



Agents the Jour Seasons Dance of Spring

Kana Akatsuki Illustration by Suoh

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Afterword



guard of winter Itecho Kangetsu

Rosei Kantsubaki

Nadeshiko Iwaizuki

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

Rindo Azami

CHARACTER Introductions





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.









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Kana Akatsuki

Illustration by Suoh



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TRANSLATION BY SERGIO AVILA • COVER ART BY SUCH

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The Four Seasons

EPILOGUE

Dance of Spring

<u>Afterword</u>

Yen Newsletter

Once upon a time, there were four gods incarnate.

Spring came with a carpet of cherry blossoms.

Summer arrived with an ocean of green.

Autumn delivered a curtain of ginkgo.

Winter granted a cradle of silver.

The blessings of the season reached all creation and each individual within it—whether poor or rich, whether good or evil.

The gods granted their powers to a few with a mission: the Agents of the Four Seasons, each reigning over spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

"May I, Lady Hinagiku?"

Here, now, one such girl was about to take a stand, her chest filling up with duty.

Her name was Hinagiku Kayo. She had been granted the power of Spring by the Gods of the Four Seasons.

She was in the office of the Four Seasons Agency, the independent organization that oversaw the Agents, for two reasons. First, to make a stand against the insurgents who had kidnapped her and humiliated her for years—and second, to save one of her brethren who was in the midst of suffering the same fate.

Before the heavy oak door, Hinagiku took a few deep breaths, letting a sigh escape her pale-crimson lips.

"Some of them may be unkind to you, both with their words and their stares. Be ready," her retainer said. Sakura was the young goddess's only ally—this human girl she loved the most.

There would be no going back the moment she opened the door. She could have chosen to ignore it all, but she had come this far already.

The upcoming fight would harm her deeply. Her retainer might be wounded as well.

But she would fight. The time for battle had come.

"It's fine." Hinagiku reached out to her retainer's hand. "You will...protect Hinagiku. Right?"

The knight named after the spring flower felt warmth bloom in her chest at the sound of her lady's words. This exchange carried a sense of nostalgia for her, even though it had just happened.

There was only one possible answer to her goddess: "Yes, I will protect you."

They could only rely on each other.

"I will protect you until the day I die."

No one was on their side. They had few people to trust.

"And I will be happy to do so."

The girls would get their revenge on this unfair world by protecting someone else.

"No. We...will live."

"...Yes."

"Hinagiku...will also...protect you. So we two...will live. Let's...live...Sakura."

"Yes, Lady Hinagiku. As you wish... Let us go."

The door opened loudly. Hinagiku closed her eyes against the dazzling light from inside.

Without her sight, her other senses sharpened.

She could feel the blessing of the miracle she had brought about, even here indoors. The pink blizzard outside. The mellowly bright sunlight. The warm air.

To the Goddess of Spring, this was the best season of all.

"Let's play hide-and-seek, Hinagiku."

A voice echoed inside Hinagiku's head.

"You mustn't look for me until I say."

The voice of a person long lost.

"One day, you will feel sleepy, so sleepy you won't be able to fight it."

Hinagiku Kayo's story began far in the past.

"Once you can't keep your eyes open..."

Back when her mother, Kobai Yukiyanagi, held the title.

"...then I'll tell you it's all right to go."

Mother...

Hinagiku had already forgotten her voice, so why was she remembering her now?

Are you...coming for...me...soon?

The succession of generations of Agents of the Four Seasons took place supernaturally.

In the moment of succession, the powers flowed into the one most suited to receive them, and a mark surfaced on their body.

Blood relationships had nothing to do with the succession. In fact, it was uncommon for a close relative to be the inheritor. When these rare cases occurred, they were mostly considered bad omens rather than good ones. In those moments, the hands of the gods were visible.

Hinagiku Kayo's destiny as an Agent had been twisted from the very beginning. What she had inherited from her mother was like a curse, swollen with near-obsessive attachment, yet pure and innocent at the same time.

People sometimes call such a prayer *love*, but sometimes...

...it takes the shape of a thorny rose.

A person who can call them	nselves happy with the love of a rose will one day kill another with its thorns.



Dusk was approaching.

The wind blew up a storm of cherry blossoms, clouding my view.

"Kobai, can you see it?" A hollow voice reached my ears.

I walked up to his side. It was a beautiful hill with an unimpeded view of the whole Town of Spring—the perfect place to rendezvous. The world below us was dyed in crimson.

"It's almost night. Seeing the Archer of Twilight at work always fills me with courage."

What a strange thing to say. "How?" I asked, and he laughed.

"Morning is inevitable, and so is the night. There is no eternity. It gives me hope in the finite—those I hate will one day die."

I was expecting something nice, but he was always like this. He said these things like it was nothing. No part of his brain warned him it was unacceptable to say that even as a joke. He belonged to Spring, but he was almost like someone from Winter.

I guess they say Spring is quick to love Winter.

Perhaps that was why I liked him. I had almost never received any kindness or warmth from him, but that meant those rare exceptions filled me with joy.

"I want too many of the people in this Town to die."

"Lord Shungetsu..."

"But I must endure and await the time for battle... I expect the Townchief to hang on to life for a long time, but death will still come one day," he said, as though trying to console himself again.

Poor man.

He had led an unbearable life.

As he struggled under the weight of it all, the hatred filled his chest. He suffered, unable to expel it from his mouth. And then he would reminisce and

spit it out like poison, like he had just now. Then the whole cycle repeated itself. Nonetheless, he was selective with the people he chose to show this side of himself.

My Guard watched over me from afar.

I knew our conversation was being read on our lips, and I worried. Did Shungetsu not mind? If this reached his opponents' ears, they would try to make an example of him.

He trusts me.

My chest warmed at the conclusion. Although I was worshipped, this was merely superficial; I was just a cog turning a machine for the benefit of all people. I was forced to give everything for them, and in the process, my body and heart froze over.

Which was why this feeling made me shiver. If he trusted me and my Guard, then I had successfully built a real relationship with him. That had to be what it meant.

He'd also asked me to go out for a walk this late in the afternoon, so surely, he didn't dislike my presence.

My chest feels like it's burning.

A fire ignited inside me, but I tried not to show it on my face. The first time we met, if I recall correctly, we were in our teens. We had finally become this close after such a long time. He was like a beast who would refuse to open up to anyone, so knowing I had his trust delighted me. No one else could make me feel this way—like I was allowed to touch the mane of a lion.

"You will hurt someone one day if you keep saying that." I made sure to rebuke him.

He snorted. "Why must I be careful about hurting anyone? It's not my problem."

"...But the Townchief is your mother."

"So what? Blood ties are just an accessory you get when you're born. What do I gain by being grateful? I don't need family."

Even listening to the spite in his words, I could not bring myself to dislike him.

Although I preached the innate goodness of humanity, I didn't truly understand what it was about. Due to my standing, I studied what they called "love" through picture books, movies, and all sorts of stories and emotional learning, and I imitated it to a degree so the people around me would be satisfied.

But after I came to like him, I began to understand what they call "being in love."

Love and romance are foolish things.

Although they sent you tumbling into a bottomless well, you couldn't help but cherish them.

You fell in love with someone you know you shouldn't.

"...Still, that family is yours," I said. "The head of the Kayos will never be fully free."

"But in exchange, I'll get power. I don't mind a few restrictions."

A refreshing answer to hear from a politician.

The world needed a certain number of people like him, in my opinion.

I could never do that. I could only do a few miracles here and there—and they were always the same. Next year, and the next, and the next, I would bring the season of vivid colors to the world.

I had to give everything and get nothing in exchange. It was my duty.

"You will want a weapon to support yourself, won't you, Lord Shungetsu?"

He caressed my head, and I knew that was a yes. I resisted the urge to move his hand to my cheek. Some time ago, I thought I would be marrying him, but due to his heritage, it seemed like that wouldn't be the case anymore.

I was sure he had brought me here to tell me about his new fiancée, but he kept dodging the subject.

The time we had left was getting sparse, like the sunlight on this hill.

He didn't know that the Townchief had already told me about it and that I'd

accepted it.

We weren't forced to break it off. While we loved each other, our relationship was destructive, we weren't fit for making a family together, we were better off apart from each other.

We were like children, the both of us. Living inside a cotton-candy dream. But we couldn't stay like that much longer.

"Won't it be hard...waiting for the time for battle?" I asked.

"...I have my support."

Only for a little longer will I be able to say I love you.

Only for a little longer will you be able to keep me tied.

"Once you have the power in your hands—after you take down your brothers, become head of the Kayos, and then get to be Townchief—what's next?"

"That's it. By the time I achieve everything that can be achieved in a single generation, my life will be over."

"...So long as you pave the right path."

"The elders are too close to the Four Seasons Agency. It will be some time before they all disappear—that will be the moment that I get to take action. Let's both live a long life. Let me show you the Town I can build."

"Yes."

"Though, I guess the one who says those things always dies first."

Please don't tell me that. It's too sad.

The time would certainly come one day. I was younger than him. Barring any terrible illnesses, I would live a long life. But I didn't quite want to.

To be perfectly honest, I was exhausted.

"Maybe I will go first," I said.

Exhausted by having to live every day like a goddess.

Exhausted by having to live as someone else's tool.

Exhausted by an existence that was only acknowledged when it was useful to

others.

"...Don't say that. It's too sad."

Ahhh.

This is why.

He wasn't kind normally, but he always said what I needed to hear when I needed to hear it the most.

"I don't want to take care of you in your last moments," he said. "Let me die first."

That was the only thing that kept me going.

"I feel the same. I don't want to nurse you. I want to die under your attention."

And I wouldn't get it anymore.

"... Cheeky to say that to a man older than you."

I would never get anything from you anymore.

I would never encounter another light as strong as yours.

I wanted to keep looking at it forever, no matter the distance.

"I worry that, if I go first...you'll summon spring and come after me," he said.

I couldn't hold back any longer. I grabbed the hand caressing my head and moved it over to my cheek.

This would be the last time I got to feel his warmth. *Please allow me to do it just this once.*

"I will...Lord Shungetsu."

The sun was about to finish setting. It was a fleeting, beautiful moment.

Twilight was such an appropriate word—two lights were disappearing over the horizon for me.

There was little I could do—only hold on to this feeling until the end of time.

"Lord Shungetsu, the sun is setting."

I was a goddess, and yet I fell in love.

"Yeah."

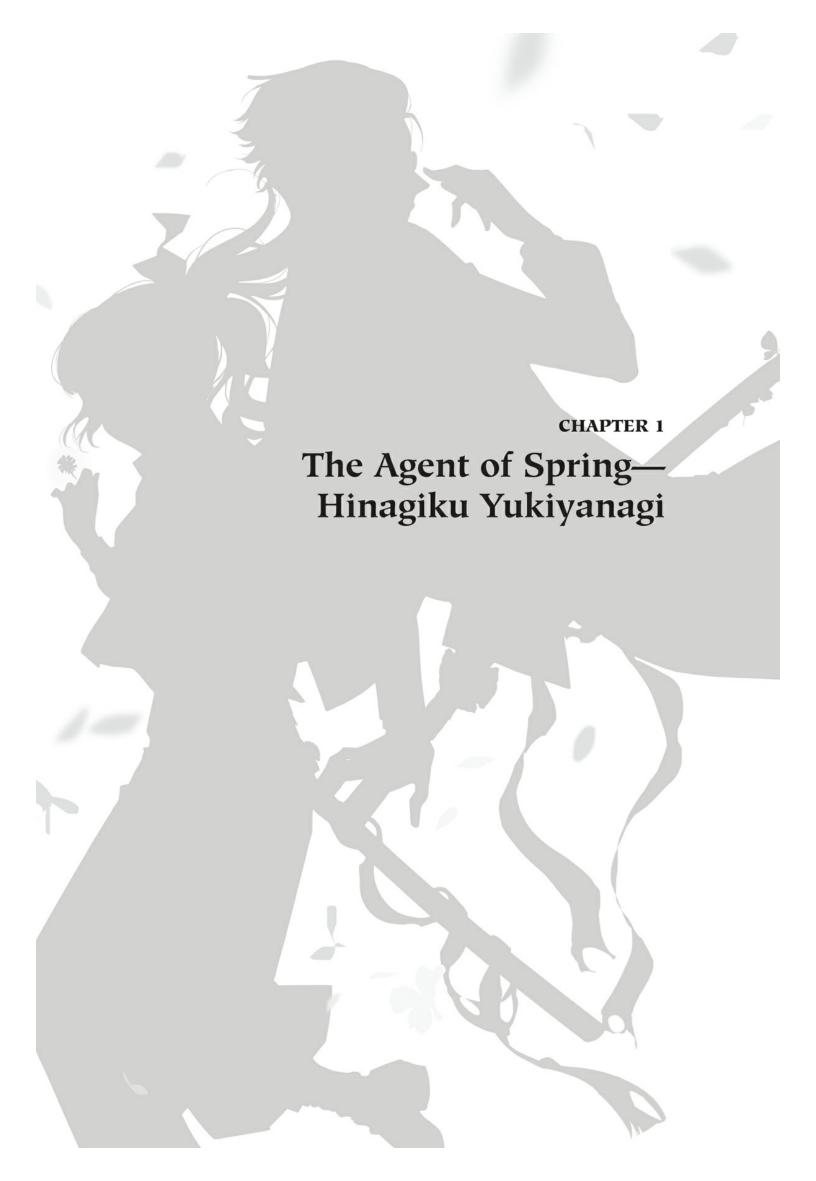
"You can say it. Tell me we're breaking up. I won't die."

And because I fell in love...

"...Kobai."

"I won't die."

I wanted to die while still in love with you.



The ferryboat swam across the water's surface, which was covered in cherry blossoms.

The light-pink petals bobbed and flocked to one another, until the boat parted them as it made its way forward. The cherry blossoms swayed with the wind and gathered again to carpet the water. The gentle, drowsy sunlight, the colorful new blooms on the trees, and the voices of the birds all joined together to create the perfect spring day.

The world was covered in cherry-blossom clouds as far as the eye could see. If one were to suddenly find themselves here, they would think they were having a dream of spring or had somehow wandered away from the transient world.

The boat's passengers sighed, bewitched by the beauty of nature.

There were two of them, both female. One was like the incarnation of ephemerality, born to nestle with the spring. She wore a graceful kimono and tied her aloeswood-colored hair up with a plum-blossom pin. Her coquettishly pale nape slipped in and out of view. She might have been in her twenties or in her thirties; she had the prim face of a maiden, only older.

The other passenger was a young girl, four or five. She was likely the first's daughter, and she was already beautiful. While her mother was *ephemerality*, she was *sweetness* itself. Her features were not that similar to her mother's, but they mostly shared the same hair and eye color. The daughter's hair was lighter, more amber than brown. The mother's eyes were like yellow zircon, while the daughter's were citrine. From the colors, one would assume they were at least related.

The ferryman was used to the sight of this flowering season.

It had become a custom for him to watch over the passengers captivated by their first glimpse of the colors of spring in this place. This was not his land, and those were not his blossoms, but he had pride in his job and loved this place. "Right?" he would say, smiling gently at them. The little passenger soaked her hand in the water's surface and played with the petals before raising her head and looking at the ferryman.

"It's my mother's spring," she said, with a clever and timidly boastful tone.

"I know, Lady Hinagiku."

"My mother's the Agent of Spring... Isn't she amazing?"

"Yes, everyone in the Town of Spring worships her. She is the pride of our Town."

Although the ferryman spoke no lies, the mother winced for a second.

The daughter, Hinagiku, was unaware of her mother's feelings. "The other day, she went to Enishi," she chirped. "And guess what?"

"What?"

"She came back right away!"

"That's fantastic."

"It's my first spring with her. I'm keeping this so I never forget it."

She grabbed the biggest petal nearby. She treated it, among the thousands of similar blossoms floating in the river, as though it were a jewel. No doubt it was her biggest, most valuable treasure.

Children always wanted to share the things that amazed them. To them, the world had just begun, and even the most trivial thing in the eyes of an adult was brilliant and precious to a child. To Hinagiku, in this moment, the proof of the spring her mother brought about was her amazing treasure.

"I'm gonna dry it and press it."

The ferryman looked at the glistening petal with a smile. He was a gentleman, the guardian of this place, and he loved children. If he wasn't holding the oar, he would have patted Hinagiku's head. It was a tranquil spring afternoon, but the peace did not last very long.

The mother finally broke the silence. "Hinagiku... Put that petal back..."

Hinagiku's face fell. "But, Mother, your cherry blossoms are so pretty."

"The person we're meeting after this hates children who do that sort of thing..."

Her tone was not chastising. If anything, it sounded like a plea—a prayer.

"But..."

"Please, Hinagiku. I want them...to like you."

Hinagiku relented and placed the petal back on the water. It drifted away from her little hands and joined the rest of the flock again. The mother sighed in relief, then said: "Thank you, Hinagiku. Let's go over it one more time."

"Yes, Mother..."

"Can you introduce yourself?"

"Yes. I'm Hinagiku Yukiyanagi. I'm from Akebono. I'm Kobai Yukiyanagi's daughter. I'll turn five this year."

She spoke fluently, showing how much she had practiced. Kobai praised her, and Hinagiku joyfully got up and jumped into her mother's arms.

The ferryman gently scolded her. "Don't stand up when I'm rowing the boat." Hinagiku apologized with a giggle. Kobai, despite being her mother, seemed surprised at the embrace. She returned the gesture timidly; perhaps her daughter hadn't caressed her or hugged her much before. But once she felt Hinagiku in her arms, she was overcome with emotion and held her even tighter, a soft smile on her face.

Hinagiku did not yet know that this would be the last hug from her mother.

The ferryman watched as Kobai and Hinagiku set foot on new land.

Until now, they had lived discreetly in a place called Akebono, in the Teishu region of Yamato.

That said, the mother and daughter spent less than half the year together, due to the former's job.

The ephemeral woman Kobai Yukiyanagi was one of Yamato's gods incarnate, one of the Agents of the Four Seasons—Spring.

From the beginning of the year and for a few months, she had to leave home and do her duty by the nation and its people. She traveled northward from Ryugu to Enishi, summoning the cherry-blossom front.

But the Agents had work to complete even after they finished manifesting the season. The Four Seasons Agency sent an inspector across the land to make sure spring had reached every corner. They would report any anomaly, and if needed, another ritual would be held. There was also the Agency Council held every summer, which all Agents attended, and Kobai had to make preparations for it. She would practice her dance with an instructor, which she would then perform as part of an exhibition.

It was only around the end of summer and the beginning of autumn that she would get some time for herself. She would be free until the New Year, when she would become busy again.

Such was the life of the Agent of Spring. She had no choice but to get someone else to raise her child for her. But it was also true that most people in the modern day were busy as well, and Agency staff worked more hours overall than the Agents.

And the reason Kobai spent so much time away from her daughter was because the Agents lived constantly under the threat of violence. On top of her normal duties, she had to deal with assassinations and conspiracies.

There was also the problem regarding the other parent of Kobai Yukiyanagi's child—the current head of the Kayo family, one of the few controlling the Town of Spring, Shungetsu Kayo.

Kobai and Shungetsu's romance began when their parents pushed them toward each other. It was normal for the people of the Towns, descendants of the Agents of the Four Seasons, to hold political marriages in order to maintain a bloodline. Shungetsu, being the son of the former Kayo head's third wife, was raised as the least valuable among his stepbrothers. He was treated like a servant until he was ten, when his intelligence began to attract attention. Eventually, he became a candidate for the next family head.

After that, he met Kobai. At first, he thought her a very absent-minded woman. Meanwhile, Kobai found him a very disrespectful man. However, soon

enough, the attraction between opposites grew, and they began loving each other without ever mentioning the fact aloud. Had their fates been a little different, they would've gotten married, formed a family, and raised their child with love. But that was a dream now.

Shungetsu first met the woman he would marry at a relative's funeral.

She was a young, sheltered girl from a distinguished family of the Town of Spring who had everything handed to her on a silver platter; curiously, she fell in love at the sight of Shungetsu in his mourning clothes. She asked who he was, and after doing everything in her power, she presented a favorable marriage deal to the Kayo family.

Marrying the Agent would bring the family prestige. Kobai had been presented to Shungetsu in order to improve his resume. However, the Yukiyanagis themselves held no influence in the Town or Agency, and they lacked economic power, too. The Kayo family went with the new suitor for her political benefits. Although producing an Agent was an honorable thing, it gave no power in a political fight, because the next Agent would likely not be chosen from their bloodline. Kobai would be but a decoration, a flower to last only one generation; it was far more worthwhile to pick an option that would become the foundation for lasting political power.

Kobai and Shungetsu discussed it on the dusky hill until the sky turned dark and the sun rose again, but in the end, Kobai decided to withdraw. Shungetsu Kayo was known for his levelheadedness, so Kobai, the people around him, and even Shungetsu himself knew he would do well even in his newly decided political marriage.

At least, until proof to the contrary was found in Hinagiku's birth.

Shungetsu had received the title of head as one of the conditions of this marriage, but his relationship with his wife soon fell apart.

Their characters clashed, and there was a palpable disparity in their feelings for each other—all this gradually ate away at their marriage.

Eventually, Kobai also received a different engagement proposal, and Shungetsu could not stand it—he worked behind the scenes to stop it. They hadn't really met since their breakup, but once Kobai learned he was the one who had interfered, she went to tell him off. They had a huge argument and expected to never see each other again, but that did not happen. They met up once, then again, then again; by the time they realized what they were doing, they were already in too deep.

The man who tried to obtain everything for himself had found the one thing he could not do. In loving her, he had destroyed his glowing reputation. Upon learning of Kobai's pregnancy, he publicly announced his affair.

Finally, this drama of love and hate ended in bloodshed. His wife chased after Kobai and baby Hinagiku with a knife, trying to kill them both. National Security visited the Town several times. The locals were outraged and disgusted by the whole matter.

The ones most deserving of pity were the innocent children—the son of Shungetsu and his wife, and Hinagiku. Although, the boy had it a bit better—he had the pity of those around him, who thought he ought to be protected.

Kobai and her daughter were harassed by the wife and her clique, and this became normalized. Not many people publicly criticized her, but the persecution going on behind the scenes was more than enough.

Shungetsu was appalled when his beloved and his daughter became targets of a murder attempt, and he helped to hide them outside. After that, Kobai stayed away from the Town, and Hinagiku was raised by her grandmother until she passed.

Which brings us to now.

[&]quot;But are you sure? You said...that I shouldn't go to the Town... Grandmother, too..."

Hinagiku innocently asked her mother. It was a painful question for Kobai.

She had taught her daughter so many unjust lessons.

"You mustn't go to the Town of Spring."

"You mustn't be selfish."

"You must act this or that way, so everyone likes you."

Hinagiku had been raised under the constrictions of this curse, and still, she grew up untwisted and loving of her mother. Kobai had kept her distance raising her daughter, trying to avoid the guilt she felt when they were together, but even so, Hinagiku adored her. That was even harder on Kobai. It must've been thanks to her grandmother that Hinagiku grew up to be like this.

Why wasn't she gentle with me, too?

Sadly, her grandmother, kind as a bodhisattva to her granddaughter, was no longer with them.

"...There's someone who will take care of you, so don't worry."

Kobai was busy and needed someone to leave her child with.

Shungetsu Kayo was the one who had reached out. Although he had given financial support, Hinagiku was not officially recognized as his daughter. However, things were changing now. Finding a new home for his daughter after her grandmother's death was the first step toward that.

Kobai coughed, the taste of blood spreading in her mouth.

I must do all I can, even though it might not end up being a good thing.

She swallowed the blood down.

"...Take care of yourselves," the ferryman said.

"I'm glad we could meet. Take care of yourself, too. Live a long life..."

The ferryman and Kobai knew each other; they said farewell with a sad handshake.

Now that they were on the other side of the river, the rest of the trip would

be on foot. This was already within the territory of the vast Town of Spring.

Kobai pulled Hinagiku's hand as she walked. The girl tottered along, her eyes darting all around.

After a while of traveling through the mountain on a path that barely counted as a trail, they arrived at a clearing. There stood two people dressed in coolcolored kimonos—a middle-aged man and an old woman. The man was the first to approach.

"..." He observed them, apparently unsure what to say.

"Who is he, Mother?"

Kobai smiled, then gave Hinagiku a little push on the back. "Hinagiku... Say what we practiced."

The girl looked up at her mother, then nodded. "I'm Hinagiku Yukiyanagi. I'm from Akebono. I'm Kobai Yukiyanagi's daughter. I'll turn five this year."

She neatly bowed. Any adult would usually praise her for an excellent introduction, but the man did not even smile; he only watched with mixed feelings.

"...I'm Shungetsu Kayo."

Hinagiku could see on his face she was not good news for him. She had been taught to pay attention to others' feelings, and she quickly gave up on further interaction with him. She looked down at her shoes, praying for the greeting to be over soon.

"Thank you for coming, Kobai," said Shungetsu.

His eyes were full of strength. He looked in his forties. He had a long scar going from his nose to his cheek. He was already manly, but the scar only added to the impression. Did he scent his kimono? The smell of sandalwood wafted about as he approached.

"How are you doing, physically?" he asked.

"I'm doing fine today..."

"Just today? You should've come sooner, then we could've..."

"I was afraid of the Town... You'll hide me, too, right?"

The adults conversed with awkward expressions.

"...I won't hide you, but I'll give you a place to rest. Take it easy and recover."

"Yes. Please take care of Hinagiku." Kobai bowed deeply.

"Stop." The man covered his eyes with a hand. "Don't bow. I don't want to see that. I was the one who begged you to come."

"Well, this is something you'll be doing for me forever..."

"Well, I...I already have someone to take care of her."

"Thank you, Lord Shungetsu."

"I've told you a hundred times this isn't just your problem."

"...Yes. I'm sorry...about your injury, too."

"You didn't inflict it, so don't worry."

"...Where is she now?"

"In the hospital..."

"Was she harmed after that...?"

"...Mentally. That's why none of the paperwork has been moving forward..."

"Then why did you call me? I was certain..."

"We will break up eventually. She planned everything on her own. And after all that...I've persuaded her parents. We talked about the deal many times before the engagement."

"...I could never be that cold... If you haven't divorced, then I can't..."

"You should be. Those who want to understand will, and those who don't, won't... I won't let you go back. And would you really rather do that now? You're..."

Shungetsu broke off—Hinagiku had come in between them with her arms wide-open. She glared at Shungetsu, her citrine eyes damp with tears.

"Don't bully Mother."

She thought they were arguing. She was not yet old enough to sense the subtleties between the lines of their tension. Shungetsu stared at her with his mouth agape.

Kobai was also shocked, but soon, her face softened. Smiling, she gave her daughter a rare head pat. Hinagiku was as surprised as she was happy, relaxing a bit.

"Hinagiku, it's okay... I'm not getting bullied. Thank you."

"Really ...?"

"Yes, really. And besides, he...he will protect us, so please don't fear him... He's your father."

Hinagiku couldn't understand what she just heard.

"...My father?"

She glanced back and forth between the adults. Shungetsu looked away.

"Mother... He...is my father?"

Kobai smiled awkwardly at Hinagiku's shy question.

"Yes, he is. But..." Kobai shook her head. She would rather not explain the tragic circumstances surrounding them. "No, forget it... He will protect you, even after I'm gone..."

Hinagiku opened her eyes wide and blinked. "You're gonna bring spring again? But it's spring already."

"...The truth is, my body isn't doing very well. I have to go get treatment. But you will be all right, even without me. Things won't change much. Right?"

"But...but I finally get to be with you."

"I never was with you. Your grandmother raised you. You're better off without me."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are... Your mother is a bad woman, and they will call you bad, too, if I stay with you..."

Shungetsu's face soured as he listened to Kobai's detached explanation.

"I don't care what they say if I'm with you," said Hinagiku.

"I do. I don't care if they say mean things about me, but you... It would break my heart..."

"...But I'm sad if they say mean things about you..."

"I'm sorry, Hinagiku. I'm sure life will be sadder here than in Akebono. But... please endure it... I'm sure you can lead a happier life than me in the end."

"I don't want to be happy. I want to be with you."

"Hinagiku... Once you come of age, leave the Town. You'll get to be freer as an adult than as a child. Endure it until then. Even if someone speaks ill of you, endure, and await the time for battle. You will get your chance to bloom again..."

"Endure, and await the time for battle...?"

It was the same thing Shungetsu told Kobai long ago, in the twilight. Now it was time for Hinagiku to hear it.

"Yes. No matter how hard it gets, live on... You can run away in order to live. Running away does not mean losing. So please live and wait for the day to fight again... Keep your blade close to your heart..."

"I don't wanna fight."

"I know...but there will come a time when you'll have to. I want to protect you from anything...but it is your life..." Kobai caressed Hinagiku's head with regret. "And you're the only one who can live it, Hinagiku."

Then the old lady spoke. "...It's time for the girl to come." She forced a smile to get Hinagiku's guard down and grabbed her arm.

"N-nooo!"

Hinagiku was startled by the dry touch of the old woman's hand and twisted and turned.

"Mother!"

She was drawn a step away from her mother.

"Be a good kid, Hinagiku."

Another step, then another.

"Are we saying good-bye now? I'll have to stay home again? How long do I have to be a good girl?"

"Be a good girl forever..."

Hinagiku dug in her heels and reached out for her mother, but Kobai wouldn't move a finger.

"I will. I'll be a good girl. Will you come see me before the next full moon? Please?"

Kobai did not answer.

"What about summer?"

Kobai did not answer.

"Autumn? What about autumn...?"

Kobai did not answer.

"Winter ...?"

Giant tears filled Hinagiku's sunny eyes.

"Will you come see me in winter? Mother...!"

Her voice rose to a scream, and then Kobai finally responded:

"Later, Hinagiku! I'll be waiting for you until much later!"

Hinagiku's tears overflowed.

"Wh-when is later?"

"Later! Much later!"

Kobai tried to run forward, but Shungetsu blocked her path by extending his arms.

"...When I turn six?"

"Much, much later!" Kobai screamed back, raising her head from Shungetsu's shoulder.

As Hinagiku struggled, the old woman picked her up in her arms. Even then, the girl tried to look at her mother's face.

"Wh-when I become an adult?"

"Later... Much later! Let's play hide-and-seek, Hinagiku! You mustn't look for me until I say. One day, you will feel sleepy, so sleepy you won't be able to fight it. Once you can't keep your eyes open, then I'll tell you it's all right to go!"

"I...I don't want that ...!"

Finally, the old lady carrying the wailing child jogged away.

"Mother, please don't leave me alone... Please, I'll be a good girl...," Hinagiku cried, her wails echoing forever in the mountains.

The creatures of the mountains observed the new resident from afar.

Hinagiku's story always began with tears. One could say it was her fate, but the tears this time stung bitterly.

"I'll be a good girl, so please don't leave me..."

Little Hinagiku's prayer melted away in the mountains.

No one granted it.

The spring breeze swept it away, as if it was never there. Their farewell did not linger.

Don't leave me.

Don't leave me.

Don't leave me.

The wish of the girl, who was not yet a goddess, went ungranted.

One month later...

...Kobai Yukiyanagi was found dead in one of Kayo's villas.

She had been suffering from a serious illness for years. She had succumbed while she was undergoing treatment, the closest thing she would get to a honeymoon with her de facto husband. The one who found her, Shungetsu Kayo, was at first suspected of her murder, but after finding her will and investigating the circumstances of her death, it was declared to be suicide.

No one knew why—whether it was her illness or distress toward her relationship with Shungetsu.

The daughter she left behind, Hinagiku, was raised in secret in a mansion in Shungetsu's name in the Town of Spring. Right after Kobai died, she began screaming and complaining about a sharp pain.

A mark rose suddenly on the back of her neck like a case of hives. It moved as though it had a life of its own, painting a flower on her skin. It was the stigmata—the sacred mark. A live-in servant was the first to see it. Hinagiku's powers awakened while they went outside to tell someone else.

By the time the servant saw her again, she had covered a whole tatami room in spring flowers. She repeated, "It's calling my name, I'm scared," in a delirium, and no one tried to get close to her.

The succession was unheard of. The powers of the Agent of Spring had gone from mother to daughter.

Kobai couldn't have done it on purpose. The Agents of the Four Seasons were chosen supernaturally; the will of humans had nothing to do with it.

Still, her daughter had succeeded her, as though she had wished for it.

Rumors that Hinagiku was the next Agent made waves all throughout the Town in the blink of an eye. She still had a fever when she was brought to the funeral, and the mark of the Agent still hurt her. They said she seemed to be in a trance. She didn't remember most of it.

She did remember one thing: what her father, whom she hadn't seen since their greeting, said then.

"You're cursed. It's almost like you killed her."

Even after she was sent back to the mansion and had crawled into her cold futon, the words echoed round and round in her head.

Cursed. Cursed. Cursed.

Hinagiku cried. How could she atone for killing her own mother?

And so was born a new Agent of Spring.



Summer had come to the Town of Spring.

It was the first season to manifest after Kobai Yukiyanagi's death.

The season arrived in Teishu courtesy of the Agent of Summer, and peach blossoms gave way to fruit, their sweet aroma spreading all around the Town.

The peaches were not sold anywhere, as trees were planted in order to keep the traditional scenery—a sight representing nature's blessings, which all Townsfolk welcomed gladly.

The Town was a paradise right out of the "The Peach Blossom Spring" this time of year.

Normally, festivities were held to celebrate the arrival of the season every month, but due to the passing of the Agent of Spring, there was no festival, no toasting, and no holiday cheer. It was a sad summer.

The new Agent of Spring had been born already, and she was training to manifest spring every day.

As she was the former Agent's daughter, raised in concealment and away from human contact, few people knew what she looked like.

Rumors of the reason behind her treatment, however, were impossible to avoid for the adults. The Townschildren, meanwhile, were kept away from the outrageous gossip. Inevitably, the children made up their own stories, as if the Agent were an urban legend.

"I bet she looks like a monster, with three mouths and four eyes."

"I heard she has a lizard's tail."

"Her eyes are magic—her gaze sucks the life out of you."

The baseless rumors made their rounds among all the kids.

Soon enough, they weren't satisfied with the Agent of Spring herself, and the mansion she lived in became their plaything, too.

They said there was a giant baby-eating snake in the mansion. They said there

was a golden peach that would have you settled for life. They said there was a mirror that immediately made you age and die if you looked into it.

What happened once the rumors and legends spread around? The kids began daring one another to visit the mansion and do mischief. In no time at all, the fences of Shungetsu Kayo's mansion were covered in graffiti and scribbles.

This was one such day, when a child came to the mansion.

"..."

A girl with lustrous hair like obsidian stared at one of the vandalized fences on the outskirts of the Town. Her name was Sakura Himedaka.

She would one day become the knight of the princess caged inside this mansion, but at the time, she too was but a child. The future Guard was only a student back then.

She was in second grade, attending the elementary school that had been built by the many descendants of past Agents of Spring who populated this area.

It was an official educational institution, but only Townsfolk attended.

The girl had come to take a look at the dreadful mansion of the Agent of Spring after hearing the rumors at school.

But unlike the other children, who were there just for a thrill or for playing ignorant, cruel pranks, she had a clear goal in mind.

Where should I sell the golden peach? Can I even get anyone to buy it?

She was there to commit a burglary.

It had been about a month since Sakura had lost her home.

Children did not grow on trees, and Sakura was no exception. It just so happened that her parents had gambled away their money and run off from the Town, leaving young Sakura behind.

People in the bloodline of the Agents of the Four Seasons were required to

spend their entire lives inside the tiny world of the Town or within the Agency. Because of this expectation, many of them wished to run away from this bubble —Sakura's parents being a strong example.

Most of these people ruined themselves in entertainment. Sakura's parents got hooked on gambling in the outside world until they were drowning in debt. It was also unfortunate that they borrowed money from someone not in a regular financial institution.

Things snowballed out of control, and soon enough, they dug a grave for themselves so deep that they decided to abandon their daughter and run away.

Sakura had always known her parents and household were a bit strange compared with others, but it only hit her once her parents disappeared.

Although the child wasn't made to carry their debt instead, she lost her house and all her belongings.

Sakura's last name was Himedaka: a lineage that had produced many Guards in the past. However, as she was seen as part of her family's disgrace, no relatives took her in, and she was instead handed over to a shelter that looked after children with nowhere to go.

The head of the main Himedaka house said her parents would be found sooner or later, but that they would never set foot in the Town again. She could not rely on any adult.

Good-for-nothings. You shouldn't have had me in the first place if you were going to do this.

She cursed all adults. She hated her parents most of all for bringing her into this world.

And that was what brought her to this attempt to break in. She wanted to see if the rumors were true. If they were, she wanted the gold to escape her poverty. It was a snap decision, made because she didn't know where to place her anger.

She was thankful to the shelter for giving her food, but her life there was far from pleasant, and her classmates all avoided her. Her heart was clouded.

Not to say this excused her actions, but there was a context for them.

The golden peach was clearly made-up, and Sakura would never even consider believing in it if she had a clear head. She would've laughed the idea off.

But she was in such a bad place that she ended up choosing to sneak into this mansion based on groundless rumors. She wanted the money, yes, but that wasn't what she was truly after.

Even if she had the money, she could do nothing as a child. Most things in Yamato required an ID and an age check. In the end, she needed an adult to support her. Sakura knew this, but she had already been forsaken by those who were supposed to fill that role. She wasn't given what she should have received; she was deemed unworthy. It left her sad, frustrated, and furious—she couldn't contain it and wanted to change something. But a child didn't have the power.

So she took action this way, hoping to find something that could change her situation.

I can't go in from the front.

After surveilling the place while pretending to be out for a walk, Sakura decided to cross the fence by jumping from a roadside tree. Her athletic talent made the task easy. She didn't hear anyone noticing her intrusion; maybe they were away from home.

It was evening after classes but before dinner; the sky was slowly turning duskier. Twilight was coming soon, and once it did, indoor lights would be turned on. A cold, un-springlike wind caressed her cheek.

The twilight dyed everything orange, even the summer green.

"..."

The beautiful madder red caught her eye for a few seconds.

While the Agents of the Four Seasons dyed the world in their own color, it was the Archer of Dawn and the Archer of Twilight who brought about morning and night. People lived in a world beyond human comprehension, although Sakura herself was one of them, being a child of the Town of Spring.

This was another day when someone out there had fulfilled their duty, and before Sakura's eyes lay the magnificent results. She realized how significant the seasons, the morning, and the night were.

However, that did not change the fact that this Town was a suffocating prison devoid of kindness, and that she did not want to spend the rest of her life here.

It's beautiful.

It was truly astonishing how the blessings of nature and heaven brought color to the world.

What was she doing here in this gorgeous world? The thought made her sad.

There were many things that were granted steadily and unconditionally—yet these, too, were still often the product of someone's unseen efforts.

Someone was out there doing their best, while she was here doing nothing.

What am I even doing?

The orange of the sky enveloped her, reaching her messy heart.

The twilight cast its colored light across the black sheep kept away from the lives of the Townsfolk.

Sakura looked at the mansion from atop the fence. There was yet another black sheep here. The Agent of Spring, whom the rumors made out to be a monster.

She didn't know how old the girl was, but most newly born Agents were young, so the two were probably close to the same age. The Agent would be five at the youngest, fifteen at the oldest.

An Agent's life span tended to be extreme—either very short or very long.

Either way, they spent it tied to the Town.

They had no right to refuse their job. Sakura's problems could be mitigated once she came of age, but most gods incarnate lost their freedom for life.

The comparison didn't make her feel better at finding someone worse off. It made her feel empathy toward someone in a similar situation.

I'll just take a look at the peach tree and leave.

She had already lost any will to steal, so only the curiosity to check the accuracy of the rumors remained. She could see a tree in the garden. Not a very big one.

It seemed just the same as any other peach tree in the Town; anyone could freely grab a fruit and eat it. Perhaps one of the fruits was made of gold?

She sneaked across the fence and jumped down to the garden. Even examining it from up close, the tree didn't seem out of the ordinary. The mansion was built two years ago, and there had been no hearsay about a golden peach back then.

Should've known it was just rumors.

It was a shame, but nothing to feel truly bad about.

In fact, she felt good about the beautiful scenery bringing her back to her senses and preventing her from committing thievery.

After all the effort she'd spent breaking in, she only took a peek at the tree in the garden. Now she could turn around having done nothing else.

Let's go home.

She didn't want to do anything bad. She didn't want to hurt anyone. She just wanted something to save her.

I'll never get that as long as I live, she thought, watching the peach tree sway in the warm dusky breeze.

I'll never find anything to magically change my fate.

But perhaps that was for the best.

She could lead a more peaceful life without anything of the sort.

Sakura did not wish for much in her life. She just wanted to grow up with the same love all the other kids got.

She simply didn't want to know she was worthless enough to be treated like this. If only she hadn't stopped after the twilight caught her eye.

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"Who's there ...?"
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If only she hadn't met that girl then, maybe her path would have been peaceful.

"...A new helper...?"

She could've led a life filled with quiet and kindness.

"Or are you...a robber?"

If only she hadn't known this feeling—so much like romance, yet *love* was not enough.

"If you are...I can give you anything you want..."

Any instances of violence, revenge, romance, or friendship would've remained at normal, serene levels.

"The peaches are still hard, so you shouldn't take those. Maybe come back later..."

She could've led the sort of life...

"I can tell you when they're soft...and good to eat... But who are you?"

...where she'd be able to stop herself when someone asked her to stop.

Instead, she met the girl who changed her fate.

"|—|..."

Sakura Himedaka's and Hinagiku Yukiyanagi's lives had intersected.

So began the tale of these two girls, the thief and the captive goddess, both shunned by the world.

Sakura was spared from the consequences of her crime and managed to form a friendship with Hinagiku simply because the latter was lonely.

Ever since her mother passed away, Hinagiku had been training as the Agent of Spring every day.

Unlike other children, she had to train from the moment she woke up, eat whatever she was fed, and go to sleep at strict times. She was micromanaged—almost raised like a pet.

From her point of view, a girl around her age suddenly showing up in her garden was hardly unfortunate—it was like a breath of fresh air, a bit of good news, a shining star in the dark sky.

Maybe we can be friends.

With that earnest wish in mind, she offered Sakura as many peaches as she could want.

Meanwhile, Sakura was bewildered by the younger girl speaking to her kindly without reproach. And Hinagiku was so adorable, Sakura could hardly put it into words; she could watch her for hours.

Though falteringly, Sakura told her about how she had entered, and as she did, she felt sad for herself. The emotions she'd been holding in spilled out.

"My parents left me."

"I don't want to stay in the shelter. They don't even give me a place to change my clothes."

"The people I thought were my friends left me. Maybe the adults told them something."

"I'm so lonely. I wish I was born in a normal family."

"I have no idea what I'm going to do now; I'm so scared."

"I'm also lonely. My mother died."

"My father said it was my fault that my mother died."

"I don't want to be the Agent of Spring. I can't keep up with the training."

"Why can't I go outside? Am I that embarrassing?"

"I want to go back to my grandmother's home. But I can't."

They told each other about their fears and anxieties. The more they said, the more they felt for each other. Their talk continued until the commuting servant stopped by to take a look at Hinagiku.

"I'll come again!"

"Really? You will?"

Fortunately, Sakura wasn't found—the adults would have given her an awful scolding had they known she sneaked into the Agent's house. After the girls promised to meet again, she left.

Hinagiku worried that she wouldn't visit again, but the following day, after school, Sakura came with a wildflower in hand.

A special bond between them was blooming.

They became closer quickly.

Sakura would visit Hinagiku every day after school and even on days off.

There was much to gain from spending time with Sakura for Hinagiku, as up until recently, the only people she talked to were her grandmother and her private tutor, and she had remained isolated from society after being taken in by her father.

Sakura taught her what was popular among the kids, local songs, and hand-gesture games. Sakura would investigate and tell her everything she wanted, including the location of the previous Agent of Spring's grave. Hinagiku had cried with happiness when Sakura reported back on this, as Hinagiku didn't even know its general direction. Their relationship wasn't that of master and retainer back then; still, naturally, Sakura showed her admiration and loyalty.

The more time passed, the more they knew each other, and the more the meaning of their meetings shifted. They were no longer filling in the loneliness; they were pursuing the joy of being together.

However, this honeymoon phase did not last long.

Someone from the Himedaka family who worked in the mansion found Sakura and reprimanded her thoroughly.

Hinagiku was Yamato's only Agent of Spring. She could not be approached so casually.

Sakura was immediately banned from entering the mansion.

As she depended on the shelter managed by the Town for her livelihood, Sakura had no choice but to obey the adults. Otherwise, the orphan would have no means to survive.

The school also suspended her for a week, and she spent those days hugging her knees and crying. She expected to suffer like this for some time, but the issue was solved more quickly than she thought.

"If you keep Sakura Himedaka away from me, then I won't fulfill my duties."

Hinagiku, having acted the part of a "good girl" up until then, shut herself in her room and refused to train. She requested her supervisors to grant official permission for Sakura to visit the mansion in order to continue her training. If they didn't accept, she would stop, and then spring wouldn't come. She pointed out how *they* would be in trouble then if that happened. Effectively, she declared war on the adults.

This was her natural way of dealing with things when she was angry—locking her door and refusing to do anything. Although she was a god incarnate, she was still a child.

"Naughty girls don't get any dinner."

"I don't want dinner."

They thought she would start crying and begging forgiveness if she missed a meal.

But they waited, and Hinagiku did not complain.

"...We will talk to the Townchief, so please just eat already."

"I won't eat until I see her again. Tell me she can come in."

She sent away the servant who had come to bring her food.

Multiple adults banded together to try and force her to eat, but she covered the room in cherry trees to keep them away. The servants were in a daze, fearing she might die from starvation.

In reality, Hinagiku had been creating trees to eat their cherries once in a while, but none of them knew. Ultimately, the Himedaka head had to bring Sakura along and beg the girl to please eat *something*.

Sakura was shocked to hear Hinagiku had done all this just to see her again—and she was happy, too. Her opinion of Hinagiku rose.

The rest went by quickly.

After all the fuss, Sakura was granted the title of Hinagiku's schoolmate.

They were now under surveillance, but even with that in mind, the fact that they could openly meet made them more than happy enough. They had some limitations in what they could do, but they could still play around like the children they were.

At first, the adults only saw Sakura as a bothersome accessory, but not for long. Once she began visiting the mansion, Hinagiku's powers of manifestation grew exponentially. If they were going to treat Sakura as an obstacle to her training, Hinagiku would be strong enough not to lose her. An Agent's powers came from their heart, so Hinagiku became stronger because of Sakura.

That being the case, the Town had to think carefully about how they treated Sakura.

She was a daughter of the Himedakas, a family known for producing Guards. Her lineage had plagued her all her life, but that same bloodline helped quickly usher her into a position as a Guard. They did not ask her; they commanded her. There was no one better for the job. Hinagiku had closed her heart, and there was no one else in the Town who could protect and love her the way she needed in order to be the Agent of Spring. No one else went to the mansion—

not her stepmother, not her stepsiblings, not even her father. Sakura was the only one—and for her part, she couldn't ask for more.

After being appointed Guard, Sakura dropped out from school and moved to the mansion to work, thus also increasing the time the two girls were together. Even though she'd wished to leave the Town more than anything before, now she had completely lost such a desire.

For one thing, her lifestyle had improved instantly just at Hinagiku's request; she was finally free from being the black sheep at the shelter. But more than that, more than anything...

...it was that someone wanted her to be there.

Hinagiku relied on her as her sole comfort after being abandoned by her own parents, and this made Sakura dearly fond of her. Protecting her and bringing her joy made Sakura happy. She had fun taking care of Hinagiku and surprising her by fulfilling her needs before Hinagiku herself recognized them.

If it meant she could see Hinagiku smile, then Sakura could do anything. She wanted to care for this little girl as best she could. She wanted to become her shield and sword to fight back against the adults who talked behind her back.

In reality, it was the same thing she wanted other people to do for her.

Sakura had someone she needed and who needed her, and the lonely space in her heart was filled.

She was still a child and didn't think deeply about the future, but this pure feeling continued even after everything that happened. In the end, this encounter was the real thing.

At that time, she could have never imagined that she would lose her beloved girl for nearly a decade.

"LADY HINAGIKU! NOOO! Don't leave me, don't leave me, don't abandon me, please, please! No! I'm begging you, let me die instead, please, please, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, LADY HINAGIKU! Lord Rosei, please, save her! Get her out of here! Lady Hinagiku is...! She's...! Lady Hinagiku...! Don't leave me, please, don't leave me, don't leave me alone, Lady Hinagiku, you're going to die, you're going to die, Lady Hinagiku, don't do it, don't leave me, please, don't leave me! Take me with you! Take me with you! I'll go, I'll go with you...! I'll do anything, I'll give you anything, I'll steal it, anything you want... Please, don't take her, don't take her, don't take her, wait...! Wait, wait, Lady Hinagiku, nooooo! Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, please, come back! Don't do it! Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, don't protect me! I'll protect you, I promise I will, I'll protect you, I will protect you, don't, don't, don't, please, please, PLEASE!You're really gone....... I can't hear her footsteps... Lord Itecho... Lord... Ite...cho... Aaahhh... Lord Rosei, Lord Itecho isn't...breathing... He's bleeding, he's bleeding, he's bleeding, he's bleeding, my clothes, I have to tear off strips, make a tourniquet, Lord Itecho, Lady Hinagiku, aaah, please, what should I do...? Don't worry about me! This won't kill me! Please, just take Lord Itecho... Take him to the hospital quickly, ahhh, and Lady Hinagiku, I have to follow Lady Hinagiku, N-National Security, yes, the sirens, I can hear...the sirens, so they should be nearby. Lord Rosei, please keep calling them, if we both scream, someone will notice, Lord Itecho, it'll be okay. I'll save you. I will, I promise, I'll save you. Don't die, Lady Hinagiku is... Lady Hinagiku gave herself to protect you! Don't die... Please... Don't die... Help! Please, help! SOMEONE! HELP! ANYONE! HELP US! We're here! He's wounded! Someone, someone, ANYONE! HEY! HELP! HELP US! Please, anyone, hear us... HEEEY! HEEEY! HEEELP! We're here! We're here! The Agent... The Agent of Spring— Ahhh, we're here, the Agent and Guard of Winter are here! The Guard isn't breathing! Touch the wall! It'll open if it feels you're not a threat! I'm sure she'd make it

that way! Ahhh... Yes, yes, okay, I'll take him out. Lord Rosei... Yes, let's go, on the count of three, let's lift him. One, two, three! ...The arm, take him by the arm! They shot him in the belly! Me...? Don't mind me! Take care of him, I have to follow them! My goddess... My...friend was taken away... She protected us, and they kidnapped her... Why, why did this have to happen? Please, rescue Lady Hinagiku, rescue Lady Hinagiku, save her..."

It was all wrong.

If nothing ever changes...

It was all wrong.

Even if we're alone, if we can live together...

It was all wrong.

If Lady Hinagiku and I are together, we can go anywhere and be okay.

It was all wrong.

That was what I used to believe.

It was all wrong.

Lady Hinagiku, where are you now?

It was all wrong.

Are you lonely? Are you in pain?

It was all wrong.

Didn't we promise to stay together forever?

It was all wrong.

Why did you go by yourself?

It was all wrong that day.

Lady Hinagiku, don't leave me alone. Please come back.

Life keeps going even without Lady Hinagiku. My heart keeps beating, even if I don't want it to.

I still believed for the first year that they would find her. Maybe it would be tomorrow, maybe the day after.

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"Lady Hinagiku."
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In the second year, Lord Rosei tried to hang himself again. Lord Itecho was taking care of him, constantly hovering like a nurse. I wasn't a good person; I just hoped he could recover soon so he could go back to looking for Lady Hinagiku.

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"Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku."
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"Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku."

In the third year, Lord Itecho found me crying in the closet more frequently.

Nothing ever seemed to faze him. I started feeling bad for him and told him he could cry, too. He did, but he tried to stifle it. We're all exhausted, I thought while hugging his head.

```
"Lady...Hina...giku."

"Hi...na..."

"Lady Hinagiku."
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In the fourth year, the days kept passing with no luck. *Maybe she's suffering right now*, I would think, and I would want to pull my hair out. I wasn't looking at the mirror much, but I knew I had new gray hairs. Lord Rosei told me Lady Hinagiku would be happier if I stayed pretty when she came back, so I resisted the urge in the hopes it would accomplish something. Hoping she would come back soon.

