?”

That question was what hurt him the most.

“I’m just an Agent... I’m not an omnipotent god. I...sure wish I were. I’d gladly cast a spell to help you. But...”

There was little Rosei could do for the children. But whatever was humanly possible, he would do quickly and precisely.

“But I’m only human.”

Rosei didn’t mind if they hated him for this. “I will take responsibility and do what is within my power to protect you.”

Whatever they could say, he felt it was better to act than to only dream.

“I’ll clear a path so that your father can receive treatment. I’ll get some adults who can take care of you. I’ll tell all the authorities to give you priority over anything else. That is what is within my power. I’ll do everything I can to save your father. And the first step is saving you two.”

Rosei spoke from the heart.

“So please, help me help you.”

The traffic accident in the mountain pass was resolved soon after it took place thanks to the heroics of the Agent of Winter. All the injured were rescued, and the aftermath was being handled without a hitch.

The truck driver had some broken bones, but he was alive.

The father who had hit the guardrail was still unconscious. Ishihara had given him first aid, but his fate would have to wait until he reached the hospital. Rosei

waited for the rescue team to arrive while holding the hands of the children. He didn't speak, but he didn't leave their side.

Once the ambulance arrived, he softly waved good-bye to them. Then he turned around, still gentle in his movements, and let the professionals take care of things. There was nothing else he could do.

"Rosei, come here."

"..."

Rosei felt powerless, despite having just saved three lives.

"How long are you gonna stand there? We just got a notice from the Agency. They called us a car for the road ahead. We're ditching the other one. The driver's waiting for us."

"Let's take this path so the onlookers can't film us," said Ishihara. "...Although some of them already did. Oh, I'll have to write so many apologies..."

"Hang in there, Ms. Ishihara... Rosei, are you listening?"

"Yeah..."

Not much time had passed since the heroics took place, yet Rosei looked exhausted. Or puzzled, perhaps.

"Itecho...I want to make sure the kids have everything they need. Can you take care of it?"

"Of course—I'll keep an eye. I'm curious about the mother's absence. We'll send for someone if they don't have any relatives who can take care of them. Someone needs to be there for the kids. That okay?"

"...Yeah."

"You must be tired from using your divine powers. Get some sleep inside the car."

"...Yeah."

"And tell me if you need anything else. I'll get it for you on the way."

"..."

Rosei was there in body but not in spirit.

“...Rosei.” Itecho grabbed his arm, then pulled it to make him walk. He needed to get his master out of there as soon as possible so that he could clear his mind.

Rosei let himself be pulled away.

This has happened before. When Rosei...when I...was stunned in front of a beautiful spring scene.

Itecho reflected on that moment. It had felt like the end of the world.

Yet life went on, even now, and he had no reason to believe the lives of him or anyone else he knew were going to end soon.

It's as though life goes on, but we're not really alive.

Reality wasn't kind enough to move at the same speed as they did—the thought echoed in his mind.

“Lord Itecho, you must be joking. You wouldn't abandon her. You would leave Lady Hinagiku...or me...alive, would you? Tell me you don't mean it...please. You said you'd save us... You told me you would!”

The past sometimes sneaks up on you to leave a knife in your back.

And the past always knows who to choose. It always goes after those with the deepest scars.

Itecho remembered her plea, the one who was always on his mind, and looked down.

“...!”

Then he felt a tug on his arm, and he turned around. Rosei had tripped on a pebble. Something he never did.

“Rosei, are you okay?”

“...”

“Are you listening? Hey!”

“...Yeah, who do you think you're talking to? Of course I'm okay.”

The lie was obvious.

Itecho's grip tightened.

"...That hurts," said Rosei.

"That's the point."

"Why?"

"Because you never say that it hurts when it does the most."

Rosei glanced at him, his eyes wavering like a lost child's. "...I don't have the right to complain."

"Everyone has the right to talk about their feelings."

"Not me."

"Yes, you do. And if anyone says you don't, my word takes priority. You have the right to say it hurts."

"Don't try to coddle me."

"I'm not. I..."

Itecho wanted to save at least him from the pain. Even if there was no salvation for himself, even if he bore all the abuse, he wanted the God of Winter to be at peace.

"I care for you deeply. How many times do I have to tell you?"

He didn't believe that saving Rosei meant saving himself, too. He simply wanted to do it. His devotion was painfully unconditional. Yet, Rosei didn't seem to understand—his face contorted with sadness.

"Tell that to Sakura."

It was the most hurtful thing he could have said to Itecho.

"...If only I could. In any case, Sakura's got nothing to do with this. You need to hear this."

"...Stop. Talking."

Stop. I...

Rosei frequently wanted to get away from this man. Itecho had always been a steadfast ally, but Rosei didn't want salvation.

"I just want to tell you this whenever I can, since I'm always with you."

I deserve condemnation. I want condemnation.

"Rosei, it'll be okay."

And yet, Itecho didn't abandon Rosei. He showed no doubt in giving his life for his liege. Sometimes he was harsh, but never to the point of abandonment.

Rosei wanted Itecho to question his way of loving, and Itecho never did.

I...

Rosei felt his eyes heating up and his throat tightening.

"And I know one day Lady Hinagiku will be okay, too."

That was all it took. An irresponsible attempt at consolation, the power of this man's reassuring words, the love and affection and affirmation.

"You don't know that... You can't say that..."

That was all it took to keep Rosei alive until now.

If I'd known how happy those words could make me, I would've said them to the kids.

It'll be okay. Your dad will be all right.

It was an irresponsible claim, but just hearing it changed a person's outlook entirely.

He should've known that, having lived with this man, but he was too scared to say it. Now that it was too late, the regret crept over him.

"I don't know, but I can take responsibility to make it so," said Itecho. "I'll protect you for the rest of my life."

Rosei wiped away the tears with his kimono sleeve before they could fall. Then he used the same sleeve to slap Itecho. He needed to vent his anger, his hatred of this man. Itecho looked perfect, no matter what he did. At least to Rosei.

“I bet you say that to all the boys,” said Rosei.

Itecho was the kind of man who could become a jester or a knight for the one he served.

“I’m affronted. I choose very carefully to whom I show my love.”

He might not always follow orders, but he was the best retainer one could ask for.

“...You mean it?”

“I do. Listen, Rosei... You have to be a man. Not a god.”

“...I know.”

“Good... Also, the ice flowers were beautiful. You did that to preserve the spring landscape of the Agent of Spring...of Lady Hinagiku, didn’t you?”

Rosei nodded in a distinctly childlike way.

Itecho cherished this man, the way a much older brother would. He roughly rubbed Rosei’s head with his empty hand.

“It was a pretty spring color. She used to love the ice flowers you made for her, didn’t she? ...Rosei, let’s go get something good to eat. We’ll have whatever you like. What do you want?”

“Supermarket sushi,” Rosei mumbled.

“Very fancy.” Itecho laughed.

“...You take the squid, though.”

“You’re giving me what you don’t like? How about I take your precious salmon instead?”

The two exchanged light blows, then started walking again.

As he let Itecho pull him along, Rosei sent only one regretful glance over his shoulder. He looked at the ice garden glowing under the spring sun, and the vision of a girl in the middle of it appeared.

The silhouette of the person he cared about most in the world.

You’re everywhere, aren’t you, Hinagiku?

Her face in his memories was already fading, and yet...

You show up everywhere because I can't stop thinking about you.

She remained vividly in his heart.

I still love you. Do you resent me?

Rosei reminisced about the girl who got kidnapped because of him.

The long day came to an end.

The Agent of Winter's group managed to arrive at their lodging before midnight.

Rosei had fallen asleep in the car, and Itecho carried him out and completed the checkin before finally getting some rest.

"Are you on break, Lord Itecho?"

"Yes, Ms. Ishihara. This seat is open, if you wish."

This floor's lounge was full of associates, as they had reserved the entire floor of the hotel. The place served free drinks for guests.

No one ordered alcohol for themselves, since they were technically on the clock, but they all took a rest and enjoyed the coffee, tea, and snacks. Outside the Agent's room, the hallways, and stairs, there were Agency bodyguards clad in black, taking turns to monitor the place. There were about twenty people total on this floor.

Ishihara, coffee in hand, took a seat on the open single sofa.

"Is Lord Rosei resting?"

Itecho showed her the earpiece he had on and smiled. He had green tea for himself on the table.

"He's snoring terribly. Maybe he's got a stuffy nose."

A surveillance camera and mic were set up in the Agent's room, and Itecho checked them frequently on his phone.

"...He was crying, after all...even in his sleep. A lot happened today, I suppose. He must be mentally exhausted," Ishihara said.

“Just don’t tell him about it, please. He acts like it doesn’t affect him, but all the fatigue comes to the surface when he’s relaxed or sleeping.”

“I heard he’s been taking psychiatric medications.”

“Yes. You only joined us recently, but you’ll find out soon... He screams a lot. It’s not unusual for him to wake up screaming from a nightmare, so keep in mind the night shifts won’t be easy. It’s like someone has just died.”

“...He screams?”

“Yes. He yells things like ‘*run*’ or ‘*don’t go*’...and most of the time...” Itecho’s expression was tinted with sadness as he muttered, “‘*Hinagiku*...’ He shouts her name all the time.”

“...”

“...That’s when it hurts the most. We wake him up from his nightmares, and then, every time, he’ll look me in the eye and ask, ‘*Is Hinagiku all right?*’”

“...She is back to being the Agent of Spring now, right?”

“Yeah. So when he asks that nowadays, I tell him, ‘*Rosei, Lady Hinagiku’s back as the Agent of Spring. She’s alive.*’”

“And how does he respond?”

“He doesn’t seem sure that it’s real. And since he’s just waking up, I have to tell him the same thing a few times until he finally believes me. Once he’s reassured, he goes back to sleep. To him, Lady Hinagiku is like... Actually, I can’t even find a way to describe it. She’s just that important to him. He’s been thinking about her for ten years, and I suppose it’s inevitable that he’d feel that way. After all...”

Itecho felt his soul scream before he could say it, but he ignored it.

No matter how much it hurt him, he had to state the truth.

“She was kidnapped ten years ago, and she did it to protect us.”

Facing up to his sin was only one way to express how much he wanted to make it right.

He remained calm and gentle, a smile on his face, but the only emotion in his

eyes was loneliness.

Ishihara didn't know what to say, so she took a sip of her coffee instead.

"But...there was nothing you could do, right?"

Itecho shook his head.

"No, there was. I let a six-year-old girl get kidnapped. I'm supposed to be a bodyguard. And it was our Town of Winter where it took place."

"..."

"They were after Rosei, but they took her. She offered herself in order to save us. And the reason was very simple..."

The usual gentleness in Itecho's voice was replaced by anger and resentment.

"Because Lady Hinagiku...loved Rosei."

And that bitterness was for himself.

"It hadn't been a month since they met, but I could tell. And Rosei felt the same. The kids were in love. The lonely kind of love only gods know."

He had held onto those feelings all this time.

"Then tragedy came, and she was forced to make a choice. Anyone would've put their own life first and run away. But not Lady Hinagiku. In the last moment, she offered herself to let Rosei live. A six-year-old. Can you imagine?"

All the sorrow, all the ire, everything, he aimed at himself.

"What do you think I was doing at that time, Ms. Ishihara?"

He accused his past self for his failure to protect the kids ten years ago.

"I was shot in the stomach. My head was hazy. It's so ridiculous and pathetic. If only I could've given my life to protect her in that snowy field back then. It's what all Guards are supposed to do. But I couldn't. And so here I am. Honestly, I often wonder why I'm not in prison right now."

"That's...taking it too far."

"No, it's not. Rosei's traumatized because I failed. I feel so guilty...about everything. The only thing I can do now is work myself to the bone."

Ishihara knew that he meant it—he had worked twenty-four seven for ten whole years, guarding the Agent of Winter without rest. Perhaps he wanted to die protecting someone.

Ishihara tried to lighten the mood a little and change the subject.

“I was surprised the Agency assigned me to the Agent of Winter as a woman, but it’s due to my experience as a nurse and counselor... I’ll do my best to live up to the expectations.”

“No need to get so worked up. Let’s try establishing a friendly workplace relationship. Rosei wouldn’t want to talk without getting close first. Also, your gender doesn’t matter. What we’re looking for is someone capable, with the right credentials, and some martial arts knowledge... That’s what I told human resources, and the Agency only found you and a sixty-year-old man. We move around a lot, so naturally, we went for the younger one. He was married, too, so...”

“Oh, I see.” Ishihara shrugged apologetically, and Itecho smiled. Her gambit had worked.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just, everyone says all sorts of things...”

“They’re just jealous of your salary. They don’t realize you really earn it.”

“I was shocked when they asked me to write a will before taking the position.”

“Yeah, and they’ll tell you to update it every year, so keep a copy of the text file. I don’t make any changes on mine, though.”

Ishihara glanced around the whole floor. It felt weird to think everyone here was made to write a will before taking up their job. She took a sip of coffee. “... Is armed conflict really that common?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“With the insurgents... I understand regular people have their qualms with the four seasons, too. The Agents have supernatural powers yet won’t use them in times of natural disaster... Some think they should use them for industry or even help with military experiments... But how many people actually try using

force in their protests?”

“It’s the offseason right now. It gets busier by the end of autumn. That’s when the manifestation journey begins.” Itecho spoke of their enemies like customers or clientele. “But we can’t let our guard down because of that... That’s how things like the attack on the Town of Winter ten years ago happen. Year to year, I’d say you can count the number of conflicts with both hands; maybe sometimes you need a couple of extra fingers.”

“Wha—?!” Ishihara exclaimed. That was more than she’d expected.

“We’re working for Winter, after all—the most hated season. So we get the most conflict. Autumn’s surprisingly easygoing. They’ve only got light security. Wanna ask them to move you over there?” Itecho asked jokingly.

“Oh, please, no.” Ishihara shook her head.

“Just know that the armed conflict you worry about isn’t only aiming for the Agent. Sometimes they create situations that call for force, to try and make the Agents use their power.”

“...Without causing them harm?”

“Yeah. That’s not their aim. Some just want another reason to be mad. You saw Rosei’s power. Many people call out the fact that they’ll use their powers to save themselves, but not other people.”

“...Well, what are we supposed to do?”

“Right? Not that, that’s for sure.” Itecho’s voice was filled with indignation. “The Agents of the Four Seasons are not superheroes. But you can explain till you’re blue in the face; they won’t get it. And the constant criticism affects the Agents’ mental health, so we have to protect them. Technically, we shouldn’t have saved that family today. They took pictures, too, so the articles are coming.”

“...”

“Don’t look so upset, Ms. Ishihara. That’s just my professional opinion. My honest opinion is that I’m happy we saved them. But if we save one, then they’ll ask for more. *You save them, so why not us?* they’ll say. And we can’t respond

to every single call. We're not National Security. We only bring the seasons to the country. But the insurgents say that's wrong, and they'll keep on criticizing us."

"It's so complicated," Ishihara said.

"Very complicated." Itecho nodded. He checked the camera feed on his phone and saw Rosei sleeping soundly. He could hear his breathing, too. Once that was done, he went back to talking: "It's a complicated issue, but our job is very simple. Protect the Agent. Defeat the insurgents who come against us. Crush them. That's all. The other seasons have it easier, but not us. Keep that in mind, Ms. Ishihara, okay?" By the time he finished his speech, Itecho had returned to his usual soft manner of speaking.

"Y-yes. I understand. Um...Lord Itecho," Ishihara hesitantly began.

"What is it?"

"...Should we not arrange for Lord Rosei to meet the Agent of Spring? If you like, I could speak to the Spring staff."

"You are quite considerate, Ms. Ishihara. I would love to ask you to do that, but..." Itecho adjusted his sunglasses and sighed.

"Is there a problem?"

"The Agent of Spring was kidnapped ten years ago, but now she's back safely. What do you think the rescue attempts were like?"

"I read that the Agency of the Four Seasons, National Security, the Town of Spring, and the Town of Winter all cooperated."

"Yes...that's right. On paper. But in reality..."

The image of a girl crossed Itecho's mind.

"The Town of Spring withdrew from the investigation three months after Lady Hinagiku was kidnapped. We from the Town of Winter worked with National Security for five years after that...but then they paused the search."

"...What...?"

"They were supposed to continue looking for her, but they halted any large-

scale operations. Either way...for someone close to Lady Hinagiku, that feels like they abandoned her, doesn't it? You can't search the whole earth for a single girl without a major operation."

"Of course... I think I would sue them if it was my own family."

"You got that right. And someone did beg them to continue the search: Sakura Himedaka. She was fourteen at the time—the Guard of Spring and a victim of the attack on the Town of Winter."

"...She was fourteen...?"

"After the Town of Spring stopped searching for her, Sakura lived with us at the Town of Winter, but once large-scale investigations were cut even there, she disappeared. I can't forget how she cursed at me when she left...like she hoped those words would be enough to kill me... From her point of view, her lady had been kidnapped because of Winter, and now they were abandoning her... I don't think she'd be thrilled at the idea of Rosei and Lady Hinagiku meeting up again."

"..."

Ishihara had no idea what to say about such a messy web of relationships.

Meanwhile, Itecho checked his phone again. He switched screens from the camera feed to a photo gallery. Not recent pictures—records of the joyful days before the tragedy.

Rosei, ten years old, making a snowman in the Town of Winter. Hinagiku, six years old, poking her head out of an igloo.

The two of them were so young. And with them was a girl with black hair and a full grin: Sakura Himedaka, nine years old. She was smiling radiantly at Itecho, who was behind the camera.

"Sakura Himedaka is, with the exception of Lady Hinagiku herself, the person I most fear to face. I have no idea if I can convince her for my master's sake." Itecho closed the gallery viewer, as though cutting off his thoughts. Then he took a sip of tea, which was already cold.

"What a difficult situation," said Ishihara. "Just picturing myself in her

position, I...”

“Yeah. I don’t know if it’s possible, but I want a future where all of them get better, if only a little.”

“How is security for spring?”

“As far as I’ve heard, Sakura doesn’t trust the Agency or National Security, so they did their first ritual covertly, just the two of them.”

“Wha—?! They can’t do that! Why...?”

“I did some digging, and it turns out the Agency was being thoughtless on a number of levels, so I really can’t blame them... It seems the top brass of Spring’s administration is rotten to the core. They seem to think of the Agent as an object, like a doll or something. I’m really worried about the Agency Council... Don’t they realize we might be attacked again at any time?”

“I’m so sorry...”

“It’s not something you should be apologizing for, Ms. Ishihara. You’re part of the Agency, but you’re in a different jurisdiction. And I heard they accepted the staff for the second ritual onward. Also...just in case, we’ve taken part of the Winter budget to keep tabs on her... I am looking for the right moment to get in touch with Sakura. Though who knows if she’ll welcome me,” he added sourly.

Itecho lost his cool for work only when Rosei caused it; otherwise, he was calm and gentle at all times. He was highly respected as well. Ishihara wondered just what kind of person the Guard of Spring was to agitate this man to such an extent.

“Lord Itecho...I hear you. Please be careful not to let the mental exhaustion give you an ulcer.”

“Oh, no, thank you. I’m feeling better after talking about it... I should go back to surveillance.”

Itecho stood up from the sofa, and then a cherry blossom stuck on his suit fell down. “I’m sorry,” he whispered reflexively.

It was only a petal, but it brought *her* to mind. Her tears, her screams, her wrath and outrage. Memories of that woman rubbing her head on the floor and

begging.

"Please help me."

Itecho had finally been discharged from the hospital and had been investigating the kidnapping of the Agent of Spring in the Town of Winter for days without rest when he got the notice.

Three months had passed since the insurgents had accepted the Agent of Spring's offer to be taken in place of the Agent of Winter.

No one knew yet where the Agent of Spring had been taken.

The Town of Winter mobilized all staff to find her and clear their name.

Itecho's master, Rosei, had been checking every surveillance camera in the area until he was exhausted. It was still too early to give up. They told themselves this every grueling day. And yet, the Town of Spring, Hinagiku's and her retainer's own affiliates, announced they would stop looking for her after just three months.

This was abnormal. The Towns produced and fostered the Agents, who were precious to them. And still, they stopped searching.

They basically declared Hinagiku Kayo dead.

All related parties were disconcerted by the news that the organization leading the search had abandoned the Agent.

I would get it if the next Agent of Spring had been born, but not like this.

Upon hearing the news, Itecho couldn't stay put and headed for the Town of Spring.

He wanted to question their decision. But more than anything, he was concerned about his fellow retainer, Sakura. She must've been disheartened.

But the situation was far worse than he had imagined.

"Please don't leave her! Open up! Please!"

The nine-year-old was thrown out like a dog.

"Sakura...?"

Itecho arrived after taking a plane, the train, and a rented car, and he was speechless at the sight. The girl was crying and knocking on the door of the stone wall surrounding the Town of Spring. She had a kerchief tied to her arm, which was still hurting from the incident, so she was knocking using her unwounded arm.

"...Lord Itecho... I..."

When she saw him, Sakura let the tears fall.

The skin of her fist was raw and bleeding from all the knocking.

"...They let me go... It's my punishment for failing to protect Lady Hinagiku..."

"...What?"

"...They expelled me from the Town of Spring..."

"Wait, hold on, that can't be..."

"I know. It's my fault. I deserve the punishment. I don't mind being let go... But they still have to find Lady Hinagiku... How could they stop the search?"

"Sakura, listen. This is in no way your fault. The young Guards' duty is more so to keep mental stability than actually protect them. Everyone knows that. How could a nine-year-old child fight armed insurgents?! The adults are at fault here! Me!"

"But I am her retainer... I'm her servant... I had to protect her even if it cost me my life... But I'm still alive... And I've been expelled... I don't know how to look for her anymore."

"This is wrong! First of all, it's us in Winter who should be punished for letting the insurgents intrude! Why would they punish you?! Stay back... Hey! Open up! Open the door!"

"I've been here for an hour. They're not opening."

"...You've got to be kidding me."

Sakura was taken to the Town of Winter for protection. As she bowed upon arriving, he had noticed gray hairs on the nine-year-old's head. Itecho didn't know if they were still there now.

Everyone knew that this child had nowhere else to go and no future.

And with that knowledge, the Town of Winter cut off their own large-scale investigation after five years.

Although small-scale investigations kept going, it was as though they were just waiting for them to die.

They all abandoned the two girls. For years.

And now, the forsaken Agent of Spring had come back.

Everyone praised the return of spring and its lush greens and beautiful flowers and even its powerful winds.

The two of them lived alone, undefeated by anyone, insubordinate to anyone's orders. Like wildflowers blooming in the open field.

Itecho found this spring almost too much for his eyes. He couldn't look at it in a trance like Rosei did.

It hurts too much.

The girl who was better dead.

And the girl who was told to wait for death.

The two, bearing the names of spring flowers, continued spreading their season across the silver world. As though flaunting their presence. As though taking a gentle revenge against all the adults.

It was a gift of spring to everyone who had waited and hoped for them to die.

Itecho never wished for Hinagiku's death, not once.

He never told Sakura to just wait for her to die.

However, he couldn't fulfill his duty—he couldn't protect them.

Itecho was nineteen back then. These past ten years had put him through the wringer, too.

All three of them were so young.

Itecho had to be the one to protect Hinagiku, protect Sakura, protect Rosei.

How he wished he could have done so and died in their place.

And yet here I am.

Ten years ago, not only did he fail to save them, but they had saved him.



Five years ago, he had left one of them cornered enough to run away from the mansion.

Now he could do nothing but tell him it would be okay and hope it was enough to keep his spirit from breaking.

He thought the world he wished for would never come, and every waking second, reality underlined that fact.

But now, things had changed.

“Is something the matter, Lord Itecho?”

“Oh, nothing...”

Itecho chose to think of other things. He looked out the lounge window, at the cherry blossoms blooming in the night.

The opportunity for atonement—spring had finally come.

Salvation like this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Hoarsely, Itecho whispered:

“Sakura, do you still hate me?”

Unable to leave the cherry blossom behind on the floor, he picked it up and put it in his breast pocket.

A girl was inside the white box.

“_____”

A chilly, quiet cage.

It had been closed for years now.

“_____”

The person who had kidnapped the girl called her by a different name. They took her life and her name to try and make her a slave. And they were succeeding. Her personality was slowly crumbling.

“...I am...”

For the first year, the girl had held hope. She'd waited for someone to come and save her.

“I...am...”

For the second year, her memories had held on strong. She could remember the faces of the people she loved.

“I...am.....”

By the third year, she had begun to doubt herself. Maybe she was the one getting her name wrong. Maybe her memories were mistaken. After all, no one had come for her.

“Hina...giku...is...”

By the fourth year, she couldn't speak clearly any longer. Her whole existence had been uncertain. She couldn't say anything with confidence. Was she even really there? Was there a world outside? Was she right?

“Hinagiku...is...”

By the fifth year, she had felt her personality unraveling, and she began repeating her name to herself in fear.

“Hinagiku...is...”

By the sixth year, she had been so afraid of the punishment that

she couldn't do anything.

The things they told her made her mind crumble. *Don't say no one's searching anymore.*

"H-Hinagiku...is...not...————"

By the seventh year, she only lived because she was being kept alive. She felt no joy or sadness.

She thought of the outside world no more. But she still wanted to believe in it.

"...Please...no."

On the eighth year, the kidnapper made a proposal—or, more accurately, an order.

She had nothing left to lose, except for the blurry faces of those she had protected eight years back—the only thing she could still hold on to.

"N-no... No... No... No."

Her body screeched. Strangers beat her and pinned her down.

"Sakura... Saku...ra... SAKURAAA!"

The call that escaped her lips was not for God, but for her only past friend.

"Lord...Ro...sei... Lord Rosei... Lord...Rosei... Lord...Rosei..."

The face of the boy she still loved rose from the depths of lost memories to appear in her mind's eye.

"Help me... Someone... Help me... Anyone... Help me... Someone... Anyone... Anyone... Anyone... Anyone..."

She screamed and attacked those who had put her in a birdcage, along with the rest of the world.

The adults yelled. She knew this was wrong, but she couldn't stop.

It took some time before everyone became quiet.

Once she came to her senses, she was outside. The world was enveloped in silver snow. It was cold.

"...Where is...everyone?"

She walked barefoot, leaving bloody footprints on the snow.

"...Want to...go...home."

She went down the mountain. Even if no one was looking for her anymore, she wanted to go home.

"Lord...Ite...cho..."

She wanted to go back where she was safe.

"Saku...ra..."

Would they welcome her now that she was broken?

"Lord...Ro...sei..."

Did the soul follow the body? Did the body follow the soul? Was it a crime to kill oneself?

"Where is...everyone?"

There was only one thing she understood about this incomprehensible, unstable world.

"Hinagiku...is...here..."

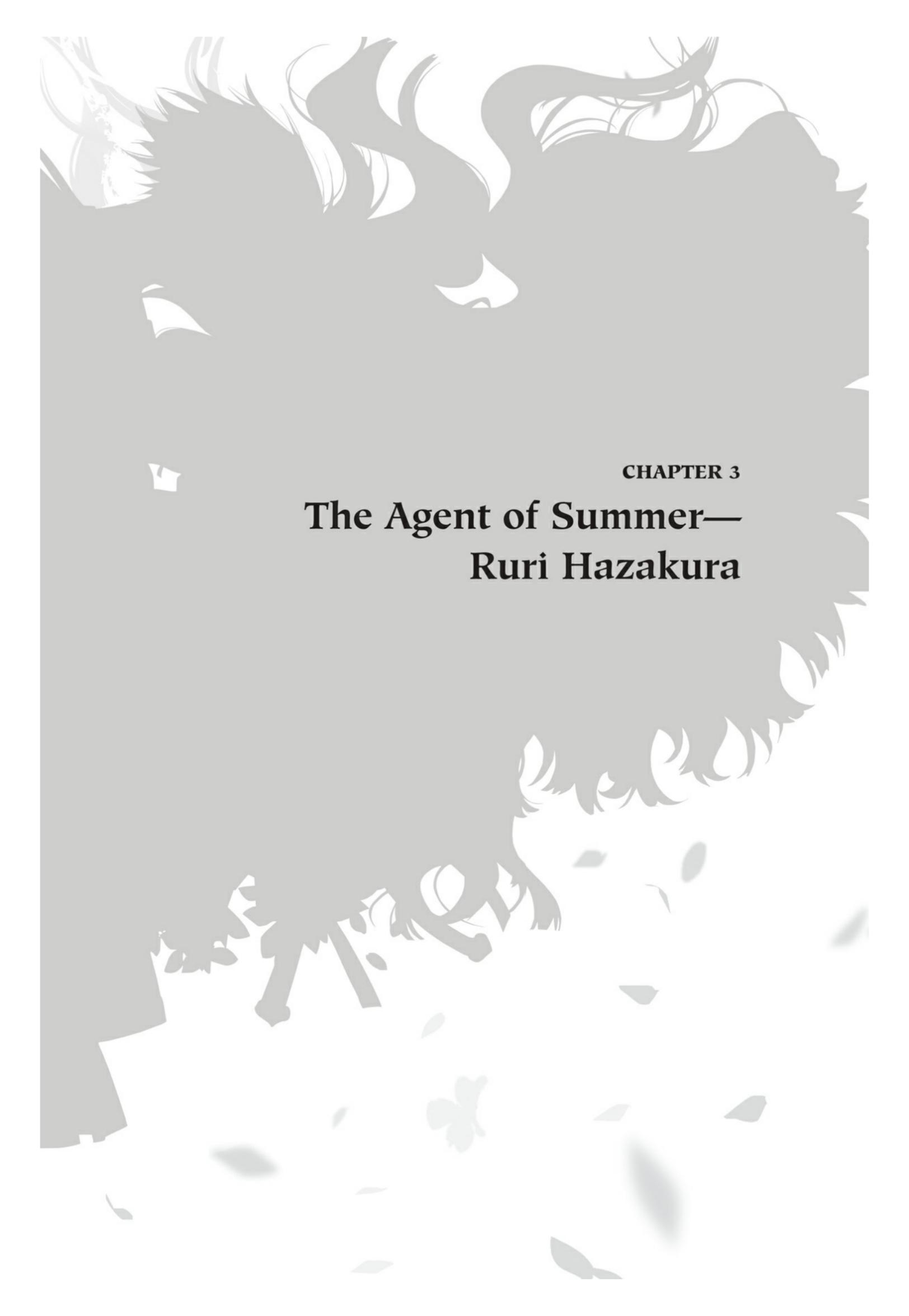
The world outside her cage really did exist.

She hadn't lost her mind. Thank goodness.

"Hina...giku...is...here..."

Thank goodness. Let's go home. I'll take you home.

The broken girl now brought along another one just like her as she made spring bloom.



CHAPTER 3

**The Agent of Summer—
Ruri Hazakura**

Each of the Agents of the Four Seasons has their own hometown.

The Agent of Spring has the Town of Spring.

The Agent of Summer has the Town of Summer.

The Agent of Autumn has the Town of Autumn.

The Agent of Winter has the Town of Winter.

