



Kana Akatsuki

Illustration by Suoh

Agents
of the Four
Seasons
DANCE OF SUMMER

I



Agents of the Four Seasons

DANCE OF SUMMER

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CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

GUARD OF WINTER Itecho Kangetsu

Rosei's retainer. He is no longer estranged from Sakura after the Spring incident, and he now builds a new relationship with her. He watches over Spring to an overprotective degree but still has yet to come to a decision regarding his feelings for Sakura.



AGENT OF WINTER Rosei Kantsubaki

Holder of the power of Life Coagulation. After successfully reuniting with Spring, he continues supporting her and her Guard to make up for his past failure. His feelings for Hinagiku remain unchanged, but he is currently trying not to overwhelm her after her return.



AGENT OF SPRING Hinagiku Kayo

Holder of the power of Life Stimulation. She went missing for around ten years after the enemies of the Agents kidnapped her. She got her peaceful life back but now faces a new problem.

GUARD OF SPRING Sakura Himedaka

Hinagiku's retainer, who tirelessly looked for her lady after she was kidnapped. She cared for Hinagiku all by herself 24/7, but now that Winter has sent escorts, she has more time to relax. She keeps her feelings for Itecho bottled up.

AGENT OF AUTUMN Nadeshiko Iwaizuki

Holder of the power of Life Petrification. Still training to control her powers. The kidnapping left a mental scar on her, but Rindo kept it from becoming too deep. She loves him more and more every day.



GUARD OF AUTUMN Rindo Azami

Nadeshiko's retainer. He thought of his role as only a job, but then he realized his love and loyalty for his lady. He cares for Nadeshiko more than anything, but he has no idea how much she cares for him, too.



AGENT OF SUMMER Ayame Hazakura

Ruri's elder sister and retainer—at least, before she became Agent of Summer herself. She is worried about this throwing a wrench into her plans to retire upon her marriage; she and her fiancé are keeping a big secret between them.



AGENT OF SUMMER Ruri Hazakura

Holder of the power of Life Operation. Guileless and straightforward. Unknown to anyone else, she worries about her sister becoming Agent of Summer as well. She likes her fiancé but cares for her sister the most.

Agents
of the Four
Seasons
DANCE OF SUMMER, PART I

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In a solemn whisper, Winter spake thus.

“Your name shall be Summer, the one to follow Spring.”

“Under your care, the land shall be trimmed with color, and lit by the sun in full bloom.”

Then, Winter shed its life further to create Autumn.

By its side was its beloved Spring, watching over the birth of the new seasons.

The land had asked Winter for salvation from the cycle of Spring and Winter.

The one season multiplied to two, then to three, and finally to four.

Summer and Autumn knew their duty the moment they were born and pledged to Winter: *“O founder, we shall rotate the seasons with you.”*

Winter welcomed the pledge, and so began the cycle of the four seasons.

As they all followed one another, the world followed their cycle.

Spring ran after Winter, with Summer and Autumn behind them.

Winter could always turn around and find Spring there, but it wasn't the same anymore.

Spring and Winter's honeymoon was over.

Winter loved Spring. It loved as the creatures of the earth loved and wed.

And Spring, too, as if by fate, loved Winter back.

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

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

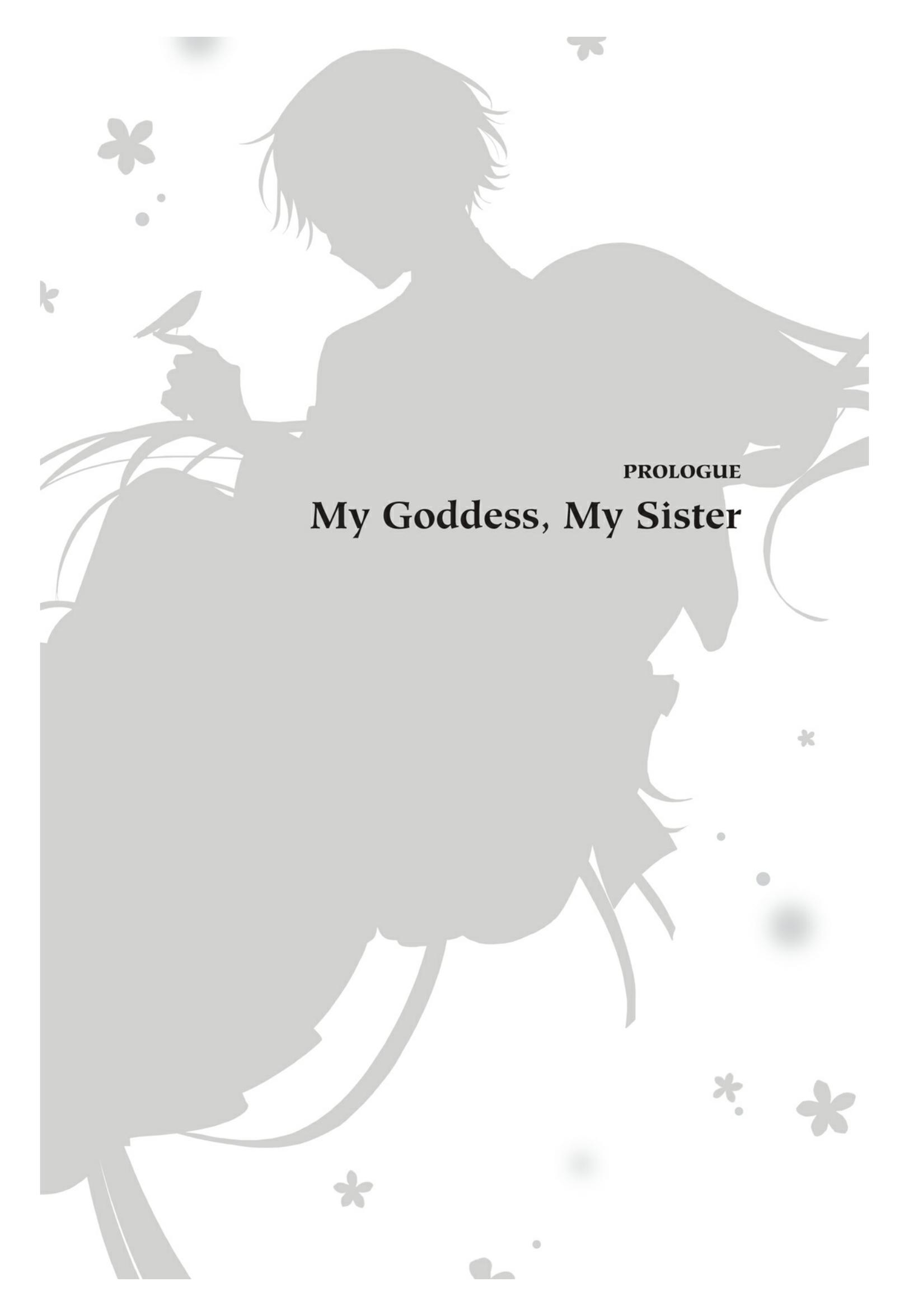
Then they tried with rabbits, but wolves devoured them.

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.



PROLOGUE
My Goddess, My Sister

The world was built on devotion and self-sacrifice.

People would shine lights into the darkest nights to protect the lives of the rest.

Others would turn the gears of society in the early afternoon.

Even when they never spoke a word to another, each person's actions brought about a chain of events.

Even when they never received a word of gratitude, someone's devotion became a light for another—and sometimes, the edge of a knife.

So were the lives of people supported; so came tomorrow, seemingly as a matter of course.

No one knew that in reality it came thanks to a series of miracles.

So the world went round.

It was not only these people who contributed to the world.

There were those entrusted with the divine duty of cycling the four seasons: the Agents.

There were those entrusted with the divine duty of bringing morning and night: the Archers of Oracle.

The representatives of the gods gave their very lives in service of all living things.

The world burst into bloom with the prayer of the Agent of Spring.

Life danced with the song of the Agent of Summer.

The ephemeral blossoms fell with the dance of the Agent of Autumn.

The world dressed in silver with the command of the Agent of Winter.

The morning canopy gave birth to light with the arrow of the Archer of Dawn.

The clear sky turned dusky with the brush of the Archer of Twilight.