```
"...Lady Hinagiku."

"Lady Hinagikuuu!"

"...Lady...Hinagiku."

"Lady Hinagiku..."
```

In the fifth year, I was abandoned. Why? Why? Why? I trusted them. Rosei and Itecho were traitors, too, in the end. Why wouldn't they go against the Town's decision? It was Winter's fault that Lady Hinagiku got kidnapped. Who cares if they ran out of money or people? What could possibly be more important than saving a life? Did they not care about Lady Hinagiku anymore? Should we just forget about her with time? Could they really abandon her just like that?

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? I liked you, but now I want to kill you.

```
"Hinagiku."

"...Itecho..."

"Lady...Hinagiku... Hinagiku..."

"Rosei."

"Lady Hinagiku."
```

In the sixth year, I considered selling my body, but I wasn't meant for doing nightlife or even service work.

They told me I just had to get dolled up and sit beside a man, but I punched him the moment he touched my leg. I had no money to look for Lady Hinagiku. For whatever reason, Itecho made me a bank account that received money every month, but I didn't want to use it. I knew they could track me the moment I did. Sometimes, I noticed people following me—was that them, too? I yelled at the runaway detectives many times. If they had the time to bother with me, they should be looking for Lady Hinagiku instead. I wanted to be left alone. I didn't want to think about Winter.

```
"Lady Hinagiku... Lady Hinagiku... Lady Hinagiku."

"Lady Hinagiku."

"Lady...Hi...na...giku..."

"Lady—Lady Hinagiku."
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"Lady Hinagiku... La...dy..."
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"Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku...?"

In the seventh year, I would doubt whether I was really alive at times.

There were times when I felt like I was looking at myself from behind, and it was terrifying. Maybe I had to go to the hospital. But I had no money to pay for treatment. I made some home bases, and soon enough, I had enough places to stay. I would help some people, punch some other people, and as time went by, I made some connections that would help me. Some people told me I should just stay, but I could never say yes.

If I did, then who would save Lady Hinagiku?

Everyone must've forgotten already, but I never will. Never, ever, ever.

```
"Lady Hinagiku."

I must never forget.

"Lady...Hinagiku."

I'm still looking for you. I know you're waiting for me.

"Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku."

Lady Hinagiku, do you remember me?

"Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku."

I am your sword.

"Lady...Hi...nagiku."

You're not here in my world, but I am still alive.

"Lady Hinagiku..."
```

I haven't forgotten about you, Lady Hinagiku.

"Lady Hinagiku."

In the eighth year, you came back.

But you said you were different. That you weren't the Lady Hinagiku I knew.

That person was already dead, you said; she wouldn't come back; she had been through so much that she couldn't bear it; she died because of it, and you were a new person now. You said that when you were kidnapped, on that eighth year, the head of the, the insurgents, told you to, to, to h-have a, a, a chchi—a, a child, w-with one of th-their subordinates. That the Agents, that they were chosen from your bloodline, and so, maybe, if they had a kid, a kid with your blood, then, they could mass-produce, yeah, mass-produce them, for their side, and then, a new Town would be, that it would be born, so they, they thought, and since you, you already had your period, you could, you could bear a child, already, so, so, so, sosososososo, so th-they they s-said, and, and, you resisted, you fought back, of, of, c-c-course yo-you did, and, and, then, and then, you, you remembered, you remembered me, and that I said, that I would save you, and you cried, you cried, for help, and also, also Rosei, Rosei, Rosei, Rosei said, he said, that he loved you, he said that, but now, now you were there, how could it be, no, ahhh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, ahhh, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO. Ahhh, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, then, then, you...you fought. And you, ahhh...you, my dear, my beloved, because I met you, because I you.

You died, Lady Hinagiku.

You did as your mother said—you endured and waited for the time for battle. You didn't give up; you lived.

Ahhh, you are so admirable. You deserve all the respect in the world. But then something unbearable happened.

And so a new you was born. And she fought in your stead.

It must've been so scary; you must've been so frightened. How I wish I could go back and hold you close then.

Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku. It's okay now. I'll protect you. I'll protect your heart. I'll protect your body.

I will protect you from anyone who tries to make you suffer. Believe me, Lady Hinagiku.

I was looking for you the whole time. I really was.

Because of what you said. You said you would tell me when the peaches softened. You were kind back when we first met; you didn't scold me.

It changed me for the better, Lady Hinagiku. I was a criminal's daughter, a thief, an unneeded child.

But in that moment, you made me your friend.

That's reason enough, Lady Hinagiku.

In the ninth year, it became my duty to heal you.

In summer, you cried over everything.

You couldn't eat your fill. You threw away the plates, saying you didn't want the food. But every time you rejected it, you cried and apologized. You were all over the place, Lady Hinagiku. Everyone killed you. They broke you and scattered the pieces of your body and soul. You were so wounded, you couldn't fully keep up the image of being human. But that's okay; I'm here for you. I won't leave you alone. Come on, let's eat some peaches.

You hadn't noticed since you weren't going outside, but it's already summer.

Do you remember when we first met? Yes, the peaches by that mansion were

still hard.

Let's wait until they soften up, okay, Lady Hinagiku? I'll wait here by your side for as long as I have to.

In autumn, you yelled over everything.

Yes, it was so hard on you. I think you were hurt more by your father's abandonment than the Town's. But don't worry about him. I'll be your family. Or do we have to be related by blood?

I can become anything for you. I can be your blade, your friend, your sister.

It's okay, Lady Hinagiku. Everything will be okay one day.

Look. It's such a beautiful autumn. There's a new Agent of Autumn; they say she's still a child.

Her season is so beautiful. Such a lovely autumn. Let's watch it together next year, too, Lady Hinagiku.

In winter, you needed me for everything.

On a day so cold that it would freeze your eyelashes, you looked for me again, after I was kicked out.

I could never forget that sight or the sound of your wooden clogs as you ran searching for me.

Lady Hinagiku, you've recovered a lot since then. You've made such a huge effort. For a while, you almost gave up on being human.

But you lived.

You're so, so admirable.

You cried so, so many times. And I cried with you.

It was hard cleaning up the food you threw away.

It was hard seeing you hurt yourself.

Every time you said you wanted to die created a rainstorm inside me.

But you lived.

No one praised you for it?

Then I will.

I'll say it in your mother and father's stead.

I will praise you as many times you want. And I'll hug you as many times you want.

If you want me to hold in my heart the memories of the girl who died, while the girl you are lives on, I will do as you wish.

To me, both of them are equally you.

Lady Hinagiku, I can be happy even during winter, if I spend it with you.

Even if the whole world was covered in snow and I couldn't see beyond my nose, it's enough for me to know I can hear your voice.

Is that delusional? Am I sacrificing too much of myself? Are you scared of me?

I'm weak. I can't stand without clinging to you. It's been this way since I was young.

I put on a strong facade, but I'm scared of everything.

I don't want to live. But when I'm with you, I feel stronger.

I'm just an egocentric crybaby, but I can be strong for your sake.

You make me better.

You make me good.

I could fight the whole world for you.

Lady Hinagiku, Lady Hinagiku. We're weak, each of us alone. But together?

I will protect you. And you will bring me spring.

So it's okay. Let's go together. Please lend me your hand.

If you can't walk anymore, I'll carry you on my back. If you feel thirsty, I'll give you my tears to drink.

Please. Take my hand. It can't go on like this. Let's go.

We must show the world who you are.

Don't you feel the same?

We can't let it end like this—experiencing nothing but pain because we are weak.

Let's make the cherry blossoms bloom. Let's bring them spring.

Show everyone who stood on the sidelines and watched. Tell off those who made you suffer.

Let us tell everyone who harmed us:

Ha! Too bad! Take that grin off your face. We're gonna break your fist.

You can't do anything to stop us. We're not weak.

We'll keep on living! And there's nothing you can do about it!

And so little Hinagiku and Sakura's fates intersected with everything on their way back to the present.

Make spring bloom. Bring the season to everyone.

Let it fall upon those who wish tomorrow would never come.

Let it reach those who pray for tomorrow to come.

Make the cherry blossoms dance on the wind. The seasons, and only the seasons, are equal. They all come equally to the good and the bad.

"I am Sakura Himedaka, Guard of Spring. This here is Lady Hinagiku Kayo, this country's Agent of Spring."

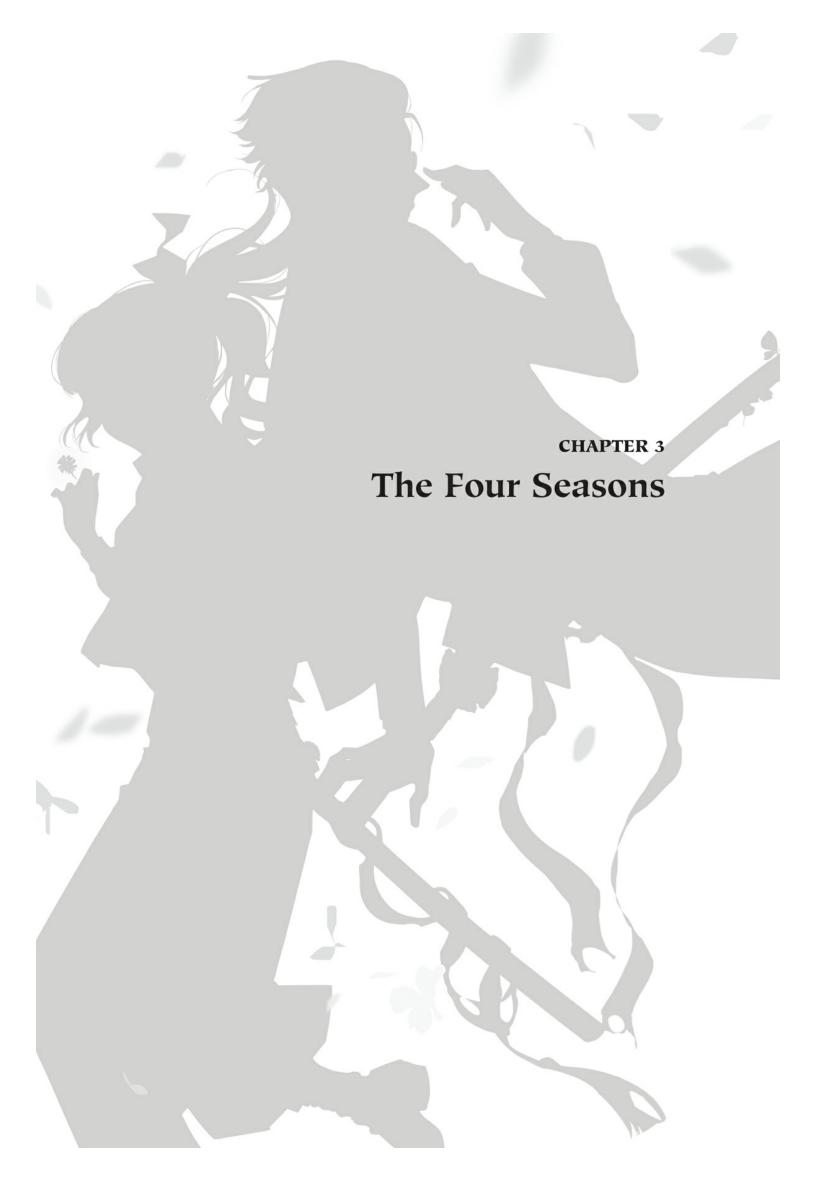
Give them a wonderful season. This shall be our revenge on the world.

"Yes...Hinagiku...Kayo."

Only those who are ready may advance to the coming battlefield.



The ablution of tears is over. It is	now time for the Four Seasons to join in battle.



The Four Seasons Agency was located in the capital of Yamato—Teito, on the island of Teishu.

It looked like any other high-rise building in the big city, but as soon as you stepped inside, it was clear that this was the Agency.

Custom-made chandeliers in the shape of flowers hung from the ceiling at the entrance hall. Healing music with nature sounds of running water and birds chirping was constantly playing. Paintings and sculptures of the Gods of the Four Seasons welcomed the visitors, and the pieces came from all eras of history.

On the nineteenth floor of the Agency building was the hastily created investigation headquarters for the kidnapping of the Agent of Autumn.

National Security promptly put together its home base for investigating the kidnapping, but the Agency supplied its own independent squad to cooperate with the search.

The unexpected arrival had sent the Agency's investigation HQ into an uproar.

A voice sweet as candy but clear as glass echoed through the building.

"Yes...Hinagiku...Kayo."

Hinagiku Kayo, Yamato's only Agent of Spring, had arrived out of nowhere.

The young goddess was as lovely as a flower. Her amber hair waved like a raft of flowers floating on the water, punctuated with a hair ornament in bridal white. She wore a modern *hakama* with a blend of Yamatoan and Western styles. The moment she entered the room, a floral aroma spread through the whole building. Spring had come to the tense offices.

"We're...here...after...receiving the...news, hoping...to be...of help."

She spoke intermittently, like there were cracks in her speech. Her face was

full of anxiety.

Her Guard was a beauty with black hair, another woman who caught the eye.

Her eyes were big like a cat's, carefully observing her surroundings. Or perhaps intimidating the others. Her poise was reminiscent of Winter's retainer, Itecho Kangetsu.

This is the Spring girl who was kidnapped for ten years and her retainer? everyone wondered nervously.

Among the staggered investigators was a woman from the Town of Autumn, a member of the security staff, and she was the first to make a move: Nagatsuki.

"L-Lady Spring, and her distinguished retainer!"

She crushed the paper cup in her hand, which she had forgotten to discard after finishing her coffee, and stood from her work chair. She tottered as she ran up to Hinagiku.

"I-it's a pleasure to meet you...! I'm... My name is Reiko Nagatsuki, member of the Agency. I work in security at the Town...and was in charge of Lady Nadeshiko's security system. My official title is administrator."

She wore a ragged lab coat. Had she showered recently? Did she not have a change of clothes?

She hurriedly brushed her hair with a hand and bowed.

"Ms....Nagatsuki. It's...a pleasure...to meet...you. You must be...worn out... from all...this...tragedy."

Hinagiku lowered her voice as she tried to comfort Nagatsuki. It was a natural thing for one adult to say to another, but she was a girl who had suffered what the Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, was going through now.

That same girl had come in a time of emergency to bring support. The gesture was deeply moving.

"No, I should be the one... U-um, I..."

It had only been a few days since her workplace was attacked. People from the Town of Autumn as well as many other concerned parties had questioned her on the futility of her security system. She was so overwhelmed that she could barely keep the tears in her eyes.

"...Thank you, really, for coming. It's so reassuring to have you here...Lady Spring..."

"Don't...cry. We will...help." Hinagiku softly placed her hand on Nagatsuki's, bringing warmth to her.

"Is the Guard of Autumn here?" Sakura asked with a level of dignity that was surprising for someone her age. "I would like to speak with him." She looked around.

"..."

Meanwhile, Rindo Azami could not react immediately, even after hearing his title.

He wasn't absent-minded—he was so shocked, he couldn't even breathe.

Why are they here?

These two girls were much younger than him.

For what purpose?

The master and retainer of Spring had come all the way to the investigation HQ—he had belittled them just before losing his own master.

Why?

Rindo remained paralyzed, when Nagatsuki called his name.

"Azami!" she shouted, the tears spilling over. "Azami!! C'mere!"

Rindo walked awkwardly toward them and bowed as deeply as he could before the Spring pair.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am the Guard of Autumn...Nadeshiko Iwaizuki's retainer. Rindo Azami."

"Please...raise your...head," Hinagiku said.

He did so, then took a close look at them. Indeed, this was the Agent of Spring. She had the visage of a floral fairy—worthy of the name of the daisy.

I never knew she was this small.

Perhaps it was his tall stature that made him feel this way, but she was quite petite.

And yet she looked much bigger the moment she entered the room.

Perhaps she got that impression due to the aura around a goddess incarnate.

Her Guard was taller than Hinagiku, but still dainty. She was around twenty, if he recalled correctly, but she appeared younger.

Sakura was but a schoolgirl in Rindo's eyes, and yet her posture with the sword on her waist was strong. She was the image of a knight.

They were attacked ten years ago, and they came back this year.

Rindo thought of Nadeshiko's little back. Seeing these two girls here now, he could feel in his bones that they knew what this situation felt like.

He put himself in their shoes and imagined what a tragedy they must've endured.

It had been a week since Nadeshiko was kidnapped. If he were to follow their path, Rindo would have to bear the weight and the regret of failing his Agent and depriving the country of autumn for ten years.

Losing Nadeshiko for ten years.

That thought sent shivers down his spine. He felt worthless. He was already weak and deep enough in despair, but the thought of this continuing for a decade fanned the flames of fear even further.

Imagining a decade of his life without her made him want to give up, but just thinking of that made him want to hang himself. There was no salvation. Only the endless cycle of pain.

Nadeshiko.

It was said a Guard gave their entire life to their Agent, but Rindo hadn't considered getting that deeply involved. He would do the job until his body lasted, and he would raise a successor. Once he was old enough, he would retire. He thought it was the perfect job for him considering his martial arts

skills, but he had no intention of considering the Agent as family. It was only a job.

Nadeshiko.

Or so he used to believe.

He'd never expected to give her his heart.

"Rindo."

The voice of the young Goddess of Autumn wouldn't get out of his head.

Give me my Nadeshiko back.

The sensation of her soft hair tickling his nose as he carried her. Her eyes lit up with full trust.

He was annoyed at her for always calling him for everything. He wanted her to grow up already so she could take care of herself. But now...

My...

How he missed that little girl, who showered him with affection like the falling leaves.

She's my Autumn.

She wouldn't leave his head. Why couldn't he protect her? He knew how lonely she was.

She's my Autumn, so why isn't she with me?

He couldn't even imagine being apart from her back then.

He had never considered what would actually happen if they kidnapped his goddess—how lost and full of despair it would leave him. How ridiculous it was to expect a small child to escape the clutches of the insurgents even with the supernatural powers she had. He'd underestimated the situation.

I was stupid. I couldn't even imagine.

Anyone could say anything when they weren't involved—you should've done this, should've done that. Rindo had been one of those people, too.

But now he could make no excuses.

I had no idea how cruel this was.

Rindo remained lost, paralyzed before the master and retainer of Spring.

Hinagiku and Sakura had responded to his greeting with words of comfort.

Rindo replied awkwardly, "Thank you... You must have traveled far to get here... We don't have a reception room, but I can show you somewhere to sit."

After they greeted the rest of the investigation team, Hinagiku, Sakura, Rindo, and Nagatsuki gathered in another room to talk about the kidnapping.

"We want to know the situation at the time of the attack. We would appreciate it if you could share all records with us."

"...That'll solve nothing..."

Despite Rindo's curt reply, Nagatsuki got them the data at once. She handed over a tablet showing the footage recovered from a security camera that hadn't been destroyed.

"Um, if you...don't mind...could Hinagiku...see it...alone...?" she asked, and the other three said yes.

It must be hard seeing something that reminds her of her own kidnapping.

Rindo found it strange that even then, she wanted to help.

Fortunately, it was an open room with glass walls, so they only had to step out to the hallway to keep her in sight. Sakura, Rindo, and Nagatsuki lined up beside one another and talked.

"Lord Azami, Ms. Nagatsuki, may I speak with a little more detail?"

The two of them nodded awkwardly.

"I am truly sorry for coming without notice. It must've taken you by surprise. The truth is, the two of us are acting on our own, without permission from the Agency or the Town."

"Wha...? Wh-what do you mean?" Nagatsuki asked, her voice cracking.

"I mean just that. We've finished manifesting spring in Enishi and would have to be back to the Town of Spring in Teishu or a villa, but we've come here of our own accord."

"Wh-what?" Nagatsuki screeched again, much to Sakura's amusement.

"We've notified them that the Agent and the Guard of Spring have fulfilled our duties and will now act on our own. The Town of Spring and the Spring Branch of the Agency are essentially fossils still living in the age of the gods—at least compared with the other seasons. So if we were to go through their organization in order to get permission, we would have to wait until next year. We were left with no choice. Our escort is behind us as always, so don't worry about having to get security for us."

"... Why would you go to such lengths?" Rindo asked in a low voice.

"...Lord Azami, it seems you've been suspicious of us from the very beginning."

He easily intimidated other people, and yet Sakura looked into his eyes without flinching.

"Although we're both involved with the seasons, there is no connection between Spring and Autumn in this generation," said Rindo. "There's no reason for you to go this far."

"Don't say that, Azami!" Nagatsuki protested. "They're trying to help!"

"Am I wrong, though? I've been Guard for a short while, but even I know. Autumn did not help with the search for Spring ten years ago. So why would you come here to us now?"

Rindo's speech was revealing more of himself with every word—a sign that he was becoming emotional. He was losing his patience, so much so that he was unable to keep up appearances.

"You're implying we have an ulterior motive?" Sakura asked.

"Yes," Rindo replied. "If you want something out of this, say so now. Money? Something else?"

"Azami!" Nagatsuki said.

"Sadly, Autumn has less of a budget than Spring. I don't think we'd be able to meet any request for money."

There was no stopping him once he got going.

"...Autumn's security department is a laughingstock after they hit us with that missile. Our reputations are through the floor. There's nothing we can give in return at the moment..."

Complicated feelings intertwined in his chest.

This girl was the same one he had belittled while he was safe, and for some reason, she was here in the flesh now that he was in danger. Every single thing that was happening was too much for his inflated ego.

"If you want something, then tell me now... I'm not...saying this just to shoot you down..."

He couldn't save Nadeshiko.

He couldn't do anything without the help of many people.

His position as retainer was very shaky without his Agent.

All these facts were too hard to swallow.

"I want help. I'll do anything..."

Rindo was pouring out his pain to a girl younger than him, to the retainer of Spring he'd belittled.

"...If you can help Nadeshiko... If you can help rescue my Autumn, then I'll give you anything. I'll give you my own kidney if you need it. If you want something that needs preparation, then I'd rather know early on..."

Sakura blinked a couple of times at his frankness. That was not what she expected.

Nagatsuki looked at Sakura with bated breath.

After a while, Sakura smiled.

"Lord Azami," she said with a firm voice. "You have guts fit for a retainer. I like

you."

She sounded sincere. Sakura rarely smiled at anyone other than Hinagiku. However, this smile was not filled with kindness.

He's not bad to have as a collaborator.

She was satisfied by her appraisal of his potential. She gazed straight into Rindo's eyes. "...Yes, we have a goal," she said.

Rindo looked surprised at the response.

Sakura's smile widened. "However, it's probably not what you're thinking about. We aren't doing this out of pity, but I'm not looking for a reward, either. There are many factors involved. Let me make one thing clear, though... We will not ask for anything in return from Autumn for helping this time. We are taking part in this battle to get revenge after what happened ten years ago. It will be the insurgents who will pay."

Rindo's eyes widened at the sound of the word battle.

Is this war?

He finally realized why this teenage girl appeared to have an ulterior motive in mind.

This is a war for them, and it's not over yet, is it?

Rindo was able to immediately understand the meaning behind her short statement; he was in the same position.

Who was the source of this humiliation and despair? Who else but the kidnappers?

Hinagiku Kayo was back, but the loss born from the tragedy hadn't disappeared.

She had many wounds unhealed—but she didn't show them on the surface.

This Guard of Spring had a strong will to be this firm and direct with an older man—and twice as much of a thirst for revenge as most people.

Their battle against the insurgents was not over yet.

The grudge from the ten lost years still remained. So these two girls jumped

at the chance to get retribution.

It was no lie that they wanted to rescue Autumn, but that wasn't all. Basically, for them, rescuing Autumn would mean avenging their past.

"Now then...I believe I will get your trust more easily if I'm frank with you, so I will be... Lord Azami, I understand your suspicions, but don't say the same thing to Summer, okay? They are doing it entirely out of the goodness of their heart. Lady Ruri won't allow anyone to be distrusting of her goodwill, and if we have led you to be so, our own reputation will suffer. Please be careful. Oh... but I don't mind if you don't trust Winter. I don't care how people talk about them."

Rindo and Nagatsuki listened to Sakura, until something she said made them wonder.

"...Huh? Lady Himedaka, you..."

"Wait, did I just hear that right? You mean Winter and Summer?"

"Yes. It won't only be Spring participating in this war. Winter and Summer are coming."

Nagatsuki couldn't contain her excitement and slapped Rindo's arm.

Having all four seasons help out with a search like this was unheard of.

"...You've gotta be kidding," Rindo said.

"You wish I was kidding? Isn't it better to have more people on the search?" Sakura tilted her head.

Rindo felt his heart skip a beat at the way she was looking up at him. Her eyes were so enchanting.

"No, I mean, you're right...," he said.

"Maybe Spring wouldn't have been lost if they did the same ten years ago."

"...But we're not close to any of the other seasons..."

"We can begin to deepen that bond now. Feel free to stay away from Winter, though."

"...But the others don't have any reason to help..."

"...I already told you! It's not for you!"

Sakura glanced at Hinagiku before returning her gaze to Rindo. She placed her hands on her hips and furrowed her brow.

"You don't understand, do you? Listen, Lord Azami. This is a critical moment! We need you to pull yourself together, accept the situation, and help us move forward! You just said that Lady Nadeshiko Iwaizuki is *your* Autumn. You are Autumn's retainer, Guard, and servant—you live for Lady Nadeshiko! If you want your Autumn back, then you need to take the lead. I am only setting the stage. *You* are the one who will have to make good use of the materials we gathered! If you're this indecisive, then the people who actually are looking to profit will be taking the lead instead! There's nothing to assure us that no one here will be getting cozy with others and manipulating them into taking your place. Those people won't do anything themselves, either. You think they can save Lady Nadeshiko? It has to be someone who truly wants to save her, or they won't take the best approach! So get a grip!"

Rindo had nothing to say to that.

It hurts, but she's right.

Sakura had gone through all this when she was nine.

After letting the adults take care of things, she had been at their mercy, and Spring ended up stopping the search after three months. That history gave weight to her words.

Not to mention her face and voice had a strength that made it impossible for him to dismiss her argument as a little girl's protests.

"Lord Azami!" Sakura barked. "Do you want to save her?!"

"...Yes!"

Sakura continued her encouragement like a hot-blooded coach. "Then use us to get her back! You said you would sell your organs for that, didn't you?!"

"Y-yes."

"Then show me what you're made of! Do it for your girl!"

What's with this chick?

It hadn't been an hour since he met her, and already, he knew he could never defeat her.

"...Fine, fine! I'll show you what I'm made of! We'll save my Nadeshiko!" Rindo finally replied with resolve, and Sakura reacted with a satisfied sigh.

Rindo was even less sure how to approach her now, but Nagatsuki's eyes were shining.

"Lady Himedaka...! I-I'm... That means so much to us...! Even if Azami gets cold feet halfway through, I will save the Fairy—er, Nadeshiko!"

"Hey, I'm not getting cold feet."

"Now we're talking," said Sakura. "Don't let any good-for-nothings take the lead, Ms. Nagatsuki. Lord Azami, this is what we need. Passion drives morale."

"There's no one with more passion to save Nadeshiko than..." Rindo stopped himself as Hinagiku showed her face from the door.

"...Are you...arguing?"

Sakura's heated coaching had been misinterpreted; Hinagiku appeared worried.

"No, not at all." Sakura immediately switched over to the kind smile reserved only for Hinagiku. "I would never. We just got a bit too excited talking about the line of command. What did you think of the footage, Lady Hinagiku?"

Rindo was baffled by how quickly and sharply she changed.

"Um... It was...that person," Hinagiku said, and Sakura's smile disappeared.

"Really...?" she asked with a blank expression.

Hinagiku nodded. "Yes. There's no...doubt. The face...is covered...but you can...tell from...the complexion."

Distress colored Hinagiku's expression, and she drew closer to Sakura. It really was hard on her to see something that reminded her of the past.

Sakura held Hinagiku's waist comfortingly. "...I see. Lady Hinagiku, could you explain this to the members of the investigation HQ?"

"Yes... Hinagiku will...try. That's...why we're...here. Should we...do it...now? It

could...take a...while."

"We can't have you repeating that over and over, so let's get everything in order first."

The Autumn pair were again confused by Spring's conversation. Sakura realized they were forgetting where they were and hurriedly got away from Hinagiku before straightening her posture.

"Sorry for leaving you out of the loop...," she said, facing Rindo and Nagatsuki. "She confirmed that the leader of the insurgents was there. It's a famous activist, who is also on the wanted list."

"Seriously?!"

"Yes. It's the same person who got in contact at the time of Lady Hinagiku's kidnapping. We could get the investigation reports from Spring and Winter, but I believe it would be better to ask National Security for the most recent documents. Is there someone who can take care of that?"

"I'll do it!"

"Thank you, Ms. Nagatsuki. This ringleader is the head of New Year, the biggest insurgent organization in the country. They call her Gozen. Besides being a terrorist against the Four Seasons, she is also an environmental activist, so you could research her from that side as well."

"...The head of New Year...Gozen," Nagatsuki murmured. "I'm not well-informed, but I know of her. Okay. I'll gather the documents. Azami, get the investigators to share the intel."

"...Got it. Lady Kayo, thank you so much for the valuable information. I will... pay you back one day...and I appreciate your cooperation."

Rindo began to bow at the waist, but Hinagiku stopped his head, then softly pushed it back up. Rindo looked up in confusion, and his eyes met the Spring fairy's.

"Um...Lady Kayo?" His voice cracked with anxiety.

Although she was pure and noble, she had this curious, bewitching air about her. Rindo was accustomed to interacting with a goddess, but her touch, her gaze still left him spellbound.

"Please...don't...lower your...head."

Unaware of Rindo's internal turmoil, Hinagiku combed her fingers through his hair.

Hinagiku was quite a bit younger than him, but it was a motherly gesture.

"You're...doing...every...thing you can to...find her. Please...don't lower your... head."

Anyone who knew him would be shocked by this haggard version of him.

He typically took good care of his appearance, yet he hadn't even gone for a proper bath after a succession of all-nighters, and he was looking pale. He had bags under his eyes, and who knew how many days he had used the same shirt under his suit? He normally acted perfect, but now he was falling apart at the seams. And despite his disheveled appearance, Hinagiku, a teenager, had reached out and grabbed him without a moment of hesitation.

"Lord Azami... You're...in pain."

She was saying what he wouldn't dare admit.

"You're...in so much...pain."

Rindo's mouth was agape.

Hinagiku kept on patting him, as though trying to soothe a wounded beast.

"Hinagiku is...also in...pain."

It must have been thanks to her Guard, Sakura Himedaka, that she was able to spare so much concern for Rindo.

After rejecting the world, Hinagiku had been shocked to see the state Sakura was in when they reunited.

The once-beautiful blade was now chipped and rusty.

This was how great a loss her retainer had suffered. And she could see that suffering in Rindo now. It brought her a rush of emotion—the desire to support him.

"Maybe...this was why...Hinagiku...came...back."

Hinagiku's voice was suffused with determination. Duty was clear in her every word and motion. This did not come from a place of a reckless sense of justice.

She had a mission as the girl who was kidnapped ten years ago. She would not let that tragedy repeat itself.

"It has...to. Hinagiku...was...an...unneeded...child. Even if...Hinagiku never... came back...a replacement...would be...born. It didn't...have to...be...Hinagiku."

Sakura glanced at her with sadness.

She knew Hinagiku felt that way about herself, but as her friend and retainer, Sakura hated to hear her talk this way after climbing back to her feet.

Meanwhile, there was no sorrow in Hinagiku. "The Agents...are...tools. Nobody...cares...about the...person...in the role."

She looked at Rindo straight in the eye. This was unlike her usual weak-kneed, fainthearted self.

"There...was a...time...Hinagiku...wished...to die."

Her hand on Rindo's head was small and soft, but it was also strong, filled with the desire to protect.

"Because...then...everyone...would be...better off."

She didn't mind hurting herself with her own words at a moment like this. What mattered now was what she wanted to convey—the thoughts behind her gaze as she met his eyes.

"But...Hinagiku...lived."

She had lived on despite the hardships. Many times, she wished to die.

But she never threw herself away. She lived, and that was why she could help the people drowning in sadness, too. She didn't want anything but to let them be happy. "And...Hinagiku's glad...to be alive."

That was the wish of Hinagiku Kayo, carried to stubborn Rindo through the warmth of her fingers, the heat of her eyes, and every little gesture.

"Spring...isn't the only thing...Hinagiku...can do...with her life. Hinagiku can... help with things...that aren't just...what every...one wants."

She was not there for fun or just to feel superior. Although Sakura had called it a quest for revenge, Hinagiku's reasons were more altruistic. At the very least, it sounded that way to Rindo.

"Hinagiku...only does...what is...natural. Don't...lower your...head. You are... suffering the...most now. Please...count on...us."

Rindo had despaired at everything and lost his trust.

"We don't...need any...thing in exchange. We will...be happy...just to see... Lady...Nadeshiko...back. Really...that is...all."

And now Hinagiku's gentle presence felt warm, like spring itself thawing the snow.

"Thank you...so much, Lady Kayo."

Tears rolled down Rindo's cheeks.

"Let's go...get her...back."

Rindo thought it was unmanly to cry, but Hinagiku didn't seem to care as she wiped his tears away with a finger, then fixed his hair, which was falling down on his face, with the same motion.

"Lord...Azami, a retainer...is an Agent's...source of...light. Lady...Nadeshiko... must be...waiting for...you. Do not...give up."

"...I won't."

The girl's pure kindness made Rindo's heart ache.

"Now then, Lady Hinagiku..." Jealous, Sakura tried to pry her hands away from Rindo, but then an investigator arrived.

He seemed confused by Rindo's tears, but he gave his report. "Um, excuse me for interrupting you. We've just received word that the Lady Summer is arriving

at the reception on the first floor! She will be stopping by the investigation HQ in a moment..."

The investigator's confusion grew as he spoke, as he was surrounded by people crying in empathy. Nagatsuki didn't care about her makeup running as she rubbed her eyes and reacted quickly.

"We've just heard they would be coming. Get ready to welcome her! Have you heard anything about Winter?"

"I heard that Winter is having trouble with their Town and will be arriving later than planned," said Sakura. "But they will come."

Nagatsuki nodded. "We'll hold a debriefing without Winter, then. We have new intel on the ringleader thanks to the Lady Spring, so we need to share that ASAP. Can we get a big meeting room from the Agency?"

"I'll look into it," the investigator said before leaving.

It was as though time itself had unfrozen. Suddenly, it was a whirlwind.

"Azami, I'll take care of the documentation and sharing the intel," said Nagatsuki. "Can you welcome the Agent? She should be arriving via elevator from the first-floor lobby. Wait for her right outside the elevator!"

"A-all right."

Rindo wiped his tears away with the sleeve of his worn-out suit. "I'll receive them. What about you, Spring?"

"...We'll receive them, too, of course," Sakura replied. "Wouldn't want to be there for Winter, but I can welcome Summer."

"Um, Lady Himedaka...you've been taking every chance you can to snipe at Winter... Do you hate them?"

"Yes, I do. The sniping is basically a force of habit, so just ignore it if you please. Let's go now."

When Ruri and Ayame arrived, they ran up to Sakura and Hinagiku with a smile the moment they saw them.

And so Spring, Summer, and Autumn gathered, leaving only Winter.

Three pillars—the Towns of the Four Seasons, National Security, and the Four Seasons Agency—all worked together toward the same goal of finding the Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

Needless to say, the Towns of the Four Seasons were a gathering point of the bloodlines that produced the Agents.

National Security was the government organization that held the power to police the country.

The Four Seasons Agency was involved with managing the country, but it was not a government agency.

For a time, there had been a plan to rename it the Ministry of Rites and bring it under government control, but due to a few issues, interferences, and conflicts of interest, it stayed an independent organization.

The country of Yamato wished for its citizens' lives to become plentiful through the cycle of the seasons and gave its full support to the Four Seasons Agency, and the latter, in return, collaborated with the Towns of the Four Seasons to bring the seasons to the country.

Such was the relationship between National Security, the Four Seasons Agency, and the Towns of the Four Seasons.

The Four Seasons Agency was the organization that managed all the seasons, but their work varied between Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter.

Staff wages and budgets were not equal. Winter was the highest, then Spring was second. Summer and Autumn were even. One's career prospects also depended on the season branch one was assigned to. The inequality was, in

part, a product of the power balance in the original myth, and this led to some hostility among the organizations in the modern era. The budgeting meetings held every year were colloquially referred to as "the budget wars."

The best way to understand the arrangement was as four organizations that were within a bigger one and did not get along with one another.

Since each branch had its own season, their busiest terms varied, too.

All staff had a title like *Four Seasons Agency, XX Division, XX Department—Winter Branch* that included their assigned season. For example, the department in charge of the yearly-manifestation schedule for the Agents was the Secretarial Department of the Rites Division. They were also responsible for other yearly events, such as the Agency Council.

The Human Resources Department of the General Affairs Division supported all the Agency staff in their work. The Furnishings Department of the General Affairs Division was in charge of equipment management. The Security Department of the Maintenance Division aided in the defense of the Agents themselves.

It was the Intel Department of the Maintenance Division within the Autumn Branch that had set up the investigation HQ this time.

During normal times, this department focused on developing systems to optimize operations; they also provided intel and backup to the Security Department, who were on the front lines protecting the Agents. During emergencies, such as an insurgent attack like this, the Security Department cooperated with National Security to solve the case. Neither National Security nor the Four Seasons Agency had priority—they were equal and entirely separate entities.

In the end, the Four Seasons Agency was quite similar to a government organization, but it obstinately retained its current form mainly due to the stubborn belief that they would not be subordinate to anyone, not even the government.

The Four Seasons Agency, as well as its collaborators, the Towns of the Four Seasons, wanted to remain mystical and unreachable to both the people and the government bigwigs.

There were times when this system complicated attempts to coordinate with National Security.

The biggest case was ten years back, when the Spring Branch's Security Department of the Maintenance Division decided to end the search after three months. The official reasons were the investigation HQ's budgeting difficulties and lack of manpower, but rumors told a different story.

The kidnapped Agent of Spring was the granddaughter of the Townchief, her father was a candidate for Townchief successor, and her mother, the former Agent of Spring, had killed herself. The Town of Spring, ashamed of Kobai Yukiyanagi's scandals and her daughter's selection as Agent, tried to cut off ties with them and hoped that a less problematic Agent would be born.

These were only rumors, but the Town of Spring and the Spring Branch of the Agency had a reputation that made them believable. People on the outside considered them capable of coldly abandoning their kidnapped progeny.

The Spring Branch's Intel Department, which was within the Maintenance Division, threw its responsibility of finding the kidnapped Agent to the Town of Winter and National Security. The Town of Winter, said to be at fault for the kidnapping, joined the Winter Branch's Intel Department to set up a new investigation HQ, while National Security continued its search. After five years, the investigation was downscaled, and even though they never found her, the Agent of Spring, Hinagiku Kayo, escaped from the insurgent hideout by herself and returned alive.

Currently, the Security Department was asking around near the Autumn villa.

The Intel Department staff, who were desk workers to begin with; Rindo and Nagatsuki, who'd been temporarily transferred to the HQ from the Town of Autumn, had been left behind. Then the master and retainer of Spring arrived.

The news lit a fire among the investigators.

With no prospects for getting the kidnapped girl back, they had lost momentum, but now the Agents of the Four Seasons had arrived.

Hope filled their hearts at the idea of Hinagiku Kayo, survivor of the kidnapping ten years ago, and her retainer coming to help. They all gathered

with high expectations in the meeting room.

Inside, people crowded around the augmented-reality projector screen at the center.

"Agent of Summer, Lady Ruri Hazakura, and her Guard, Ayame Hazakura, have come here from the Town of Summer."

Although everyone knew about them, Nagatsuki gave introductions in case anyone present hadn't met them firsthand. Rindo had recovered his usual poise as he stood beside her. Sakura's words of encouragement had worked.

"Lastly, I want to thank the ones who put together this collaboration. From the Town of Spring—the Agent of Spring, Lady Hinagiku Kayo, and her Guard, Lady Sakura Himedaka. You have all our gratitude for gathering here for the search of our Agent of Autumn."

"The investigators already know us, but allow us to introduce ourselves, too. I am the Guard of the Town of Autumn, Rindo Azami. This here by my side is Administrator Reiko Nagatsuki, from the Security Department... Now then, let's cut to the chase. There has been no statement or request for negotiations with the government from the insurgents this time. The investigation is not seeing any progress since the attackers were wearing combat suits and little to identify them. We have this bit of intel from Lady Kayo, however."

Right after his introduction, Rindo turned on the projector screen to open the footage they had just received. All chairs and desks had been taken out of the room, so everyone could gather around the augmented-reality image projected into the air.

"This is who we believe to be the ringleader. The head of New Year, an insurgent organization of reformists: Misuzu Henderson. Also known as Gozen."

He showed images of a woman with long, wavy, black hair. In the first, she was striding confidently forward, wearing big sunglasses; in the second, she was wearing a combat uniform and holding a gun; in the third, she was getting on

what appeared to be a private jet. All these were taken in secret.

If the pictures were recent, then she seemed to be in her early thirties. All the photos captured her model-like proportions.

"Her father was the former head of New Year, and she's taken up the mantle. Before she started commanding New Year, she was an arms dealer thanks to her mother's connections, and she's also been making full use of that background."

It was possible to procure a gun even in Yamato if you looked underground, but you needed special routes and trust as a buyer in order to get a guided missile like the one used in the attack on the Autumn villa.

She was a thoroughbred, with the blood of her radical insurgent father and her arms-dealer mother in her veins. She was the perfect leader for her allies—and the worst possible enemy.

"She's been sighted in recent years as an environmental activist, and the Maritime Defense Forces has their eyes on her. She was also involved in Lady Kayo's kidnapping ten years ago. Lady Kayo..."

Hinagiku nodded when her name was said.

"...if you have any intel on Gozen or New Year, please..."

Everyone turned toward Hinagiku.

Her face stiffened, but she mustered the courage to open her mouth.

"I don't...know...much...about...the people...of...New Year. They...have a...lot... of...turnover. Too...much."

"Does that mean they lack strong leadership? Considering how quickly they acted and retreated, I can't believe they're lacking in unity, though."

Hinagiku listened carefully to Rindo's response before nodding.

"They...are very...united. But...it's...different...from...the way...we're...united... here."

Hinagiku struggled through her words, unaccustomed to speaking in front of so many people.

"Misuzu—oh, um, Hinagiku…called…Gozen…Misuzu. Misuzu…is…very… smart…but also…very…scary. When…she gets…angry…it's like…the air… around…starts…shaking. And she…punches. She…treats…her sub…ordinates… like…tools. So…only…those who…can stand…that…remain…in the…group."

One of the investigators in the meeting room jumped in. "Ten years ago, New Year got in contact with the government to negotiate. It appears she was their head even back then."

The investigator looked at Hinagiku and Sakura. The latter nodded in confirmation.

The investigator continued. "The Four Seasons Agency has been looking for her whereabouts ever since. No info on her education has been found, so it is highly likely her public name is also fake. Currently, New Year is one of the most influential and radical insurgent factions. However, they were not widely known ten years ago. It was thanks to Misuzu Henderson's leadership that they succeeded in their attack against the Town of Winter. Later investigations show that the organization underwent a major reform once Misuzu took over. Her ten-year reign so far demonstrates why the former head gave the organization over to his daughter."

A murmur rose among the investigation team.

"U-um...there's...one more...thing." Hinagiku shyly raised her hand, and everyone went quiet immediately. "...It's...very likely...that...Lady Nadeshiko... won't be...in danger...right away."

"Really?!" Rindo exclaimed with joy.

"Yes, um...but that...doesn't mean...it's good..."

"What do you mean ...?"

"Misuzu's...goal...must be...to make...Lady Nadeshiko...her daughter."

"...What?"

"She wants...to pamper her...like...her own...daughter. That's...her goal. At least...that's...how it...was with...Hinagiku."

The room temperature dropped.

Why had Hinagiku Kayo not been killed after so many years in captivity?

Whenever she was the topic of conversation, the question was inevitable.

One could come up with various reasons why she hadn't been killed immediately after negotiations with the government failed.

Maybe they abused her?

Maybe they put her to work using her Spring powers?

Maybe they wanted to waste her life by keeping her prisoner?

One could take a million guesses.

Naturally, she had given the answer to National Security. There was one truth, but only a few people knew it.

It was too painful for her to mention it herself.

The mere thought of hearing it from her mouth sent shivers down everyone's spines.

"Lady...Nadeshiko...is still...young, right? About...seven? That's...the perfect... age. Hinagiku...thinks...she's...being shaped...into...Misuzu's...daughter."

Hinagiku spoke plainly. There was no sadness or pity in her voice. She tried to keep as calm as possible as she alluded to her own painful experiences.

The most bewildered one in the room was Rindo. "Nadeshiko... The Agent of Autumn is being made into the kidnapper's daughter?!" A bead of sweat ran down his forehead.

"Yes. They...attacked...the Autumn...villa. So violently...the Agent...could've... died, right?"

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"Yes..."
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[&]quot;But...they...took Lady...Nadeshiko...away."

[&]quot;But..."

"She was...still...alive. Still...breathing. Still...a little...girl. Misuzu...lost her...own child...before. She said...she was...very...very...sad. That...there was...nothing... sadder... Compared with...that sadness...nothing else...mattered...to her. Hinagiku is...sure that...when she...saw Lady...Nadeshiko...she thought..." Hinagiku frowned. "I want her..."

The soft words sent a chill over Rindo's skin.

She wants Nadeshiko?

It was useless directing his anger at Hinagiku, but he couldn't stop himself from fuming.

A child who isn't hers? And one of the country's gods incarnate on top of that? Rindo couldn't comprehend.

"An insurgent woman—someone who hates the Agents—wants one as her daughter? Misuzu may seem to be a strong leader, but surely that would invite opposition."

"New Year...is a group of...reformists. As you say...many people...had their... doubts...regarding her...but...she was...welcomed. Hinagiku...has the...power of...Life Stimulation. And...because of...that...they were...welcoming. Autumn... has...Life Putrefaction...right?"

"Yes. She can make anything decay, the same way the trees lose their color. But she can also absorb life itself, both to wound and to heal. Nadeshiko isn't yet good at handling her divine powers...but she absorbed someone else's life to heal herself after she was mortally wounded. We have footage of that, although there is no sound. And the biggest proof of her survival is that no successor has been born. You've seen the footage in question, right, Lady Hinagiku?"

"Yes. Which...is why...Hinagiku thinks...that they...probably...took her...after... seeing her...do that. Misuzu...said...that she...also took...Hinagiku...after she... saw the...cherry tree...manifesting. She didn't kill...Hinagiku...because...she thought...Hinagiku would be...useful...and they...kept Hinagiku...safe...while... using...the powers."

"...What did they make you use your powers for?"

Hinagiku kept silent, hesitating for a few moments before opening her mouth again. "They...made Hinagiku...create...cannabis...the whole...time."

What's cannabis? Rindo wondered.

Nagatsuki told him it was the scientific name for marijuana.

Marijuana was an addictive plant prohibited in Yamato. Sale as well as production of it was deemed detrimental to its users' mind and body. Although it was also utilized for medical treatment, governmental medical organizations made the supply for those cases. The insurgents' production was, needless to say, illegal.

"You mean those heretics made the Agent of Spring grow marijuana?"

"Yes. And since...Hinagiku...made it...it's...special. It can...sell for...a lot, they said. It's, um... What was it...? Additional...?"

"Value added, Lady Hinagiku," Sakura offered.

Hinagiku nodded. "Yes, value added. It...became a...major source...of income. So even if...Misuzu said...some weird...things, no one...really...cared, since...they were...making...a lot of...money. They must...be planning...to use...Lady... Nadeshiko...for something like that."

"...This is unbelievable..." Rindo fumed. "You were only six!"

Hinagiku flinched.

"Oh, excuse me. I am not mad at you, of course."

"Are you...angry...Lord Azami?"

"I'm not, I'm not. Sorry. Did I scare you?"

Sakura couldn't bear to see Rindo frightening the younger girl with his futile indignation. "...If I may, for the sake of Lady Hinagiku's honor—she was forced to do this, as you pointed out. She's not been charged with any crime. No matter what, she will not be judged, as she is not a criminal... Please keep this in mind. Now then, let's get back on topic. May we, Lord Azami?"

"Y-yeah... So the insurgent woman makes the Agents of the Four Seasons her children...and also uses them as tools. I can only say that that is insane, but I

suppose I must take it as a fact in order to move on..."

"Yes... It's...nothing...strange...for...Misuzu..."

Rindo could never comprehend such a way of thinking. He couldn't stand the idea of Nadeshiko being in the middle of such insanity.

"Um, Lord...Azami. You can...rest assured...that Lady...Nadeshiko...should be... all right...for the...time being."

"...So they won't kill her right away?"

"No. So long...as Lady...Nadeshiko...obeys...Misuzu..."

Rindo covered his mouth with a hand. He wasn't sure that his master would understand her situation the same way Hinagiku did. Would she obey?

As though reading his mind, Nagatsuki gave him some words of encouragement. "Azami, it's okay. I'm sure she'll cooperate. She'll believe you're coming to rescue her. You are her Prince Charming."

"...I hope so...," said Rindo. "Lady Kayo, did you move much around the country after you were kidnapped? Do you have any guesses as to where Nadeshiko could be now?"

"Probably...inside...the country."

"Why do you think so?"

"After...Hinagiku was...kidnapped...and negotiations...with the...government... fell through, Misuzu...continued...working with...New Year...for a...while... before...going...overseas. She left...a man called...Mikami...in charge of...New Year...in the meantime. But...we returned...right away. She didn't...like it. I don't...think she'll...go over...seas. Um, by the...way...you write...Mikami's... name...with the...characters for...beauty...and...up."

Nagatsuki browsed her tablet to bring up the camera feed of the attack on the Autumn villa. Hinagiku pointed at a man with foxlike eyes.

"That's...him. Mikami. The...thin man...with the...hunched back."

Rindo didn't doubt her, but he still commented, "You recognized him easily."

"Because...he's the...person who's...been by...Hinagiku's...side...the most. You

could...tell...the one...closest to you...walking...at a distance...couldn't you?"

Rindo had no response; he only nodded. He would be able to recognize someone he'd lived with for a long time, even far away.

But he's your kidnapper.

Mikami wasn't *close* in the sense that most used the word—still, Rindo refrained from pointing that out.

"Mikami...seemed to...care a lot...for...Misuzu."

If Hinagiku recalled correctly, she had spent about one or two years with Misuzu overseas.

Comparing that to the data, New Year was comparatively less active during that time; there were no real incidents to speak of. Mikami was more cautious than Misuzu. Considering how he kept a low profile while his boss was away, he didn't seem the kind to plan mutiny. Misuzu didn't seem one to allow rebellion, either. It was reasonable to assume there was trust between them.

"The reason...we went...overseas...was because...Misuzu's...mother...passed away...and Misuzu...had to...take over...some of her...stuff. Misuzu...fought... arms dealers...for territory...and soon...became tired...of it...so she...left her... younger sister...to take over...and came...back to...Yamato. Then she spoke...of how...Yamato was...the best...and traveled...all over...the country. She said...she didn't...want to...leave...ever again, so...she should...be...here."

"Okay, now, let me put this question out there." Ruri raised her hand. "You think it was also New Year that struck the Summer villa?"

Sakura was the one to answer. "It's highly likely. We could also assume it was them who blew up the power plant. This wasn't brought up back then, but part of the power plant near the Town of Winter was also destroyed during the attack. It's just that it was during noon and the prominent damage was only a shutdown in cell phone lines. Because of that, the Town of Winter couldn't call for backup, and there was a delay in detecting the incident."

Sakura showed no emotion on her face, but everyone present knew how her words pained her. Her voice was sharp.

"Our saving grace was that neighboring National Security maintenance staff came immediately after the outage. We got them to radio for an ambulance... but if Lady Hinagiku hadn't made a deal with the kidnappers, New Year would've stayed for longer and injured the maintenance staff. We wouldn't have gotten treatment for the wounded quickly enough..."

Hinagiku smiled a little at that part.

"Then we should assume that all cases are related," Sakura continued. "Which means..."