Ever since the first Agents received their powers at the dawn of time, their descendants have made their homes here.

The powers awakened naturally in one of those from the bloodline.

Once the current Agent passed, a perfectly ordinary person would inherit their powers as the next generation. For them, although the Town was their homeland in the sense that it would be the place they eventually left, it didn't necessarily mean it remained a place they would one day want to come back home to.

In such cases, the Agents normally had a residence elsewhere.

The Agent of Summer's hideout/villa was deep inside the forest.

The Yamato archipelago was commonly referred to as the Eastern Cherry Blossom.

One of Yamato's islands was Iyo, and one of its provincial territories, Yaga, was a very popular tourist spot in Yamato. In the middle of the mountain was a valley with a big waterfall that got overcrowded every summer, and quaint homes could be found throughout the bountiful forest and mountains.

It was the perfect place for those who wished to withdraw from civilization and live among the green. There were a few inns known for past visits by national literary masters, and many people visited just for them.

"This villa was designated an important cultural asset, and it's been used as a hideout for generations of Agents of Summer since it was bought."

Hinagiku and Sakura walked among the snowy larches as they heard the woman before them explain, and they let out a sigh in admiration. The manifestation of spring had extended from Ryugu to Tsukushi, and now they

were in Iyo to bring the season here, too.

They had predetermined places for the rituals, but this time, the Agency recommended they pay a visit to the Agent of Summer.

“The Agent of Summer can use their divine power to not only bring the season, but also employ animals. So they have a tendency to like places that are more out in nature.”

Although Winter still reigned, the chirping of birds and footprints of smaller animals were already spreading.

“Basically, this place was built for healing.”

They had traveled without rest to reach the Agent of Summer’s villa: a majestic Western-style building in the middle of the snow.

“But even without it, Yaga has ley lines that boost divine power. Lady Spring, I surmise you might be tired from all the manifesting, so I recommend you stay a few days here to rest before heading over to Teishu.”

The Guard of Summer, a pretty woman with glasses and black hair, smiled.

“Hopefully you can take some time to relax here.”

Her name was Ayame Hazakura. The sweet-tempered woman had invited them to the Summer villa and come to welcome them personally after hearing the lady and retainer of Spring would come. She was around twenty years old, still youthful in her expensive gray suit.

“Thank you very much for your kindness. The media won’t be able to easily reach this place, and it seems like it would be a very relaxing spot for my lady.”

“Please, no need to thank me. It is an honor to be able to give support to you ladies. As the myth goes, Summer was born from Spring and Winter. But more than anything, I want to give all my support to the comeback of this woman who’s so close to me in age. Plus, it is my duty as a Guard.”

Ayame was like the moon, faintly lighting everything around her. Sakura was only superficially courteous to everyone but Hinagiku, but Ayame’s sincerity and friendliness was drawing out an uncharacteristically cooperative side of her.

“Thank...you...very...much, Ms....Hazakura.”

Hinagiku bowed, and Ayame did the same. The motion was smooth and clean; even Ayame's loosely tied hair bobbed with grace. Her hair was decorated with small white flowers and a jade hairpin, while her skin was silky like a polished gem. She was the living representation of the phrase *Yamato beauty*.

Ayame seemed unaware or unaffected by the enraptured gazes of the other two women. "Please, call me Ayame," she said. "After all, the Agent of Summer is also a Hazakura, so let's avoid any confusion."

Hinagiku blinked in surprise, and Sakura hurriedly explained.

"I'm sorry, I hadn't told you. The lady and retainer of Summer are sisters."

"Sisters... But lady...and retainer?"

"Yes. Other seasons tend to choose friends of the successor or people with outstanding physical skill...but we in Summer tend to pick family."



“Hinagiku...isn’t Sakura’s...sister, but...we are...kinda like...sisters...so we...match?”

“Lady Hinagiku! I could never be so bold as to say that...”

“We’re...so close, so Hinagiku...thought...just maybe. But you...don’t like it...do you? Sorry...Sakura.”

Hinagiku dropped her shoulders, and Sakura rushed to elaborate. “No, I do like it! I can be your friend, your sister, and of course your blade! Please allow me to stay by your side in joy and sorrow.”

“...Sakura, you...already have...too much work. You need...rest.”

Sakura shook her head hard and looked her dear lady in the eye. “No, this is what I want!”

Sakura clenched her fist without any shame, worry, or falsehood. Hinagiku blinked before putting on a bashful smile.

“R-really?”

“Really.”

“Hee-hee... It’s...too much. Hinagiku...is too fortunate.”

“Hee-hee! As you should be!”

Ayame held a hand to her mouth as she watched the two fidget like a couple who had just started dating.

“I’d heard the Spring pair were very close, and they sure weren’t lying...”

Sakura timidly denied her claim. “I-it’s nothing major. I am sure you and your sister must have an even stronger bond.”

“You think so? Perhaps. We are family. But...we aren’t as intimate as you are,” Ayame demurred with a wry smile. “In fact, being family makes it harder. Even more so when my selfish little sister is my lady.”

“Sel...fish?” Hinagiku asked.

Ayame looked away. “Yes, she is... I wish she had grown up to be a goddess full of love and mercy for others like you, Lady Hinagiku.”

The Spring pair couldn't bring themselves to pry further into it, so Ayame ended the conversation and led them to the Summer villa. While following behind her and taking in the sights, Hinagiku and Sakura looked at each other in wonder.

The Summer villa appeared even more spacious on the inside.

There was the entrance hall, the common living room, a few guest rooms, the playroom, the reading room, and the lounge bar. The various facilities ensured there was not a boring moment during the stay. If a guest didn't want to step outside, they would still have plenty of space to walk. There was also one other feature of note: It was full of animals.

"There are...rabbits."

"Indeed, Lady Hinagiku."

"And...puppies...and...kittens."

"It is downright outrageous."

"And birds...and squirrels..."

"Have we stumbled into paradise, Lady Hinagiku?"

Hinagiku and Sakura blushed in excitement as they whispered to each other.

Creatures of all kinds showed up to welcome them to the living room. Some were in cages, but most of them moved freely around the room, some napping against each other, some playing with each other.

Hinagiku looked happy for sure, but the change in Sakura's expression was striking. Her eyebrows softened, and her lips formed a smile. Despite her cool aura, she adored everything cute.

Ayame was helping the two with their luggage. "Hee-hee, I'm glad you don't hate animals."

Sakura gave her a shocked look, scandalized by the very idea that anyone could hate anything so adorable.

"Is this the power of the Agent of Summer?" she asked.

"Yes, they are all employed by the Agent of Summer. They're Ruri's friends.

Her power is Life Operation. Every year, when manifesting summer, she takes in wounded ones or becomes friends with some she meets on her visits. The numbers never stop growing.”

“Can the...kitties and...puppies...speak?”

“Yes, although only Ruri has the power to communicate. I can’t; I have no idea what they’re saying. But you can tell from their movements. Ruri taught me.”

Hinagiku’s eyes lit up, and then she whispered enviously, “I wish...I were the... Agent of Summer...instead.”

“It’s not all good. The administration costs are outrageous,” Ayame replied with a laugh.

Sakura knew what she meant. “I can only imagine how much you spend on food,” she replied gravely.

Guards were also in charge of the accounting for their season manifestation journey. The relatability of the issue seemed to have broken the ice between the two.

“Yes. We do have the budget, but as the spending on this increases, we have less left for other expenses. It’s a big task managing to get by every month... But it’s something all Agents of Summer have historically done, so no one complains. The Town of Summer understands.”

“I would love to keep expenses down and save some money every month to have more for clothing for my Agent,” Sakura said.

Their conversation was warming, leaving the Goddess of Spring behind.

“I totally get it. My sister loves dressing up, so we keep the budget for that, but you know teenage girls; she burns right through those clothes. By the way... Lady Himedaka, isn’t it difficult for you wearing Yamatoan clothing all the time? Other seasons wear that style, too, and I always wonder how much it must cost them every time we have a meeting.”

“Yamatoan clothing is certainly prohibitive, but...look at her. It’s so lavish and lovely.”

Sakura held Hinagiku’s shoulder. Her lady and dress-up doll could only stare

vacantly in a daze.

Ayame nodded fervently. “I don’t care about how hard managing expenses is whenever I see how incredibly cute she is!”

“Yes, our ladies’ clothing is an opportunity for us to show off our skills!”

“Exactly!”

“The Yamatoan style looks so nice... But she doesn’t like wearing clothes with low mobility.”

“Excuse...me... Hinagiku...would be...fine...wearing something...other than...a kimono. What about...a suit?”

“A suit? No, what are you even saying, Lady Hinagiku?”

“I agree, Lady Kayo. Western clothing could suit you as well, but I believe Yamatoan dresses fit you the best.”

Although she didn’t understand why, Hinagiku had no choice but to accept what they were telling her. She slumped in defeat.

After the enthusiastic discussion, Ayame finally invited them to come into the room instead of just standing and talking.

“There are a few members of the Town of Summer staying here at all times, as well as Summer representatives of the Agency guarding the villa on shifts. I will introduce them to you two later on. If you have any questions regarding the facilities, please ask either them or me.”

“Yes. Um...Ayame.”

“Yes, Lady Kayo?”

“May I...pet...your...friends?”

Ayame already liked the cute and reserved Agent of Spring, but the polite request for permission raised her opinion even higher.

“They’re all very friendly, so you can pet away, no problem. Just be careful and don’t try holding them if they don’t want to. If they follow you around, please pick them up. They have set feeding times, so if you join us, I think you’ll get closer to them quickly.”

“Nice! Let’s take some pictures later on, Lady Hinagiku. I need one of you and the bunnies—the greatest combination in the world.”

“Saku...ra, no. The flash...will hurt...their...eyes.”

“I won’t use the flash. I’ll take them from afar. Please just give me this...”

Ayame’s eyes lit up with delight. “By the way,” she said to Sakura. “Will the guards from the Agency of Spring be waiting outside? We can get a room for them, too.”

“They came in a camping truck, so no worries. We’re having them keep their distance.”

“...Is that so?”

The Four Seasons Agency was an independent organization that managed the seasons, separately from the four Towns. To put it simply, the Town produced the Agents, and the Agency managed them. Commonly, Agency staff were designated to guard and help the Agents with various tasks during their long-distance journeys for manifesting the season. Where an Agent went, the Agency followed, usually in the form of people in suits. Their main jobs in managing the Four Seasons were investigating any anomalies that arose, backing them up, guarding them and guiding them out of any danger, and negotiating with the authorities. However, since they took care of all sorts of problems relating to the Four Seasons, their duties were greatly varied. The only reason Agency staff hadn’t been by Hinagiku’s and Sakura’s side as they traveled to manifest spring was because the two of them didn’t enjoy having the auxiliary personnel.

They have good reason, after all, Ayame thought to herself.

“Should we not go greet the Lady Summer?”

“No, she’s in bed at the moment. I’ll introduce you if she gets up.”

The three entered their guest room as they conversed.

It looked like a hotel room, with a neatly made bed, a white cabinet, antique chairs, and a shabby-chic interior that stirred a maiden’s heart. They must’ve had the heating on before they got there, since a pleasant warmth welcomed them inside.

“Sakura...this room...is...fantastic!”

Hinagiku rarely seemed happy to get involved with other people, so Sakura was truly glad that they got to stay there.

“You must be tired from traveling,” said Ayame. “I’ll get you something to eat. The cook baked a cake just for you.”

“Lady Ayame, let me help. Lady Hinagiku, would you please wait here?”

“Yes. I’ll...get what...I need...out from the...luggage.” Hinagiku opened up the luggage with a big smile on her face and started settling in. That is, until she noticed a gaze on her.

“...”

She turned around, and there was a white rabbit sitting before the opened door.

“Hi...bunny.” Hinagiku waved timidly, and the rabbit twitched its nose in response. Once it had Hinagiku’s attention, it turned around and shook its behind before disappearing into the hallway.

“...”

Hinagiku followed in an *Alice in Wonderland*–esque chase behind the white rabbit. It was waiting out in the hallway, as though it had known she would follow.

“...Hello.”

She closed in, and the rabbit twitched its nose again. Then it beckoned her farther down the hallway.

“Is there...something...over...there?”

The fairy-tale situation was scary at first, but Hinagiku was not afraid.

It must...be a...servant of...Summer.

If she could indeed communicate with the animals, Hinagiku was certain that the white rabbit must’ve come for a reason.

And she was right. The white rabbit stopped before a door at the end of the hallway. The door looked dark, despite receiving light from the hallway window.

“...”

The white rabbit hopped around by Hinagiku's feet, and she picked it up. She gave it a few pets for showing her the way, then summoned her voice.

“Ex...cuse me.” Her voice cracked from the nerves, on top of her usual choppy way of speaking. “Excuse...me... Is this...the Agent...of Summer?”

She got no answer, but the door opened a crack. The rabbit jumped off her arms and into the room.

It smells...like...summer.

The scent was green and fresh. Not even Hinagiku knew why she'd made the connection so quickly, but her blood just knew.

“Hinagiku...Kayo. Thank...you for...receiving...us.” She worked hard to let the words out, even if she was not fully articulate. “Did you...want...to...talk?”

Hinagiku had tried to imagine what Sakura might have said, and she managed to say them. A giant victory for the shy girl.

“...”

The silence persisted, though someone was clearly inside.

Hinagiku worried she might have said something wrong.

Did she think...Hinagiku's...way of...speaking...is weird?

Hinagiku grasped her kimono's sleeves and cast her gaze down.

She wanted to leave right away, but then she heard a voice come from the room.

“...Is my sister back?”

The voice was small; its owner sounded like a delicate person. Hinagiku didn't know if she was allowed to come in, so she stayed by the door. It had been ten years since she had seen any other Agent.

“U-ummm...”

“It's me, Ruri. The Agent of Summer.” Ruri kept the conversation going from the other side of the door.

"It's...Hinagiku...here."

"Is my sister back?"

"Ms....Ayame?"

"...Yes. Did she say anything about me?"

"..." Ayame had, but none of it was good. Hinagiku paused before replying, "She said...you were...in bed...because you're...not feeling...good."

Hinagiku made the safe choice, but she felt her hands sweating as she spoke.

Hinagiku...only...ever...speaks...with Sakura...so...Hinagiku...doesn't...know...what to do.

She realized the only person she talked to always went along with whatever she said. Now she was facing someone she had to be particularly considerate with, someone she couldn't even see. Anxiety was rising inside her.

"...That's all?"

"...Um, yes."

"She didn't say she didn't know what to do with me or anything like that?"

"...Um...no...she...did not."

Hinagiku had gotten the impression that perhaps they didn't get along, but she couldn't say that here. She waited for Ruri to respond.

"...I knew she didn't care about me..., " she said coldly.

"Huh? N-no, that's..."

"I mean, she goes out without telling me anything... I could've gone to welcome the Lady Spring with her if she'd told me."

"Ms. Ayame...said...you weren't...feeling...well..."

"That's not true."

"Huh?"

"I'm feeling great. But I'm not going out because I'm annoyed. I want to annoy her."

“...”

Then Hinagiku realized she had called her there to vent.

“I can’t keep on living if she doesn’t need me... I care about her...but she doesn’t care about me... I’m so dumb... I don’t need her as my stupid retainer...”

“...Is that...so?”

She wanted someone to hear her out. Perhaps she wanted Hinagiku because she was a fellow Agent.

Hinagiku didn’t feel like it was something you should talk about to someone you’d just met, especially through a door, but she stayed and listened. The fear had let up a little.

She guessed the Agent of Summer was feeling lonely.

If she had another source of support, then she wouldn’t fixate on a single person. Hinagiku understood that without even seeing Ruri. And she could relate to that feeling.

“It’s not fair. If I hadn’t been chosen...then I wouldn’t have to rely on her. I could’ve led a different life. But I was... So she should be nice to me. She should want to protect me more than anything. Don’t you think?”

Hinagiku could feel the other girl’s anger against something big, though she didn’t understand what.

“...Excuse...me, mind if...Hinagiku...asks...you?” Hinagiku didn’t reply with sympathy but with a question. “If you...love her...that...much...then why...are you...mean...to her?”

She heard a gasp on the other side of the door.

“Hinagiku thinks...she’s...worried.”

The smile of that girl with the flower’s name who lived for her sake came to mind. The girl who respectfully called her *Lady Hinagiku*.

“Because...” A hoarse murmur came a couple of seconds later. “Because...I’m suffering more...!”

Her tear-filled whisper saddened Hinagiku, too.

“Listen...Lady Summer... Hinagiku isn't...trying to...be mean... Hinagiku knows...”

Before she could finish, footsteps echoed through the hallway.

“Ruri came out from her room?”

She saw Ayame, and Sakura behind her. They had gone back to the room and noticed Hinagiku was missing.

“...!”

The door slammed shut right before Hinagiku's nose, and she was so startled, she fell back.

“Lady Hinagiku!”

“I-it's...fine.”

The fall hadn't hurt her; Hinagiku got up in a hurry. She smiled bashfully at the undignified display, but Ayame exploded with indignation.

“Ruri! How could you be that rude to Lady Kayo?! Come out here!”

“P-please, it's...fine.”

“You didn't come here on your own, did you? I know Ruri. She must've called you here with an animal. Am I wrong?”

“Y-you're...right, but...”

“Ruri! Ruri! Why won't you come out?! You're dishonoring the name of the Summer! I want to talk, so come out here! Stop running away whenever things don't go your way!”

“M-Ms....Ayame...” Hinagiku fumbled her way between Ayame and the door.

“Lady Hinagiku, are you hurt?”

“No, Sakura! Hinagiku...was just...saying...hello. That's...it!”

Sakura nodded with relief after such a strong reply.

“Lady Ayame, my lady is not harmed in any way; it appears they really were just greeting each other.”

“But...!”

“Lady Hinagiku wouldn’t say this just to defend her. Lady Ruri was appointed Agent eight years ago, so it’s the first time meeting her. Of course she would want to say hello. Although I admit the right thing would’ve been to do so while we were present.”

Ayame glared at the door, still wanting to say something, but then she sighed and desisted.

The three of them headed back to Hinagiku’s room.

“I am sorry for losing my temper...,” said Ayame. “I thought she wouldn’t leave her room even for the Lady Spring, so I was surprised...and angered by how selfish she acted.”

Hinagiku replied to Ayame’s apology by telling her not to worry, but Ayame shook her head.

“I should’ve told you from the very beginning... But I decided to hide the shame.” She wilted with fatigue, and her voice fell to a gloomy monotone.

“My lady, Ruri Hazakura, is in the middle of a strike. This has been going on for the past three months... She’s cooped herself up in her room.”

The word *strike* confused the lady and retainer of Spring.

Ayame smiled self-consciously. “I’m quitting as retainer in order to marry. And in response...my lady and little sister has refused to carry out her duties...”

So began the visit of the Agent of Spring to the Summer villa.

After they were told to make themselves at home, Hinagiku and Sakura sorted their luggage at their own rooms, then met back at Sakura’s room.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The two of them were still processing what they’d learned.

“Marriage.”

“And a strike...”

They each hugged a cushion, as if holding their hazy anxieties to their chest, and said nothing else for a little while.

“Hey...Sakura, are you...planning on...getting...married?” Hinagiku broke the ice first.

“What?! N-no! I only wish to stay by your side forever! I have no plans or hopes for the future!”

Sakura shook her head so hard, it would have come off if it weren't firmly attached.

“But, but, but... What if...Lord Itecho...asked you to?”

Maybe she shouldn't have said that. All expression left Sakura's face, and her voice turned grave. “What? What's he got to do with anything? Have you been talking to him?”

“S-Sakura...you're...scaring Hinagiku. It's just...when we were...little...you liked...him.”

“That was ten years ago. I put those feelings in the trash can, the collector picked it up, and the incinerator's finished its work. It was also one-sided and delirious, so please don't speak of it again... Lady Hinagiku, you're not thinking about going on strike yourself, are you? Please tell me right away if there's anything you don't like.”

“I-it's...fine. Hinagiku...won't.”

“Good to hear. I'm sorry... I just got a little worried.”

“Because...Hinagiku...did it...before?”

Silence fell after she said that.

Sakura wasn't expecting her to mention it. “No, I...”

Sakura panicked under her lady's gaze. She looked down, away from her beloved goddess. “It's true you have a record on that, but...”

She scrambled to find words that wouldn't hurt her.

“Your circumstances are different from Lady Summer's...”

Once she said that, she gave Hinagiku a quick glance and noticed Hinagiku was frozen, her mouth half-open. “A record... Hinagiku...learned that...word...recently.”

Despite her care, Sakura had still fumbled.

“...S-sorry... It’s true...Hinagiku...is a...criminal.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! You’re not! You aren’t!”

“It’s fine... Hinagiku does...have a...criminal record.”

“Please forget I said that, Lady Hinagiku! You have experience! Yes, that’s the right word! I’m just very bad at language! Forget I said that, and let’s go eat some snacks!”

“No...” Hinagiku shook her head, then inched closer to Sakura and grabbed her hand between both of hers. It was very warm.

“L-Lady Hinagiku?”

The retainer was flustered by the sudden closeness, and Hinagiku whispered words from the bottom of her heart. “Sakura... Sorry. Hinagiku...is a...criminal... but...”

She seemed to be referring to many things in her past. “For your sake... Hinagiku can...be good.”

All the sad, all the good, all the painful things that happened between them.

“Hinagiku...will be...a good person. So...please...don’t ever...leave...”

All of it was contained in her voice.

“Never...leave...Sakura. Hinagiku...can do...anything...for you.”

The natural light coming into the room lit up Hinagiku’s hair and skin and everything about her. To Sakura’s eyes, it formed a halo.

They were alone in the quiet room. The Goddess of Spring prayed as though begging forgiveness in a confessional.

But those prayers and entreaties were to a powerless human.

To just stay by her side.

Oh, she’s still so lonely after all these years.

Sakura was proud to be relied on, but at the same time, it was sad.

Many times before, this goddess’s actions had moved her, but never had she

been shaken to her core like this before.

“I would never, Lady Hinagiku.” Sakura placed her free hand on Hinagiku’s.

“We are here like this now because of what happened in the past. We won’t lose. We vowed to overcome everything together, remember?”

Her voice was warm, filled with the truth.

“Yes...” Hinagiku was relieved.

Even though they had received separate rooms, in the end, they slept together in the same bed, like sisters.

The next day, the two of them went to check out the spot for the manifestation of spring and offered the song and dance.

The manifestation of the season came right away to the places they visited, but gradually to the surroundings.

Hinagiku’s song and dance became more and more fantastical the more times she repeated it.

“Look at the flurry of snow flow West, flow East.”

As though Spring itself had taken over her, yearning for Winter.

“The light snow and the ashen snow change color as Winter goes.”

There were many songs of the four seasons, and when she sang the love song, her voice grew loud and powerful.

“The faint snow, the powder snow, the petal snow flow West, flow East.”

Sakura wore a complicated expression as she watched, though she didn’t know why.

“Flow a thousand miles and a million more.”

Unlike Sakura, who had come to dislike Winter, her lady was merciful and voiced no grudges. If anything, she may have grown fonder of him the more time she spent away from him.

“And though Spring may never receive your embrace, she will follow behind.”

Even though her beloved was the cause of her kidnapping.

Sometimes, all that mercy only brings trouble.

“Thank you...for...watching. Spring...has...come.”

As Hinagiku finished her song and dance, Sakura ran up to her with a coat and blanket and wrapped her in an embrace.

“Good work. We must walk back to where we stopped the car, so please rest before we go.”

“...Yes.”

“We have *houjicha* and a cold sports drink—which one would you like?”

“The...tea...please.”

Sakura unfolded a chair and let Hinagiku sit down. She took a soup thermos from her bag, then unlinked the red oilpaper umbrella from the hiking backpack, opened it up, and stood beside her.

It was a picturesque sight—master and retainer under a red umbrella on a sunny winter day.

“...Sakura...you don’t...have to...do all...of this,” Hinagiku said apologetically, feeling awkward being the only one sitting.

“This is how it should be, Lady Hinagiku. You have the status.”

“You’re...also...tired...from...working.”

“I am not. Not in the slightest.”

“The umbrella...must be...heavy. Put it...down.”

“I chose the item that would fit you best, Lady Hinagiku. It’s very high-quality and quite light for an oilpaper umbrella. I must also protect you from the harsh UV rays.”

“Then...come and...sit down.”

“There’s only one chair.”

“Sit...down...Sakura. Hinagiku...will sit...on your lap.”

“Huh?”

“Sit...down. We can...use the chair...together.”

“...Now this is a request I cannot turn down.”

Sakura entirely dismissed her standing as retainer and accepted the deal. The two of them sat on the little chair, together like a couple of sisters. The umbrella remained open.

This is perfect.

It was quiet here. Nothing got in the way—well, except for the snow.

“Lady Hinagiku, please don’t look directly at the snow for too long. You’ll burn your eyes.”

“...Can’t look away.”

It would be perfect, if not for the snow enchanting her beloved lady wherever they went.

“Lady Hinagiku.”

“Hmm?”

“Please don’t. Rest your eyes,” she whined as she covered Hinagiku’s vision with a hand.

Even though she knew there was no point, at the very least, just for this moment, she wanted her lady to be hers and only hers.

“S...sorry.”

Sakura sighed at the apology. She felt Hinagiku’s eyelashes brush against her fingers. She was staring at the snow through the gaps. Hinagiku was usually meek, but when she dug in her heels, she dug them in deep. Sakura felt stupid for doing this when she knew what her lady was like.

Perhaps her position on Sakura’s lap was why Hinagiku’s attention was elsewhere.

Even though Sakura never looked away from her.

“...Do you...think...Lord...Rosei...is doing...well?” Hinagiku’s citrine eyes stayed fixed on the snow nearly melting. At the remains of his season.

“Who cares about him? It’s not worth worrying about.”

The words came out aggressive.

“...Hinagiku...was...just...wondering.”

“I hope he’s having a terrible time. He’d better not be doing well.”

“Don’t...say...that. Sakura...Hinagiku...really...doesn’t...hold a...grudge against... Lord...Rosei.”

“...”

“He’s...the person.../...loved... So Hinagiku...was just...wondering...even now.”

Hinagiku had said something strange.

Sakura replied with a question. “It’s not your own will...?”

“...Who...knows... When Hinagiku...first met...you...Hinagiku...knew...it was... you...but...it’s all...borrowed.” Hinagiku kicked her feet idly. “...It’s like...living... inside...a stranger’s...house.”

“But it is your house.”

“That’s...true...but...not...really... So...the replacement...Hinagiku...is very... grateful...to you...for being...so kind.”

Sakura pressed her lips together sadly at her lady’s bizarre words.

The girl on her lap suddenly felt so delicate.

Please don’t say that.

The plea echoed in her head, but it didn’t leave her lips.

“You can...go...home...now. Hinagiku...will just...die.”

It echoed.

“Lady Hinagiku, the doctor told you that you’re a different point on the same line.”

Sakura spoke strongly so as to convince herself, too. She could never put her anxiety into words; if she didn’t show confidence, then her lady would break.

“...Yes.”

“You are not a replacement. You are also Lady Hinagiku Kayo.”

“...”

“Even if you don’t believe so, I know you are. But you don’t need to try to go back to the way you were. I also love the new Lady Hinagiku. You are doing your best. And I love you.”

“.....Yes.”

If only the conversation had ended there, wrapped in a neat little bow. But Hinagiku rested her head on Sakura’s and said, “...Then...”

It was a show of trust. And Sakura cherished more than anything the trust of this girl, who had stood up after her heart and spirit had been broken so many times.

She could not betray that trust.

“Can I...still love...Lord...Rosei?”

Do not betray her.

Not even if Sakura’s own words inspired her to ask for the unthinkable.

“Hinagiku...wants to...see him. Hinagiku’s...not sure why... Hinagiku...might be...a different...person now...but...these...feelings for...Lord...Rosei...don’t...seem to be...dead.”

No matter how her heart screamed, she must not betray her.

“Sakura...Hinagiku...wants to...meet...him. Hinagiku...wants him...to meet...*her*.”

But even the current Hinagiku might be lost if she did.

I can’t let her do that.

Sakura remembered the fear she felt when the girl on her lap had returned.

It was the year Reimei 18, autumn.

A lone girl visited the Town of Spring.

The Town of Spring, hidden in the mountains, was not on any map of Yamato.

It was one of a few special Towns for nurturing the Agents of the Four Seasons in this country.

The locations of the Town of Spring, the Town of Summer, the Town of Autumn, and the Town of Winter were all national secrets.

Among them, the most lush with natural beauty was the Town of Spring.

The Town was isolated from the outside world by a tall fence.

On the inside, there were many houses with thatched roofs. There was a main road extending from the entrance into the shrine forest. Beyond the forest was a small hill, and on top of it a long stone staircase, with seasonal flowers and trees at each side, until it reached the headquarters.

This place, where they venerated spring and nurtured the Agent of Spring, was called the Shrine. It was divided in two: the *honden*, where the servants lived, and the *haiden*, where the Season was enshrined. There was also a luxurious Yamatoan house on its spacious grounds.

A visitor from the outside stood timidly at the front of the Shrine in the old-fashioned Town.

The girl was, in a word, scruffy.

Her hair, black with some white strands, was unkempt and reached all the way to her hip. She didn't seem to have the money to buy clothing; she wore a thin black shirt and denim shorts despite it being nearly autumn.

This wasn't a place she could normally enter, but she had been invited. She had been driven in and made to walk through the mountain paths until she finally reached this place.

After a while, a woman in a kimono came out from the Shrine's *honden*.

"The Townchief awaits... Do you have a change of clothes?"

The girl shook her head. She had nothing on her at all save for her rucksack, which only contained her carelessly stored katana.

"...They won't see you like this."

"Wasn't it you who called me?"

"We called for the retainer of the Agent of Spring, not a filthy, homeless wanderer."

"I don't see the need to get all dressed up if we're just gonna talk."

The girl didn't let the scornful glare get to her, and she glared back.

"...Fine, then, Lady Sakura Himedaka. Follow me."

The luxurious house was like a castle.

A beautiful Yamatoan garden spread everywhere they walked.

Sakura surveyed the *honden* until they showed her to the reception room.

However, she was forced to wait for the one who had called her. Sakura had arrived at the Town just after noon, and the meeting didn't begin until dusk.

"Who do you think you are, old hag? Stop wasting my time," was the first thing Sakura said when the old woman stepped into the room.

The woman was unfazed. *"Careful with that language, little girl."*

This was the Townchief of Spring, more than seventy years old.

The two of them sat on their knees across from each other in the Yamatoan room in a corner of the *honden*.

"Sakura Himedaka... You sold yourself to the Town of Winter in order to search for the Agent of Spring, Hinagiku Kayo... And now that even they have forsaken you, you've fallen to human settlements. Look at yourself... You should be grateful that we've received you without condemnation."

Sakura responded to the cold words with a snort.