The gods incarnate devoted themselves to the world with their blessings.

The difference between them and the average people was that the gods had no choice.

The world asked them to work until their lives were exhausted.

They had to trek mountains in the middle of a storm.

They had to dance under the boom of thunder.

They had to sing and dance and shoot even if a friend died. A friend, or family, or even a lover.

For that was the reason for their existence.

Yet it was not only the gods' Agents that had a duty.

Their retainers, their Guards, had to offer themselves to the world as well.

One Guard of Summer had to say the magic words to her goddess sister.

"Ruri, show me summer."

The younger would bring the season only for her sister upon hearing the words.

They were identical twins who had been forced to sacrifice their own happiness for the greater good.

It was the elder's task to encourage the younger.

“Ruri, show me summer.”

“I love your summer, Ruri.”

“I want to see your summer.”

She had to say that to the sister being sacrificed.

She had forgotten which adult had warned her—but her sister must not be judged incompetent.

And so she told her hapless sister:

“Ruri, show me summer. I love your summer.”

The wish of the older sister was Ruri’s only salvation.

She never wanted to become a god; she never received help from anyone; and yet she sang and danced for them all.

She needed a reason to bear it, and what better reason than love? That would ease the burden.

So Agent of Summer Ruri Hazakura said:

“Look, Ayame.”

The offering of song and dance, the faith in the land, and the wish to gift the season to her sister were the reasons summer came to the world.

The fresh sprouts raised their arms to the sky; the rice rippled like waves.

One intervention brought a bigger one, and that brought about a miracle in the world.

Gentle heat became scorching. Soft rain gave way to lush green. Lingering blooms succumbed to the dog days.

Summer storm became summer breeze. Flowery fields became green fields. Abundant ivy became blighted leaves.

The winds of Summer’s season echoed the loudest.

All for the sister who supported her.

They were equals in the truest sense. But they were twisted; they could not function if not like this.

No one knew summer came from them.

Reimei 10. The Town of Summer, Iyo, Yamato.

In this hidden village unwritten on any map, the light of life of the current Agent of Summer was about to extinguish.

The passing of the noble soul who had given themselves for the tranquility of Yamato.

Family and friends gathered at the Town of Summer's *honden*, hating that they would soon be separated.

The Agent had reached a ripe old age, so this death had been foreseen.

As one person died, another was born.

A new suitable Agent would be chosen upon the former's death.

Statistically, the chosen were usually young, but "young" could mean anyone from five to fifteen, even late teens. It was not unlikely in the slightest for a ten-year-old girl to be chosen.

The girl who would be chosen lived her ordinary life in blissful ignorance.

The morning sunlight was soft. She had barged into her older sister's room again to wake her up.

"Ayame, Ayame, wake up!"

"It's a holiday today... And you made me stay up late last night..."

The younger was lively, and the elder was sleepy. The elder retreated into the depths of her blankets and shut her eyes. The younger sister tried to get her attention by jumping on the bed.

“Ruri... Please... Stop waking me up like this...”

Ruri was pleased to receive the annoyed reaction she wanted. Her elder sister could not hate her, despite her mischievousness; Ruri’s innocence and love were always on the surface. Ruri stopped jumping and hugged Ayame from above the blanket.

“Hug time!”

“Ugh... You’re so heavy... Why are you like this...?”

Ruri was restless, like a kitten who had only begun to experience the world.

Meanwhile, Ayame was mature for the same age. Ruri was like the sun, and Ayame like the moon, each with their own light.

“I just love jumping!”

“Then go jump on your own bed.”

“I like jumping on *your* bed!”

“...”

While annoyed, Ayame did not mistreat her little sister; she knew Ruri loved her.

Ruri was her excessively lively twin sister, and her beloved family.

With a tantrum, Ruri begged her to play together and to style her hair, and Ayame patted her head in admonishment. Only when she did that did Ruri calm down.

Ruri wanted this to keep going until forever, and so she stayed still. But this time, she let go right away. Ruri pouted her lips in disappointment.

“Keep going.”

“No.”

“Why? Please.”

“No, I’m getting up now.”

Their world was peaceful and full of love, without a single distortion.

“Meanie.”

“Yes.”

No violence. They were free, protected children, not tools of the world.

Back then, the Hazakura sisters were happy. That happiness was theirs.

No one knew the misfortune that would befall them.

“What should I wear today?”

Ayame opened her closet and took out a few garments. She held them up to herself and checked the mirror. Ruri popped her head from behind her back, and the mirror held two identical, black-haired reflections.

Ruri and Ayame were twins. They had black hair with a greenish undertone, a pearlescent glow to their skin, and prim, shapely faces ideal for a Yamatoan beauty.

“Dress like me! Let’s match! I wanna match!”

“Again? Mom and Dad won’t be able to tell us apart...”

“Great! We can play guess who!”

“We shouldn’t bother them like that.”

“But I wanna!”

The similarities between them were only skin-deep, in the end. Ayame was a responsible girl and kept watch over Ruri all the time, because that was who she was. In the end, Ayame wore the same dress as Ruri, then sat her down at the dresser to fix her hair.

“Want me to do your hair next?” Ruri asked.

“No way! You’ll set it on fire!”

“What, your hair?”

“Mm-hmm. Then my head will explode.”

“Oooh! Kinda wanna see that!”

Afterward, they had breakfast. The adults were uneasy.

“The epiphany will come any moment now,” they muttered.

“What are you talking about?” Ayame asked with worry.

Her parents did not answer. Ruri said she wanted to go play in the garden and, hesitantly, they gave her permission.

“We can’t let them out of our sights. Who knows what could happen...”

“They wouldn’t be chosen. Just don’t think about it.”

Their whispers remained ominous, almost like prayers. A wish born from love asking for their children not to be chosen by the gods.

Blissfully unaware, Ruri and Ayame went out to the garden. The Hazakura family was blessed with plenty of outdoor space.

“What do you wanna do, Ayame? I’ll do whatever you want!”

“You choose. What do you want to do?”

“Oh—then let’s play catch!”

They wouldn’t be able to play outside once it got cold. Ayame had no objection.

The ball was big enough for the kids to hold with two hands. In those days, all the kids were trying to see how long they could keep the rally without dropping the ball.

It was early autumn. That said, the Agent of Summer had yet to come to Iyo, so the trees were still green. Fresh air and soft sunlight embraced the sisters. The ball flew to and fro under the late summer blue sky.

Their parents, sitting on the veranda, cheered for every successful catch, and the praise encouraged them to throw harder and harder.

Who would be the one to drop the ball first?

Ruri? Or Ayame?

“Ayameeee! Throw it higheeer!”

Ruri? Or Ayame?

“Sure you can catch it? You’ll fall on your back.”

Ruri? Or Ayame?

“Don’t worry! Throw it higher! Higher! Mom, Dad, you clap if I catch it!”

Ayame threw the ball higher and higher, until it joined with the sun itself.

“Ruri?”

The ball bounced on the ground and rolled away to some corner of the garden.

It was Ruri who had failed to catch the ball.

“Ruri...!”

It was then that the Agent of Summer took their last breath in the *honden*.

The world quickly demanded a successor—the switch was instantaneous.

It was as fast as it was cruel and merciless.

“Ruri, what’s wrong?!”

The epiphany was conferred, and the successor was Ruri Hazakura.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts it hurts it hurts...!”

The younger Hazakura twin was chosen. No one knew why it was her.

“Stop it!! Don’t call me!!” Ruri fell with a scream and writhed on the ground.

“R-Ruri...! Are you hurt? Ruri!”

“It hurts, Ayame, it hurts, it hurts so much...”

“J-just wait, just hang on, okay?! Mom! Dad!”

Ayame couldn't take her eyes off the chosen girl. Something was changing within her sister's body.

A lily mark was spreading across her bare leg, red as though she had been cut with a knife.

Their parents's voices were full of despair. “It's the stigmata.”

Ayame had no idea what that meant, and it only terrified her further.

The change extended to the surroundings, too. Birds gathered around Ruri, like subjects waiting for their queen to waken. Dogs far away howled. Cats lined up on the fences. Crows wheeled overhead. Everyone was looking at Ruri.

At the new holder of Life Operation.

I'm scared.

Ayame felt nothing but fear at the sight of it. Why were her parents crying?