Ruri, who was wearing a simple dress, crossed her arms and bluntly finished the sentence. "We have a traitor on our hands. There's gotta be a spy."

Her cutting remark left the room deafeningly silent. Rindo and Nagatsuki grimaced. They had no way of knowing whether such a person existed—or whether they were in this very room.

"Yeah, probably." Sakura nodded calmly.

We can't discard the idea that someone had a hand in what happened ten years ago.

She was intent on drawing out the traitors eventually. "But we should focus on rescuing Lady Nadeshiko now, rather than uncovering a culprit."

"I agree. It's likely we could find out in the course of solving that case. We're currently interrogating the insurgents we captured after the attack on the Summer villa." Ayame spoke as calmly as she could.

This reminded Sakura of the person she had cut down. They were likely in critical condition, but not dead. After hearing how Ayame was dealing with them, Sakura was once again reminded that taking a life was not something done lightly.

"I'm sure...there must be multiple insiders who can sell intel," Ayame said as she looked around, almost like a stage actress.

Who knew if a spy was present there? But if there was, perhaps their allies could keep them in check or even smoke them out.

Sakura, secretly impressed, continued the conversation: "Lady Ruri, I asked

you to investigate the Autumn villa before coming here. What were the results?"

"Yeah, I asked the birds and other animals living nearby, and they lost track of them at the Tsukushi airport. Oh, ummm, for those who don't know, I can tame and talk with animals and insects with my Life Operation power. Perfect for searching, but there's nothing I can do once they get into a plane."

"What about the car nearby when they attacked the villa? I remember you mentioned it after the attack."

"You have a good memory, Lady Sakura. I also lost track of that at the airport. If the car also belonged to the insurgents, then their home base must be somewhere out of Iyo or Tsukushi. It'd be strange to take a plane if they had a hideout nearby...so it's probably in Enishi or Teishu. Though, there's also the possibility that they've gone overseas while the commotion cools down..."

Since there had been no communication with the culprits, they had to rethink their approach and range of investigation.

The meeting continued.

Meanwhile, the Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, was still in a deep sleep within her prison.

Nadeshiko didn't quite possess the quintessential Yamatoan beauty—she seemed to have Western blood in her. Still, she looked like a doll as she slept. Her blood-soaked body had been cleaned up, and she was wearing a child's yukata robe. She wasn't exactly kept in poor conditions, as sanitary concerns were taken care of, but her living space was not what you would call comfortable.

At long last, she woke up drowsily and noticed no one else was there in the quiet room.

She could only see bare concrete walls and blood-transfusion equipment.

She knew immediately this wasn't her Autumn villa. The first thing she did was call the name of the man she cared for more than anything in the world.

"Rindo..." Her voice was dry and raspy. "Rindo, Rindo."

She called his name again and again, but she received no response.

She tried the name of her babysitter. Then the names of the guards she remembered, one by one.

"..."

No one replied, much to Nadeshiko's fear.

No one's here?

The Town of Autumn's Security Department had twenty-four-hour surveillance.

The system was set up so that Nadeshiko would receive some sort of reaction within sixty seconds of her calling anyone's name. A reply would come from the room's speakers, and someone would rush to her side. Whether the reason was that she had a nightmare or she was hungry, she'd get a sincere response every time.

Nadeshiko was raised by parents who were elite staff of the Four Seasons Agency.

After her powers manifested and she became an Agent, her parents entrusted her upbringing to the Town of Autumn. Ever since, she had been seeing them on birthdays and other such holidays or anniversaries.

Nadeshiko did not feel discontent, because the adults in charge had an integral management system in place. But it wasn't working now.

The window was broken.

The last thing she saw was the shower of glass shards—something must've happened after that.

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".....Mgh..."
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Terrified, Nadeshiko stifled her sobs. She tried to get up from the bed, but

then she realized a band of some sort was holding her belly down. She struggled, but it wouldn't budge. The immobility only escalated her fear.

"...Fweh... Ngh... Bwuh... Rindo... Ri...Rindo...!" Nadeshiko wailed as she tried looking for help again. She then found a security camera on the ceiling, just as they had in the Autumn villa.

Nadeshiko turned to face it. "H-help me..."

She cried for help for a while, but nothing happened.

The only sounds in the silent room came from her clothes and her restraints rubbing against each other. The only bright thing in there was the blood pack hanging from the IV stand.

"...Help me. Help me."

It was one hour before someone visited the room. There was no clock, so it felt like three, maybe five hours to her. She had cried so much by the time the man and the woman arrived that there were tearstains on her cheeks.

"Gozen, we'll be going soon, so keep the talk to three minutes, please."

The man had a slightly hunched back and gloomy visage.

"...You're so impatient."

Meanwhile, the woman had lustrous black hair. She wore a comforting smile, but the man's scowl remained as his eyes met Nadeshiko's.

"...Nadeshiko Iwaizuki... That's you, right?" the woman asked.

Nadeshiko shuddered upon hearing her name.

"Don't be afraid... Um, are you finding the room temperature all right?"

"Huh...?"

"Is it too cold? Too hot?"

She seemed like a kind adult at first glance.

"My... The transfusion isn't complete. Who was keeping an eye on her?"

But something felt wrong. The woman's actions were too much. Her expression, her bearing, the movement of her hands—it all seemed a bit

exaggerated, and even her voice sounded like she was playing a character.

"...I'll have a talk with them later, Gozen."

"Take care of it, Mikami. Sorry, Nadeshiko. Someone will be coming to take that needle out later. You must want to go to the bathroom, too... Oh, but maybe you're hungry? Gee, and I have to leave right after this; I need someone to take care of her properly..."

She didn't seem trustworthy, but she seemed more empathetic than the man.

Nadeshiko mustered her courage and said, "...Where am I?"

She timidly asked the question that had been in her head the whole time.

The woman gave a soft smile—a charming smile. "I can't tell you where this is, sorry. That's confidential. But think of it as your house..."

"Who are you ...?"

"I'm Misuzu Henderson. The boss...well, the mom of the house. I'm at the top, so if you need anything, call me."

"You're a mom?"

"Yes, and I'm also your mom, starting today. I'm sure you'll be a little confused at first. The other girl called me Misuzu, like I was a stranger...but I would like it if you could call me Mom."

"...B-but you're not my mom."

"I most certainly am. I just told you."

"...Huh?"

Nadeshiko was bewildered. She had a mother, yes, but it wasn't this lady. Calling her Mom would be strange.

"B-but you're not...?" she timidly tried. She spoke as softly as she could, so as to not hurt this woman.

"Yes, I am. Look. You're my girl now. That's a fact. You have to accept it."

"N-no... Why?"

Misuzu twisted her lips at the rejection, and Nadeshiko instinctively braced

for a scolding.

"What do you mean, why...? Because I said so."

"...So everything is because you say so?"

"Yes. I may not be a goddess like you, but I am basically a god here."

""

This woman wasn't making sense. As Nadeshiko's confusion grew, the reality of her situation began to sink in.

The rain of glass. The wrenching pain. The screams of the adults.

The sound of something collapsing. Bits and pieces of her memory flashed back.

Nadeshiko was only a child, but she was clever enough to remember what people told her.

Rindo said...

She remembered when she first met Rindo Azami.

It was at the honden, the core of the Town of Autumn.

It was summer. A particularly hot day.

Rindo was wearing a suit and sweating waterfalls as he knelt down in the wide tatami room.

Nadeshiko was smaller then and oblivious of the position she was in. People around her had told her that Rindo would protect her for the rest of her life, and she could only blink in silence.

Rindo vowed to give his life to protecting Nadeshiko.

"Protect me from what...?" Nadeshiko had asked.

Rindo finally raised his head. Nadeshiko's heart skipped a bit at his princely bearing.

"From anything I must. But...if I should be more specific..."

Rindo had named them.

"...from the Agents' natural enemies, the insurgents, my Autumn."

Rindo taught her that her enemies were called the insurgents. He had taught her not to let any kindnesses from them reach her heart.

They're not on my side.

Despite being a child, she made her decisions based on whether she could trust the other person or not.

And her criteria for that came from Rindo Azami.

I shouldn't obey the people Rindo said were bad.

"C'mon, Nadeshiko. Just say it aloud. Can you do it?"

Nadeshiko refused. "...You're not my mom, and I won't say it because you might be an insurgent!"

It was all she could do to resist. Perhaps Rindo would have praised her for doing the right thing if he were here now.

But unknown to her, she had made the wrong choice.

"My, my..." Misuzu's voice turned dangerous all of a sudden. "I am an 'insurgent,' yes, but you also owe me your life. Are you sure you should be saying that?"

"...Wh-where's Rindo? Where's everyone from home?"

"Nadeshiko, we're in the middle of a conversation here. Don't change the subject. You owe me your life. You were dying, and I saved you. You think you should be so rude to me?"

"Where is Rindo?!"

"Stop trying to talk and listen to what I'm saying!" the woman snapped.

Nadeshiko's throat tightened. Fear numbed her head.

She looked at the man called Mikami, hoping for help.

"..." But he only sighed and turned away with a grumble.

"Where's your gratitude? Say thank you," Misuzu commanded even more harshly than before.

Nadeshiko didn't want to.

"D-did you take me away from Rindo?"

"Say it, Nadeshiko."

"Get me back to Rindo... He must be worried. He's always like that. He won't even play hide-and-seek with me because he doesn't want to let me out of his sight. That's how much he—"

"... Nadeshiko, I'm telling you to say thanks. Say it."

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Nadeshiko kept her mouth shut, and Misuzu slapped her. Strapped down, the girl couldn't avoid it. Again and again, Misuzu slapped her back and forth.

"...Mgh, ngh... Aaaah, ahhh, agh..."

"If you're gonna cry anyway, then don't talk back to me. Got it? You will listen to what I say. You're mine now. You're my daughter. Children have to obey their parents, right?"

"Uwaaah! Aaaah, uwaaaah!"

"Shut up! Stop crying!"

She slapped her again, and blood trickled from Nadeshiko's lip.

"Stop it. Stop crying. I'll hit you again if you cry. I will. I will!"

"...!" Nadeshiko let out a whimper, but she bit her lip to avoid being hit.

"Ahhh... You're nothing like her. She was a good girl from the beginning."

"Are you done, Gozen?" the man said.

"No... Look, since you seem to be dumber than the other one, I'll be stricter

with you. You will forget your own name and be born again as my child. Don't worry. As long as you do as I say, your life will be good. You were thrown away. You were heavily injured, but no one came to your rescue. But I was there, and I helped you. Are you sad they abandoned you? Those people aren't sad at all. They're relieved, actually, to be rid of a selfish and stupid girl. Why wouldn't they be? No help will be coming. It's been days since you blacked out. And *no* one's come for you in that whole time. They don't need you. You're unwanted. Maybe you didn't realize, since you just did whatever you wanted. That's why they didn't like you. That's why they didn't want you. But not me. Even if no one else wants you, I can take care of you. And you should thank me for it. You're my girl now, got it? How do you plan to stay alive if I abandon you, too? What will you eat? Where will you sleep? You're not even healed yet, are you? But if you listen to what I say, then you'll have no problems. So listen to what your mom says, okay? Are you listening? Are you?"

Nadeshiko could only tremble and nod after Misuzu's agonizing monologue.

"Mgh, ah, ugh..."

Mikami just looked at Misuzu with pity as she planted the seeds of obedience and solitude into the little girl like a curse.

Rindo.

Nadeshiko choked back her sobs as she called his name inside her mind.

Rindo.

She was exactly the same as Hinagiku Kayo had been ten years ago. In this life of despair, she could only cling to these feelings to nourish her soul. She prayed for the man who swore to protect her his whole life to come and rescue her. It was the only thing she could do as a prisoner.

Rindo, please come save me.

She believed blindly in him. She was able to believe in him even under these conditions thanks to the affection he'd shown her as he'd raised her, even when he wasn't being honest with himself.

Rindo's Autumn closed her eyes to shut everything out, like Sleeping Beauty waiting for her prince.

The day after Hinagiku and the rest gathered at the Four Seasons Agency.

The Agency received a call from New Year, the insurgent organization presumed to have committed the kidnapping.

Finally, negotiations for the rescue began. Their first condition was a large amount of ransom money.

The second condition was a reform in the Four Seasons Code, which governed the Agents. New Year asked for the Agents' powers to be broadly available to the country and its citizens. The third condition was the liberation of their imprisoned comrades. They also demanded that the Agents be strictly punished for any excessive self-defense against the insurgents' attacks, per the laws of Yamato.

The Agency accepted the ransom request but refused all other conditions.

New Year responded that if they weren't willing to cede to changes in the system of the Agents of the Four Seasons, they would not be releasing the hostage. They cut the call. They seemed even more unrelenting than they were during the kidnapping of the Agent of Spring ten years back. Fears of a season being lost in Yamato again spread throughout the concerned parties.

National Security managed to trace the call and mobilized immediately, but they only discovered a disposable phone in the garbage. They found multiple fingerprints on it, but none were on the registered-criminals database.

The day after the call.

Ten AM. The Four Seasons Agency was already buzzing with activity.

People came into and went out of the investigation HQ.

The HQ was waiting for another call from New Year as they searched for the

hideout and investigated their escape route from the Autumn villa.

The Agent of Summer, Ruri, and her retainer, Ayame, had gone outside with an investigator and the Autumn retainer, Rindo. They had been busy since the day before, looking for clues where the phone had been discarded.

Meanwhile, the Agent of Spring, Hinagiku, and her retainer, Sakura, were on standby at the Agency.

Sakura was on the phone in the hallway before the HQ. "...Got it."

Hinagiku stood restless by her side, curious as to who she was talking to.

As soon as the call ended, she asked, "Sakura, who...was it?"

"Huh?"

"Who...were you...talking to...on the phone?"

"Oh, the Town of Winter. It was about work. Rosei seemed to have laid the groundwork for a collaboration between Spring, Summer, and Autumn, so they'll officially be giving us people and a budget."

"Ground...work?"

"We were grabbing provisional support where we could because we forced our way to help in Autumn's rescue at first. Things like guards, accommodation costs, all that."

"We...were?!" Hinagiku exclaimed in shock.

"Yes. But this is political work here, in a way. It takes the same level of planning, at least. Since we're participating, the Agency staff who take care of our protection and daily necessities need to move accordingly... They shouldn't allow us to act without orders from above. But they also can't just ignore us now that Autumn was kidnapped, even if we're not cooperating with their restrictions. The Agency and the Towns exist to support the Agents. It would be against their goals to not give us proper support, so basically, they have to yield."

"But...it's not...our fault..."

"Maybe we're in the wrong in their point of view, but in the grand scheme of

things, you're right."

A hint of confusion surfaced on Hinagiku's face.

"We have to grab those people who only care about their own safety and position, then kick them in the ass to make the investigation go smoother."

"K-kick them in the...?"

"Yep. First, we and Summer act on our own to raise the issue to our Towns and the Agency. Make them ask themselves, Why aren't we cooperating with Autumn? It also helps that, on paper, you're the one who proposed the teamup. It would be extremely bad optics to ignore you, a former hostage, when you're offering to help. Most of all for the Town of Spring. People haven't forgotten about how they cut the investigation off after three months. Then Rosei and Itecho come in as detonators. I had them request a meeting with the bigwigs at the Towns and the Agency in order to convince them not to let the same tragedy happen again. Since Winter was at fault for the previous incident, Winter would naturally mobilize for another season, don't you think? They could hardly criticize anyone, especially not those two. They're pretty intimidating when they keep their mouths shut, so now that they've bowed to the bigwigs in each Town, we can finally make an official request for assistance."

After a smooth and lengthy explanation, Sakura gave the smile she reserved only for Hinagiku.

"Now that we all have the goal of saving Autumn, we can go all out. We were granted reinforcements and a bigger budget. Would you like us to get a better hotel, Lady Hinagiku?"

Hinagiku could not comprehend everything, but she was suddenly imagining Sakura as the evil magistrate in a period drama. Flustered, she said: "How...do you...sometimes...come up...with all this...mischief? You're a...good girl...at heart..."

Sakura gave her an impish grin. "Lady Hinagiku... I've said this before, but I am only a good girl in front of you. I will say I didn't feel right leaving Winter with the hardest job...but Rosei said he wanted to do it. So don't worry. He'll do anything for you. You could command him to eat mud if you wanted to."

"I-is that so ...?"

"Yes. He's happy to do all of it. So let's keep working that guilt of his."

Hinagiku wasn't sure that was a good thing to do, but at the very least, she was relieved to know that Sakura was still in contact with Winter.

"Sakura, have you...talked with...Lord Itecho?"

All these plans had been made while Hinagiku was asleep, so she hadn't even heard Rosei's voice.

"...It was only Rosei on the phone."

And Sakura hadn't spoken with Itecho.

They were both delaying the conversations they needed to have the most.

"Is that so ...?"

"Knowing him, he would probably want to set up a proper place for us to speak face-to-face... He'd want us to go have lunch. It's about time to eat, too."

"If he...does, I'll...go. They're...coming here...now, right?"

"Yes, they should be arriving any moment now. We're a bit early. Should we have some tea before the meeting?"

"Maybe...if we...wait at the...cafeteria...on the...first floor, we might...see them...coming."

"There's no need to go out to meet them, but yes, I suppose we would."

The look on Hinagiku's face made it clear that she really wanted to do it, so Sakura acquiesced.

"...If that's what you want, then let's go. But allow me to warn you: I will not be friendly to them."

That was as much as Sakura could concede. Hinagiku nodded, then hurriedly tried to fix her hair.

"Sakura, does...Hinagiku's hair...look...weird?"

"Huh...? It shines as bright as any of the national treasures."

"What about...the kimono? Is it...weird?"

"It looks beautiful on you. It's like an angel descended from heaven."

Satisfied that her appearance was in order, Hinagiku sighed in relief and then nodded to encourage herself.

"...Hinagiku...is no longer...Hinagiku... Will that be...all right?"

One would have to be unbelievably dense to not understand why she asked that.

"...If he does anything to make you feel that it isn't...I will cut him down then and there."

"Please...don't."

"...I'll just punch him, then."

"No."

"So I can't do anything?"

"Watch...over us? If Lord...Rosei...can't accept...this Hinagiku...then...there's nothing...we can...do."

""

"But if...we can...become...close..."

Lady Hinagiku.

Sakura had always found it strange.

Why did the current Hinagiku Kayo want to meet Rosei when she believed her own self was dead?

If she was truly a different person, then there shouldn't be any need to fixate on any love or romance her former self had.

"...Even if...Hinagiku can't...replace...me..."

Yet she couldn't take her eyes off the snow. She called Rosei by name. She worried about what he would think.

"If we...can become...close..."

Perhaps that love had changed its shape now, and perhaps it was faint, but it remained.

Across her dark and painful life in confinement, she must have been supported by the love of the other her. The hope of meeting him once again someday gave her the strength to keep on living.

"...then...most likely..."

The love Hinagiku Kayo had protected so dearly in her confinement still lived on.

"...it could lead...to bringing back...me...to all of...you..."

No matter how much she insisted she had died, the past Hinagiku still lived thanks to that endurance. The current Hinagiku had carried the love of the dead girl into life.

"Hinagiku...wanted to...give me...back to you...from the...beginning."

Lady Hinagiku, why?

Sakura felt her eyes sting as Hinagiku spoke.

"I...wanted to...protect you...three, so Hinagiku...wanted to...give me...back to you. But...Hinagiku can't."

Even so, Hinagiku wasn't looking to force that love to fruition.

"Hinagiku...can't do...a lot for...the *me*...who's already...dead. There's... nothing...to give...to those who...said they...liked...*me*."

Why do you fight for the sake of others?

Hinagiku was trying to start from the beginning.

Every time I'm with you...

She wasn't trying to run away from her past or drown in it—she wanted to settle the score.

...I feel so foolish.

"But...Hinagiku...feels it. We could...become...close again, Sakura. If Hinagiku... can do...the same thing...with them...even if...it's not...love..."

I only think of myself.

Sakura's throat growled. Her chest hurt, like it was wounded by a knife.

She had decided to accept all the pain and joy this goddess would bring her, but it still hurt.

"If we can...then...maybe...the pain...in everyone...from these...ten years... might...change. Hinagiku...changed. Hinagiku...had a...good farewell...with the... girl who died. And now...Hinagiku can...move forward. So can you. Even if... we're not...the same as...we were...before. You can...grieve...now."

Everyone involved in that tragedy was desperate to be forgiven.

Even now that Hinagiku was back, their pain and sorrow remained.

Nothing had really changed, least of all what had happened or the wounds they received. But...

"Please, Sakura..."

...they could take it as a new starting point.

That's what she meant; that would be how they mourned.

"...could we do...what we can...to pull through?" asked Hinagiku, carrying her dead self.

It was impossible to compare the sorrows or ask who had it the worst, but because Sakura knew Hinagiku and her history, hearing this from the current Hinagiku was like another knife in her chest.

Lady Hinagiku.

Sakura saw a faint halo around Hinagiku. It was only a bright distortion in her vision caused by the welling tears in her eyes, but Hinagiku herself appeared as a source of light.

Lady Hinagiku.

Hinagiku had told Rindo that retainers were like lights for their Agents, but Sakura wanted to tell her the reverse was true as well.

Lady Hinagiku.

Sakura had been jealous this whole time. She dedicated herself more than anyone to Hinagiku—why wouldn't she look her way?

But that entire time, Hinagiku had been thinking of what her new self could

do for those around her.

And even now, she was forging ahead. Who was this for?

My Lady Hinagiku.

"Hinagiku...wants to...keep on living...with...you, Sakura..."

It was for her beloved friends, still living in the guilt and the hate.

"Hinagiku...wants you...to watch...over her. One day, when you...think it's...all right to go, when you...think what...Hinagiku does is...good to do, and you...say so...then...you will feel...more at...ease. Hinagiku knows. You taught...Hinagiku this. It's true... It's all...thanks to...you. And now...it's Hinagiku's...turn to... protect your...heart. Sakura, when you...feel tired...of hating...then...come. Hinagiku will...show you the...way."

Hinagiku decided to live. And if she was to live, she would lead a better life; she would live for the sake of those she loved.

This was her wish, and she had already recovered enough to carry it out.

And Hinagiku had explicitly said it was thanks to Sakura.

"...Will you really do that for me...if I get tired?" Sakura asked.

"Yes. I'll...call for you...over and over."

"...Understood."

Sakura didn't want to be negative anymore.

She still clung to her hatred. Nothing had really changed. But Hinagiku would show her the way. Sakura could come to her if she wanted to set that hatred down.

Sakura knew it would save her.

And Hinagiku wasn't asking to come to her right now—she would wait. Just as Sakura waited patiently for the snow to thaw in her own heart.

"So my presence gave you strength..."

That choking feeling, like she was tightening the noose around her own neck, was already gone. And this was why.

"Yes, you...did. Without...you, Hinagiku...wouldn't be...here now. You know... that...better than...anyone."

"..."

"How many...times must...Hinagiku...say that...Hinagiku wants...you?"

Sakura had said that to Hinagiku when she worried about not being able to manifest spring—those words came right back at her. Sakura chuckled.

"As many times as you want—we have a lifetime together ahead of us."

Hinagiku smiled at the sincere reply.

"...Well then, only one thing to do now. We'll wait for Winter. It might take a while, so we should go get our seats at the lounge while it's still empty."

"Yes... Here it comes, here it comes... Winter...comes."

Sakura gave an awkward smile as she pushed the elevator's button.

It happened right at that moment—a coincidence so perfect that Sakura thought she had caused it.

Alarm bells rang across the Four Seasons Agency.

Buzzzz, buzzzz, buzzzz.

The ear-piercing noise came from every which way.

"What's happening?"

Sakura glanced at her finger and the button before looking around.

She froze, wondering if she had pushed the emergency alarm button, but that couldn't possibly be.

Alongside the siren, an announcement voice notified them of a fire.

"Fire. Fire. Please evacuate immediately." The mechanical announcement repeated over and over.

The Agency had just opened. Many people were just entering, and many were just leaving. There was security at the front entrance checking bags for those without an ID, but it was not a difficult place to breach. So long as you knew someone inside and got an appointment, anyone could slip in. This fire might not have been an accident.

Sakura felt déjà vu.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

Sakura held Hinagiku's waist and drew her close. She examined the surroundings as she placed a hand on her sword.

"Fire! Everyone, downstairs, outside!"

"The elevator?"

"Safer not to use it! Let's take the stairs!"

"Lady Spring! We must go to the lobby!"

The investigators grabbed their valuables and important documents and ran.

The announcement didn't specify any evacuation route. Hinagiku and Sakura were currently on the nineteenth floor out of twenty. Upstairs was an observation deck and garden, but it wasn't open at the moment; the smell of smoke would've already reached them if the fire was above. It had to be downstairs.

"Sakura, we're not...going anywhere?"

Sakura kept quiet as she took Hinagiku near the window to look outside.

There was a big parking lot. There were more cars there than the previous day. People on the first floor were already pouring outside. She could see strangers wearing private-security-firm uniforms coming out of some of the cars. They were from one of those companies that sold security systems for office buildings. Did they rush over here after the alarm sounded?

They're responding too fast, though.

Almost like they were waiting in the parking lot before it happened.

"Lady Spring, Lady Retainer! Hurry! We must head downstairs!" Nagatsuki

rushed in, panicking. She hadn't gone with Rindo; she'd stayed behind at HQ as a liaison.

"Yes...," Sakura replied as her eyes darted around.

Noticing Sakura's distress, Hinagiku kept still and quiet by her side. Anxious, she waited for her retainer's judgment.

"Over here! Come on!" Nagatsuki called.

Sakura stared at Nagatsuki's back as she realized that the guards from the Town of Winter and Spring Agency staff who'd been following them hadn't showed up yet. She had demanded they keep at a distance, but their job was not to let the Spring girls out of their sight. How long had they been missing? Why wasn't anyone rushing over?

No, wait.

Something was keeping them busy. There could be nothing else.

Have they already been dealt with?

She shuddered.

It was like being on a game board, and someone else was moving the pieces.

Sakura's heart raced faster and faster.

1...

If people were already being attacked...

I can't stand aside and watch things unfold.

She had a duty.

She had already lost once.

She had to protect Hinagiku this time.

"Ms. Nagatsuki!" Sakura yelled as she scanned the surroundings. "Come here quickly! We will have to descend carefully—you understand?!"

"Yes, I understand. But if I may!" Nagatsuki turned around, and her eyes widened as she realized Sakura had unsheathed the sword.

The Agency staff who hadn't evacuated yet screamed. They must have

thought she was crazy.

However, three of them, just like Nagatsuki, observed her in silence.

One, two, three. And that makes four.

"Ms. Nagatsuki."

Sakura tapped Hinagiku's waist with her index finger, signaling her to keep alert. Hinagiku shuddered before moving a foot behind, ready to flee. Just as they had practiced.

Sakura would fight to protect Hinagiku. She needed to have her lady at a safe distance so she could do so without fear of harming her.

"Your outfit is awfully thick for this weather," she commented.

The strokes of the Kangetsu style I use are too broad.

Sakura had learned the sword under the guidance of Itecho Kangetsu. The Kangetsu style, a combination of martial arts and swordsmanship, was often compared to a dance. One attacked with acrobatics similar to competitive fencing and sword dancing. A wide area was essential for fully employing the skills.

The fight had begun in Sakura's mind the moment she had judged the distance between them.

"Would you mind telling me why you're wearing a bulletproof vest?"

The trigger was pulled.

"...!"

Nagatsuki's warm expression, her facade as staff for the Town of Autumn, crumbled.

"...Lady Hinagiku! Stay back!"

Sakura swung her foot as she kept her upper body low for a tornado kick. She did two full turns as she closed the distance and slashed with her sword the moment she was within reach. A gash tore through Nagatsuki's shirt, but there was no blood.

I knew it!

Sakura hissed at the sight of the bulletproof vest. Nagatsuki was protected by the armor, but the weight of Sakura's deadly strike slugged the air out of her lungs, and she clawed at her chest as she collapsed.

"And don't come back up!"

Striking a known enemy without mercy was a virtue for a Guard.

Sakura kicked Nagatsuki across the floor, and the woman let out a scream.

The three men standing nearby rushed against her, all armed. Were they hiding their weapons in their suits? Two of them had batons, and the last one had a handgun. The man with the gun clearly had no experience with it.

He's never shot a bullet in his life.

Judging that from his posture and one-handed grip, Sakura decided to go for him first.

She blocked the first baton with the sword and parried it away.

She dodged the second baton as she approached the man with the gun. She knocked it out of his hand before he could try to shoot.

She did not slow down as she formed a fist and punched him so hard, his feet left the ground. As he shrieked and drooled, she kicked the gun away so he couldn't grab it again.

Two more!

Sakura heard the footsteps charging toward her from behind and sheathed her sword.

She did not look back as she took a step forward with her right foot and swung her left, then landed just as she kicked her right foot up high and twisted her body 180 degrees. She scrunched herself in the air to become a spring and kicked back with her left foot multiple times.

"Gwah!"

The kick sent the man's chin flying up to the moon.

She moved as though she didn't even need to see where her enemies were. The moment she turned around, she saw the man she'd struck already hitting

the floor, unconscious.

One more!

The man's baton was bouncing across the floor.

Sakura kicked it up and caught it before throwing it at the remaining man. She closed in while he was flinching, unsheathed her sword, and slashed him from the shoulder. The man screamed as he collapsed to the floor. Unlike with Nagatsuki, Sakura cut open the bulletproof vest, superficially drawing blood.

"Stop crying—it's just a scratch!"

She stomped on the wound, ruthlessly doubling his pain.

"Lady Hinagiku!" Sakura turned around and ran up to Hinagiku, who was frozen in place. "Use thorns on the men!"

While she was speaking, Sakura took a pouch full of seeds out of her pocket. She threw it gracefully like a baseball, and it landed perfectly in Hinagiku's pale hands. Hinagiku grabbed some and sprouted them into brambles that squirmed like snakes across the floor and wrapped themselves around the men.

The remaining investigators could barely even keep up with Sakura's movements as she fought, but they candidly dropped their jaws at the sight of Hinagiku's divine powers.

"Lady Hinagiku, keep an eye out. We must lea—"

The sound was like thunder. The Agency building trembled.

An explosion? Downstairs?

Although it was drowned out by the blaring alarm, it clearly was an explosion. And more followed. This was like a battlefield. They could get caught in the blast themselves if they went downstairs.

Fuck! They got us! We're trapped!

"If anyone else wants to fall at the hands of my Kangetsu style, raise your hand! Otherwise, close the door to the emergency staircase! They tried leading us there! Someone could be waiting to ambush us!"

The investigators hurried to shut the door to the stairs. The Agency staff sent

over to guard the Agents were chosen for their excellence in combat, but the people here were only desk workers.

Perhaps some of them enjoyed martial arts in their free time, but hardly anyone there was trained to handle terrorist attacks. Naturally, Sakura held the reins. She ran up to Nagatsuki, who was crawling on the floor, and kicked her again before wrenching her to her feet by the wrist.

"Gyah!"

"...Why are you running? You're the spy, aren't you?"

"Eek..." Nagatsuki yelped.

"...No wonder the Autumn villa fell when the insurgents had an insider in security... Lord Azami will be heartbroken... Incredible that you had the nerve to do that to his little girl... Were you behind the attack today, too? Did you leak what we're doing? Are you going after the Agency?! This is unheard of! You're not getting off the hook, you extremist piece of—!"

Sakura twisted her wrist further, making her scream.

"Saku...Sakura!" Hinagiku shouted, unable to watch anymore.

Sakura came to her senses. No matter the circumstances, she shouldn't act this way in front of her beloved master.

"Ahhh! Lady Spring!" Nagatsuki screamed. "I-it's not what it looks like! I...!"

"What's not what it looks like?! You just tried to attack her!"

"No! I tried to protect her! I tried to take her somewhere safe!"

Nagatsuki was staring at Hinagiku with something like ecstasy on her face.

"Oh, Lady Spring... The world needs you. Why must I harm you? You finally came back. New Year has to pay for daring to take your season away. Let us run... Keep bringing spring to the world forever..."

Huffing and panting, she crawled forward, while Hinagiku and Sakura backed away.

"S-Sakura...she's...acting weird."

"Don't look, Lady Hinagiku. Even the sight of her is unclean."

Sakura pressed the tip of her sword against Nagatsuki.

Nagatsuki stopped her advance, but she did not stop smiling. "...Lady Himedaka, please do not worry. I bear no animosity, truly."

"Then let me ask you: Why did it look like you knew about the attack? Why did you try leading us elsewhere?"

"As I said, to protect you. I've always been on the lookout for any movement from New Year. I simply prepared myself after hearing the worrying results of their negotiations with the Agency. I didn't expect you to come here, but you could say it was my fate to guard you. I will do anything."

"But why? Aren't you an insurgent? An enemy of the Agents?"

When Nagatsuki looked at Sakura, her religious fervor remained.

"No, we are followers of Spring. Higan-Nishi."

Sakura had no idea what that name referred to.

What? What in the world is going on?

She pulled at her hair and tried not to scream.

The raid was completely unexpected. They had to be careful about their next move.

They didn't know who to trust, and now a new entity had joined the fray.

"We could never think of harming the Lady Spring. All the other seasons can go rot... Although personally, I would like to help Autumn...but that is not my duty..."

"You're not like regular insurgents?"

"No. We failed just now... We wanted to take only Lady Hinagiku somewhere safe...but you are a loyal vassal. And it would be impossible to separate you, so how about we work together? We are Lady Hinagiku's followers. Our goal is to protect her. You may use us as your own arms and legs to escape this place."

I don't ever want to have limbs as creepy as you.

Despite her internal commentary, Sakura's reply was composed. "...We accept the help if it means we can cut off those limbs at any time."

It was an emergency, and they were trapped at the top of a tower.

They had to make use of everything they could to protect Hinagiku, who was shivering and holding on to Sakura at this very moment. If that meant a strange believer out of the blue, so be it.

"...If you really are a follower of Spring, then give us all the information you have. I command you in the name of my goddess to tell me what Higan-Nishi is."

There was no one to protect Sakura. She kept her face perfectly neutral as she asked the question.

Meanwhile...

A black luxury car had just barely avoided tipping over as it sped through the metropolitan expressway in Teito, Teishu, with multiple cars behind it.

As for the occupants of this particular car...

"Are we killing them, Itecho?"

"Don't even suggest it! There are civilian cars around!"

"An enemy should be dealt with the moment you identify them."

"...Listen, Rosei, just shut up and let me protect you!"

The master and retainer of Winter were heading to the Four Seasons Agency after their talk with the Town of Spring, concealed somewhere in Teishu. When Hinagiku and Sakura were discussing meeting them in the lobby, they were already in turmoil.

Why now?! Itecho screamed internally as he pushed Rosei's head down to look out the window.

The time to get closure for everything from their past had finally come, but now they didn't even have the luxury to focus on that. The current priority was guarding Rosei and taking him to a safe place. They might not get to see the master and retainer of Spring today.

The image of the two young girls came to mind—the girls he'd wanted to see again for so long.

"Dammit!" Itecho swore, unusual for him.

He took out not his sword but the handgun he had hidden under his suit. Guards were required to carry a sword, but whether they used it or not depended on their own combat style. The sword was to be their main weapon, but they could use others, and Itecho could handle a wide array of them, including guns.

The car's shaking all over the place, but the driver's a pro from the Town of Winter.

Itecho was confident their driver would be able to handle it without flinching even if Itecho started shooting from the back seat.

"You're shooting? Don't miss, okay?" Rosei said calmly, like he wasn't in the middle of a crisis.

"...Just keep quiet and keep your head low!"

"Want me to lend a hand? You're not that good a shot, are you?"

"Rosei... Are you enjoying this?"

Rosei smiled at Itecho's distress. Everything he did was elegant; his grin was quite wicked, and yet somehow, he didn't look vulgar.

"No way." Rosei smiled, but his voice was cold. "I just want to meet Hinagiku as soon as possible."

His breath was icy, literally. He was only keeping up a composed facade.

"And they're getting in the way. If anything, I'm furious. I want to get rid of them right now. Really."

He's a tough nut to crack.

It wasn't that he was enjoying this—his anger had gone so far past reasonable levels that he was calm again, even thrilled.

At least, that was Itecho's guess, after knowing him from childhood.

"That's why I asked if we're killing them. Itecho, I haven't given you any orders yet, but do it quickly or I'll do it myself. I could just freeze them and be done with it."

Itecho let out a big sigh before flicking Rosei's forehead.

"Ow!"

The ensuing yelp was in his normal voice; perhaps that had knocked a little sense back into him.

"Rosei, you know you can't say that in your position. Getting rid of them is my job."

"...Sorry. It's just that my life's been treated like a paper balloon, so I end up doing the same to others without realizing. Gods don't have human rights."

"Again with that... You have anger management issues."

"...Shut up. This whole place would be a skating rink by now if I really couldn't control it. Hey, don't you think the public would like that? Maybe I should do it."

"Don't. Just let me take care of this, okay?"

Itecho notified the driver and Ishihara, who was in the passenger seat, that he would strike back and removed his sunglasses before leaning out the window. As soon as they saw him take aim, the pursuers took action, too. One of the cars hid behind a civilian vehicle. Despicable.

"Shoot the one on the left. If it tips over, I'll give you a hand with some ice," Rosei said as he held his hand out the opposite window.

I can always count on you in times like this.

Itecho took a deep breath and aimed at the tire of the wide-open car in pursuit.

Immediately, he fired. Clearly, Rosei only meant Itecho wasn't that good a

shot when compared to his skill with his real weapon of choice, the sword. The bullet hit the tire, sending the car spinning out and getting rid of one pursuer.

"And now, some ice."

At the same time, Rosei froze over just a portion of the road. The car slid along the path until it crashed into an ice pillar.

"...That's just 'giving a hand'?"

"I never specified how hard I would go—"

Rosei swallowed his words as Itecho roughly yanked him close. Gunshots. The pursuers were firing back.

"Rosei! You okay?!"

"Besides you crushing my ribs, yeah."

Thankfully, no bullets had hit the car.

He was fine, except for the large man shoving him into the seats.

"Lord Rosei! Lord Itecho! Are you hurt?!" Ishihara asked from the passenger seat at the front. The other Agency staff and Winter guards had baited the enemy before entering the expressway. They'd succeeded in splitting the enemy forces to an extent, but a few cars were still in pursuit.

"We're okay! What about you?"

"No injuries! We'll be speeding up to shake them off! Hold on to something!"

The car weaved gracefully down the expressway.

"The gunshots stopped," said Rosei. "Itecho, get off. You're too heavy."

"Keep your head down. They'll shoot again... If Azami's intel is right, we're up against New Year. They have a ton of weapons. We've fought them a few times before, but they always vanish without a trace... Not to mention we never know what they're thinking."

Rosei raised an eyebrow at Itecho's words.

"They abducted a kid and are trying to make her their own. Why do you care what they're thinking?"

"...Rosei."

"Just thinking about it makes me nauseous... I can't let them get off without a beating. This is for Autumn, too," Rosei spat.

Rosei had heard of what Hinagiku and the others talked about in their meeting.

The Guard of Autumn, Rindo Azami, had communicated the details.

Rosei knew him, but not very well. He scowled when Sakura told him she had given Rindo his personal phone number without permission.

He had written Rindo off as a smug hipster or a playboy—that was the impression he left from his treatment of Nadeshiko. His smile looked fake. He would pick her up, carry her around, and spoil her rotten all the time. He acted like a good retainer on the surface, but if you watched closely, you'd realize he was hiding something.

He reminded Rosei of the people all around him who pretended to be good adults on the surface. They'd spent a month together for the Season Descent, but due to Rosei's antisocial tendencies, Rosei didn't interact with him as much as he did with Nadeshiko.

They'd only ever said hello and good-bye. Rosei frequently spotted him smoking in secret. The Season Descent ended, and Rosei's image of him had never improved.

"...Lord Kantsubaki, it's all my fault."

But that impression changed the moment he heard Rindo's voice through the phone.

"If only I had been able to protect Nadeshiko..."

Ahhh. "If only I hadn't left the room..." Were my suspicions unfounded? "If only..." Rindo sounded like that Guard. It was the voice of someone with regret. Did you value your Agent? Rindo Azami had taken off the mask and trembled in worry appropriately for his age. He was still young, still unused to hardship and failure. He didn't know what to do to overcome this wall—he was hurting—but he hadn't given up. He'd swallowed his pride to make this call. It reminded Rosei not only of Itecho, but also of himself, when he'd been in the same abyss of despair ten years prior. "...If... If only they'd...hurt me instead of her..." How many times have I said the same thing? "Mr. Azami." "I feel so sorry for everyone, if only I'd—" "Mr. Azami, don't say any more. Once you put it into words, they'll keep echoing in your head. Too much regret is just poison." Rosei caught himself worrying about the guy. "...But I..." "You've only been talking about yourself, but your security was a group effort, just as ours was. There is no single person to blame." "But I am her retainer." "Still, you're human. There's only so much you can do."

"That went too far, sorry. But it's true. Make up for what you didn't do with

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what you'll do next. I could say the same for me... But well, listen. Itecho and I want to get Winter to help. You don't have anything to apologize for."

"Thank you..."

"Sakura made the first move, but I was already thinking about helping Autumn. Now that's brought us to a collaboration between the Four Seasons. It sounds like you feel sorry about that, but you don't need to. We have our own goals in mind. We want to teach the insurgents a lesson while also rescuing her."

"Lady Himedaka said the same, and now I can completely understand how you feel."

"…"

"Just thinking about losing Nadeshiko...for ten years..." Rindo heaved a heavy sigh through the phone. "I feel like I might lose my mind."

The pain in his voice was so deep that Rosei was genuinely worried.

He knew better than anyone how difficult it was to go back to normal after a psychological blow like this.

"... Will you be okay?" Rosei asked softly.

"...I am so sorry for making you worry."

"No, I'm being serious. I went through this. Losing someone you care for is hard... And Nadeshiko is...so young."

"Yes, Nadeshiko...is still only a child..."

"Agent or not, she's too little. I'm also worried about her."

"I realized after losing her that, apparently, I really do care about her, from the bottom of my heart."

"You didn't before?"

"No..."

"As far as the rest of us could tell, you really spoiled her rotten."

"...I didn't mean to. But a coworker told me the same thing, so maybe you're

right... Argh, I was so foolish... Now I know that there is nothing more important to me than Nadeshiko..."

Rosei understood after hearing that stereotypically playboyish line.

I see—he shares that with Itecho.

Rosei was a little embarrassed, wondering if that was what they looked like from the outside.

Whether Agent and Guard knew each other before their relationship became that of master and retainer, for some reason, they tended to become codependent. As though it was an inevitability, the two came to love the other, each in their own way. Rosei was used to hearing Itecho say he cared about him and that he was more important to him than anything, but hearing another Guard say the same about his Agent was a bit awkward. And maybe it was the same for others. I'll be more careful about that, he thought. Not that him being careful about it would accomplish anything.

"...Nadeshiko."

"Mr. Azami, as I said, don't let the regret get too strong."

The conversation was turning more and more into a therapy session.

"Just think about rescuing Autumn now. Don't punish yourself too hard, or you'll lose sight of what to do. You won't be able to make rational decisions. We will help you, okay? We'll make it so that you feel glad about giving it your all in the end."

"Yes... Sorry. I have to thank you not only for your help, but also for your encouragement, too... Lady Kayo also comforted me, I'm ashamed to say. I will try to hold myself together."

"...Is the Agent of Spring doing well?"

"Yes. She's eating well, too, although we could only give her a boxed lunch..."

"I see, that's good to hear. Hinagiku...if her tastes haven't changed, should like orange juice."

Rosei felt Rindo was in a lighter mood now, even through the phone.

"I understand. I will get her some orange juice. Anything for Lady Kayo."

That let him know that Rindo, at the very least, respected her. Rosei was relieved to know she had someone like that nearby, but it also gave him some mixed feelings. Rindo was attractive, and women found his voice soothing.

What if she's fallen in love with someone else while I couldn't be with her?

He ended up worrying about Hinagiku's romantic situation before even meeting her again. He had asked the Winter escorts following her to get rid of any unwanted characters who might approach her, but they wouldn't be able to do that with Rindo.

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"...Mr. Azami."

"Yes, Lord Kantsubaki?"

"Excuse my manners, but...do you have a romantic partner?"

"...What? No, I don't."
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He could picture Rindo's confusion at the question.

"I see, so you're single. There must be many young men among the Agency staff. And you can look around easily being single. I don't feel great about pointing this out, but Spring and Summer will be there. Four girls. I want you to be their sword and shield. Keep the youngsters in check."

Rosei was being so indirect that Rindo didn't quite get the message.

"Well, even if we're expected to be cordial, they wouldn't be going out for drinks and such. Not everyone is of age, after all." Rindo thought Rosei meant hanging out after work. "In fact, Lord Kantsubaki, after this is all settled, I would like you to grab a drink with me."

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"O-okay."
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And now he was asking him out for a drink.

"You can rely on me if you ever have any problems. I'll do everything in my power; I promise."

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"Please, no need to go that far."
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[&]quot;I must repay you the favor."

"Seriously, that's too much."

"I insist."

Just as Sakura had said, he was not a bad Guard.

He was loyal and diligent at the core. He was no playboy—he was pretty hardcore.

Although his weaknesses were coming to the surface now, it was good that he hadn't completely imploded under the circumstances.

After reflecting on the conversation with Rindo, Rosei came back to the present, and he asked Itecho:

"Back to what you said—we don't know if that's New Year, though. Couldn't they be radicals?"

Itecho and Rosei talked carefully so as to not accidentally bite themselves as the car snaked through the expressway.

"I would've considered it if they went after just one season, but they attacked the Summer and the Autumn villas. Now they're attacking us. They must be reformists. I would think they're doing this to put pressure on the government. But if they're radicals... I shudder to even think about it, but it'd have to be a cult trying to get rid of all seasons."

"...Got it. Itecho, give me some bullets. I'll add an ice blessing to them. Let's get rid of them now."

Itecho hesitated for a second before handing Rosei the gun. Rosei took the bullets out of the magazine and infused them with his powers while the car rocked and swayed. Although Rosei wasn't paying much attention to his surroundings, Itecho was close enough to notice: "Rosei, your phone's ringing."

"Pick up for me. Just shove your hand in there."

Rosei was lying on his back, praying and chanting the spell to the bullets, so he had his hands busy.

Itecho sighed and reached into Rosei's kimono to grab the phone pressed

against his body. Rindo could be calling to relay a break in the kidnapping incident, but that didn't turn out to be the case.

"...It's Sakura."

The screen read Sakura Himedaka.

Rosei loaded the magazine back into the gun. "Pick up, then."

"She wouldn't want me to." Itecho frowned. He wanted to speak to her but felt like he couldn't.

"She only growls at me when I pick up. She used to call me *Lord*, but now she not only drops the title, she speaks to me like I'm her inferior... Though, I prefer it that way. Feels like having a friend my age."

"…"

"She doesn't use titles with your name, either. Welcome to the club."

"I don't mind. I may be her elder, but we have the same rank."

"You used to be so close, though."

"...It's my fault."

"No, it's mine."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is. Now pick up that phone. Then I'll pick you up if you need it. Tell her how hard you were looking for her and worrying about her."

""

"That's an order, Itecho. Pick up the phone. I'll go back to chanting, so don't speak to me."

The phone had stopped ringing while Itecho hesitated. Flustered, he dialed back. The phone was covered in his sweat already. He was more panicked by this than by the insurgent attack.

Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring. On the third set of rings, she picked up.

"...Lord...Ro...sei?"

Itecho gasped. The choppy voice sounded like music in his ear. At first, he

didn't know who it was, but then he remembered what Rosei had told him.

"This is the Guard of Winter, Itecho Kangetsu. Is this...Lady Hinagiku...?"

Rosei stopped chanting and raised his head, but he wasn't in a good position. He was lying on his back, and Itecho was on top of him in a way that Rosei ended up head-butting Itecho's jaw.

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"...gh..."
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Itecho groaned while Rosei agonized in silence. The clash had hurt Rosei more, which only proved how strong Itecho was.

"Wh-what...happened? I just...heard a...thud..."

"N-nothing, I'm in a cramped place, that's all."

"Lord...Itecho? S-Saku...ra, it's...Lord...Itecho. Huh? W-wait? Y-you're...hanging up? Oh, B-Brother, Sakura is...on another...phone right...now."

Sakura had reached out first, but since Itecho didn't pick up, she ended up on another call. Hinagiku picked up Sakura's phone for her after Itecho dialed back.

"No worries, don't make her hang up. It is you, Lady Hinagiku?"

"Y-yes, it's...Hinagiku. Lord...Itecho, are you...doing well?"

"For the time being, yes."

"No," Hinagiku said immediately.

"No...?"

"Hinagiku doesn't...mean for...the time being. Back then...they shot...at you. Are you...well now? You covered...for...Hinagiku back...then..."

Itecho gasped. "..."

"Thank...you for...saving...Hinagiku."

Itecho realized she meant the day of the attack on the Town of Winter, and he was unable to respond for a few moments.

"Hinagiku always...wanted to...say thanks."

Why?

For Itecho, time had stopped when he received that wound.

Of course, she knew he was alive, but it was unbelievable to him that she would worry about a ten-year-old injury.

That's not the first thing you should be saying.

There was a more relevant question.

Why not ask why we didn't save you? Why I didn't back Sakura up the whole way? Why you had to lose so much of your life because of us?

There were so many unfavorable things she could say instead.

"You're...okay now? You're...not hurt...ing?"

And yet she didn't.

Why this and not that?

Itecho had put a foot on the borderline between life and death ten years ago. He survived only thanks to Hinagiku.

Back then, she chose to protect. Perhaps she could have been spared had she used her divine powers to attack the insurgents instead, but if she did, maybe not everyone else could have survived.

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Why?
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The insurgents had the numerical advantage. If she let any of them go, someone would've been killed in retaliation. Itecho understood very well that he had made it to the hospital and survived because the trees protected him.

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"Yes, I'm..."
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Why?!

He expected a different conversation. Harder questions.

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"l…"
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He was ready to receive any barrage of insults, to kneel, to grind his forehead into the floor for forgiveness under a flurry of punches and kicks.

He expected to at least have to apologize.

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"Lord...Itecho?"
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But in reality?

Punish me.

Not only was she not angry, but she was also worried about the man who was not able to protect her.

I deserve punishment.

His heart screamed for help. It hurt. He wanted to rip it out of his chest.

The pain, the sadness—it was too much. It wasn't even an issue of forgiveness.

"Does it...still hurt?"

This whole time, she had kept him in a corner of her heart and wondered if he was fine. All this time.

She'd worried about him while she was imprisoned, with no one to save her.

"I'm...doing well now..."

He said it, as if he was back in that time.

"...I'm not hurting anymore."

Back to being her big brother figure.

Itecho felt his eyes warming.

Back then, he had realized from the way she talked to him that she was looking for something specific in him. After he learned that she had a stepbrother, while knowing he couldn't become her big brother, he cared for her in hopes that she might look up to him in such a way.

The fact that this lost girl still spoke to him in the same way, still sometimes

called him *Brother*, even after all that happened, pained him to no end. And foolish though this feeling was...

"Don't worry... I'm not hurting anymore, Lady Hinagiku."

...it made him so happy.

You deserve to give me punishment.

Itecho hurriedly put his sunglasses back on as his vision blurred.

"It should be me...thanking you. Thank you, truly, for...saving my life...ten years ago..."

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"...Lord...Itecho..."
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"I could never ask for forgiveness for failing to protect you... I will atone for this sin for the rest of my life... Is everything okay with you? Are you feeling well?"

"Brother..."

"...I don't deserve to be called that..."

"Please...don't say...that..."

"It's true, Lady Hinagiku..." Itecho sighed in pain.

Itecho.

Rosei stared at him in shock. This man, who always kept up appearances, who always made sure never to let anyone see him crack, had taken his mask off so easily.



They're talking, after ten years.

He could hear bits of Hinagiku's voice through the phone. He couldn't understand her words, but he could hear her—sweet and musical and bright like stars.

She's alive.

Rosei closed his mouth, forgetting about the chant. All of a sudden, he felt like he was drowning, and he realized he had stopped breathing. He shouldn't let her hear. He put a hand over his mouth as he restarted breathing shallowly.

Hinagiku is alive.