"I suppose it's a matter of perspective. I was born in this Town, but I do not serve it. I only have one lady. Of course I'm looking for her now that she's missing. I gained nothing by staying with you after how quickly you stopped looking for Lady Hinagiku. At least Winter was useful. And you didn't 'receive' me; you were looking for me. Am I wrong?"

"You've become so foulmouthed."

"Should've seen that coming after you abandoned a nine-year-old."

"...We tried to raise you to stay strong and firm no matter what happened. But it seems we failed. Now you say you don't care who you're with so long as you profit from it. Like some whore."

Sakura didn't care for the slander and smiled coldly. *"Say what you want. I'll be a whore or a thief if it's what my lady needs me to be. So if you can't stand the sight of me, why did you call for me? You going to put on a trial here and now?"*

"..."

"Or are we here to share intel? If, after all that's happened, you want to restart the investigation, then I'll give you everything I have."

"We do not intend anything of the sort."

Sakura had expected that; she gave a wry laugh. *"Of course... You're betting on her turning up dead."*

The tension was thick enough to cut.

Both parties could feel on their skin the terrible mood turning even worse.

The Townchief opened her mouth to say something, but Sakura spoke first. *"So long as the Agent doesn't lose their life or their divine power to manifest the season, they will be able to control spring."*

You horrible bastards, she thought.

"As soon as they lose that power, the next generation manifests."

You should be ashamed of yourselves.

"It's been eight years since she disappeared, and there's still no spring. Lady Hinagiku is alive."

Shame on you! Shame on you! Shame on you!

"But you wanted her to die as soon as possible! That's why you cut the investigation short... If anyone should be ashamed, it's you! You assholes make me sick!"

Sakura felt her head boiling. She was still sitting, but all the yelling had her short of breath. The stress had triggered the symptoms of her chronic illness.

"...!"

She shut her mouth and took a deep breath. She gulped down the suffocating feeling to try and stop her attack.

I said it. I finally said it to them.

Sakura had wanted to hurl the truth at them for a long while. But just saying it didn't give her relief. It didn't bring her joy. It only made her feel empty and indescribably sad. She bit her lip to stop the tears from welling.

"How could you...wish for a new Agent to be born?!"

Her last words came out hoarse from the pain.

The Townchief remained silent for a while. The Town of Spring had to admit fault—they had to.

Effectively, Sakura's denouncement came from the following logic:

Hinagiku Kayo, this country's Agent of Spring, had been kidnapped. Once an Agent of the Four Seasons died or grew too old to use their power, another person received the powers. This person was chosen supernaturally from the bloodline of those who began the Agent of the Four Seasons system back in the age of the gods. Considering the next Agent hadn't been found, it meant that Hinagiku Kayo was still alive somewhere. And yet, the Town of Spring cut the investigation short. A girl was out there, abandoned after she was deemed unable to do her job.

"And as we speak, you're still choosing to let her die out there, you disgusting —"

"The Towns were established in order to keep the seed of the first humans appointed as Agents of the Four Seasons."

The Townchief kept her voice level in an attempt to mollify Sakura.

"We in the Town of Spring exist for the sole purpose of bringing spring without delay. Now that the Agent has disappeared, it is only natural to wish for a new one to come. We don't have time or money to waste on someone who won't come back. She was taken by the insurgents... It was clear she would pass soon."

"You treat her like a literal goddess so long as you get some use out of her, but the moment you can't, you dump her like garbage."

"..."

"And your prediction was entirely wrong! She's been alive for eight years! I

shouldn't have come here... I don't know what you want, but just talking to you makes me want to throw up."

"Wait... Sakura, listen."

"To what?! If you're not going to look for her, then why did you bring me here?! To laugh at me?!"

"That's not it. Listen."

Sakura stood up in silence. The Townchief grabbed her arm to stop her, but Sakura roughly shook her off. The Townchief grabbed it once again.

"If you think I'll hold back just because you're an old woman..."

"She's back!"

Sakura didn't understand what she meant right away.

"...What?"

Sakura couldn't breathe.

"Agent Hinagiku is back. She was found half a year ago... We haven't made any public announcement."

"That...can't...be..."

Her voice cracked. She should've asked for confirmation of the shocking news first, or maybe she should've felt light-headed at the sound of it. But none of that happened. Instead, her reaction was visible in her body. Her fingers trembled uncontrollably, despite the lack of cold, and she ground her teeth together.

"But..." Her voice was feeble, like a weak little girl's. *"Half a year ago...? Why didn't you make an announcement...? Why didn't you tell me...?"*

"We didn't know where you were... And we were planning on choosing a different retainer."

It was another heart-wrenching truth, and Sakura was at a loss for words.

"...gh!"

Of course they wouldn't want to appoint a retainer that was useless when her

lady got kidnapped. But it still hurt to hear it.

But then why call me here?

The Townchief wasn't caring enough to call her here just so she could meet the lady she once lost.

There's gotta be a catch.

Sakura glared at her, and the Townchief realized what she was thinking.

"National Security handed Hinagiku Kayo over to us," she began weakly. "We tried our best to get her back in shape, but she's shown no improvement... She might never be able to work again. After the kidnapping...she's changed dramatically. She's broken inside—or perhaps it's better to say she's nearly become a goddess. We appointed her retainer after retainer to reverse it, but we haven't had any success..."

Sakura's face went pale as she heard of her lady's situation.

"Can she speak?"

"She seems to have regressed, but she can still speak. Her mind might become unbalanced, and if she gets too close to her divinity..."

The following words shook Sakura even harder.

"...she might die."

Now that she was sure Sakura wouldn't run anymore, the Townchief let her arm go. *"Protecting the lady's body is not the true role of the retainer. You are assigned to guard their heart, to keep them human. As much as the Agents of the Four Seasons deny it, they are gods incarnate. They are not like us. If they lose their human mind and inch closer to the side of the gods...they won't come back. Sakura Himedaka...we didn't want you to come back...but if there's anyone who can do something for her, it's you."*

"How...dare...you..."

There were so many things she could have said.

"You come crying to me now, after everything?" "It's all your fault." "You're the one who should die." "Why didn't you call me earlier?" "Then why did you

throw me out?" "You abandoned me, and now you want me back?" "You didn't help me."

"...I know you'll say I'm not being honest, but I do want to do something for her now that she's back. Please save Lady Hinagiku."

"Liar." "You thought she'd die right away." "And she didn't." "She lived for years after you abandoned her." "I wish I could do the same thing to you." "She's just a tool to you." "But to me, to me, she's..."

"I'll show you. She's living in a corner of the haiden."

"To me, she's the most precious girl in the whole world."

All those words whirled like curses inside her head, but Sakura didn't speak. If even one of them escaped her, she might not be able to stop herself from clobbering the Townchief. And no matter how much she hated the old bitch, she was the bridge to reconnecting with her lost lady. She had to keep calm for now. And so she gritted her teeth.

But you will pay.

She concealed her wish for vengeance and followed in silence to the *haiden*.

The Townchief vanished as soon as they arrived, believing it would be best for her not to be here; she had warned Hinagiku that someone would be coming.

"Excuse me," Sakura said as she entered the *haiden*. There was a room with statues of the four seasons and a sliding paper door going deeper in. She opened door after door like she had found herself in a fairy tale.

Dried flowers were hung up everywhere on the Yamatoan rooms she advanced through, and the sight was stranger and stranger as she advanced. The choice of flowers looked to be deliberate and carefully considered. Bouquets of baby's breath, roses, lavenders, globe amaranths, statice, and more decorated the walls. Looking up, she found them on the ceiling, too. It felt more like being inside a flower than inside a room.

Eventually, she reached a space so full of flowers and plants that she could hardly tell it was a Yamatoan room. Sakura looked around, but she didn't find anyone anywhere. Why was her lady isolated?

Sakura stood before the last room, where she'd likely find her lady, and looked down at her feet.

“...?”

The wind coming in from the gap in the door brought a petal. Light pink, in the shape of a peach. A cherry blossom.

She's really here.

It was autumn. Red leaves and ginkgo fruit surrounded the Town. There couldn't be any cherry blossoms. The mere existence of this was odd.

It's the power of the Agent of Spring. It even smells different.

The distinctly non-autumnal scent beckoned her. It was an ephemeral fragrance, like a fleeting dream you might wake up from at any moment. The smell of spring. Sakura reached out to the door's handle, and as she slid it open, more cherry blossoms danced out on the wind.

She gasped when she saw the world on the other side of the door.

The striking landscape entranced her instantly, like a spell from a queen enchantress.

Her senses were taken from her. The beauty was powerful enough to stop time.

“The cherry blossom twirls and sways,

The cherry blossom drops and sinks,

There it goes, lovely and fragrant,

Spring comes, so close your eyes; for whom does the beauty bloom?

For whom? For whom? Spring comes, please come through.”

A girl clad in a white kimono sat on the veranda, singing. In the garden, there was a cherry blossom tree the height of an adult man. Her Agent powers were weakened, but she could still manifest spring.

“Please come through, please come through...”

The girl shut her mouth in the middle of the song and turned around. Her

eyes didn't seem to recognize Sakura as an acquaintance. She quickly turned back around and stepped down barefoot into the garden. Her posture said she was ready to run.

"Lady Hinagiku!" Sakura shouted. *"Lady Hinagiku, it's me! Sakura! Your...your Sakura!"*

The girl stopped all of a sudden. Sakura couldn't say anything else right away.

Her lady was right there. The Goddess of Spring she had failed to protect was alive. That was enough to take her breath away.

"It's Sakura Himedaka!"

Breathe in, and prove yourself.

"I am sorry I couldn't protect you!"

Your goddess is right before your eyes.

"This whole time, I've always..."

She's right here.

"I never stopped looking for you! Lady Hinagiku!"

Sakura realized she was on her knees, sobbing.

"...gh!"

In truth, she wanted to press her head to the floor, but the crying left her weak in the knees, and she couldn't even clench a fist.

"...Agh... Gh... Bw-wuh..."

She could only hit the floor and weep. She had to straighten her posture; she moved her trembling hands desperately and placed her forehead on the tatami. But she couldn't hold the position.

"Saku...ra."

Hinagiku's mechanical voice fell on her like rain.

She raised her head.

"...Sa...ku...ra?"

Sakura's goddess walked up to her silently, watching her from above. Tears spilled from Sakura's eyes as the girl's tremulous fingers brushed over her face, her hair, and then her lips.

"Is it...really...you...Sa...ku...ra?"

"L-Lady Hinagiku...!"

"What...happ...ened...to your...hair? It...was...so...black...and...pretty...but...now...it's...all...white."

"Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku...!" Sakura extended a trembling hand. *"Lady Hinagiku, I've wanted to see you again for so long... I was looking for you this whole time."*

She couldn't bear it, and she clung to Hinagiku's legs.

"..."

Hinagiku comforted her by patting her head and speaking, but her voice was strange.

"Lady Hinagiku...! Lady Hinagiku..."

"Sa...ku...ra... You...were...loo...king...for...Hi...na...giku?"

"I was... The whole time..."

"The...whole...time?"

"The whole entire time...! I never stopped, not for a single day! Lady Hinagiku..."

Hinagiku's joyful expression suddenly warped into pain.

"I see... You...were...looking...for...Hina...giku... Sorry..."

"No, no... I'm sorry, from the bottom of my heart. I failed to protect you, to fulfill my job as your retainer... If you are still angry with me, please punish me the way you see fit."

"N-no... That's...not it. You...see...Hinagiku...is..."

"Yes, Lady Hinagiku?" Sakura looked her lady in the eye, ready to accept anything she could say.

"Hinagiku...is...already...dead."

The words hit Sakura like cold rain.

"...Huh? What do you...mean?"

"The...original...Hina...giku...died. This...Hinagiku...is a...different...person."

"...Lady Hinagiku?"

She could hear her heart beating.

A hint of a smile found its way to Sakura's face. The person before her had grown up so beautiful.

This Hinagiku felt too ephemeral, but Sakura could never mistake her lady. It was clearly the Agent of Spring she had been looking for this whole time. The manifestation of the cherry blossom tree also proved it.

"What do you mean...'a different person'? I'm sorry, Lady Hinagiku, I don't understand..."

"You...see, the previous...Hinagiku...couldn't...take it. She...disappeared. This Hinagiku now...is her replacement. It's...not...the Hinagiku...you were...looking for."

"...It's true that you speak differently from before, but even so..."

"We're...different. I've...been...telling...everyone."

"..."

Sakura could feel something was up, and it wasn't something she could easily picture. Hinagiku's eyes softened sadly. Her expression said she was looking for a way to comfort this girl who had come out of nowhere.

Sakura let go of her.

"So...rry."

The cold voice rained on her again.

"...Sorry...Sakura... But...you can...go home...now."

Her gentle words sounded like a painful rejection.

"Someone...got the...wrong...idea, right? Hinagiku...told them...it was fine."

Yes, Hinagiku was different from before.

“Hinagiku...knows...that everyone...had been...waiting...for ‘her’...to die.”

She spoke differently, and the expressions on her face weren't like before.

“So...Hinagiku...will...give them...what they...want. This...Hinagiku...will die, too...so just...leave Hinagiku...alone.”

She looked the same, but it was as though someone else were inside her.

“And then...they can...serve...the next...person. So...you can...go home. Thank...you...Sakura.”

Shivers went down Sakura's spine. This was not the reunion she had hoped for.

“...!”

Sakura was handed the choice to give up and leave.

She could go, as Hinagiku had said, and live the rest of her life forgetting about the Agent of Spring.

And the choice did cross her mind.

Stop.

A voice inside her immediately denied it.

Stop it.

She had lived for this girl and kept her at the center of her thoughts. Now that Hinagiku was back, alive, and unwilling to welcome her with open arms, Sakura had the choice to lead a new life.

I don't need such a life.

She could just go home. She was still in her teens—she could make up for the time lost.

Here she had the opportunity to go live like any other person. Perhaps this was her point of no return. She could just tell herself the seasons didn't matter and wash her hands of all of it. She could leave behind the girl who had saved her life, risking her own, ten years ago. Hinagiku herself was saying she didn't

need her.

But...

It was like...

But so what?

...like fate itself was urging her to accept the offer. But Sakura didn't.

So what? I don't need anything normal.

She hated herself for imagining a life without Hinagiku even for a moment.

Sakura could've made lots of other friends, gone to school, fallen in love, gotten married, maybe had children. She could have led a modest, tranquil life.

Shut up.

But to fate, Sakura said:

"No..."

Shut the fuck up.

She snarled at it.

Shut up! Die! Go away!

She killed the voice in her head telling her to betray her lady.

Again and again, she killed that girl inside her. She beat her. Ran her over. Strangled her. Stabbed her. Burned her. Crucified her. Shot her. Poisoned her. Crushed her. Mangled her. Executed her. Hung her. Assassinated her. Hollowed her.

She killed, murdered, and slayed her, until only loyalty remained.

"No, this is my home."

And so the new Sakura Himedaka was born.

Kill all the noise. What do I care what it says?

Her lady was alive and didn't need her retainer. But so what?

I don't need it. I don't need anything but the right to stay here with her.

"No matter what happens, I am your servant. My home is always with you."

So what? The words burned in her soul.

"Please forgive me for my long absence. From now on, Sakura Himedaka will always remain by your side."

Hinagiku looked at her in disbelief.

Lady Hinagiku's trust is the one thing I cannot lose.

Now the anxiety was like a worm slithering all through Sakura's body.

She could just indulge her lady with the words she was looking for. She ought to. She was no longer in the valley of hatred.

But Sakura's pain was too great. The load was unbearable for a nineteen-year-old girl, and she didn't realize how it bound her.

"It was Winter's fault that you got kidnapped," Sakura tried desperately.

I shouldn't be saying this.

Sakura realized it wouldn't work on Hinagiku.

"That's...not true. It is...the insurgents'...fault."

Hinagiku no longer needed Sakura to escape the pain in her life.

"They abandoned you. Your life was ruined because of them."

Hinagiku had survived her betrayal and left it behind. Sakura still hadn't. Perhaps she never would.

"If there's anyone else we can trust...no. There's no one."

It wasn't that she couldn't.

"That's...not...true."

She simply didn't want to.

"Yes, it is."

Sakura did not want to get over it. She couldn't function without the hatred.

"Why...do you...say that?"

Hinagiku stopped leaning on Sakura and turned around. Their gazes finally met. Sakura finally saw those citrine eyes she'd longed to see, although they

shimmered with sadness.

“Is it...because...you feel...better...if Lord...Rosei...and Lord...Itecho...are the... bad guys?”

She's a goddess.

“I...get it. I know...how you...feel. I...used to...feel that...way. It...hurt.”

My goddess.

“But...you know, you're...just...putting...the blame...on them.”

You are so pure, so innocent.

“You...taught...me...that.”

And yet you see everything from a higher plane, it seems.

“Why do you...go against...what you...taught me? You know...that's wrong. That day...the two...of them...tried to...protect us.”

And you hurt me.

“Trying...to put...the blame on...someone...will only...make you...suffer... more.”

Hinagiku's words were like a pure prayer.

“Hinagiku...still...loves you...the way...you are...”

A shining light showing Sakura the painless way.

“But...Hinagiku...doesn't...want you...to suffer.”

Still, Sakura didn't want to leave the hatred behind. If she did that now...

“...Lady Hinagiku.”

...she would become weak.

I looked for you for years.

Weaker than she already was.

Even after Spring gave up on you. Even after Winter gave up on you.

And a weak woman couldn't be her blade.

I need the anger.

If she was not a blade, she couldn't protect her dearest girl.

I needed the hatred, Lady Hinagiku. You don't know.

She couldn't protect her dearest lady.

You just don't know.

She couldn't keep her safe.

Some of us can't live without the hatred.

And if she didn't keep her safe, they would both die.

"..."

Sakura sighed, attempting to gather her thoughts. "I'll try my best to do as you say."

"Really?"

"Yes, I will...do my best...so please...Lady Hinagiku."

"...What?"

"Could you please tell me that you love me? I want the strength to persevere."

Sakura realized how foolish a request it was once it had left her mouth.

This is foolish and disgraceful, I know.

She was a child throwing a tantrum. She was selfishly asking for affection because she didn't like that the one she hated could receive it without asking. She knew she wasn't Hinagiku's mother or partner.

"I don't care if it's a lie..."

Lady and retainer. God and goddess. Woman and woman. Man and woman. The relationships were different in so many ways that it felt stupid to try to compete. She knew her relationship with Hinagiku was unlike Rosei's.

Even if Sakura hated him, it was foolish to try to have her lady's heart all to herself.

I'm sorry.

Still, she wanted this girl's love.

I know it's just a substitute.

After living on hatred for all this time, what Sakura truly needed was Hinagiku. She was her only hope.

I know you're suffering, too. I'm sorry.

She wanted Hinagiku's gaze. Her attention. Even her love. She begged for it.

"Why...do you...say such...things...again? Hinagiku...won't...lie."

She didn't need to compete for the goddess to cherish her, but still she hurt.

"Sakura...I love you."

The words Sakura longed for the most reached her ears without a trace of falsehood.

Thank you. When you say you love me...

"Hinagiku...loves you. Your kind...ness...your grumpi...ness..."

...I feel something inside me being forgiven.

"Hinagiku...loves you...a whole...lot."

So I seek it out like some sort of excuse.

"Don't...worry...Sakura."

Even ten years back, the only one who could heal the wounds in her heart was Hinagiku.

"...Lady Hinagiku."

Sakura tried not to look at the inconvenient reality.

"I love you, too, Lady Hinagiku."

Sakura wanted to hate for a bit longer, but she released the umbrella and let it fall. Instead, as Hinagiku turned around, Sakura wrapped her arms around her. She hugged her lady tight, as though resisting the light being reflected from the snow to them.

Hinagiku smiled in her arms. “It hurts,” she said.

Sakura let go in a hurry. “Lady Hinagiku...”

“Don’t...worry...it’s...fine,” Hinagiku whispered comfortingly. She would never let Sakura go, no matter how badly Sakura erred.

“It’s fine...”

I’m sorry, Lady Hinagiku.

The reason Sakura had survived from the age of nine was thanks to emotions she was better off letting go of—her obsession and regret.

I’m sorry. If only I could be more normal.

She couldn’t live without them. She wasn’t allowed to live without them.

If only I could love you normally.

Sakura knew her love was twisted.

“I want to hear those words for the rest of my life. I want to stay closest to you—forever.”

Sakura’s love, while warped, was more guileless than anybody else’s.

“Yes...Hinagiku will...say it...as many...times as you...want. Because...Hinagiku...loves...you. Hinagiku...doesn’t...blame you. Hinagiku’s...grateful...that you...waited...and didn’t...forget. Hinagiku...loves you.”



Sakura couldn't function any other way.

"Yes. I love you, too. And I will protect you for as long as I live."

She needed the hatred and the dependency.

"It'll...be...fine."

Hinagiku understood everything, and she gave Sakura all the words and attention she wanted.

"Sakura, Hinagiku loves you."

"...Yes."

"Hinagiku loves you...so much."

"Yes, Lady Hinagiku."

The love she professed to her supplicant was not romantic love.

"So...it'll be...fine."

"...Yes, Lady Hinagiku."

It was not romantic love, but it was far more intense and pure than platonic love.

"So long as I have you, it will all be fine."

It was a bit broken, but it was a proper feeling between the two.

By the time Hinagiku had said she loved her about fifty times, Sakura could smile again.

A few days passed after they arrived at the Summer villa.

Hinagiku and Sakura followed the schedule and fulfilled their duty to bring Spring to Iyo.

The place had been chilly and full of snow when they first arrived, but it had been getting warmer. Winter was turning into spring.

After a few days of rest following the manifestation, they had to head to Teishu next.

"Lady Hinagiku, are you okay?"

After using her divine powers for multiple days in a row, Hinagiku had come down with a fatigue-induced fever the moment she went back to her room.

“...Yeah... It’s just...a little...fever.”

Her lady’s feeble response as she looked out from under the sheets hurt Sakura’s chest. She had spent too much time talking in the snow. Just thinking that this might have been the cause pained her.

Hinagiku noticed she was worrying about this and added, “It isn’t...because of before...”

“In any case, we need to get that fever down. I’ll go find some medicine. And we should grab you something else for dinner. I’ll borrow the kitchen to make it myself. Is rice porridge okay?”

“Could you...make it...with some...eggs? Or is that...asking...too much?”

“It is never asking too much. Please tell me whatever you want, whether you’re down with a fever or not.”

Sakura adjusted the cooling sheet on Hinagiku’s forehead before heading to the kitchen.

She had memorized the building’s structure in order to guard Hinagiku, so she reached her destination without any needless detours. The Summer villa was built like a Western mansion, and every room was spacious.

There were two fridges in the kitchen, too, perhaps in case of visitors. Sakura couldn’t find a cook there; she wondered for a while if she was allowed to just open one of the fridges.

“Were you looking for something, Lady Himedaka?”

Sakura turned around to find Ayame.

She was wearing a fancy rich-girl dress; perhaps she had just come back from an outing.

“Oh, Lady Ayame. May I use the food in the fridge? Lady Hinagiku’s come down with a fever... I was thinking about making something else for us tonight.”

“Oh my. Of course, go ahead. You can use anything in the kitchen. The cook is

out shopping at the moment.”

“Thank you. I will help myself, then.”

Ayame watched with deep interest as Sakura opened the fridge and quickly took out all the ingredients and seasonings.

“...Is there any problem?” Sakura asked.

“No, I was just impressed that you can cook.”

“It’s just porridge. Anyone can make it.”

“...I’m ashamed to admit that I haven’t ever tried it.”

“What?!” Sakura exclaimed.

“The people around here have always made everything for me.”

Agent and retainer normally traveled from a young age to manifest the seasons. The accompanying adults cooked for them, so naturally, they would have no opportunity to do it themselves.

“And I’m about to get married... That’s not good, is it? I can’t have him cook for me all the time. I should be able to at least make porridge for my husband when he gets sick.”

Sakura hesitated to say, *That’s right*, so she simply asked if Ayame wanted to lend a hand. Ayame nodded with a smile, and the two of them stood together at the kitchen counter. It was nothing complex, though, so most of their time was spent watching the pot.

After a while, Sakura couldn’t take the silence anymore.

“Um, may I ask...about the strike?”

She had wanted to ask about it for a long time. Ayame deflated and replied weakly, “Ah... It’s so embarrassing. Who else has their lady on strike, right?”

“No, I...”

“It’s quite simple. She’s always felt entitled to me since we were children.”

Ayame reminisced about their past together.

“Since the Agents are treated like gods, they don’t go to school. They really

are sheltered in childhood... So they depend heavily on their retainers. She must feel like her toy's being taken away because I'm quitting to marry... Like she owns me..."

Sakura understood that feeling, but she knew that wasn't exclusive to the Agents.

Aren't we the same? Isn't that why you worry the way you do?

The retainers, too, in a corner of their mind, thought of themselves as their Agent's possession.

And this feeling got stronger and stronger the deeper their bonds became. Leaving their lady's side brought agonizing pain. Even if the sisters didn't really get along, Sakura couldn't believe the retainer of Summer wouldn't feel it.

She stared at Ayame as she said, "I must say...I'm shocked the Town approved it. Retainers are there to guard their masters, too, but their main objective is to not let them get too close to godhood... We're here to keep their mental stability."

"This is something particular to Summer. Their family gives them support when they are young, but as they come of age, they spend the rest of their life with their partner. It's custom, so I'm not the only one getting married."

"You mean the Lady Summer is also marrying?"

That revelation came as a shock to Sakura, but Ayame nodded like it was nothing.

"They've already met. Starting next year, Ruri's husband will join her. He's from a renowned family with strong blood ties to the successors; he's a bit older but very kind and open-minded. Ruri doesn't hate him, either, but..."

"...How old is Lady Ruri, again?"

"Eighteen, a good age. It's time for her to leave her sister and turn her attention elsewhere... After all, the older she gets, and the more knowledgeable she becomes, the harder she'll reject this kind of marriage."

"..."

Ayame spoke softly, but it was all so bizarrely cruel.

I suppose she's made her peace with it.

Even to Sakura, who cared for nothing but her lady, this arrangement was regressive. The world of the Four Seasons was very different from what was normal in society, but this made Sakura want to ask her if she really was okay going through with this. But once she noticed the way Ayame was clasping her hands, she desisted.

I see. This is not what she wants.

The families of those who devoted their lives to the Four Seasons were, in a way, sacrificing themselves for the world.

That included Sakura and the Agents. If they wanted to keep going at all, they had to convince themselves that there was no other way.

"Summer has been changing little by little lately. They didn't allow the retainers to get married before. And the Agents' partners were greatly limited. If Ruri and I can improve the policy...then perhaps we'll be able to make it easier on the next generation."

"That's commendable."

"Ruri also seems to understand this, but she won't accept it. Even if her next retainer loves her...she only wants the one who's been there with her since her childhood."

"..."

"I'm sorry for all this... It's so embarrassing... But I feel an affinity with you as a fellow retainer."

"Oh, don't worry."

"You in Spring don't have to worry about this, do you?"

"We..."

Sakura didn't intend to put their shame on display, but she felt it would be wrong not to say anything now that Ayame had shared so much. Besides, expressing her anxieties could lighten the weight on her shoulders.

"...Actually, we've had a strike of our own, too."

“What?!”

Sakura gave an awkward smile at the predictable reaction. “After Lady Hinagiku came back...from the kidnapping, she cooped herself up in her room... She was dealing with trust issues and post-traumatic stress disorder and so much more...”

“Ah!” Ayame exclaimed. “So the official announcement was inaccurate. When did she return, then?”

“Two years ago, actually. She spent that time healing until she could finally go out again.”

For a while, the only sounds in the kitchen were their breathing and the bubbling of the pot. After some time, Ayame spoke again. “...I did read the documents, but... Was it that terrible...?”

“What do you mean?”

“The kidnapping, when they attacked the Town of Winter.”

“Yes... It was awful. I was there, so I was interrogated... I’ve read the documents detailing the case many times. I have it all memorized.”

Ayame stared at her, and Sakura stirred the pot as she recounted the events like a bard reciting a tale.

“It happened on February second, Reimei ten.”

Like *One Thousand and One Nights*.

“We were visiting the Town of Winter for the Season Descent. It was three in the afternoon when an extremist anti-Agency group attacked the Town of Winter... They infiltrated through the sewers and shot the staff. Many were wounded...”

The pot roiled and seethed.

“When the battle erupted, Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki, age ten; his retainer, Itecho Kangetsu, age nineteen; my lady, Agent of Spring Hinagiku Kayo, age six; and I, Sakura Himedaka, age nine, evacuated the *honden*...”

The boiling in the pot seemed to spill into the words coming from her mouth,

knocking on the door of her memories.

As dispassionately as she described the situation, she couldn't help remembering.

"The four of us were able to leave the Town of Winter, but the extremists caught up to us at the shrine forest on the outskirts. In the struggle, Guard of Winter Itecho Kangetsu covered Lady Hinagiku, receiving a serious gunshot wound."

Knock knock, sounded the door of her memories.

"Lady Hinagiku manifested spring in that moment, creating a big cherry blossom tree that protected the three of us; we would have been dead otherwise."

Knock knock, knock knock.

"Then she negotiated with the extremists. She offered herself if they would leave us alone."

Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock.

The rhythm persisted as the door itself was pried open.

"They accepted, and she was kidnapped. We were saved."

Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock.

"Then...the perpetrators got in touch with National Security."

Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock.

"They requested limits on the powers of the Agents of the Four Seasons and requirements to use those powers in new ways."

Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock.

"National Security immediately set up a task force and began negotiating with the extremists, even offering money. The Agency of the Four Seasons, National Security, and the Yamatoan government rejected the terms..."

Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock.

"One day, they stopped revising conditions and trying to communicate..."

Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock.

“They completely lost track of her and failed to reach a resolution.”

Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock.

“The survival of my liege, Lady Hinagiku Kayo, was proven by the lack of a succeeding Agent of Spring and the absence of the arrival of spring.”

Knock knock (help me), *knock knock* (help me), *knock knock* (help
me), *knock knock* (help me), *knock knock* (help me), *knock knock*
(help me), *knock knock* (help me), *knock knock* (help me), *knock
knock* (help me), *knock knock* (help me).

[illegible]

I don't want to remember. Fuck the past.

It was all, all, all wrong.

The Season Descent was the custom wherein a newly chosen Agent spent a month with the Agent of Winter.

The honeymoon with Winter, their forefather, was part of the ritual embodying the lives of the gods. It was how the Agents were welcomed into the group, to let them spread their wings out into the world after the Descent.

We had foreseen and prepared for an attack on the Town of Winter during this period, but everything fell apart as soon as it actually happened.

The attackers knew our evacuation routes, we couldn't use the cars, and the only direction we managed to flee in was the shrine forest, with nowhere to hide. We were separated from the rest of the guards, so the only ones there to protect the Agents were Itecho and nine-year-old me.

I held Lady Hinagiku's hand as she sobbed, and we ran alongside Itecho and Rosei, but they caught us in no time.

It was all, all, all wrong.

It was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, it was all wrong.