Anyone would know that the girl had been chosen as the Agent of Summer. The stigmata was the first sign.

The Voice of the Four Seasons calling their name was the second sign.

And the third was the forcible transfer of the god's powers.

There was no escape from the system.

The ten-year-old girl's innocent life ended on this day.

Now she was a goddess.

The lives of the Hazakura family changed the moment she did.

The epiphany was only the beginning of their departure from the ordinary.

Ruri soon came under the adults' supervision. Her parents followed her

everywhere, and Ayame could do nothing but go to the Town's school and stay put in their mansion.

“...Why? Why was it me? What about Ayame?”

Ruri asked, and her parents explained time and again that she was the sole chosen one.

The staff of the Four Seasons Agency told her that it was a wonderful and honorable thing to be chosen as Agent of Summer. But Ruri did not listen.

“No, no, no! I don't wanna be a goddess! I won't go to the *honden*! I'll stay with Ayame!”

Despite the high honor, being chosen meant your life was stripped away from you.

Those chosen for the roles became mere cogs in the machine of the world.

The Agents of the Four Seasons were but offerings to the world.

“No, nooo...”

Ruri became a sacrifice for the many.

She was cruelly deprived of her childhood and the rest of her life.

Her role could only end with her death, be it late or early.

“Ruri... Don't be selfish...”

“Nooo... Come with me, Ayame. Come with me...”

Ruri clung to Ayame in tears, but Ayame could do nothing.

Ruri had been summoned to the Town of Summer's *honden*, the center of the Town, to train and learn to use her divine powers freely. Her new home as Agent had been set there, too.

Ruri cried incessantly, and her parents pleaded to let her commute to her training at first, but she would inevitably leave her family. Agents had to be

supervised and secured. The gods incarnate were the engine of the world, and they needed practice in order to function properly.

Her year of training would be more efficient if she lived in the *honden*.

“Let’s play again when you come back, Ruri...”

“No, no, no! I wanna be with you! Lemme stay!”

Ruri threw tantrums day after day. She would hide in her house, cling to Ayame and cry. Her parents had to carry her to the car as she kicked and wailed.

Ayame could only see the car come and go every day from the window.

Perhaps the girl was too stubborn, or maybe the people around her were unable to give her enough support, but either way, it did not take long before rumors of the new Agent of Summer being a problem child made the rounds.

She got herself a reputation as the first to reject her job to this degree, and the Agency was forced to assign her psychological support, an Agent Guard, sooner than planned.

The Guards of the Four Seasons were tasked with protecting their Agents’ body and mind.

The process of selecting a Guard differed from Town to Town and Agent to Agent. In the Town of Summer, relatives were chosen most of the time, but Ruri rejected any close cousins.

There was no one who could handle Ruri’s grief.

She never was one to allow herself to be controlled.

There were few people who could keep her in check and guide her.

Inevitably, the task fell to one person.

Her twin sister, Ayame Hazakura.

Her parents probably knew only Ayame could give her peace of mind, too, but

they never forced her in to the position. They had already lost one daughter.

At least Ayame could live a normal life.

As for Ruri, she must have longed for it, but she never asked. Perhaps her parents had asked her not to make the request, or maybe she believed that on her own.

However, she would run up to Ayame every day upon coming back home.

“I can’t take it anymore! I’m not going tomorrow. Not this time!”

She rolled herself up like a pill bug in her sister’s bed, rejecting the whole world. All the worry bottled up in her little body had to be part of why she couldn’t make full use of her divine powers.

Ruri cried about how the voices of the animals echoed in her head all the time because of Life Operation. This could be solved by training, but she would not calm down.

“I don’t wanna be a goddess... I don’t wanna! Tell them to let me go, Ayame...”

Ruri didn’t need practice in the *honden*. She needed a place that would calm her worries.

She needed someone she could trust, someone that could encourage her.

“Ruri...”

Ayame was wise, even at her age. She knew why her parents wouldn’t ask her to be a Guard. She knew how hard it was to be a goddess just by watching Ruri. She knew how hard it would be to serve as a retainer.

She knew she would one day regret it if she reached out to her little sister out of pity.

But then...

Her chest hurt every time Ruri said, “*What about Ayame?*”

...What’ll become of Ruri?

Ayame was relieved to know she wasn’t chosen.

But at the same time, she felt guilty.

Perhaps she wouldn't have felt this way if they weren't twins.

They were identical—so much so that even their parents would have a hard time telling them apart when they weren't speaking. But Ayame was spared.

She had no right to argue against the gods, but the doubt remained within Ayame always.

Wasn't it possible that she could have been chosen, too?

What if it was because of what I did?

Ruri had dropped the ball.

She couldn't catch it because Ayame threw it too high.

What if it was my fault?

It was a pure coincidence, in reality.

And still, Ayame could not stop thinking about why Ruri was chosen. Had she been cursed?

Ruri woke up first that morning.

She finished breakfast first.

Which girl was the first to say good morning, again?

It was no use thinking about any of that now.

It was useless if they were chosen not by their actions but by their souls. One could imagine endless reasons why, but only the gods knew the truth.

Ayame did not want to become a goddess, and yet she could not stop thinking about it.

We have our differences, but we're twins.

That similarity gave rise to dark thoughts. It didn't help that she heard the staff of the Four Seasons Agency coming in and out of the Hazakura house

gossip.

“It should’ve been the elder sister instead,” they said.

They would say she was mature, strong, and easier for them to handle.

Ayame was furious.

They knew nothing about the best parts of her sister.

She’s brave, she’s creative, she’s cheerful, she has a strong sense of justice.

Ayame was like the moon, and sunny Ruri lit her way.

Ruri was the better choice.

Yes. No matter the endless possibilities, it wasn’t wrong for her sister to be the Agent of Summer.

No matter what anyone else said, she knew how amazing Ruri was.

Ruri was worthy of the title. There was nothing wrong with her being chosen. There was no need to think about it anymore.

You are worthy, right?

“I didn’t want to be a goddess.”

But it’s right...

“I didn’t want to...”

All her thoughts were reduced to nothing whenever she recalled what Ruri would say.

“Right. Of course... You didn’t want to be a goddess.”

You were worthy. Worthy, but not fit for it.

If only I could take your place.

Could it be she missed a sign from the gods and ended up pushing the role on Ruri?

What a horrible sin that would be. How could the elder sister allow her younger sister to take the role of the sacrifice?

Meaningless thoughts went round and round in her head without pause.

There was little she could do for her poor sister. What would she have wanted, if she were in Ruri's place?

"Ayame... Will I have to be like this... forever? Will I never go back?" Ruri asked, tears in her eyes. The changes in her relationships were devastating, and young Ruri couldn't bear them.

No more jumping on the bed in the morning. No more pleasant afternoons where they shared snacks.

The ball from that day had been thrown away before they knew it.

It was like a never-ending wake at the house. None of them laughed anymore. The whole family was worn out.

They didn't seem to agree on anything now, and they argued like they never had before.

Everything had changed.

That day, her sister became a goddess, and nothing would ever be the same.

The family could never go back again.

I don't want to.

If she could improve anything about this tragedy, ever so slightly...

I don't want to, but I have to do something.

She had no choice.

Her sister wanted to be saved. They needed someone who could keep Ruri at ease by sharing her joys and griefs. Her parents would get peace of mind if they didn't have to keep seeing their daughter's sorrow.

"...Ruri, listen."

Fortunately, Ayame felt no gloom at this moment.

There were plenty of reasons why she couldn't make this choice, but she looked only at the reasons why she had to and steeled her resolve.

Young Ayame Hazakura was wise, but more than that, she was a lonely girl who loved her family.

"Ruri, I'll be your Guard. I'll protect you."

She was a child who loved more than she craved love.

"I'll be with you."

She could have run away.

It was a hard path ahead. It was hell she was walking into.

She already knew it would be rough. She needed to be prepared to kill any enemy in order to keep her sister safe.

Even if she was still only ten.

"...B-but..."

A little bit of light returned to Ruri's eyes.

"...But...if you do that, then you'll..."

She saw a ray of hope in the darkness, and the Goddess of Summer began worshipping her sister.

"...It'll be hard on you, too... I don't want that..."

Even so, she didn't accept right away. She wanted this more than anything in the world, but...