Finally, he felt it was real.

He couldn't move—it was as though he was having a huge, supernatural experience. A storm of emotions hit him.

"Don't...say that..."

Hinagiku repeated herself sadly.

"If you...say that, then...Hinagiku doesn't...deserve it, either. But...it's hard to... explain now... Lord Itecho...Brother, have you...heard about...Hinagiku?"

"...Yes, I've been informed, at least partially."

"...Hinagiku is...different now. There's a...different...person...inside. A fake. But...some parts of her...are still...here..."

The sentence was like a riddle; Itecho could say nothing back.

"If...the dead...girl...was here, she would...call you...Brother...the same. So... please don't...say that..."

"...Dead..."

"Hinagiku is...dead. This Hinagiku is...different."

"...I can't fully understand. Do you mean you have a dissociated identity?"

"Hinagiku doesn't...know. There are...multiple...illnesses...that might...fit."

Itecho felt as though he had been punched in the head by the sound of the word *illnesses*. Of course. There had to be a name for Hinagiku's condition in

modern medicine.

"But that's...the current...Hinagiku. Lord...Itecho...um...Hinagiku thought...to say it when...we met...face-to-face...again..."

"W-wait, please. Rosei is here. I'll put him on the phone, Lady Hinagiku!"

"...Hinagiku isn't...sure about...being able to...say it, so...Hinagiku will...say it now."

Hinagiku seemed flustered; she didn't hear Itecho's words.

Itecho hurriedly put the phone up to Rosei's ear.

Rosei grabbed it without speaking.

"Sorry for not being able to...bring the Hinagiku from ten years ago...back... alive..."

Finally, Rosei was hearing her voice.

"..."

He had covered his mouth to not let Hinagiku hear his voice once he realized it was her, but now he couldn't even do that.

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"...Hi...na..."
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His lips and hands shivered. The king of winter, unfazed even by the coldest weather, could not stop shivering when he heard the voice of the girl he loved.

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"Hinagi...ku..."
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He managed to say her name, but the next moment, he heard an explosion. Multiple explosions, in fact, followed by screams.

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"...Hinagiku?"
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One of those screaming voices was Hinagiku's.

Then the call was cut off, replaced by a monotonous beeping.

"Rosei, I heard a strange noise; did something happen?"

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"Did Sakura take the phone? Answer me, Rosei."

Itecho grabbed the phone from him. The call was over. He tried dialing back, but it wouldn't connect.

"...Hinagiku was screaming," Rosei whispered.

Not even Itecho could process what happened next.

"She was...screaming."

After he said that, Rosei's body floated up in the air—and not in a figurative or illusory sense.

It lasted only a few seconds, but Itecho witnessed the whole thing in slow motion. His body floated up, too, as did the gun and the bullets.

He heard Ishihara scream from the passenger seat.

Then there was a loud crashing sound.

He wasn't wearing a seat belt; he smashed into the car.

He heard something breaking, but he couldn't tell what it was.

He would've believed it if someone said there was a giant outside and it had grabbed the car and smacked it on the ground.

Itecho yelled in pain. The impact was louder than it felt, but he was in pain. He had hit his lips and head somewhere; they were bleeding slightly.

Itecho first checked whether Rosei was okay.

"..."

Rosei was alive and breathing.

Itecho had held him close subconsciously—that was the result of a lifetime protecting him. Rosei seemed weakened, but his eyes glowed brightly, and a cold breath escaped his lips like a dragon breathing fire.

Did he do this?

He turned his head to check what happened and saw a giant ice pillar growing overhead.

Ahhh, Rosei.

The pillar had pierced through the back seats. It could have skewered him and Rosei, too, if they hadn't been under the seats.

It was like a manifestation of Rosei's death wish.

It resembled his ways, his tendency to bring himself to the brink of death while never going over.

"...Rosei!"

Rosei was slow to react. He looked drowsy, perhaps after using up so much divine power.

Itecho sat up. "Are you okay?!" he asked the driver.

"W-we're...fine. The airbags saved us...but I can't move...!"

"Hold on. I'll get us out of here! Rosei! Wake up! This isn't the time for a nap!" Itecho slapped Rosei's cheek a few times. His eyes gradually focused.

"...Itecho."

"Let's get out of the car. You really went overboard this time..."

With a lot of effort, they managed to climb out of the mess.

Then Itecho realized the inside of the car wasn't the only victim of the outburst. He was at a loss for words.

"…"

It was an iceberg. Giant lumps of ice clashed with the vernal landscape of the Agent of Spring. The metropolitan expressway was entirely walled off. Rosei's ice had created a blockade.

He attacked?

It was an ice-needle hell. A few of the cars that had been chasing them had been skewered by the multitude of icicles. They managed to miss the seats, but the people inside weren't exactly unharmed. He'd probably also hit their own car unconsciously. It was easy to guess that this had been an explosion of emotion.

This is insane.

It was quiet all around, until several cars started honking.

The cars and bikes ahead started gathering to see what was happening. The Agent of Winter's miraculous powers had cut off a major traffic artery of the metropolis. The whole thing was a hindrance to regular people.

"...Lord Itecho!" Ishihara screamed.

Itecho sensed the danger and charged toward Rosei, holding him close as he lay both of them on the ground. Immediately, gunshots echoed. The skewered insurgents hadn't given up, shooting from the ice mountains.

Did they shoot to intimidate, though? Or out of confusion? Desperation? None of the bullets hit their marks. Even so, Itecho had to disarm them now that there were civilian vehicles parked around.

"...Obnoxious pricks."

Still under Itecho's protection, Rosei raised his hand up in the air.

A large blade of ice instantly appeared in his hand. He gripped it, shoved Itecho away, stood up, and ran, all in a single motion, before throwing the blade like a spear.

The ice sword stabbed the vehicle that the shooting was coming from and completely froze it over with a crackling sound.

Silence returned. Everyone around began realizing what to call the person who'd caused this bizarre, dreamlike scene.

"It's the Agent of Winter..."

Someone muttered.

The Agents of the Four Seasons didn't live in the world of regular people.

They were gods made flesh living in a mythical realm.

People enjoyed the cycle of the seasons, but they rarely thought about the

Agents working behind the scenes.

It was only natural. Although everyone knew how the seasons came about, almost no one had seen their powers in action.

Rosei had no qualms using his in sight of the people, but the Agents normally avoided this. Visibility meant attention, and not all of it was good. Both their powers and their identities were best concealed.

It was part of protecting them.

Did he not understand this? Or did he simply not care?

Rosei's actions were always rash and incautious.

Perhaps that was also due to his abnormally persistent death wish.

Still, Itecho always advised him not to use his powers without caution.

That time he helped with the accident at the mountain pass was a very rare exception.

Continuing to do this could only worsen his position within the Town and the Agency. It would make things worse for him specifically.

He made these gigantic mountains of ice and then stabbed the insurgents with an ice sword.

Someone weaker might have had a heart attack—but Itecho was furious as he walked up.

"Rosei, clench your teeth."

He gave a warning but gave no time to react.

The sound of the punch echoed in Rosei's head. He saw stars as he stumbled, just barely staying on his feet. He raised his head to protest, but he lost all strength the moment he saw Itecho's expression of outrage. He had known his retainer long enough to realize how bad this was.

"You...didn't let me react," Rosei said awkwardly. "I bit my cheek..."

"You stupid fool! You can't get away with this! Do you want to make a show of your powers that bad?!"

"No...I didn't mean to. I did it unconsciously..."

"That's no excuse!"

Itecho clenched his fist again and approached him, but Rosei raised his hands and told him to wait. Itecho gave him a chance and stopped.

"Itecho, listen. You already punched me, okay? You got it out of your system."

"No, I need to hit you one more time. I'll avoid your face, though, since you are meeting Lady Hinagiku after this."

"Wait, wait. We shouldn't be arguing in the middle of an emergency, and my head hurts like hell already. I need my stamina for the battle!"

"You're right on all counts, but I know you're trying to weasel out of this...
State the reason and purpose behind this, then, and make it brief!"

Rosei had this look of *Okay, Mom* on his face, but just for a second, since he realized that would only get him another blow.

"Fine. First, my aim is to go to the Four Seasons Agency and rescue Spring. I heard screams and gunshots through the phone. That was the weird noise you heard. We gotta go there right away and keep them safe."

"...!"

"My reason is saving the woman I love and her friend. Did I really need to spell that out?"

Rosei's statements and actions were absurd out of context, but it all made sense to someone who knew his past.

"...You mean Spring and Winter were attacked at the same time?"

"Most likely. It had to be planned. Itecho, please, let's go. They're waiting for us."

"…"

A long silence fell.

Rosei studied Itecho's eyes behind his sunglasses and thought:

He is not considering how to say no.

Rosei gave a lot of commands to Itecho, but he rarely asked for things with a *please*. He knew that when he did, Itecho could never turn him down. Not to mention that Itecho himself also wanted to do this.

"...Rosei." After a while, Itecho replied, "You should've said so sooner." He fixed his sunglasses in place. "It should take the other escorts one hour to reach the Agency. We can't wait around. We'd be going in alone; are you really prepared?"

Itecho wasn't one to hold back when it came to Spring, either.

"Of course. That's why I froze the insurgents. They might get frostbite, but they won't die. Let's leave them there."

"We should ask National Security to rescue them, though. This was excessive, you realize?"

"I get it, I get it! Yes, I went overboard, even though we were in a car chase. But...Hinagiku was screaming..." His expression turned desperate. "The point is, we can take care of this later! The car's...done for, huh? Itecho, go help Ishihara and the driver. I'll negotiate with the civilians, see if we can get one to give us their car."

Rosei immediately walked away and spoke to the onlookers.

Rosei...you've still got the same issues, but you've grown, haven't you?

The boy he had to protect was now a reliable young man who could stand by Itecho's side. It was a reassuring idea. He wouldn't have thought such things ten years ago.

There's nothing more encouraging than knowing we can split roles.

He walked to the car to help Ishihara. He cut off the airbags and seat belts with his sword, finally letting them get outside.

"What is going on?!" Ishihara exclaimed with exasperation.

Itecho shrugged. He wanted to scream the same thing.

The driver was also unharmed, but he sat down on the road and looked up at the ice as he muttered, "Our god sure is furious." A very fitting response for a resident of the Town of Winter. Rosei himself had concealed his anger now as he spoke with the driver of a nearby light truck—a young man who had parked to stare at the ice.

"We'll give you three million. What do you say?" Rosei said while pointing at the motorbike on the truck's trunk.

He was trying to buy the bike instead.

"H-huh?"

The young man's mind was still numb from the shock of witnessing the icespear attack, and he couldn't understand the sudden offer.

"I want the bike. It's...usable, right?"

"Ah, yes! I was already planning on selling it... I was going to take it for one last ride, so, uh, yes, you could drive it away if you want. U-um, if I may, are you really the God of Winter?"

"The Agent of Winter. I consider myself a human, though I'm aware calling me a god incarnate is probably more accurate. Which means that helping me means helping God."

"For real?"

"For real. This is a good deed. Sell it to me."

The young man blushed as Rosei leaned in close. His good looks were something to acknowledge, no matter one's orientation.

"Three million... That's enough to buy a new one—are you sure? It's used."

"I need a small vehicle ready to go right now."

"Umm, I don't know. Oh...but I could pay off my student loans with this..."

"Loans? You're a student?"

"Oh, no. I'm already working, but I haven't paid off my debt... Y-you're really okay with that much?"

Seeing him hesitate, Rosei went all in.

"I'll give you three and a half million. I'll wire you the money right now."

The young man kept quiet for a moment before nodding with resolve.

"...It's yours."

Rosei held out a hand, and the young man replied in kind with a shake.

"You made the right decision," said Rosei. "Give me your bank details."

Deal closed.

"Oh, yes. Hold on a second—I wrote them down for when I got to the bike shop..."

It hadn't been even ten minutes since they met, and they were already on good terms.

"Your Divinity...I mean, Agency, er...this is an off-road bike. Have you ridden one before? Do you have a license? Do Agents get licenses?" the young man asked with excitement—his anxiety was already gone.

Rosei replied coldly as the God of Winter he was. "No way, I'm not driving. My retainer will take care of that... There, you got your payment. Thank you for your help, random citizen. Now, please get the bike off the truck. And drive somewhere far away—it's dangerous here. I wired you a little extra, too, so go get yourself a nice meal today. May the Gods of the Four Seasons send you their blessings."

Rosei let him get the bike down and sent him off without waiting for any further response.

"...All right. Itecho, over here! You have a motorcycle license, don't you?"

Despite his arrogant attitude, he somehow didn't seem like a jerk, which only made it worse.

Itecho sighed. "What sort of god do you take yourself for?"

His remark was supposed to chastise his arrogance, but Rosei didn't get it.

"The God of Winter? Literally one of the Agents of the Four Seasons?"

"..."

"Anyway, can we ride together on the expressway?"

Itecho sighed again. "Article six of the Four Seasons Code applies due to the special circumstances. We may take extrajudicial measures until the insurgents

have been taken care of and we're back to safety. Which means we can't get arrested for riding the bike together."

"Good. Wouldn't want to break more laws, or Ishihara will be crying trying to clean up the mess."

"I'm crying already... Rosei, be more respectful with regular people. Doesn't matter if you're an actual god," Itecho responded.

"I'm like this with everyone. I don't take social status into account. Besides, it was you who told me to carry myself with pride. After all, Winter is the top of the seasons."

It was true he treated everyone the same, but this wasn't the moment for him to point that out with pride.

"...You're twenty years old now," Itecho replied. "At this point, it's more an issue with you rather than the education I gave you."

"An issue with me? Aren't you being awfully rude to your master?"

"Oh, whatever. The sun will set if I keep engaging with you... Ms. Ishihara, I assume you've been liste—"

Itecho turned to look at her and the driver, but the shock of what he saw didn't let him finish his sentence.

"...I'm so sorry," Ishihara said.

The tepid apology floated in the air, dissolving away before he could understand the meaning behind it.

"...Ishihara?"

Rosei let out a snicker. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, but he hoped she would say she was just kidding. Unfortunately, she wouldn't.

Ishihara was pointing a gun at the driver.

Why would Agency staff point a gun at a driver appointed by the Town of Winter?

There was only one possible explanation.

"Lord Rosei, Lord Itecho, I'm sorry, but I can't let you go."

The spring skies were blue above the frozen expressway.

The sight was already fantastical enough, but to add such a betrayal to it—how much more bizarre could it get?

It was too much to handle for Rosei and Itecho. Too much to believe.

"Please don't go. You'll die if you do."

Ishihara pleaded with woe.

Rindo, Ruri, and Ayame had arrived at Ohme, in Teishu, alongside staff from National Security and the Security Department of the Maintenance Division of the Four Seasons Agency.

It was in the opposite direction from where New Year's phone call came, but Ruri's power of Life Operation had the local animals searching for the kidnappers who'd fled the aforementioned location. She asked dogs to follow the scent that lingered on the disposable phone, and she listened to the rumors told by the birds, the bugs, and even the rats and cats.

This was where the trail of the insurgents ran cold.

"Uhhh..."

Ruri stabbed a straw into her pack of strawberry milk.

"You know, hopefully, the insurgent who fled from the phone went back to their base...but if not, then this is all a waste of time." She had a vacant look in her eyes. She was exhausted from using her divine powers without rest. "But even if we only catch one guy, we could torture him and make him give up their location..."

Rindo had a discomforting look in his eyes, too, also from exhaustion. He opened yet another energy drink as he replied, "I wonder. We haven't gotten anything out of the one we caught at the Summer villa."

Ayame, sleepless, rubbed her eyes before taking a sip of coffee.

"""Haaah...""" All three of them sighed in unison.

They had departed right after the call from New Year and had been looking for them overnight. They were currently taking a breather at a convenience-store parking lot.

They got out of the car and stretched their stiff bodies.

Rindo wished he could go to a hot spring inn and get rid of all the fatigue, but he couldn't do that while Nadeshiko was still out there somewhere.

We are making progress, though, he thought as he gulped down his energy drink.

He gave a thankful glance at the master and retainer of Summer for going along with him despite the exhaustion on their faces.

He was grateful Ruri had used her powers to track the kidnappers, of course, but more than anything, he was glad they were just there with him. He could feel that he was not alone. There were also Hinagiku and Sakura, who had launched this collaboration, and Rosei and Itecho, who promised to join them. He was endlessly grateful to all the Seasons.

Hang in there, Nadeshiko.

Rindo prayed for his Autumn.

He reassured her that people were coming to help her.

"National Security is inquiring around here, so we'll be on standby for a while. Lady Ruri, Lady Ayame, would you like to take a rest in the car?"

"We've had plenty of sleep. We weren't driving like you have been. I know you've been taking shifts, but you should be the one napping. We'll wake you up if anything happens."

"Thank you for your concern, but I think I'm too worked up to get any sleep..."

He couldn't get a wink since he was thinking about Nadeshiko, but more than anything, the boiling rage that kept building up inside him toward the insurgents wouldn't let him sleep.

Ruri nodded. "...I really get it. I'm super mad this time, but the insurgents annoy me all year long. I wanna punch those suckers right in the face! Don't you, Lord Rindo?"

"Ruri, watch your mouth," said Ayame.

"I agree. The suckers do need a fist in their faces."

"...Not you, too, Lord Rindo..."

"Stop acting like a goody-two-shoes, Ayame!"

"I'm not acting... I just don't like the language. An Agent of the Four Seasons

shouldn't be saying that...even if I feel the same."

They conversed casually.

Although their greetings were awkward, the long, exhausting drive together had built a sense of unity among them. The existence of a common enemy also helped. The insurgents were a persistent topic of conversation.

Ruri finished up her drink and crushed the pack in her hand. "First of all, don't you find it wrong that it's always only the insurgents protesting? I've got a few things to say myself!"

Rindo nodded. "Go ahead, Lady Ruri. Get it off your chest."

"I will!"

"Ruri... Lord Azami...," Ayame murmured.

"First of all, the radicals! They wanna kill a Season just because they don't like them?! Sure, some people got too sick to survive the winters a long time ago, and it might be a life-and-death problem for people in the mountains, but what're we supposed to do about it? Why're they holding grudges for centuries? Why even complain to Mother Nature? I don't see anyone going on about how they loathe mountains! Don't mountains cause problems, too?! So why us? Summer gets its own harassment from the radicals, but I don't care whether those jerks are feeling hot or cold! We're basically gods, arbiters of nature! You can't fight nature! I've had about enough of it!"

"You don't hold back, huh, Ruri?"

"No! Having a variety of ideas is good and all, but it's not good to try and impose your views on others! If you don't like it, then go live somewhere else!"

"...I suppose that would be ideal, but we call them insurgents for a reason."

Rindo chimed in, "Personally, I don't understand the reformists. They're either people with too much time on their hands, or a bunch of idiots simply wrecking everything and calling it justice. If they're going to be spending all their time complaining about how the Agents should use their powers for the sake of the world, then they should be moving to do something themselves. But no, they only protest and riot... They're crazy. Do they really think they're doing

the right thing?"

Ruri's anger had infected the others as their conversation got more and more heated.

"Right?!" she said." Not to mention they don't care what we think! They wanna use us as weapons! Fight your own damn wars! We should move in case of natural disaster? What if we make the environment worse? It's never been a smart idea to use the Agents' powers against nature!"

"They don't consider the rights of Agents as humans," said Ayame. "They only see them as tools... Either they ignore us when we point that out, or they bring up noblesse oblige... They're taking the gods for fools."

"You are right, Lady Ayame," said Rindo, "They don't understand how awful it is to try to bend a supernatural being to their will. What if they succeeded and incurred the wrath of the real Gods of the Four Seasons? Can they not think of that possibility?"

"There is a documented history of such cases," said Ayame. "There was a country that tried to use the Agents for war, and then its land turned into a desert. I wonder if those events aren't in the books available to the public."

"It's in the textbooks, actually," Rindo commented.

"Lord Rindo, you're very knowledgeable about the common world!"

"My upbringing was a special one, so I attended a public school."

Ruri jumped. "Whaaat?! You went to a normal school?"

"For how long? Did you go to university?" Ayame also leaned forward with curiosity.

"Yes, I went to university. Although, I guess it was for nothing since I ended up serving the Four Seasons anyway..."

"Aww." Ruri and Ayame looked at him with pity.

The conversation would sound strange to outsiders. It was an age of freedom, and yet they had their careers, their reach, and even sometimes their marriage chosen for them.

It was not only the Agents who were sacrificed to maintain the ancient system of the gods' delegates. The relatives who supported them were also confined to this closed world. Just as one could not choose their own parents, they could not choose their own careers.

"But hey, Lady Nadeshiko's an adorable girl. So it's all good in the end, right?"

"She's right; there were plenty of people who applied to be Lady Iwaizuki's Guard, weren't there?"

However, that was normal for them. They were living in modern times with ancient traditions. They were able to use modern technology and dabble in the common world, thus upgrading their values—but to some, this only meant further despair at the difference between their lives and those of the other youth.

Most people, though, accepted that they had to live this way.

"...Yes, you're right," said Rindo. "I also wanted to pursue a postgraduate degree, but I chose not to. In any case, my parents were also glad to hear the news...and it is an honor."

The advantage of living in this closed world was that everyone had a secured minimum standard of living, and unless they did something truly foolish, the Town would support them for life. That said, if one resisted the situation too strongly, any judgment would befall not only them, but also their family.

It was far easier to keep quiet and endure it.

"And yet I..."

Rindo had resigned himself to take it just as any other job, keeping up an act before Nadeshiko, but without knowing it, he had become a true Guard. Whether this was a good or bad thing depended on his own perspective.

"Nadeshiko..."

When they remembered her absence, the mood fell a bit. Ayame was flustered, but Ruri clapped him on the back.

"Chin up! It's rare for someone not to graduate from the school of the Four Seasons. That's nice. So nice."

"It's nothing special...," said Rindo. "My parents had this job collaborating with a foreign Four Seasons organization, so we got permission from the Town as expats. This happens not only in Yamato—you hear about it overseas, too. Also...I had to move across various countries due to my parents' jobs, and some of them had greater faith in the Gods of the Four Seasons. Even there, the insurgents were extremely violent. It's not an issue of public knowledge, but of individual moral values... It could also be that we're only being used as outlets for their violence."

"Moral values—yes, very important," Ruri replied. "They all know these are blessings from the gods, and they still do those blasphemous things. And it's like, um, don't we get any human rights? The only reason any people are alive is because nature was merciful enough to give them life, but they don't show the tiniest bit of respect! It's unbelievable! They're the ones receiving the blessings, and yet they talk like they're in charge! Who do they think they are?!"

"You tell 'em. It's so refreshing hearing you talk, Lady Ruri."

"Who the hell?! Who the hell do they think they are?! They're just a bunch of idiots! Jeeerks!"

"Lord Azami," Ayame interjected, "please don't encourage her."

Rindo was the oldest here, yet somehow, Ayame ended up being the mature one. Ayame taking up the role of assuaging her was not a good thing, though. She and Ruri tended to argue a lot when they were alone, but with a third person along, the conversations could flow smoothly. Rindo's presence kept the harmony between the sisters. Indeed, they hadn't gotten into an argument since they left the Agency.

"Hey, someone's phone's ringing! I can hear it," Ruri said.

Ayame and Rindo checked their pockets. It was Rindo's phone, and the call was coming from the investigation HQ.

"It's the landline back at investigation HQ. I'll answer."

Rindo held the phone up to his ear, and the first thing he heard was a banging noise. He raised an eyebrow.

"Lord Azami, are you okay? Can you hear me?"

It was Sakura. Her elegant voice was clear even in the apparent chaos.

"Lady Himedaka? I can hear you. What happened?"

"It's an emergency. I want you to share this information with Summer, too. Is there anyone around?"

"We're at a convenience-store parking lot, on standby with the tracking team."

"Okay, you hear me out first, and then you can tell the others."

Why was she being so roundabout? He considered putting her on speakerphone to let everyone listen, but the tension in Sakura's voice and the noise around her dissuaded him from even suggesting it.

"The Four Seasons Agency building is under attack. We don't know the goal or affiliation of the enemy. The battle is taking place on the ground floor, and we're blockading ourselves in the upper stories."

"Wha ...?"

"I said we are under..."

"No, I could hear you! Are you okay? What about Lady Kayo? Is anybody hurt?"

Ruri and Ayame shivered when Rindo raised his voice.

Rindo apologized with a glance.

"Lord Rindo, we can't hear. Lean down."

Ruri and Ayame walked up to him to find out what was going on. Rindo felt awkward as he was sandwiched in between the pretty twins, but he bent down so they could also listen. He was used to treating women with care due to his time with Nadeshiko.

"We're fine at the moment. There weren't many, and I beat them before they could hurt us. We're holing up inside for now."

Rindo was relieved to hear Sakura's dependable response, but his anxiety immediately rose again as he realized she was trying her best to keep her composure.

"We blocked off the stairs. We also blockaded the elevator's entrance."

Then what was the noise in the background?

"Have you received backup from National Security?"

"Not yet as far as I can see. I've reported it, so they must be coming, but there's a chance we might fall first."

"Got it, I'm heading back."

"No, you don't have to come," Sakura declined cleanly. "It should all be over by the time you get here. It's a war of attrition until outside help comes. Either we fall or they will, but it'll happen before you can get here. I want you to keep going with what you're doing. Even if something happens to us, if you get useful intel on New Year, we could get the advantage."

"But what happens to you then?!"

"This is my duty as Guard. Lord Azami, you focus on Autumn. Once I end this call, I will only think of Lady Hinagiku. Okay? Keep calm. I called you because I wanted to tell you not to come back no matter what you hear, and to warn you. There are multiple traitors. I believe you aren't one of them, which is why I'm telling you this."

"What? What are you ...?"

"...Nagatsuki betrayed us."

Rindo's brain ceased to function for a moment. He couldn't understand what he'd just heard.

Once he started processing things again a couple seconds later, the time he spent with Nagatsuki flashed before his eyes. She had been appointed when Rindo was, and although she was older, she was a friendly person who was good at making others feel welcome.

"Nagatsuki belongs to a radical organization known as Higan-Nishi."

His first impression of her had been that she was a loud and attention-seeking woman, but she quickly fit in with the rest of the security team.

"They're a bit different from the radicals who wish to eradicate a specific

season. They worship the Agent of Spring and believe all other seasons are unneeded. Fanatics of Spring, basically. She said she had infiltrated Autumn so that they could end it once they had a world where they could worship only Lady Hinagiku...only the Agent of Spring."

Nagatsuki had been a stellar coworker; if he had to criticize something about her, it was that she ate foods with strong smells even in shared spaces. No matter who else was a traitor, he would have trusted her.

"It was Higan-Nishi's predecessor that collaborated with New Year ten years ago. They've already dissolved, but the remaining members created this new organization."

"I...can't believe Nagatsuki betrayed us, but does that mean you want revenge on her?"

"Well, since the previous organization already disbanded, and the new one has different ideals in place, I'm not quite sure what to do. Higan-Nishi used to be anti-Winter, but it appears that, after seeing Lady Hinagiku offer herself to protect him ten years ago, they converted to being worshippers of Spring..."

"...What?"

"Oh, I know what you're thinking. Who would change their views that easily, right? Although, I...kind of understand...why they would become fans of Lady Hinagiku after what she did..."

"…"

"She stood on her own against the insurgents, created the cherry blossom trees to protect us, and appealed to the evildoer's good heart to beg for our lives... She was truly godly..."

"Isn't she already godly by nature?"

"Yes, but that's not what I mean."

Sakura paused to look for the right words.

"She was already a goddess incarnate...but, Lord Azami, across the history of all peoples, once one witnessed that miraculous power, they would call its user a saint and begin worshipping them. The sight of it made me feel like...Oh, so this

is how religions come to be. And that she was, in fact, a goddess. Before then...I considered her closer to us. Perhaps it's hard for you to imagine when you weren't there..."

For a moment, Rindo thought she had to be exaggerating, but then Hinagiku's face crossed his mind, and he couldn't bring himself to refute her.

The Agents had something that charmed people. Something that was different among the Four Seasons.

Winter's Rosei Kantsubaki was just like the star Sirius, the root of his name—despite being solitary, he had a centripetal force that attracted people to him. Rindo heard the elite squad guarding him was as united as army troops.

Summer's Ruri Hazakura was ingenuous and cheerful. She had a love-and friendship-oriented mindset stronger than anyone else's, and she was deeply compassionate. Still, she had the coolheadedness to evaluate her surroundings. Her caretakers loved her like a little sister.

I know Nadeshiko's charm better than anyone else.

As for Spring's Hinagiku Kayo, although she appeared to be in a constant state of fear and anxiety, she did all she could to live. She was still a child who liked orange juice and couldn't speak properly. You could pick that up from just a short conversation with her, but even then...

She is spring itself, illuminating other people.

It was too abstract, but there was no other way he could put it. She illuminated people. And the more stubborn the other person was, the brighter her light was.

It was just as the sun in spring brightened the cold world of winter and filled it with warmth.

You couldn't help but be touched by her whole being.

She tries to protect other people's hearts.

She was not a strong girl, but she wouldn't keep herself weak. Despite generally being the recipient of protection, she went out of her way to protect others. One wanted to tell her to not overexert herself.

I can understand why Lady Himedaka dedicates herself to Lady Kayo.

Rindo had also been touched by Hinagiku's spring sun.

Just thinking about it turned his face red, but he had recalled her kindness comforting him over and over again already. The frayed threads of his soul had been soothed in that moment.

She didn't have it easy herself, and yet she worried about others. This prickled at Rindo's heart.

He was a regular human who had made contact with a goddess incarnate—if he saw Hinagiku as a six-year-old, overflowing with divinity, protecting everything with her cherry blossom trees, and tearing up as she pleaded to let them live...

Maybe it's not so difficult to think someone would fall.

What would you call it? *Touched? Spellbound? Hypnotized?*

In any case, this was how the season drove people mad.

Rindo reassured Nadeshiko inside his mind that he would not cheat on her as he thought that. Since Rindo was saying nothing, Sakura gave up and accepted that he wouldn't understand her.

"Ten years ago, Higan-Nishi clashed with New Year regarding the treatment of Lady Hinagiku, and they disbanded. Or rather, they were killed off by New Year. The survivors held grudges toward New Year for kidnapping Lady Hinagiku, and they were also searching for her... For years, they planned to get the Agent of Spring once she was reinstated and worship her as their own...and then we just came in the front door to them... Lord Azami, I don't blame you for not realizing Nagatsuki was a traitor. The seeds were planted almost ten years ago."

"...That long?"

"Yes. Nagatsuki was a student then. It just so happened that the club she joined in university had people from Higan-Nishi behind it. Alumni visited from time to time to win people over."

It was a common method for religious groups or frauds. Rindo felt as though he was about to drop into a spiderweb someone else had woven right beneath his feet.

"Nagatsuki fell for it, and she wasted a decent life to follow the orders of the top brass of Higan-Nishi and join the Four Seasons Agency. Then she was appointed to the Town of Autumn...and you know the rest."

"...I don't think I know anything about her..."

What was all that work they did together to rescue Nadeshiko up until just the previous day? Were her tears at the sight of Nadeshiko's blood at the Autumn villa also an act?

The friendship he felt for her was fading silently.

It was all a lie?

She thought about the security schedules harder than him. Her work was never sloppy.

She had made little contact with Nadeshiko since she spent most of her time underground, but it didn't look like the affection she felt for her Fairy was fake.

She was really thinking about killing her the whole time?

Rindo felt a shiver.

He had realized how incautious he had been after the Autumn villa attack, but he had never felt it so painfully as he did now.

What do I even say to Nadeshiko?

Rindo wondered about how sad his Autumn would feel if she knew of it.

Unaware of his feelings, Sakura continued:

"Nagatsuki is not a descendant of the Agents of the Four Season—just a commoner who got into this as a career. An important step moving forward will be to investigate when exactly someone with the potential to join the Agency was infected by insurgent ideology. The backlash is going to be rough on the Agency's HR, but it could also create more rot..."

Someone seemed to have called Sakura, since she stopped. Apparently, someone had dialed another phone. He could hear Hinagiku's flustered voice in the background.

"Excuse me, I haven't taught Lady Hinagiku how to put calls on hold... It's from Winter. I just tried to contact them, but they wouldn't answer. I'll share the details with them once our conversation is over...if we have enough time."

Rindo managed to calm the storm inside him enough to reply:

"Keep calm. Please continue."

"Yes. Now, I am not defending Nagatsuki, but her confession is the reason we're talking now. I didn't torture her, either. We can't exactly take her at her word, but it seems that once she came in contact with the Agent of Autumn, she ended up wanting to protect the Autumn villa. Apparently, she began connecting the dots as she looked into New Year's fundraising in arms and drug trafficking... Once she heard about a major deal made in the arms field, she braced herself for a major terrorist attack. She put two and two together from the way Higan-Nishi got weapons from New Year for the attack on Winter ten years ago. She supposedly warned her higher-ups about it—but well, they're a small organization founded just a decade ago. They don't have the military power New Year has. They're more oriented toward information operations. So since they really couldn't do anything about it, they remained observers until New Year attacked the Autumn villa, directly involving Nagatsuki herself... That's her story anyway."

"...She didn't know they'd attack the villa?"

"I imagine she had a guess, but being a spy, she couldn't leave, and she had no idea when it would happen. She says she didn't see the attack today coming, either. But since Lady Hinagiku happened to be right there, she tried to take advantage of the confusion to bring her to their hideout, but then I kicked their asses, so they're obeying me now."

"…"

"Lord Azami?"

If all that was true, then maybe Nagatsuki was only brainwashed—a victim herself.

But it didn't change the fact that she had planned to betray Nadeshiko and Rindo in her time with them. The next time he met her, he had to see her as an enemy.

"I'm fine. Did you capture her?"

"She's not tied up. She insisted she wanted to help protect Lady Hinagiku, so I'm having her build a barricade before the elevator."

"Wouldn't it be better to restrain her?"

"Oh, I'll be doing that later. I just need all the help I can get right now. It sounds like the Agency is fighting some armed group on the lower floors, so we need cover and decoys for when they get upstairs. We could escape down the emergency stairs...but since the conflict is going on below, I reckon it's better to stay safe up here. We'd have nowhere to go if we ran into the enemy. Some of us are unarmed—we ought to wait for backup from National Security. We need human shields."

It was an atrocious thing to say, but perhaps it was easier on the mind to double down and think of everyone but the Agent as just tools. Rindo was in no state to put that together at the moment, though, as he was still shocked from hearing about Nagatsuki's betrayal.

"Just beware of the traitors. New Year might be planning something big. Be careful, okay?"

"I will, Lord Azami. And do not give up on the search, even if we die here."

"...Don't say that."

"I have to. No matter what anyone says, do not give up on Lady Nadeshiko. Especially not you. Got it? A retainer...is a source of light for their Agent. Don't forget what Lady Hinagiku said to you."

"I promise... I won't give up on Nadeshiko."

"I'm glad to hear that." At the very end of the conversation, Sakura sounded like a girl her age.

"H-hey! I still think we should go!" Ruri interjected desperately, but then a strange noise came from the other side of the line, and the call ended.

"...Huh? What just happened?" Ruri pulled Rindo's shirt, and he tried dialing back. He could hear the phone ringing.

But Sakura did not pick up.

"...Did you hear her scream?" Ruri asked.

"Yes. I also heard an explosion. And gunshots."

".....I can't believe Lady Hinagiku and Lady Sakura are under attack from the insurgents... Shouldn't we go back?"

Rindo couldn't answer right away. Sakura had said not to, both because it was useless and because they wouldn't be in time either way.

The only contribution they would make was to the number of corpses.

Should we split up? Even if it is useless, shouldn't we try to help?

Should they follow their emotions? Or see the bigger picture?

"What shall we do, Lord Azami?" Ayame asked.

"What now, Lord Rindo? We're going to help, right?" Ruri added.

Cold sweat ran down Rindo's back.

Meanwhile, the master and retainer of Spring were in the middle of the chaos on the nineteenth floor of the Agency building.

Another heavy explosion sounded from downstairs.

Sakura felt nauseous at the noise and what it meant.

Did one side win the battle downstairs already?

Sakura looked out the window—smoke was coming out of the main entrance. The alarm kept ringing incessantly.

Around her were about a dozen Agency investigators, shocked by Nagatsuki's betrayal and shaking at the sound of the explosion. The stairs were blocked off, but the elevator was still working. If the phony contractors she saw outside were as crooked as she thought, then they didn't have much time left.

Her allies were piling up the heaviest furniture in the office to block the

elevator's door, but that would be useless if the attackers brought more explosives with them.

"Y-you hear the gunshots coming closer?!"

Loud booms went off in an almost boastful manner following the investigator's comment. They were difficult to make out due to the alarm bells, but they were still noticeable.

Hinagiku let out a small scream. Sakura nearly cried out, too. The situation was eerily similar to what had happened in the Town of Winter.

"Have we gotten any news from National Security?!" Sakura yelled at no one in particular.

One Agency employee responded, "No!"

"You reported this already, right?!"

"Y-yes! And besides, this is a huge attack. I'm sure we aren't the only ones."

Right. There were onlookers, staff who got to run away—someone else must've reported it already.

Sakura was suspicious of everything after finding out about Nagatsuki's betrayal. She didn't know who to trust. What if her phone was bugged? What if there was a traitor inside National Security? Could she even trust the staff here to be on her side?

She tapped her chest a few times anxiously.

"...Sakura, the call...was cut...off."

Hinagiku handed her the phone, pale in the face. No time to call back. She grabbed the phone and put it in her pocket. They dialed back from the landline, too, but this wasn't the time for that, either. She hung up.

"Lord...Itecho...answered."

"I see... Who knows where they are, but I imagine National Security should be coming first. Lady Hinagiku, we must stay inside here. We must resist until help from the outside comes."

"Yes. Should Hinagiku...wrap some...thorns around...the barricade?"

"Please do. We can expect an armed group to come upstairs after they finish the battle downstairs."

"...Yes. Got...it."

Hinagiku's expression was full of fear, but she acted quickly. She chose some seeds from the pouch and strengthened the barricade with her divine powers.

"Lady Himedaka."

Nagatsuki, having finished setting up the barricade, spoke to Sakura in between heavy breaths. The men Sakura had defeated, too, saluted her in sync like a troop.

They looked at her with bright eyes, despite being bruised and bleeding.

Ugh.

Sakura had obtained a squad that was ready to follow her command, even if they would never see eye to eye. She had no idea what had won them over, but they seemed to be fond of her now.

"I don't think you should expect much from National Security," Nagatsuki continued.

"Why?"

"New Year's influence has expanded these last few years; they've been spending a lot of money and creating collaborators everywhere. I believe people inside National Security may be included. For starters, don't you find it strange that not even the firefighters are here yet? Isn't this building close to a station? Something's delaying them."

What can we even do, then?! Sakura wanted to yell, but Nagatsuki's words were only speculation.

"Also, I'm sorry, but here's the real issue at hand... Someone's been knocking on the emergency exit. Should we ignore it?"

Sakura glanced at the locked door. "It must be one of your crazy friends. You tried taking us over there, didn't you? The insurgents might use the emergency staircase. We need a shield for when they come, so we're not opening the door."

Nagatsuki wasn't sure what to say for a few moments. Then she stared at Sakura with smitten eyes.

"Lady Himedaka, you're so coldhearted... I can feel my heart throbbing."

It seemed she was a bit on the masochistic side.

"Stop involving me in your weird fetishes," Sakura snapped. "You're gonna force me to be nice, and I don't want to."

"No, please remain as cold as you are..."

"You're scaring me. I may be rude, but I'm not like that..."

"...You're so cute, Lady Himedaka. Now, if I may go back on topic, all members of my group are right here. Unfortunately, Higan-Nishi is too small... We haven't gotten to spread the word of Lady Kayo to the world...but we plan to grow her following now that she's back."

"Please, no."

But then who's out there?

"If there is someone who would come here, other than an insurgent... wouldn't it be those pesky escorts following Lady Kayo around?" Nagatsuki suggested.

So either the Agency or Town of Winter staff.

Their presence would be appreciated. Sakura hesitated, and then the alarm bell stopped ringing. As the loudest noise faded away, all the others became clearer.

She was now able to hear the knocking on the fire door and the voice outside.

"Please open! Lady Spring! Lady Guard! Are you there?!"

It was one of the two escorts from the Town of Winter.

Sakura hurried up to the emergency door. The others stood before it with folding chairs and fire extinguishers.

"Are we opening the door?" asked the person keeping watch by the door.

Sakura, still undecided, figured she could kill the newcomers if need be.

"Please let us in!" the voice called again.

"We're opening up! Keep any weapons down as you come in!" the staff said with a trembling voice.

Once the door was slowly unlocked, the two escorts entered. No one else.

"Oh, thank goodness. You're all right!"

"We're sorry for not being here. We were attacked and tied up, but we managed to escape."

They had bruises and cuts all over their faces.

The door was locked again once they were inside. They didn't seem to be looking for a fight, so Sakura sheathed her sword.

"You were responsible for the gunshots? Was it New Year?" Sakura asked.

The Winter escorts looked at each other.

"No...it was Agency escorts. From the Security Department of the Maintenance Division. Spring Branch."

"We took care of all of them, but there might be more traitors. We must be careful."

So they weren't safe even staying here. They were cornered.

"Lady Guard..."

As they tried to show their concern, Sakura ruminated over the betrayal. Nagatsuki had already revealed herself. It was an easy guess that there would be more traitors inside the Agency. The ones who had already been discovered just happened to be the closest, lurking in Spring. Escorts from Spring had been monitoring Sakura and Hinagiku since they performed the manifestation in Ryugu all alone. Sakura had been keeping their minders at a distance due to personal reasons, but it turned out to be the right choice.

"When did they attack you?"

The Winter escorts had been assaulted by the Security staff before the emergency alarm rang, dragged to the eighteenth floor, and beaten. The number of Security staff was different every day, but there were five today. Five

vs. two.

Now Sakura was feeling grateful toward Itecho for giving them their elite escorts.

"Let's get up to speed." Sakura informed them about Higan-Nishi.

The escorts winced when they heard about the traitors and Hinagiku's believers. "Shouldn't we restrain them?"

Sakura had expected as much, and she frowned. "I have a plan. We should make use of what we can, and I already took their weapons."

"Please, you can trust us," Nagatsuki interjected.

"Shut your mouth, Nagatsuki."

"Still," one of the escorts insisted, "I think we should get rid of anything that could mean trouble."

Sakura was starting to doubt her own judgment. No one was capable of making perfect decisions in this situation—the weight of responsibility on her shoulders was too big.

Dammit.

She was mentally cornered. Her heart was racing.

Then the sight of Itecho's back came to mind.

"Sakura."

She remembered his voice. The voice of the only man who had tried to protect her.

Stop it. Don't think about him.

She always thought of his back when she was anxious and uncertain.

Get him out of your mind.

Itecho's influence on her life was huge.

He'd taught her martial arts. Taken her in when she was thrown out of the Town of Spring. They weren't quite friends, but they were close, even fond of each other, and they'd lived together for five years supporting Rosei after losing Hinagiku. And most of all...

Don't. It'll make you weak.

...he'd protected her. He'd backed her up. He'd cherished her. He'd shown her kindness.

Be strong. Be brave.

Itecho was gentlemanly to everyone. Kindness was his usual state of being—nothing special. It just so happened that Sakura had no other young man like him around her.

Sakura's fondness was one-sided. Fondness that one day grew into love.

"Sakura... The search for Lady Hinagiku's..."

And it all collapsed. She couldn't clearly remember the moment Itecho told her that the search would be downsized—meaning the Town of Winter was effectively giving up on finding Hinagiku.

Her mind had gone blank, and then the love for him that had grown inside her suddenly turned into hatred of equal strength.

Kill that emotion. You're on the job.

Sakura exhaled. She barely managed to keep her heart in check.

Forget about Itecho. Forget about Itecho. Forget about Itecho.

Forget about that back she used to run after.

You're already strong enough. You're strong.

Forget about his expression when she told him he could cry, too.

You're strong. You can fight.

Forget about those eyes that always looked at her with tenderness.

You're not doing it alone. Don't try to carry it all. You have your pawns. Use them.

Forget how sweet her name sounded on his lips.

You have to protect her, and she's right there.

She got rid of any trace of Itecho from her mind.

"Sakura."

She turned around at the sound of her name.

Hinagiku was short of breath after finishing the thorn barricade, and she seemed unsure what to do next. "Hinagiku will...help with...anything."

She looked so reliable. Her goddess had grown so much after ten years. And Sakura would fight by her side now.

"...Lady Hinagiku."

You've saved me so many times.

Sakura forgot about her other feelings and focused on the one she loved right before her eyes. She reached out to bring Hinagiku closer, like someone does to their romantic partner. Hinagiku said nothing as she clung to Sakura.

"I am so lucky to have such a wonderful lady."

"Hinagiku...is way...luckier...to have...you."

Hinagiku hugged her hard, as though absorbing all of Sakura's worries. Peace overwrote the panic in her mind.

Protect her.

Sakura exhaled again and took everything in—Hinagiku's body, her warmth, the feeling of her beating heart.

"...Are you...okay?" Hinagiku asked, noticing something wasn't right.

Without a moment's delay, Sakura responded, "Yes, Lady Hinagiku. No problem. Don't worry. I will protect you." She was back to her usual, cool self. "I have a plan. This is how we'll minimize harm to those who cannot fight as we strike back."

Everyone turned to listen to her.

Meanwhile, Sakura's target of affection, Itecho Kangetsu, was facing a new enemy.

"Please don't go. You'll die if you do." Ishihara held a gun to Rosei's escortteam driver.

"Ms. Ishihara, let's calm down for a second," said Itecho.

I wasn't cautious enough.

From Itecho's point of view, Ishihara had seemed like a perfectly fine and normal person. She was a good listener, a good worker, and a kind person. Even Rosei seemed to have calmed down mentally after he began receiving counseling from her.

And it was all for nothing.

The sight of Rosei's suicide attempts and all the drugs he'd been taking flashed through Itecho's mind.

Self-harm had become regular for Rosei ever since he lost Hinagiku.

Every time Itecho asked why he did it, he would say, "Hinagiku might be hurting right now; it's not fair that I get to go unharmed."

All of it. All the treatment for nothing.

Mental scars came back time and again, no matter how much you treated them. Even if a scab formed after stopping the bleeding, and everything went back to normal superficially, you could so easily scratch it open to prevent healing. Itecho understood this. The woman before him was most likely an insurgent. It was his fault that he'd trusted her and appointed her as an escort. He couldn't help but fear how much this betrayal would hurt his master.

All the time they'd spent on treating Rosei was not only wasted—his mental health would end up even worse.

I have to kill her.

Itecho's voice lowered ten degrees compared with his usual warmth. His gentle eyes behind the sunglasses changed to those of a hunter. "Let's talk."

He decided to get rid of her.

How, though?

Sakura was also one to change her demeanor on the fly, but Itecho's switch was far more mechanical and precise.

She's close. I only need to draw her focus away.

On the surface, he seemed just like always, trying to find common ground; however, on the inside, he was coldly planning the assassination.

His thoughts were devoid of warmth or noise—the same way one would feel when doing addition or subtraction.

She's a good shot, though. I have to be careful.

Sadly, Itecho was used to betrayal.

His work was to protect the most vulnerable of the Agents, the one most often targeted. It was not uncommon for him to find out that those he trusted were on the insurgents' side.

Even if things didn't go that far, as Winter had the top spot among the seasons, there were many people who tried to get on Rosei's good side. He had seen the worst of humanity far too many times to count, both inside and outside the Town of Winter. He didn't have enough fingers to count the number of times he had to put down people trying to harm Rosei.

We must get to Sakura and Lady Hinagiku's side.

Itecho's ability to change gears quickly wasn't something he was born with; it

had grown through his life experiences.

To an outside perspective, he was a kind, merciful man who could get along with anyone.

This side of him was innate, not an act. But...

I should've grabbed the gun.

...that was only *one* side. He was also not afraid to do anything to protect his master.

"There must be a reason for all this. I'll hear you out."

He was born to be a Guard.

Guards needed no pity. They had to be able to burn to ash any emotion that could get in the way of performing their job.

I'll kill her.

Even if it meant wiping a colleague off the face of the earth.

"...Ishihara, Itecho's right. Calm down, please. Put down the gun...I beg you."

Rosei, on the other hand, seemed to be desperately trying to keep his panic in check. They wouldn't be able to go help Hinagiku if he fell apart. And Ishihara had done her part as Rosei's therapist—the betrayal had to weigh on her. She must have been strongly disoriented, but she kept herself in check.

"Ms. Ishihara, Rosei is right," said Itecho. "Calm down."

Don't think you can get home alive after hurting my Winter.

Itecho concealed his anger as he spoke.

"...I am calm," Ishihara replied. "I'm perfectly composed. Well, not really..."

Ishihara glanced at Itecho, then at Rosei, and back. Her lips were trembling. Her eyes were out of focus, and her whole body was also shivering.

"In any case, please don't go. You'll die."

She was clearly terrified.

"Ishihara, we can't hear you out if you won't give us a reason," said Rosei. "Why won't you tell us?"

Ishihara bit her lip.

"…"

She seemed to be wrestling with something. Maybe she didn't want to betray them at all.

"Ishihara, are you having trouble with something?" Rosei immediately bet on the possibility. "You're short of breath. You're wincing. Is someone threatening you? It doesn't look like you want to do this."

"...l..."

"It's also strange that you say you're trying to stop us from heading to our deaths. Ishihara, if there's anything going on, tell us. Quickly. I don't have time. I have to go help Spring. Even if it kills me."

"No...!"

"Ishihara, you're pointing a gun at a compatriot. You're already going to be punished. It looks like you're the one heading for death. You think Itecho can't cut you down or I can't rain ice shards on you faster than you can shoot us? Try us if you want. All my escorts have written their wills. They're prepared for this. But it'll be you dying here today. I won't let my subordinates die easily. We'll kill you. But then we'll never know what was ailing you. Is that all right with you?"

"...l..."

He's good, Itecho thought as he listened in silence.

Rosei kept a good pace changing from carrot to stick as he spoke. It also helped that he said it all with relative calm. You could tell he was worried about her. And while he wasn't in a position to forgive Ishihara, he was implying that he might turn a blind eye to some of her wrongdoings if she changed her mind now.

He's so good at manipulating people.

From how Ishihara was acting, her betrayal didn't seem to come from her own volition. It was clear she had doubts about her own actions.

She would sway if they showed her a path to salvation.

Itecho kept his sword in hand as he let Rosei take care of persuading her.

"I haven't known you for long," Rosei continued, "but you've helped me out a bunch. Truly. You've been my best therapist up to now. So I want to help you. You're not doing this because you want to, are you? Is someone forcing you?"

"...My...pa...rents..."

Rosei and Itecho blinked at the unexpected answer.

"Your parents are telling you to do this?"

Ishihara nodded. She kept quiet for a while before saying, "...Both of them are top brass in New Year."

"An insurgent by blood... Not so different from Gozen, huh? I see... And you can't run away from them?"

The blood drained from Ishihara's face. "...They might...kill me if I do... I've tried many times before...but they always took me back home. My older brother was killed by New Year management as punishment... They won't let me go just because I'm their daughter..."

"…"

It doesn't look like she's lying, Rosei thought.

Not only the Agents of the Four Seasons were bound by their bloodline.

There were people all around the world in unfortunate family situations. It wasn't strange to think one of them would happen to be a daughter of the insurgents.

"Lord Rosei...it's not because of their orders that I won't let you go. It's that New Year's attack squad..."

"What? What about the attack squad?"

"...They're planning to blow up the entire Agency building."

The problem had suddenly escalated. Rosei could fill the expressway with ice swords, but not even he could do anything to stop a building from blowing up. Cold sweat ran down his back.

"Are you telling the truth?" he asked.

"Why would I lie now? Gozen is furious because the Agency and National Security wouldn't accept the deal. She thought that, if they weren't willing to yield even after kidnapping an Agent, they had no choice but to attack the organizations themselves... But I know you're most worried about Lady Hinagiku, and I think she'll be saved... Lady Gozen is obsessed with her, so she will try to get her out before the explosion. Once Lady Hinagiku is clear, she won't hesitate to blow the place up. We don't know if you'll be able to get there in time, and worst-case scenario, you'll be caught in the explosion... I'm telling the truth. I'm warning you because this is the last bit of help I can give you."