Itecho was shot multiple times defending Lady Hinagiku.

Rosei protected him after a few blows by creating a wall of ice, but his anxiety made the ice fragile. We had to protect Lady Hinagiku at all costs, but our attackers broke through every attempt.

Everything. All of it. None of this was right.

I had no supernatural powers. If only I did—I could have protected everyone.

We were useless. Absolutely useless.

Maybe she heard my inner cries.

"Lord Itecho, please take care of Lord Rosei and Sakura."

She was six. She was so sharp and intelligent—but still only six.

"Sakura, don't worry. It'll be fine."

She knew why this was happening and what would make it stop. But she was

only six.

“Lord Rosei...”

I was only a tool for her to use, but she treated me as a friend.

“Thank you for hanging out with me.”

I should have protected her. I should have saved her, even at the cost of my life.

“Thank you for the ice flower.”

And yet. It was useless. *I* was useless. It was all wrong.

“Thank you for all your kindness, Lord Rosei.”

Everything that day was wrong.

Sakura came back to her senses as she saw the pot boiling over, and she hurriedly turned off the stove.

“So Lady Hinagiku...saved you and the Winter pair.”

“Yes...”

“It’s amazing that she could do that before she could reliably manifest spring, not to mention in such a terrifying situation... She must have nerves of steel.”

Sakura nodded in agreement. *“She is amazing. I’m only alive now because of what she did. I owe her my life.”* Her voice fell to a whisper as she recalled that day. *“I will never forget that sight... Her back was so small, I could barely see it among the cherry blossoms. Lady Hinagiku manifested spring for the first time in order to protect us. That wasn’t how it was supposed to happen. It should’ve been on a special day, with everyone celebrating...”*

I can still remember.

“As she sang, the cherry blossom trees sprang up from the ground, providing cover for us... I cried. There were so many petals; everything was pink. I desperately tried cutting through the branches, but I couldn’t. And I heard a voice—a six-year-old girl—”

It was breathtaking—and maddening.

"She was saying, 'I'll come with you, so don't hurt the others anymore.'"

That moment was pure despair.

"I could never forget that sound, those colors—not a single detail."

Ayame watched Sakura with sympathy as she calmly recounted her experience. Of course, Sakura had to keep a detached tone or it would be too painful to speak of it at all.

"It must've been devastating..."

"..."

Sakura gave a vague smile, neither confirming nor denying it.

It wasn't as though Ayame had no stake in the conversation, either. Hinagiku and Rosei were the ones who had been attacked ten years ago, but there was no guarantee the same thing would never happen to the Agent of Summer.

"Excuse me, may I ask a question?"

"Yes?" Sakura responded.

"Which insurgents attacked the Town of Winter?"

Sakura tilted her head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"What faction were they? Just as a reference, since it could affect Summer, too."

"Faction... Oh, you mean whether they're reformists or radicals?"

Ayame nodded. "We call them all insurgents—anyone who tries to harm the Agents of the Four Seasons due to their ideology—but there are two sides. The reformists are the ones who approach the supernatural powers granted by the Four Seasons at the beginning of time with self-interest. They want those powers to be available to the people, and they use violence in their protests against the government and the Agency. But some people are against specific seasons, claiming humanity doesn't need them—those are the radicals. Considering they negotiated with the government after the kidnapping, I surmise they were reformists. Am I right?"

Sakura groaned in thought for a moment.

“The circumstances are too complicated... The reformists negotiated with the government, yes, but it was radicals who attacked the Town of Winter. From what Lady Hinagiku said after she came back, there seemed to be internal conflict. I believe it was a joint operation between both factions. The collaboration fell apart halfway...but attacking one of the Towns must’ve been of great significance to them, and it was the biggest terrorist attack in recent years.”

Ayame sighed darkly.

Lady Hinagiku wouldn’t have lost ten years of her life if they had never done this.

Ten years. The simplicity of the words robbed the time of its weight, but it was like an eternal hell to the one going through it.

As the two of them had said, there were two main sides to the differing ideologies of insurgents.

The reformists operated by protesting the Yamatoan government and other institutions to change the way the Agents of the Four Seasons were managed. The radicals simply believed a certain season shouldn’t exist, and they went after the Agent directly. When the next Agent appeared, the radicals would hunt them, too. The specific demands of the reformists varied depending on the era, but the radicals remained the same. Their ideology came from grudges that had lasted generations and quasi-religious views.

It was true that some lives were affected directly by the seasons. Some people tried to prevent winter because of ill family members back home, but they were rejected and ultimately lost those people. Some summers, the droughts lasted too long, and lives were lost. Resentment from such events from the ancient past were passed down through generations, and their descendants now hunted the seasons.

“Winter in particular is a season that many have resisted, such as in farming communities or in places where sickness is common... It’s why they must’ve chosen to attack there. Lady Hinagiku was only kidnapped by coincidence.”

“And then, after living in confinement for so long, she suffered from mental illness... Of course that would need care, and she would refuse to manifest

spring. She couldn't go right back to work."

"And that wasn't the only thing..." Sakura said as she scooped the hot porridge from the pot and served it on a plate.

The image of the homeland she loathed crossed her mind.

"The Town of Spring stopped looking for her after three months."

The fury was clear in her voice.

"...What?" Ayame was confused; she simply and sincerely couldn't understand what Sakura meant. "But... But without the Agent of Spring, the season wouldn't come to Yamato... They're basically her parents; why would they give up looking for her so quickly? It doesn't make sense."

Sakura nodded. "Yes," she replied coldly, "but if the current Agent died, a new one would be born right after, remember?"

Her own words were painful to say. Even after so many years, the thought of the treatment of her dear lady, and her own inability to help, still hurt.

Sakura's voice turned colder and colder as she remembered what they had done. "It's just the way the world works."

She spoke softly, liltingly...

"I really hate how systematic this fairy-tale world is."

...and glacially.

"Once a machine stops working as it should, you throw it out and replace it. And those powers naturally reach the most suitable person at the moment...the youngest, the one with the thickest blood. It happens automatically. It's just the way the Agents of the Four Seasons have been born since the beginning of time."

Immeasurable hatred filled her eyes.

"..."

Ayame finally understood what drove Sakura Himedaka. She was built on her overprotective devotion to her Agent.

"Once the data gets ported over, you don't need the old device anymore. The

Agent of Winter once said that they were livestock. They were replaceable, with no freedom. At the time, I just thought he was a cold kid, but later on, I realized that he truly understood his position. The Town of Winter isn't kind, either... So the higher-ups at the Town of Spring gave up on Lady Hinagiku. They figured she would die sooner or later and a new one would be chosen from the bloodline. Everyone in the bloodline is under supervision, no matter where they are. They made their gamble because it would be *easier*."

"That's... That's too much."

Ayame's face paled as Sakura stated the facts.

Hearing a colleague say all this, she couldn't help wondering, *What if the same thing happened to us?*

The question remained in her mind, unanswered.

"Do you think your Town would never make such a decision? Perhaps Summer wouldn't. But Spring did. I was shocked, too, and I deserted. I was better off searching on my own. In the end...I spent eight years without finding her, and she was alive the whole time."

"Heavens..."

Ayame had noticed the closeness between the girls as soon as she'd met them, especially with regards to Sakura toward Hinagiku. Ayame couldn't begin to imagine how full of despair those years must have been after her organization betrayed her.

"..." Ayame covered her mouth with her hand.

The peaceful sight of Sakura making porridge now seemed so ephemeral.

"How did you two reunite?"

"It was a bit later on that I saw her again. The Town called for me because Lady Hinagiku refused to speak to anyone else. They had kept her return secret, and they even planned on getting a new retainer, but it didn't go well. So the Kayos got ahold of me."

"Why did she refuse to speak to anyone?"

"Lady Hinagiku knew all about what had happened. She knew that she had

been abandoned after just three months and that everyone had been waiting for her to die. Someone from National Security must've answered all her questions honestly. So she refused to manifest spring."

Sakura remembered Hinagiku back then when she was crying and driving people away.

"Well, of course she felt unstable after finding that out..."

"Yes... But no matter what, I had to get her to manifest spring. An Agent of Spring who couldn't do her job would be useless to the Town, so her life was in danger. I didn't want to force her. I wanted her to live a normal life. But she wasn't allowed that. The Agents of the Four Seasons insist they aren't gods incarnate, but they are. They're the gears that keep the world running. If they don't serve their function, then the hard-liners in the Towns would get them replaced," Sakura explained.

Hinagiku would throw her food away; she would come out of the bath with scratches all over her skin and dripping in blood; she would rage whenever she was asked to do anything. Then, once night came, she simply wept in silence. She was broken inside.

I can't even imagine that.

Ayame couldn't picture this broken side of the Agent of Spring. She knew only the gracious, quiet, and sweet girl who always smiled by her retainer's side.

"The Kayos and their associates took her side, and she remained protected, but the balance was only barely maintained. I explained to her the danger she was in, but Lady Hinagiku wouldn't understand... I felt so trapped back then, but in the end, she recovered. We overcame that trial together, and now our bond is stronger than ever."

"..."

Ayame couldn't say anything for a while.

"I'm starting to feel stupid... It's not like we're being torn apart from each other, as you were... We may be living separately due to my marriage...but we can still keep in contact."

“Please, you’re not stupid.”

“No, we really are... It’s stupid for us to say we’re sad or lonely, knowing someone else is going through something much worse...”

Sakura’s tone softened as she replied. “Lady Ayame, I want you to hear this because your Agent is on strike. Listen.”

“Yes...”

“An Agent needs her retainer. You need to support her, or she’ll collapse.”

“...”

“That goes for anyone, really...but I think it’s even more so the case with the Agents of the Four Seasons. All of them are extremely delicate inside, and they fixate on the people who support them. They would sacrifice their lives for us.”

“...That definitely checks out...”

“They manifest the season in their hearts. So if their heart collapses, so does the season. Winter is a great example. Winter in Yamato after Lady Hinagiku disappeared was dreadful. It was harsh and long, as if it was trying to fill the void spring had left. Even Ryugu in the south was covered in snow. Spring vanished right before his eyes; letting it happen is a heavy sin...”

“...” Ayame remained at a loss for a moment before saying, “Are you...scolding me?”

Sakura shook her head. “No. I just want you to understand.”

“Understand...?”

“Yes. You speak as though the Agent of Summer is throwing a tantrum, but that’s not it. She really needs your support. She’s hurting. Even if she had a man who was fond of her elsewhere, you were the one who supported her up to now, and she can’t take the idea of losing you. Her heart is crumbling. And if you think her pain is only coming from a place of selfishness, then you can’t ever help her heal.”

“...”

The retainer of Spring almost seemed to be speaking about herself.

Ayame remained silent for a while, then nodded. “Thank you...Lady Himedaka.” She smiled softly. “I feel a bit better now, knowing there’s someone like you who really understands the Agents.”

Sakura tilted her head. “...You think? I feel like it was a bit preachy.”

“That’s not the case.”

“You must have your own worries as the retainer of Summer. It isn’t my place as the retainer of Spring to speak for you.”

“No, no, I really needed it... I think I’d been waiting to hear just that.”

Ayame reached out to Sakura and then grabbed her sleeve.

Sakura looked straight into Ayame’s eyes for the first time.

Ayame was an elegant, beautiful woman with glasses. Like the personification of the moon, or so Sakura had thought until now. Her eyes behind her glasses were amber. Her skin was pale but glossy and bright.

“Even if I can’t change anything now...” Ayame smiled with the radiance of the sun.

Why had Sakura thought of the moon?

How could she be the moon with such a bright and warm smile?

“...I wanted someone to tell me it was okay to keep loving her... Because I do. I adore her.”

“...Um.”

“Lady Himedaka?”

“No... It’s nothing.”

Sakura couldn’t put into words what seemed so strange, so she retracted it.

By the time they finished talking, the porridge wasn’t hot anymore, but it was just cool enough for Hinagiku to eat.

That same day, at nine in the evening.

Hinagiku had eaten her porridge and gone to sleep, but she woke up all of a sudden.

“...”

She placed a hand on her forehead. Her fever had gone down. The curtains were closed, but even then, the room was too dark. She looked around for a clock, wondering how much she had slept, but didn't find one. She could hear a drizzle outside.

I should...tell...Sakura...that the...fever's...down.

Hinagiku sluggishly got up and started toward the door, but then she heard a loud boom. At first, she thought something had exploded.

“Lady Hinagiku!”

“Ruri!”

She could hear Sakura and Ayame calling in unison from the living room on the first floor. They were running up the stairs together, but the rooms of their respective ladies were at opposite ends of the hallway.

“Lady Ayame! I'll go protect Lady Hinagiku!”

“Yes! I'll safeguard Ruri!”

They split up at the top of the staircase, and each ran for their own lady. Sakura kicked the door open, and Hinagiku immediately ran to her side.

“Saku...ra,” she said anxiously.

Sakura tried to calm her down. “It's okay. I'm here.”

“Yes.”

“That was so loud. Was it an earthquake? An explosion?”

“It wasn't...fire...works...was it?”

“I haven't heard anything about fireworks. And if that was the case, Lady Ayame wouldn't have gone to secure Lady Ruri.”

She had imagined and practiced countless times how to act in an emergency. Hinagiku hid behind Sakura's back, and she nodded to let her know the way to go. Sakura placed a hand on her katana hanging by her waist, ready to unsheathe it at any moment.

“It could be an insurgent attack, but...”

Then everything turned dark.

There was screaming all over the Summer villa as power to the whole building went out. They could hear the birds and the dogs and the cats shrieking and rushing up the stairs, turning the building into a jungle at night. The dogs howled like wolves in the dark, perhaps wanting to confirm the safety of the Agent of Summer.

“Sa...Sakura!” Hinagiku clung to Sakura’s back as the howls got louder and the anxiety turned heavier.

Before saying anything, Sakura grabbed Hinagiku’s hand. “It’s okay, Lady Hinagiku. I will protect you.”

“Y-yes...”

Sakura gave her a squeeze and let go, looking around.

As far as she could see from the window, even the night-lights outside were off. The Summer villa was separated from the others, so there were streetlights at regular intervals all the way to the main road. If they were off, too, then the power had probably been cut to the whole area.

Sakura took her phone out of her pocket and checked the signal—no service.

“...Do you think the earthquake just now was natural?”

“I feel...the ley lines...healing the...divine power...same as...always. I don’t...think it...was natural. Even...the smallest earthquakes...make the...ley lines...all fuzzy. They...wouldn’t be...this stable.”

“I see...”

Meaning this is man-made.

“Got it. We’ll be even more careful, then.”

“...Yes.”

First of all, they had to meet with Ayame again. The moment they went out to the hallway, they sensed something moving at the end of the corridor. From the side opposite to the Agent of Summer’s room.

An animal?

The animals were running wild around the Summer villa. At first, Sakura thought it might be one of them, but the moment she heard their breathing, she knew it was a human. A man.

“Everyone, ready for combat! It’s the insurgents!!” Sakura yelled.

She shouted to let everyone in the villa know. And the following moment, she heard screams and gunshots from downstairs and elsewhere. The intruders had come out from hiding and begun their attack.

A figure rushed at them, but Sakura wasn’t used to the dark yet—she couldn’t tell what weapon he was holding.

“Shit!”

Either way, she had to protect Hinagiku.

Sakura looked for a way to gauge the distance between her and her opponent, then swung her sheathed sword and followed it with a mid-height kick. Luckily, it hit. Now she had a grasp on how far away she was.

That was a hard hit. He’s well-equipped.

Unflinching, she released a smooth succession of attacks. She heard her sheath hitting a blade—the man had precisely parried her attack with a knife. He sidestepped too perfectly, which meant he had to be equipped with night-vision gear. He also clearly had height and weight on his side. Sakura kicked again and again, but he blocked all of the blows without being hurt. He would learn her patterns sooner or later, and she’d be at a disadvantage then.

I have to go for his head.

Sakura leveraged all her weight into a kick at his face, hoping to knock him out, but he seemed completely ready for her and grabbed her leg. She lost her balance, and she could feel the strain. His grip was strong enough to break her leg, and he would stab her once he did.

I’m not losing!

Sakura’s captured leg was an anchor, and with a scream of pain, she used that anchor to finish the blow with her other leg. The enemy’s grip weakened, and

she fell to the floor with a hand on her katana's grip. She had intentionally left it sheathed up to this moment.

A slash of her blade could take her opponent's life. She may be a Guard of the Four Seasons, but she couldn't end lives whenever she pleased. She was forbidden from unsheathing it lightly.

Kill him.

But this wasn't the time to keep it covered. No matter who her enemy was or why he was here, Hinagiku was right behind her.

Kill him.

Hinagiku had trusted her when she went on her journey to bring spring to the land. Sakura could not allow anyone suspicious to get even one step closer.

Kill him before he kills you!

Her fall had revealed a sliver of the blade. The metal was designed with the color and pattern of cherry blossoms, calling to her in the dark to harden her resolve.

Kill him!

Sakura wasn't fully in her body when she swung the katana.

"A-aa-aaah!"

I cut him!

She felt the blade slicing muscle, and the man screamed loud enough to pierce her eardrums. The sword hadn't severed his leg, only stabbed it. He screamed again as she pulled it out. The lukewarm touch of blood splashed on her hands and face, but it quickly cooled.

"Stay away if you don't want to die!" Sakura yelled as she felt his life spill away. The words came from the pit of her stomach. "...Stay away...if you don't want to die...!"

Keeping him in check after that was not a difficult task. As the man fell, clutching his leg, she knocked him out with a single blow from the katana's hilt.

"...Haaah...Haaah..."

She huffed and panted as she waited for her enemy to go completely silent, and then she turned around, forgetting to wipe the blood off her face. “Lady Hinagiku! Are you all right?!”

“...Sakura!” Hinagiku called her retainer’s name and ran up to her.

Then they heard a new set of footsteps.

Sakura’s sweaty hand slipped as she adjusted her grip on the hilt, and the footsteps stopped.

“It’s me, Aoyama! From the Town of Summer, manager of the villa!”

Sakura halted mid-strike when she heard the woman’s voice. Even among the confusion, she remembered the person in question. She had already learned the name, face, and voice of the manager when they arrived.

“Lady Spring! Guard of Spring! Are you all right?!”

She had come to see if they were safe. Sakura’s eyes had finally gotten used to the darkness, as well, so she could recognize her.

“We have an insurgent here! I’ve knocked him out, but there may be more!”

“There are no enemies on the first floor! They seem to be fighting outside! We’ll keep you safe. Is he restrained?”

“Not yet!”

“I’m walking over to you! I’m carrying a gun, but I’ll approach you with my hands in the air. Confirm that I am not an insurgent insider. Okay?”

The Summer villa manager held her phone with one hand and lit up the way. Then Sakura remembered they hadn’t checked on the safety of the people most likely to be attacked, besides themselves. She finally realized the dogs were howling from Ruri’s room.

“Lady Ayame! Lady Ruri! Are you all right?!” Sakura yelled toward the room, staying where she stood.

She received an answer right away. “Ayame here! We’re both fine! I’m sorry I can’t back you up! An insurgent appeared in the room, but I’ve taken care of them!”

Sakura was relieved; she couldn't see Ayame, but she sounded fine.

"Good. I figured the animals had gone to help, but still..." Aoyama said.

"Are they able to serve as guard dogs? I only saw cute little ones..."

"Even the smallest puppy, kitten, or bug has the power to kill an adult human if Lady Ruri commands it. The Agent of Summer holds the power of Life Operation in addition to her manifestation. The lives of her familiars receive great power."

Shivers ran down Sakura's spine as she pictured a small dog becoming a brutal beast. No wonder they let her keep so many critters.

"I see. I suppose there's no need to worry... But we're okay here. I cut his leg, so he shouldn't be able to move. Go check on the Lady Summer."

"Roger."

Sakura looked around. Were they still securing the living room? People with phones ran hurriedly every which way; they were all from the Summer villa. After a while, she heard the entrance door open, and they named themselves as Aoyama had a moment ago. It was Spring staff from the Agency who had been monitoring outside.

Right away, the people on the first floor were rounded up and interrogated on their identities. Sakura watched with caution.

"Saku...ra."

"..."

"...Sakura!"

Sakura came to her senses at the second call. "Ah. Yes?"

"...Sakura." Hinagiku's voice sounded uneasy.

"It's okay, Lady Hinagiku?"

"No, Sakura... The blood..."

Sakura finally noticed the blood dripping from her jaw and forehead. "Oh, it's not my blood, so it's..."

Before she could finish, Hinagiku wiped her face with her kimono's sleeve.

"Lady Hinagiku—" She tried to warn her that the garment was incredibly expensive, but the shaking of Hinagiku's hand stopped her.

She didn't want to scold her lady for doing something out of concern for her. And the most terrified person in here had to be Hinagiku. Sakura didn't want to upset her even further.

"Are you...hurt?" Hinagiku asked.

"I don't think so, but I'm buzzing with adrenaline, so I'm not sure."

"A-adre...na...line?"

"It's a hormone that gets you all worked up and makes you not feel when you get hurt...sort of? I'm still so worked up that I can't really explain it clearly."

"S-Saku...ra." Hinagiku held her close and struggled to say, "Please...don't...get hurt."

Sakura's chest tightened at the sound of that. She softly hugged Hinagiku back with her open hand.

"It's okay, Lady Hinagiku."

Hinagiku shook her head, as if she didn't like that answer. "It's not...okay. Please...don't get...hurt. You're...shaking."

Hinagiku was far more afraid of Sakura's life being in danger than the general situation they were in. Sakura noticed this, and a faint smile appeared on her face, although there was some darkness in it.

"Yes, I am shaking. But you can see, Lady Hinagiku, that I am not the girl I was ten years ago... I've learned from many people while we were apart. I trained hard to be able to protect you when we met again. It was a difficult life, but now I'm useful."

"...Yes...but—"

Sakura didn't let her finish. "Don't you say you don't want me fighting because I'm a woman or because I'm your friend or something like that."

Sakura lived off her lady's kindness, but in this moment, she wanted that

kindness locked away.

“The best reward I could get for my efforts is to hear you praise me for fighting.”

Sakura lived to be Hinagiku’s blade, her Guard. Finally, she had the opportunity to protect the lady she couldn’t save ten years back. She did not want to give this role to anybody else.

Anything she could give to her goddess, she would give—her whole adolescence, even her life.

“Lady Hinagiku... Ask me to protect you.”

The Guard’s biggest wish was to protect her lady.

“We might have to fight again in the future. Please give me the strength to persevere.”

What could she do, if not that? That was Sakura Himedaka’s source of self-worth.

“...”

Hinagiku kept silent. Many things could be heard in her silence—her worry, her desire to ask Sakura to start, her concern that any praise would only make Sakura more reckless.

“Sakura...”

However, Hinagiku reconsidered. It was her duty to give her Guard, the one who had devoted her life to this, what she wanted. And so she granted her reward.

“...Thank...you. That was...amazing. Sakura...protect Hinagiku...”

Hinagiku shivered. She didn’t want to ask her precious friend to protect her.

Tears spilled from her eyes as she finished saying it.

“Thank you. It is my pleasure.” Sakura hugged the sobbing Hinagiku even harder.

Meanwhile, the Spring Agency staff monitoring the outside entered the mansion with a flashlight. Sakura already knew them, so Sakura had no need to

be as cautious this time. She instructed them to apprehend the unconscious man.

“Lady Himedaka, there is something I want you to hear,” the Spring Agency staff murmured to her. “We failed to defeat them outside. I am very sorry... The ones we failed to put down entered the mansion, and this happened.”

“No use crying over spilled milk. Any dead or wounded?”

“None on our side. The Town of Winter’s guards helped us take care of it.”

Hinagiku raised her head at the sound of that.

“...Winter? Why...?!” Sakura exclaimed.

Itecho.

The image of that wide back she used to follow around crossed her mind. Her chest twinged.

“We also just found out. It seems that Winter...Lord Rosei Kantsubaki and Lord Itecho Kangetsu had them watching over you two. We’ve confirmed their identities.”

Sakura could easily imagine why. They wanted to protect the Agent of Spring in secret, after she had been kidnapped because of them. The master and retainer of Winter had spared some of their own guards to keep an eye on their journey manifesting spring.

“...Tsk.”

You mean to say I’m not enough? Or do you think you’ll atone by doing this?

A torrent of emotions surged inside her, but she swallowed them all down. The danger she feared had actually come to pass, and they were better off taking advantage of the help.

“...Got it. We’ll make use of what we can. Let the Town of Winter keep guard over us and Summer.”

“I understand.”

“If possible, I’d like to see the news. Do you have a phone?”

“It has no service. None of the others’ worked, either. Everything electronic is

unusable. For the moment, please come with Lady Hinagiku over to the living room. They have an evacuation route. We'll keep everyone in a large room while we make sure it's safe."

Sakura nodded and headed over to the living room alongside Hinagiku.

The bunnies, kittens, and puppies gathered, sensing their worry. Hinagiku petted them softly one by one; the sight brought some relief to Sakura, but the tension remained. After a while, Ayame came downstairs with a camping lantern in hand.

Her traditional Yamatoan beauty gave her a ghostly appearance with this lighting.

"..."

She looked around at the people gathered in the living room. Everyone who made eye contact with the dark-haired woman emerging from the gloom looked away immediately. She had a sulky expression on her face.

As the woman observed everyone in silence, the animals began to gather at her feet.

"..."

Sakura could tell she was missing something, judging from Ayame's silence and the way the critters followed her, not to mention the distinctly otherworldly air around her. Before she could find words for it, the answer revealed herself.

Another girl appeared from behind the person Sakura had thought was Ayame. Her clothes were different, but her face was exactly the same.

Hinagiku and Sakura gasped.

"Ruri, I told you not to walk ahead."

"Shut up, Ayame."

The two bespectacled women grumbled at each other as everyone around stared in confusion.

"The Lady...Summer?" asked Hinagiku, and Sakura finally made the

connection.

She had misunderstood what Ayame meant by *“little sister.”*

She wasn't wrong—this was her sister.

The twin in the dress spoke. “The birds are telling me there was great destruction.” Her words sounded like a divine prophecy.

Soon, confirmation arrived through the Summer villa manager's emergency radio. There had been an explosion at a power plant in the area. The cause was unclear, but some people were wounded. Only part of the plant had been damaged, but it was a total blackout, and they had no forecast for when the power would be restored.

“The traffic lights are out, too. We have to either leave now or guard the place until morning...,” said Sakura, and Ayame nodded.

“Ruri, can you tell how it is outside?”

“...” Ruri, however, looked away in annoyance.

“Ruri...! This isn't the time to be sulking! Answer me!” The usually calm Ayame flushed with anger.

“I'm not sulking...!”

“Yes, you are! You've been sulking for three months!”

“But that's because...!” Ruri's shoulders shook as she wrung out the words. “... You didn't tell me...”

“What...?”

Ayame's reply only upset Ruri further; her eyes were welling up now.

“You didn't tell me you had a boyfriend!” Ruri shivered violently, as though she had taken all of the sadness in the world onto herself.

“...”

Everyone else in the room was stunned.

The power was out. The insurgents had attacked. The situation wasn't yet under control.



And she was choosing now to complain about her sister's fiancé.

"...Is this the time?" Sakura butted in.

Ayame covered her face in shame.

Ruri's indignant rant didn't stop there. "It's a huge deal for me! Of course I'm mad; you just told me you were getting married out of nowhere!"

"...Ruri!"

"You're my retainer! When did you even meet him? Why did you hide it from me? We're twins! There's no secrets between us! I always told you!"

"...Because I knew you would interfere if I told you! And please stop. This isn't the time to argue about that!"

"Then when is it the time?!"

"Literally any other time!"

Sakura's gaze wandered side to side as the argument heated up. Hinagiku tried to stop it, standing in between them with arms raised.

"Don't...fight. Let's...get along."

Lady Hinagiku, you're just the best. Sakura's heart was warmed by her lady's response.

Meanwhile, Ruri was embarrassed at the scolding from the younger Goddess of Spring.

"...I'm sorry," said Ayame. "This is disgraceful... Ruri, we have to protect the Lady Spring, too! We need your power right now, so please just tell us what's going on! How are we supposed to protect you?!"

Ayame slapped her shoulder, and Ruri crossed her arms grumpily.

"...There's no sign of any further insurgents coming to attack us...," she said, "but there is a car that's been parked within three hundred feet for the past hour, so the birds living around here told me to be careful. Also, there's been several car crashes out in the road, so it's better not to go out."

"You...can...tell?" Hinagiku asked in shock.

Ruri raised her hand slightly, and the birds flying around the living room gathered at her feet.

“That’s what my friends are telling me,” Ruri said, giving off the scent of fresh summer green.

“We tried approaching the car, and it drove off. If there are any more intruders outside, we’ll take care of it. You can go ahead and rest.”

“Thank you.”

Sakura locked the entrance door after receiving the report from a member of the Spring staff.

In the end, I can’t do it alone.

She sighed. She wished she could protect her lady all by herself.

Everyone staying at the Summer villa remained. They concluded it would be more dangerous to try to evacuate at night when there was a large-scale power outage and multiple car crashes out there.

They had contacted National Security, too, and quickly received backup. If they were to leave this place, it would have to be in the morning, when they were no longer at risk of getting attacked in the dark. Thankfully, the only worry besides potential intruders was a lack of light and heating. It was a relief knowing their lives weren’t in immediate danger.

“We still have candles and lanterns in the storage room. Let’s go get them.”

“Should we make dinner? Good thing I had some rice cooked.”

“Get a wet towel for Lady Himedaka. We should at least let her wipe her face.”

Ayame was busy with the rest of the Summer villa staff. Hinagiku and Sakura, being guests, could only stay put in the living room with the animals. They offered to help, but there was little they could do, and there was no guarantee they wouldn’t accidentally get in the way.

“ ... ”

Sakura stole a glance at the other girl staying put.

I think that's the one I met in the kitchen.

She needed to put her jumbled thoughts in order. The Ayame who had received them at the station was the one in the suit. But the Ayame she'd spoken to in the kitchen was the one in the dress.

"Lady Ruri," Sakura called.

Ruri raised her head. "Yes, Lady Himedaka! What's the matter?" she responded cheerily.

Sakura examined her for a few seconds. Her silky black hair and glasses were the same as Ayame's, but the rest was different. Her slender body was wrapped in an elegant A-line dress. It was made of pure-white cloth, decorated with lace and flowers and a light-green ribbon—very summerlike. She had a tuft of hair tied up with a lovely pin. She didn't look cold in the thin dress, perhaps because of her nature as the Agent of Summer? Ayame had handed her a cardigan to cover up, but she only put it on her shoulders.

There's no doubt. She has the sunlike warmth to her.

Ruri smiled, happy to have her start a conversation.

"You pretended to be Lady Ayame when we met in the kitchen, didn't you?" Sakura asked.

"..."

"Didn't you?"

Ruri's smile weakened. "Sorry. I didn't mean to trick you. I just wanted to know what sort of person the retainer of Spring was."