Ruri loved Ayame. She didn't want to make her smart, kind twin sister suffer.

But she wanted to be with her. She hesitated to drag Ayame down with her, but that feeling was mixed with yearning for that salvation.

"Ruri, it's okay. I want to do it. Let's hang in there, together, okay?"

Ruri sat in silence for a while, until she reached out to Ayame.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Finally, the sacrifice was saved in turn.

As Ruri clung to her, Ayame was sure she made the right choice.

Thank goodness. Now everything should be all right.

That was the belief of an excessively kind, foolish girl.

Reimei 12. The Town of Winter.

After one year of training, Agent of Summer Ruri Hazakura and her Guard Ayame Hazakura headed to the Town of Winter to spend one month with the Agent of Winter for the ritual called the Season Descent.

Two years prior, during their Season Descent, the Agent of Spring had been kidnapped to protect the Agent of Winter. The news sent shock waves through the Four Seasons, and the Agent of Spring remained missing.

The Town of Winter was still in mourning.

“Good to have you here, Lady Summer, Lady Guard. Please make yourselves at home.”

Because of that, the Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki barely showed himself during the Season Descent.

He was still looking for Hinagiku Kayo, and he was always accompanied by his Guard, Itecho Kangetsu. Winter was still fighting to find Spring. In short, Ruri and Ayame were not welcome. The Season Descent was meant for the Agents and Guards to get to know each other, but Rosei was too preoccupied to engage.

The people of the Town of Winter hoped Rosei would get along with Ruri, as they were close in age, but this only drove him further away; he felt they were

trying to make her into a replacement for Hinagiku.

The environment didn't allow for it, even if they wanted to. The Town of Winter deployed maximum security to keep Ruri and Ayame safe. They weren't able to protect Spring, and they were on edge and full power so it wouldn't be a repeat of that tragedy two years back. It was hard for them to form the desired relationship in the middle of a state of high alert.

Ruri and Ayame were told about how close Rosei Kantsubaki and Hinagiku Kayo were during their Season Descent. Ruri seemed moved by it and tried valiantly to talk with Rosei, but her efforts were in vain thanks to the accident.

Ruri and Rosei were told to practice their powers together at the very least one time, and Ruri inadvertently harmed a tree Rosei was deeply fond of. The animals she was controlling with Life Operation hit the tree and broke a branch. Rosei had had the tree transported from the previous, abandoned Town of Winter all the way here, in memory of Hinagiku Kayo. Rosei did not appreciate the harm to his quince.

None of Ruri's apologies could quell his fury; Ruri eventually fired back, and it exploded in a huge argument.

So Ruri and Rosei turned their back on each other.

"I wanted us to be friends," Ruri said in tears. Ayame wanted to cry, too.

Reimei 13. In the journey to manifest summer.

Summer had been fighting insurgents since they began their journey in Reimei 12, but due to Rosei Kantsubaki's so-called Insurgent Hunt, their focus was on him instead. Ruri and Ayame had yet to be in fierce battles, which was great news for Ayame and her duty to protect her sister. She couldn't see herself killing someone else.

They still had to be protected by the Four Seasons Agency staff assigned to

them.

“Ayame, you’ve gotten so athletic...”

“You can tell?”

“I heard them saying you’re learning how to use guns and swords very fast. That’s amazing.”

“Yeah...”

Oddly enough, her physical abilities appeared to have surged after she decided to become Guard.

She wasn’t sure if she could call them “powers,” but apparently, the trend was seen among other Agent Guards. Her physical capacity was slowly reaching the range of the superhuman. Perhaps a gift from the gods in order to protect the human avatar.

The wrong gift for the Hazakura sisters, who only wished to return to their peaceful lives.

“Sorry, it’s my fault.” Ruri stroked Ayame’s blisters.

“This is no big deal.” Ayame smiled, much to Ruri’s relief.

Reimei 14. In the journey to manifest summer.

Ayame killed a man for the first time.

The insurgents had launched a surprise attack. After a fierce battle, she ended up killing him.

It was before Ruri overwrote the winter—the red of his blood spattered on the pure-white snow was dreadfully vivid. Ayame spaced out, staring at it as Agency staff tried to calm her down.

It was nigh impossible for an Agent Guard to end their term without killing

someone. Many of the people working to protect the Agents ended up involved in violence like this. It was always in self-defense.

There wouldn't be criminal charges, but even after hearing that, she found no peace in her heart.

Ruri was screaming at the corpse. "Ayame became a murderer because of *you*, you bastard!"

Right. I'm a murderer now. Ayame sighed a white breath.

Reimei 15. The Town of Summer.

Ruri and Ayame watched a TV news special titled "Five Years Since the Lady Agent of Spring Disappeared."

The lack of spring was becoming normal.

A replacement was chosen the moment an Agent died; it had happened to Ruri. No new Agent of Spring meant that Hinagiku was still alive.

She was out there somewhere—alive, but likely not well. After five years in captivity, she couldn't be unharmed—in mind at least, if not in body as well. The TV report said, "the people want Spring to come back soon."

Did they mean the Spring who was still out there, fighting? Or just a new Spring?

"They probably just want the season. They don't care about us," Ruri muttered.

What if the same thing happened to them?

They shivered just at the thought of it.

Reimei 16. The Town of Summer.

Fifteen-year-old Ruri and Ayame argued constantly; maybe it was puberty.

Being together all the time didn't help. Even the closest family members need some time alone. Yet Ruri's fixation with Ayame grew with each passing year.

Part of it was the news that a different person would eventually take over the role of Ruri's Guard—most likely her future partner.

Traditionally, a family member supported the Agent of Summer in their infancy, then someone else took over.

It was around the same time that talk of marriage interviews popped up, much to Ruri's objection.

Ruri's life was always under someone else's control.

She had vented everything on the one closest to her; she believed Ayame could take it. And so she became dependent on her family's kindness. Meanwhile, Ayame sought to justify her actions by accepting the role of receiving Ruri's anger.

I would have done the same if it were me.

The elder twin was freer than her.

She must feel so conflicted every time she looks at me.

Ruri suffered because of her presence. Maybe the choice she made then was wrong.

As Ruri's marriage meetings progressed, Ayame began considering stepping away little by little.

The foolish child finally began regretting her choices.

Reimei 17. The Town of Summer. Ayame ran away from home. She would not escape for good, but it allowed her a chance encounter.

So began Summer's love story.



CHAPTER 1

**Guard of Summer—
Ayame Hazakura**

Reimei 19. Summer. The Town of Summer.

The festival sun embraced the land, and the fragrance of fresh green filled the dewy mountains.

The vividly dressed flowers sang an ode to life, and the butterflies wandered the skies calling to children.

It was the season of the Agent of Summer.

The Town had shed its winter garments and now wore a summer dress.

Ruri and Ayame were back in town after wrapping up the summer manifestation journey.

It's been a long time since we last saw each other.

Eighteen-year-old Ayame was about to go out to meet her fiancé.

Her clothing matched the season.

A new dress and freshly bought pumps, with a basket bag in hand.

Ruri interrogated her unusually stylish dress-up, but Ayame only gave a decent-sounding excuse before running away. The sunlight outside blinded her the moment she opened the door.

She wasn't yet used to the brightness of the sun, as she had spent the recent days bringing summer to wintry lands.

She looked around for traces of the cold, forlorn season; was there any snow left?

Winter was deeply rooted this time, too.

Winter had been getting harsher year by year. The Agent of Spring was still missing. The grief of Rosei Kantsubaki was reflected in his season.

As Rosei tried to fill in the hole of Hinagiku's loss, winter lasted double the normal length.

The season then jumped right into summer, and the sudden change in weather was a problem for many.

The legend of the Four Seasons said that the land only knew winter at first, then suffered at the abrupt cycle between it and spring after the latter's birth.

The people of Yamato now knew this hardship firsthand.

I hope Lady Kayo is all right.

It would be no exaggeration to say summer was standing in for spring now, but things could not go on like this.

Ayame could only pray for the Goddess of Spring she had never met to come back safe.

As her mind wandered in that direction, she reached her destination.