"...Help?"

"Yes. All the pursuers were from New Year. I can tell you this now that you've frozen them. The plan was that they would get you out of the picture, but thanks to you splitting up, you've been able to escape so far. You're safe. You can't go to the Agency."

Rosei's group had come all the way here after a series of car chases. If New Year had managed to get Rosei and Itecho out of the way, Ishihara would have been taken out as well.

"If everything you're saying is right, Ishihara, then...you're disposable?"

"..."

"They only attacked in ways that would've gotten you killed, too. What did your parents say when they sent you here?"

Ishihara kept quiet as her eyes turned red.

"...They told me to be prepared to die for the cause..."

"I see. That would get anyone running..."

They were only safe now because Ishihara had refused to obstruct or trick them as she must've been told to do. They could surmise that much. From her point of view, heading to the Agency despite all that would mean that her efforts were going to waste.

"I thank you for your backup," said Rosei, "but that's against my wishes. It's pointless for Hinagiku to be saved at the cost of everyone else's lives. Her Guard

is also my friend. I can't let the Agency staff get killed, either."

"You can't save everyone... That's why I chose you." Ishihara's voice trembled. "...I don't want to do as my parents say and let you die. It goes against the tiny bit of conscience I do have... Lord Rosei, Lord Itecho, I am sorry for deceiving you. You... You've been so kind to me...far more than my parents ever were..." Ishihara lowered the gun as she spoke. "So I want to help you. You mustn't go to die... You must leave Teito. I'll give you an escape route. I will make sure that you get away safely. In exchange...please let me go, too..."

She dropped the gun.

The driver moved to restrain Ishihara's arms as soon as he was free. She didn't struggle.

"...I see... You did this so you could get an escape for yourself, eh?" Rosei said.

Ishihara nodded, pale in the face. It was true that she helped them out of goodwill, but she couldn't deny that it was also because she wanted to run away from her life as a spy. She never intended to shoot anyone.

Rosei looked at Itecho.

Itecho nodded, letting him know to do whatever he wanted.

"Ishihara, let's make a deal." Rosei crouched down to look at her face as the driver pushed her to the ground.

"...There's not much I can provide..."

"Give me every single little bit of intel on New Year you have, and I'll get you under my protection."

"Th-they'll kill me! New Year doesn't let traitors go free!"

"I won't let them kill you. I could even send you overseas. You'll have to live in hiding for a while, but you'll get your freedom in a few years. I will also provide you with the money. You just asked for us to let you go, but do you even have a real escape plan? It sounded like you decided to ask us for help on the spot."

"..."

[&]quot;I don't blame you. That's how desperate you were to save us, right?"

"Y-yes."

"Thank you, Ishihara. Now I'll help you. I swear on the Gods of the Four Seasons. Follow me, Ishihara. You won't regret it. I vow to repay you for your loyalty."

Itecho wasn't looking at Rosei's face right then—but from the awe in Ishihara's eyes, he could guess how beautiful Rosei was in that moment.

Seriously, he's such a pro at using people.

Master and retainer of Winter obtained a huge trump card among the crisis.

Rosei immediately contacted the Guard of Autumn, Rindo Azami.

"Mr. Azami, sorry for the sudden call."

Curiously, it was right after his call with Sakura.

"Lord Kantsubaki?"

"We have an emergency here. I thought I should inform you."

"Lady Ruri, p-please hold on."

Rosei could hear Ruri yelling about something in the background.

"Are you driving?"

"No... It's just, Lady Ruri... I know, I know... I'm sorry, Lord Kantsubaki. We've got issues over here, too, and we were just talking about what to do. Allow me to inform you."

Rosei had thought he would shock Rindo with the news, but they seemed more or less even.

The information spread across his mind like a bitter flavor—the betrayal at the Autumn villa and Spring holing up, Sakura being ready to die and telling Rindo to keep looking for Nadeshiko in such an event.

New Year must really hate us.

"...Mr. Azami, Sakura is right. You must continue heading to New Year's base. I've already sent the location to your phone. It'll be hard to track them down if they move once the attacks over here end."

"But..."

"According to our whistleblower, most of their members are out for the attack on the Agency building and us here. They must have some security left over, but ironically, they're practically defenseless in this moment. This is our chance. Go."

"...What about Lady Kayo?"

"No problem. I'll save her."

Just as Rosei said that, Itecho called out to him. He was on the bike, beckoning him. They were ready.

Rosei had to go to the Agency building that was about to be blown up.

"I'm leaving. Good luck."

Then he heard rustling on the other end of the line.

"Mr. Azami?"

"Wait! Don't hang up yet!"

"Ruri!"

Someone had taken over the phone. Rosei winced at the shrillness of the voice.

Agent of Summer, Ruri Hazakura?

"Ms. Agent of Summer, thank you for your cooperation. Please continue giving your support to Au..."

"Enough of that crap!"

"...You're the one who didn't want me leaving. Can't I even greet you?"

Rosei dropped the formalities when Ruri demanded it. Rosei and Ruri had known each other the longest out of the current generation of Agents.

"So what is it, Little Hazakura? Keep it short. I'm in a hurry."

"...Show a bit of respect, Gloomy Blizzardman."

They did not get along.

Agents and Guards usually referred to each other with respect. These two, however, purposefully avoided honorifics and nicknamed each other *Little Hazakura* and *Gloomy Blizzardman*, so everyone could tell what they thought of each other.

There were many reasons behind their unfriendliness.

Ruri once visited the Town of Winter for the Season Descent. She wanted to become friends with Rosei and tried talking to him many times, but he ignored her. Everyone around him basically tried to put her up as Hinagiku's substitute, and that only made him want to keep her away.

It got worse when Ruri was practicing Life Operation in the garden, and her animals damaged the flowering quince, which held his memories with Hinagiku. He was furious and committed even more stubbornly to ignoring her.

The end result was that Ruri found him unfriendly and scary, and her impression of him was negative overall.

"Lady Hinagiku wanted to see you, Blizzardman. I don't wanna help her since I don't like you, but well..."

"Hey, stop calling me that already."

"You gave me a bad nickname, too. Just because I'm the younger twin? What's wrong with you?"

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"..."

"Anyway, back to Lady Hinagiku."

"What?"

"She seemed really concerned about you."

"What?"

"I think you've got a chance there."

"...What?"
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"Gosh! See, I asked Lady Sakura, and you...told your feelings to Lady Hinagiku but didn't get any response, right? I don't know if you'd do it again, but it looks like she was thinking about you for the whole ten years..."

What...?

"Just my impression. Also, listen... I'm getting married. It's arranged by the Town, but well, I ended up liking him..."

What's she even saying?

"Wh-what I mean by this is that I've got more experience with romance than you, Gloomy Blizzardman. It's only with the guy I'll be marrying...but the point is —! You can trust my advice! If you can save her..."

Ruri spoke with the kindest voice Rosei had ever heard.

"...tell her you like her one more time."

Suddenly, Rosei turned bright red, as if he'd been standing in a winter wind.

"Y-you little..."

His whole body was burning from embarrassment. Not only was his romance more widely known than he thought, but he also had a supporter in the most unexpected place.

Unaware of his inner conflict, Ruri kept rambling on.

"They've been saying Lady Hinagiku has a different personality now, but I can't tell that from the outside...and, like, her favorite foods and stuff haven't even changed, apparently. Like, Lord Rindo got her orange juice because you told him to, and she was really happy about it. I think that means she's got some connection to her past, despite everything. So hey, give it your best! Go meet her with the guts to tell her your feelings once again! I mean, you still like her after ten years, right? That's why you stayed away from anyone else, isn't it? Ayame keeps saying we'll never get to be friends if you don't go and get closure on your first love."

"...You don't need to tell me all that!" Rosei was so flustered that he hung up.
"..."

A beat later, he covered his face with his hands.

"... Aaaahhhh!" he screamed at the sky.

Ishihara—who would have to be transferred to the Town of Winter now—and the driver, still holding her in place, glanced over at him with concern.

"No. Save it for later. Get it out of your head," Rosei said to himself, then ran up to Itecho.

"What's the matter, Rosei?"

"Nothing!"

Itecho frowned, knowing something had definitely happened, but he was too focused on rescuing Spring to pry further.

"I'm done checking; it works," he said. "Put the helmet on."

"No, you put it on. I gotta have my vision clear to use spells."

"... Are you really doing this?"

"Do you really need to ask? We can get to the Agency in half the time this way. Don't worry, I'll give the ground enough support to not fall over."

"..."

"Saving them is the priority. Let's go."

Rosei gripped his fan tight and held it up to the sky. He sharpened his senses for what he was about to do.

Hinagiku.

Once he was ready, cold air oozed through Rosei's lips.

Rosei opened the fan and pointed in the direction they were heading. A path of ice spread across the expressway, over the local streets, to the rooftop of a high-rise building and then another rooftop, growing across Teito.

"Spin the skies with the silver-flower spear; smash and rain down the Pleiades."

Icy, arched bridges extended proudly across the cherry-blossom wind of spring to adorn every corner of Teito.

"Wear the camellia robe and sing the song of the solar terms."

Yamato's own Agent of Winter dedicated his dance and shook his fan.

The icy magician slashed the light-pink world of splendor.

The forefather of the seasons.

"Winter whispers: Ponder death."

His powers had grown tremendously since his childhood.

"Death comes to all, as the seasons do."

One could only describe it as the work of a god as he manifested what he pictured in mind without wasting a breath.

He held the longest tenure among the Agents of the current generation. Yet this was but one of the reasons behind his mastery of his skill.

"It whispers to the children of men: Expect your impending death."

The biggest reason was Hinagiku. He grew by thinking of his first love. He trained again and again to make the ice flowers the Spring girl asked for even more beautiful, even more exquisite.

"Where there is life, there is death, and there are the four seasons."

He did it all for her. His desire to bring her joy had elevated his abilities.

"Do not fear the end."

That was why he had confidence in his Winter skills.

"With my breath, I bring you an honorable death."

He lived only to give his sweetheart one more flower.

No one could stop him—not now, not today.

I'm coming for you, Hinagiku.

Rosei forgot about everything else as he focused only on making bridges all the way to his beloved Spring.

"...Lord Itecho, only you can protect Lord Rosei. Be safe," said the driver with worry as the Agent and Guard got on the bike.

As expected from a Winter escort, he was unfazed after being held at gunpoint.

Ishihara, tied up beside him, whispered, "Take care." She lowered her eyes meekly.

She and the escort were to get off the expressway and reunite with the rest of the Town of Winter escorts. If they were in time, they would then go to the Agency building—and search for Rosei and Itecho's corpses if they weren't able to stop the explosion.

Itecho looked at Ishihara. He hadn't completely forgiven her, but he couldn't deny her help had been essential in getting here.

Itecho gave her a thumbs-up. They'd probably never meet again.

"I'll keep us in control as we run up and slide down," said Rosei. "You trust me and move forward, Itecho."

Rosei focused on the ice bridge before his eyes. Delivery staff in snowy countries rode bikes even in winter, but they used lighter and smaller vehicles; otherwise, driving wouldn't be possible.

In order to run an off-road bike across a literal ice bridge, Rosei had to place soft snow and create a track for the wheel on top of it.

"...Not something most sane people would do," Itecho complained as he put on the helmet.

Rosei chuckled. "Don't be stupid, Itecho. Common sense won't do much good. What we need here is crazy," he said coolly.

"I'm not gonna respond to that. All right. That's an order, isn't it?"

"Yes. I've created thousands of ice flowers at this point. This is nothing. And really, Itecho, from our point of view..."

Rosei punched Itecho's shoulder with a smile.

"...we've been crazy ever since we lost Hinagiku and Sakura, and you know it."

Itecho didn't reply; he just revved the engine.

The slightest slip on the ice bridges crossing the skies from building to building would mean death, but they still chose to take the shortest route.

One could say that their actions were barbaric, as they dragged the ordinary Teito locals into their extraordinary lives. Itecho had only accepted doing this because they had to stop the terrorists and save Spring.

"I'll do a countdown," said Rosei. "Accelerate on the count of three. I'll begin melting it as we move forward. No one's following us, and there's no one in our way ahead. It's a straight line to the Agency."

The people stranded on the icy expressway looked on with excitement.

"One."



They would never see anything like this ever again.

"Two."

The spectators didn't know where the motorbike was heading or why, but they burst into cheers the following moment.

"Three!"

Master and retainer of Winter ran across the ice bridges infringing on the cherry-blossom world.

Now, to the first floor of the Agency building.

The strife frightening the people upstairs finally came to a close.

Men wearing the uniforms of a private security firm entered as the alarm bells rang, and the fight between them and Agency security staff ended in victory for the latter. There were no deaths on either side thanks to the arrival of National Security, with sirens blaring. The last explosion Hinagiku and Sakura had heard from the nineteenth floor was a flash grenade courtesy of National Security. Although the weapon wasn't lethal, the deafening boom and bright flash stunned everyone nearby.

Agency staff who had evacuated began clapping, believing the case had come to a close.

Those who hadn't gotten a chance to evacuate were finally led outside along with the captured suspects.

It was a quick response, as one would hope from the professionals responsible for keeping the country safe.

"Anyone left behind on the upper floors?" one of the officers asked a security guard taking a long-awaited rest.

"It was all so sudden—I don't know... We need to go check immediately..."

"No. We don't know who they are, and they might try to attack again; you

need to seal the entrance. We'll go check every floor. Guide the wounded to an ambulance."

The security guard nodded dutifully at the instructions. The dozen or so National Security members left the guards to take care of the first floor, then split into two groups. The first group took the stairs up, and the other, the elevator. Most everyone on the lower and middle floors had run to the first floor the moment they heard the emergency alarm.

However, there were still a few innocent people left on each floor—people who had frozen in fear, or people who'd been wounded in the stampede for the exit. An old woman with a twisted ankle cried out for help as she saw the National Security members run up the stairs.

And yet for some reason, they ignored her plea.

"Please! Help me! I'm hurt!"

The Agency staff screamed, but nobody turned to her.

"..."

Dumbfounded, she could do nothing but cry. She didn't realize that she was lucky to be ignored.

The group was only pretending to be from National Security—they were, in reality, members of New Year.

"Should we kill her?"

"She can't move. She'll die anyway."

The insurgents thought nothing of her life as they made their way through the building.

New Year had prepared thoroughly for this day, for the attack on the Four Seasons Agency building. The first wave, wearing the suspicious uniforms of a security firm, was a trap.

Let's sort through everything that happened up to this point.

First, an insider was bought off by New Year and activated the alarm system with no actual emergency. Agency staff, contractors, clients, and everyone else inside the building panicked at the sudden sound and ran every which way in fright.

Only someone properly trained knew how to act appropriately in times of emergency. Fear created tunnel vision, and that narrow perspective made good judgment difficult.

Still, the building's security guards moved according to the manual.

The top priority in times like this was evacuation.

The security guards made the rounds, asking Agency staff and visitors to head to the entrance. The insider who'd triggered the alarm was already gone by this point.

Meanwhile, as people tried to get out, others tried to get inside; they were dressed in private-security-firm uniforms. That security firm was the one that had sold the alarm system in question—but they arrived far too quickly.

Most security companies signed a contract promising twenty-four seven surveillance on their systems and to head over in case of anomalies.

They offered a wide range of services. For example, when something happened in a certain area, an alarm would sound. Let's say the AC knocked over a pile of papers inside a locked room at night; the system would detect the anomaly and ring the intruder alarm. According to the contract, even if it was an error induced by one sheet of paper, they had to go to the scene and do a security check.

In this case, the alarm bell in the building rang for no apparent reason this time.

A professional security-service company would arrive a half hour or so later, perhaps taking more time if they were currently understaffed. And yet this company got there the moment the alarm started ringing.

As Sakura saw from the nineteenth floor, they'd been waiting in the parking

lot. The Agency security guards would naturally find it suspicious.

And their suspicions were right. These newcomers were New Year. Misuzu had set up this trap.

Unaware that the suspicion was part of her plan, the regular building guards tried to get in touch with the security-service firm to check whether this emergency was a real.

"Excuse me, may I call to see if you're really from the company we're contracting?"

"We're just here because of the alarm. Let us in."

"Hey, hold on! We haven't given you permission!"

That was suspicious—or maybe they were just pushy? Before the security guards could reach a conclusion, a brawl broke out, and the opponents ended up throwing a homemade bomb into the lobby.

"Aaaghhh!"

This was the first explosion Hinagiku and Sakura heard.

One of the evacuees screamed, and the rest panicked in their attempts to escape, throwing the lobby into pandemonium.

There was no longer any doubt that these new people were not employees from the security firm but criminals carrying explosives. The building guards were forced to fight this mysterious group to stop them from infiltrating further.

Back to after the battle ended.

Some were wounded, but luckily, none were dead.

This was thanks to the people pretending to be National Security, who'd arrived in the nick of time. The whole ruse paved the way for members of New Year to just walk inside the building.

National Security was the organization responsible for policing Yamato, so no one would suspect them after such a major upheaval. Finally, they were here.

Now they could take care of things.

No one inside the Agency realized yet that this "National Security" was not the real thing, either.

The members of New Year pretending to be from National Security stared at the elevator's floor numbers ticking up.

One of them was a head shorter than the rest: their boss, Misuzu.

"...I wonder how Hinagiku is doing," she muttered.

Her right hand, Mikami, responded flatly, "Great, I imagine, since she's trying to fight alongside the other Seasons now."

"Yeah..."

For some reason, Misuzu's face lit up despite the sarcasm in his comment. "And now there's Nadeshiko back home. I need to take her big sister home to her soon."

"…"

"Once I have two girls, one of them has to give birth to a descendant. I'll get one this time."

She didn't seem to find her words inhumane.

No one reacted. They knew that anything that could incur her wrath would mean punishment.

Everything depended on Misuzu's mood, and that changed day-to-day, even moment to moment. Predicting the best way to act around her was difficult. Only the most sensitive people worked by her side.

They knew it was best not to say anything.

The only one capable of speaking up was her right hand, Mikami.

"Gozen... You still haven't given up? We failed last time," Mikami said sharply.

"No, we didn't."

"She almost killed the guy the moment her back was against the wall."

"Of course she did. She's not one to lose against some man. I raised her. Of course she'd be strong." Misuzu sounded proud about Hinagiku's rebellion.

And it was you making that man assault her. Mikami swallowed the last part of his comment. Misuzu would be more willing to listen if he was gentler, and so he considered his next words carefully.

"Gozen... I'm not against taking her. We need her to grow more cannabis, but...I don't think it's a good idea to have her reproduce..."

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"You're against her having a kid?"
"Yes."
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"Mikami... So she's your type?"

"No. What I'm trying to say is..." Mikami furrowed his brow. "She endured almost everything..."

"Yes. She's a good kid."

"...and if you hadn't tried to do that, maybe she would still be with us."

"..."

"You stepped on a land mine. She could not allow that."

"You're telling me to be kinder? I was kind to her, best I could... I didn't just pull some random guy off the street to be her partner, you know?"

"That's not it. That's not helping... I'm telling you that you shouldn't try to break her. Give her just enough treats and let her live long. That helps us, too, right? We were making a killing with the weed. Then you broke her. You killed the golden goose. We had her under control, but we need to remember she's beyond human. If we want to keep her, we need to be careful not to get bitten. What you did was like putting your head into the lion's mouth. All we had to do to make her cooperate was threaten to attack the Town of Winter, but you..."

Misuzu kept quiet. She was displeased, but she seemed to think he wasn't wrong. "...I tried caring for her in my own way... I did what I thought was best for both Hinagiku and New Year... I didn't mean to break her..."

"She was in pieces. I'm shocked she managed to get reinstated at all after

that."

"..." Misuzu thought in silence for a few moments, before muttering, as though to herself: "But...that means that she's already broken now, right...?"

"Yeah. Because of you."

Despite the accusation, Misuzu smiled. "Hee-hee. She's just like me now. See? Just like mother and daughter."

Mikami wanted to sigh. Why is that what you draw from this?

This beautiful woman twisted everything to make it about herself. She had no insight or generosity for other people.

"She's really special," Misuzu said. "I can't wait to see her again."

If you cultured a young child's cruelty with no competing influences, this would be the result.

This was Misuzu.

Is this some new form of self-harm? Mikami thought as he stared at Misuzu's profile, which was getting lovelier every year. You know you're the one who suffered the most from that.

Mikami had been by her side as she grew into this monster.

When he first became aware of her, she was still a young girl.

Misuzu was accompanying her father to a meeting of dissidents.

The former head had a wide range of activity as an entrepreneur, and behind all his businesses, he was also a revolutionary. He had a habit of taking in runaway boys and keeping them around for various tasks, and Mikami was one of them.

Mikami looked up to him and listened to his every word. He was secretly excited to see what kind of person his patron's daughter would be, but...

Doesn't look like we can be friends was his first impression.

When she was introduced, Misuzu didn't even look him in the eye to greet him. She appeared to be of age even then, perhaps due to the maturity of her face and curves. He had heard her father sent her to a special educational institution and she had just come back. She was to work for her arms-dealing mother.

"Do you like weapons?" he'd asked her.

"No."

So ended their first conversation.

The party went on until late, and Misuzu had disappeared by the time he realized.

He then saw her right as she was shoving the head of an insurgent top dog into the koi pond.

"Hey, you."

Mikami was heading to the toilet, but the sight got rid of his urge to urinate.

A broken beer bottle was on the floor.

She must've knocked him out with it.

She'd also tied his hands with his necktie. She was fully intent on killing him.

"Hey! Help me out."

Mikami had done his fair share of misdeeds, but seeing Misuzu pushing this large man's head deep into the water shocked him. A guy was about to get murdered in a corner of the beautiful Yamatoan garden. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

After a few moments of shock, he rushed to Misuzu and noticed her clothes were in disarray. The corner of her mouth was also bleeding.

"He said I was seducing him," Misuzu explained while staring at the man, who was already too weak to resist. "That I was asking for it with a skirt this short."

Every word coming out of her mouth was brimming with anger.

"He said that it wasn't his fault... I just wonder...how many times he's done this already. I don't— I just don't get it... Why...?"

Her powerful burst of emotion had become murderous.

"I don't get it. But I should hear him out, right? I should see things from his point of view, shouldn't I? So I did."

And that murderous intention had grown so big, she chose to act on it.

"He's got the face of an insect. That means he ought to be exterminated, don't you think?"

A sadness, a disbelief in how this wide world could be so unfair...

"Right? He ought to. So I did this, and here we are."

The hardship in pondering it all the time...

"He only got what he deserved. But it's so strange."

...was finally spilling over.

"He was so shocked when I hit him with the bottle. He was so sure he could never be subjected to violence..."

Mikami curiously happened to be present in the moment Misuzu couldn't stand life any longer.

"He just thought his position made him immune? Maybe it did...but then why hurt me? ... I did nothing wrong... Hey, help me here."

Misuzu's words sounded like an earnest prayer.

Her legs were trembling, and tears welled up in her eyes. Mikami personally had no reason to let the man live after he touched his patron's daughter. She didn't have to ask for his agreement, but he let her finish talking.

Then before Misuzu's anxiety could take over again, he said, "All right. I'll help you."

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Misuzu looked at him in shock. "You'll really help me?"
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"Yes."

"Really really?"

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"Mm-hmm."

"Why?"

"Because I owe your father."

"...You... Just because you're his subordinate...you'll help his daughter kill someone?"
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"You asked me for help..."

"But..."

"Either way, we have no choice. He's already dying. Let's put him out of his misery."

"…"

"You won't do it? You did this because you had no choice, didn't you?"

"You... You're so weird."

So are you, Mikami thought. He hadn't been seeking gratitude, but he would never forget the way Misuzu looked at him in that moment.

"...Thank you for coming to my help. My hero..."

He ended up being her savior, even though they were about to do something unforgivable.

The two youngsters had their first date—not hanging outside, not stargazing, but shoving a man's head into the water.

After that, Mikami fought tooth and nail for his lady. He explained the circumstances to Misuzu's father, and instead of apologizing to the insurgent organization that produced the scoundrel, the father went as far as to blame them for poor management.

He made the group take the corpse away.

Mikami got away scot-free, too, although he was anxious the whole time. He

thought his relationship with Misuzu would end now that the body had been taken care of, but for some reason, Misuzu followed him around. He tried to cheer her up: "Good thing your father didn't get mad."

"He hated that group anyway. He must've been glad I found a reason to kill the guy... The last time something like this happened, he told me it was my fault for being so defenseless. Can you believe how differently he's treating me now? What's wrong with him?"

"..."

"I... Whatever, it's fine... Hey, so what should I call you?"

"Mikami. That's what your father calls me. And...that's what I said when I introduced myself to you."

"Oh, I wasn't interested then."

"…"

"But now I am—very interested. Mikami. Got it. Mikami, the hero of the people... No. My hero."

She'd taken a strange liking to him ever since.

Some time later, Misuzu became an arms dealer under her parents' suggestion, and she eventually married a man with a bad reputation.

Mikami tried to stop her, but she had sadly explained:

"I don't like him, but...I want to be away from home, even if just a little. The only thing I can do is marry someone they know... That'll be enough to keep them satisfied. I'll divorce him in a year. Come for me then, Mikami..."

Up to then, she used to call him to chat or to ask him to take care of someone she wanted to be dealt with, but all that suddenly stopped. He had found her troublesome before, but now he almost missed her.

And then Misuzu finally called him.

"Hey, help me out."

Misuzu was waiting for him at the entrance, her face covered in bruises and dripping blood from her abdomen.

He immediately guessed what had happened. Misuzu couldn't talk through the tears.

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"The baby, my ——..."
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She kept repeating the same thing over and over. Mikami couldn't bring himself to say, I told you so.

"Mikami, please help me. Get rid of him and ——..."

Always the same.

Every time she said that, someone who'd gone through her body vanished from her life.

The only person who never vanished was Mikami, who had also never laid a finger on her.

"You'll help me, right, Mikami?"

She would never let him.

"Mikami, I can only trust you."

Mikami didn't want to end up another passerby who hurt her, either.

"Yes, milady."

In the end, he was the one mostly taking care of things.

Misuzu had asked him to get rid of her husband and the corpse of the baby she had lost.

A few days after they disappeared without a trace, he received a call from Misuzu's father.

Mikami went in expecting to lose a finger, an arm, or some other body part, but he was only thanked for his work and given a new job as Misuzu's right hand, since she would be taking over.

Perhaps Mizusu's father thought his own organization was the only place he could send his daughter, who left corpses in her wake. And the only one who could keep up with her was Mikami.

Once he was alone with Mizusu, she seemed happy. She tugged on his shirtsleeve.

"Hey, Mikami, help me out."

For whatever reason, he could never turn her down when she said that.

That night, in the garden, she had asked for help. She was crying. Beaten up.

Perhaps it was because he could never forget that sight.

From Mikami's point of view as one who could never go back home, Misuzu was an unreachable flower high above.

She looked like a sheltered little girl who could live without a worry in the world. She seemed to shine bright.

But in reality, she was in her own hell, and one too difficult to escape.

She had no salvation. No hope. If there had ever been any, it was already too late.

Someone should have found her earlier.

No one asked her to run away; no one taught her of any world outside.

It was more convenient for the world to have someone as a sacrifice.

Eventually, Misuzu ended up dominating other people, just like the parents she wanted to run away from.

"Mikami, I've realized that there is so much wrong in the world. Why does it

have to be this way? There are so many people with power, but they won't go help those who need it. Not everyone is a hero like you. I have no choice but to change the world myself. So I thought, Mikami, that if I want to change the world, I need to change the system. And for a task that big, I need a lot of people. I can't keep being a weak girl who can't even push someone's head down. I'll be a woman who's indomitable. I think I can make it. There's nothing left for me to lose. Everyone's left me already. But they'll see. I'll make New Year into something amazing. I'll change the way this country is run. I'll become someone who helps the weak. I'll do it, Mikami. I can. I know the pain."

People usually took one of two paths after knowing pain.

Either they became part of those who heal.

Or they became part of those who harm.

"First of all, let's begin this revolution by killing God, Mikami. The Agents of the Four Seasons would be great for changing the system. A new one gets born whenever you kill one, so we can kill them one after the other to threaten the government. We'll force them to adopt policies that make the world better. We'll help the weak; we'll help everyone... This is so exciting, Mikami. C'mon. Let's go murder God."

It was up to the person to decide who they would become.

"Mikami, help me out. Let's persuade that girl. My world needs her."

Mikami stared at Misuzu as she said it again: Help me out.

She looked far livelier, like a fish back in water, compared with who she'd been a little over a decade ago.

Misuzu was perfectly fit to be a terrorist. She had a few screws loose. She could become as cruel as she needed to. She had an innate capacity to take the lead in a hierarchy.

The life experience she had accumulated through all her hurt was put to good use as she became a criminal.

Almost as though this was why she'd had to suffer in the first place.

Misuzu was terribly unfit for this world.

The environment she was born into was terrible, and she was too insensitive to her own pain. Although she complained, she never escaped the source of that pain. She didn't run away, and she became prey for her abusers. Eventually, she felt no qualms about attacking someone else herself or doing what had been done to her.

She only tilted her head with a look on her face that read: *Hey, I was able to take it.*

"So why can't you?" she would ask those she punched.

The world would be a much kinder place without people like her.

Honestly, Mikami pitied her. If only she had been born into a better family. If only she had a happy marriage. If only she were more aware of herself and many other things.

If only I had the courage.

But those ifs had no meaning.

The only thing he could do for her was be by her side.

That was the most complicated and dangerous of all. He knew he wouldn't live long.

Whatever. You only live once.

They were about to reach the top floor. Someone might die.

Hell was about to begin.

Dying alongside this crazy woman isn't such a bad way to end it.

"As you say, Gozen."

Mikami was justly Misuzu's hero.

Meanwhile, the squad trying to rescue the Agent of Autumn was reaching an important stage.

Rosei had shared the location of New Year's base with National Security and the Four Seasons Agency.

They were putting together a plan to rescue Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

Due to the Agent of Autumn's special position, they were able to take extrajudicial measures in various places.

Under her Guard's request, a rescue team was to be deployed without the typical paperwork. Its members would be the Agency staff who had followed them in the search, as well as National Security's special forces squad, Porcupine, which would be sent as soon as possible.

To repeat, National Security was the organization with policing power in Yamato. They were in charge of protecting the law and order of the country.

They kept the local public peace from their stations in villages and cities, caught criminals, and much more.

Within this huge organization, there was an armed force known as Porcupine.

There were garrisons all around Yamato where National Security's elite were assigned.

Basically, they were the counterterrorist team.

There were similar teams overseas that went by different names—the antiterrorist unit, the task force, the special-purposes mobile unit, and more.

They were deployed mostly after a case took place, and they would only offer support unless barricades were involved, but this was one special situation.

Since the Agency had already shared intel with National Security, the garrison

was close to Ohme, and the deployment order came from extrajudicial methods, Porcupine arrived in just one hour. Thanks to this, Rindo and the rest obtained backup before breaking into the place.

The team gathered in Ohme to fight the insurgents comprised the following:

Guard of Autumn, Rindo Azami. Agent of Summer, Ruri Hazakura. Guard of Summer, Ayame Hazakura.

Four Seasons Agency, Maintenance Division, Security Department—Summer Branch: four members deployed as escorts for the Agent of Summer.

Four Seasons Agency, Maintenance Division, Security Department—Autumn Branch: four members deployed to rescue the Agent of Autumn.

Four members of National Security who were already collaborating with the Agency.

And twenty members of the special unit Porcupine.

All of them were here.

They were filled with trepidation at the incoming, incessant news of the attack on the Agency building, but they were about to join the battlefield.

Presently, they were by an alluvial fan in Ohme.

This land spread from the foot of Mount Ohme. A settlement had been built here, which eventually developed into the city of Ohme; there were abandoned shrines all over the mountains. Most of them had merged due to a lack of bearers as the generations passed, but some were unfortunately left behind as landslides made them less accessible.

Rindo and the rest were heading to one of these shrines.

It was said a building was constructed without permission near an abandoned shrine.

This was New Year's current base and the location where Nadeshiko Iwaizuki was being held, according to Ishihara's report. In the mountains, and by an abandoned shrine of all places. This was a disgusting place to hide, where not even the locals approached.

There was an issue as they headed to their destination.

There was no road that could take cars all the way up, so they had to walk across a steep sloped path that wasn't properly maintained.

Some were not dressed for a mountain hike, since they had left the Agency the moment they managed to trace back the call from New Year. Ruri was wearing a dress, and Ayame had on her usual suit. Their footwear was likewise not suited for hiking, so they appeared to be underestimating the mountain itself.

"Wrong clothes to wear today..."

"How could we know we'd be climbing mountains?"

Ruri and Ayame were having an especially hard time.

Their role was supposed to be over the moment they tracked down the base's location.

Ruri was mainly here because she could track the insurgents. She wasn't meant to aid the special forces in a surprise attack. Still, Ruri and Ayame had asked to come with them.

"Grab onto my shirt or arms, ladies. It's a steep slope. I'll help you up."

Rindo offered his help, short of breath himself. His well-trained arms seemed reliable.

"Wait, but then you'll be dragging us along," said Ayame. "You'll get even more tired."

"Please. The two of you are like carrying a pair of feathers."

"W-wow, what a gentleman... Lord Azami... Perhaps I chose the wrong person to marry..."

"What is your fiancé like, Lady Ayame?"

"Even more playboyish than you," Ruri answered.

"...I can't deny it," said Ayame.

"I am not a playboy—"

"By the way," Ruri continued, "my fiancé is super kind and smart. So mature... So wonderful. Hee-hee. But Ayame says he looks shady."

"He does seem kind, but in a way that makes me think of the guy who betrays the protagonist at the end of a disaster movie..."

"Now I want to meet him," Rindo commented. "Please invite me to the wedding."

Ruri and Ayame had insisted on helping rescue Nadeshiko, as they were also worried about Rindo. It was safer for them to remain close by while they were still at risk of getting targeted by the insurgents. If the Summer twins didn't come, they would have to keep on standby somewhere or go back to the Agency with a few escorts, which would leave them vulnerable in the meantime. And Rindo bore the same risk.

Autumn and Summer were turning distrustful of everything around them after hearing about the multiple betrayals, so at this point, they wanted to stay together until the end—better for the Seasons to fight together until Autumn was rescued.

The abandoned shrine certainly looked the part. The place was so utterly dilapidated, it was sad to think about the god enshrined here and all the worshippers throughout history. The troop, led by Rindo, paused there.

Ruri made the wild dogs and birds she brought scout the surroundings, and they came back with the precise location of the base within a few minutes. It was farther into the abandoned shrine, a steel and concrete building hidden in the middle of the shrine's grove. It was obviously some sort of institution—the rectangular two-story building was far too big to be a simple residence.

A fence surrounded it, and a sign at the entrance said, OHME FORESTRY, LTD.

A company using their location's name was very common, but the one in

question didn't appear in search engines as Rindo and the rest looked it up on their phones.

"I checked the Public Accounts Agency's corporate registry. All corporations in Yamato must be registered there." Ayame acted with the most calm. She'd gone straight to a government website, so she clearly knew what she was doing. "No *Ohme Forestry, Ltd.* It should be here."

"The current proprietor of Mount Ohme's forest seems to be the mayor's household," said Rindo. "It's strange for a local public figure to create a fake company here. We can be sure this is the place. Even if they just haven't submitted their registration, it's enough of a reason to come into contact. Let's have Porcupine go first, and if they refuse to let us in, we'll force our way through. Lady Ruri, Lady Ayame, you can wait here."

"But I can send the animals if we end up at a disadvantage."

"No, you can use them just to keep yourselves safe. Lady Ruri, Lady Ayame... thank you for coming all the way here. My wish is to have you two and Nadeshiko sent to safety. Please. Don't put yourselves in danger."

Ruri didn't like following his earnest request, but she still decided to accept for the time being.

With the insurgent base right in front of them, the strategy meeting came to a close, and finally, it was time to approach.

First, as Rindo suggested, a member of National Security's Porcupine squad went over the fence and rang the interphone. Nothing happened the first time. After a few more attempts, he began knocking on the door. "It's National Security. Open up."

Finally, someone arrived—a burly man wearing an irate expression. "What gives you the right to come on my property?"

He wore no uniform or suit—not the kind of person who would be inside a building labeled as a company on a weekday afternoon. More like an unpleasant man who would loiter around downtown at night. Still, the Porcupine agent couldn't charge in just yet. He had to try and talk this out peacefully first.

"We're National Security," the agent said firmly. "This place is suspected of harboring illegal activities, and we would like to take a look inside. Is your representative present?"

"...What? No, not now."

The agent remained firm against the man's curt response. "May we take a look inside?"

"Fuck off! This is trespassing! And...hey, where's your warrant?! You got a warrant?! Show that first!"

"We are here to investigate acts of terrorism against the Agents of the Four Seasons. We are allowed to investigate and make arrests without a warrant in such cases. Were you not aware of this exception?"

The resolve vanished from the man's face. His eyes darted around in silence.

The agent continued his interrogation. "Who gave you permission to build this place? This is an illegal construction."

"...What?"

"You called it your property, but the sign at the entrance says it is a company. Is this really a forestry company?"

"...Yes."

"May I see your corporate registration?"

"What's that?"

"The document you submit to the government in order to do business."

"..."

"If you don't have one, then you must be aware that this place was built illegally. That's grounds for arrest."

While the man and the Porcupine agent argued, more menacing men came out of the building and lined up by the door.

Rindo and the rest had been told to remain on standby outside and keep an eye on the scene. The rest of the Porcupine squad was waiting for their leader's signal.

"Ugh, that guy started cracking his knuckles," said Ruri. "Is he stupid? Just grabbing a National Security agent's shoulder is enough to get you arrested."

They watched with worry as the threat of violence loomed.

"There they go..."

"Ahhh, they're heating up!" Ruri cried. "What now? Do I send a dog? Have them bite them?"

"Lady Ruri, I told you to stay back," said Rindo. "I will go. Your job is to stay here and stay safe. You may join us once we've recovered Nadeshiko."

"This is already getting ugly. Are you going, too, Lord Azami?"

"Yes. But only after the Porcupine leader gives us the sign to charge in."

Things were about to blow up over there.

They would be able to charge in the moment the men put a finger on the Porcupine agent, and their argument was reaching a boiling point.

Allies got in position to deal with the other men who appeared from behind the first one. Still, it would certainly not end there.

"We have permission to shoot!" the agent was shouting. "Stand down!"

"You think you're hot shit, huh?! Get the fuck outta here!!"

Neither withdrew as they glared at each other.

"Die!!" someone yelled.

Immediately after, the Porcupine agent held his chest and collapsed. The men coming out of the building were armed.

The Porcupine leader breathed in sharply. "Charge in!!"

At his command, the other agents, members of National Security, and Agency staff on standby entered the grounds and shot back at the men.

"I'm going now!" Rindo, wearing a borrowed bulletproof vest, said good-bye to Ruri and Ayame before running off.

""Take care!"" they both said back.

Ruri watched him go worriedly. "And there he goes..."

The two of them hid in the shadows of the trees beyond the property.

Their escorts from the Agency had joined the attack squad, so they only had Ruri's wild dogs to protect them now.

They could do nothing but peer at the battle from the trees.

Except the Porcupine agent who'd made first contact, everyone had riot gear.

They wore ski masks, bulletproof uniforms, a bulletproof vest on top of that, military boots, and military gloves, and they carried firearms and vertical ballistic shields.

Most people would never see a group like this in person, but the enemy didn't flinch once. Although their individual abilities varied widely, they all seemed used to armed conflict. The special forces would not be able to solve this right away. The girls could only watch in suspense.

"Get them, Lord Rindo!" Ruri cheered.

"Oh, dear," said Ayame. "Will he be okay? I heard he had martial arts experience, but still..."

"We'll just go back him up if he needs it! Go, go, Lord Rindo! Wow! Yeah, show 'em who's boss! Ah, huh...?" Ruri got quiet all of a sudden.

"Hmm...?" Ayame brought a hand to her mouth in surprise, too.

What they were seeing left them speechless.

"Wait, seriously?" Ruri murmured. "Lord Rindo?"

Rindo had shed the kind-to-ladies facade and was now knocking out the large men one after another in close-quarters combat.

Shocked, master and retainer of Summer stared at each other and blinked.

The man had been talking with them with such friendliness, but the moment he left them, he had turned into a different person. He was tossing aside, knocking down, and tearing apart every enemy who crossed his path.

"Out of my way." Rindo dodged the next opponent who approached him, before throwing him over his back with the ease of tossing a small child.

As soon as the man hit the ground, he convulsed and went still. The Porcupine

agents quickly moved him into their barricade of ballistic shields.

"Lord Guard! You'll be shot! Please get inside!" a Porcupine agent called.

"No, this is fine. I'll take them down. You clean them up and move forward. Then we'll reach the entrance. Don't worry, I'm not stupid enough to try to get inside on my own."

Some of the vanguard had already gone inside.

However, their safety was unknown. The New Year men were experts using firearms; there was no way to know who was winning. Rindo and the follow-up squad who charged in after the signal were fighting before reaching the entrance. The Porcupine agent tried to say something else, but the enemy rushed again, and Rindo ran in.

"You're in the way."

Rindo's fighting style was quiet. It was the opposite of the Kangetsu style, with its acrobatics meshed with swordsmanship—this was reminiscent of the flow of water. He wouldn't counter enemy attacks, but he'd dodge or block them.

His movements were soft, as if the effects of any force applied to him were sliding off him, and the next moment, he was strangling or throwing the enemy away.

He kept his sword sheathed, using only his bare fists.

He threw one attacker, then two, then three. Someone well-versed in Yamatoan jujitsu or aikido would recognize him as a master of his art, but to the untrained eye, it looked as though he was manipulating gravity itself. His every motion was so light, it was like magic. One blink, and everything was over—one couldn't even see his complex footwork.

They're not that strong. But there are too many of them.

Rindo looked at the entrance.

People were still pouring out of the building; just how many were hiding in there? It was a two-story building, but there were probably more underground. It wouldn't make sense otherwise.

They could use Nadeshiko as a hostage. We must deal with them quickly and get to her.

The priority right now was to manage the brawl.

He had to knock out as many armed opponents as he could while he dealt with those coming at him in close quarters. Rinse and repeat. They had to whittle them down as they approached.

"...Back off!" Rindo could no longer think about anything but Nadeshiko.

Ruri and Ayame held each other's hands in excitement.

""He's so cool...,"" the twins said in unison.

"Ruri! Lord Azami's so strong!"

"Y-yeah... So cool...and strong... My goodness...he's normally so... And now he's... Wow..."

The man truly deserved to be called *strong*.

"What's up with that?" Ruri said. "He moves so quietly... He just touches a guy, and he flips around in midair. How? Is this like qigong or something?"

"I think...that's a deadly martial art that's popular overseas."

"What?"

"It's a close-quarters technique used to take down opponents with firearms...

Very few people practice it since it's so difficult. I wish I'd learn it, too..."

While Ayame wanted to do that herself, Ruri didn't seem too into learning martial arts. Ruri frowned; this wasn't for her.

"It looks so scary, though... I don't think most people should be learning."

"That's why it's called a deadly technique. I heard he lived overseas for a time, so I wonder if he learned it then... He really was a martial arts master, huh." Ayame's eyes lit up. "Maybe I can get him to teach me if we all get back home fine!"

"Nooo! What if you get all muscly?"

"That technique relies more on your core, so I don't think I'd get very buff."

"Either way, you can stop thinking about upping your Guard skills! Oof, look at that! The guy he threw isn't moving at all... What even is your deal, Lord Rindo? You're nice to us, but... Oh my gosh, I was rude to him, wasn't I? Should I apologize?"

"He'll just get sad if you start acting like that. He's a good guy at heart."

"But, like, I even hit him on the back a few times... Wh-whoa! Look at that! He has no mercy! That guy flew up like a tennis ball! Lord Rindo, you're scaring me! But you're so cool! But scary! I really gotta apologize!"

"It's amazing how he doesn't break a sweat. Mental fatigue usually shows in your body, but I suppose his physique is just that strong." While Ayame muttered in admiration, a little bird flew overhead.

Ruri reached out, and it landed on her finger. A dog also showed up, panting from effort. "Ayame, they've got a report."

The dog barked.

"..."

Ruri listened in silence. Ayame made sure not to make any noise as she watched. The animals soon went quiet, and the bird flew away, staying low to guide them.

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"What did they say, Ruri?"
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"…"

"Ruri?"

"Nothing certain yet, but I'll go check." Ruri turned her back on the brawl and followed the bird.

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"W-wait, Ruri!"
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Ayame and the dog hurried behind. They advanced quickly through the mountain trees until they arrived at the backside of the building. There were two Porcupine agents standing there. They looked left and right outside the fence, waiting for something. After a while, a man spoke from the other side. "They're inside! Take it away, quick!"

"Put it down carefully."

The Porcupine agents seemed to understand what he meant.

"...No way, they're...talking with the insurgents...?" Ayame asked.

Ruri nodded. "Traitors. But they said Porcupine was clean. The dog says they smell different. Maybe they just got the uniforms."

"...Hmm, wait. But then that still means that the insurgents knew what we're doing."

"Probably. There's someone among us reporting our plans. Agency staff? National Security? Either way, I imagine the person in question already left among the chaos. So even we had a traitor with us."

Ayame put a hand on the short sword hanging from her hip. "...Fuck these guys." She rarely swore—she had to be furious. "Shit. Someone needs to trim down the Agency and National Security."

A suitcase was passed over the fence. A big one, for long trips. Big enough to hold a small child.

Ruri and Ayame looked at each other.

"...Ruri, is that—?"

"Lady Nadeshiko, yeah. My gut tells me so."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, I'll believe you. You think...she's still alive...?"

"Right... It could also be her body... They said it smelled a little like blood..." Ruri bit her lip, emotion burning inside her with nowhere to go.

Ruri and Ayame weren't very close with Nadeshiko, but they remembered the time they met. She was still a little child.

Just thinking about such a young girl who needed protection being inside a suitcase turned their stomachs.

"Ayame, get that piece of her clothing. The one we used to look for her."

Ayame took a transparent bag out of her suit's pocket. It contained a piece of Nadeshiko's kimono that Rindo had retrieved from the wrecked Autumn villa.

"Hey, you, you pretty black boy," Ruri said to the wild dog guarding them.

It was a big dog with intelligent eyes. He rumbled happily as Ruri petted his head.

"Good boy, good boy... Go to Lord Rindo."

She held the bag up to his snout, and he grabbed it.

"Lord Rindo. You know him? Yes, he walked through the mountains with us. The guy who petted you a few times. Yes, him. Bring him here, by force if you have to. This is the piece of Lady Nadeshiko's kimono that we used to look for her, so I think he'll know if you take it... Now go!"

The black dog immediately ran back the way they had come.

"...Ruri, I'll take care of them. Wait here."

"Got it. I'll back you up if things get hairy."

Ruri and Ayame nodded at each other. The two insurgents wearing Porcupine uniforms walked away while carelessly rolling the suitcase.

"Okay."

Ayame disappeared a moment later. Not literally—she was just that quick. Surprisingly fast for her skirt suit and heels.

She also made no noise as she ran. The men didn't realize until the ninja-like figure was already right behind them, blade unsheathed.

"Who-?!"

"A-a-ahhh! Gaaaah!"

Ayame did not hesitate.

The goddess incarnate of Summer had already asked her familiar to confirm Nadeshiko's smell—Ayame had no need to ask the men what they were carrying.

Ayame had protected Ruri for a long time since becoming her Guard.

She had shielded her sister from everyone and everything. From the worst kind of adults, from the gazes of the men attracted to the naive goddess, and even from loneliness and sadness.

Part of the Guard's duty was making sure nothing unclean reached the Agent's heart. Ayame was by Ruri's side in every moment. She watched over her more closely than anyone.

She knew well the effects, reliability, and weak points of Ruri's Life Operation. In Ayame's eyes, her twin might be but a hopelessly selfish girl, but...

Her gut doesn't miss.

Ruri had the intuition of a wild animal, which was likely part of her ability as the Agent of Summer.

And her tamed animal had gotten a whiff of Nadeshiko's scent. Whether it was her corpse or even just a piece of her, the girl was inside that suitcase.

I have no qualms cutting your arm off.

Ayame swung the blade at the man holding the suitcase.

Blood and screams filled the air. Red splattered across Ayame's glasses.

"Gaaaaaaargh!"

She couldn't see as well, but she wasn't worried. She shook the blood and fat off her blade.

"Impressive," she said calmly. "You didn't let go of the suitcase. There must be something incredibly precious inside it. Now please slowly put it down."

The wind blew.

Her lustrous black hair swayed softly in the middle of the spring-tinted mountains, the red of her blade clashing against the backdrop.

"You have no right to say no."

Ayame's usual reserved and peaceful self was no longer here.

"You will not live to see tomorrow. How dare you?"

This was the Guard of Summer, Ayame Hazakura.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, insurgent."

She was the older sister who'd become strong for the sake of her younger sister.

"Hand that over. I'm checking what's inside."

Ayame pointed the blade at him. She glared at the man as she measured the distance between them.

He hesitated whether to put the suitcase down or not; Ayame seemed intent on cutting him down either way.

"Sis!"

It all changed at the sound of Ruri's scream.

Numerous men had gone over the fence and were approaching her. The insurgent took notice of what happened.

But Ruri was pointing behind Ayame.

Ayame turned around and saw a dozen men, armed with batons, knives, and handguns, approaching from the direction of the abandoned shrine. They must have been close for them to hear the strife going on at the building.

So that wasn't the only insurgent base.

There must have been another one in the abandoned shrine they'd passed by. It seemed entirely forsaken at first glance. No one thought to take a look inside.

What now?

She was at a crossroads.

Should she prioritize defeating the insurgents coming from the shrine and rescuing Nadeshiko, who could be suffocating inside the suitcase?

Or should she abandon Nadeshiko and run to her master? Which choice to make?

What now?! Ayame was slowly being cornered.

Until Ruri shouted her doubts away. "This is an order! Protect Autumn! I'll protect myself! Everything will be fine! You keep fighting there!!"

Ruri's high-pitched voice reached Ayame's ears, along with a word she hardly ever used. *Order*. A command to obey her lady.

Ruri.

Right after fearfully screaming for her sister, Ruri decided to get her to guard someone else.

"I repeat! This is an order! Protect Lady Nadeshiko, Ayame!!"

Ayame bit her lip.

She had only one thing to do now.

"... As you command!" She shouted back her confirmation.

As she did, she drew closer to the man holding the suitcase and sliced into his midsection.

The man's pained screeches echoed in the mountains. Ayame immediately reached out for the suitcase, but he threw it away with all his might. The suitcase fell with a loud *thud* and rolled down.

"Be careful!" Ayame shouted furiously. "You know there's a person inside it!!"

She glanced at the suitcase. It didn't seem to be moving. She wanted to rush to open it right at that moment, but in a way, one could say Nadeshiko was safer inside it. Why?

"Sway, sway, sway the petals, over the gleaming pastures, in the booming summer."

Because the goddess incarnate of Summer was about to turn this place into a battlefield.

"Love, love, love breaks, under Tora's rain, under the summer fireworks, among the firefly traders."

Ruri's song was a tad odd. The other Agents sang to the land or the sky, while she sang at the wild dogs snarling at the incoming insurgents.

"Slash, slash, slash, slash through, hatching dragonfly, waiting for autumn."

Her words had power in the name of the gods; in a sense, they were like a curse, as her familiar's lives became puppets, and their bodies morphed. The dogs around her began howling like wolves.

Then...

"Sit tight, waiting for autumn."

...more wild dogs hiding in the mountains showed themselves.

"...Go! Protect me!!"

She sent her familiars after the men approaching her. Most of them were medium or small in size, all adorable. But their appearances transformed with Ruri's divine powers.

They bared their fangs and growled. They sprang off the ground like cats.

The little monsters bit Ruri's attackers all in sync.

"Stop! Get off me! Get off, get off, get offff!!"

The men screamed in a panic as their skin was ripped off and blood flowed onto the earth.

As soon as one man was down, the dogs moved on to their next target. The victims did not die, but they experienced something close. Getting mobbed by wild dogs was beyond terrifying.