All pretense vanished in that moment. The pouting girl before her was the Agent of Summer, Ruri Hazakura.

"You didn't even need to disguise yourself."

Ruri nodded. "I'm good at playing the part. I do it when I wanna go out by myself. I have a lot of practice under my belt."

"Practice you shouldn't be getting."

Ruri laughed. Apparently, she was a veteran actress. "But it's the only way I

can have any fun. The Agents need supervision to do anything, but I'm a teenage girl, you know. I wanna go out shopping and stuff."

She deserved pity for the situation, but just hearing about it was giving Sakura a headache, and Ruri wasn't even her lady.

Thank goodness I serve Lady Hinagiku.

No wonder Ayame had such a hard time handling her.

"What...are you...talking...about?" Hinagiku asked timidly from behind Sakura.

"We're talking about how I pretended to be Ayame when I talked to Lady Himedaka, Lady Spring. I just apologized, so please forgive me."

"..."

Hinagiku tilted her head curiously, and Sakura nodded with a similar expression of confusion.

"I wanted to know what kind of person she was, but I didn't want to just go outside when I'm trying to stay in my room, so I pretended to be Ayame. I considered causing some trouble for her if she turned out to be a bad person, but, well..."

"Huh?!"

Sakura was about to complain, but Hinagiku was faster. "Sakura...is...a good... girl!" she said, leaning against her.

Both Sakura and Ruri were surprised at the proclamation.

"L-Lady Hinagiku, I am *your* good girl and yours only... I'm not really good to anyone else... But I am glad to hear you think so."

"No, you were a good retainer even to me. I'm jealous... It's like the Agent of Spring has her own knight in shining armor."

Sakura, confused by the praise from both sides, turned red. Thank goodness the lights were out. But even as she blushed, Sakura noticed the gloominess in Ruri's voice. The twins had shown no sign of making amends after their argument. Even now, as she spoke with Hinagiku and Sakura, her gaze followed Ayame.

It's undeniable she loves her sister.

And her feelings were too big for Ayame to handle. They kept overflowing, spilling onto the ground, and she was angry that she couldn't hold them. They were selfish feelings, but considering Ruri's upbringing, one couldn't discard them so easily.

In the Agents' eyes, their retainer is meant to share life and fate with them.

Anyone would be distressed if they were to lose their irreplaceable someone after so many years together.

But I shouldn't stick my nose in.

The fact they were family only made things more complicated. Not to mention they were currently under attack.

Sakura pondered what to do, but then Hinagiku spoke with resolve.

"Lady Summer...may I...speak...for a...moment?"

"Sure. There's nothing else to do anyway."

"We will...be leaving...tomorrow."

"Oh, yes... You gotta go bring spring to Teishu. Bad timing for this to happen," Ruri said apologetically. "Gosh... We'll go back to the Town, too... I'm gonna have to put up with their grumbling again... Don't take me there..."

It turned out many Agents had complicated feelings about their hometown. As Ruri deflated, Hinagiku continued. "Lady Summer...once you...go back...to your...Town...will you...shut yourself...in your room...again?"

"I dunno."

"You won't...make up...with...Ms. Ayame?"

Hinagiku's question was too serious for Ruri to reply with a joke.

"..."

Was she at a loss for what to say? Ruri looked away to flee from the conversation, but Hinagiku quickly added, "Hinagiku...has done that...before." She pleaded for Ruri to listen. "Sakura...would...knock on the...door every...day. Just like...Ms. Ayame...does."

Sakura straightened upon hearing her name.

Lady Hinagiku, what are you thinking?

This was unusually assertive for Hinagiku; whatever she wanted to say had to be important. The tension of the battle earlier was nothing compared to this.

“Um... Yes, Lady Himedaka told me about that.”

“We...are Agents. But we’re also...human. When we...go through...something painful...we want to...run away.”

“...I sure do.”

“But...you see, running away...and...refusal...aren’t the...same thing. If you...stay like that...bad things...will happen.”

It was like she was delivering a prophecy.

“Hinagiku...knows that...so...Hinagiku doesn’t...want to...leave you...like this.”

Like a sage warning a youngster at the mercy of fate.

Lady Hinagiku.

Sakura finally understood what her lady was trying to say.

You’ll speak of it yourself?

And understanding it only made her worry further.

You’ll only hurt yourself.

The two girls in her field of vision were lit up by the flame of the candles.

Hinagiku was serious.

Ruri grimaced; she must be taking this as a scolding. Usually, Hinagiku would have seen her face and stopped. But this was not the usual Hinagiku Kayo.

“Hinagiku...hurt...Sakura...like that...and received...punishment. One day...Sakura...didn’t knock...on the door. Hinagiku...was surprised...and thought...Sakura had...finally...given up.”

Her voice echoed like it would in a void, in a cold world full of snow, in an empty room. The sad echo spread throughout the quiet space, and everyone present stopped to listen.

“...”

Ayame and the staff stayed still, too, holding their flashlights and watching curiously.

“Lady Hinagiku, that wasn’t your fault...”

Hinagiku ignored Sakura’s comment and continued speaking only to Ruri: “Hinagiku...didn’t want...to do...the Agent of Spring’s...job. Hinagiku...hated...this world. Don’t you...feel the...same way? Why must...I bring...the season? More so...after...today. They...attacked us. Do you...still want...to do...it?”

Both asking and answering this question was a taboo for any Agent. It was not something one of the Four Seasons’ goddesses should be saying.

“...No. I don’t want to keep living like this.”

“...Right?”

But it was also something only they could talk about.

Their lifestyle, time, and future were consumed to make the seasons go round. They lived for this huge and inescapable responsibility.

“Hinagiku...was attacked...by the insurgents...and the Town...did not...help. They...abandoned...Hinagiku. That was...so painful...Hinagiku decided...to refuse...them...in revenge. To not...give them...spring.”

Hinagiku’s words had more weight than anyone else’s, for she had gone through the worst pain an Agent could.

“Of course. I would do the same.”

Ruri nodded in agreement, but Hinagiku shook her head.

“But...that’s...not good. Bringing...spring...is Hinagiku’s...duty.”

She struggled and faltered, but she enunciated each and every word with all her might.

“Some people...cultivate...rice. Some...plow the...fields. Some...plant the...flowers. Some...study...bugs. Some...study...animals. Some...make a living...from tourism. A lot...changes... about...the sun...and the land...and the sky...in spring. And it’s...not just...about the...people. The animals’...lives...their safety...the

breath...of the...land...it's all...connected to...the season. Hinagiku...was...a criminal.”

She condemned herself for her failings.

“Hinagiku...is a...bad girl. But Sakura...didn't abandon...Hinagiku for...being...selfish. When Hinagiku...was kidnapped...she looked...all over. Hinagiku...could tell...how hard...she looked...by how hard...she cried...when we met...again. Hinagiku...stole...Sakura's life...from her. So...Hinagiku thought...Hinagiku ought to...try to...trust in...Sakura...at the very least.”

“Lady Himedaka is a good retainer who cares a lot for her Agent.”

“Yes. But...Hinagiku wasn't...like that.”

“...”

“Hinagiku...was too...stubborn...for too...long...and ended up...wasting...Sakura's...efforts. Sakura was...exiled...from the...Town of Spring...because Hinagiku...wouldn't bring...spring.”

“Lady Hinagiku...,” Sakura said with worry.

Hinagiku turned to smile at her and grabbed her hand before continuing. They could already understand each other just by holding hands.

“It was all...Hinagiku's...fault. The Town...thought that...Sakura...was useless.”

Sakura could only listen on with anxiety. Hinagiku kept her in check.

“But it was...Hinagiku who was...useless. Sakura was...forced to...take respon...responsibility. Hinagiku was...told a...new retainer...would come...soon. And then...Hinagiku realized...how stupid...Hinagiku had been.”

Ruri would relate to the testimonial. Hinagiku was not a girl of many words. She was introverted. But now, she spoke with all her might, for the sake of someone else.

“There are...very few people...who really care...about Hinagiku...in this world. Hinagiku was...stupid...for troubling...one of them.”

For the girl who kept her sister at a distance.

“...”

The egocentric girl uncharacteristically listened in silence.

“Hinagiku...was stupid. And because...of that...Sakura left. It hurt...so...so much...Hinagiku could only...cry.”

Hinagiku looked down as she reminisced.

“It was...a cold...winter day. Very cold... My tears...would freeze.”

“And then what did you do?” Ruri asked in a small voice, the way she would ask if they were sharing a secret.

Hinagiku gave her a weak smile. “Even if...Hinagiku hated...the world...and couldn’t...trust it, Hinagiku...trusted...Sakura. Hinagiku knew...she would...wait...out there...somewhere...for Hinagiku...to come.”

Hinagiku spoke like a bard weaving a story.

“So...Hinagiku...ignored everyone...in the Town...saying no...and went...out to...look. Hinagiku...manifested spring...over and over. They pulled...Hinagiku’s legs...and she trapped them...in plum trees... They held...Hinagiku’s arms...and she blinded them...with a blizzard...of cherry blossoms. Hinagiku...did not...care. Only thought...about leaving...the Town...and looking for...Sakura.”

Everyone listening to her unsteady words could imagine the scene—the young Goddess of Spring crying out for her only retainer. The image of her finally giving in and using her miraculous powers, for the sake of finding one girl.

“But...then...”

She was out of breath. She had lived in a cage. Her heart and her legs couldn’t keep up with the action.

Yet she ran, knowing she would regret it if she didn’t.

“Then...I got out...of the Town...and went down...the long...long, stone stairway...and just outside...the gate...Hinagiku heard...a voice.”

The story from then on was also Sakura’s.

“A girl was...crying.”

Sakura replayed the scene in her mind as Hinagiku described it.

One of her most vivid memories in her nineteen years of life. One she could always remember.

“Hinagiku’s...Sakura...was crying. Hinagiku had...to stop...her tears.”

I can remember how salty they were.

“Once Hinagiku...thought that, there was...nothing else...Hinagiku could...care about.”

How small the goddess was in my arms.

“And then...Hinagiku brought...spring...on the way...to Sakura.”

I could never forget how beautiful that winter day was.

Sakura had been thrown out of the Town on a freezing day.

As the Agent of Spring hadn’t yet used her powers again, winter in Yamato dragged on.

The Town of Spring, hidden in the mountains, was no exception. It was wrapped in a blanket of frigid air.

The only door inside the Town was heartlessly locked.

Sakura’s things had been packed for her and thrown outside. More than ten people had to dump her out like an abandoned animal. The cold profiles of the people responsible were burned into her eyes.

“Lady...Hinagikuuu...”

The tears had spilled over then. Just as things were finally looking up, this happened.

Just as she had finally won Hinagiku’s trust after such a long time.

Just as she was thinking she finally got a chance to return the favor for saving her life.

“Lady...Hina...gikuuu...”

They had taken away the right to stay by her side.

“Someone open up... Please...”

Her fist bled as she knocked on the door. The door was streaked with red, and

a puddle was forming on the ground.

Still, she could not stop knocking.

“Lady Hinagiku...”

Who’s going to protect her in that den of demons?

The people of the Town of Spring thought only of themselves, of how they could profit short-term. They might care about the Agent of Spring, but there was not a single person there who would look after the once-kidnapped Hinagiku Kayo.

How could I not cry, knowing that?

“Open up... Please...”

I know how fearful and quick to cry she is.

“Open...open uuup...”

But she’s also kinder than anyone else.

“Please, I don’t need anything else.”

And she’s broken now.

“I just want to be by her side... Please open the door...”

She won’t come back.

“Lady Hinagiku...”

Things won’t go back to how they were, but still...

“Please... Let me in...”

No matter how much she changes, she is still my goddess.

She wailed hoarsely like a small child. Her hands were numb with the cold, and soon, she felt no more pain. No one was coming, but she still sobbed and clung to the door.

She didn’t know how long she kept it up, but out of the blue, she heard the crows cawing up in the cold winter sky. They wheeled overhead as though trying to alert her of something.

“...”

After the crows came the foxes, running through the sea of trees. Something was changing.

“Lady Hinagiku...!”

She got a whiff of the scent of spring and a touch of the warm air.

The icicles hanging from the door melted away with tremendous speed.

“Lady Hinagiku... Lady Hinagiku!”

So she knocked and knocked and knocked on the door.

“I’m here!”

She had to make her presence known to her lady.

“Lady Hinagiku! I’m here! Lady Hinagiku!”

She knew spring was coming. She saw cherry blossoms among the snowflakes. She heard the wooden steps of *geta* shoes. She could tell the Goddess of Spring was coming down the long stone stairway.

She was singing. She sung as tears ran down her face.

Sheathe your edge, O hazy Moon,

As mist shivers in the night,

Endure your longing and let the Spring Banquet shine,

Let the hills and fields spill over with wisteria; let the land dye itself with crucifers, No flower blooms forever, my dear Winter,

But forever I will follow after you, as does the moon.

“Lady Hinagiku!” she screamed, and the time between that and the lock opening felt like an eternity.

A narrow path of spring beyond the open door wound its way toward Hinagiku’s retainer, and Sakura smiled through her tears.

See? You can do it.

The goddess had so easily summoned spring, after refusing vehemently to do

so, just so that she could follow after her retainer.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

It's the same as it's always been.

The goddess never hesitated to use her powers to help someone.

She would gladly make the flowers bloom for those she loved.

"Sakura...don't...leave...Hinagiku."

Her beloved goddess's hair and pin were a mess as she wept.

She must have looked for Sakura everywhere. She was short of breath; she wasn't used to running.

Hinagiku wailed like a child as she clung to Sakura.

"Don't...leave...Hinagiku. Without you...Hinagiku...can't stand up...again."

She held Sakura close, the only thing she could do anymore. Sakura hesitated to return the gesture with her bloodied hands, but the hesitation lasted only a moment. Even if it meant tainting her goddess, she had to receive those feelings, and so she hugged her back. After a while, they finally caught their breath again. Breathing in this world was too hard for either of them when they were not in each other's arms.

"Hinagiku...won't be able...to stand up...again."

They had to be together.

"It's the same for me. There is no point in living...without you."

It was their only way to resist the cruelty in this world.

"Please...stay by...Hinagiku's side. Hinagiku...will do...anything."

"Please let me stay by your side. I will do anything. I still haven't done anything for you."

Their way to counter against those who attacked them.

From that moment on, Hinagiku and Sakura were as one.

"Hinagiku...will...protect you...Sakura."

"No, I will protect you...as you protected me when I was nine."

"Sakura...this world...is too...scary. Hinagiku...doesn't know...what to do. But...even though...it's scary...Hinagiku...still lives... Hinagiku must...still live... But what...should Hinagiku...do? Hinagiku...only knows...how to...be with...you."

"Lady Hinagiku..."

"So tell...Hinagiku...what to do. Help...Hinagiku. No one...else but...you...will. Please...Hinagiku...is so afraid...afraid...to live."

"I will protect you. I will guard you from anything that frightens you."

She could never, ever forget that winter day.

"And because...of that, Hinagiku...was able to...change."

The Goddess of Spring spoke softly to her elder, the Goddess of Summer, here in the dark.

Sakura's vision blurred. *Don't cry, stupid.*

The same thing had happened with Nazuna. It made her realize how quick to cry she really was. She wanted to be strong, but whenever she was with her goddess, she regressed into a child.

Crying won't make anyone protect you or change the past.

That moment between them thudded in her chest, stinging her eyes.

"And after...changing...Hinagiku became...closer to...Sakura. Even if...you can't do it...as quickly... If the...girl you...love the most...in the whole...world...is your...sister..." Her whisper softened even further. *"Then don't...be mean...to her."*

Ruri wasn't looking at Hinagiku anymore. Her head was lowered, tears streaming along her face and dropping onto her lap. She nodded lightly, then again and again, and she wiped her face with her sleeve.

"You might...really not...get to...see her...again. So don't do...something you'll regret... Be kind...to those you...love."

That night, they slept all together on the futons they laid in the living room; Ruri snuggled up to Ayame's side like a small child.

The day after the blackout, the Agent of Spring and her retainer left the

Summer villa.

The power wasn't back yet, but people were out directing traffic. The Agency, too, had decided that Hinagiku and Sakura ought to leave right away. The Summer folks were to move to a different area.

The Spring couple got ready to leave early in the morning, and the birds and cats and dogs and rabbits and all the other animals came to say good-bye at the door. The Agent of Summer and Guard, too.

"Lady Hinagiku, since we won't be seeing each other until the Agency Council, please give me your contact info," said Ruri as she shook Hinagiku's hand.

After a night of chatting, they had become close enough to call each other by their first name.

"Lady...Ruri...Hinagiku...can't...use...phones," Hinagiku managed to answer as she wobbled from the recoil.

"What? Is your retainer financially abusing you? She didn't let you buy one?" She glared at Sakura in disbelief.

"Excuse me! No. She's just bad at texting. She's still learning... We will get her a phone."

"Oh, then give me your number, Lady Sakura. And then you can give me hers."

"Very well."

Hinagiku observed their lighthearted conversation. *Come to...think of it... they're only...one year...apart in...age.*

Sakura didn't seem particularly happy, but Hinagiku was glad that her retainer had made a friend.

Ayame seemed to be thinking the same; their eyes met as they smiled at the interaction. The sisters were twins, both eighteen and with the same face, yet Ayame still looked a bit older.

"Lady Kayo, I will be praying you have a safe trip. We'll meet again at the Agency Council. I'll remain in my position until the end of this term, so I will be there. I hope to see you."

Hinagiku smiled back at Ayame, imitating her kind expression.

“Yes...and...you both...too... Please...be...well.”

Ruri and Sakura finished exchanging contacts while the gentle pair smiled at each other.

“And it’s done. I don’t use emojis and all that, by the way, just so you know.”

“Why? You don’t have any stickers? I’ll send you some.”

“No, I don’t... Hey! I don’t need them. Please don’t send me any more.”

“All right, please give me your number once you’ve mastered the ways of the phone, Lady Hinagiku.”

Hinagiku tilted her head with uncertainty. “Not sure...Hinagiku will...master it... Hinagiku’s...stuck at...six...in a lot of...ways.”

“Oh, it’s easy peasy. You can do it.”

“Can...grade-schoolers...text...well...nowadays?”

“It’s not about your academic level. Agents don’t even go to school. Lady Sakura, please get her comfortable using the phone. I—I want you to play me in this game, too! Let’s duke it out online!”

“Is that...so. Oh, but Hinagiku...can play...games! Hinagiku is...really good...at pushing...buttons!”

“Really?!”

“She’s amazing at rhythm games. I’ll let you know which ones later on.”

They wanted to keep chatting, but the Spring Agency staff were insisting that they had to go.

Hinagiku and Sakura chose to let themselves be escorted to a safe place, considering they had just been attacked. The Winter Agency staff vehicle was also ready to leave.

“Hey, Lady Hinagiku, you’re going to Enishi after you’re done with Teishu, right? That’s where the Town of Winter is... Will you be meeting up with the Lord Winter?” Ruri asked before saying good-bye.

It was a serious question, and she was channeling her Ayame persona as she asked. She must have been worried.

“U-um...I haven’t...received any...messages from...Lord...Rosei, so...probably...we won’t...meet until...the Agency Council.”

“What?! You saved his life ten years ago and he hasn’t even sent you a message?”

“...” Hinagiku kept silent.

Sakura flinched, but she said nothing.

“What a dick,” said Ruri.

“H-he’s not...”

“A jerk, then. That guy’s so unfriendly and scary. Honestly, I don’t think much of him.”

“That’s not...”

“I mean, not only that. After just five years with the investigation, Winter—”

Sakura lost color on her face and broke her silence. “Lady Ruri, that’s enough.”

She was happy to join in the Rosei-bashing, but she didn’t want to make Hinagiku sad.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem to upset her.

“Winter...stopped...large-scale...investigations...but they...kept looking for...Hinagiku. That’s...what...National Secu...rity said. Hinagiku...doesn’t...hold any...grudges.”

“Hmmmm... So you don’t hate the Lord Winter.”

“No...”

Ruri stared closely at her. “Actually...you wanna see him?”

“U-um...” Hinagiku faltered. She covered her mouth with her kimono’s sleeve and cast her glance down as her eyelashes quivered. “Hinagiku...”

The fairy of Spring looked troubled.

There was nothing wrong with fellow Agents forming close bonds, but if these happened to bloom into romance, then problems might arise. The feelings not only got in the way of their duties, but both Towns would oppose it. And it was particularly easy to guess how they would react in this instance.

It was far easier, far less likely to upset the balance, to simply find someone else to fall in love with.

Hinagiku had been reinstated as the Agent of Spring. Simply stating affections aloud could have major repercussions.

And more than anything, such a love would not bring happiness to anyone. The scars were too big.

Hinagiku was better off getting rid of her feelings, both for her own sake and for the sake of those around her.

“Yes... Hinagiku wants...to see him,” she whispered, as though begging for forgiveness.

Her feelings didn’t seem like just the remnants of the affection of the “other Hinagiku,” who had already been worn down.

“Hinagiku...wants to...see him...so badly.”

There was pain in her voice.

“Because.../...longed to...see him.”

Hinagiku had been in love when she was little. Her love had been her support for ten years—even if people thought she was stupid, even if they criticized her for it, *Hinagiku Kayo* wanted to fulfill that wish. And no one could control her feelings.

“Lady Sakura, if I may.”

“Uh, yes, what’s the matter?”

“This isn’t good. Don’t tell me you’re okay letting such a lovely girl get with that...gloomy guy?”

“Gloomy? Do you mean Rosei?”

“Yes, Rosei Kantsubaki. Gloomy blizzard man.”

Did that nickname come from his cold, taciturn demeanor?

“I’m not okay with it... I do not want her to see him unless he himself calls or visits because he sincerely wants to, not as a part of any formality.”

Hinagiku’s expression fell, and her eyes were as sad as a puppy’s. Ayame couldn’t bear it and interjected: “Lady Kayo...if I may offer an outside perspective, the Agent of Winter may not be sure how to approach you.”

“Ms....Ayame...”

“Your reinstatement as Agent was very sudden, and besides, I would think he is trying not to get in the way of your journey after you went straight into manifesting spring. If it were me...I would have sent you a message, but I would wait for a better time to meet you.”

Hinagiku glanced at Sakura hopefully. Sakura curled her lip and replied, “I didn’t tell you. He did send a message, but it was just a formal greeting.”

Hinagiku’s face lit up again.

Ayame continued softly. “There is no way he’s not worried about you; you can see it in the way he sent some of his guards to protect you. No other Agent would send their own security to work for another season. Especially considering he’s Winter, who’s frequently targeted by the insurgents... It must have been tough convincing his guards to follow that order.”

Ayame’s words of comfort were all correct. Hinagiku nodded a couple of times, picking herself back up.

Ruri, on the other hand, was visibly opposed to the idea, but reluctantly, she yielded. “Fine. If that’s what you want, then okay. You can tell me if he’s ever mean to you. You too, Sakura. Summer is willing to help with anything. This is a promise from the Agent herself.”

In the end, that seemed to be what she wanted to say.

Hinagiku smiled, and Sakura bowed deeply.

After the Spring pair had gotten in the car, Ruri spoke to them through the window.

“I’ll have the birds watch over you until you leave the mountain. Don’t

worry.”

“Thank...you...very much.”

“Also, if you want to, I can send one of my guard dogs over to you, though you’ll have to pay for their food. What about a Doberman? They’re really strong.”

“We will think about it.”

“Also, also!”

Ruri just wouldn’t let them go, and Ayame had to physically restrain her.

“Sorry, I’ll get Ruri off your backs,” she said. “Have a safe trip.”

“Nooo! I still wanna talk!”

As it happened, Ayame had some martial arts experience. Ruri struggled, but she couldn’t move an inch. Ayame signaled them to go with her eyes, and Sakura nodded with an awkward smile.

“See...you!” Hinagiku waved.

Ruri finally gave up and hung her head. “See you at the Agency Council!”

“...Yes! See...you!”

Hinagiku and Ruri said their good-byes about a million times, stopping only once the car couldn’t be seen from the Summer villa.

“ ...”

Even after they were gone, the sisters remained.

Ayame had already let Ruri go; now it was Ruri holding Ayame in a hug.

She held her tight to distract herself from the loneliness. This meeting with Spring, with her harshness and kindness, had meant so much to her.

“Just when I got a friend who didn’t simply watch from a distance...,” she said as she clung to Ayame.

“I thought you hated me,” Ayame said impishly.

“What we say during arguments doesn’t count,” Ruri replied grumpily.

“It doesn’t? I was serious when I said I wanted your blessing.”

“...”

“I want to give you my blessings for your wedding, too.”

Then Ayame hugged her sister in return.

She patted Ruri’s back like a mother comforting a crying baby, with a practiced hand; she had done this many times before. Although they shared the same face and the same gender, it was her little sister who had been chosen as Agent of Summer. And Ayame had given everything to support her.

“I’m happy to know that you need me. I’ve always felt it was my duty to support you, Ruri.”

Ruri argued back in a quiet voice. “Then stay just a little longer...”

“But we can’t stay like this.”

“...You mean *you* can’t stay like this?”

“I’d be fine. I know how to deal with things.”

“You’re saying I don’t?”

Ayame was about to tell her what exactly was wrong with her way of handling difficulty, but then the figure of the goddess who spoke to her with the warmth of the spring sun came to mind. “I know you’ve been feeling lonelier and lonelier,” she said.

She did not scold with the harshness of Summer.

“The more you grow, the more a void I can’t fill grows within you.”

She chose the words that would light up the way with a prayer.

“Being an Agent must be a heavy burden on you.”

“...It is. It’s too much.”

“You didn’t want to become the Agent of Summer. I know that, and I know you’ve tried your best despite it. But you see...I don’t think I can heal your loneliness. I think you’ll feel better once you have the recognition of someone else, someone who isn’t family. That’s a different kind of loneliness, and you

have more of it than regular people.”

Ruri had just experienced firsthand what Ayame pointed out last night. There was something to learn from people who had led different lives than her—something she could not get from her family.

“That’s what it means to be understood.”

Getting to know who you are and who you ought to be.

Getting a different perspective on the path so you can keep walking once again.

At the very least, this was Ayame’s point of view. She understood this because she had discovered an emotion her sisterly relationship wouldn’t give her.

Ruri grunted. “This is all so complicated. I don’t get it.”

“Yes, you do. You pretend to be dumb, but I know you’re not.”

“...” The silence was a tacit admission.

“Stop pretending to be dumb. You can be independent—you just need to try.”

“I’m not like you... Even if I could, I’m still a kid. I don’t want to get married yet... I want friends... I want...”

A wet spot was growing on the shoulder of Ayame’s suit.

“I want to be with you forever... I don’t care about summer. I only do it because...because you say you like looking at the summer flowers...”

The tears ran down Ruri’s cheeks.

“I’m not doing it for the world. I only do it...because you tell me you want to see summer...”

“Ruri, I’m sorry...”

“It’s always been like this. There’s no other way to get me to do it.”

“Oh, Ruri. Ruri.”

“You can have your boyfriend. You can...get married...but stay by my side...”

“...Ruri, I’m sorry.”

“Stay with me next year, and the next, and even when we’re old... Keep asking me to show you summer...”

Her last whisper was like a knife in Ayame’s heart.

“...”

I’ve always treated her like a kid throwing a tantrum—trying to get her in the right mood.

“Show me summer, please.”

“Ruri, show me summer.”

“I love your summer.”

She offered encouragement all the time. They were magic words. A necessary ritual for the two of them. Without it, Ruri wouldn’t do her job as a goddess incarnate.

Oh, Gods of the Four Seasons.

The gods had surely made a mistake. At the very least, that’s what Ayame thought.

Why did you choose my sister? She isn’t made for this.

“I don’t want you to go... I don’t want to be a goddess for anyone else...”

She’s a spoiled kid with no sense of responsibility, and she’s too bull-headed.

“Why do you have to change? You’ve always been my sister. Mine.”

Just a child who loves her sister.

“I want to keep going...but...”

She could have been free. She could’ve grown more. Lived more.

“But...it’s only because you’re here with me...”

The girl chosen by the gods was special.

“Without you...”

Special—and unfortunate. She needed a protector.

“...there’s no reason for me to keep going.”

Perhaps this was her way of atoning.

Ayame had the same face, yet she was granted freedom.

Anyone in the Town could have become the next god, but only her sister was chosen.

If Ruri hadn't been chosen, she would have led a much, much different life.

She could've joined the Town's orchestra; she's good at singing.

She could've found a hobby to dedicate her life to.

She likes talking, and that's a useful skill in many careers.

But the world gave her no choice.

She was allowed none of these lives. Ayame, on the other hand, would quit being a retainer after marrying; she still had her future open.

I'm sorry, Ruri.

Naturally, Ayame had to give up many things to become a retainer.

She'd given her teenage years to Ruri. But she only had to bear it a little more, and she would be released from her position. She would be free. She wouldn't have to endure anything. Her own life was about to start.

"Ruri."

It was the end. Ayame had the right to be happy. She didn't have to feel any obligation just because she was family.

But it's strange. Now that freedom is a step away, I...

"This is my last year. The Town has made the decision. Don't gift summer to me next year. Be strong."

...Somehow, I get confused.

"If only...it hadn't been you."

I wanted to get away from this goddess.

"If only I could've taken your place."

I didn't like my sister.

“If only it hadn’t been you.”

I hated her, in fact.

“If it hadn’t been you, I...I would’ve...”

But I also loved her.

“...maybe I would’ve been a kinder sister.”