She hid among the trees on the side of the narrow path, confirming no one saw her before walking again toward their meeting place. Lush trees surrounded the Town; people and animals were lost in the greenery the moment they stepped into the underbrush. Ayame subconsciously took stealthy steps, despite knowing she was doing nothing wrong. It just happened that their relationship wasn't public yet.

Does this count as a date?

She felt ticklish in the chest just at the thought of it.

Ayame jogged at the car in between the trees the moment she found it.

Her face reddened, and her heart raced helplessly at the prospect of meeting him after such a long time.

“Huh? You didn't tell her yet?”

He said with a sigh upon realizing Ruri hadn't been told about their relationship.

Ayame frowned; those were his first words as he got out of the car.

Not that I was hoping for anything sweeter.

But he could have brought it up differently. She objected to her charming

fiancé.

“Renri... It’s not so simple.”

“Simpler than your Guard job, surely.”

Renri poked Ayame’s puffed cheeks, which made her even grumpier. He was the only person in the whole world who would treat the Guard of Summer like this.

“You worry too much about what she’d think.”

Ayame, too, did not allow such familiarity to anyone but him.

“Look, I worry because it is my job. She needs to be stable to manifest the season, so why would I go out of my way to tell her something that would hurt her in the middle of our journey?”

“Easy, easy. Oh, I almost forgot. Thank you for bringing summer this year, too.”

“ ... ”

“I really am grateful to Lady Ruri Hazakura and Lady Ayame Hazakura, as well as everyone involved in the manifestation of summer in Yamato. I thank you in the name of the Rouo family of the Town of Summer’s medical office.”

While Renri acted flippantly before Ayame, he really was mature and kind.

“...I am thankful for your show of gratitude, Lord Renri Rouo. May you have a wonderful summer...”

Ayame replied sulkily, and he smiled softly.

“That’s enough of the formalities... I’m sorry, I know it’s not easy to tell her. And thank you for meeting with me when you’re still tired from your journey.”

“ ... ”

“Please? I’ll do anything.”

What was she to him?

Ayame didn’t know, but at the very least, he was irreplaceable for her.

You never knew who would mean salvation for you in the moment.

They had met only a little while ago.

When she was sixteen, Ayame Hazakura ran away from the Town, fed up with everything.

She did it on impulse, without a plan.

At the time, she had no idea how to treat her little sister who was also her lady, and her job as Guard was crushing her life. She couldn't help the sister she had to be with at all times, and that was only the start of her issues.

At the same time, Ruri was in turmoil, too; talks of her marriage were making progress. She wanted to live the rest of her life with her sister, and now someone else was barging in. Ruri would eventually come to like the fiancé they settled on, but this was not the case at the time. Ruri was carrying out her goddess duties by depending on Ayame, and anything that had to do with her marriage was a source of distress. She would have to part with her sister in just a few years. Ruri's fear turned to anger, and she lashed out at everyone around her.

Naturally, Ayame bore the brunt of these protests, and it wasn't long before her spirit cracked.

She was tired. She wanted to disappear.

For better or for worse, Ayame had a strong sense of responsibility. She supported other people, but she never thought about anyone else supporting her. She was deserving of pity, but even so, it was too soon for her to leave it all behind. She knew it would only end in a way she didn't wish for.

First of all, she would make Ruri cry.

Despite how much she hated her situation, she didn't hate Ruri.

Second, she found a sense of purpose in her position as Ruri's elder sister.

Running away from her Guard duties was suffocating her, too, in a way.

Being the goddess's older sister was her *raison d'être* and the only source of approval she got from others.

Fleeing her duty only hurt her. Doing as expected of her was, in a sense, a form of self-defense. Not to mention they obviously would pursue her and bring her back to the Town.

She could easily imagine how much Ruri would be saddened, and how all the trust she had built would be lost; people around her would be disappointed in her, and she would be the target of endless criticism and contempt. The escape was abjectly foolish.

What happened to Ayame on that day, after she crossed the woody mountains on the motorbike she had just gotten the license for?

The bike ran out of gas soon after leaving the Town, and the foolish girl was stranded.

As she was at a standstill in the middle of the mountain pass, her future fiancé, Renri Rouo, happened to pass by in the car and helped her. He kept her escape a secret, so no one had found out. He kept her safe and her honor intact.

“There's no choice. I gotta go to her myself and ask for your hand.”

On that day, he saved her.

“Renri...”

That became the start of their relationship. It was romantic, for sure.

It became a crossroads in Ayame's life. She found someone who could help her—whom she could tell her worries to. Exactly the person she needed.

With Renri's help, she was able to keep her spirit from breaking apart.

She was also able to act as Ruri's older sister again.

Inevitably, Ayame and Renri's relationship led to their engagement.

"No, that would be our last resort...and who knows what Ruri might do to you. Even now that my parents gave us the okay, convincing her will be harder. The fact that I was hiding your existence from her at all will make her furious. I can already picture her face when I tell her..."

Ayame still felt indebted to Renri; she was a bit apprehensive about troubling him.

"She's gonna do something to me?"

"She'll send the dogs after you, at the very least... But don't worry, I'll protect you."

I don't want to be even more of a disappointment, she thought, and not without good reason.

To tell the truth, their encounter in the mountain pass was not their first.

Although Ayame had forgotten it, they had met in their infancy.

The memory was buried among others of her childhood.

Her parents had taken them flower viewing, and she had chatted a bit with him in a moment away from her parents. The twins had also bumped into him (literally) one time at the Town's festival. That was it, though. They only interacted a few times with each other inside the Town.

The problem was, while Ayame forgot, Renri remembered.

Apparently, he knew it was her the moment he saw her lost back then. But she had eyed him with suspicion—a bitter memory in the middle of the heartwarming story. Renri was clearly hurt when he explained they had met before.

"...Pretty sure that would kill me," Renri said. "I can't survive against the Lady Summer when she can control the animals..."

"Y-you won't die!"

Despite his disappointment, their relationship wasn't much to speak of. He shielded her and took the role of someone older. His generosity saved her. That

was all.

“Heh... Cause of death: sister complex.” Renri cackled and sighed, but it was all in good fun.

“This is no laughing matter, Renri.” Ayame pressed her lips together.

“Sorry. Even if she gets aggressive, I’ll stand my ground and insist she let me have you. You back me up.”

“I will... She’d be attacking me, too, anyway.”

Ayame did not underestimate the effect the news of her engagement would have on her sister.

Still, she should have been more serious about it.

A few months later, Ayame found the place and time to make the announcement, and Ruri bawled her eyes out from shock. The vortex of emotion triggered her divine powers, and her panic spread to all the animals in the Town.

It took three days to calm all of them down. After that, Ruri refused to speak with anyone, including Ayame. The furious little sister cooped herself up in her room, continuing her strike until spring returned to Yamato and Lady Hinagiku Kayo thawed the snow in her heart.

“Is it really that bad?” Renri played it down.

“I can still feel her crying...”

They were in a car, and it was currently under assault by birds furiously dropping the only bombs birds had all over it. It was a nasty mess, and while he acted like his world was ending...

“Heh... You’re quite loved, aren’t you, Ayame?”

They didn’t know what tragedy awaited them.

“Hey, don’t laugh. You have any idea how serious this is? There’s a storm out there because we’re getting married!”

Ayame pouted. Smiling, Renri wiped away the tears in her eyes.

“Yeah... It *is* funny, though... Well, we’ll be free once we get past this, right?”

“I mean...”

“We’ll leave Iyo and build a new home in Teishu. The city life of our dreams. I’ll work in the Four Seasons Agency’s medical offices, and you...will be at the Agency, too, I guess? We’ll be under supervision and have to be filing reports... but we’ll be much freer than in here. We’ll get what we want.”

“...”

He tried to instill hope in her.

“We’re just a couple steps away from our dream of leaving the Town and being free... Let’s just hang in there a little longer, okay?”

“...Yes.”

“But I’ll say this—I know I asked you to marry me, but I’m starting to worry myself as it gets closer to happening... Will Ruri be okay without you...?”

“At the very least, she won’t die. My parents are taking care of it.”

Renri cocked his head.

“I hope she’ll get married without issue...”

“Ah, so there’s interests there. Like with us...”

“...Yes.”