"Go! Next!" Ruri commanded, jogging away from the approaching men.

She had no supernatural strength herself. No martial arts or swas Ayame or Rindo did. She really was just a girl.	ords expertise



But as she sang and commanded, life would rejoice, fall in love, and become her servant.

So long as she had her beasts, Ruri had no blind spots. They could not even touch her. Anyone who tried would have their throat bitten by her loyal servants.

Still, she was outnumbered. Ruri and Ayame were completely surrounded, separate from each other. No matter how strong they were, if reinforcements kept on coming, they would tire out eventually.

They needed backup. Ruri and Ayame prayed:

Someone, help.

And there was only one person both of them could pray to.

"Ladies!"

Ruri's and Ayame's faces lit up the moment they heard the incoming footsteps.

And then he was there, rushing past Ruri. He landed a flying kick on one of the insurgents fighting the dogs.

"Excuse the delay!!"

It was such a clean blow that Ruri's jaw dropped. Rindo Azami rang the gong of battle with a dropkick. He was the one they had prayed for—the only person they could trust not to betray them. Ruri's gamble on the dog had paid off. Whether the chaos over on the other side was dealt with or he'd left partway through, who knew, but he'd rushed to the scene here.

He panted and gasped for air, and his handsome face was quite dirty.

"Lord Rindo!" Ruri called.

Ruri was truly in love with her fiancé, but seeing him like this made her heart skip a beat.

"I'll get rid of these men! I will protect you!"

Then Rindo used the silent "deadly martial art" on the insurgents, working in tandem with the dogs.

Finally, he drew his weapon. He made the opponent flinch with a sweep of his sword, then sent them into the ground with a mix of kicks and punches.

Ruri looked over at Ayame. She was struggling against the sheer number of enemies. And the enemy had taken the suitcase away. One man, bigger than the rest, picked up the suitcase with ease and ran away.

"Lord Rindo, that's enough!" Ruri called. "Follow that big man!"

"But ...!"

"Lady Nadeshiko is inside! It's over if they take her away! Go! My familiars will take care of the rest!"

"...Apologies!" Rindo left a few insurgents standing as he ran in Ayame's direction.

Ayame used her short sword and a handgun she'd stolen from an insurgent to slowly but certainly lower their numbers. She kept her eyes on the target as she yelled: "Lord Azami! Follow the suitcase!"

"...Sorry!" Rindo slashed down a couple of men and slipped through to keep on running. His magnificent skill got a chuckle out of Ayame.

The man with the suitcase was heading down to the abandoned shrine. While Rindo wasn't as fast as Ayame, he was more than fast enough.

He closed the distance quickly; the suitcase was weighing the man down. When he noticed his pursuer, to Rindo's shock, he threw the suitcase away into the mountains.

"Son of a...!" Rindo followed the suitcase.

It crashed on the ground, slid across the grass, and dropped over a small cliff created by the landslides. It hit rock after rock with a loud *thud* every time. Finally, the lock broke open, letting its contents fly outside.

"...Na...de..."

Rindo couldn't finish.

Inside the suitcase was the girl he was searching for. Nadeshiko Iwaizuki. The Agent of Autumn, whom he had failed to protect, whose suffering had driven

him near madness.

"..."

She did not look like he remembered.

Nade...shiko.

Her lovely face was covered in cuts and bruises. Even at a distance, he could see evidence of beatings on her arms and legs, which were peeking from her kimono. They had punched and kicked her numerous times. And she didn't even look conscious.

Nadeshiko.

He couldn't tell whether she was breathing. He had to get closer, hold her up, and ask her if she was fine. He was too far away.

How dare you do this to my Nadeshiko.

The moment Rindo's heart flared with wrath and despair, he received a hard blow to his head from the back.

"...!"

He lost his balance and fell off the cliff.

Just as Nadeshiko did inside the suitcase, he bounced like a ball, taking hits everywhere, until he reached the bottom. He did what he could to break the fall, but he heard cracks from a few of his bones. Maybe they broke. He wanted to check whether Nadeshiko was alive right away, but he heard footsteps coming down the cliff.

"...You're dead!!"

He had to get rid of the enemy before he could run to his princess.

Rindo was ready to kill this man.

At the same time all this was happening, Winter drove across the skies after relaying intel on New Year to Autumn and Summer.

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"Speed up, Itecho!"
"...!"
```

"You're going slower than my spells! What's wrong?!"

Itecho had no concentration to spare for a reply. He had driven a bike in winter, as he lived in the Town of Winter, but he had never driven on his master's ice bridges.

Not to mention, these bridges were built from rooftop to rooftop, without guardrails—if the bike fell over, they'd slide all the way to the ground. He wouldn't mind if he was alone, but right behind him was his master, the same person commanding him to go through with this lunacy.

"Speed up!!" Rosei shouted.

Itecho was driving slowly to keep his master safe, but Rosei wouldn't shut up about it. Itecho clicked his tongue inside the helmet.

Don't blame me if something happens!

Itecho twisted the throttle, and the number on the speedometer jumped. Now Rosei had to help him. He couldn't dance, and singing could make him bite his tongue. He continued drawing ice bridges in silence.

At the same time, he was erasing the bridges they crossed, like wiping away the evidence of a crime. His longtime obsession with creating ice flowers and swords was paying dividends now. He needed to keep his concentration all the way to the end.

But then he received a call on his phone.

Who would be calling me?

He took the device out of his sash and glanced at the screen.

It said, *Sakura Himedaka*. The last call had been from her phone, but it'd actually been Hinagiku contacting them. It could be her again. He couldn't bear it, and so he knocked on Itecho's helmet.

"Stop! Stop!"

Itecho's face contorted in confusion as he hit the brakes.

They happened to stop in an office district where the Agency building was almost visible. They were in the middle of an ice bridge connecting the rooftops of commercial buildings popular with the youth. The people in the pedestrian area on the surface far below kept on walking, unaware of the god incarnate of Winter's wild actions.

"It's Sakura! I got a call from Sakura!"

Itecho slowly started moving again. "Well, pick up! I'm heading over to the next building!"

They got to a place that was out of the way. There was only a billboard of a famous foreign actor promoting lipstick with a smile. Rosei awkwardly took the phone up to his ear.

"Sorry for taking so long to answer... It's Rosei. Hinagiku? ... I mean, Sakura?"

His voice trembled as he gave his name, and there was no immediate response. Who knew who would answer? Then he heard a sigh of relief.

"It's me, Rosei."

Sakura Himedaka this time.

"It's Sakura, Itecho."

Itecho took his helmet off before nodding, and he watched over the conversation.

"Sakura, are you and Hinagiku okay?"

"We're alive. Lady Hinagiku is fine. But someone's attacking the building."

"I heard from Autumn! I know what's going on! It's New Year! Get out of the building now!"

Sakura gasped.

"We can't. We let our chance go. I told Autumn not to come here, and you shouldn't, either. It's dangerous. Stay away from the building and anyone you can't trust. Hide. We're prepared to take on the attack."

Sakura had called to make sure Rosei and Itecho were safe.

After the Agency building was attacked, Hinagiku and Sakura barricaded themselves, then first tried to call Winter.

But Itecho hesitated to answer, so Sakura called Rindo.

While Hinagiku and Itecho talked on the phone, Sakura informed Rindo of Nagatsuki's betrayal. Then an explosion went off on the first floor. At the same time, Hinagiku's call with Itecho and Sakura's call with Rindo were cut off.

This had deeply upset Rosei, who covered the expressway with ice and blocked off the insurgent pursuers in his fury. After that, he called Rindo and relayed to him the information from Ishihara on New Year's base.

That's the gist of it. Now Spring was trying to maintain the barricade while Winter took a shortcut to the Agency building.

Meanwhile, Gozen, New Year's boss, pretended to be from National Security as she infiltrated the Agency building.

"You want to fight them?! Why didn't you run away?!" Rosei shouted.

"I can't just run!" Sakura shouted back.

She truly couldn't, but there was no time to explain why, and it came out as though she was angry at him.

"D-don't get mad. I'm just worried..."

"Shut up! I'm doing what I can! Don't complain! Just keep yourselves safe! That's what Lady Hinagiku wants, so don't come!"

Hearing that Hinagiku was worried about them slashed open Rosei's heart.

"...Okay. Don't yell."

I gotta get to them quick.

"Sorry, but I'm already near the building. I... We'll be there in no time, so wait

for us! Just tell me what floor you're on!"

"...The nineteenth, but the plan is for Lady Hinagiku and me to go up to the twentieth alone. There's a rooftop garden on that floor. We'll stage our counterattack from there. I'm hanging up, Rosei. We already said our piece."

"Wait, wait! Counterattack how?!"

"We're fighting back. That's it."

"No, don't. Just get out of there. One of our escorts was a spy, and she talked. They're planning to place explosives on the building. We don't know how big. Just don't do anything rash!"

"Explosives...?"

"Yes. I've already put in a request to National Security's Teito base to send Porcupine. Their bomb-disposal squad should be heading there, but I don't know if they'll make it. It also sounds like New Year's boss is heading for Hinagiku. Don't trust *anyone* dressed like National Security! That's how they plan to get in. The nearest NS office and fire department won't be coming any time soon. They're getting sabotaged and paid off to delay their arrival. Ha! Ironic, isn't it? They're supposed to be protecting the country!"

"Wait, that explosion... How big's it supposed to be...?!"

"Like I said, I don't know. As far as Hinagiku's concerned, though, she's more likely to get kidnapped again than killed in the explosion. New Year's Gozen is obsessed with her. They'll attack you first, and the explosion will take place once they've taken her away. So you have time. If you're still fine, then run! Don't fight!"

Sakura didn't answer right away.

The situation was bad enough to begin with, and now she had to deal with the fear of explosives and the news that New Year was going after Hinagiku again.

"Hey! Maybe I spoke too fast; did you get all that? New Year's coming, and they've got a bomb! The government won't do anything in time! That's why we're heading over there! Get away now if you have the chance!"

```
"Got it! But...goddammit! Can the day get any worse?!"
  Burning desperation and fear took over her.
  "Sakura? Sakura! Hold it together!"
  "Shut up! Be quiet... I've got it together!"
  "Rosei, what's wrong?" Itecho asked.
  "It's just, Sakura's..."
  "Is she okay?"
  u n
  Better not assume she is doing okay.
 Then Rosei did the most natural thing to do in that moment.
  "...Itecho."
  He handed Itecho the phone.
 "Say something. I think she needs you."
 He had seen them become close friends despite their age difference—
building a relationship of mentor and pupil. He judged that she needed Itecho
to help her regain her composure.
 Itecho hesitated for a moment, but he picked up the phone.
  "Sakura."
 His voice reached Sakura's ear for the first time in five years.
  "..." She said nothing. Itecho could only hear her gasp.
  "Sakura... It's me, Itecho. Can you hear me? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"
Itecho spoke with the gentleness of rain after a drought. "Hold on just for a
little longer. We'll be there soon."
```

Itecho's soft words solved nothing.

But she understood that he was worried about her.

Itecho didn't know exactly what Sakura was to him.

"Sakura..."

He cared about her, that was for sure. It was similar to how Hinagiku was the most important girl in the world to her.

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"What's wrong?"
```

Sakura Himedaka was the girl whom Itecho worried about the most in the whole world.

```
"...Sakura, are you crying...?"
```

He wanted to see her safe. He wanted to support her. Forever, if possible.

But if this was only a protective desire, he wouldn't fixate on her to this degree.

His voice was filled with a prayer to know she was safe.

"Please don't cry. That pains me more than anything."

Even if it wasn't romantic love, he was opening up his heart.

That was the most effective way to reach her at this moment.

He heard sniffing from the other side of the line.

```
"...I'm not crying!"
```

The lie was obvious; her voice cracked and trembled.

She didn't want him to know, but she couldn't control herself.

"Yeah, right... It's good to hear your voice after all this time."

"Shut up," she whispered.

"Sakura, do you still resent me?"

"..."

"You must have a lot to tell me. I'll hear all of it. You can even punch me if you want. But if you want to do that, I need you to survive. It'll be hard, but please hold on just a little longer. I'll be right there..."

Itecho realized his words were probably not reaching her anymore. She hated him, and she would not forgive him.

She was more likely to push him away, but he still wanted her to know.

"Sakura, don't try to do everything yourself. You might not believe me, but I'm on your side."

That girl who had gone away all those years ago was still in his heart.

He never forgot her. Itecho was ready to cut any relationship off for the sake of his goals, but not Sakura. Never.

It was after she left that Itecho realized how much he cared about her. No matter where he was or what he did, he always wondered what she was doing at the time.

"I've always been on your side. I'll always be."

It was the truth.

"I will protect you, and Lady Hinagiku, and Rosei. I'll keep all of you safe, this time for sure. I'll be right there. So keep those cheeks dry waiting for me... Don't cry, Sakura."

""

No one knew what Sakura's face looked like at that moment.

"You'll be...right here?"

Her voice came out muffled.

"Hmm?" Itecho responded by reflex.

"You'll really be here soon...?"

Itecho felt his chest burn at how childish she sounded. That was the voice that used to call him *Lord Itecho*.

Throughout the fun month of the Season Descent and the sad and painful years after the loss, Sakura had always supported him. He was transported back to those times for just a moment.

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"...Yes, I'll be there right away..."

"Seriously...?"

"Believe me, I will. I'm going there to help you."

"...All right, I'll wait... Be here soon...Itecho."
```

That was the last thing she said before hanging up.

"..."

The answer was blunt and curt, yet still a little cute.

"...Rosei."

That was enough for Itecho.

"We're going at full throttle. Get us the shortest route there, even if you have to take a few risks. Sakura and Lady Hinagiku are waiting for us."

His fighting spirit was burning like never before.

"Y-yeah... I'll do it." Rosei immediately put his hands around Itecho's waist.

Good. That was the right choice. Rosei focused on creating a new ice bridge. How does he actually feel about Sakura, though? he wondered.

Rosei knew about Sakura's feelings. They'd lived together, and she was too easy to read. The one he didn't get was Itecho.

From Rosei's point of view, Itecho only thought of Sakura as a pupil, and that aspect of his feelings seemed to remain even now. He loved her and wanted to protect her the way an older brother did toward his sister.

However, Itecho had changed after Sakura vanished.

The loss appeared to have been too much for him; his feelings seemed too complicated to pin down with labels.

Rosei worried about Sakura, too, but the quality and fervor of his feelings were different from Itecho's.

Sakura had also changed while she was away. She was no longer the girl who admired "Lord Itecho."

She had to look so different now, and there was no way of knowing what their relationship would be like going forward.

There might be a chance.

Which was good, in Rosei's opinion. A new question popped into his head.

Can this guy even do romance?

Itecho had basically no personal life. He'd spent his every waking hour serving Rosei ever since the attack on the Town of Winter. Up to then, he had occasionally taken days off to go out to the city, but now he never did. He was always with Rosei. He didn't put himself in an environment that would allow him to fall in love.

Almost like I'm his boyfriend.

Rosei recognized how handsome his Guard was. Perhaps his job would impede the possibility of a family, but Itecho was perfectly capable of getting himself a one-night stand at the very least. In any case, Rosei wanted him to find happiness.

Perhaps it was too selfish a wish, but if it was going to happen either way, he would rather have Sakura's feelings reciprocated as well.

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"Itecho."
```

"What? Hurry it up."

"I'm working on it. You can't rush art, and look at my wonderful ice bri— Er, anyway. I wanted to say, once everything's over...I'll give you a vacation, so go take Sakura out somewhere."

```
"...Stop it."
```

"Why? Nothing wrong with..."

"I don't mean it that way. That's the kind of thing that'll jinx us and get us killed."

```
"Oh...right. Okay."
```

"Yeah."

He had to save everyone and take them somewhere safe. Itecho could only think about rescuing Rosei, Hinagiku, and Sakura. Rosei's comment was getting in the way of that perfect ending he was working toward. Instead of wearing the helmet, Itecho only put his sunglasses back on.

"Where are they?" Itecho asked.

"On the nineteenth floor, but she said they're moving to the twentieth. We

should probably head there."

"Roger. I'm going full speed, so hang on tight. If you fall, I'm not coming back for you."

"Please don't leave me."

"I know you'll be fine, master. Now shut up, or you'll bite your tongue."

Rosei tried to brace, but the top speed was still twice as fast as he expected, and he bit his tongue right away.

Meanwhile, Hinagiku was looking at Sakura as she hung up the phone.

More precisely, she was rubbing Sakura's back when she began crying during the call.

Sakura's...at her...limit.

Sakura deserved all the respect in the world as she fought to protect everyone in this situation. This nineteen-year-old girl was leading the resistance, and Hinagiku felt bad for letting her take care of it all.

"Sakura...it's okay... Hinagiku will...protect every...one."

Although Hinagiku was trying to put her at ease, Sakura looked shocked, as though she'd just been fired.

"N-n-n-no!" She sniffed.

"But, Sakura...you're...crying..."

"It's sweat! Just cold sweat!"

It's...not.

Hinagiku couldn't deny it out loud, though; she didn't want to make Sakura feel even worse. Hinagiku waited painfully for what Sakura would say next.

Sakura swiped away the tears with her sleeves. "Lady Hinagiku, I believe you heard what they said... We're in big trouble."

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"Yes... It's like...the end of...the world."

"Don't put it like that..."
```

"But...Ms. Misuzu is...coming...with a...bomb..."

"Yes..."

"Everything bad...is happening. It's...like the ... end of the world."

Those words were heavy with meaning.

It sounded as though she was ready to die, or perhaps for Hinagiku, this woman Misuzu was the end of the world. Perhaps it was both. Hinagiku's eyes turned somber.

Now Hinagiku's mental state was deteriorating alongside Sakura's.

Ms....Misuzu...is...coming.

Hinagiku had spent most of her life with Misuzu—she was like a second mother, with a twisted sense of love.

If Hinagiku...dies again...what will...happen...next?

Hinagiku had died by this woman's hands.

Misuzu had killed the previous Hinagiku.

She had tormented Hinagiku so severely that a new one had been created.

What...does she...want to...do by...taking Hinagiku...back?

Hinagiku always thought of the possibility of coming into contact with Misuzu again, but it felt different now knowing that she really was heading here. The memories of everything Misuzu did to her, everything Hinagiku did back to her—it all came back with stinging pain.

She...cannot be...reasoned...with. We have...to fight...her.

Hinagiku could not make any sense of Misuzu. She understood what she did, but she had no idea what her endgame was.

Misuzu had wanted to become her mother, and yet she also wanted to break Hinagiku. She called Hinagiku her daughter and claimed to love her, but then she had callously ordered her to have a child with some unknown man.

Her words and actions did not line up. Of course, people are not perfectly consistent, but the dissonance in her was so distinctly bad, it was hard to believe anything that came out of her. The contour of her being was so blurry, even trying to approach her was difficult.

Hinagiku could never do more than shrink in fear of provoking her.

Will she...make Hinagiku...grow cannabis...again?

Her whole life was controlled by violence and fear.

Or will...she take...Hinagiku's body?

A near-religious world created by one single ruler. Misuzu was God, and everyone else was her lackeys. No one could oppose her, or they would be punished.

Hinagiku...wouldn't be...able to...take it.

Hinagiku's eyes welled up from pure terror. No matter how hard she tried not to think of it, it all came flooding to her.

All those memories of the eight years she spent with Misuzu.

The first time Hinagiku saw someone die around Misuzu was shortly after she was separated from Rosei and the others.

The joint terrorist operation between New Year and what was now Higan-Nishi did not succeed in taking the Agent of Winter's life, but the supposedly impenetrable fortress of the Town of Winter had fallen. Plus, they'd abducted the Agent of Spring, who happened to be staying there. It was a win for the terrorists.

As Ruri, Ayame, and Rindo had said, the insurgents each held their own beliefs and used violence in their protests.

Higan-Nishi was a radical organization. They looked to get rid of the season of winter—at least in the times before Nagatsuki joined. They were descendants of people who were born in cold villages, protested against the Agent of Winter,

and had lost members of their families. They cared about nothing but killing Winter.

New Year was different.

Misuzu's father had inherited the organization from his father, and although they dedicated themselves to terrorism, they held no strong convictions. Their protests against the government were under a more ambiguous banner: that the Agents of the Four Seasons should be put to good use. Perhaps this was the closest thing to a creed they had. The important thing was having something to use in their protests against the government. Violence done in the name of justice had a sweet taste to it. Misuzu's father tried wearing two hats with his diverse businesses as he led the insurgents, and so the organization wasn't as active as in his father's time. This changed once Misuzu took over.

Higan-Nishi had the honor of completing a successful attack on the Town of Winter, and New Year had earned a source of income for negotiations with the government.

However, they soon clashed regarding the treatment of Hinagiku, and New Year killed multiple members of Higan-Nishi under Misuzu's orders.

This collaboration had brought the biggest terrorist attack of the century, but the cause of its collapse wasn't infighting. It was, instead, New Year's one-sided betrayal and massacre of the other side.

Hinagiku saw members of Higan-Nishi reach out toward her, pleading for help just before their skulls were crushed like grapes. Higan-Nishi was wiped out for saying they wanted Hinagiku.

"This is your fault."

Hinagiku vividly remembered Misuzu's smile as she held up a corpse's hand and playfully waved at her.

Hinagiku was given a private room when she arrived at the New Year base, and she was kept locked up in there for most of the time.

She was made to cultivate marijuana in a separate room for a few hours a day. They had her working long hours at first, but they reduced the load when she nearly died from exhaustion. She had no idea what she was making. Her throat got sore, and she had a fever from excessive use of her divine powers, but they didn't let her take a single day off. Misuzu also came to see her daily.

Sometimes, Misuzu even had lunch or dinner with Hinagiku. She loved buying her clothes and plushies. She had no interest in what Hinagiku liked, though; instead, she tried to mold Hinagiku's tastes to her own.

She asked for constant gratitude for every little thing she did. Her love always came with a price.

It was like playing house.

So long as Hinagiku acted her part, Misuzu was a good mother. The moment the fantasy was threatened, however, Misuzu became a tyrant who yelled and punished her. Violence often accompanied this.

"Do you understand what you did wrong?"

Hinagiku hated that line the most.

If she didn't give the correct answer, Misuzu would get angrier and hit her again.

A frightened, beaten child could do nothing but hold her head in pain; how could she answer? Yet more yelling and violence would follow. She would numb out. She would be blamed further. And she would numb out.

Her captive life there deadened her soul.

As she numbed out, her mind would unravel.

As her mind unraveled, she looked for normalcy.

As she looked for normalcy, the part of her that had unraveled was left behind.

As it was left behind, the other side grew.

As it grew, her other side was whittled down. As it whittled down, it faded. It faded, and died. Death was the beginning for the current Hinagiku. In that way, perhaps it wasn't wrong to say that Misuzu gave birth to this Hinagiku. She was born with a cry. A cry that came with a curse on the world. It was a cold, quiet birdcage. It had held Hinagiku for many years. Hinagiku's kidnapper called her by a different name. — was the name of her lost child. Misuzu must have wanted to subjugate Hinagiku by robbing her of her life and name. And it worked. Little by little, Hinagiku's sense of self collapsed.

For the first year, Hinagiku had held hope. She'd waited for someone to come and save her.

"...I am..."

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"I...am..."
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For the second year, her memories had held on strong. She could remember the faces of the people she loved.

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"...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.

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"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?

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"Hinagiku...is..."
```

By the fifth year, she had felt her personality unraveling, and she began repeating her name to herself in fear.

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"Hinagiku...is..."
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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.*

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"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.

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"...Plea...please...no."
```

Then it came. The eighth year.

Misuzu made Hinagiku a proposal. Or rather, she gave an order.

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"Hey, —, I want you to make a family."
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Hinagiku didn't understand what Misuzu meant at first. How could she "make a family"? She could only make flowers bloom. She was never taught how to create humans.

"Hee-hee, you say such silly things. That's not what I mean. There is a way. Ah...but you never took a health class. That is my fault. Forgive your mother."

You are not my mother.

The denial crossed her mind for the thousandth time.

However, it was dangerous to let it leave her mouth. She could never say it if

she wanted to stay safe. Who knew what Misuzu would do if she did?

"...At first, since I love you so much, I considered having Mikami do it. He's perfect. I would love your and Mikami's child so much. But when I think about it actually happening, I can't bring myself to do it... Mikami is mine. I don't want to give him to you... Sorry."

I don't care.

This Mikami might've been the best man ever to Misuzu, but he was only another cold adult to Hinagiku. He could do his job for sure. He did everything impeccably. But he lacked any tenderness or affection an elder should show a youngster; it was as though he was taking care of an animal instead of a child.

He seemed decent at first glance, but there was something off about him, considering how he only did anything when it was for Misuzu.

Although he looked different from the other adults, he was not trustworthy.

"This plan won't only put pressure on you. Eventually, we will catch another descendant, and then you'll be a little freer."

Let me go, then. Do it now. How long had she been captive at this point?

"Mikami. Mikami, come in."

Mikami and another man entered the room.

"Did you bring the drug?" Misuzu asked Mikami.

"...Are we really doing this?"

"I asked you a question."

"I brought it, but I still think this will break our golden goose."

"I've used it. And I was fine."

"...And how old were you then? You realize you use different volumes for any drug depending on age and size?"

Hinagiku did not understand anything they said.

There was little she could understand. She lacked the intellectual and language skills. She'd been kept a child forever.

"Gozen... She's...so small... Can she even give birth?"

The man who'd entered the room with Mikami spoke as he stared at Hinagiku. His gaze was not directed at her eyes, though; he was taking in her whole body, making her flinch.

She had never seen this person in the organization. Maybe he was a new recruit. Staff changed frequently since Misuzu broke them all the time.

"She had her period just the other day. She can. It's fine."

"What's fine about this? None of this is fine."

"Mikami, why are you always arguing with me?"

"It's too risky. Listen, we can get infinite money just doing what we always have. What's the point of putting this pressure on her?"

"I'm not like the rest. I had Hinagiku make drugs to get everyone on board, but I'm looking for real change in the world. Money's not everything to me like it is to you. The government won't listen to our deals, so we'd better think of a long-term plan. We've gotten a decent few people in the Four Seasons Agency and the Towns on our side these last couple of years. It's about time we take the next step toward the future."

"We only got those insiders because of the money. We'll get even more if we keep paying. And where's it gonna come from? Aren't we using her? I'm telling you we're gonna have to shrink our operations if we lose our golden goose. And what then? Will you ask your father for help?"

"...You're getting out of line, Mikami."

The restlessness in Hinagiku's heart grew as the conversation heated up. As long as it was over soon. She had no idea what they were going to do, but if they were going to hurt her, if they were going to scare her... As long as it was over soon.

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"Um... ----, was it?"
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The stranger grabbed her arm, making her shiver.

"It's fine. It'll all be over by the time you wake up."

What will?

"Just hope you're not allergic to the shot..."

What was he talking about?

"...I suppose no one's told you, so I'll give you a simple explanation. You'll...be getting married, basically."

With who?

"And when you get married, you have kids. You know that much, right? You've seen that in picture books."

I know. But why me?

"Ms. Gozen wants you to create a new Town. Agents of the Four Seasons come from their descendants. She wants to have her own faction...and to prepare for that, she's been getting people on her side. I'm a descendant myself, in fact. I work for the Four Seasons Agency. Over these eight years, they've set up a strong foundation to turn the Agency on its head. It should take time, and honestly, I still think it'll be difficult...but we used to think just having an insider collaborating with the Agency would be impossible, and they did it. Maybe they really can do it."

Why won't anyone save me?

"...Frankly, I think the whole descendant system and the Towns should go under. It's suffocating."

Please. Anyone.

"So just give up."

After that whisper, he held Hinagiku close.

She felt it by instinct. She had to get away from this. This was different from the violence she'd suffered up to this point. Something dreadful was about to happen. Hinagiku twisted out of the man's grasp.

He approached her with an awkward expression.

"It'll be fine, really."

Hinagiku usually only ever shivered and cried, but that sentence made her

angry.

It's never been fine.

Not for a single moment had it ever been fine since she got there.

Hinagiku frantically ran to try to get away from him, until he finally cornered her against the wall.

The other adults watched them in astonishment.

"Hey, don't be too mean to ——."

"No, I'm not trying to... I feel bad for her, so I'm telling her not to be afraid..."

"——, if you don't like him, we can get another person. We have a few waiting, actually. But you don't get to say no to everyone. I did my research. I chose those with the best background and looks. I did that for you."

Hinagiku teared up and shook her head. A visible no.

"Don't be stubborn," Misuzu scolded casually.

Like it was nothing.

Because it *was* nothing to her. She wasn't the one getting hurt. She was keeping herself safe.

She kept herself safe from her own scars, too, by calling Hinagiku using ——'s name.

She sacrificed someone else's life to protect her own heart.

And since she wasn't getting hurt herself, she cared for nothing.

"Why do you refuse so strongly?" Misuzu asked. "Don't you want a boyfriend,
——? I'm giving you one..."

Boy...?

"Maybe she still likes the Agent of Winter. I mean, she gave herself to protect him," Mikami said.

Marriage?

"Oh, you're right."

Isn't that something you do with someone you like?

The faces of the people she protected eight years back faintly crossed her mind.

That was the only thing she could cling to.

```
"_______
```

She prayed for help from those she hadn't seen in so long. She had prayed so many times, but they never came.

```
"Hinagiku."
```

Hinagiku shivered at the sound of her name. She knew perfectly well what it meant when the empress used the name of the Agent of Spring.

```
"Do as I say."
```

Then Misuzu tried to make her obey by threatening her with something she could not oppose.

"Or I will kill everyone you tried to protect."

Misuzu took even the faint memories of the ones who might already be dead.

```
"N...no... No... No... No..."
```

Hinagiku shook her head desperately. She begged. Anything but that.

Why? Why had she accepted this life? For them.

She lived in this prison for the ones who had shown her a moment of light in her short life.

To protect them.

"So you can do it, then? Well, let's begin. Get her to stay still, Mikami. I'm giving her the shot."

Mikami sighed. He made it clear he didn't want to do it, and yet he still followed Misuzu's orders. The man, clueless as to how to treat a child,

approached Hinagiku and twisted her arm.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

Her body was screaming.

"You grab her legs and pin her down."

"Hey, she's kicking."

"She's not strong. Pin her down."

The man they said was going to marry her shoved her down and kept her in place.

I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared.

"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 reached her mind from the recesses of her memory.

"Help me... Someone... Help me... Anyone... Help me... Someone... Anyone... Anyone... Anyone... "

No one will help me.

That was the truth.

No one would save her.

There was no savior in this whole world.

Thousands, maybe millions of people were praying in this very moment around the world.

But no one came to help them.

No miracles happened. No saviors came. Nothing. There was nothing.

Then...

There was no hope in Hinagiku's life.

...there's...

Not a shred.

...there's no reason to endure this.

Because no rescue would come.

Mother.

Hinagiku had lived. She'd done her best to live until she finally reached her limit. She could rest now, right?

"No!"

She heard a voice then.

It came from the other self she had raised inside her. She had watched her all this time, encouraging her from the inside. Many times, she had told her not to let herself lose.

Sorry, but I can't any longer, Hinagiku replied to the other little girl inside her. That girl insisted to keep going, but Hinagiku could no longer make the effort.

```
"Don't die. Not yet."
```

I can't do it.

"You can't...give up...now."

I just can't anymore.

"You haven't...given Lord...Rosei his...answer."

I won't even get to see him again. What's the point?

"Keep...going. Fight. They'll...come."

I'm scared. I'm too scared to fight.

"You can...do it. You've made...so many...so many flowers...bloom."

But I've never given them to anyone.

"Please...fight. Don't...die."

```
But I want to.
"Don't leave... It'll be...lonely."
I'm sorry. I'm sorry.
"You'll...break your...promise to...Mother?"
She's calling me.
"She's...not. Please...fight...the adults."
I can't.
"You'll...really give...up?"
Yes. I'm tired.
"Even though...good things...might come...if you're...alive?"
I can't keep going for that long.
"Are you...sure? You'll...die."
Yes. I'm sure.
"What about...Lord Rosei?"
I leave him to you.
"But...Hinaqiku...is not...you."
I leave him to you.
"Don't...let your...self go. Don't. You can... You can...still...do it."
I can't.
"You'll...die?"
Yes. I want to die already.
Her mind was unchanged. The other Hinagiku went silent in resignation.
"Okay..."
```

Hinagiku had thought of ending her own life, but before she could, she felt her coming out. Hinagiku sighed in relief as rescue finally came, and she became another person. It still meant her death, but it was gentler than smashing her

head on the wall, or biting her tongue off, or hanging herself from vines she'd grown on the ceiling. This psychological death was the rescue she was allowed.

"It's all right to go now."

In that moment, Hinagiku felt as though she heard Kobai's voice in her ear.

Mother, come for me.

Hinagiku Kayo, the protector of the Town of Winter, slowly died without anyone noticing.

Hinagiku's body relaxed, and she went quiet as all signs of resistance disappeared.

"...She's awfully docile all of a sudden," the man whispered with suspicion.

Misuzu let out a tired sigh before clicking her tongue.

Mikami felt something was up, and he looked carefully at Hinagiku.

Her eyes were wide open, but there was nothing in them. They were completely hollow.

He took his hand up to her mouth, and she was still breathing. She seemed to be unconscious.

"...Is she broken?" Mikami asked Misuzu.

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean...like, mentally... The emotion is completely gone from her face..."

"...Hmmm. Well, at least she's quiet now."

"Gozen... What if she can't make us marijuana now?"

"Just splash her face with some water or whatever later, and she'll be back. We're in luck. We don't even need the drug now."

"Gozen."

"Why was she making all that fuss to begin with? There are way worse things out there. Can't a goddess put up with a little trouble for us humans? Children are so tiresome. Sometimes, they're cute, but most of the time, they're just a pain in the ass. Hey, Goddess, answer a prayer for once in your life."

"Gozen, Gozen,"

"Humans have it so much worse. The Agents of the Four Seasons spend their lives loved by everyone without a worry in the world...but you introduce them to the tiniest hint of hardship, and this happens? Gods originally come from humans, so they should just obey and be quiet... Act the part! Do your job! I did! Why can't you?! Put yourself together!!"

"No! Gozen... Look! Her body's...!"

Mikami couldn't finish his words.

It was an odd, strange sight. Flowers were blooming from Hinagiku's neck.

More accurately, her stigmata was acting abnormally.

When the Agents of the Four Seasons received their powers, a flower mark appeared on their bodies.

Spring had a cherry blossom. Summer, a lily. Autumn, a chrysanthemum. Winter, a peony.

The mark was hot and painful when it was first drawn into their bodies, like a beautiful tattoo, but soon, it melted into another part of them.

"The flower...!"

Hinagiku's mark was right behind her neck, on her nape.

The mark was now spreading like water across her whole body. The blossom extended its branches, budding and blooming, taking on color and light.

Divine majesty enveloped her, demonstrating just what sort of being this little girl was.

```
"Why...did you...kill...Hinagiku?"
```

No one in that room knew that when the flower mark reached an Agent's whole body, they could use the full extent of their powers.

```
"Why...?"
```

The girl wept as her emotions returned. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

The girl who had valiantly fought for the longest time had weakened and died.

In her corpse, a new self was born—one now quietly beginning a rampage.

The adults, unable to understand what the child said, looked at one another with horror. Their base was in a mansion in the middle of a mountain forest, and the entire building began creaking. In spring, the cherry blossoms would be a beautiful sight.

But right now, it was winter.

```
"...Why...did you...kill...Hinagiku?!!"
```

Yet the moment the new Hinagiku screamed, the cherry blossoms embraced the mansion.

Yes, embraced.

Monstrous branches pierced the walls indiscriminately, stabbing everyone present.

The mansion had three floors and a basement, and the cherry blossom trees punctured everything and everyone inside it.

The cook was impaled by the trees pushing through the kitchen fridge.

Misuzu's personal driver was crucified to his car seat in the underground parking lot. The napping guards were thrown out through the ceiling as the branches pushed their beds upward. The tidy rows of marijuana in the underground garden were buried in pink petals.

Thin branches projected themselves into the eyeballs of the man who was supposed to marry Hinagiku. Cherry blossoms bloomed in their place.

Mikami immediately covered Misuzu, but a branch pierced through both of their midsections.

Everyone and everything was perforated, crushed, smashed, and shattered without prejudice.

Stabbed. And pierced. Stabbed. And pierced. Stabbed. And pierced. Stabbed. And pierced.

The girl screamed as she attacked those who put her in this cage and the whole wide world.

The adults were screaming, too. She knew this was not good, but she couldn't stop.

```
"Why...did you...kill...Hinagiku...?"
```

By the time she came to, Hinagiku was outside, surrounded by silver snow. It was so 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 home. She wanted to go to the place her dead self had

protected.

```
"Saku...ra..."
```

Would they accept her even if she was someone else inside?

```
"Lord...Rosei..."
```

Was a soul born in the body, or was the body born out of a soul? Was it a crime to kill oneself?

```
"Where is...everyone?"
```

The world was too uncertain. She knew nothing, except...

```
"Hinagiku...is...here..."
```

The world outside her cage really did exist.

She hadn't lost her mind. Thank goodness.

Ahhh, thank goodness. Let's go home. I'll take you home.

And so a broken Hinagiku was now reunited with her retainer, and she was in the middle of another calamity.

"There's not much we can do, though," Sakura was saying. "The plan stays the same."

Sakura held Hinagiku's hand, and the touch made her flinch.

"...Lady Hinagiku?"

"Y-yeah." Hinagiku nodded weakly.

"Once everyone's in place, we will need much of your power. I apologize...for not being capable enough..."

"That's...not true."

Hinagiku didn't mention the cold sweat running across her whole body, didn't say she wanted to scream, didn't reveal how she longed to break down in tears.

"You can...ask me...for anything."

For she loved her Guard.

"Let's...fight...together."

She thought no one had looked for her, but that wasn't the truth.

Sakura had searched for her the entire time, even throwing away her life. Even when the Town asked her to fix Hinagiku, Sakura chose not to run away.

"For you...Hinagiku can...make...as many...plums, roses, camellias, or... anything."

Sakura had nursed her. She cared for her. She protected her. She loved her.

"Sakura, you...have full...permission. You can...use Hinagiku...as much as...you want."

This was a fake Hinagiku Kayo, and even then, Sakura loved her.

[&]quot;Hinagiku...loves you...Sakura."

She wasn't just trying to offer comfort—she truly felt that way.

She was not alone this time. She had her Guard—her best friend.

"Hinagiku will...do anything...to protect...you."

So she wouldn't cry, Hinagiku grabbed Sakura's hand back.

"...Lady Hinagiku."

Tears streamed down Sakura's cheeks again. Before she could wipe them away, Hinagiku reached out to caress her cheek.

"Sorry. It's scary, yes. But...let's do...our best."

"I'm scared, but I will do my best. You're scared, too, aren't you, Lady Hinagiku?"

"Yes... Very. But...we must...protect the...other...people, too."

"Yes!" Sakura's tears stopped in that moment. "...Lady Hinagiku."

"Yes?" Hinagiku tilted her head.

Sakura blushed as she continued, "Um...excuse the delay in saying it back. I...I also love you, Lady Hinagiku."

"...Hee-hee. Yes. Hinagiku...knows."

The world here right between them was warm, despite the emergency unfolding around them.

Then a voice came from behind. The Town of Winter escorts had finished preparations. Sakura and Hinagiku looked at each other and nodded before moving to the arranged spot. They shared one final conversation as they walked.

```
"Hey, Sakura. Is...Lord...Rosei...coming?"
```

"Yes, he is."

"...It's dangerous."

"Yes, but they said he'd come. They told me...to wait for them."

```
"...They should...run."
  "...Yes, but...I would do the same, if I were in their shoes."
  "But..."
  "Even if you've changed, that is no reason not to come."
  "...Is that...so?"
  "Yes."
  "And Brother...Lord Itecho...is also...coming."
  Hinagiku was staring at Sakura, which made her look away.
  "You have...also changed, and...Lord Itecho...is coming. We're...the same."
  "... Everyone changes at some point. I bet Rosei and Itecho have changed, too.
They must be much taller than when I was living with them."
  "... A taller...Lord Rosei... Oh, no... Hinagiku's...heart is..."
  "He's not worth a racing heart... It's a waste of blood."
  "Can't...help it. Sakura...let's...survive...until we...meet them."
  Sakura gave a confident nod.
  "Yes, Lady Hinagiku. Let's live."
  Sakura was no longer promising to die protecting her.
  Let's go to another point in the timeline.
  Rindo Azami was slashing the man who'd pushed him down.
  It was his first murder.
```

He had learned martial arts, but that was merely training for certain expected

"...Haah, haah."

circumstances.

Both his martial arts and swordplay were meant to neutralize the enemy. Although he had learned some moves that could kill, he could only use them in times when his own life was threatened. Even the extralegal measures allowed for protecting the Agents of the Four Seasons had their limitations.

```
"...Hah... Ah... Haaah..."
```

He would be dead otherwise. He had attacked with the intention to kill, and he did.

This was legally self-defense, but the question about whether the law could possibly measure the weight of life only came after his first murder.

```
"...Ah... Hah... Uh..."
```

He was shaking. He was going to be sick.

The Agent of Autumn was less likely to be targeted than the other seasons, and the attack on the villa was the first time he had encountered danger since being appointed last year. But he was prepared to go through something like this one day.

When he was appointed, he was told that no Guard of the Four Seasons had ever ended their term without killing a person. He had prepared himself mentally for his time to come. Or so he thought.

```
""
```

His hands were soaked in blood and fat.

```
"…!"
```

He sheathed his sword back and ran up to the suitcase.

He tripped. A voice repeating he had killed a man rang ceaselessly inside his head like a bell.

Still, there were more important things at hand than his own grief.

```
"Nade...shiko."
```

He had to check whether his Autumn was alive.

"Nadeshiko."

Rindo fell to his knees before the suitcase and picked up Nadeshiko's body in his trembling hands.

He checked her breathing, her pulse, her heartbeat, one after the other.

"...Nadeshiko..."

She was alive. Her breathing was shallow, but she was breathing.

"...Nadeshiko!"

Rindo shed tears of relief as he held her close.

She had no deep wounds on her face or body. She still looked in bad shape and appeared to be internally bleeding, but she didn't seem to have any broken bones.

"Nadeshiko, Nadeshiko, it's me. It's Rindo... Nadeshiko, please wake up..." Rindo called her name, forgetting entirely how he usually spoke to her.

He had longed to hear her voice all the time she was away. He needed her to wake up. He needed to hear his name coming from her small lips.

"Nadeshiko."

The moment I first saw you, I was amazed by your sheer purity and innocence.

"Nadeshiko."

You knew nothing of the misfortune that awaited you.

"Nadeshiko."

I thought I had to protect you. As things turned busier, many times, I forgot about that original purpose.

"Nadeshiko..."

But not for a single moment...

"Nadeshiko, Nadeshiko."

...did I stop loving you.

```
"Nadeshiko... Please wake up..."
```

He had to be deserving of this kind and sad creature.

I wanted to be worthy of you.

He wanted to be good enough for her. He wanted to be faithful to her.

Even if that was not his truth, even if it was all fake and pretension...that was his wish.

I forgot.

He could become a knight or a prince for her sake.

"...Mmm." After a few calls, a drowsy murmur escaped from Nadeshiko's mouth.

"Nadeshiko?"

"...Rin...do...?"

Finally, she slowly opened her eyes.

Her eyes were so special, shining bright like glass beads. And in them was the image of the knight she yearned for.

"Rindo..." She smiled limply. It was as though she knew he would be coming for her.

"Nadeshiko... Do you recognize me?"

"Yes, I do..."

"Who am I? Can you say my name? How many fingers am I holding up?"

"...You're my Rindo... Rindo Azami..."

"Yes, I am... What else?"

"You're my prince... My knight... The coolest of all... And your hand... You're showing...three fingers..."

Rindo's lips trembled as they formed a smile. "Nadeshiko!"

Rindo hugged her again, soft enough not to break her, but deeply enough to

make up for the time lost.

```
"...Rindo...I was dreaming about you..."
```

The young Autumn goddess was an endlessly adorable maiden. Rindo was finally able to smile properly.

In between sobs, he whispered, "And I'll give you so many more. I'll give you one every year...Nadeshiko."

```
"Yes..."
```

Nadeshiko was in a soft trance at first, but gradually, she understood the situation she was in.

```
"Nadeshiko, Nadeshiko..."
```

She was embraced like a lover.

```
"R-Rindo... U-ummm..."
```

Her face was dyed the color of roses as she was able to objectively see her position.

"...Nadeshiko... I'm sorry I wasn't able to protect you... I let you get hurt... Did they hit you? I was right there...and let this happen... Your pretty face is all..."

```
"Rindo, um, hey."
```

"I'll spend the rest of my life atoning for this. I will serve you until my death. I will watch over your coming-of-age and your marriage. I won't retire no matter how old I get. I will make up for this, Nadeshiko..."

```
"H-hey, Rindo... You've changed a little..."
```

```
"..."
```

It was until she said that that Rindo realized that the image of Rindo Azami he had made up only for her was nowhere to be found here.

[&]quot;Me...?"

[&]quot;Remember when...you gave me a bouquet of ginkgo leaves...?"

[&]quot;Yes, I remember..."

[&]quot;That was the first time a boy gave me something..."

"You're...so charming now..."

As Nadeshiko stared, mesmerized, Rindo frantically tried to replace the mask.

"Excuse me, Nadeshiko... I am glad to find you well."

"Oh, no. I prefer you the other way."

"...I can't..."

"You can. I had already realized that you were different only around me..."

Rindo blinked. "...You knew?"

"Yes, the cook and the person who sings me lullables told me...that you're only super gentle with me."

""

"Rindo, you don't smoke in front of me, do you? They told me you try to keep it from affecting my lungs."

"..."

"I also heard that you swear with other people."

"...N-Nadeshiko."

"And that you don't want me to see you like that...because you don't want me to hate you. You're such a dummy, Rindo. How could I ever? I...um... Well, even if you are a bit bad, I love you... I will always, always love you..."

Rindo plummeted from his euphoria as he heard Nadeshiko's sincere words.

They were telling on me.

All his efforts meant nothing. He turned red from embarrassment, an expression Nadeshiko had never seen; she poked his cheek.

"...It's so cute, Rindo..."

The small girl came to know how adorable this older man could be.

"Please don't... Nadeshiko..."

"Excuse me, I should've said *charming*. Oh, I just realized, you're wounded... You have blood all over your hands... Are you okay...?"

It was not Rindo's blood.

"..."

Rindo could not bring himself to say what he had just done.

"Are you okay, Rindo?"

"... I shouldn't be touching you with these dirty hands..."

Nadeshiko frowned. "Don't say they're dirty... No matter what, Rindo...to me, you'll always be..."

Nadeshiko's entire body hurt from Misuzu's beating, and still, she forced herself to put her arms around Rindo's neck and pull herself up.

Then like a little bird landing softly on his cheek, she gave him a kiss.

"You'll always be my Prince Charming."

Immediately, she ran out of strength and let go. She let herself be supported by Rindo's arms again. Her giggling smile was like the loveliest, most priceless source of light in the whole world.

"...Nadeshiko."

Rindo, still holding her, grabbed her arm. Nadeshiko looked up, wondering what he would do, and then he planted a kiss on the back of her hand.

"My Nadeshiko... You will always be my princess."

Rindo wore a smile unlike what she had seen before—a smile full of his natural tenderness.

With the sweetest voice, the one that only she in the whole wide world would be able to hear, he said:

"I will be your prince any time. Anything for you..."

And he kissed her hand again.

"R-Rindo..."

Now it was Nadeshiko's turn to blush.

"What is it, Nadeshiko?" Rindo grinned.

Flustered, Nadeshiko said, "...Th-then...I—I have to... I must be a princess worthy of you..."

"You are perfect as you are. You are already my princess."

Nadeshiko felt dizzy from the sweet whispering. "Aw... R-Rindo..."

Her chest hurt from her unprecedented heartbeat, making her wonder whether she was dreaming.

"I love you, Rindo."

"I do, too."

"I really love you."

"Of course, I do, too."

"But your love and my love are..."

"Nadeshiko, you must be hurting, but hold on just a little longer. We can't stay here. Let's go back."



The sweet time ended then.

"...Aw, okay, Rindo."

The trouble wasn't over yet.

"We fell from a cliff, but it's not too steep. We shouldn't climb straight up, though, so we will take the way around. That should let us join Summer."

"Summer...?" Nadeshiko tilted her head.

"Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame Hazakura. Winter and Spring also helped us rescue you."

"Really...? My, what should I do now? I have to thank them somehow..."

"Yes, let's get you to them so you can do just that."

"Let's have Ms. Nagatsuki bring us some sweets. She has a knack for finding good food."

The traitor's face crossed Rindo's mind.

"<u>.</u>"

"Is everyone back at the Autumn villa okay...?"

Rindo did not answer as he ran with Nadeshiko in arms. As though he was escaping from the insurgent's dead body.

The lady and retainer of Summer kept fighting after Rindo went to save Nadeshiko.

Agent of Summer, Ruri Hazakura, glanced over at her older sister.

Rindo had taken care of most of Ruri's enemies, so her wild dogs could handle the rest, but Ayame was having a hard time. Too many insurgents came from the direction of the abandoned shrine.

"Be quiet already!" Ruri shouted as she made all her wild dogs attack the last of her enemies at once.

These people would never be able to keep a dog as a pet again.

I gotta save Ayame.

Ruri hurriedly ordered the dogs:

"Protect my sister! Go!"

Her familiars immediately followed the command. She employed all the wild dogs living in the mountain. Not one was left to protect her, but everything was good so long as they could get rid of the enemies surrounding Ayame.

She could also go back Rindo up.

"On your right, bite him! Get his throat on your left!"

The animals under the control of the song of the four seasons did as the Agent of Summer commanded.

She only had to tell her familiars who to target to let the ravaged dead bodies pile up, but if she needed to give specific instructions, she had to say them out loud.

"Another one coming from behind! Jump over Ayame's head! Claw their face!"

One by one, the enemies fell. The sisters were in sync.

Ayame battled at close quarters, while Ruri gave support from a safe distance.

This was the sisters' fighting style. Their victory was virtually assured the moment Ruri offered her assistance. Ayame's swordsmanship was breathtaking, her slender figure slashing down the larger men in succession. The fight was coming to an end soon.

"Go! Go! Get 'em!"

They had always managed this way. They survived the perils they had found themselves up to now.

Ruri was certain they would be all right.

"Go left! Get his le—"

Ayame likely thought the same. They were twins, after all. They were often in

sync like this.

Ruri had told Rindo to go on without them because she believed they could handle this alone.