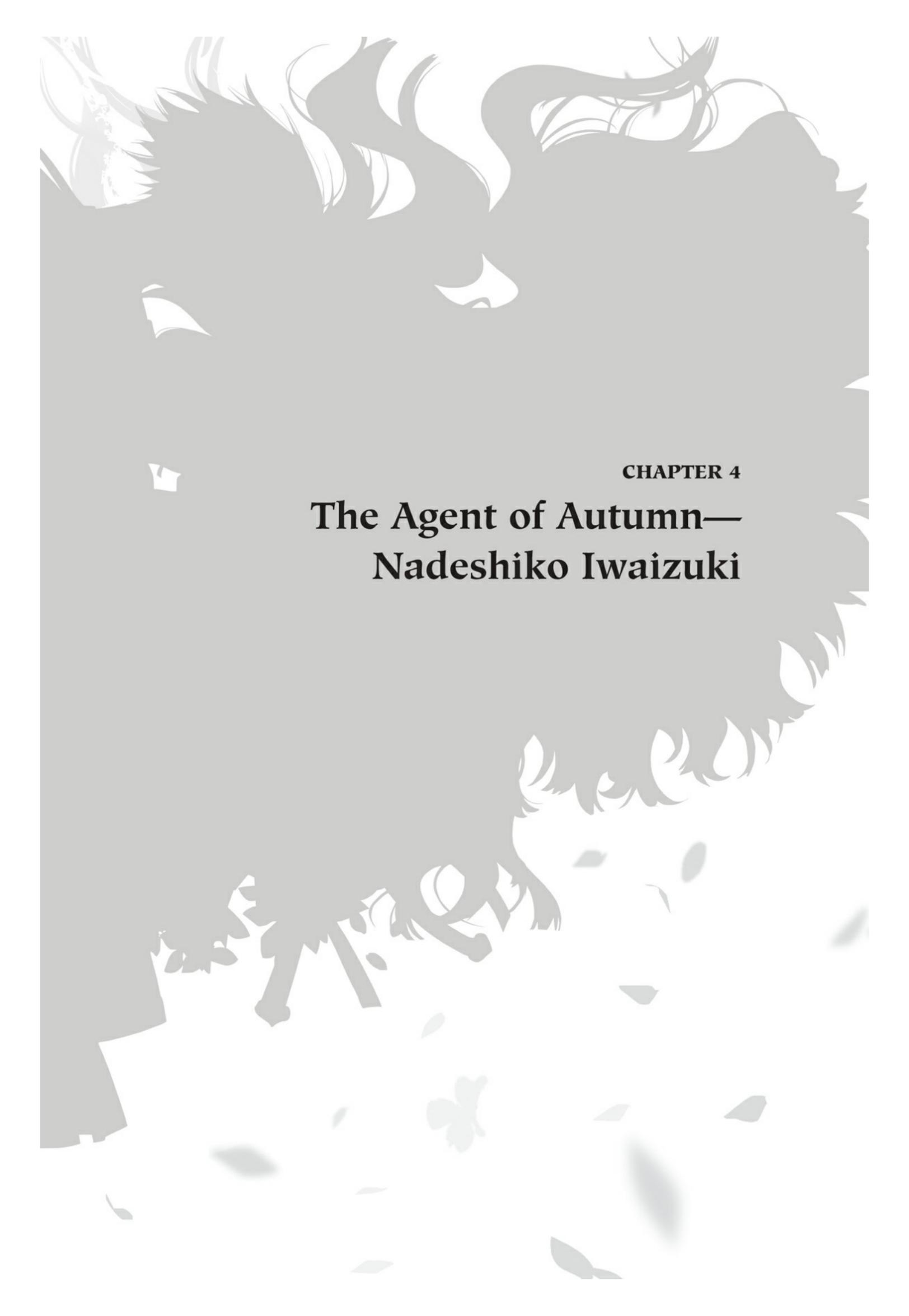
A tear ran down Ayame’s cheek, full of genuine emotion.

“I’m sorry, Ruri. I wish I could’ve taken your place.”

The seasons keep going round, whether or not someone is weeping.

The migratory birds passed by the mountains of the Summer villa.

The cherry blossom trees began blooming among the light snow in the mountains where spring was coming to life.



CHAPTER 4

**The Agent of Autumn—
Nadeshiko Iwaizuki**

The young Goddess of Autumn played among the height of spring.

She was about seven or eight years old.

She had the face of an angel, almost transparent skin, chestnut-brown curly hair, and eyes the color of forget-me-nots, like an amalgamation of all the blues in creation.

She wore a canary-colored kimono with a flower pattern, and on top a *haori* coat the tint of dried wood, embroidered with ginkgoes. On her head was a classical beret adorned with fun ribbons and ornaments. The blue contrasted with her autumn-colored outfit, but it went perfectly with her eyes. The care put into her clothing showed how loved she was. Now she was pretending to be on an outing while indoors—having a picnic.

The place was Tsukushi, Autumn's country house.

She was in the elegant sunroom made of white walls, a glass ceiling, and wooden floors.

The weather was clear outside; it was the perfect weather for a picnic, and yet, she was holding it indoors.

There was a reason why. The adults had tried to be considerate; if she couldn't go outside, they may as well let her do it in a place where she could see it.

Many would feel sorry for the girl to be locked inside at a playful age, but she seemed to be enjoying herself well enough. She was good at finding her own joys, even under supervision.

She was wearing outdoor clothes to help create the proper mood. On the rug, she had a backpack, toys, and plushies all around her. She'd already had her fill playing with them.

Her full attention was in her drawing at the moment. Her little hands, like maple leaves, held the crayon as she scrawled cherry blossoms across the page. She studied the falling, prancing petals through the sunroom window and copied them down.

It had been ten years since the last spring in Yamato. This goddess was also

one of the children getting to see their first spring.

Her little voice counted the petals falling. “One, two...” Her babysitter watched her with a smile as she prepared tea over by the wooden table. It was a warm and gentle moment of spring, in every sense.

The young girl looked over her shoulder as though just remembering something and called someone’s name. “Rindo, Rindo.”

A bit away from the peaceful space in the sunroom, a man carrying a sword stood back from the sun, hiding in the shadows.

He was in his early twenties. He had brown skin, bright *sanpaku* eyes, and gallant features. His hair was parted on the side and the color of the autumnal yellow chrysanthemum; it formed a harmonious combination with his skin. His lean body was enveloped in a gray suit and black vest. He wore a hazel ascot tie and polished leather shoes, giving him an almost majestic air.

One could tell from a glance that the man thought well of himself.

“What’s the matter, Nadeshiko?”

Despite his pompous appearance, his voice was quite serene. The velvety sound of it echoed quietly in the sunroom. His tone was indulgent toward her.

“You call those *sakura*, right?” she asked.

“Yes, those are the cherry blossoms. Here’s how you write it in *kanji*.” Rindo approached her and grabbed a crayon to scrawl on a new page in her notebook. “Like this. They bloom in spring. It is your first time seeing them, isn’t it? Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Yes, they’re so pretty... Hey, what about my name? Nadeshiko’s an autumn flower, right?”

“Yes, as is rindo.”

“What was the name of the Lady Spring?”

“Hinagiku. Lady Hinagiku. Like a daisy.”

“We’re all named after flowers!”

“Most descendants of the Four Seasons are named from words of the season,

and most of these tend to be flowers.”

“But the Lady Summer isn’t a flower. Nor is the Lord Winter.”

Rindo didn’t understand what she was getting at; he listened without any change in his expression.

“But now there’s another flower! It’s the first time someone’s had a name like mine!”

“And that makes you happy?”

“Yes!”

After a moment, Rindo’s dour expression softened. “That’s good to hear.”

Nadeshiko stared at his affectionate gaze for a moment before grinning back. Then she held out her hands. Rindo said nothing as he picked her up.

They were like a pair of close siblings.

“Rindo, Rindo.”

“What is it, Nadeshiko?”

She smiled, blushing at the sound of her name right by her ear. “You’re my prince.”

“...There’s been no royalty in Yamato for a very long time.”

Nadeshiko pouted, her good mood evaporating.

Rindo had known full well how she would react, and he chuckled when she played her part.

“I meant you’re *charming* as a prince.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You’re my prince, Rindo.”

“If anything, I would say I’m your knight, my princess.”

“I’m a princess?”

“Of course. You are my Autumn, my dearest princess.”

Delighted to hear that, Nadeshiko hugged him harder and kissed his cheek.

This game of knight and princess continued for a little while, until the babysitter interrupted.

“Lord Azami, security is calling for you,” she said. She was wearing an earphone and mic.

“Are you leaving, Rindo?”

“I’m sorry, Nadeshiko. I’ll be back soon.”

“Don’t forget about me! Not even for a second.”

“Not a moment goes by when I’m not thinking of you. I’ll be away, but the glass is bulletproof, and you’ll be under supervision the whole time. Another guard from security will be here to take my place in the meantime, so please keep enjoying your afternoon.”

“I’ll leave some snacks for you. An apple tart!”

“Thank you, Nadeshiko.”

“We’ll take care of her, Lord Azami. Come, Lady Nadeshiko. The tea is ready.”

The moment Rindo turned his back on her, the smile faded away from his face.

“Notify security. I’m leaving the Fairy’s side. I’m heading over there,” he said into the mini mic in his breast pocket.

Rindo glanced back at the girl once before leaving the room.

The Autumn country house looked like a modern building with an open-air concept, but the interior was anything but.

All the glass in the sunroom was bulletproof. One step out of the room and you were in a concrete-wall corridor.



Security cameras were set a few feet apart, all monitored from the underground security room.

Rindo walked back to that security room, and a short woman in a white coat received him. She was older than he was, in her late twenties. Her dyed blond hair was up in a ponytail. Under the coat, she wore a red dress, the same color as her shoes and the frames of her glasses. Clearly it was her favorite.

“Hey, you’re here. We finished the security plan to present at the Agency Council. We just need you to review and submit it. The deadline’s almost here, so do it now.”

“Fine.”

“By the way, Azami, how’s the Fairy doing?”

Rindo sighed at the question. “No problems. She’s perked up now that she’s in the sunroom.”

“Good, good. I was worried.”

“It’s easy to calm her tantrums by just putting her out in the sun and giving her some snacks. Hey...Nagatsuki, stop eating curry in here. You’re gonna stink up my suit.”

Rindo had become a completely different person once he left the sunroom.

The woman, Nagatsuki, wasn’t surprised in the slightest. “No, no, it’s curry *udon*,” she replied with a smile.

He acted soft in front of his lady, but he grumbled and swore away from her. This was Rindo Azami, the retainer of the Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

Security for the Agent of Autumn had fewer overall guards in favor of surveillance and GPS technology. *The Fairy* was the code name for their object of protection. Rindo’s colleague, Nagatsuki, switched on the air purifier as she said, “Little Miss Fairy hasn’t been able to go for a walk recently. We can’t even get her to bask in the sun, the poor thing. If only it wasn’t for the explosion at the power plant and the attack at the Summer villa...maybe we could’ve taken her for some flower viewing.”

Rindo nodded in agreement. Nagatsuki was talking about the blackout

incident that had taken place in Iyo the other day. The Agency had informed Autumn about the Agent of Spring's stay at the Summer villa in Yaga, Iyo, and the insurgent attack that took place.

"If the insurgents also caused the explosion behind the outage, it could be a message to the Agency Council, saying they're watching... The warning shot must've been a shock to Spring in particular. Did you hear about what happened, Nagatsuki?"

"Ah, you mean that the Lady Spring and her retainer escaped from a plan to hold a ritual before a big crowd?"

"Yeah, it's unbelievable."

"For sure."

"The retainer of Spring is such an idiot."

"The Agency of Spring is so stupid."

When they realized they had been disparaging different people, they stared at each other in disbelief.

"..."

"..."

Rindo began with his side of the argument:

"Clearly it's the Spring Guard who's in the wrong. She can't rein in her Agent."

Rindo plopped down on the nearest office chair. He turned around to face Nagatsuki and crossed his arms before continuing.

"The Agent must be kept in check. They're not people; they're important cultural property. They have to obey."

"The Agents are not people?"

"No."

"They're cultural property?"

"Yes."

"So what was all that sugary-sweet nonsense with the Fairy just now?" She

smirked.

Rindo winced. “Nadeshiko...has some selfish tendencies, but it’s not excessive. Besides, it’s easy to see her mental state. The precision of her divine powers varies greatly depending on her mood and condition. It makes perfect sense to be careful with her and keep her functioning in the best state possible. It’s like how you protect books from humidity and sunlight. It is my job as her retainer to care for her, to keep her in check. I have my Agent in the palm of my hand.”

Nagatsuki clicked her tongue. “That’s the thing. The divine powers of the Agents vary depending on their emotional state, and the research backs this up. Which means that making them go against their will—like putting them onstage to dance and sing for a crowd like they’re some kind of pop stars—is the worst thing their caretakers could do. Not to mention the girl in question was kidnapped and missing for ten years.”

Rindo raised his eyebrows, unable to argue against that. Nagatsuki sat on her chair and swayed her ponytail rhythmically, speaking in a singsong kind of way. “Everything they do depends on their mood.”

Nagatsuki couldn’t keep herself from talking when this topic was brought up.

“It sounds bad to put it like this, but their emotions really dictate everything. Whatever their age, whatever their experience, incredible things happen if their emotions get out of control. A hundred years ago, the Agent of Winter built a castle of ice to protect the Town, including giant ice soldiers to fight off the insurgents. It’s quite frightening...”

Rindo had never heard of this. He raised his eyebrows again.

“Winter has a lot of legends like this, since they’re the most specialized in combat among the seasons... But the others aren’t without their own sagas. The current Lady Spring is a good recent example. She formed giant cherry blossom trees to protect her retainer and the Agent of Winter and his Guard, even though she hadn’t finished her Season Descent. Both events were born out of a desire to protect, hmm?”

Rindo gave a sullen response to the lecture. “They’ve got guts, at least.”

“This isn’t about guts, you idiot. Lady...Hinagiku Kayo, I think her name is—she has a power unlike anyone else in history. I mean, she did that at the tender age of six. Not that far from our Fairy’s age. It’s amazing.”

Rindo took offense at that comment. “Stop comparing her with Nadeshiko.”

The apparent belittling of his lady felt like a reflection on him, too.

Nagatsuki didn’t care. She laughed. “No, I’m not trying to put her down. I’m just pointing out how much power that girl had at six. The Agents’ powers grow as they age and accumulate experience, so one can only imagine how powerful she is now. And with that much power, she’s also more likely to lose control. Which must be why her retainer shut that down.”

She finally reached the conclusion to answer their original argument.

Rindo kept a straight face, but inside, he realized what Nagatsuki was trying to say. Rindo had assumed the retainer of Spring had neglected full security just to meet her Agent’s whims, but Nagatsuki proposed she had actually purged any unnecessary potential influences on the Agent’s emotions so that her first manifestation ritual in ten years was a success. They would never know the truth, however, unless they spoke to the woman in question.

“There’s no official record on how the Agent of Spring...Lady Hinagiku got away from wherever she was taken, but just between you and me...” Nagatsuki inched forward to Rindo so their knees bumped into each other and whispered, “Apparently, she destroyed their secret base. Amazing, isn’t it?”

Rindo froze in shock. “...”

“You should look at your face right now. Yeah, I know. I reacted the same.”

“...”

“Hey, you in there? What’re you thinking?”

After a while, Rindo responded with confusion. “If she could do that, why didn’t she do it earlier?”

“...”

Nagatsuki’s jaw dropped. She kicked his office chair with her red pumps, and Rindo slid all the way to the wall.

“Hey!”

“Oh, you’re the kind of guy to tell an abuse victim, *Well, why didn’t you put up a fight?*”

This slander Rindo could not take. “I would not!”

“Ugh. I’m done with this conversation.”

“Come on, Nagatsuki.”

“No. Get away from me, you heartless dick.”

“No, but I’m serious. I wouldn’t say that about a regular person, but the Agents have the powers of the seasons. Don’t you think she could’ve escaped at any time if she used them?”

“Okay, you need to go read a book or two and cultivate some empathy. I’ll also lend you some about the psychology of people under special circumstances. The kid was six, remember? You think she’d put up a fight if they told her they’d attack the Town of Winter again if she didn’t?”

“...”

Rindo still wanted to argue back, but he kept his mouth shut.

They were too unprepared. We won’t make the same mistake.

He knew better than to put his thoughts into words.

“All right, chat’s over. Let’s do some work. Check the plan already so we can bring up anything that needs revision. This is a ritual we cannot postpone.”

“I know. I’ll give it a look.”

Rindo sat at the security desktop and opened up the text file on the computer.

The document outlined the Agency Council. The prayer that had been taking place since ancient times.

The Agents of the Four Seasons gathered to pray all together.

Without it, the seasons would not be passed on, and the country would stop receiving their blessings.

It sounds made up, Rindo thought as he read it. We held the Agency Council while the Agent of Spring was gone. Couldn't they do it without Autumn this year?

He grumbled internally about the ritual that had been in place since the age of the gods.

Hinagiku Kayo had been absent from the Agency Council for ten years, and there was no sign of the Agents losing their powers. However, they had received more reports of the fauna changing.

The passage of the seasons without spring was unstable, and many crops withered.

The signs of collapse were there. If this was because of Spring's absence from the Agency Council, then it was worth seeing how this year would turn out. Rindo finished reading the document and marked it off.

"Done."

Nagatsuki had been doing other work in the meantime. She was already back to normal. "Good, good. That's all, then. You can go back."

"Yeah... I'll say, though, security's quite tight compared to past years."

"I mean, Spring and Summer were attacked. We need it."

"Not that I mind...but is there really a need for this high a level? I'm here in case anything happens."

"We can't let our guards down. Autumn may not be the target of many attacks, but there's no guarantee we *won't* be attacked. Just go back to her already. Little Miss Fairy starts grumbling the moment you're not with her."

Rindo felt like talking to an adult for a while longer, but he gave up and got to his feet. He glanced at the monitor and saw Nadeshiko doodling serenely in the sunroom.

Annoyed at having to babysit again, Rindo yawned as he walked upstairs.

The schedule for today is...class with her tutor, was it?

It was spring. The season in which all those buried under the snow finally felt

the sun on their faces. Work for the Agent of Autumn would begin after the Agent of Summer wrapped up her manifesting.

The days tended to run together when the other seasons took the stage.

After studying, it's time for dinner. Then the bath, and then...

It was a boring routine, perhaps, but one worth cherishing. Boredom is a sign of peace—and no one ever notices until it's gone.

How much free time will I get?

Rindo Azami wasn't as diligent a retainer. Compared to others, he didn't fixate on his Agent. He saw it only as a job.

Ugh, what a bother.

But still, he was not one to wish for his routine to be broken.

"Huh...?!"

The moment he got upstairs, the moment he saw the projectile from the hallway window, the moment he shouted in surprise—everything changed.

It hit the Autumn country house before he could even recognize the shape of it. The missile destroyed the peaceful afternoon.

Rindo's body hit the wall as the country house exploded, and he dropped back down the stairs.

One could say he had been lucky.

Right after he fell, the underground's entrance's fire shutter activated and closed. A crowd of insurgents swarmed the first floor and easily made it through the guards who relied on surveillance. The armed invaders assaulted everyone they came across, but they passed by the shutter, so his life was not in danger.

Thus, he was lucky. And the most fortunate part of it all was that he was unconscious and spared from watching it happen.

The bulletproof glass of the sunroom was not missile-proof, and it burst in a shower of shards. Agent of Autumn Nadeshiko Iwaizuki could do nothing. The babysitter and guards had unfortunately ended up unconscious under the rubble.

Nadeshiko looked like a bloody corpse when the insurgents found her. A small doll dyed red.

The insurgents, armed with military-grade equipment, approached her to see if she was alive. One especially large man took her pulse, and he shook as though he'd been struck by lightning.

Everyone watched as Nadeshiko's body glowed with a faint light. She was already unconscious, but her powers activated on their own.

The Agent of Autumn had the power of Life Putrefaction. She made the trees and the land decay, preparing them for the world of Winter. However, what Nadeshiko was doing at this moment was a little different.

"A-aa-a-a-aa-aaaaah!"

Nadeshiko held the hand of the man who touched her, and he screamed.

She had sucked the life out of the insurgent's body, circulating it into herself.

This was the Agent of Autumn's special power. Nadeshiko was unconscious, but her body was aware of the massive loss of blood—the approach of death. It instinctively activated her powers.

Her desire to live drew the life force out of the insurgent. Defying all the laws of modern medicine, Nadeshiko's body healed so quickly, her wounds were closing visibly. Foreign splinters of glass fell down one by one as her body expelled them.

The armed insurgents drew back before the fantastical sight. This was the power of a god. Nadeshiko let go of the man once she was satisfied, and he slowly keeled over.

He clearly needed urgent care, but nothing could save him now. His skin was dried up, his tongue lolled out of his mouth, and blood oozed from every hole in his body. He had become the bearer of Nadeshiko's pain.

"Let's take her," said an armed woman.

"But, Gozen, the plan was to kill her," said the tallest of the insurgent group.

"Yes. We had no intention of keeping her. But...look..." Gozen knelt before Nadeshiko. "She's so young... Just like the other girl... Don't you see it, Mikami?"

Mikami seemed less sure. “You mean to let a pet bite your hand again, Gozen? One time was enough. We can’t make beings like the Agents into our pawns.”

“You don’t know. And she can heal... If we raise her well, she could learn to heal people. Think of all the lives that could save. More people will realize that we’re doing the right thing! They’ll understand the Agency is wrong!”

“But, Gozen!”

“We’re taking her.”

The head of the insurgents ignored Mikami’s objection and reached out for Nadeshiko. Now that she had healed herself, the girl did not use the powers of Life Putrefaction on the woman as she held her up. The limp child breathed shallowly in her arms.

“Let’s go.”

The insurgents left as quickly as they had arrived.

It was a full day before the survivors were saved—both those left in the country house and those fortunate enough to have been locked underground by the malfunctioning emergency-escape door.

The small mercy among the tragedy was that the sprinklers set all over activated properly, and a fire did not break out.

However, the Autumn country house was barely recognizable.

The place where Rindo had thought of the girl as annoying was in shambles.

The hallways her little feet had run through were dirtied with the victims’ blood.

The bedroom where he had held her little hands until she fell asleep was covered in rubble.

The sunroom where her little eyes had gazed upon nature held a puddle of blood, exactly where she had been sitting last. It remained like a burn mark.

“...Azami... The Fairy... Nadeshiko’s...”

Nagatsuki, who had also been spared, couldn’t stop herself from tearing up at

the sight of the blood.

Rindo was in utter disbelief. There was no way this could've happened, he thought.

"This can't be..."

Rindo Azami had been the retainer of Autumn for only one year. Both Agent and retainer were novices. He had been chosen despite his much older age because he was the most experienced in martial arts in the Town.

"...We had the security cameras, and..."

His ancestors had been retainers; his family was well-established in the Town of Autumn, known for producing many retainers across generations.

"There was no sign of them coming."

He had done an excellent job during his first year as Guard.

Although he grumbled behind her back, he cared for Nadeshiko Iwaizuki in his own way. His pretense, his deception was his way of showing his feelings. He did not like children.

"...This isn't fair..."

But he played his part. He acted like a good retainer for her sake. And in return, Nadeshiko always called his name out with joy. He'd thought this would go on forever. He'd believed that even if danger came, he could take care of it himself. He had the confidence. But in reality?

"Nadeshiko..."

He wasn't even given the chance to fight. Everything was over before he could regain consciousness.

"Nadeshiko."

She was gone.

"Nade...shiko..."

Only the puddle of blood remained.

"Are you leaving, Rindo?"

"I'm sorry, Nadeshiko. I'll be back soon."

"Don't forget about me! Not even for a second."

She was no longer there.

Nothing was left. There was no one left to atone for. No one left to heal. Nothing.

Only his sense of powerlessness as he watched the scene before him.

I could do nothing.

I could do nothing.

I could do nothing.

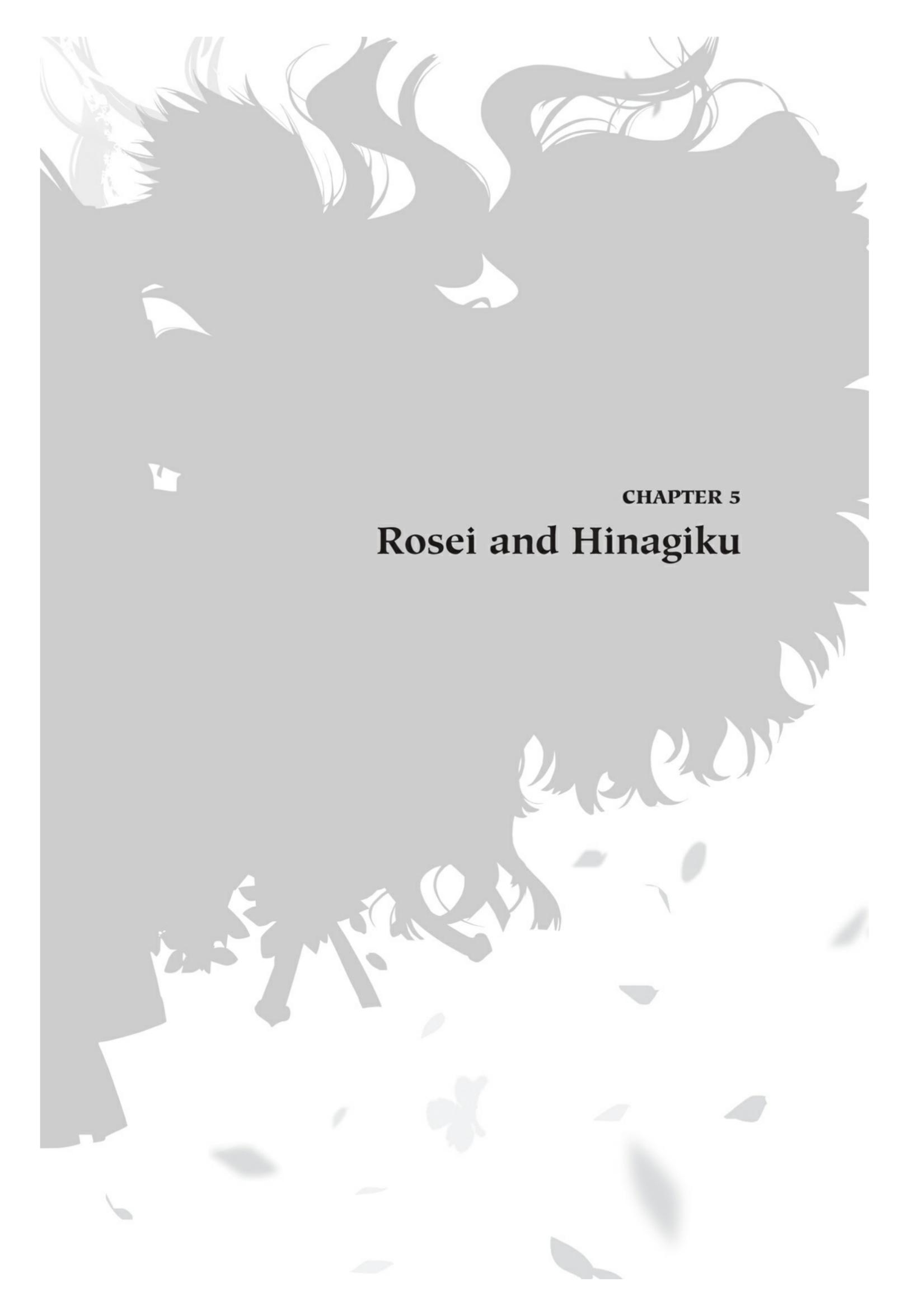
And yet, his eyes saw; his nose smelled; his mouth could taste; his heart kept on beating; he could still experience the world as it kept going, even after this tragedy.

This isn't right.

Why was the world still breathing? Why was it still there even after such a terrible thing had happened?

"Nadeshiko..."

His Fairy was no longer there to answer the call.



CHAPTER 5

Rosei and Hinagiku

It was a special day.

Lady Hinagiku, who had become Agent of Spring at five, was to do her first manifestation in the Town of Winter.

She had been training for this day.

She was only six, and yet she behaved in a way worthy of her station and respectful of the people in the Town of Winter.

The only time she acted her age was when she was with me, but this changed after our stay in the Town of Winter for the Season Descent.

The time Lady Hinagiku spent with her fellow Agent, Lord _____, and his retainer, Lord _____, had become special for her.

That was not good. This eventually became the reason for her sacrifice.

Lady Hinagiku was wearing her favorite kimono when it happened—crimson cloth with a big chrysanthemum pattern. It stood out among the white snow of the Town of Winter.

I don't remember what time it was when the white around us turned red.

I think it was early in the afternoon.

I heard a huge sound, followed by screams. Afterward, I learned that was a gunshot. The same sound blasted again and again, and then a group of large men rushed violently into the room we were in. Lord _____ and I attacked back to protect Lord _____ and Lady Hinagiku as we ran away from the Town of Winter. A bullet hit Lord _____'s abdomen, and I was hit, too. Lord _____ used his powers to protect Lady Hinagiku, but we had already lost. Our pursuers were close behind.

And then it came. Spring.

Lady Hinagiku turned everything into spring to protect us.

Signs of spring softly enveloped the Winter villa.

This was the northern land of Enishi, in a place called Shiranui. It was three hours away by car from Enishi's capital city of Satsumiya, and it was abundant with flowers. Fields of lavender bloomed here in the summer. The log-cabin-style mansion there was the villa of the Agent of Winter.

The Winter villa's architecture was at home among the trees deep within the mountains of Shiranui. The mansion, built based on overseas architecture, was three times the size of a regular log cabin. It had been used and treated with care by the Agents of Winter across generations, and the current one was no different.

“ ... ”

Rosei Kantsubaki watched as his retainer, Itecho Kangetsu, spoke on the phone. Even at home, he was wearing a pitch-black kimono. He sat on the fabric couch before the old-fashioned fireplace as he listened attentively.

“I see. Thank you for the report.” Itecho's expression as he nodded to the phone looked severe.

The season in Enishi was changing from winter to spring right at that very moment. Which meant the Agent of Spring had arrived at Winter's home turf.

Enishi was vast, so she had to travel from spot to spot. The local news celebrated the return of spring, and the people followed her tracks as though she were the cherry blossom front.

Rosei was prepared to take this chance to meet the lady and retainer of Spring and apologize. Perhaps they would turn him down, but even so, he wanted to watch over Hinagiku's manifestation of spring in this land.

“I see... She was crying? That's rough...”

However, the situation didn't even allow Rosei to hold a faint hope.

After the Summer villa attack, the Autumn villa had been destroyed in an explosion, and the Agent of Autumn had been kidnapped. The unrelenting insurgent attacks had plunged the Agency and the Agents into a state of emergency.

On top of having extra security, they were allowed out only for trips that were absolutely necessary. The situation didn't allow for Winter to meet with Spring. Hinagiku and Sakura were also to go back to the Town of Spring in Teishu the moment they finished manifesting spring.

"Keep on the lookout. Prioritize Lady Hinagiku and Sakura. Also put their plans above whatever the Spring Agency says. I'm relieved to have you all guarding them."

Itecho was on the phone with the elite guards of the Town of Winter he had appointed to keep an eye on the lady and retainer of Spring.

After the attack on the Summer villa, the Spring Agency had learned what they had been doing, and after a check from Spring Agency staff, they had been escorting them.

They were currently talking about the Spring couple, of course.

"So it'll be over in a few days. If you need anything, go ahead and write it off as expenses. Anything the girls need, too."

There wasn't much strength in Itecho's voice. It was easy to tell how deeply saddened he was by the situation.

We can only pray for them to finish safely.

If Hinagiku wasn't mentally stable enough, the manifestation of spring wouldn't happen properly, but even now, the cherry blossom front kept going strong.

Normally, the trip around the vast island of Enishi took place over a few weeks, with breaks in between, but Spring was traveling day in, day out, manifesting without rest.

You could almost hear them shouting, *I won't lose.*

Meanwhile, here I am. Doing what?

Rosei heard about the attack on the Summer villa when Hinagiku and Sakura had already moved to Teishu.

Rosei and Itecho volunteered to guard the Spring lady and retainer personally, but the Town of Winter, the Winter Agency, and even National Security did

everything they could to stop them. They couldn't read the insurgents' moves.

And if Rosei and Itecho were to depart, their numerous staff members would go with them.