“But...didn’t Ruri already ride away from her fiancé on a deer once? Will he marry her after that? I laughed out loud when I heard about it, but I’m sure it wasn’t funny to him. I’d be shocked if my fiancée hated me so much she’d hop on a deer just to get away from me... Thankfully, you wouldn’t do that... You think they’ll be able to get along?”

“Sh-she’s stopped running away recently. It sounds like they’ve gotten closer. I wasn’t sure about him at first, either... But my parents do want the best for her.”

“Oh, really? So he’d be a good Guard?”

Ayame nodded. Things weren’t going well due to Ruri’s escapes, but Ayame wasn’t opposed to their engagement.

After all, the whole point of it was to protect Ruri.

“What I was most worried about was if my successor would really be able to protect her.”

“...Yeah.”

He understood what she meant right away.

“If she can’t do her work, they might replace her—and I can’t let them do that.”

Ayame’s heart darkened.

Replacement was a euphemism for killing the Agent so a new one would take their place.

The season had to be cut off until the new Agent underwent their training, so this was a last resort, but the probability was not zero. Replacements had happened before. The big example was if an Agent committed a crime, and the replacement occurred by way of execution.

It could also happen if the Agent got involved in power struggles within the Town, adultery, grudges, and other civilian conflicts.

The whole Town would work to avoid a gap in the seasons, which a replacement would cause, but some people saw the method as proper and rational; if there was an error in the system, then it should be replaced.

And a new Agent of the Four Seasons was born the moment one died.

They were expendable.

The fear of replacement wasn’t unique to the Town of Summer, either.

Although Ayame didn’t know at the time, the Guard of Spring Sakura Himedaka would later tell her that the Agent of Spring Hinagiku Kayo was once at risk of replacement.

The Agents of the Four Seasons were divine, subjects of worship, VIPs meant

to be kept safe and concealed; but at the same time, they were cogs in the machine driving the world—sacrifices. The reason Ayame had kept her feelings bottled up and begged Ruri to show her summer was to avoid the ultimate consequence.

There was no need for a dysfunctional Agent to exist, not in the Town, not in the world.

“Why do you think he’ll be all right?” Renri asked.

“He’s far stronger than I am,” Ayame replied sadly. “He’s won the Town’s martial arts tournament without defeat and is now in the hall of fame... It’s reassuring to know she’s marrying him.”

“...What’s his history?”

“I don’t know all the details; I know that if he went down in a fight, every other Guard and Ruri would be dead, too.”

“Stronger than you... Is he superhuman? Is he human at all?”

“He’s like a human weapon.”

“He must be a titan if *you’re* saying that,” he said with admiration.

“He is a Kimikage, after all.”

“Oh! You’re right.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“...The scion of the family who handles the Town’s security... Of course he would make a good Guard. Very good choice for laying a solid foundation. And the bigwigs would have trouble doing anything to her if she’s got him for a husband. Your parents did a great job.”

Marriage issues concerning power relationships between families made it hard to find the best choice. Ayame was reminded of how deft her parents were in securing this engagement.

“Ruri already caused trouble by refusing to manifest summer in the past... She’s not the hated problem child she once was, but we can’t say for sure that she wouldn’t get embroiled in power struggles that have nothing to do with

her. Maybe I'm overthinking it... But that's why I want someone strong to marry her."

Renri nodded several times. "I can see how much all this means to you. You are her Guard *and* her sister. But does Ruri? I mean, a lot of our people end up in political marriages, but it's easier to accept them when you see how they benefit you, not just your family... Sure, it's weird to be in this position when the rest of the world is allowed to marry whoever they want... But the Towns are always weird, so it's better to be with someone who can protect you. Especially when you're a girl, I think. No one is going to tell you you can just not get married."

"Yes, my parents and I have told her all of that. She's slowly beginning to understand."

"Oh... I hope it all goes well. I really do."

Ayame felt her chest warm up at his earnest words. "Thank you."

The descendants of the Agents of the Four Seasons were not allowed to live freely. They had to look for their own bit of happiness within a small frame.

This being the case, Renri's wishes were a great thing to hear. She felt his sincerity. He truly cared for the girl she loved. Renri's kindness warmed Ayame's heart.

Still, she fought to keep that joy from showing itself on her face.

"Ummm... Back on topic. Where should we hold the meeting about the ceremony?"

"More of a chat, really. I found a nice garden where we could walk around while we talk. It's a bit far away, but I think you'll like it. And I want you to take your mind off things for a while, too."

Ayame still held in her joy; it wasn't right for her to be moved this way by his kindness, she felt.

"We could go to any old thicket..."

"C'mon, we're not kids meeting up in secret."

"But..."

There was a reason why Ayame resisted the urge to indulge herself in his generosity.

She couldn't get too close to him; there was no love between them.

There was a contrivance at play behind Ayame Hazakura and Renri Rouo's marriage.

Renri was the second son of a big family in the Town of Summer. He wanted to decline the arranged marriage his parents planned.

Ayame was the Guard of Summer. By marrying, she could step down from her position and live her own life as she pleased.

They were both constrained by the circumstances of their birth and wanted to escape their families.

However, breaking from the Town to freedom was nigh impossible. The only act of rebellion they could muster was to choose a partner who would not tie them down.

So Ayame and Renri decided to use each other to obtain their own freedom.

They would marry and live together. But that was it. Once they proved they'd fulfilled their duties to their families and the Town, they would be free to live as they liked. They promised over and over not to tie each other down and presented a united front.

It was a marriage by contract. And falling in love with her contract partner would only cause trouble. They had to stay on equal standing with a common interest.

Yet Ayame felt like she was falling closer to him every time—so much so that she had to remind herself to keep away.

He's just my partner in crime.

She was beginning to fall in love. And who could fault her?

The lonely girl had finally met someone outside her family she could open her heart to.

It was like being given a blanket after being thrown out into the freezing night.

Her strong sense of responsibility did not allow her to complain, yet when she was with Renri, she acted like any other girl her age. She could let herself depend on him, if only a little. It was obvious how much the Guard of Summer needed this. Indeed, it was no strange thing for her to fall in love. Not at all, and yet.

Why did this happen?

She was confused. It had been years since she adopted the role of Guard. Her life had Ruri at its center; romance was not a part of her world. A bird brought up in a cage did not know love. Such relationships were not in her plans. She only needed a way to escape from the confines of the Town. Marriage was but a method. She made the decision with a cool head.

But now I'm in love with him.

The caged bird fell in love. Not a passionate one, though: a quiet, stealthy love.

He shouldn't marry me.

As love grew inside her, so too did a wish for him to find true happiness.

This isn't right.

If one had to say whether they were right or wrong, they certainly were in the wrong.

But it was too late. Not to mention it was her who instigated it.

"...I want to change... I want to be free... It's suffocating being in this Town..."

On that day, when she ran away from the Town, Ayame wept and poured out everything to Renri.

She had been so lost at the mountain pass when he saved her; a storm of shame and grief and so many other emotions raged inside her.

She ended up venting what she'd kept to herself forever. The things she always wanted someone else to hear.

That life was so hard for her. That she wanted out.

He didn't look down on her after her sudden confession, even though they'd only just met.

He softly remarked that obtaining true freedom was not an easy task for the descendants of the Agents of the Four Seasons; still, he thought with her about a way out. And after careful consideration, he replied: *"Right now, I'm in marriage talks, and I don't want to go through with it. I want to get out, too. I want to marry someone I can fight with for our freedom. Not for love... It would be entirely for my self-interests, but it means that person would also be able to live freely. We could support each other without getting in each other's way. So...more like friends. What do you say, Ayame?"*

He listened to Ayame's heartfelt cry and lent her his hand.

"We would have to lie to everyone, but what do you think? Would you marry me as a cover?"

He offered to become partners, friends, mutual supporters—and they would have mutual freedom.

Even though he benefited from this, too, he'd only brought it up out of pity for her.

Which is why I should not have accepted.

Ayame couldn't help but regret her choice now.

She gave Renri a quick glance. He was waiting for her response.

She wasn't eager about the suggestion to go to that garden.

"If it's such a great place, then you shouldn't go with me... You should go with someone you truly like."

She only said that because she really cared about him, but Renri was clearly disappointed.

"Why do you say that...?"

Ayame's chest ached from the question, which almost felt like an attack.

"Because... When you eventually want to go there with someone, then the memory of being there with me would only get in the way."