```
"...His...leg..."
```

They would be okay. They had to.

"Sis..."

And yet.

Huh?

Ruri collapsed. Blood spilled from her mouth. She couldn't breathe.

The blood gushing from her throat wouldn't let her.

What?

She had no idea what happened. The pain came with a delay. Her back hurt. As though she had been stabbed with a spear. An intense pain like she had never felt before. Her limbs trembled from the sheer pain. She needed to get rid of it, but the suffocation from the blood was even worse.

Help me, Sis.

Ruri had a bullet buried in her back.

They were outside the fence at the back of New Year's base.

The building was two stories high. The surrounding area was full of trees, but one could see the Agent and Guard of Summer fighting from the window of the second floor.

The sniper attack came from there. The sound could barely be heard, thanks to a silencer. Ruri, face down on the ground and unable to see anything, moved her fingers as her mind went hazy.

Hunt them.

She commanded the birds in the trees. Immediately, the birds flapped their wings and turned into predators.

The flying assassins would eliminate the enemy with ease, but Ruri might not

get to see the results.

Sis.

Her life flashed before her eyes.

Memories of the red shoes she liked when she was a kid.

The sunflower garden in the Town of Summer that she loved to play in.

The picture book with the pretty cover that she never read but loved to touch.

There was always one girl in all her memories.

Her twin, who was only designated as the older sister because she was taken out of the womb first.

A girl who was at times annoying, but always reliable, who frequently went along with her whims, the girl she loved so much...

Ayame.

In her memories, her sister was always angry. Was Ruri always upsetting her?

Many times, she made Ayame laugh, but worrying or bothering her was more common, maybe; she couldn't see her smile.

I'm sorry.

Maybe she had it too easy as the little sister—just because she came out later.

Many times, she felt bad being compared with her perfect older sister, but the older sister had to bear so much more.

That day when Ruri cried about not wanting to be the Goddess of Summer, her sister reassured her she would be by her side and volunteered as her Guard.

If Ayame had abandoned Ruri to handle it all on her own, Ruri would not have lived to this age.

Sis. Ruri should've been kinder to her. Sis. She should've been a better sister. Sis. She loved her sister so, so, so much and tied her down in the process. She asked Ayame not to get married. She asked her not to quit being her Guard. She put her on the spot, but she truly had no other allies. What could she do without her? How was she supposed to live without her? Ahhh, but... She couldn't take her next breath. ...now Ayame can live freely. It hurt. Everything will be simpler once I'm gone. She never thought it would come to this. I see. It's better this way. Should she not have come to rescue Autumn? Ayame, I'm sorry. No. Her position as goddess didn't matter—she only did what she had to, as a human. She did nothing wrong. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. If there was anything wrong... Ayame.

...it was her own weakness forcing her to say farewell to her sister in this way.

I'm sorry, Sis.

Ruri Hazakura was dead.

She died from blood loss and asphyxiation after being abruptly shot in the back.

Ayame Hazakura did not realize right away that Ruri Hazakura had died.

Just as she landed a roundhouse kick on an approaching man, she turned to look at her sister.

Ruri had been hidden in the shadows of the trees, but somehow, she was lying on the ground.

The wild dogs that had been fighting alongside her suddenly lost all interest and howled before leaving.

No.

Ayame's face went pale.

"Ruri!"

Ayame turned her back on the enemy and ran. It couldn't be. It couldn't be. She screamed internally as she sprinted all the way to her sister and the pool of blood growing underneath her. The sniper on the other side of the fence fell from the window, pecked by the birds, but Ayame did not notice.

"…"

She could only hear her own shallow breathing.

Ruri wasn't moving. She wouldn't say anything. Ayame's noisy, rambunctious little sister had gone quiet all of a sudden.

She reached out to try and see her face, but she felt the danger approaching from behind and immediately crouched down.

Leaving the battle didn't get rid of her enemies. Ayame moved nearly automatically as she slashed them down. Blood gushed from the cut, covering

both her and her sister. So filthy. It was the only thought her mind could produce. There were more important things to consider, but she couldn't reach that thought. She could not believe it. After the kill, Ayame called to Ruri. "Ruri?" No response. "Don't mess with your sister like this..." No response. "Please, Ruri." No response. "This can't be real." She stared down at the unresponsive body, but nothing changed. "Please tell me it's not true." She tattered toward her and fell to her knees to rock her. No response. "Ruri. Ruri?" It was no longer Ruri. Just a shell. "A-ahhh. A-aaah."

She shook her a few times. Nothing changed, save for a little more blood on

I couldn't protect her?

the ground.

She didn't even know when she died.

Me? Her Guard?

Ruri must have been calling for her, but she was just so focused on the fight.

"Ru...ri... Ruri..."

Wasn't a miracle supposed to happen in situations like this?

So she prayed, but she received no response.

Please, God.

She prayed once more.

Please, God.

And again. And again.

Please, God...

Nothing happened.

God was dead—right before her eyes.

Her goddess was right there, lifeless.

The closest deity had been her own little sister.

"Ruri."

Yamato's only god incarnate of Summer. An irreplaceable life. One that should not be lost.

But above all...

"Ru...ri..."

...she was Ayame's other half. She had her same face, her same height, her same shoe size. They were so identical that even their parents mistook them for each other all the time.

"No. Please tell me this isn't happening."

She had let her die—the person she had to keep alive no matter what.

Ayame vainly called her from the deep trenches of despair. Just as she was realizing it was useless...

"Ruri, please, Ruri, Ru..."

...she felt intense pain all over her body.

Wha...?

Suddenly, she was lying right beside Ruri's body. She was staring at the corpse from the side, not above.

Then her body convulsed, as though she'd been struck by lightning.

What is...happening?

It was as though someone had taken over her body while she remained conscious. She felt weak. Maybe she had been wounded, and she only didn't realize due to the rush of the battle. She managed to reach out her hand to Ruri.

Ruri.

She wanted to touch her, even if only a little. Ruri's body was still warm. She wasn't stiff. You couldn't call her a corpse yet—meaningless denial crossed her mind.

"Ru...ri...," Ayame whispered as tears rolled down her cheeks.

There was nothing else she could do.

Her little sister had died, and she hadn't even noticed. She wasn't given a moment to protect her. She was so focused on defeating the enemy before her that she assumed Ruri would be all right giving support like always.

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"Ru...ri."
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Ayame had always believed she would be the first to go, due to her job. She'd been complacent.

She had assumed there was no way Ruri could die first.

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"Ruri, Ru...ri."
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This baseless assumption, this prayer, killed her sister. She killed her little sister.

"Ruri, Ru...ri, Ruri, Ru...ri."

She killed her sister. There was no taking that back.

"Ru...ri... Ru..."

Ayame's call was cut short.

"Agh..."

Someone kicked her back, and a cry of pain escaped her throat.

It was an insurgent survivor.

"Damn bitch!"

The kick was his revenge for all the trouble she'd given him.

Once he was satisfied, he turned her body around on its back. He straddled her abdomen and pushed the gun on her chest. He ground it into her aggressively.

I can't escape from this position.

It was hopeless.

And it hurts like hell.

Her foot had been screaming at her for a while. That must have been the cause for her spasm and fall. Anything touching her ankle hurt.

The pain was like fire.

"Ayame."

There were many distractions—the discomfort of the gun's muzzle on her chest, the agony in her foot—but that didn't stop her from hearing a voice inside her head.

"Ayame, Ayame."

She didn't know the voice. She couldn't even tell whether it was that of a man or a woman.

"Ayame, Ayame, Ayame."

Oh, this is...

Ayame knew this phenomenon.

"Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, "Ayame."

She had seen it before. It happened a long time ago, when Ruri Hazakura turned from human into goddess.

No way.

"Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, "Ayame."

Once an Agent of the Four Seasons died, another person would immediately receive their powers.

They were transferred to the worthiest person at that moment.

The choice was made supernaturally, not inherited from mother to child.

That was why it was shocking to the Town of Spring when Hinagiku Yukiyanagi, now Kayo, received her powers from Kobai Yukiyanagi.

Such a coincidence was unheard of.

Ahhh, you've got to be joking, God.

A voice would come to the chosen one. The Voice of the Four Seasons, as it was known, would call the person's name as though chanting a curse, until eventually, they manifested their powers. There was no rejecting them. This had been the way since ancient times, and it happened with Ruri.

Ahhh, but I'm wounded right now.

"Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame,"

I'm being chosen. Is it because we're twins, God?

"Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame."

I think you're making a mistake. Ruri's dead.

"Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame, Ayame."

How foolish you are, God of Summer.

The insurgent did not notice the lily stigmata surfacing on Ayame's foot.

I am not worthy. I've done nothing but dirty work up to now.

The man punched Ayame in the face instead of killing her. He wanted to drag this victory out.

God of Summer, I...

Ayame stared at the man she was about to kill.

...I am not as kind as Ruri was.

The next moment, the stigmata blooming on her ankle raced throughout her whole body at an imperceptible speed, activating the power of Life Operation. She did not give vocal orders as Ruri did. She did not make any hand signs.

Ayame merely prayed to the mountain.

"Kill him."

The wild dogs returned like mechanical dolls to bite the neck of the man atop her.

"Gweh!"

The shriek would be the man's last utterance. As much as he'd enjoyed punching Ayame, he turned out to be weak to pain himself—he died from the shock the moment he realized he had been bitten.

"..." Ayame slowly rose.

Around her were the wild dogs gnawing on the corpse and the birds gathering atop the trees. She could see someone in the direction of the abandoned shrine. He fired a warning shot into the air.

"Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!" Ayame laughed out loud.

He looked so stupid, trying to show off.

Before her now, he was a baby.

"Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha!"

After a bullet grazed her cheek, Ayame sighed.

"Kill him," she whispered.

The dogs ran, and the birds flew.

"Sway, sway, sway the petals, over the gleaming pastures, in the booming summer."

They acted as the new Agent of Summer's hands and feet as they slaughtered anyone who got in her way, anyone who tried to harm her.

I've got the song of the four seasons memorized.

She was laughing so hysterically that tears were forming in her eyes.

"Love, love, love breaks, under Tora's rain, under the summer fireworks, among the firefly traders."

I was always with Ruri. I've lived with her my whole life.

"Slash, slash, slash, slash through, hatching dragonfly, waiting for autumn."

I don't even need training.

This was a historic event taking place; it was a great shame no one was there to witness it.

"Sit tight, waiting for autumn."

The newly chosen Agent of Summer, Ayame Hazakura, made free use of her divine powers at the moment of her birth.

"Die."

Ayame remained seated as she waited for it all to be over.

After the dogs ripped the man apart, the birds began his sky burial, even though she never asked for it.

He doesn't deserve a funeral, Ayame thought, her heart ice-cold.

"Ruri."

Ayame called out to the body lying by her side.

"Ruri, Ruri... Listen... I became the Agent of Summer..."

No response.

"Can you even believe it, Ruri?"

No response.

"...Maybe it didn't have to be you, after all. Since we're twins...it could've been either of us..."

Ayame Hazakura's beloathed and beloved little sister gave no response.

"I should've died instead, then..."

Her tears spilled down her cheeks.

She had to do something, but there was nothing she could do. She knew what you were supposed to do when someone died. First, you had to call someone. But she couldn't bring herself to leave.

"God is so cruel, isn't he? All this time, he never cared which of us it was..."

She could not leave.

Ayame crawled over to a corpse without a throat and grabbed his handgun.

"And to think that they probably knew this is how it would end... How cruel can they possibly be...?"

She pointed the gun at her temple.

"Let's go file a complaint together in hell, Ruri."

The moment she put her finger on the trigger...

"Lady Ayame!!"

...the voice of a man reached her ears.

"L-Lady Ayame Hazakuraaa!"

The voice of a little girl followed.

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Ayame wiped away the rain of tears off her face before looking for the source of the voices.

In the distance, she saw Rindo, and Nadeshiko in his arms. They were running toward the dogs, which had become more playful once Ayame lost the will to fight.

"Haah, haah... Lady Ayame!" Rindo was shouting.

Ayame stared at Rindo in a daze as he arrived at full speed. "Lord Azami... Lady Iwaizuki, you're all right..."

"Thanks to you. But wh-what are you doing? Haah, haah... Where is Lady Ruri...?"

Rindo put Nadeshiko down and fell to his knees before Ayame.

"Ruri is..." Ayame had cried earlier, but the dam completely burst this time. "Ruri—Ruri is...!"

"Lady Ayame..."

These were not tears of physical pain, he realized, as he saw Ruri lying still on the ground.

"Lord Azami... Ruri...my little sister...is dead..." Ayame's voice was devoid of emotion.

"...How...?"

That was the only thing Rindo could say. The shock didn't even allow him to feel sad or sympathize.

"I...couldn't protect her..."

"No, you were doing well..."

"Ngh... Aaah... Uwaaaaah!!"

Her emotions exploded, and she clung to Rindo's chest.

He held her up as he tried to keep his composure and observe the area.

It's true, she's dead.

Ruri had been so full of life, and now...

Still, he could tell she hadn't been dead long.

"Rindo, she's still warm." Shockingly, Nadeshiko was touching the dead body without fear. She tapped her a few times, as though trying to check something.

"Nadeshiko," Rindo said.

"Rindo, I...don't know if I can do it, but..."

The Agent and Guard of Autumn looked at each other, apparently thinking the same thing.

"Should I try?"

Can she do that again? Rindo wondered.

Nadeshiko had healed herself supernaturally at the Autumn villa.

The Agent of Autumn had the power of Life Putrefaction. It essentially dealt with the state of life.

When autumn leaves withered and fell, they eventually returned to the land and became nourishment for life.

She could make that life fade—or recover.

However, Nadeshiko was still immature as goddess incarnate, and her healing was basically a fight-or-flight response that would be hard to replicate.

"...You think you can do it?" Rindo asked.

"...I don't know, but I have to try... I need something to pull from, though...
That scary woman who captured me told me about what I did. She wanted me
to be able to do it at will...so she...gave me a lot of rats...," Nadeshiko explained.

Misuzu had made her practice Life Putrefaction with rats.

She'd gathered dead rats and live ones and told Nadeshiko to bring the dead ones back to life.

"And I succeeded with a few...but I failed with even more, so she hit me a lot..."

Deep hatred surged inside Rindo as he learned the reason behind the wounds

on Nadeshiko's lovely face.

"Not even Misuzu Henderson's grandchildren will get away with this."

"I-it's okay, Rindo. You saved me already."

"...Nadeshiko, use my own life if you can. Lady Ruri is supposed to get married. We must get her safely back to her fiancé... Even if I..."

"But, Rindo..."

Ayame gasped in Rindo's arms. "...Lord Azami...? Lady Iwaizuki...? What are you...?"

Through the fog of her grief, she began to understand what they were talking about.

"Lady Ayame, I will try. This... Um, the mountain has leylines." Nadeshiko tapped the ground.

"You can use the leylines' power?" Ayame asked.

"Yes. I can take it from the mountain... I'm tracing it now... Rindo, you said you defeated a lot of insurgents to get here, right? Are they still here?"

"They should still be fighting by the mansion's front door."

"They're all so energetic... I'll take a little bit...from each one of them."

"Th-there's also people from National Security and the Four Seasons Agency there, though; can you tell them apart?"

"If they're all fighting, I can just take a little bit from everyone. I won't take their life. I'm taking their energy. They'll just fall asleep for a while."

"..."

Sorry, guys.

A life was on the line. He couldn't stop Nadeshiko.

"E-excuse me... You'll save her...?"

Ayame looked at Nadeshiko with worry, and the latter nodded. She was tense, too.

"I'll try. It'll be okay."

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"B-but...she's dead...?"

"Life and death is my domain. Will you leave it to me?"

"..."

Ayame could not fully comprehend the words, but she left Ruri in her hands.

"Please..."
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Nadeshiko nodded again before showing the palm of her hands. On one, she had the chrysanthemum stigmata of the Agent of Autumn. She placed it on the ground and put her other hand on Ruri.

"She's still warm... I'm sure I can." She closed her eyes and focused.

Then Nadeshiko's five senses merged with the mountain.

She felt the breath of the mountain, the pulse of its life. The wings of its insects, the flow of its streams, the rustle of its wildflowers' petals falling as the birds took flight. She had a grasp on everything that made the mountain alive.

Among it all were people fighting. The insurgents who'd built a mansion to use as base, and the members of the Four Seasons Agency, National Security, and its special unit Porcupine.

One, two, three, four.

Nadeshiko began counting them, but she gave up partway through.

Lots of them.

It didn't matter. She only had to take the energy from those who had it, and she only needed their location for that.

Everyone, give me a little bit.

Nadeshiko's soft lips parted as she took a breath. Her lovely voice echoed throughout the mountain.

"High up in the autumn sky shine bright the constellations, the stars, and the comets."

The sky—the universe—surfaced in Nadeshiko's mind.

"Across the starry sky flies Goddess Tatsutahime."

Nadeshiko was at the center of this vast "sky." Everyone else was far below her.

"Rejoice in delight, enjoy in respite, with song and with dance."

Nadeshiko had only to pinch them up and choose.

"Dance with the colorless wind, for one day you may reach the moon."

That was all she had to do.

I can do anything with Rindo by my side.

Nadeshiko had come back to the safest place in the world. And so she believed herself capable. She trusted her skill as Goddess of Autumn—he would protect her.

You come back, too, Lady Ruri.

The men in battle lost consciousness one after the other as Nadeshiko looked from the "sky" and prayed. She pulled the life into one hand, passed it to the other, and sent it into Ruri Hazakura's body.

Come back, Lady Ruri.

The bullet within her body began squirming.

Come back. Lady Ayame is crying.

The bullet slowly slipped out the way it came, until it finally dropped from her back. Ayame gasped as she saw the blood-drenched bit of metal. "...!" She sat up from Rindo's hold and approached to see the miracle happen up close, just far enough not to bother Nadeshiko.

"She needs her sister's voice, Lady Ayame. Call her name," Nadeshiko whispered as she closed her eyes suddenly.

Rindo was taken aback at the fluency of her speech; it was as though someone else had taken over her.

Ayame was surprised, too, but she followed the command.

"Ruri!"

Ruri's body jolted intensely, as if woken up by the call.

"...One more time."

"Ruri! Ruri!"

"Again."



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"Ruri, Ruri! It's your sister! Come back to me!"
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Ruri's body jumped.

"..."

She was still once again after the jump. Ayame reached out to her with a trembling hand.

"...Ruri, come back to your sister...!"

Ayame gently rocked her, and immediately, Nadeshiko looked up as her link with the mountain and the "sky" was cut off. She collapsed to the ground from the sheer momentum.

"Nadeshiko!" Rindo hurriedly held her up.

"... She came back too hard," Nadeshiko muttered with fatigue.

"Did you hit your head?"

Rindo caressed her head with extreme tenderness. She grinned.

"I'm fine. And thank goodness."

"...Hmm?"

"Lady Ruri is back, isn't she?"

Rindo turned around to see Ruri.

Ayame took her wrist. "... She has a pulse," she said, dumbfounded.

"S-so she came back to life?" Rindo asked.

"She's breathing!" Ayame's eyes welled up again. The dogs sitting around howled.

Unable to believe the miracle right away, she checked her vital signs one by one as Rindo did Nadeshiko's.

She's alive.

She was weak, but alive.

"L-let me check, too," Rindo said.

"Sh-she's alive... Lord Azami... Lady Iwaizuki... Ruri is alive... Mgh, aaagh...,"

Ayame cried out on top of Ruri. "Uwaaaah... Aaaaahh! ... Aaaaahhh!"

She cried like a child wanting to scream her feelings to the whole world.

"A-aaah! Uwaaaah..."

Rindo couldn't find what to say, so he only let himself be infected by the crying.

"Lady Ayame... Thank goodness..."

"Thank you, thank you..."

Nadeshiko watched the two crying adults with exhausted calm.

"U-um, Lady Ayame, Lady Ruri is alive, but she still doesn't have her blood. You shouldn't lean on her like that."

"Huh?!" Ayame scrambled away from Ruri.

"...I only made it so the others' life force made up for the blood loss..."

Ayame's face was still scrunched up. "Mgh, um... Th-then wh-whaddo I do?"

"First, get off her. Crying on top of her will suffocate her."

"Mm, 'kay."

"Your wavelengths are very similar, so get her up against you in an easy-to-breathe position. That way, your energy will reach her. Maybe you could get her head to rest on your lap..."

Ayame did as told, and sure enough, Ruri's breathing stabilized. She couldn't stop her tears. "...Thank you, Lady Iwaizuki, thank you so much..."

"Please... It should be me thanking you..."

"No, no...I really must thank you...so, so much..."

"...I'm glad I could help... I'm glad you helped me... Right, Rindo?"

"...Yeah."

"You're crying, too ...? C'mere, let me pat you."

"...N-no, I'm okay."

"I'll pat Lady Ayame, then. Here, pat, pat."

"L-Lady Iwaizuki... Uwah... Ngh...mgh...aaaah...!"

"...I—I made her cry more..."

"Nadeshiko, you did great... Good job."



Nadeshiko grinned at the praise from Rindo.

And so while there were losses on both sides, the rescue of the Agent of Autumn ended in success.

As for the occurrence at the Four Seasons Agency involving Spring and Winter, we must go back in time before the completion of the operation in Ohme.

The nineteenth floor of the Agency building. The elevator was about to open on the floor of the investigation HQ.

Gozen—Misuzu—grumbled, "...It won't open."

She pushed the button multiple times.

However, she only heard the sound of it hitting something.

"...What now?" she asked Mikami.

"They're just stalling for time. We should go down to the eighteenth floor and take the stairs."

"What? The stairs?"

Although she complained, Misuzu was left with no choice but to follow Mikami's suggestion. The group went back down a floor, exited the elevator, and headed for the stairs.

They moved in formation to guard Misuzu.

The emergency-stairway door was unlocked and opened easily.

"...Oof."

Getting in was simple.

"...What is this?"

But they did not expect what they found there.

Mikami, always unfazed by any abnormal situation, had his jaw on the floor.

"...What in the world?"

From the elevator all the way to every meeting room, the entire floor was a jungle.

Vines and grass and flowers enveloped the place, hindering the view.

Lions and elephants would look at home in this deliberately constructed landscape.

There were no birds, but you could almost hear chirping anyway.

No sounds of nature could be heard, in fact. The only sound was the background music of the building as it automatically recovered its security systems.

Curiously, though, it was not the usual relaxing music, but classical.

This was the default setting. They must've changed it to another channel for their normal operations.

All the little dissonances piled up into a significant sense of discord.

The forest wasn't even outdoors, and they could hear a sad piano overhead.

The whole atmosphere made the group feel as though they had wandered into some other world.

"There's been a leak...," said Mikami.

"What do you mean?" Misuzu asked.

"Someone we bought out must've told them, or...there could've been a double agent from the get-go, although I find it hard to believe... The Agent of Spring knew we were coming. Otherwise, why do this? This is obviously her work."

"...You're saying she's preparing to fight?"

"Naturally. She must be hiding somewhere in this green battlefield, on a deserted floor. She's taunting us, bragging about how she's going to kill us."

"..."

Misuzu did not doubt Mikami's words; she'd nearly been killed before. He was

most likely right. Still, she frowned, unable to fully accept that reality.

"Why...? It's not like every day with me was bad for her, was it...?"

"...Gozen."

Not even Mikami could stand to hear Misuzu's shamelessly egocentric question.

"Gozen, open your eyes. That girl despises me, you, and everyone else here."

"But!"

"You can go dote on her in whatever way you want; I won't stop you. But any normal person would not find love in your way of doting."

I'm probably the only one in the entire world who would.

Misuzu was still shocked, and Mikami looked away.

"...Let's send out a scout," he said. "First, though, check our location sharing."

Mikami took out a handheld device. All eight members of the team had a similar one.

The devices had a high-capacity tracking app installed.

It would track where the transmitters were and show their distance. The information was updated every thirty seconds or so, making it possible to follow their locations in real time.

"She's here...," Mikami said.

"Yes, we got the intel from an Agency staff member working as an escort for Spring," Misuzu replied. "We can track the location of Guard Sakura Himedaka's phone. And wherever she is, Hinagiku must be with her... In any case, everything has been proceeding quickly, so if they only made this place to play hide-and-seek, it won't meaningfully affect our plan. And either way, we only need to capture the Guard and threaten to kill her to draw Hinagiku out. We don't need a scout. I need to see her now. I must clear up the misunderstanding... Let's go. The plan is over if she escapes. I need her back..."

"No."

"Mikami!"

"You and I will wait here, Gozen. We'll send two scouts. Do not kill the Agent. Do as you please with anyone else."

Misuzu pouted at his unvielding command.

The infiltration team taking the elevator was composed of eight people, including Misuzu and Mikami.

Another eight formed the bomb squad, who took the stairs.

Mikami sent two of his men out of the hall.

Just outside the door was a corridor extending to the right and left, leading to meeting rooms. At the center were the stairs leading to the rooftop garden.

They couldn't see upstairs thanks to the vines hanging from the ceiling.

However, one could surmise the vast vegetation came from the rooftop garden. The Agent of Spring was able to accelerate the life of any plant so long as she had its seeds, but just seeds wouldn't be enough to create all the green covering the entire floor.

The scouts checked each room one by one.

The trees and flowers Hinagiku had grown from the rooftop garden reached out endlessly, transforming the rooms into mazes.

While the scouts walked with their guns in their hands, the noncombatants hid themselves behind Hinagiku's plants.

After checking the smaller meeting room and the computer room, it was time to head for the big meeting room.

"This...is the place, right? I don't see anyone... You think she ran away already?" one of the scouts commented.

"No, she has to be here..."

"Maybe the info is wrong. It could be tracking someone else..."

"There's no reason to lie to Lady Gozen. You don't get paid, and she'll come after you."

The intel had been sold to them by escorts from the Spring Division Agency the same people who had pulled the Town of Winter escorts away from Hinagiku and Sakura before the emergency alarm went off.

The situation was abnormal already.

Initially, the Agency traitors were supposed to trick Hinagiku and Sakura into staying on the nineteenth floor after getting rid of the Town of Winter escorts.

Meaning the traitors should have been near Hinagiku and Sakura.

However, they had lost to the Winter escorts despite a numerical advantage, and they were still unconscious on the floor below. As fate would have it, after Higan-Nishi tried to help Hinagiku, Sakura ended up fighting them, and thus they heard the explosion, which led them to remain on the nineteenth floor.

Both sides had been brought onto the stage without realizing it.

"...If we don't find the Agent of Spring, she'll go mad and kill one of us."

"Oof... That woman's just like my shitty mother."

They talked as they advanced, until a path suddenly opened up inside the big meeting room.

There was a flower field. A field of vivid colors that looked like heaven.

Curiously, it didn't appear out of place, as the floor was covered in grass instead of the usual carpet. If they didn't know better, they would think they were outdoors.

"…"

They observed the view in awe. The sheer magnificence of the flower field left them at a loss for words.

"The Agent of Spring can create all this...?"

"It almost makes you feel bad that we're blowing this place up."

"...Ah, wait. We've got comms. Seems like they're withdrawing."

"The other team?"

"That was quick. Let's wrap it up here, too... We're gonna get killed if we don't find that Agent."

They carefully observed their surroundings as they talked and moved forward.

"H-help! Help, please!"

Someone was calling.

The scouts found a few men and women on the ground, tied up by the vines. They held up their guns.

"Who are you...?" one of the scouts asked.

A woman with a blond ponytail and red-rimmed glasses answered, "Higan-Nishi. You're New Year, right?"

"Higan-Nishi...?" one of the scouts asked his companion.

"You know, the radicals Lady Gozen got rid of ten years ago after the Agent of Spring was kidnapped."

"Ah..."

Nagatsuki was internally indignant at their reaction, as if they couldn't believe the organization still existed, but she kept up the weak act.

"I was a spy at the Autumn villa, but they found out... Please, we're both fighting the system, right? Help me out?"

The scouts looked at each other. This was fishy.

It had to be a trap, and a poorly put-together one at that.

"Even if she is from Higan-Nishi, we have no reason to help her."

"...So what? Should we kill them?"

"He did say we could do as we pleased with anyone but the Agent of Spring."

The scouts did not fall for it.

"Wait, wait," Nagatsuki tried again. "Not to brag, but I've got a great body. Wanna take a look at my rock-hard abs? Killing me would be a waste. My subordinates are extremely fit. You have a good selection of men and women right here."

That didn't matter, though. It didn't matter whether they believed her or not, whether they killed her immediately or not.

"Just don't kill us—I think we can get along. We're all in the same boat,

right?"

The aim was only to keep New Year's eyes fixed downward.

There was someone watching them from afar.

The vines covering the entire floor were not only there to give the place a jungle feel. There was a good reason. For example, someone with the proper skills would have plenty to hold on to if they wanted to hang from the ceiling.

"I am not getting into it with a woman when this place is gonna blow up in a few minutes. Let's just kill her. Maybe that'll bring the Agent of Spring out..."

"Yeah, otherwise, we're never gonna fi— Wagh!"

And that was the end of that.

Both insurgents were knocked out at the same time without even realizing what hit them.

The plan with a raid squad waiting in the vines went off without a hitch. The two escorts from Winter descended from above like spiders onto their prey and snapped the insurgents' necks.

"All clear."

"...All clear. You can come out."

Sakura and Hinagiku appeared from the shadows of large evergreen shrubs.

The two of them would have finished the job if the first strike from above wasn't enough.

"Lady Spring, what did you think of my acting?" Nagatsuki asked, grinning broadly from her bonds.

Hinagiku peered out from behind Sakura and offered a nod to make Nagatsuki happy. Although she received no words, Nagatsuki took it as praise and rolled around on the floor in joy.

"Stop it, be quiet. Everyone, keep your voices down."

"Ahhh, Lady Himedaka..."

Nagatsuki's ecstasy only intensified as Sakura stepped on her.

"Using them as bait wasn't a bad idea. And New Year sent scouts, just as expected. They should send more once they realize the first round isn't back..."

"Yes, I'm not worried about getting rid of them. More importantly..."

The Town of Winter escorts took the devices out of the insurgents' coats.

"...what do we do about the explosion?"

New Year's chatlog said the explosives were already in place. They were also remote-detonated, so the plan was for the bomb team to return to the lower floors, exit from a window, and wait in an escape car for Gozen's team to come back.

"We should send people to deal with this."

Sakura nodded. "I agree. We should at least check whether they placed them on something we can move. Rosei said he asked Porcupine to send a bomb-disposal squad. We should have someone check where they placed the bomb and get instructions from the professionals. Also..."

She took her phone out of her jacket and showed it.

"My phone... I didn't realize Agency staff leaked my location... It's true I lent it to them... I was careless."

"No, we should use it to our advantage," said one of the Winter escorts. "Let's leave the phone here and have you two escape down. Only the enemies on this floor remain. You could exit through the window and lower yourselves with a vine, couldn't you? Not all the way down, necessarily. Right now, there's a low chance that you might get sniped from below. You could go down a couple floors, get back inside, and simply take the stairs for the last stretch. There were too many uncertainties for you to do anything decisive before, but now is the time to make a run for it. What do you think? I believe that's the safest route."

"…"

Sakura pondered in silence. Hinagiku pulled her jacket. "We're...leaving... everyone?"

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"...Lady Hinagiku."
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[&]quot;We...can't..."

The Winter escort seemed pained by this as well. "Lady Spring, my master, Rosei Kantsubaki, would prioritize your safety above all if he were here. I beg you, please run."

"Yes, but—but...Ms. Misuzu...is looking for...Hinagiku, so...if she...doesn't find Hinagiku...she'll...get...very...mad, and she'll...blow the...place up. And not...just this...floor... There...could still...be people...on...the other...floors... If Hinagiku... stays..."

"No." Sakura shook her head. "You intend to sacrifice yourself to protect others again?"

"No, Sakura. If Hinagiku...stays...then we...could get...some more...time. That's...all. This is...not the...same...Hinagiku...as before."

This was unusually aggressive for Hinagiku, but her face was still full of anxiety.

"Hinagiku...will fight. No more...sacrifices. Hinagiku will...fight."

She gulped her fear down.

"You can't, Lady Spring!" The escort's voice was firm.

"But...at the...very least...we should...get the...people here...out."

Sakura thought for a moment. "...Lady Hinagiku, that Gozen bitch must be by the emergency staircase now. We blocked off the elevator. We would need to get her out of there if we want to have everyone here run to safety... It wouldn't be realistic to ask untrained people to climb down vines."

"But—but these...people said...that she's...looking for...Hinagiku. In that...case, let's...walk with...your phone. That way, we can tell...Ms. Misuzu...that we're... over here, and...they'll...move. So everyone...can escape...in the...meanwhile."

"But..."

Basically, they'd be using Hinagiku as bait.

"We already...had the...plan to...climb up...with the...vines, right? Our last... bastion. Where Hinagiku...and you...can fight...with all our...might. The plan... hasn't changed. Let's...stick with it."

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Sakura understood what she meant.

Sakura would have immediately decided to save those lives if she were by herself. The strong had to protect the weak. Helping any noncombatants run away was not a bad idea.

However, as the Guard of Hinagiku Kayo, she could not make that choice.

They knew the enemy's moves now, and they had a way out. They had to escape, even if they could only save themselves. Even if it meant losing more lives.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

"Sakura, listen. Hinagiku...will only...say this...today. Sorry, but..."

Hinagiku looked Sakura straight in the eye.

Like golden gems. The goddess incarnate's citrine eyes met those of her most beloved retainer.

"...Sakura...this is...an order...from your...Agent of Spring."

Sakura blinked her big, catlike eyes.

"...Sorry...but...Hinagiku can't...let you...say no. Not this time."

Hinagiku had never said something like that before.

Hinagiku did not want to give orders to her best friend. She only ever asked for favors. No matter how much Sakura looked up to her, Hinagiku wanted them to be on equal terms.

"Sakura...the people...are in danger. This is...our...battle."

Still, she commanded this time.

"This body...has the...blessings of...the Gods...of the Four...Seasons. Usually... it's prohibited...to use...divine powers...outside of...manifesting...the season, but...it is...me...under attack...now. We must...help...the people...who have... nothing...to do with...this. Get them to safety. This is a...command. You may not...refuse."

Hinagiku then addressed the rest, also as goddess incarnate.

"In the...name of the...Agent of Spring, Hinagiku...requests your... collaboration."

She was no longer the fragile, weak girl who had to be shown the way.

She was Yamato's one and only goddess incarnate of Spring.

Goddess Hinagiku Kayo.

She had once died, but then she returned for the sake of that same lost girl.

"We will...save as...many lives...as possible. Please...help."

The young Goddess of Spring bowed her head deeply.

"Please. Hinagiku can't...do this alone."

The Town of Winter escorts were taken aback.

"Please."

Nagatsuki and her team were shedding tears as though they were witnessing a miracle.

"Please."

And Guard Sakura Himedaka—

"...As you wish."

Sakura resolved herself.

"They're not coming back...," Misuzu whispered dully.

It had been several minutes since the scouts left, and they wouldn't answer their calls.

They sent a new couple of scouts. Misuzu, Mikami, and the other two remained at the elevator hall by the staircase in alert.

"...They're going for guerilla warfare," said Mikami. "Should we call the bomb

team back?"

Misuzu sighed. "I'm tired of coming up with plans. Let's just go ourselves."

"...No... I don't think the girl is smart enough to come up with something like this, so she must have someone else strategizing. We have to be careful. What do you think will happen if we go in with bad visibility and an unclear route?"

"Nothing. We can fire shots ahead of us if you're that worried."

Mikami couldn't believe her reckless and thoughtless suggestion.

"...The alarms are still on. We could trigger the sprinklers, and it's not smart to shoot blindly to begin with. What if we hit your dear ——? We're not doing that. We need her to make bank for us again."

"…"

"...What?"

"Do not say ——'s name," Misuzu stressed.

"You're the one who made us call her that."

"...We've been calling her Hinagiku recently, though... I can no longer see her the same as that child... I shouldn't mix up —— and Hinagiku..."

Mikami raised his eyebrows at the unusually evasive comment. "What?"

"Nothing..."

Come to think of it, this is only natural.

Misuzu had given Hinagiku her dead daughter's name, and that same girl almost killed her in return.

Misuzu was still fixated on her, but perhaps she no longer saw Hinagiku as a replacement.

That girl was too dangerous to conflate with her dear child.

The girl who was weak, who would cry at the smallest thing and obey any order at the first sign of a threat, was gone.

All the adults killed her. That girl was no longer in this world.

"...Maybe you were right, Mikami. Maybe it was wrong to try to make her have a child...," Misuzu whispered pensively.

They were in the middle of a green field. The Agent of Spring's domain. Had Misuzu turned weak after setting foot in this battlefield? She started making excuses for herself.

"My first marriage was with a man I didn't like, either. I did what my father wanted. I hated that marriage. He kicked me, he punched me... I lost my baby..."

"I told you not to do it," Mikami said with annoyance at even having to remember it. "You should've called me sooner. I would've killed him."

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"That he isn't."

"You got rid of him for me."

"That I did."
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"It's fine. He's no longer here."

"Gozen..."

"So it's okay."

Misuzu and Mikami were lost in their own world.

The other team members kept quiet. They were filled with trepidation—anything could happen in this jungle.

"I need both you and Hinagiku if I'm going to be okay," Misuzu said.

"…"

"If I can get that goddess under my thumb..." Misuzu gave Mikami her best smile. "Then I'll be above God again. I will not be stepped on so easily. I don't want to bow my head to anyone ever again. Please, Mikami. Get Hinagiku back for me."

It was the smile of a child, free from any sense of guilt.

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Mikami wondered whether he should answer, Yes, Gozen or Yes, milady, when suddenly, all members of New Year received a message notification at the same time.

"…"

There was no text—only a picture of the scouts tied up in vines.

"...Are they trying to provoke us?" Mikami was furious.

Misuzu, realizing the weight of the situation, erased the smile off her face. "Wait, they're moving."

"What?" Mikami asked back.

"They were staying at the same place until now, but now they're moving. They're getting away."

The location data transmitted from the phone was shifting.

"They don't get to mock us. Let's leave behind the guys they captured and go punish those brats playing with us. Is it the Guard of Spring? She was a young woman, if I remember correctly. The perfect toy..."

The point on the map moved toward the twentieth floor, the rooftop garden, and they followed. An outsider would feel incredibly anxious watching these events unfold.

Misuzu was dancing in the palm of Spring's hands.

First, Hinagiku and Sakura went out the big meeting room's window and climbed a vine up to the twentieth floor. There was no safety net if they fell.

Once Misuzu and her team left, the Town of Winter escorts, Higan-Nishi, and the Autumn Division Agency staff who had been hiding among the trees commenced their move toward the stairs.

The Winter escorts and Higan-Nishi, which was under supervision, moved to

find the explosives. The other noncombatants evacuated downstairs while looking for stragglers on each floor.

Now that their forces were divided, each of them had a heavier duty now. But they were all allies gathered for the Agent of Spring.

"Are you okay? We'll be heading to the first floor. Come with us."

The evacuees rescued the wounded woman ignored by New Year.

Although the label of *noncombatant* wasn't exactly glorious, all of them had joined the Agency for the love of getting the seasons to the people. Some of them might have dirtied their hands and forgotten those ideals due to Misuzu's money, but most of them were just happy to help people in their daily lives.

"Thank you... Thank you..."

"No need. We were lucky to escape ourselves. Now let's get out of here."

These were the ones who Hinagiku said shouldn't be getting embroiled in this mess.

"Leave it to us. We are totally Lady Hinagiku's dogs now. We will not betray her. Our love burns for her until it consumes our lives."

"...Better put your money where your mouth is."

"Of course. Guys, let's find this bomb!"

Nagatsuki had joined Higan-Nishi after receiving a religious invitation when she was a student. Now she was like a fish in water. She, along with her compatriots, had been moved by Hinagiku's choice to save the others instead of abandoning them. She was more sure than ever that her beliefs were not wrong.

The Winter escorts, appointed as Higan-Nishi's supervisors in the search of the bomb, were fed up with the zealots, but Sakura had told them that Itecho would be there in no time, so they endured. They trusted Itecho implicitly. If he said he would be here, then he would be here.

Then in the rooftop garden on the twentieth floor.

The place was only open to the public during limited periods of the year, but it was set up as a botanical garden where one could see the flowers of the seasons, a place to worship the Gods of the Four Seasons and nature's blessings.

This year, as the Agent of Spring had come back after a decade, the garden was brimming with spring flowers.

"Hinagiku, Hinagiku, where are you?" Misuzu's voice echoed throughout the garden. "It's your mommy. Please don't attack me..."

She softened her tone as she spoke, trying to reach Hinagiku's good heart.

"Stop."

The first one to appear before the group of four was Sakura, sword unsheathed.

The garden contained many cherry blossom trees, and Sakura was a gallant knight standing in the middle of the pink petals. Some ways behind her stood Hinagiku.

Those who had been stabbed by Hinagiku two years back could not think of a way to attack her, not in the middle of this green battlefield. Sakura had her sword drawn in order to keep them away from close-quarter combat. Even if the enemies were able to make their way through her, Hinagiku could stop them in their tracks with the abundant plants.

Hinagiku's entourage could easily attack first, and yet they only asked them to stop.

"So you're not coming at us?" Misuzu asked.

Sakura only clicked her tongue.

"...What a rude girl."

Internally, though, Misuzu was smiling.

Oh, yes. They know.

She realized they were only stalling for time.

And that we have the advantage.

"Hee-hee." Misuzu was not very sharp about other things, but she could immediately tell in these situations. "Hinagiku."

She gave the best smile she possibly could.

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"...Ms....Misuzu."
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The girl who had torn Misuzu's stomach open with a cherry blossom branch was now more mature, a more refined Spring. Misuzu was simply delighted.

"You've grown, Hinagiku."

"..."

"Not a fan of those clothes, but Mommy's glad to see you matured."

Sakura had chosen these clothes for her—Hinagiku was angry to hear them dismissed.

Misuzu was a master at making people sad with the little things. Hinagiku's friend had looked at a Yamatoan fashion catalog and asked her about her favorite colors and patterns many times before making a special order. Hinagiku loved her kimono.

She loved choosing it together with Sakura. She loved the kimono and the memories that came with it.

"...Hinagiku likes...these clothes...more than any others. Hinagiku...hated...the ones...from before."

Her lips trembled, but she was able to say what she couldn't before.

Mikami remained silent as he stood beside Misuzu, but the shock on his face was clear.

At the same time, he braced himself for a fight.

She's changed.

He could still remember that madness, that screaming, that assault. The girl he'd raised had changed rapidly.

She was not the same person as when he managed her. He could not underestimate her now.

We should aim for the Guard.

The girl at the front had to be the source of the location data. Probably the same person who had attacked with guerilla tactics before. He glared at her, but she did not flinch; instead, she clicked her tongue again.

"You, you're Gozen's right hand...Mikami, right? I've heard of you from Lady Hinagiku. What're you looking at? You wanna die?"

That girl had the looks of an elegant lady, but the attitude of a yakuza.

"You think you can kill me before I kill you, bitch?" Mikami retorted.

"Yeah. I do."

"No, I'll kill you first."

"No, I promise I will kill you first."

They began exchanging death threats.

"...Mikami, don't scare them. You go too far, and then they'll already be frightened, and I won't get to have any fun."

"Yes, Gozen."

Sakura's mouth dropped open. "So you're the dog of 'Gozen,'" she said with a snort. "It's amazing you can deal with this crazy woman, really."

"...Right back at ya. As if your master wasn't crazy herself."

"My lady is an Agent of the Four Seasons, a goddess of the highest rank in this country. A living miracle who's brought spring back to the people after ten years. She is not someone you can insult like that and get away with it, scoundrel."

"...Whatever her standing, it doesn't change the fact that the monster almost killed us..."

Sakura kept her smile in place. "Oh, so she didn't even kill you. She was merciful."

I am going to murder this chick.

Mikami pointed his handgun and pulled the trigger before he fully realized he was doing so.

He fired so fast, it was basically a surprise attack, and yet Sakura moved beforehand.

"I said I was gonna kill you first!" she yelled.

The bullet missed, and Mikami's posture gave Sakura an opening to jump close.

"Gozen!"

Mikami pushed Misuzu away before barely blocking Sakura's sword with his gun.

The other two insurgents immediately backed him up.

Sakura took a step back and tried to get her breathing under control. Three men armed with guns. They felt better trained than Nagatsuki's peers, too. Not a good match.

"Sakura! Don't...kill!" Hinagiku yelled.

"They're the ones who hurt you, Lady Hinagiku!" Sakura yelled back.

She had been ready to kill when she heard why the previous Hinagiku died. She knew all the fear, all the sadness, all the pain they inflicted on the young girl.

And she had finally met the targets of her revenge in person.

"Still!" Hinagiku shouted.

"Then I'll make them regret being born!!"

It was hard to comprehend how that statement connected to the last with a *then*.

Hinagiku could not stop the warriors; their fires were already lit.

"...I will end you, you cheeky brat!"

"I have to obey my lady, old man. I'll hold back, but you'll be a sobbing mess when I'm done with you."

The fight began, three versus one.

Misuzu was calm and composed, as though the battle had nothing to do with her.

"Ms....Misuzu!"

Hinagiku called her name, silently pleading for her to make them stop, but Misuzu only shrugged.

"Let's both keep out of this, shall we?"

"...Ms....Misuzu."

"What...? You going to strangle me with some vines? Stab me with a tree? No, you won't. Not yet... You want me to do something about the explosives, don't you? Geez... Who leaked that?"

""

"You're trying to do something while we speak? Too bad. It won't be solved that easily. Take a look at this."

Misuzu revealed a handheld device.

"It hasn't started yet. You need my approval to defuse and start the bomb. You can't break this device, by the way. Which means you have to treat me carefully. You have to do as I say. And if you try anything violent, I'll start the countdown. You think I won't? There's time before it explodes. So you can even run away if you try hard enough. But what then? The building falls...and what about the area nearby? What if there's still people inside? My, oh my. I don't care who dies, as long as it doesn't include me. It's all up to you now. Let's let them fight for a while over there; that seems interesting. Meanwhile, you and I can negotiate. How about that?"

Hinagiku glanced at Sakura. Still fighting, Sakura glanced back and locked eyes with her for one moment.

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It seemed that was enough for them; despite her fear, Hinagiku nodded, believing Sakura would endure.

"I want you," said Misuzu. "I want you to come back home, Hinagiku. I won't make you have a baby this time... If you accept, I will defuse the bomb and leave."

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"...Ms....Misuzu..."
"Yes, Hinagiku?"
"Why...are you...fixated...on Hinagiku?"
Misuzu tilted her head. "Why? Because you're my daughter."
"Don't mistake...Hinagiku for ——. That's not...Hinagiku."
"..."
"What...do you...solve...by making...a replacement...for her?"
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"I'm not trying to solve anything. How can you say that after I raised you for eight whole years?" Misuzu was getting irritated.

"…"

Hinagiku's expression became more and more melancholy. "Right... Hinagiku was...with you...longer...than Hinagiku's...own mother. But Hinagiku...doesn't... understand you...in the least. Please. Please just...leave Hinagiku...alone. Stop... looking...for Hinagiku."

This was the second open rejection.

"…"

The first time was when Hinagiku attacked her, asking why she'd killed her. But that was less revenge than an instinctive reaction, and her rejection was too violent to have a conversation.

Now, however, they could talk.

"Give...Lady Nadeshiko...back...and...don't hurt...any of...the other...Agents."

They had a strange link, the two of them.

The woman who had both loved and broken the girl who was not her daughter.

The girl who could not fully cut off and kill the woman who was not her mother.

Each would have been better off never meeting the other, but they had.

"...Hinagiku."

Hinagiku didn't know.

Misuzu had nearly cried when she saw her create the trees to protect Rosei.

She had finally found someone other than Mikami who tried so hard to save another person.

A child so young cried and screamed to protect someone else.

She was so pure, so beautiful, Misuzu felt the need to protect her.

She needed that light in her own life.

She wanted someone like that near her, too.

And yet no matter what she did, everything Misuzu touched withered away.

Including Hinagiku Kayo.

The girl living now had used herself as a graft to learn to stand again. She was not Misuzu's flower anymore.

Hinagiku was also aware that she wasn't the I she once was.

When one's heart and spirit were broken, one had two choices.

"Don't...use the...Agents...just to...get me...out."

To remain broken, or to mend and reinforce the break to stand up again.

The former Hinagiku could not endure and wait for the time for battle. But the current one could.

"We are...reborn...even if we...die...again...and again...but that doesn't...mean that...you can...use us...like that."

She had the will to fight.

"Don't...kill us."

She had the strength to protect others.

"You're...ready to...hurt every...one...again...today."

She had learned. She overcame her woes.

"Stop...those terrible...things. What you're...doing...isn't...right...!"

She had the courage to declare war on those who hurt her.

"Hinagiku will not...allow you...to do it...!"

A sea of tears overflowed from Hinagiku's golden eyes as she spoke. She didn't really want to speak like this.

She was not one to be forceful or say hurtful things, even to a criminal.

"Hinagiku...won't let you...!"

Still, she repeated herself.

"I will...never forgive you...if you do!"

Because Misuzu was forcing her.

"Heh, hee-hee...hee-hee, ah-ha!" Misuzu couldn't contain her laughter.

Hinagiku stared at Misuzu angrily. "...Why...are you...laughing?"

"...I just found it so funny. You're saying the same things I did when I was younger."

Misuzu had screamed at those who'd harmed her in many stages throughout her life.

Why are you doing this?

Why are you doing this?

Why are you doing this?

Not once did she receive an answer. The pain stayed and festered with a

victim, but the inflicter barely even remembered. They left those wounds only for a moment of pleasure, nothing more.

"I screamed and cried, and the world never became a better place. So I decided to stand on the other side. Now I've realized. I learned how fun punching is. How strong you become when you're finally inflicting the pain for once. How much louder your voice gets. And if you're loud enough, it scares everyone into listening to what you say. But you see, I want to make the world a better place from my new position... Your power and that of the other Agents should be used to help those in need. There are people out there who need you. Why do you ignore them?"

"..."

"You're only throwing a tantrum. Your half-hearted prayer won't reach me... For starters, how are you supposed to 'not let me' do it? The fight over there is about to end, and then you'll do as I say if you want her to live. As long as you concern yourself with the lives of others, you'll never win. So just do as I say, Hinagiku. Come back home with me. Be mine. Forever."

Then, albeit stiffly, Hinagiku smiled. "Hinagiku...will win."

Her lips trembled.

"We have ... a chance."

How could she say that? Did she believe Sakura would defeat them?

Misuzu took a glimpse at Mikami. He shouldn't be having this much difficulty fighting one girl. Still, Sakura was mussed and short of breath as she stayed on the defensive.

They'll be fine.

And yet Hinagiku wouldn't despair.

What?

That smile was unsettling.

"What...are you smiling about?" Misuzu asked. "Are you making fun of me?"

She bristled at the sight of that smile.

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"I won't let you ridicule me!"
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That was when a shudder ran through her, as if her body temperature had suddenly dropped a degree.

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"It's...getting cold...isn't it?" Hinagiku muttered.
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"Huh?"
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"It's...getting...cold."

What a strange thing to say. It was spring. It was a warm season, brought about by the Agent of Spring herself. Misuzu's chill was only from disgust toward Hinagiku's expression.

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"Hinagiku's been...waiting."
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It wasn't really cold.

No way.

Then Misuzu noticed her own breath coming in white puffs.

No, this can't be.

The air temperature had dropped. Hinagiku was right—it was getting cold.

No, no, this is impossible.

"Waiting...all this...time."

Misuzu's comrades were too engrossed in the fiery battle to notice the shift in the climate.

"Mikami!"

"Lady Hinagiku!"

Only Sakura and Hinagiku had known what this meant. And now Misuzu, after a bit of thought.

Hinagiku shouted back to her Guard:

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"Sakura!"
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This had been their plan all along.

Why did they not use their advantage on this green game board right away?

Misuzu should've thought about it harder. She was right that they were stalling for time, but not because they wanted to make a deal to stop the bomb. Knowing Misuzu, they should have expected that she would detonate it in the end, no matter what happened. It was fully possible that, even if they captured Misuzu and tried to negotiate with her, she would never tell them how to deactivate it.

They were better off leaving the bomb to the disposal squad to begin with. Amateurs could do nothing but set the stage for the pros. What were they to do, then?

First, stall the terrorists until the professionals arrived; defeat them, if possible.

Second, find out how to deactivate the bomb.

Misuzu was prone to showing off her own power; she might make a slip of the tongue. They had chosen to make her think they couldn't attack her right away. It wasn't that they refused to attack first—they purposely avoided it to have her lower her guard.

Sakura's sudden aggression was also part of the act.

She was outnumbered, and Hinagiku wouldn't make a move. From that alone, Misuzu would think she had the win. There was no guarantee that she would talk, but they decided they might as well if there was a chance. In any case, they had to make time for the bomb-disposal squad to arrive.

Fortunately for them, Misuzu herself had immediately told them how to deactivate the bomb.

She told them they needed her approval, and that her handheld device was necessary. That meant they had to steal it. Then they could leave the job to the disposal squad. They had their best possible scenario laid out before them.

Now they just had to look for an opening to stop her. This part wasn't so much a plan as it was a prayer.

They needed someone not within their sights. Perhaps the arrival of someone who shouldn't possibly be here.

"...Mikami!! The Agent of Winter is coming!"

They were here.

In the next moment, something broke through the glass ceiling of the rooftop garden. He was like a sorcerer slashing through spring, bringing cold and darkness and death to the beautiful green space. The last ice bridge through the city of Teito had carried him to the twentieth floor of the Four Seasons Agency building.

Everyone, including Hinagiku and Sakura, looked up to the ceiling and the iron steed smashing through it.

"Hinagiku!!"

"Sakura!!"

They heard the Agent of Winter and his Guard call their names as they achieved the absurd.

The off-road bike curiously landed right between Hinagiku and Sakura.

It was spinning around, but Rosei stopped it with his ice powers before a great accident could occur.

Now was the chance—the shock from the Agent of Winter falling from the sky.

""Get them!!""

Hinagiku and Sakura yelled in unison. They knew what their roles were. Hinagiku had to capture Misuzu; Sakura had to take care of the rest.

The moment they yelled, Hinagiku activated the briar seeds she had concealed in her hand. They reached out with lightning speed toward Misuzu to entangle her, and the device fell out of her hand. Hinagiku rushed forward and caught it, rolling across the floor.

"You! Agent of Winter ...!"

Misuzu tried to grab her gun, but Hinagiku's thorns held her arms in place.

Rosei jumped off the bike and dashed, immediately reacting to Hinagiku's actions.

"That's Lord Winter to you, scoundrel!! Bow down!"

He raised one arm and created a block of ice above Misuzu, immediately dropping it on her head.

Misuzu fell to her knees as though following the god's command. Crimson blood gushed from the strike.

"Don't! Don't...kill her!" Hinagiku screamed from the floor.

"…!"

"Yeah! Kill me, and you won't get to turn off the bomb!" Misuzu remained strong-willed despite her head wound.

Rosei reluctantly disintegrated the ice sword in his hand.

Misuzu cackled at his frustrated glare. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Aww, you're pissed, huh? You can't do anything to the woman who stole your Spring ten years ago!"

"…!"

"Well, too bad. Everyone will die if you try! You wouldn't want to ruin everything after coming here to protect Hinagiku, would you? Or what? You're here for a double suicide? Wanna make it triple? Ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha!"

"Shut the fuck up!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

After much hesitation, Rosei ran up to Misuzu and struck her face with the heel of his palm. A chill threaded through her veins, and before she could scream, her vision blacked out.

"..."

Everything about Misuzu made Rosei nauseous. This was his first time talking to her, and he never wanted to do it again.

Hinagiku, meanwhile, hadn't been able to break her own fall, and the slide sent dull pain through her entire body. She struggled to sit up, holding the device.

"Hinagiku!"

She shivered at the voice and the sound of the footsteps approaching from behind.

"Are you okay?"

The person she had waited for forever was right behind her, and yet she couldn't turn around.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to catch you...," he said. "Here, let me help you up. Excuse me, I'll be touching you."

She braced herself, but he was exceedingly kind with every motion as he grabbed her arms to support her as she stood. Everything about him flooded into her eyes.

His big hands, the smell of his perfume, the sight of his mourning dress—like kimono.

"...Hinagiku... I'm here to help you."

His fair skin, his broad chest, his shapely visage. His raven-black hair. His melancholy, yet alluring eyes.

"...You recognize me? I..."

Their faces were so close.

Hinagiku immediately stepped back, holding the device to her chest.