They did not want even more trouble going around right now, when the multiple organizations had to be extra careful with security. There was nothing he could do. It was the right thing to keep important people safe during the state of emergency, even if it was inconvenient.

Hinagiku was out there exposed to danger, while they were ordered to stay put. Rosei was distressed enough before the kidnapping of Autumn.

There was no way Hinagiku Kayo could be doing well knowing another tragedy had occurred, not to mention the recent attack she had survived. She must have been terrified even as she brought the spring.

Is there nothing I can do for them?

He had been thinking of nothing but Hinagiku and Sakura the past few days.

She kept calling for spring despite her fear, and he couldn't help worrying.

I wish I really were an omnipotent god.

The only thing Rosei did was wait in the Winter villa.

He stayed inside, thinking of going to meet her the moment things calmed down. His powerlessness was killing him.

"How's the trip going?" Rosei asked Itecho as he hung up.

"Quickly. They're moving at an unprecedented pace," Itecho answered as he wrinkled his brow.

He usually carried himself with grace, but now he lacked the energy to keep it up. He plopped himself down by Rosei's side and let his legs sprawl.

"They've left Satsumiya, and now they're at the port of Hakojima. It took them eight hours to move, including the rituals... Enishi sure is huge. They said they'll move again today once they're done at Hakojima. I wonder if they're getting much sleep. They may be young, but they're just girls... Won't they get sick?"

Enishi was one of the biggest islands in the Yamatoan archipelago.

One could go between the major cities in Teishu using public transport in just an hour, but it took the rural folk three hours by car to reach the city in Enishi. It was a five-hour trip from Shiranui to Hakojima. Rosei and Itecho weren't close enough to help if something happened, even if they wanted to.

"They also likely have instructions from National Security telling them to finish bringing spring ASAP and go somewhere easy to oversee."

"Yeah, most likely."

Although he didn't say it, Itecho had worry written all over his face. Rosei knew that feeling painfully well.

He doesn't know what to do, either.

Rosei had never seen Itecho so mentally exhausted—but that kept him sane, strangely enough. Even if he did hate to see his retainer in this state.

Itecho was as glad as Rosei to have the duo of Spring back, and he prayed for their new journey to succeed, too. If possible, he wanted to beg for forgiveness and put an end to the long nightmare.

But destiny was cruel, and they were slowly wearing down.

They remained silent for a while, until a member of the Winter Agency staff, Ishihara, arrived at the heated living room.

"Have you had lunch yet?"

They both shook their heads in silence.

"I know how you feel, but you have to eat. And keeping an eye on your health is part of my job. Would you like to order something?"

"Have you had lunch yourself yet, Ishihara?"

"No..."

Staying on high alert was also wearing Ishihara out. "How about udon, then? Easy on the stomach." Itecho looked at a shop up on his phone.

Rosei always took sleeping pills before bed, but that night, perhaps because of the mental fatigue, he dropped off right away.

That spring evening, Rosei dreamed.

He dreamed of the past.

The skies of the Town of Winter were clear, for once.

Clear skies were a rare sight for the inhabitants of this snowy land.

Although it wasn't snowing, the Town of Winter was bone-splittingly cold. In the dream, Rosei vacantly stared at the sky as Itecho pestered him to eat his breakfast. He had been taken outside to receive the soon-to-arrive Agent of Spring. The people of the Town of Winter had been waiting by the gates since early morning, despite the extreme cold.

Rosei walked as Itecho pulled his hand. Everyone showed the minimum respect for him, but they did not halt their chatter for a little boy.

"It sure was good timing for the previous Agent to die—pardon the insolence."

"And the training takes a whole year. It's a good thing it happened after the manifestation was already finished."

"Yeah, just in time for everyone to keep the seasons rolling."

"Although...you think the rumors were true?"

"Who knows, but in any case, I hope she lives longer than the previous one."

White breaths swirled around like tobacco smoke.

They're talking about us like we're tools again.

Rosei clicked his tongue in exasperation. Itecho took notice and held his hand tighter to cheer him up.

They don't even care to mourn the dead?

The previous Agent of Spring had passed away after bringing spring to the entirety of Yamato, as though the job was already done. The next one had gone through her customary year of training and was now to spend a month with Rosei in the Town of Winter. No hole was left in the circulation of the seasons, so some people were saying the timing of the last Agent's death was fortunate. If even one season went missing, it would greatly affect the people of Yamato and its many businesses. Rosei understood the logic behind it, but he didn't

want to.

I heard her child was still young, the poor thing.

Rosei and the previous Agent of Spring weren't that close, but none of the adults cared nearly as much as he did.

Poor Lady Yukiyanagi.

She was in her early thirties, gloomy but lovely—an ill-fated beauty.

The ephemeral aura around her was so strong that he was convinced her life was destined to be short when he heard the news. Then, not long after, he received news of the instatement of the next Agent of Spring. Rosei was now about to meet this newly appointed goddess incarnate. They were to partake in the Season Descent, in which she re-created the myth by spending time with Winter, the father of all seasons.

That said, it was not overly formal. It was also meant as a way to have the Agents get to know each other, so really, after receiving them, it was just a month living with a stranger.

I heard the new one was close to me in age.

Rosei gave defensive glares at the people of the Town of Winter surrounding him. Most of them were middle-aged men, and basically all of them imposing and tough-looking. Itecho, nineteen at the time, was on the young end of the spectrum.

"Itecho."

Rosei called him in a small voice. Itecho immediately crouched down to draw his ear closer.

"Hey... How old is the Agent of Spring?"

"Rosei...were you not listening? Six."

"So a child."

"Just like you."

He frowned. He had been Agent of Winter since he was five, and he was now ten. A six-year-old Agent would be much like him when he was just starting out.

He felt like an adult in comparison.

"It's your first time being with a kid your age, isn't it? Hope you get to be friends."

Itecho smiled at him, but Rosei did not return it.

"It's a girl, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"...Can we really be friends...?"

There were many men in the Town of Winter but few women. Rosei was used to living with older men, so he didn't feel right having a woman barge in at this point.

"Listen, Rosei. She's not coming here because she wants to. Don't wonder about whether you can be friends. Just do it. Be friendly."

"Why? She shouldn't have come, then."

"You think she has any right to say no to the rituals? She's being thrown out to a place unlike where she was raised. You don't get to go through the Season Descent as Winter, but think about how it feels for her. Wouldn't you be scared about spending a whole month in a house you don't know?"

"...I feel like throwing up just thinking about it."

Rosei was annoyed by the lecturing tone, but Itecho's point was easy to understand. He acquiesced.

"Besides, you might get to be best friends forever!"

Rosei wasn't sure how to react to that. *"What? I haven't even made one friend in my whole life."*

Rosei's honest thoughts were that he was not comfortable being granted something he never had before. The fact he had no friends didn't hurt him anymore, but it hurt Itecho.

"...You don't count me?"

"I mean... You're like my guardian, my retainer...my brother..."

"...Right. You're right. And that's why...the other Agents are the only three people in this country who can understand your position and your pain."

"I don't need anyone. I've never needed anyone."

"...Fine. I won't force you. Just stop glaring. It's rude."

"This is just my face. I've looked like this since I was born, and you know it."

Itecho got fed up with Rosei replying to everything with sarcasm, and he grabbed his nose. Rosei fought back by kicking Itecho's chin. Itecho pinched Rosei's cheek. Rosei punched Itecho's hip.

As the master and retainer of Winter continued their customary body-language conversation, they heard a car stop outside. The gate was unlocked then.

"Lady Hinagiku Kayo, Agent of Spring, and her retainer, Lady Sakura Himedaka, have arrived."

With the dramatic announcement of their arrival, the gate was open. Curiously, no matter the generation, the Agent of Spring always gave off a floral scent. The fragrance of spring filled the surroundings the moment the gate was open.

Rosei gasped when he saw her.

So this is the new Spring.

It was as though she had a divinity to her that touched all five of his senses. Even though he knew all the other Agents, Rosei felt overwhelmed by her presence. As he looked for the six-year-old with the mystic aura, he noticed there were two girls. One with hair the color of amber, the other the color of obsidian.

They were both beautiful and graceful, but a gut feeling told him it was the girl with the amber hair who was the incarnation of Spring. She also seemed able to tell Rosei was the Agent of Winter without anyone telling her. Somehow, in his dream, her face was covered in black.

But although he couldn't see her face, he remembered how her gaze felt.

"Lord Winter, I am glad to get this audience with you."

Rosei learned in that moment what it felt like to have your heart stolen. She was adorable as a fairy, but that was not the only reason.

My Spring.

For some reason, the thought came to mind. He didn't know why. He hadn't felt it with the previous Agent of Spring. But when he saw this girl standing in the middle of the snow, she was his Spring, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. He felt it in his blood. Anyone would tell him it was love at first sight if he mentioned it, but Rosei felt this was something different.

I've been waiting for you.

He felt destiny at work. As though he had been waiting for this girl to show up from the moment he was born.

"I've come here from the Town of Spring. My name is Hinagiku, and I look forward to spending the month with you. My retainer, Sakura, and I are still inexperienced, but I hope you can welcome us warmly."

She spoke as though she was marrying him.

Rosei was frozen staring at Hinagiku. The poor girl from a faraway land feared she had blundered in some way, watching him with worry.

"Rosei, say hello. Rosei."

After Itecho called his name a few times, Rosei finally greeted her back.

He remembered Hinagiku Kayo smiling at him then, but he still couldn't see her face.

Her figure turned into cherry blossoms and vanished.

The stage of the dream switched to the inside of the dojo in the Town of Winter. Hinagiku's face was still unobservable.

Rosei created a sword of ice. Since ancient times, creating ice weapons to prepare for fighting off the insurgents was part of the Agent of Winter's basic training for mastering their divine powers. She watched him practice.

Meanwhile, Sakura and Itecho were to practice with bamboo swords.

"Should I be teaching the Kangetsu style to someone from Spring?"

“So it really is against the rules to have an apprentice from a different Town?”

“No, there’s no such rule. I welcome the enthusiasm...but I worry the folks back in the Town of Spring might not appreciate it... It’s a very intense and brutal style, and I’m not sure about teaching it to a girl.”

Itecho hesitated, but there was not a speck of doubt in Sakura’s eyes.

“I want to learn to protect Lady Hinagiku; it doesn’t make sense for the Town of Spring to get mad about it. Besides, you can’t say I shouldn’t learn how to use a sword because I’m a woman in this day and age. Although I wouldn’t like it if you were scolded for teaching me... What if we keep it a secret? I’ll say I just learned it by watching. I will not cause you trouble.”

“No, I...I mean, I would like to teach you, but I’m not sure if I should teach it to someone from Spring...”

“Lord Itecho, we’re back at the beginning now.”

The apprentice seemed to be the one leading her new mentor.

Sakura and her enthusiasm turned out to be a good fit for Itecho as his apprentice. He was good at looking after people, and he enjoyed it. Meanwhile, Hinagiku observed in silence as they began their training. Rosei’s eyes drifted to the idle girl. Hinagiku just so happened to look his way, too, and their eyes met. Embarrassed, Rosei looked away immediately.

“Rosei, keep Lady Hinagiku company.”

Itecho was keeping a keen eye as he swung his bamboo sword. He was the host, and she was the guest—of course it fell to him to entertain her.

However, Rosei had no idea what to talk about. He frowned. Then soon gave up and walked over to the girl on the floor of the dojo.

“...Are you cold?” he asked.

The air temperature was nothing unusual for Rosei, but the outside was subzero. She was holding her arms close.

Hinagiku shook her head, trying not to inconvenience him. Rosei scratched his head before picking up the coat he had left on the floor and handing it over to her.

"Hmph."

"Huh...?"

Hinagiku didn't take it right away, and Rosei irritably pushed it on to her.

"At the very least wipe off the dust before handing your coat to a girl!" Itecho called from behind him.

"Shut up!" Rosei replied. *"C'mon, put it on before Itecho yells at me again."*

"A-all right. Thank you."

Hinagiku did as he said and hurriedly put it on. The *haori* was a tad big for her.

"Wow, you're small."

"Huh? I'm sorry."

"Why're you apologizing? Anyway, you're the Agent of Spring, so why don't you make it warmer for yourself?"

"I was told not to do that outside of practice..."

"Practice, then."

"...R-right. But trying to make a little of spring around me is too hard... And I shouldn't be doing it before the day of the manifestation..."

"Hmm. So you can't do little things."

"...I'm sorry."

Rosei almost told her not to apologize again, but she'd probably only do it another time if he did.

"Hey, you don't need to stay here and watch. I bet it's boring, huh? Wanna go somewhere else?"

"I want to keep watching Sakura work...if it's not too much trouble."

"...It's no trouble at all."

The conversation ended then. Rosei turned around, thinking his job here was done, but then Itecho gave him a meaningful glance, while Sakura shot him an aggressive glare.

“Lord Itecho, as her retainer, I cannot overlook this...even if it is Lord Rosei we’re talking about.”

“Wait, Sakura. Give him a bit more time. He’s never talked to a girl around his age before... Cut the poor guy some slack.”

How rude.

However, the fellow masters couldn’t stay behind while the retainers got along this well.

Rosei understood this despite his young age. And Itecho wouldn’t shut up about him being friendly to her. So he gave in and turned to look at Hinagiku again.

Hinagiku shivered. She was scared. Maybe it wasn’t good to talk to her from a standing position. So Rosei sat down beside her. Still, he couldn’t come up with a topic for conversation. He already talked about the weather. And he wasn’t very talkative to begin with.

“...”

The moment he thought of complaining about Itecho as a last resort...

“Lord Rosei.”

...Hinagiku spoke first. She grabbed her kimono’s sleeves and fidgeted, summoning her courage before continuing.

“Um... Can you make anything with your Winter powers?”

Hinagiku’s voice cracked from the nerves. Her face was red, too.

Rosei didn’t understand the question at first, but soon he realized she was talking about him creating the ice sword. She wouldn’t have seen anything like that before. Of course she was impressed. Rosei felt his confidence rise.

“I can make swords, arrows, and spears.”

“Could you also make flowers? Or stars?”

“...Huh?”

Rosei didn’t know how to answer those questions. He had never even thought of making flowers. No one in the Town of Winter had. They never taught him

about creating anything but weapons for practice.

"I've never done it, but...do you want me to?"

"O-oh, no. Sorry for the stupid question. Forget it." Hinagiku bowed her head deeply in a hurry. Silence fell again.

Now it's gonna look like I'm giving her the cold shoulder.

Itecho and Sakura stared at him again, waiting to pounce.

He also didn't want to say that he couldn't. Not because of his pride as the Agent of Winter, but Rosei Kantsubaki was a stubborn boy. He tugged Hinagiku's kimono lightly. She looked at him meekly, as though she regretted her blunder after gathering the courage to speak to him.

Rosei spoke with even more confidence. *"I can do it. Just you watch."*

Still, he couldn't make it right away. It took trial and error until he finally scraped together a single flower and gave it to Hinagiku. He was a bit embarrassed about giving a flower to a girl but still proud of himself. Hinagiku fearfully grabbed the misshapen blossom.

"It's supposed to be a flowering quince. There's some in the garden that bloom every year. I don't know many others, so...sorry."

But Hinagiku was touched. *"It's cold...and so pretty..."*

Hinagiku was so happy, she walked over to Sakura mid-practice to show her. Then she came back, grinning like a child with a new toy, and then she used her own Spring powers.

"I can do a few little things."

She produced a pouch from her kimono, took out some flower seeds, and held them tight. Then flowers began to bloom from her hand.

"This is the daisy," she said bashfully. *"The hinagiku, just like my name. Please take it... Unless you don't want it?"*

It was a real, live flower. Rosei's eyes lit up at the sight. The Agent of Spring was making it bloom right in front of him.

"Wow! That's amazing!"

“N-no, yours was more amazing.”

“No, this is definitely better. You can create. I can only freeze stuff. I can’t do anything like it.”

“...”

“What’s wrong?”

“The previous Agent...the previous Agent of Spring...didn’t show you?”

“No, we spoke during the Council but never showed each other our powers. I was the only kid there, too, so.”

“I see...”

“You’re the first person to show me, Hinagiku. Thanks.”

It was the first time Rosei used her name. Then she smiled.

“Yes, Lord Rosei.”

But in the dream, she vanished into cherry blossoms before showing him her smile.

The dream fast-forwarded through the month they’d spent together for the Season Descent. The days came and went.

He made Hinagiku a snow rabbit. They played with a sled while Itecho watched. Itecho dueled Sakura with swords. The noteworthy events were very small, all things a normal child his age would experience, but to Rosei, they were all precious. As for the other Agents at that time, both Summer and Autumn were different people, both elderly.

Communication among the seasons wasn’t common to begin with, but the generational gap created an even larger barrier. Hinagiku was the first other goddess of his own generation.

“Lord Rosei...I thought you were scarier.”

Hinagiku muttered one day. This formation—Rosei and Hinagiku walking together as Itecho and Sakura watched from behind—had become customary. The intensely cold Town had nowhere to play, but the kids wanted to get some fresh air, and so they went out for a walk.

Strolling around the shrine forest, grabbing some nice-looking sticks, and taking them back had become part of their routine.

“Me? Scary? They do say my resting face isn’t very nice...I guess...”

“N-no, I meant, it was just my imagination. You’re really kind. Everyone in Winter is very kind.”

“That’s not true. Some of them are awful.”

“But Lord Itecho is so kind, too...”

Hinagiku glanced backward. Itecho immediately stopped chatting and waved at her. The overprotective retainer reacted the moment the masters did anything.

Hinagiku softly waved back at him. From the very beginning, their time together had been unimaginably peaceful.

“He’s just kind to you. He’s plenty annoying with me.”

Itecho was used to handling mischievous and foul-mouthed Rosei, so having girls like Hinagiku and Sakura around flipped the loving-older-brother switch in him.

Well, I get the feeling.

Rosei gave a sidelong glance at Hinagiku. He still couldn’t see her face, but just looking at her made him feel warm inside, and he could feel himself smiling.

Maybe I’m more superficial than I thought.

He never thought he’d ever feel like this, but he was growing attached to Hinagiku, too.

The distance between them had closed, and now she talked normally to him, which made him happy.

“Are they tougher over at Spring?”

He was simply saying that to continue the conversation, but Hinagiku’s expression stiffened. Rosei frowned. Maybe this wasn’t something he should talk about to her.

"Are they doing anything to you? Something you don't want to say?" He grabbed her hand without thinking.

"N-no."

The desire to protect her surged within him. *"Tell me if they're bullying you. I'll speak with the Town of Spring myself."*

"I'm fine, really." Hinagiku grabbed her sleeve as she continued. *"...It's just that I'm the daughter...of a...mistress... Sakura was the first person I met who was nice to me...so I... I really..."*

Rosei would come to regret his ignorance. *"What's a mistress?"*

"Y-you don't need to know."

Then Hinagiku vanished with the cherry blossoms again.

The dream flowed by once more. This time, it didn't go that far ahead. Rosei was peering into the kitchen from the hallway. Sakura and Itecho were peeling vegetables.

"I see... I'd noticed her features were similar to her predecessor's."

They were having a gloomy talk.

"They say it's unheard of. They never go straight down the line like this."

"Maybe they've got thick blood."

"I don't know. But that is why I would appreciate if you don't talk about the former Agent or the Town of Spring to Lady Hinagiku... If she brought it up, it's proof she trusts you, but still..."

"I understand."

Rosei had only come to get juice from the fridge for Hinagiku.

But now he couldn't go inside, as though his shadow was sewn onto the spot where he stood.

"But to think the former Agent was Lady Hinagiku's mother..."

He must not go inside. His heart beat loudly.

"Why is her name different? I believe the last Agent's full name was Kobai

Yukiyanagi..."

"Her name is actually Hinagiku Yukiyanagi. Her last name changed once she was recognized. The Kayos are a renowned family in the Town of Spring. The Townchief is a Kayo, too: Lady Hinagiku's grandmother. The current head of the family is married with kids, but Lady Kobai fell in love with him...improperly...and had Lady Hinagiku."

Rosei felt the depths of his head growing colder. He heard the sound of ice crackling.

She...

He felt his heart freeze over like in the middle of a blizzard.

She was trying to tell me something important, but I couldn't listen.

It was then that Rosei understood the meaning of the word *mistress*.

He understood why she couldn't give a straight answer when he asked about the Town of Spring. He understood why she would call him and Itecho *"kind."* He understood everything.

"So Lady Hinagiku was considered an illegitimate child..."

Rosei felt like he was about to pass out. Hinagiku had come to the Town of Winter at the age of six, after one year of training.

Meaning she had lost her mother at five.

"That's correct, but since Lady Kobai was the Agent before giving birth to Lady Hinagiku, they didn't treat her like the plague outright... It was more subtle."

The former Agent was her mother, and she was an illegitimate child. Then the gears of fate gave the child the power of the Agent. Direct blood relations had nothing to do with the succession of the Agents, but it meant that five-year-old Hinagiku was the one most suitable at the time.

"Right... They can't directly criticize someone who carries the country on her back."

"Yes, but I hear they said she was a disgrace to the name of the Agents. Kayo's wife was furious...and put her through hell..."

“And nothing happened to the father, eh?”

“Some people criticized him, but for whatever reason, the woman always gets the short end of the stick in these situations. I hear Lady Kobai wasn’t home much; it was her way of protecting Lady Hinagiku from the harassment. So...that little girl couldn’t see her mother in her last moments... She left a will, but it mostly said she requested the Kayo head take care of Lady Hinagiku. To change her name from Yukiyanagi to Kayo.”

“Wait... If there’s a will, then...”

Not even the mother imagined what would happen after she made her choice.

“.....Yes. She killed herself.”

She must have thought her death would solve everything. But that did not happen.

She could never have predicted her daughter would become the next Agent.

“After she passed...who took care of Lady Hinagiku?”

“No one from either the Yukiyanagis or the Kayos volunteered, so...”

“I see. And that’s where you come in.”

“Oh, no. I met her when I snuck into her mansion’s garden to steal some peaches. It was mere coincidence. It was later on that I realized we were connected.”

“...”

“Please don’t yell at me.”

“I won’t.”

Itecho and Sakura then moved on to another topic, but Rosei was still stuck on that one.

What about Hinagiku now?

The daughter left behind was still living in an uncomfortable situation. Perhaps she could’ve begun a different life somewhere else in quiet, if she hadn’t been chosen as the Agent of Spring. She could’ve been a normal girl,

living somewhere nice, away from the rumors and criticisms of her mother.

However, the gods were unkind, and fate had dealt her a cruel hand.

Isn't she going through the same pain her mother did?

She was worshipped due to her position but only superficially. They treated her like a tool, just as the adults in the Town of Winter treated Rosei.

She couldn't answer his question. Gossip never vanished. People didn't become good all of a sudden. Rosei was an outsider, and even he could tell that she would still be ostracized as the daughter of the woman who had scandalized the Town of Spring and the girl who succeeded the miraculous powers of the Agent of Spring.

Why?

Rosei wanted to ask someone.

He knew no one could answer that question, but he had to ask it. Anyone would ask it when faced with injustice.

Why, you gods?

When he got no answer, Rosei took his empty cup and turned back.

Then there she was.

"Hinagiku."

He saw her tears fall down to the floor. Rosei reached out, but she retreated. He stepped forward and grabbed her arm. He wanted to take her away somewhere—now.

It didn't matter where. Any place they could be alone and she could cry all she needed to.

He knew no such place existed, but still.

As he ran away with her, Hinagiku suddenly vanished into cherry blossoms.

The scene rushed forward in the white haze of petals.

The dream reached its climax. The stage moved to the outside.

Rosei rushed through the shrine forest surrounding the Town of Winter. This

was where the dream always ended—with the despicable tragedy from ten years back.

Rosei was out of breath as he ran through the silver environment. He looked back and saw Itecho run with Hinagiku in his arms. Sakura followed behind. And farther behind, their pursuers weaved their way through the trees. Rosei created a wall of ice with trembling hands, but he was beginning to feel faint after doing it so many times. His lungs were burning.

Hah, hah, hah.

Hah, hah, hah.

Hah, hah, hah.

Hah, hah, hah.

“Rosei!”

His breathing was so sharp, it felt like blood was gushing out of his throat. He was having trouble putting one foot in front of the other. Again and again he considered stopping.

“Rosei! Keep it up! Run!” Itecho yelled at him.

“Lord Rosei...!” Hinagiku called his name in tears.

Rosei wanted to cry, too. A voice in his head screamed—why did this have to happen?

“Run around, around, get ahead of them! The boy’s the Agent of Winter! Kill him!”

Then Rosei understood that the insurgents were after him.

The four of them ran away from the intruders.

Radicals looking to get rid of Winter?

They said to kill him, not capture him alive—they weren’t after his powers. They were part of the insurgent faction that considered the seasons evil.

Were they not mentioning Hinagiku because they didn’t know about her? Perhaps they weren’t aware the Agent of Spring was a little girl now. Hinagiku wouldn’t go out into the world until after the Season Descent.

Which meant that they were unlikely to go after her. They shouldn't have made their escape together. He shouldn't have thought to "protect" her after the insurgents showed themselves with a gunshot.

It's all my fault.

Rosei looked around in the dream. Blood dripped from Itecho's wounds as he ran, shielding the children. Rosei stared blankly at the colored dots on the snow. His brother figure was bleeding now because of the insurgents that had come for his life. They were having trouble running because of the snow. Their throats burned because of the cold. Hinagiku was crying because she ended up involved in Rosei's assassination. Rosei himself had brought it all.

"Look out!"

Sakura leaped in front of Rosei, taking the bullet. His fault again.

"Take care of Lady Hinagiku!"

It was all his fault.

"Go! Quick!"

All of it. Everything. More than made sense.

"Sakuraa...!"

It all happened because of him. Because he was chosen to be the God of Winter.

The Agent of Winter before him, and the one before, and all the way back through history—they had been a part of this endless game of tag.

Back when civilization was less advanced, many sick people couldn't survive the winter. Because of this, the Agents of Winter were hated the most out of the four.

To these people, Winter didn't bring miracles—the Agents were walking disasters. They were attacked with stones and arrows. Succession proceeded most quickly among Winter, because they were literally hunted down.

Even now, there were less-developed areas that had a hard time getting through winter. The harassment had become tradition. People didn't become

pacifists that easily. They didn't change their minds. Their ideologies were passed from generation to generation.

But is that my fault?

Winter bore the blame for that, not Rosei Kantsubaki.

But this—this is my fault.

They were here in this situation now because Rosei Kantsubaki was the Agent of Winter.

Would it all go away if I wasn't here?

At the very least, the insurgents might leave satisfied. He had to make a choice.

It wasn't a choice a ten-year-old boy should have to make, but his position left him no other way.

Ironically, the gods let the humans take over because of love, and now the humans succeeding the Seasons were at a loss because of love.

What can I do? he asked himself. Another side of him gave him a clear answer: *Grab the insurgents' attention. Or give them what they want.*

Rosei asked again what to do. The answer came back immediately:

Die.

He could think of no other way.

The conclusion was emotionless, cold as the outside air.

If I beg them to spare the others first, they might let them go.

The only one they could rely on, Itecho, was gravely injured. The other three were kids. It was only a matter of time before one of them was caught. It just had to be him. He had to accept his fate. But not the others'.

Not Hinagiku and Sakura.

He couldn't let them be taken down with him.

Itecho had sworn to give his life to him, but he couldn't let the other two be dragged to the grave, too.

I have to die.

It was worth the gamble. The insurgents wouldn't want to stay there for long, either.

There's no other choice.

He had to do the right thing, and he had to do it now.

Rosei looked at Itecho. He looked at Sakura and then at Hinagiku. He still couldn't see her face in his dream. But he could tell she was crying.

The tears fell one after the other. She trembled both from fear and cold.

Hinagiku.

An indescribable desire to protect her bloomed within his heart.

She was always getting dragged into other people's troubles. And always for reasons she was powerless to change.

No matter what, even if it's only Hinagiku.

She was always swept up by the anxiety.

I want to protect her.

It was no longer just pity.

At first, that may have been what he felt—compassion for her upbringing and circumstances. It made him want to protect her. But that alone wasn't enough for him to give his life as he was about to do now.

Hinagiku.

They had played together among the winter snow. She was his first friend.

Hinagiku.

They had shared their fears, fears only a fellow god or goddess would understand. Her pain became his.

Her smile had infected the inexpressive boy. That time with her had been fun—perhaps the most marvelous time in Rosei's short life.

Hinagiku. Hinagiku.

If he could save only one person in his entire life...

Hinagiku, I want to protect you.

...he wanted it to be this girl.

I want to protect you.

That was the moment Rosei fell in love.

At that moment, he was not the Agent of Winter—Rosei Kantsubaki had fallen in love with Hinagiku Kayo.

“Itecho! Take care of Sakura!”

In the dream, Rosei created the biggest ice wall he could, just as he had back then.

A commotion rose among the insurgents. Behind Rosei were Sakura, Itecho, and Hinagiku, in that order. The wall needed to be tall and strong enough to keep them all safe. That required a high degree of skill.

Then Hinagiku jumped out of Itecho’s arms and ran toward Sakura.

A moment later, Itecho gritted his teeth against the pain of the gunshot wound and ran after her.

“Lady Hinagiku! I will carry Sakura. Sorry... Can you run by yourself?”

“Yes!”

Rosei felt a moment of relief at the sight of their coordination.

Good. That will give me more time.

The insurgents shot at the ice wall again and again. It was only a matter of time before they broke through it.

Focus. Keep it steady.

Rosei’s hands were trembling, but the blue light of his divine powers lit up his fingertips, the cold rays becoming solid. The same thing he had done plenty of times before. Even amid the fear and confusion, he could still do this.

Create something that will end it in the blink of an eye.

He had created swords many times before. Long ones for fighting.

But he didn't need that kind now. A short one, just big enough to destroy his heart, was enough. Not too short, either, else it wouldn't pierce deeply enough. But something easy to hold and quick to wield.

Create something that can kill you.

"Rosei, what are you doing?! Let's go! You're just a kid! You can't defeat them with a sword!" Itecho yelled. He thought Rosei meant to fight back.

Rosei tried telling him to keep running, but Itecho could sense from Rosei's expression that something was off.

Rosei had an awkward smile on his face. He realized how uncool it was for him to not be able to give a proper smile, but even with the clumsy expression, he gave an order to his retainer.

"Itecho, I command you to keep running."

"...Rosei?"

Itecho called his name back in befuddlement.

"You realize what I'm saying?" Rosei admonished him.

"Wait!" Itecho realized what he meant, but he didn't want to understand. Someone had to surrender.

The nineteen-year-old wasn't enough to protect the three children.

"You can take care of the girls, can't you?"

Better to choose who to sacrifice themselves.

Better to sacrifice someone who could be replaced. That way, the world could keep running.

"Rosei, wait!"

And the best one for the role was the ten-year-old boy Itecho had shed blood and sweat to raise.

And the boy understood it.

"I'll make one last blizzard. I may not be able to hide the bloodstains. But please. Run away. I'll beg for them to spare you. It's the only option."