I say this for your sake.

She spoke to him without words.

You wouldn't want me to fall in love with you, would you?

She wanted to say it all out loud, but she kept it in.

You only want a girl to play the part and nothing else.

She did not want to get closer than needed.

The logic worked for her, but not for him.

His face fell. "I don't see it that way..."

"You won't be able to go on that date with a clean slate. You should save it for later..."

"Don't say that. I want to go with you...", he said sadly.

Oh no. Did I make him mad?

Ayame was paralyzed by confusion, then insisted, "Don't worry about that. Let's go."

His voice was unyielding.

"Yes... If you say so."

That was romance's Achilles' heel. She couldn't turn him down if he insisted.

In the end, they headed over to the garden in Renri's car.

That said, the time they could spend together was limited.

Ayame had to be back home before the Archer of Twilight shot the sky.

In consideration for her curfew, he took her to a big garden on a nearby mountain. Hundreds of varieties of flowers bloomed all over.

"Wow... This place is amazing..."

The strong aroma of the summer flora tickled her nose.

"You like flowers, right?"

Ayame nodded excitedly. "I do..."

"Good. I knew you would like it. Did this cheer you up?"

"Yes..."

Renri smiled blissfully at seeing Ayame happy.

He understood her and was unselfish in his love for others.

Ayame loved all flowers, in part thanks to her name being taken from one summer flower, the iris.

She didn't remember telling him about it, but she must have. Her journey to manifest summer would have been exhausting, so he must have considered carefully how to get his fiancée.

"She liked flowers, so that should cheer her up."

So that's why you insisted so much we come here.

There was a reason why he had to take Ayame there, and not his future true love. At the same time she felt her chest fill with joy, there was a twinge of sorrow.

She got these ideas when she spent time with him. These weird delusions he might possibly like her, too, just a little.

“It’s really such a nice garden...,” Ayame replied, shaking off the notion.

She had to remind herself not to misunderstand his kindness.

“You should use your family’s land to make something like this.”

While Ayame was working hard not to fall in love with him, he kept talking guilelessly.

“Mine is so desperate to maintain tradition that they would never think to have a Western-style garden.”

“Sounds like a waste of all the mountain land they have.”

“It’s fine. It’s also important for the land to leave some of it natural.”

This mountain used to belong to a famous family.

It had been transferred to someone else now, and they developed it and built an inn in the style of an old castle.

The giant garden was basically just an add-on for the castle inn, but word of mouth had made it popular enough that it was now open to the public. It was becoming a famous spot for dates, and just thinking of how she was there with Renri had Ayame blushing. She shook the bashfulness away.

We’re partners in crime, not in love.

Ayame’s emotions were an endless cycle of this. They would rise and fall like a roller coaster at everything Renri did or showed her. She kept a cool mask on while her heart was floating on cloud nine. And then she would drop back to reality.

The reality that this love ended as soon as it began.

“...Let’s go.”

Ayame was used to suffocating her own feelings and ignored the pain running across her chest.

They talked while walking around the garden.

It was noon exactly, so the paths were empty as people went to the inn’s

restaurant. They had the place all to themselves, which only made it feel more like a date.

At one point, a bee chased Renri away from Ayame for a bit—very ungentlemanly of him—but she had fun with that, too. Her heart kept racing against her wishes.

“Ayame, since we’re here already, would you tell me which flowers you like? I’ll take note for the bouquet.”

As for Renri, he looked the same as always.

“A bouquet? So we’re holding a Western-style ceremony? I assumed it would be Yamatoan...”

“We’ll be doing the ritual at the shrine of the Four Season Gods, of course. I was talking about the reception. The standard nowadays is for the guests to come over in Western clothing, so why not go in a dress and bouquet? Or did you prefer Yamatoan?”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Which one do you prefer?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure... I’ve always been compared to my older brother—unfavorably—so I don’t really want to invite comparison at my wedding, too.”

“...”

“I want them to think I’m a man worthy of you... So which one would be better...?”

“...”

“Which one do you prefer, Ayame?”

“Ummm... I’ve been thinking this for a while now, but...”

“Yeah?”

“...You do that consciously, don’t you? Putting yourself down...”

Renri’s smile disappeared in a moment, replaced with surprise. “...”

His mask had been ripped off.

“You’re such a serious, earnest guy, but you almost pretend to be a playboy

and always put yourself down... I've been wondering why. Even your clothes and hairdo look artificial. You know your parents will hound you about it, but you still..."

Renri's voice was hoarse. "I can't believe this..."

"Is it really all an act?" Ayame ventured. "Why...? Oh, but don't worry if you don't want to say..."

Renri didn't say yes or no. "...How long have you been thinking this?" His voice was flat. "When did you realize I was acting for a lot of it?"

Ayame was frightened; she wasn't used to seeing him without a smile, and she regretted saying anything at all. Still, she ought to be sincere in this moment.

"For quite a while now... But I was convinced when I visited your house."

Ayame remembered the time she paid a visit to his family.

The Rouo name was big in the field of medicine in the Town.

Renri's house was not in the main family, but a branch; that said, it was still a fixture in the Town.

He had both parents, an older brother, and an older sister, and none of them seemed to take him seriously at all.

"Lady Guard, are you sure you want my idiot son? I'd think his older brother would be the better choice."

Ayame had felt such a surge of anger then, she'd felt her head would explode.

The visit was meant for exchanging engagement gifts and talking about the wedding, but he was so busy bashing Renri that it was slowing down the proceedings.

"He's always been mediocre at everything he does."

“He’s a coward and a slacker. I don’t think he’s worthy of you, Lady Guard.”

“My elder son is divorced, but he wants to marry again. Wouldn’t you rather have him?”

There were parents in this world who not only avoided bragging about their children but went out of their way to run them down. It was a terrible way to raise a child, but saying these things to his fiancée was downright abusive.

Not to mention Renri was right there. Ayame was furious.

She kept a smile on her face to keep from rocking the boat, but internally, she hoped she’d never see anyone from this family ever again after the wedding was over.

Meanwhile, even Renri kept on smiling quietly, as though his father’s insults were perfectly natural.

Ayame would never forget the pain in her chest when Renri later shamefully apologized that he was the one she had to marry.

After witnessing that, she had absolutely no doubts that Renri truly wanted to escape home. No wonder he didn’t want to obey his parents’ wedding arrangements.

What confounded her, however, was why he would keep himself in that position.

It was easy to tell just from talking to him that he was not stupid. He was smart enough to be a doctor, even. His worldview was not ignorant, either. Yet when his family was around, he would keep his head down and act like a damn court jester. It was like he had no choice.

After hearing Ayame out, Renri returned to his usual lax smile.

Then, shyly, he said:

“...I have to. I’m supposed to be the carefree second son of the Rouo family...”

Ayame frowned.

“But why...?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s just my role. I’m acting my part, like you do

yours. I laugh like an idiot because... My stupidity brings peace and happiness to them. It just so happens...some families need someone like that.”

“...Renri, I don't think that's normal...”

“Don't worry. I'm relieved enough just to know you understand me.”

“No, I haven't done anything...”

“Oh, yes you have. You wouldn't believe how happy I am right now.”

There was a tinge of sadness in his smile, prickling Ayame's chest.

“...”

“Let's get out of here soon, okay?” Renri whispered.

“Yes,” Ayame replied.

Their sad and happy time together flew by.

The place also had a labyrinthine rose garden, and by the time they arrived, they had the place all to themselves.

The only sounds came from Ayame's and Renri's footsteps and conversation, joining the birdsong and summer breeze and rustling leaves in a harmonious soundscape.

They walked down the rose arches across the maze.

They talked about preparations for the ceremony and about what they did while they were away from each other. They laughed and joked here and there, and soon it wasn't really a meeting at all anymore.

Is this all right?

Ayame thought it wasn't.

She was happy because she liked him. But he didn't feel the same.

“It's like we're already at our wedding, huh?” Renri excitedly held a hand out to her, unaware of what could be going through her mind.

It was the first time this happened. They had never held hands. He had poked her cheeks playfully and patted her head to comfort her, but he had never offered his hand like a gentleman before.

Caught up in the moment, Ayame grabbed his hand.

“It’s like we’re walking up to the altar.”