```
"...Hina..."
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Rosei's face turned visibly pale at the rejection. If the state of his heart were to take physical form, it would have been torn right down the center.

"Hinagiku, it's okay—I'm not your enemy!"

Rosei drew close, making Hinagiku take another step back.

An invisible gap was opened between the two.

"This is the end!!"

Meanwhile, Sakura focused her attacks on Mikami only.

She leaped forward and kicked up into his face. Mikami's body swayed before she grabbed him violently and put her sword up to his neck. The other two insurgents were no longer a threat.

"Nobody move!"

Mikami blacked out for a moment but immediately began struggling again as Sakura held him down.

"Sakura!" Itecho shouted.

Ignoring Rosei, he got off the bike and ran toward Sakura. He unleashed an *iai* flash slice on the other two insurgents, followed by a roundhouse kick.

His flowing, dance-like movement was similar to Sakura's, but much more intense and powerful. He drew back for a beheading strike, but Sakura hurriedly stopped him.

"Don't! Keep them alive!"

u n

Itecho complied and instead hit one of them on the top of the head with the sheath, then knocked out the one charging him with an over-the-back throw. It took only a moment for the two of them to fall, and Itecho did not break a sweat. Meanwhile, Sakura was sweating bullets.

"Sakura!!" Itecho immediately looked up and rushed to her. It hadn't even been a minute since he arrived.

Sakura was busy holding Mikami down, but she allowed herself a moment of awe. He was like a knight in shining armor.

No, don't come.

Itecho approached. The sweat was pouring now.

She had nearly worn herself out after having to deal with three enemies at once without killing them. Now she was worried about how terrible she must look at the moment.

"...Sakura, are you okay? Want me to take it from here?"

"Y-yeah..."

"You did well. It's all good now. Where are the Winter escorts? Can you get in touch with them?"

Sakura could not answer before Itecho took Mikami from her, all the while asking question after question to try and deal with the situation.

"Let me go! Get off me! Milady!" the insurgent was screaming.

"I'll shut him up, okay?"

Sakura nodded, and Itecho quickly choked him into unconsciousness with an iron grip.

"There we go..."

It was all so fast, she was frightened at the thought of how many times he must have done this before.

Took me too long to realize I probably shouldn't get on his bad side.

She remembered how her sword instructor was a master of martial arts specialized in assassination.

"Itecho, get Lady Hinagiku."

"Don't worry, Rosei's with her."

They had captured the enemy on that side, too, thanks to him.

Hinagiku and Rosei were talking. Sakura wanted to go there, but she figured she shouldn't barge in and decided to watch from afar.

"Sakura..."

She turned back to Itecho as he called her name.

They stared at each other as though time had stopped.

"...You must have been frightened. I'm sorry I couldn't be here sooner...but we made it in time thanks to your efforts."

Sakura said nothing. It had been so long; the sight of him was dazzling.

""

"Let's move on to the next step. You ready?"

She couldn't say anything. She'd heard his voice through the phone, but hearing it now in person raised her body temperature and dizzied her.

"…"

Itecho raised an eyebrow when he noticed she was ignoring him.

"Why are you staying quiet? Are you hurt? Let me take a look. Or, well, rather..." Itecho realized as he spoke. "...Uh."

He realized how much the girl had grown from the last time he'd seen her.

"I... You, um..."

She was so beautiful, he couldn't speak so casually anymore.

"..."

Itecho trailed off completely.

Who is this?

The question popped into his mind.

He had assumed this was Sakura. He recognized her the moment he set eyes on her. But as time went on, he wasn't so sure anymore.

Is this really her?

The last five years had changed her much more than him. The transformation

of Sakura Himedaka, now nineteen, threw him for a loop.

As Itecho shut his mouth, she began worrying about how truly terrible her face must have looked. Little by little, the delight of getting to see him again swelled within her.

Tears began forming in Sakura's large, catlike eyes.

"Wh-what the hell? You're...late...and don't say so much at once."

After all that effort, those were the words that came out of her mouth.

I'm so stupid.

She kicked herself internally. It was easy to tell from her teary voice that she was putting up a front.

This was her chance to be sincere for once, and she'd ended up blurting out something rude. She used to be so polite, and now she just couldn't.

It wouldn't be unreasonable for him to be confused by the sudden change.

"...Sorry," Itecho said. "I'll speak more slowly."

She couldn't even thank him for risking his life to come save her—but Itecho was so bewitched observing her that he didn't care.

"Whatever! Don't kill him, he's important. We're using him to put pressure on Gozen! The Winter escorts are downstairs looking for the bomb! Let's join them ASAP!"

"...All right, I haven't killed him," said Itecho. "Also, um."

"...What?"

"...Are you really Sakura?"

"Huh?" she squawked.

Itecho took off his sunglasses and leaned closer to her.

"Wh-wha-what?"

"...You are Sakura, right...?"

He drew nearer and nearer, uncertain.

Sakura's heart couldn't take any more of this.

She shoved Itecho away.

"Give me some space!"

Itecho was visibly hurt.

"...You... You—you—you weren't even sure it was me this whole time?" Sakura shivered with embarrassment.

"I mean, I assumed it was you. You felt like Sakura, but..."

"What if it wasn't me?! You're so embarrassing!"

"I would be really embarrassed if I was wrong, sure. But I wasn't." Itecho's expression softened into a smile. "It's been a long time, Sakura... You've, um, you've grown."

Sakura hid her reddening face with her arms. "Don't treat me like your niece!"



Despite her yelling, Itecho looked happy. "We are kind of family, though. But I'll say... I can't believe it... Now I feel bad. I haven't grown, just gotten older..."

"Well, believe it! I am the one and only Sakura! Although not the Sakura you knew..."

"Is that so ...?"

"Yeah!"

Itecho forgot all about the people lying at their feet. He was just happy to get to talk with her.

"...So should I call you something else now? Like Ms. Himedaka? It feels wrong to just call you Sakura when you've grown into such a wonderful young woman..."

"Just be normal!"

A new relationship was forming between Sakura and Itecho.

While the Guards kept away out of consideration, the gods incarnate went through an awkward reunion.

"...Hinagiku, I-I'm not— I'm not your enemy..."

Hinagiku knew that. She only got away from him because he was too close, and she was surprised to see how he had grown.

"...I'm the Agent of Winter, Rosei Kantsubaki. I've heard everything. You're... You're different now? But I hear you kept your memories. Don't you remember? I gave you that quince ice flower, remember? We—we played together during winter... You saved me... Now I'm twenty... Hinagiku, I'm not your enemy. I'm here to help you... I'm here to save you. Please don't run away... Please..."

She knew all that.

He was at the top of the four seasons—Winter, the forefather. The most

noble boy she knew.

The boy the dead Hinagiku had been in love with ten years ago.

That same boy was now standing before her eyes.

Ahhh, it's Lord Rosei.

The tears she'd been shedding ever since she confronted Misuzu continued to flow.

It was the boy she had kept in mind for ten whole years.

Lord Rosei...is alive.

Her first love. The one who tried to sacrifice himself to save her. Who tried to die for everyone else.

The Hinagiku who was gone had wanted to protect him.

He's...alive.

She knew he was alive; she even heard Sakura speak to him. But seeing it with her own eyes was something else entirely.

Ahhh, this moment...

She felt she was doing something wrong.

...was supposed to be...hers.

She had taken away the position of the girl who was supposed to be standing there.

Still, at the same time, as Hinagiku Kayo, she felt her chest aflutter at her reunion with Rosei. Whose emotion was this? She didn't know whether it was even hers. Was the remnant of that dead girl crying tears of joy? Or was it her, the new one? Either way, Hinagiku cried for her now-absent self.

Sorry.

She wanted to let her meet him.

Sorry... Sorry...

She wanted to take her to him alive.

Sorry...for being unable...to stop you...from dying.

She was not the same girl he said he loved. And yet she was the one who was here.

But...thank goodness...Lord Rosei...is alive. She...was able...to protect him.

She was happy to see him alive and grown up. It felt like a bouquet for her dead self.

"Lord...Ro...sei." Hinagiku called his name even as she stepped away. "...Sor... sorry."

She had to apologize.

"...Hinagiku...couldn't...bring her...back to...you..."

She got to reunite with him, but she couldn't bear the knowledge that she was a fake.

"...Why...are you apologizing...?"

"...You see...the previous...Hinagiku..."

"Yes...I was told about that."

"She...died...and she...loved...you."

Rosei was paralyzed as he received an answer to his feelings from ten years back.

"She...loved...you...to the...very...end. Sorry...for...not being...able...to bring her...back...to you... You must...have wanted...to hear it...directly...from her. Sorry..."

He had heard it from other people, but finally, he was hearing it straight from her.

Ahhh.

The girl doing her best effort to relay that to him was the same girl as his first love.

She really is different.

But she had changed. He could not clearly say how exactly.

But...

He could also tell that this Hinagiku wasn't totally separate from the other.

"Sorry... Sorry that...your answer...came from...a fake...Hinagiku..."

Hinagiku shed tears like rain. Rosei took a step toward her, then another.

This time, she did not run away. Her sight was blurry from the tears; she couldn't run.

"...Thank you for telling me."

"...!"

Rosei peered into Hinagiku's eyes. She hid her face behind her hands. Left with no other way of keeping her here, he grabbed her kimono's sleeve.

"I've always, always loved Hinagiku. I'm glad to have the answer. And to know that my feelings were reciprocated."

"Sorry... Sorry..."

Rosei shook his head. "It's enough for me just to hear that."

"Sorry...that it was...this Hinagiku...who came...back... Ngh... Mgh..."

"...Don't cry... You... I am extremely glad that you came back... Really."

"...Mgh... M-mmm... But Hinagiku's...not..."

"I know. You're different. But I am glad that you came back, even so."

"...Even though...Hinagiku's...different?"

She finally took her hands away from her face, and she blinked. The tears were streaming down her face.

"Should I not be happy that you came back just because you've changed?"

This was the Agent of Spring, for this year and many more.

"You protected the girl I loved. And we...we share our memories with her. Why do you apologize? Did you think I would reject you?"

"But..."

"I would never do such a thing."

The new Hinagiku Kayo met Rosei Kantsubaki for the first time.

"...Thank you for coming back alive... I've loved her all this time...but that doesn't mean I can't be glad to see you return."

She had gone through a long, long journey just to hear him say that.

"Thank you for being alive."

The longest, harshest journey.

"This is my answer. I am happy you've returned. I've been wanting to meet you."

Neither of them realized that the meaning of that flower was *one and only love*.

"I will not let anyone take you again. I will not let anyone hurt you again."

Tears fell from Rosei's face as well.

"You are my Spring..."

"Welcome home, Hinagiku."



So ended the terrorist attack on the Four Seasons Agency building.

The details were recorded by the real National Security and the bombdisposal squad of their special forces Porcupine. The documents remained confidential due to certain inhumane details.

When New Year boss Misuzu Henderson regained consciousness, she had already been captured and tied up by Winter and Spring.

She opened her eyes in the cafeteria on the eighteenth floor, woken by a splash of mineral water. The first thing she saw was the face of the Guard of Spring, Sakura Himedaka.

"...We've never spoken directly, I believe. I'm the Guard of Spring, Sakura Himedaka."

Why was she in this situation? Misuzu struggled to think through the fog of pain.

Right. That motorbike crashed into the garden.

The next moment, she was hit in the face. Her usually cool and pretty face was now covered in frostbite.

"Cutting to the chase, I have a few questions for you."

Sakura showed her the handheld device she'd confiscated, as well as the explosives that the Winter escorts and Nagatsuki's team had found. The bomb was discovered on the bottom of a coffee table.

"This is how you deactivate the bombs. Fortunately...I mean, unfortunately, the bomb-disposal squad will take a while to get here. We want to make good use of the time we have while we're waiting for them. My master is worried about the building blowing up. She says we can't let the regular people nearby suffer the consequences of our fight here. She's a very kind person. And...you will never see her again. She's taking a break where you can't see her. Now, back to the bomb... This device has multiple items on it... I thought there would be a single one, but it seems there are quite a few. And they all have their own defuse code... I tried beating up your colleagues, but all I got out of them was

that you're the only one who knows the codes. Now you gotta tell me. We could find a way if it was just one...but this would take too long. So tell me. I simply want my master to enjoy her reunion with Winter in peace."

"...Ha, ha-ha! Stupid girl. Why would I tell you?"

"So should I take that as a no?"

"Of course! But...if you let me and my friends go, then maybe we can reach a deal. You don't want anyone to die, and we just want to go home... I'll give up on Hinagiku."

Sakura smiled. Misuzu was awfully stubborn for someone lying on the floor.

"I already hated you, but man, it feels great knowing I can hate you even more..."

There was no light in her eyes; Misuzu felt shivers down her spine. "Be careful how you speak to your elders..."

"Be careful how you speak to me. I have the life of your beloved in my hands."

Misuzu wasn't sure what Sakura meant at first. She loved nothing. If anything, it would be her place in New Year, and her right-hand man.

"..." Misuzu looked around.

"Wanna know where he is? He's over here. Can you see him? He's about to die... Given what you did to Lady Hinagiku, this is far too kind, wouldn't you say?"

Sakura turned her face toward Mikami, tied up and unconscious.

Misuzu shrieked.

"Ha-ha!" Sakura laughed.

Get them off guard and, if possible, learn how to defuse the bombs. Capture them and wait for the bomb-disposal squad.

That plan was, in a way, more for Hinagiku's sake than anyone's.

In reality, it didn't matter whether they got the codes or not.

It didn't matter what happened so long as they could neutralize Misuzu and her followers.

As far as Sakura was concerned, if Misuzu didn't want to listen, then she just had to make her listen. At first, she considered threatening Misuzu's own life.

If the bomb-disposal squad got there quick, then great. If they didn't, then she just had to make Misuzu regret being born and hope she spilled the beans. More specifically, Sakura imagined cutting off her fingers one by one.

However, she knew that her kind master would be opposed to torture. Hinagiku would ask for a way to solve this more peaceably.

Thus, Sakura had to go along with Hinagiku's wishes for the time being, despite her own reluctance.

Even if everything was solved in the end, she still wanted some revenge.

Was there nothing she could do before leaving New Year in the hands of the law? She wanted her pound of flesh, and she would be sure to get it.

Lo and behold, the chance fell into her lap.

Mikami was with her.

Hinagiku had told her how Misuzu cared deeply for Mikami.

Sakura also knew that Misuzu had refused to give him as a partner for Hinagiku.

She did not know whether Misuzu would bring him, but she did.

The moment Sakura saw him, she thought:

How lucky I am.

She could use him to threaten Misuzu.

Misuzu would finally pay.

Now that Sakura had him in her hands, how could she use him?

Then she heard the devil whisper in her ear:

You already know how to get your revenge.

The same thing Misuzu did to Hinagiku time and again.

Sakura had heard that her lady had endured her captivity to protect those she loved.

Time, and time, and time, and time again, Misuzu had threatened Hinagiku.

If Hinagiku wouldn't listen, Misuzu would break everything she held dear.

Sakura had barely contained her rage when she learned this, and she had resolved to have her revenge.

There was nothing more inhuman than using a person's heart to abuse them.

But right now, she was just grateful for the inspiration.

Taking hostage what Misuzu cherished most was the best way to bend her will.

What was the thing a person cherished the most? Most of the time, it was their own life.

However, there was one other common pattern: someone they loved.

What did people do when that person was taken away and threatened with death?

"Ha-ha!"

So Sakura laughed.

Fortunately, the bomb-disposal squad wouldn't be here for a while. How could she waste this opportunity? She poured all her effort into setting the stage for her revenge. She even had the best collaborator now.

The Guard of Winter, Itecho Kangetsu, was dangling Mikami by his leg out of a large window from which you could see the entirety of Teito. He looked like a gentle man at first glance, but he was prepared to do anything for his master, too.

"Wh-what...? Hey! Let Mikami go!"

Itecho chuckled. "You sure? It's a long way down..."

"You know what I mean, asshole! On the floor! Put him on the floor!" Misuzu's yells echoed throughout the cafeteria.

Sakura winced. "Itecho... She doesn't get it."

Itecho nodded. "Right. It seems like we need to make her understand. Let's push a little harder."

Misuzu shrieked once again as she saw Mikami's body gradually lowered beyond the window.

"Stop! Stop, stop, stop! What's wrong with you?!"

"...You told me to let go of him," Itecho said. "Didn't she, Sakura?"

"I think she did. And that's rich, asking what's wrong with us. You're telling us that after you attacked the Town of Winter ten years ago?"

Misuzu's mouth dropped open.

"Apologies, I haven't introduced myself," Itecho said calmly. "I am the Guard

of Winter, Itecho Kangetsu. You also hurt my master ten years ago. I'm seriously considering killing all of you before the proper authorities come to judge you... Perhaps, that will let you know how deeply I despise you. We want you to give us the codes so that the bomb squad can finish their job quickly, and we get to leave this place and go somewhere safe. If you won't tell us, then...that's too bad. Your beloved will face the consequences."

"Itecho always follows through with his word, just so you know."

"She's right. Once I've made up my mind, that's it."

"Mikami's got nothing to do with this!" Misuzu screamed. "He's got nothing to do with this!"

"Yes, he does," Itecho replied. "He's your right hand. Lady Hinagiku must have pleaded to him, too...but none of you listened... It's really a shame... We'll have to take our revenge."

"Oh, make sure he's awake before you drop him," Sakura said. "Don't want him to sleep through the whole experience."

"Good point... But if I do, he might struggle and end up falling on his own."

Mikami's body was lowered farther and farther into the abyss.

What in the world?

This was insane. That was her position they were in.

She was the one giving orders from a safe place. This was all backward. She couldn't believe it. And she could hardly believe that Guards of the Four Seasons would stoop to using hostages.

"Stop, stop, stop! This has to be a joke. You're not really going to kill him, are you...? I mean, are you going to become criminals just like that...?"

Sakura and Itecho looked at each other.

"You have to be willing to dirty your hands for the one you serve, right, Itecho?"

"That's right, Sakura. It's far too late to be worrying about that... I've already killed multiple insurgents myself..."

"Why are you expecting perfect integrity from us?"

"...We have shown integrity to the people, but we have no obligation to keep our hands clean when we're dealing with insurgents."

A trickle of cold sweat ran down Misuzu's back.

"By the way, after I drop him, you're next. I'll give you the same window, the same spot. You'll stare at the stain this man becomes and regret being born. You're not safe, either."

They were serious.

And they were enjoying this, even.

"Misuzu Henderson," Sakura said, "think very carefully once again. You're going to prison either way. There's no bright future for you. But there's a future where the man you love lives and another where he dies. Which one do you want? Even if you never get to see him again, the knowledge that he's alive should bring you peace. I speak from experience. That's how I survived for eight years when no other Agent of Spring was born."

"You might lose one of your choices if we change our minds. Despite what Sakura says, I'm already getting tired of holding him up. And honestly, I'd rather see you in hell than give you a choice."

"Stop it, Itecho. Think of the paperwork—we'll be so busy and leave Lady Hinagiku and Rosei hanging."

"...Right. For their mental peace, it's better we solve this quickly...but I can handle the overtime."

"This overtime is certainly worth it. I've been wanting to do this for ten years."

"Yeah, let's have a bit more fun."

"What a good day. The perfect day for revenge. Makes you want to whistle a little tune, huh?"

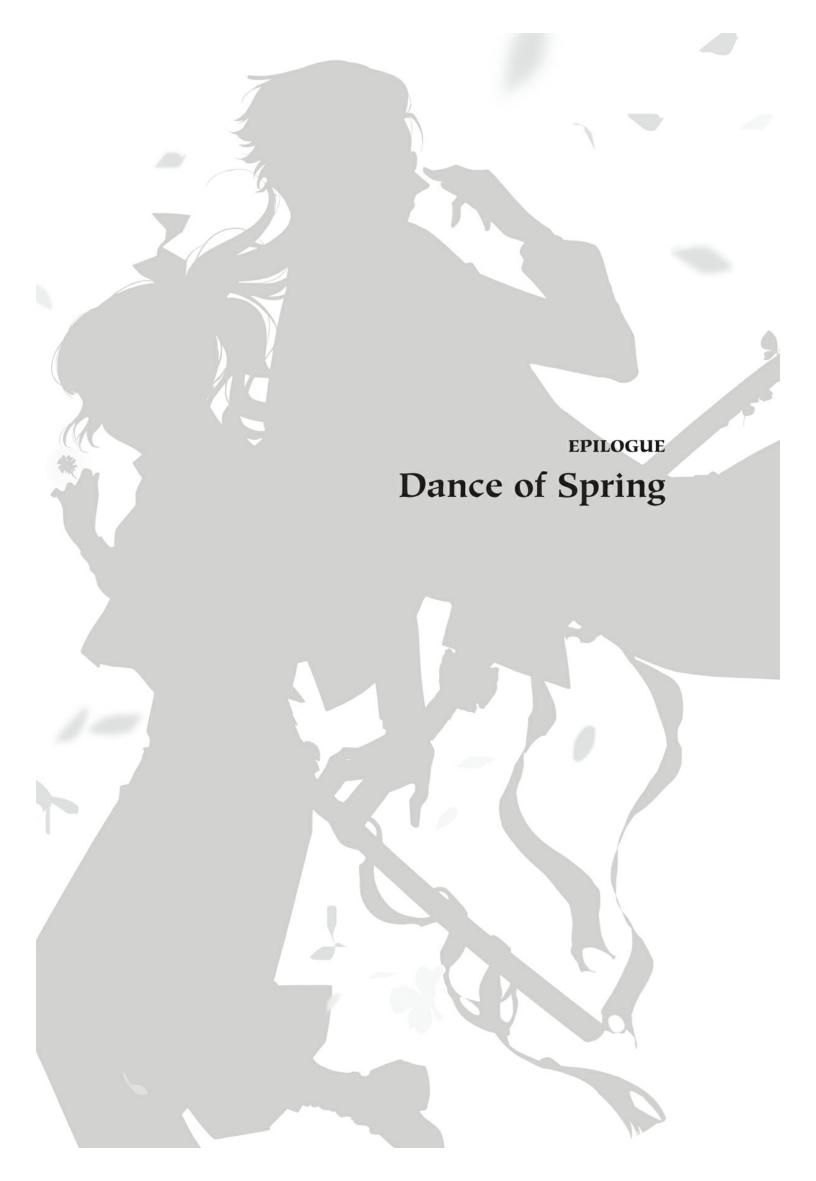
They were speaking without emotion the whole time.

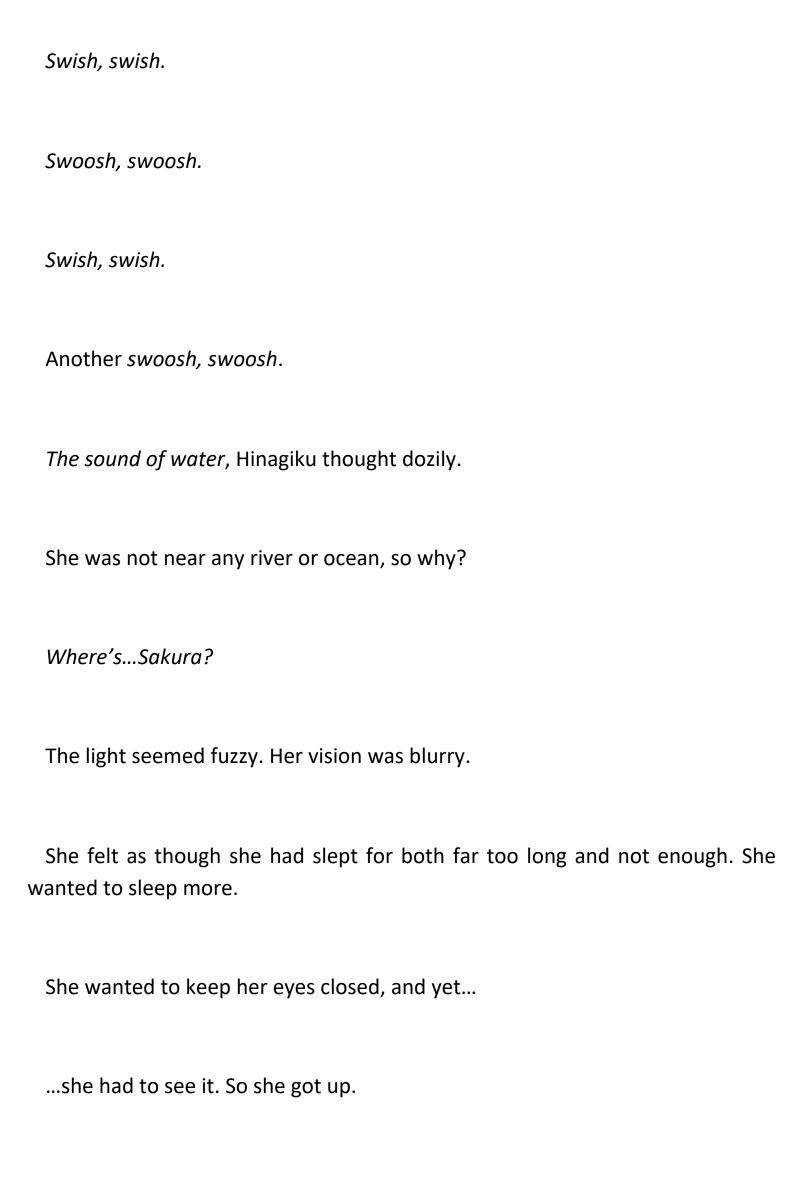
It took some time for Misuzu to give up, but in the end, she confessed the

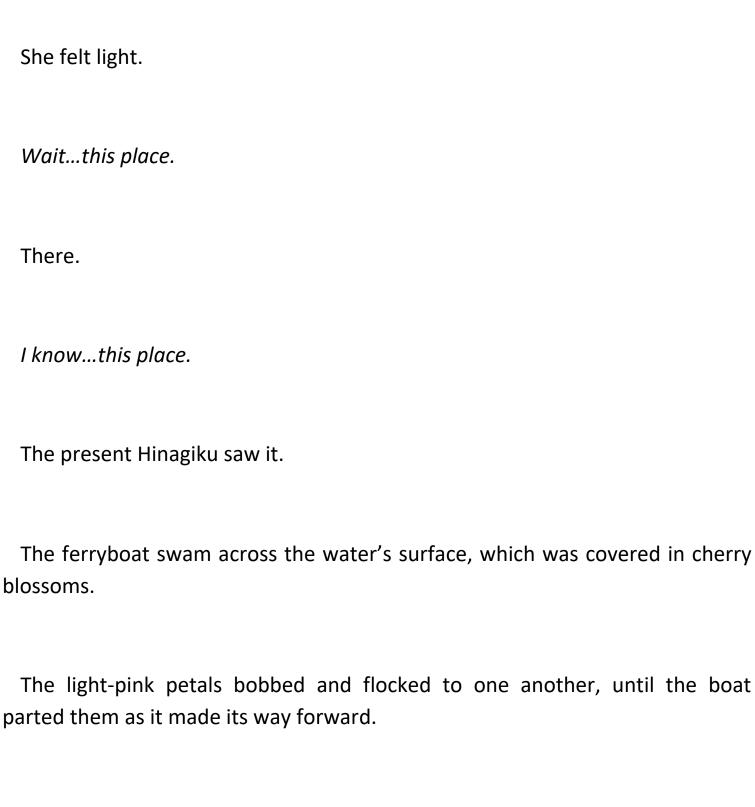
locations and codes of all the bombs. Once the bomb-disposal squad arrived, she cried to them for help.

And so the Four Seasons Agency building was spared.

Hinagiku and Rosei were off by themselves, so they knew none of this.







The cherry blossoms swayed with the wind and gathered again to carpet the water.

The gentle, drowsy sunlight, the colorful new blooms on the trees, and the voices of the birds all joined together to create the perfect spring day.

Ahhh, wait, this...

The world was covered in cherry-blossom clouds as far as the eyes could see. If one were to suddenly find themselves here, they would think they were having a dream of spring or had somehow wandered away from the transient

world.

The boat's passengers sighed, bewitched by the beauty of nature.

This is...a memory. The previous...Hinagiku's...memory.

There were two of them, both female. One was like the incarnation of ephemerality, born to nestle with the spring.

Mo...ther...

She wore a graceful kimono and tied her aloeswood-colored hair up with a plum-blossom pin.

Mother...

Her coquettishly pale nape slipped in and out of view.

She might have been in her twenties or in her thirties; she had the prim face of a maiden, only older.

Mother...is still...alive.

The other passenger was a young girl, four or five. She was likely the first's daughter, and she was already beautiful. While her mother was *ephemerality*, she was *sweetness* itself.

That girl...isn't dead...either.

Her features were not that similar to her mother's, but they mostly shared the same hair and eye color. The daughter's hair was lighter, more amber than brown. The mother's eyes were like yellow zircon, while the daughter's were citrine. From the colors, one would assume they were at least related.

The ferryman was used to the sight of this flowering season.

Ahhh...is this...a dream?

A dream easily mistaken for reality.

Her own body was transparent, and although she was right beside the mother and daughter, she could not interfere with the past.

Hinagiku could only stare at the girl she used to be, and the woman who was once her mother.

"It's my mother's spring."

Hinagiku shed tears as she saw this memory of her past self, one she'd never seen.

"My mother's the Agent of Spring... Isn't she amazing?"

You...will also...become Spring.

"Yes. I'm Hinagiku Yukiyanagi. I'm from Akebono. I'm Kobai Yukiyanagi's daughter. I'll turn five this year."

You...will be...Kayo. That's...your father's...name.

She tried to talk to the little girl, but she did not react.

That Girl was so small. Her mother seemed fragile, ready to fade at the lightest touch, yet she still had warmth.

It was all so nostalgic and so cruel. The more beautiful the world was, the more its cruelty stood out.

"Mother... He...is my father?"

If only...Father had...liked you better...then.

"No, forget it... He will protect you, even after I'm gone..."

Then...maybe...you could've...lived...like a...family.

Time went by ruthlessly, until the moment she last saw her mother.

"But I never was with you. Your grandmother raised you. You're better off without me."

Don't...say...that.

"Yes, you are... Your mother is a bad woman, and they will call you bad, too, if I stay with you..."

Even so...it didn't...matter.

"I do. I don't care if they say mean things about me, but you... It would break

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my heart..."
  Being...alone...is sadder.
  "Yes. No matter how hard it gets, live on..."
  Mother...that little girl...
  "You can run away in order to live. Running away does not mean losing."
  She...lived.
  "So please live and wait for the day to fight again... Keep your blade close to
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your heart..."

She...did her...best. She...lived.

"And you're the only one who can live it, Hinagiku."

Hey...are you...there?

Hinagiku watched over them as the tears overflowed.

She could do nothing but watch the perseverance of the child as she was taken away from her mother. She desperately reached out and cried to be with her, but none of the adults let her.

Not even her own mother.

You...won't see her...again.

"I will. I'll be a good girl. Will you come see me before the next full moon? Please?"

You'll...never see her...again.

"Okay, then. Come with me."

Then as the tears kept running, Hinagiku's breath was taken away.

"I can. Mother?"

That Girl escaped the old woman's grasp, jumped away, and dashed over to her mother's side.

The child—whom Hinagiku had protected for years, only to let her die—created a different future.

Ahhh, it can't be.

"I was good. I was good the whole time."

That Girl clung to Kobai with a full smile.

"I did my best. I lived."

"Yes, I know, Hinagiku. I was watching."

This is...just a dream. A convenient...dream. I know.

"Now you can take care of me, right? I already did my best."

"..."

I know...that. This...isn't real.

"Listen, Hinagiku."

Kobai, inside the dream, was speaking to Hinagiku—not That Girl.

Kobai looked at Hinagiku, who was crying, straight in the eye. That Girl also gave her an apologetic glance.

"Can you keep going for a bit more, Hinagiku...?"

This...is not real.

"I'm sorry to give you such a hard role, Hinagiku. Can you keep going...?"

But...even so...there's only...one thing...to say.

"Yes. Hinagiku...can...keep going...!"

Then she was brought back to reality.

Hinagiku realized she had woken up from a dream. It was not rare for her to wake up in tears.

She had lived most of her life in tears. Smiles were far rarer.

```
"..."
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Normally, usually, she would hug herself to distract from her loneliness and soothe her sadness.

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"...Mm."
```

But today, she was embraced by someone else.

Her retainer was lying on the same bed, burying her face in her belly in lieu of a pillow.

A smile rose on Hinagiku's face as she saw Sakura hugging her like a plushie.

```
"Saku...ra."
```

Hinagiku's tears spilled over as she smiled, but she did not mind them.

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"..."
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Hinagiku looked around the room of the inn. The sunlight seeped through the gaps of the blackout curtains covering the big window. The Archer of Dawn's job was fulfilled.

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It's...gonna be...a good day.
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An important ceremony for her and the entire Four Seasons was to be held today.

```
"...Saku...ra."

"Mm...mm..."

"Hinagiku's...Saku...ra."

"M-mm..."
```

Hinagiku caressed her sleeping retainer's head as she called her name like a song.

"Sakura, it's...morning."

The beginning of a new day awaited.

That summer, Yamato had its first full-attendance Agency Council in ten years.

The ritual was to be held under strict security in the inner sanctuary of the Yamato Shrine in Teito, Teishu.

Only a selected few were to attend. The Guards of the Four Seasons watched their masters' gala occasion with pride. The Agents wore ceremonial dresses as they sang and danced.

The ritual began on a clear morning and reached its end by noon.

In its last moments, the forefather of the Four Seasons—Winter's god incarnate, Rosei Kantsubaki—led the closing chorus.

"Chorus of the twenty-four solar terms."

The Agent of Spring, Hinagiku Kayo, stepped forward.

"Risshun, Usui, Keichitsu, Shunbun, Seimei, Kokuu."

The other Agents followed with their chant.

The Agent of Summer, Ayame Hazakura, as well as the miraculous survivor, Ruri Hazakura, stepped forward.

"Rikka, Shouman, Boushu, Geshi, Shousho, Taisho."

The Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, glanced at her Guard before chanting with a smile.

"Risshuu, Shosho, Hakuro, Shuubun, Kanro, Soukou."

Rosei Kantsubaki led the chorus to its end with his resonant voice.

"Rittou, Shousetsu, Taisetsu, Touji, Shoukan, Daikan."

They all lined up to bow to the statues of the Four Seasons.

"The Seasons are here."

The *five* Agents of the Four Seasons reported to the Gods of the Four Seasons that they were complete and unhindered before offering a prayer.

After the Agency Council, a banquet was held inside the Yamato Shrine.

The Agents of the Four Seasons changed out of their ceremonial dresses and gathered with their Guards, walking all together through the hallways of the shrine. It was quite a large group.

"Ah, did you see, Ayame? I messed up during the dance... What if the God of Summer gets mad?"

"...I told you yesterday we should've practiced before bed..."

Ruri Hazakura and Ayame Hazakura were the first twin gods in history.

During Ruri's brief death, her older sister, Ayame, was chosen as a worthy inheritor of the Agent of Summer's powers. Then the Agent of Autumn had revived the younger sister. For whatever reason, Ruri came back with her Agent powers intact. The birth of the twin goddesses signified a change in their romantic future with their fiancés, but that is a story for another time.

"Apologies, Lady Ayame... It's my fault... I shouldn't have visited your room just because we happened to stay at the same hotel..."

Rindo Azami was on alert day by day with a new escort team.

His former coworker, Nagatsuki, was in custody with National Security, but the top brass at the Four Seasons Agency were intent on making her a double agent, which was his biggest headache at the moment.

"No, it's not your fault, Lord Azami," Ayame replied. "It was mine...for accepting the game of cards."

"No, no. It's my fault... I was the one who suggested it... I wasn't expecting Lady Ruri to play so seriously... We were up way too late," said Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

The Agent of Autumn was now living in the Town of Autumn, as the villa was destroyed. After what happened during her rescue, she had become close friends with the Agents of Summer.

"Are you making fun of me, Nadeshiko?" said Ruri. "I mean, sure, I lost all ten games, but I'll win next time! I'm gonna get so good, you won't know what hit va."

"I—I didn't mean to... Lady Ruri, I think I'm just good at cards. How about we try something you could win? I would feel bad. What do you think we should play, Rindo?"

Nadeshiko remained clingy with Rindo, but having some older girl friends would be a good influence on her. Ruri had promised to gift her a puppy, too.

"Is that pity?" Ruri said. "A little girl is feeling bad for me! For crying out loud! Mr. Guard! Is this how you raised her?! This baby is ruthless!"

"...Apologies, Lady Ruri. Nadeshiko didn't mean to... She already told me yesterday about how she wanted to let you win once... Right, Nadeshiko?"

"Don't worry yourselves about my sister," Ayame interjected. "She's gonna lose no matter what handicap you give her."

"Aaaaagh! I hate how all of you sound sincerely worried about me!"

Behind Summer and Autumn's lively conversation, Spring and Winter's was comparatively serene.

Agent of Winter, Rosei Kantsubaki, held the little hand of the Agent of Spring, Hinagiku Kayo, as he escorted her.

His eyes followed Hinagiku's every movement, as though he couldn't let her out of his sight even for a moment.

He was the God of Winter himself as he cared for Spring.

"Hina."

Rosei, out of consideration for Hinagiku's assertion that she was different from her old self, had nicknamed her *Hina*. He could not bear to see her apologetic face whenever he called her *Hinagiku*.

"Yes, Lord...Rosei?"

Only Rosei was allowed to use the nickname. The sweet sound of it from his mouth was so gentle in her ears. She loved it.

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"Watch your step. The hallway is slippery."

"Yes."

"...They're so noisy, huh?"

"But...it's good...to see... Lady Ruri...so cheerful," Hinagiku whispered happily.

"Yes, and Nadeshiko, too."
```

Despite what he said, Rosei's eyes were not on Ruri or Nadeshiko.

He was enraptured by Hinagiku's graceful appearance in her brand-new kimono. Her long hair was usually loose, but at the moment, it was in a lovely pair of braids that bounced with every step.

Rosei burned with the desire to touch her hair, but he resisted.

"It's your first time in the post-Council banquet, right? Well, it is your first Agency Council period..."

"Yes, Lord Rosei. It's Hinagiku's...first time."

"The food is pretty good. I hope they got something you like..."

"Yamatoan? Western?"

"Yamatoan. You have no choice there. It's always Yamatoan. Ah...but I told them to bring orange juice, so you're covered there, Hina."

Hinagiku blushed, feeling like she was being treated like a child.

"Hinagiku...can...drink...things other...than juice."

"But you like it, don't you?"

"...Well...yes."

"I want you to have your favorite drink."

The conversation could only be taken as wholesome and heartwarming from the outside, and yet.

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"...Sicko."
```

The Guard of Spring, Sakura Himedaka, was watching them sternly, and Rosei nearly stepped on his kimono.

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"Wait, Sakura, what did you just say?"
"I called you a sicko."
"What?"
```

It was hard to tell whether the two young adults had become better or worse friends.

Sakura, as Guard of Spring, should at least keep up a respectful facade before the Agent of Winter, but she had absolutely no intention of doing so. Rosei did not call her out on it, either; instead, they openly taunted each other. Mostly over Hinagiku.

"My alarm is going off," Sakura said, "and it says you're being indecent in public!"

"What? Who cares about your weird inner alarm?"

"I have a very sharp sense for these things! You tried to make her blush on purpose. The sirens are screaming!"

"I did not."

"Really? Can you swear it to Winter?"

"Hina, don't take her seriously, okay?"

"Don't ignore me. Swear it."

"I am not a sicko."

"..." Hinagiku remained red and silent.

Rosei and Hinagiku were presently friends, but it was obvious to everyone that he had feelings for her. Even Hinagiku, with her underdeveloped mind, could tell.

He didn't have to say it aloud—he loved her, new Hinagiku and all. She couldn't bring herself to reject that loving affection, and every day, she grew more attracted.

Rosei himself accepted that things would develop slowly and he shouldn't rush the relationship.

Today, however, as he got to be with her, he couldn't allow anyone else to be closer to her than him.

And her Guard did not like that.

"First of all...why do you want to escort her when she's got her Guard? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I have permission!"

"...Tsk."

"Don't click your tongue! You are so rude to me..."

"You think? I don't really care about anyone but Lady Hinagiku."

"You're nice to Itecho! I've seen you!"

Then Sakura looked up at Itecho, who was listening to the youngsters' conversation in silence beside them.

Itecho leaned down to her eye level. "...You're being nice to me? What an honor."

"…"

Sakura tried hard not to think too much about this man, who invaded her personal space like it was nothing. He still didn't know how she felt.

"I'm not trying to. Itecho's...just not a guy who e-mails me insistently a whole month ahead about letting him escort Lady Hinagiku, so I just haven't happened to be mean to him. I don't care about him, either."

They hadn't completely gone back to normal, but they had reached a better mutual understanding in the time that had passed since their reunion. Rosei always wanted to speak with Hinagiku. Their Guards had to mediate, of course, so they ended up treating each other like coworkers.

"C'mon, it's just for a day," said Rosei. "Let me do this. Don't you think I was being considerate by asking you beforehand? You would've chewed me out if I waited until today to bring it up."

"Well, duh! You'd have to be crazy. But I don't like how well-prepared you were. How could I tell you no considering everything you said?"

"Then don't. Greeting everyone's gonna be tiring, but there's a few people you ought to have as acquaintances. I'll introduce you. And don't forget you're a Guard. I'll also introduce you to someone I recommend as Hina's escort. It's a pretty good deal, don't you think? It'll all be for Hina's sake in the end."

"What the hell? Who do you think you are?"

"I've been involved with the Four Seasons for longer than you."

"Rosei, stop teasing Sakura," Itecho said.

"I'm not teasing her. I'm being nice."

"Lord...Rosei, don't...tease...Sakura."

"I-I'm not! That was just a bit of sarcasm."

"You tell him, Lady Hinagiku," Sakura said.

Such peace enveloped the four of them, as though this year's spring ordeal never happened.

The banquet in the Yamato Shrine garden started out strictly formal, but as time went on, some people got up from their seats, walked around the garden, visited others, and chatted while enjoying the food and scenery.

In order to get to this point, there'd been cuts to the Four Seasons Agency's human resources—deep, revolutionary cuts. Nearly half the staff was replaced.

The members of New Year who had plotted the terrorist attack on the Agency building were in prison. However, there were already unpleasant rumors of other insurgent organizations finding inspiration.

Ishihara, who had ultimately joined Rosei's side, was now under National Security's protection.

Hopefully, they could get some intel on the other insurgents' activities from her, but they were not expecting much.

Who knew how long everyone here could enjoy this peace?

Ultimately, this game of cat and mouse had repeated itself since the dawn of time.

The fight between the Agents of the Four Seasons and the insurgents would not end.

"Lady Hinagiku, your face is red..."

"I had...some...amazake."

Sakura, unable to leave her by Rosei's side any longer, got up to take a stroll around the garden with Hinagiku.

"We'll go for a walk," she made sure to inform Rosei and Itecho. Both overprotective men were halfway out of their seats by the time she said, "Don't stand up. We'll go by ourselves."

"May Hinagiku...go for a...walk with...Sakura?"

Rosei realized she was tacitly asking him to leave them alone, so he reluctantly nodded. "...Don't go too far."

"Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame will be showing us their Song of Summer soon. We'll call for you when it's about to begin."

Hinagiku and Sakura held hands and walked away. They looked back and saw the master and retainer of Winter still watching them with worry. They giggled before leaving.

The Yamato Shrine garden was lavishly maintained, built like a small village.

It had a streamlet with a bridge, a field, and flowers beyond. It was only open to the public one month a year.

It was a rare experience simply walking around it.

Hinagiku and Sakura stopped on the red wooden bridge.

"Rosei's so obvious," said Sakura.

"Hmm?"

They talked while watching the stream and the fish swimming in it.

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"He's in love with you, and he doesn't intend to hide it."

"..."

"How do you feel?"

"...Um..."
```

Hinagiku blushed and furrowed her brow; Sakura found the expression as adorable as it was sad. She was sure that, eventually, Hinagiku and Rosei would be together.

They were drawn to each other as though it was fate.

Was it because they were Winter and Spring? Or because they were Rosei and Hinagiku?

"...I won't be excited for it, but I won't oppose it, either." Sakura didn't adamantly refuse the way she had before. "I think he's doing his best. He's doing whatever he can to protect you. Maybe he...could even win over your father one day."

"..." Hinagiku quivered.

The Town of Spring had been quiet about this incident. Hinagiku and Sakura were able to solve the problem by joining hands with the other Agents. To that, the Town said nothing, refusing to acknowledge that they had abandoned them before. However, her father did call.

He asked whether she was unhurt, which was already huge progress for them.

"...Sakura."

Hinagiku said the name of the girl who was always opposed to change.

"Yes, Lady Hinagiku?"

Hinagiku's voice dropped to a mumble. "Hinagiku...likes...Lord...Rosei..."

"...Yes."

It was the first time she had said these words aloud.

"...I see."

Sakura didn't feel as hurt as she might have expected, but it still pricked her

chest a little.

This is no romantic love.

It was not, but it was something close.

Sakura loved her more than anything, and she did not want anyone to take her away.

She loved this girl. She loved and respected the goddess incarnate of Spring.

That would probably never change.

It hadn't changed for ten years.

I love you.

Even if the form of their love differed, Sakura was certain that hers was not less than Rosei's.

I really do.

"But...," Hinagiku said. "Even if...if there's a boy...Hinagiku likes."

Hinagiku placed her hand on Sakura's, grabbing it with warmth.

Who knew how many times they had held each other's hands already?

Even after this, Sakura would be the only girl Hinagiku would hold hands with of her own accord.

The smile on Hinagiku's face was the happiest one she'd ever worn.

"You will...always be...the girl Hinagiku...loves the most...in the whole world."

"That will never change," Hinagiku whispered. "Never ever."

The warm wind blew between the two girls.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

Summer was just about to begin in full.

"It will...always be...you...by Hinagiku's...side."

Once summer passed, it would be autumn. Then winter would follow.

"Even...after we're...old...Hinagiku wants...us to be...like this."

Even if Hinagiku's romantic love was for someone else, this girl named after the cherry blossoms would be the one to stand by her side and support her.

Even next year, and the year after that, and years and decades after that.

Even after they grew old, even when they could no longer move.

"Hinagiku...loves you, Sakura."

This goddess incarnate of Spring would love her retainer.

"More than anyone?"

"More than...anyone. Until we die... Even after...we die. Hinagiku...will always...love you."

Sakura's vision blurred from the tears. She turned into such a crybaby whenever she was with her goddess.

"Even after we're reborn?"

She became a spoiled child. A sincere child.

"Hinagiku would...like to be...a flower you raise...in the next life."

"...No. We won't get to talk that way."

"But...Hinagiku wants to be loved...by you."

For Hinagiku loved Sakura.

"I love you, and I always will, no matter how you change."

Sakura didn't care about anything else, so long as she had this goddess's love.

"Lady Hinagiku, I want to protect you. And one day, I'll—" She cut herself off.

"…"



Give my life for you, she had chosen not to say.

"No, I will protect you, always. Let's live together."

Hinagiku smiled. "Yes. Let's live."

"We're strong together."

"Yes."

"Let's bring spring next year, and the next."

"Yes."

"We can do this."

"Yes, rest...assured."

Hinagiku's sweet-as-candy face turned slightly coquettish.

"We shall...manifest...spring...beautifully."

They heard a voice calling them, and so they walked, hand in hand.

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.

The 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.	

And a new story would begin.

AFTERWORD

I hope this message finds you well. Is it cold now?

Even as I submit this, I'm uncertain as to whether this is the correct letter to send you after the end of this story.

Last time, I said I wanted to give you something wonderful, and perhaps, some of you pictured a bright and dreamlike world. I'm sorry, my meaning of wonderful is a bit sadder.

It's the word that comes to mind when I go out without a coat, and I feel cold, and lonely, and helpless, and teary-eyed—but then I find someone else just as cold as me.

"Ahhh, I'm not alone."

Wonderful is the word for that feeling I get when I see them, the desire I have to run up to them. To me, it's not like *Oh*, *okay*, *someone's going through the same*, *so it doesn't matter*. It's the desire of wanting to tell them, *I'm cold*, *too*. Let's do our best. The feeling of togetherness inside a sad moment.

The outside world is so cold and cruel.

This story was not born out of someone's desire. It is my letter to everyone living out there as they hold their small selves inside. Even if some heartless person denies your survival or way of being, if you never give up, then maybe one day, you'll meet a person or a story that is also out there in the cold and snowy night.

And one day, you might be able to think, *Let's fight once more*. I wanted to give you that hope.

Even if something hurts you, I want you to stay strong and live. I want you to

wait for the time for battle.

Although I can give you a blanket, I am sorry that I cannot be by your side.

You're the only one who can live your life.

If you're wondering when your time for battle will be, I send you my support all the way from the land of snow.

Our only connection may be this book you hold in your hands, but I want to show you my support.

Please be well. I want you to meet many wonderful things. But don't push yourself too hard.

May this story become a blanket to get you through the long nights.

It is time to wrap up. I have many people to thank.

Thank you to the bookstores, the publisher, editors, designers, and every person involved in the delivery of this story to you. Thank you so much.

I am also deeply grateful for the beautiful illustrations. Thank you, really, thank you so much, Suoh, for bringing Hinagiku and everyone else to life. With your illustrations, you've made it possible for everyone who holds this book to flutter with joy and be enthralled by this world. I am so glad to have you on board once again.

Finally, thanks to you, for reading. For being by my side in this very moment.

I pray you can become someone else's blanket after you close this book.

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