“Don’t be stupid! Just come on and run!”

Rosei trembled; the fear on his face was a child’s, but his posture was a ruler’s. *“Don’t make me repeat myself, Itecho. This is an order. Take Hinagiku and Sakura and run away. I will not run. I will die here. That will satisfy them.”*

“Rosei!!” Itecho yelled.

“Don’t...!” Hinagiku screamed alongside him, and it tore the world apart. *“Don’t do it!”*

The haze covering Hinagiku’s face in the dream finally dissipated.

Hinagiku.

Her face was the incarnation of Spring.

Lovely, ephemeral, and...

“Lord Rosei.”

...strong like a flower blooming in the field. Hinagiku’s rare citrine eyes shone bright.

“Don’t give up! Don’t do that! You must run and live!” Hinagiku’s voice sounded like a broken machine.

Sakura had collapsed from her wounds, and Hinagiku touched her. She merely touched her.

“Sakura, don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

Itecho and Sakura were taken aback.

They had no idea why the Agent of Spring would say that.

“Hinagiku, you...”

Then a bullet grazed his ear. The enemy had broken through the ice wall. Ice shards fell down on Rosei’s back. He had to focus again and create another one.

Can’t you wait for a second?!

The other three hadn’t run away yet. He hadn’t convinced them. He had to die as soon as possible, but now Hinagiku was acting like a different person. Her eyes were burning with the will of a cornered animal.

"Lord Itecho, please take care of her!"

She was supposed to stay behind, but she was running up to Rosei.

Rosei gulped down the desire to yell at her and created another wall of ice. He had to protect her from the bullets. There was no time. He made it tall and wide, shaped like a U, surrounding them. Once the insurgents noticed the opening, it would be over.

Hinagiku ran to Rosei's side and couldn't come to a halt before bumping into him. Rosei held her up with one hand.

Even when he was about to die, hugging a girl felt strange.

As Rosei resisted the bullets penetrating the ice wall, Hinagiku desperately yelled in his arms: *"No one must die! Not you, not Lord Itecho, not Sakura, not anyone from the Town of Winter. I won't allow that to happen!"*

Hinagiku's expression looked like she was about to die.

"Hinagiku, please! This has nothing to do with you..."

"Yes, it does!"

"No, it doesn't!"

"Yes, it does! Because I...I love you!"

"...!"

"You'll spend time with me again, won't you? You said you would!"

"Sorry... That's not possible anymore... Be friends with the next Agent of Winter."

He responded coldly, but Hinagiku did not give up.

"Don't say that like it's nothing... I want you... I need you... And besides...you don't know what happens after death, do you?"

"Huh...?"

What?

"...I know..."

What is she talking about?

Tears poured from Hinagiku's eyes, round as full moons as she pleaded. Then she asked the boy marked for death a question he couldn't answer.

"Lord Rosei... My mother tried to achieve something by dying, too, like you are now."

Please don't.

"She did something unforgivable, and everyone hated her."

I don't want to hear it.

"They told her that she wasn't needed so many times. They said it to me, too."

I've already made my choice. Stop talking.

"So she tried to fix it. If they said she was a burden, then she simply had to go. That way, her daughter's life would be a little better. So she hoped..."

Don't try to shatter my resolve.

"But after she opened that box, everyone still hated me. If you listen to people who hate you and do what they say, you'll only save yourself!"

I've already made my choice. I've steeled myself.

"And they'll only laugh after you're dead! They'll say you deserved it! That you're stupid for doing as they said! I know it!"

Please, just don't say it.

"I...know it... I've seen so many people like that before!"

It was because those words came from Hinagiku—from the girl who had been left behind—that they reached Rosei.

He was about to give Hinagiku even more of that pain.

"...But it's the only thing I can do to protect you from the insurgents!"

"There's another way!"

"There isn't! They'll catch us all eventually!"

"There is! Let's run! Even if we can't fight, even if we're just struggling to survive, we should choose to run! After all...Lord Rosei..."

I chose to die.

“Lord Rosei...”

I’ve made my decision. Don’t break it.

“You don’t want to die now, do you?!”

Hinagiku’s citrine eyes, her voice, her whole being shook his resolve.

Her innocent words were as sharp as any blade.

How do you know?

He wanted to tell her that he didn’t need her shallow attempt at consideration, that he was free to choose the day he died, and so much more.

Tell her.

“...Then what am I supposed to do...?”

He ground his teeth, and he was crying harder than Hinagiku.

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t stop the tears.

Yes, you’re right.

He couldn’t contain himself, now that the girl he’d tried to protect had exposed him.

“What do you want me to do, then?!”

He exploded.

I don’t wanna die. It’s just the situation we’re in; I don’t have a death wish.

“I don’t want to die! But I’d rather it be me than any of you!”

I want to live.

“I wouldn’t be able to bear it! I should die alone instead of dragging everyone with me!”

But I can’t think of any other way.

And more than anything, I want to save you.

Then he heard the ice wall crack behind him.

Everything was past its limits. They'd all be shot full of holes the moment the wall crumbled.

Hinagiku!

The fear overtook Rosei's face even as he tried to hold Hinagiku close.

He wanted to protect her, nothing more. But Hinagiku shook off his hand.

She rejected him. She escaped from his arms and then grabbed him. With all of her strength, she shoved him behind her and away.

Rosei tripped and fell on the soft snow. Hinagiku's back was facing the crumbling ice wall, their last line of defense. Was she angry? Or confused? He had no idea what her aim was.

Rosei stared at her, bewildered.

"Lord Rosei. Let's all run together, then... This isn't defeat. Let's all...run, run, run away."

As the ice wall cracked further, Hinagiku took her pouch out from her kimono's sleeve. She gripped the seeds and shot a glance at Rosei.

"Endure, and await the time for battle."

Perhaps Hinagiku really became a goddess in that moment.

She did not look like a six-year-old girl.

Those words wouldn't come out of a child's mouth. She wouldn't take command in this situation.

She was telling him to bide his time and prepare for another opportunity to fight.

Then trees grew by Hinagiku's feet.

She was no longer a girl—she was a goddess.

The tall shadows soon overcame Rosei and everyone else. The plants growing with the supernatural powers and hopes of the Agent of Spring slashed the faces and bodies of everyone around them.

It was a full-out attack. If she had the power to employ the plants to her will...

"Hina...giku..."

...would they become monsters that swallowed everything like this?

She did no song or dance. The outburst of her emotions was enough.

She had lost all restraint.

The trees squirmed like snakes as they entrapped Rosei and the rest. Their branches and leaves quickly covered the gaps between the inside and the outside of their prison. The flowers budded, then bloomed. The cherry blossom trees created by the goddess's power formed a wooden fortress around those Hinagiku wanted under her protection.

Rosei couldn't understand right away what was happening.

Why am I being locked up?

Rosei looked behind and saw Sakura wailing, half-unconscious as she bled.

Itecho understood what was going on and tried to fight back; he broke some branches, but they regenerated immediately.

The only thing Rosei could see was the beautiful color of the flowers. Even heavy weaponry would have taken a while to break through this lush fortress.

On the other hand, he could see no threats around him anymore. Just the beautiful cherry blossoms.

Hinagiku Kayo created a fortress of spring just through her desire to protect them. But she wasn't inside with them. Her voice sounded from the outside:
"Please... Don't kill Sakura. Don't kill Lord Rosei."

Rosei could hear pain in her voice.

"Don't shoot at Lord Itecho anymore."

She had done a job too heavy in too short a time.

The load of the divine power on her body was unfathomable. She must've been struggling to breathe.

Wait, Hinagiku.

Rosei swung the ice dagger he still had in his hand.

He raised it, and the shock of the blow shook off the tears running down his face.

“...Gh...uh...”

He swung it high again and again, cutting the wood, desperately chasing her voice.

The tears spattered the branches with every swing.

Wait. Wait, please.

But it was in vain; new branches would grow, and new flowers would bloom. They were in perfect safety, locked away in this castle of flowers. The fortress would crumble once it was cut off from the divine powers of its creator, but Hinagiku would not allow that to happen.

No. Please, no. Wait.

Hinagiku spoke clumsily but urgently to convince the insurgents.

National Security would be coming soon, she argued. They had to run. They should be satisfied to have succeeded at attacking the Town of Winter.

Let the others go, and the insurgents could take her as a hostage.

She offered herself. Put up no resistance. She knew a new Agent of Winter would be born even if they killed him.

That was enough for today. The case would remain engraved in history.

That was enough of a victory for the insurgents. There was no point in letting themselves be captured. The attack would turn into a failure, then.

They could take the win and run if they captured her.

So please, don't hurt them anymore.

“Lady Hinagiku, don't! No! No! NOOO!”

Sakura screamed inside the wooden prison. Hinagiku heard it and replied back with words of encouragement.

“Sakura, don't worry. It'll be fine. I will protect you.”

Hinagiku was right there, but Rosei couldn't see her.

“No! No! I’ll be the hostage! Take me!”

Almost within reach but out of sight.

“Sorry...but it can’t be you. Please get help once I’m gone... I’m sure the survivors of the Town of Winter will look for me...”

“NOOO! Lady Hinagiku! Lady Hinagikuuu!”

She was within earshot but beyond reach.

“You don’t have to go! Don’t do it! Don’t worry about us and run!” Rosei’s vision turned blurry from the tears.

The teardrops fell faster than the cherry blossoms did. The ice blade dropped from his hand and crumbled into snowflakes. His arms and legs were weak. The rapid swell of sadness and despair had taken everything from him.

Why? he asked the world.

Why? he asked fate, as he had so many times before.

He could not understand why this had happened.

He could not understand why his existence had to bring so much misfortune.

And he did not want to understand.

“Lord Itecho... I can’t...hold it any longer...”

He was thrown into this world, told to breathe and to walk.

“Please take care of Sakura.”

He was given a mission, and he lived for it.

“Please. Please live.”

Everything had been decided for him since he was little, and he had been forced to accept it.

He did the best he could, and misfortune still struck.

Why?

The repeated question was meaningless sentimentality. It wouldn’t solve any of this. But Rosei was ten years old—there was nothing he could do against the

swirling vortex of fate except shed an endless stream of tears.

"Hinagiku..."

The cherry blossoms were in the way. The trees were in the way.

"Hina...giku...I..."

He liked her flowers, but now, he wanted to just freeze them away.

"Please don't. I'm begging you."

Rosei clung to the cherry blossom tree guarding him and wept.

"Hinagiku, don't go. Please...I love you."

He implored.

Why?

The answerless question kept echoing vainly in his head.

Rosei wished his heart and eyes would just stop. They were in the way. Everything they did was irritating.

"I love you..."

He wanted something more useful than tears.

"...I love you just like the God of Winter fell in love with the Goddess of Spring."

He wanted a miracle that could undo all of this.

"So please don't go. This won't make me happy. I hate it."

Wasn't there anything? Anything that could solve this?

God.

Rosei silently cried out to any omnipotent being that would listen.

God.

But nothing happened.

God.

Who would a god incarnate pray to?

Someone.

The God of Winter? But it was his blessings that had made this happen.

Anyone.

There was no salvation for Rosei.

Anyone, please. Please.

There was no one for the Agent of Winter to pray to.

"Lord Rosei..."

His throat closed up at the sound of his first love calling his name. He gulped down the salty tears.

"Please wait. I know you can hear me. Please...I love you...I'm telling you..."

"...I'm very glad...Lord Rosei..." Hinagiku's voice sounded sincerely happy.

"Please don't do it..."

The pain in his heart was too much; he wanted to die that very instant.



"Lord Rosei."

"Please don't. Don't go."

".....Lord Rosei. I had fun this winter. Thank you for hanging out with me."

Why did this have to happen?

"Hinagiku, listen. I was trying to die. That would solve everything."

What did they do wrong?

"Thank you for the ice flower."

"Just wait. I'll die instead."

Who was in the wrong?

"Thank you for all your kindness, Lord Rosei."

"I'll die. I'll die right now. And then you won't have to go."

Was his own birth at fault?

"And I'm sure I'll be saved, too. So please."

Ahhh, if I was going to go through this...

"So please, will you pass the time with me again?"

...I wish I had never been born.

Despite having no one to pray to, Rosei made his appeal.

"I'll die. I'll show you... I'll die right here; please tell them I will."

He prayed to the young Goddess of Spring.

"Please. I'm sorry, Hinagiku... I was stupid."

He knew no one else to pray to. He had no one but her.

"I should've killed myself earlier... Please don't do this; you don't know what they'll do. You have no idea what they'll do to you."

Because she had protected him from punishment, because she had kept him away out of love.

"Please don't. Please, I'm begging you, Hinagiku, I...I love..."

There was little he could say to his first love on the other side of the cherry blossom trees.

So he had to use that time to tell her as much as he could.

“I love you. Please listen to me...I love you.”

He relayed his love with a prayer for her not to leave.

“Lord Rosei—”

Hinagiku’s voice was interrupted by the voice of an insurgent.

They were ready to leave. They had accepted the deal.

Sirens rang in the distance. National Security was on the move. It was over. They were taking her away. Rosei could hear footsteps on the snow.

“Lord Rosei! Lord Rosei! I will give you an answer!” Hinagiku’s voice reached his ears as she was taken away. *“So please, Lord Rosei...”*

The dream came to the same end as reality.

No changes happened in the repeated nightmare.

Rosei relived the same story again and again, like some sort of punishment.

“Will you please live?”

He dreamed of the girl who had protected him with heart-wrenching kindness.

He was always left weak after waking up.

“...ngh!”

Someone shook him awake, and he tried to ground himself in reality.

He touched his face. He was no longer nine. He had the complexion of an adult.

But the tears were the same.

“Rosei, what happened? Were you having another nightmare?”

Itecho was right beside his bed, like always. He had woken Rosei up; he must’ve seen him tossing and turning through the security camera.

He'd been doing this for ten years.

He wore his life away in atonement for his failure all those years ago. He was nineteen then, twenty-nine now, and still keeping an eye on Rosei. It was like a curse.

His kindness was sometimes annoying to Rosei, sometimes another reason for his pain.

"...Itecho."

Rosei was now twenty. After growing up, he realized what a burden Itecho had had to carry at nineteen. In the glow of the lamplight, Itecho's face looked like a source of light itself. A light always softly illuminating Rosei's darkness.

"It's okay, Rosei. Spring is back now."

Itecho's presence gave him courage.

I have to stop living like this, Rosei thought at that moment. In every way, he was reaching a breaking point.

His current situation, his past, his future, his face wet with tears, his trembling hands, the drugs he had to take, living with people holding his head down—he hated it all. He hated this life.

Fuck this.

His present was the worst. His fate was too cruel.

His future was despair. His past was better discarded.

There was nothing good in the life the God of Winter led now.

He felt nauseous at the thought of finding a culprit to pin the blame on.

Yet again, the suicidal thoughts ate away at him from the pit of his stomach, taking over every inch of his body. Maybe it was best for him to succumb. He always had that little desire to die. But...

Not now.

He didn't want that thought to win.

He would die someday anyway. He just didn't know when.

Death came equally to all. Perhaps the insurgents would kill him. Maybe an illness. Right now, the most likely possibility was himself.

But that isn't now. There are still things for me to do.

Now, Rosei was alive.

Spring is back. I have to act.

He was granted this life by her protection. He should use it for something good. He wanted to live in a way he wouldn't be ashamed of.

And the person he most wanted to see it was back now.

Get on your feet.

His first love had told him to endure and wait until the time for battle.

I've endured enough. The time for battle is now.

She had granted him his life, and it wasn't so he could lose—she let him live so he could win.

Now was the time to challenge fate and take revenge.

He wanted to yell at everything that made them suffer. Flip it the middle finger where everyone could see.

Tell it, Now it's time for you to get a taste of your own medicine.

"Itecho, if I told you I wanted to do something stupid, would you come with me?"

The question was thoughtless; there was no context for what he was talking about or expecting. And yet, his retainer did not raise an eyebrow or think it over; he just nodded.

"I'll follow you wherever you want."

Perhaps he had been waiting for this moment, too—when his master stood back up.

"Well then, where should we begin?" he asked back, and Rosei was reminded again why he wanted this man alongside him on his journey to the grave.

The next day, Rosei contacted the Guard of Spring, Sakura Himedaka.

He called the Town of Winter guards to put her on the line and talked to her for the first time in five years through the phone.

“Sakura, can you hear me?”

He hadn't heard her voice in years, but they had lived together once. Even after she left, he never stopped thinking of her.

He heard her gasp in shock.

“Rosei...”

He could still vividly remember her yelling at him, calling him a traitor. The last time he saw her was when the Townchief of Winter had decided to stop large-scale investigations. She had cried and attacked them for betraying her trust, and Itecho and Rosei would never forget the expression on her face. They begged her to wait as they tried protesting the decision, but by the next day, Sakura was gone.

“What do you want?”

It was a miracle that she had answered the call.

“Sorry for calling you out of nowhere and without the proper procedures. I really wanted to make a time to apologize in person, but the situation won't allow for that now.” He gripped the phone tight. “...Hinagiku's there with you?”

He had wanted to hear their voices all these years.

“...”

“I know. You won't let me talk to her like this. If you don't want to talk, then just listen. Give me a moment to speak.”

He wanted to apologize for not supporting her.

“I assume Spring has heard about the kidnapping. It's a shame that this happened... I spent a month with the Agent of Autumn for the Season Descent. She's a sweet girl...just a little kid. Very lonely. She liked calling her retainer's name all the time.”

He had no intention of abandoning her. Even though investigations weren't happening on a large scale, he didn't give up in his personal search for her.

“...I hear this is hurting Hinagiku, too.”

Trying to find a single girl in this wide world was a massive undertaking.

It was also understandable why Sakura would be disappointed and leave the Town of Winter without listening.

“...It’s incredibly sad... But to be honest, at first, I didn’t think of doing anything about it. Summer and Autumn did nothing when Hinagiku was kidnapped.”

But if he was to be allowed...

“...Of course. I have no sense of obligation, either,” said Sakura.

If he was to be forgiven...

“Right. You and I were told to stay put, after all. We’re just pawns. Pawns aren’t allowed to move unsupervised. The tragedy is very regrettable, but we can do nothing but grieve... That’s the easiest.”

“...”

“However.”

If he could be pardoned...

“I...I wanted someone to help back then.”

He wanted to stand up at this moment.

“I wanted everyone in the world to help. I begged everyone to save Hinagiku.”

He wanted to get back on his feet, no matter how many times he fell.

He didn’t want to lose. He knew he couldn’t keep silent now.

“They took the girl I love because of me. I didn’t care what happened to me. I just wanted someone to help... And Autumn must be feeling the same way now. Abandoning her would be like abandoning our past selves, don’t you think?”

“...”

“...Maybe I can’t change your mind right away, but...”

“...You.”

“What?”

“Do you still love Lady Hinagiku?”

Rosei wondered why she had asked that, but he answered sincerely. “Yes. I love her.”

Without a moment’s pause.

A long silence followed. Rosei waited patiently until Sakura spoke again.

“Lady Hinagiku changed after her kidnapping. The one you’re looking for no longer exists. Can you say you love her even then?”

She was testing him.

But Rosei responded right away. “Yes. I fell in love with the woman leading Hinagiku Kayo’s life. It doesn’t matter what changes—her appearance or anything else. I love her.”

“She’s a totally different person. Her way of talking, her whole aura, it’s all different.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m serious. You’ll be shocked.”

“Really? It’s no problem.”

“You haven’t even met her... You don’t understand...how serious this is...”

“...I understand why you’d say that. But it’s true. I’ve loved her the whole time.”

“...”

He didn’t understand whether Sakura had accepted his answer or given up before he changed back the subject.

“You’re going to help Autumn?”

“That’s what I want to do. I just said that they didn’t help me ten years ago, but that was the previous Agent... It has nothing to do with Nadeshiko. The Agent of Summer is different now, too. They weren’t even there back then; holding it against them is what the insurgents do. I may be the Agent of Winter,

but I was Rosei Kantsubaki first. And as Rosei, I want to help Nadeshiko. She's only seven. What about you? What do you...and Hinagiku...think? You can answer as yourself personally or as Guard. Just give me your opinion."

"...I have no personal interests. I live for Lady Hinagiku. And my opinion is only one."

She raised the tension, then kept silent for a while.

It was obvious she was hesitating whether to tell Rosei or not.

Among the silence, he heard fragments of a girl's voice.

Hinagiku?

The girl whose voice he hadn't heard in ten years was saying something on the other side of the line.

I want to hear you.

Sakura replied to her lady with an overly sweet, soothing tone before moving.

"What's Hinagiku saying?" Rosei asked in a strained voice.

"She left already."

Apparently, she was tired and went to bed. She had woken up after hearing the conversation and stepped out to see what it was.

"Did you tell her you were talking to me?" Rosei desperately asked.

"No. I would never. She'd be distressed if she knew you were on the phone."

"..."

"About your question...I would rather feign ignorance about the whole thing with Autumn...but I don't like my chances of that. Lady Hinagiku is very unstable right now because of the insurgents' attacks and...what happened to the Agent of Autumn. She's exhausted, but she can't get a full night's sleep. She might be getting sick... Plus..."

Sakura's voice fell to a mumble.

"She's been crying and whispering about poor Lady Nadeshiko."

It was then that Rosei finally noticed the nasal quality of her voice.

Perhaps it had been like that for the whole conversation. He thought she was only tired, but that sounded more like she had been crying.

Sakura.

Just how worried was this girl, keeping by her lady's side, trying to protect her now that she was finally back, while the circumstances didn't allow her to get a good night's sleep? She had no adults around who she could trust.

And yet, she never talked about herself. She only talked about Hinagiku. She never mentioned how terrible her living conditions must have been while looking for Hinagiku, how hard a time she'd had, and how alone she felt even now. She must have wanted to break down sobbing more than anyone, and she never did.

"She talks about how Lady Nadeshiko must be crying right now. Even though she isn't a part of this, Lady Hinagiku wants so badly to reassure her."

Sakura was a prideful girl. She could suppress her emotions as much as she needed to for the sake of her friend, her Spring.

Now she was on the verge of collapsing.

"...She cried herself to sleep today, too. I can't stand to see her like this. It's too much... And just when she was finally back on her feet... Now it's back to ten years ago. She's in a different position, but she's having to see the same nightmare... I have to get rid of everything that hurts her. I have to condemn anyone who makes her cry; I have to remove anyone who harms her. Making my lady cry is blasphemy against the gods of the Four Seasons. As her retainer... as her friend, I can't allow it. So...I want to do something. Looking for her will become harder and harder by the day."

"I completely agree."

"Will you be doing anything about it?"

"Yes. Winter—well, Itecho and I—have decided to help in the search for Autumn. It won't matter what the Agency or the Town says; we'll act on our own."

"And so you're asking us to do the same?"

"No. I asked your opinion, but I'm not asking you to act. I just wanted to let you know we will be. I want you to stay safe. We're going to do something about this, so...I wanted that to be encouraging."

"Idiot. What will Winter alone achieve?"

"..."

"Rosei, you're always terrible at organizing anything. And most of the time, you're reacting. You're so sluggish, I can't believe you're Itecho's master."

Rosei had no argument to defend himself with.

"You're twisted and gloomy, and you always look like you're at a funeral. I don't want to give you permission to love my lady."

"Was all that really necessary?"

"But what angers me the most is you treating me like I'm a damaged little girl."

Sakura's tone changed then.

"I..."

Her voice was curt and hoarse.

"I am Lady Hinagiku's retainer. I cannot stand silently by while you humiliate me."

But there was a mighty strength to her every word.

"It's already too late, you idiot. Spring is already planning to act. We've also gotten in contact with Lady Ruri Hazakura, the Agent of Summer, and received her approval. Spring and Summer will be working together for the rescue of Autumn."

Rosei was surprised at the sound of that name. He knew Ruri Hazakura from meeting her every year at the Agency Council, but he had no close relationship with her.

"Summer? The Hazakura twins are always arguing. You managed to convince them?"

"...I think that's a bit rude, but yes."

“Did you make a deal? Are you giving them something in exchange?”

“Nothing of the sort. If anything, it’s a deal of...friendship.” Sakura chuckled, confusing him even more.

“But you met just the other day!”

He raised his voice in envy. Rosei’s only friends were still Hinagiku and Sakura.

“Bonds between women are strong once formed. And you can thank Lady Hinagiku’s character for that. You don’t have anything close to what she has. By the way, Lady Ruri had plenty to say about how gloomy you are, too.”

“...Stop bad-mouthing me behind my back.”

“That’s not bad-mouthing; it’s just stating the facts. And it’s that gloominess that makes you so bad at organizing. While you were busy hesitating, I was already getting things done.”

“...”

Why not say that from the very beginning, then? Rosei thought as he waited in silence for her to continue.

“And besides...”

Still, listening to her lifted his spirits. It was good to hear that she hadn’t given up.

“This battle to save Autumn...might be a good chance to settle the score from ten years ago. I was nine back then, but I’m nineteen now. I can fight much better. I have the martial arts skills to go head-to-head against the insurgents. Lady Hinagiku, too. She’s exhausted, but she’s ready for battle.”

The girl who had cried alongside him in the cherry blossom trees that day was now fighting back against the enemy. The mere fact gave Rosei courage.

“It’s time for revenge.”

The Guard of Spring, Sakura Himedaka, would not run away from fate.

“Once Spring has finished manifesting in Enishi, we will head to Teishu in secret.”

She was incredibly straightforward—she was strong, if also very stubborn.

“Rosei... Maybe I should’ve said this earlier, but I hate you. It was because of you that Lady Hinagiku got kidnapped. You should have vetoed the Town of Winter’s decision to stop looking for her, and I’m still angry that you didn’t. But you took me in from the streets. You taught me how to fight. You gave me the strength to be a Guard, and I am grateful to you even now... All of it is helping me now—it’s my means to protect Lady Hinagiku. Which is why...I’ll give you a chance to make up for it. Although I really wish I didn’t have to. This is your chance to clear your name for what happened ten years ago. We really need the numbers to look for her; we can’t afford to turn down any help. So let me ask you this directly.”

This was the moment, the instant—

“Lord Winter. We’ve endured long enough. Is it not the time for battle?”

—Rosei felt as if the color had come back after ten years of gray.

“Let us fight side by side.”

The path his life should take had been laid right before his eyes. He was finally seeing again after so much time in the darkness.

“The Four Seasons will join hands to save Autumn.”

And it was because they had survived the tragedy ten years ago.

Ten years. It lost weight when put into such simple words, but it was like an eternal hell to the one going through it. And they had endured it.

They had grown during the time Hinagiku had given them with her sacrifice.

They were no longer weaklings abandoned and wounded.

“Rosei.”

He turned to look at his side at the sound of his name, to face Itecho.

Itecho gave him a firm nod. His eyes told him to agree. The most cautious man was telling him to give in to the ardor and face the fight. Rosei shuddered.

His retainer had been there for him in sickness and in health.

Rosei nodded back with gratitude and answered:

“Lady Sakura Himedaka, Guard of Spring. I thank you for setting aside your

grudge and requesting my support. As you said, we've endured more than enough. Let's go to war. Winter will give full support to Spring's requests... And, Sakura—stay with Hinagiku and wait for me.”

And so the lady and retainer of Spring headed to Teito, Teishu.

The various struggles that shook the Four Seasons that year were reported across Yamato through the Agency.

The disappearance of the Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, was like a repeat of Hinagiku Kayo's case.

The system worked such that a new Agent was born after the previous one collapsed.

The signs of a new Agent varied by season.

For Spring, cherry blossoms.

For Summer, lilies.

For Autumn, chrysanthemums.

For Winter, peonies.

A divine mark called the stigmata appeared on their bodies, making it so they couldn't deny having been chosen.

That was the first sign. Then a voice called to the person appointed. The Voice of the Four Seasons, as it was known, called the name of the chosen in celebration until their powers manifested, whether or not the future Agent willed it.

However, none of this had happened even after Nadeshiko had been gone for three days. Which meant she was still alive out there somewhere. The search had begun in collaboration with National Security and the Agency, but they had no traces.

Teito was the capital city of Teishu. The independent organization that watched over the Four Seasons of Yamato, the Agency, had its headquarters in the business district of the city. Daily search meetings were held there. Guards who were present at the time of the kidnapping, Nagatsuki and Rindo, were there to aid in the investigation.

It had been exactly one week since the abduction, and no progress was being made—until the arrival of one visitor. Or rather, two.

The lady and retainer of Spring had just finished manifesting the season in

Enishi amid the fatigue, worry, and desperation. They had arrived without even stopping by their Town.

And they finally got to face fate in a revenge match.

“I am Sakura Himedaka, Guard of Spring. This here is Lady Hinagiku Kayo, this country’s Agent of Spring.”

The girls abandoned by the world, stronger than anybody else, gracefully introduced themselves.

“Yes... Hinagiku...Kayo.”

AFTERWORD

I hope this message finds you well. What season is it as you read this book?

Cherry blossoms arrive in spring, sunflowers in summer, maple leaves in autumn, chrysanthemums in winter.

Is there anything that reminds you of the season nearby? Any flowers blooming?

The seasons are there with you wherever you go. This is a feeling I hope comes across as I write this. By the time you're reading this, I'm sure it's a different season from the one I'm experiencing.

It's a curious feeling, don't you think? This book, the feelings I send to you, are like the light of a star in the sky—an afterglow from the past.

Now then, I wrote plenty about the seasons and their continued losses in this book.

The seasons have become more and more ambiguous to me than when I was little. I'll never again see the spring I saw when I was ten; I'll never relive my winter when I was fifteen. Above all, I wanted to convey this feeling through the story.

However, the main theme of my stories is always the same.

This is my show of support to everyone who keeps on living despite it all.

I weaved this story like embroidery with the hope that, once you finish reading it, your world might be a little bit kinder. I wanted to give you something wonderful.

I couldn't get it right at first. For three years, I went through trial and error, thinking about how I should let Hinagiku spread her wings and take flight out

into the world, about how best to convey the world of the Agents of the Four Seasons.

Will this reach you? Will reading this make you sad? I reread it again and again with the questions in mind, worrying and worrying until I no longer had any idea what was what.

I have great aspirations built on poor craftsmanship. In the end, though, I can't quite give up hope, and so I write day after day. I don't know where you might be or what you may be doing, but I keep weaving this story with the hope that one day you'll read it. I wonder how many more stories I will get to write in the remainder of my short life.

Was this story the right thing to spend my limited time writing?

I thought so hard about all of it, never knowing for sure, sometimes nearly in tears—but I made it.

I'm so relieved right now. Whatever its shape ended up being, I am glad that I could deliver this to you.

I have nothing but gratitude for the bookstores, the publisher, my editor, and everyone else who became a part of delivering this book to you.

Suoh brought this story to life with some wonderful illustrations. I was ready to be turned down when I made the request, so the joy I felt when you accepted is indescribable. Thank you so much.

And thank you for reading this. There's still more I want to tell you, so I'll keep working hard at it.

May we meet again in the second volume.

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