Renri smiled. Indeed, they looked like bride and groom walking down the flowery aisle.

I’m elated, but...

She was sad, too. She regretted it.

“Yeah... Okay, that’s over.”

She put an end to the play. She was beginning to feel empty. Yet Renri grabbed hold of her hand again and looked at her with worry.

“Why? Let’s practice.”

“We already did.”

“A bit more... Can’t we?”

“...”

“We need to...”

Renri’s eyes seemed to be begging her.

“Um... I know what you mean, but... We’re a fake couple, so we...shouldn’t act like a real one so lightly...”

I wouldn’t feel right if you ever found someone to truly hold hands with.

He frowned, unaware of her feelings.

“...Friends hold hands, too.”

“No way. I’ve never seen that. Especially not with a man.”

Perhaps she had been too brusque; he seemed wounded by that.

“I’m sorry. Okay, you’re free. I won’t touch you anymore, I promise.”

Her hand felt cold as soon as he let go.

He walked away; was he angry at her stubbornness?

He's leaving.

It was dark under the rose arches.

The sunlight filtered through, but one of them was still walking in the shadows.

He wasn't far ahead of her, but the distance seemed so great.

Ayame forgot all about what she had just done and ran up to him, unwilling to see him disappear into the darkness. She grabbed his arm.

She crawled her fingers up to his hand and grabbed it, the same way he had just done.

My face is burning. My fingers are burning. My heart is deafening.

Not even she understood what she was doing.

Don't fall in love with him!

She knew that, but the emotions within her were clashing too intensely for her reason to reach her.

"What's...the matter?" he asked.

Ayame was too anxious and ashamed to answer.

"Didn't you want me not to hold your hand?" He sounded hurt. "...You were so against it."

The words stabbed her chest.

Ayame was too cold even for the distance they'd always maintained. And even though she had hurt him, he was worried to see her upset.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

He took a step back and let her make the decision.

He was used to constraining himself, too.

"I'm...not against it...," she said. She had only acted the way she did because she didn't want her feelings to overflow.

It might be easy for you, but I couldn't do it.

“It’s not that I’m against... holding your hand. It doesn’t...disgust me... It’s just...”

He gently intertwined his fingers with hers and studied her face. “You were just being considerate?”

Ayame was afraid to look at his eyes. She feared her eyes would betray her and reveal her love.

“Yes. I mean, I would feel bad...for the person you might eventually fall in love with...”

That wasn’t really it.

It was not a lie, but it was not the biggest reason.

She was reproofing herself.

It was that voice again:

“Did you forget you’re sacrificing Ruri to save yourself?”

A voice that pierced her heart with chilling accuracy.

“You’re disgusting.”

Her own voice reviled her.

“She loves you so much, and you’re leaving her behind.”

That voice always appeared when she was too happy.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself for running away on your own?”

It told her to not forget about her sin.

“...Ayame?”

Renri was getting worried about her silence. She wanted to smile and reassure him that she was okay, but she couldn’t. Too many emotions attacked her all at once; she was suffocating.

The guilt strangled her. The lonely goddess awaited her back home even now.

Ruri wanted to come along, but Ayame refused and ran away.

Her poor little sister was all alone.

I know. I understand myself.

Now being with Ruri made her sad more often than not.

I'm a liar and a traitor.

The more time she spent with her sister, the clearer she understood how cruel Ruri's position was.

Why did her life have to be stolen from her so suddenly?

Why did she have to give everything for everyone else when no one would help her?

"Look, Sis, it's summer."

"I made it for you."

"I can do this because you're here with me."

The only day her sister would be freed from her lamentable role would be the day she died.

If Ayame really cared, she would stay by Ruri's side as much as possible. And yet, she chose to get out early by holding a sham marriage with Renri.

She felt she would break if she stayed alone with her sister. She wanted someone else's help. She wanted to change their current relationship.

Ayame was running away. She loved her sister, and she still wanted out.

Just remember how she says "Look, Sis."

Ruri brought about summer like it was magic—she became goddess for the sake of Ayame and Ayame only.

"Look, it's summer."

Her twin sister. The girl who was forced to let go of her happiness for the sake of everyone else's.

It was Ayame's duty to encourage her to play her part as the goddess.

"I make it summer because you want me to."

The coming of summer pained her every time.

Ruri.

"I don't want to make it for anyone else."

Because it made her face her own sin.

Ruri, stop.

"Ask me to show you summer, Sis."

I'm sorry, Ruri. I lied.

Her divine sister *was* her sin.

"I love you, Sis."

I love you, Ruri.

But all this time, what she really wanted to say, was...

“I hate your summer.”

I hate it, Ruri.

The words I couldn't speak were like a pile of corpses.

I hate the summer you were sacrificed to bring.

I hate this world. I hate the world that would make you suffer like this.

I don't like summer.

I only say so because I'm afraid they might replace you.

The adults are making me say it.

I don't like the season that took you away from me. I hate it.

I only pretend to like it in front of you.

I only pretend to like it in front of everyone else.

You know why?

Because I don't want them to kill you!!

...I'll lose you if you're not good.

I don't want them to kill you over a season.

I don't want to see you die.

Our family has been a mess ever since that day. Dad's hair is all white now.

Mom won't stop sighing. We can do nothing to alleviate your or our suffering.

And you, you've stopped looking at anyone else because I'm always

by your side.

You can't do that. Who knows when I might die.

I'll die protecting you. Right now, I'm almost certain I will.

Don't cling to me so much. It'll only make you sadder when it finally happens.

Besides, I'm actually a horrible person.

I hate you, but I love you; I want to protect you, but I can't.

I thought I'd chosen a fate fit for a coward like me.

I thought I'd chosen a future where I couldn't be happy.

I wanted us to be unhappy together, Ruri. Because we're sisters.

I thought that was the right thing. So, why?

Why am I trying to obtain love?

“Ayame... Don’t talk about a lover that doesn’t exist...”

Ayame came back from the pits of sadness and stared at Renri. Her words were stuck in her throat.

If only you weren’t so kind.

If only he were cold and heartless and didn’t care about her.

She wouldn’t have felt this way; she wouldn’t have had to hesitate like this.

“We’ll only be together for our contract, but we’re still friends. We’ll support each other for life...”

From his point of view, she was just an impudent, unlikable little girl. He could just as easily be frustrated at having to put up with her.

“Let’s say...we can hold hands. I’d like to do that when you’re sick, for example...”

Renri guarded her silently, like a tree sheltering people from the rain.

He gave her a peaceful break from her violent life.

He wanted them to do what they could to live serenely together.

“And I would want you to do the same for me...”

Why?

The kinder he was, the more she suffered.

Why did she have to choose someone she could fall for?

“I want us to be close enough to hold hands even when we’re old and wrinkly...”

I didn’t want to fall in love.

The world was unfair, and still she wished only for what was out of her reach.

Just as the land suffered for knowing spring, she would have endured better had she not known this warmth.

“...”

She had to say something; otherwise, he would be troubled. Ayame gave up and whispered, “If that’s what you want.” Renri’s face lit up.

“Thank you...Ayame.”

He didn’t have to thank her, but once he did, he held her hand tight. From the tip of his fingers, from the movement of his hand, she could feel his feelings for her.

His strong hand was refusing to let go—it was enough to drive a girl in love to madness.

I’m sorry.

The guilt filled her heart. Their relationship was entirely built on mutual trust, and Ayame was about to break that one support point.

How would he react if he found out?

“...Can we stay like this for a while?”

Ayame nodded. Their hands entered her field of vision. She wanted to strangle the bliss welling up inside her. This scene was the result of her deception, and it hurt.

Ahhh, we should’ve stayed under the rose arches.

The darkness could have hidden her rosy cheeks—and the guilt on her face.

“Look... If you really don’t want to do this, please say so.”

“Why...?” Renri’s voice was soft and hoarse.

“...I’m trying my best to keep up appearances when I’m with you... But I’m hiding a lot of my worst traits...”

“Trying your best...?”

“Of course. I don’t want you to hate me...”

Renri’s smile was shy, but playful. “My family already hates me. If you hated

me, too, I don't know what I'd do."

Joking around again—running himself down was his coping mechanism.

Ayame wanted him to stop it. She already knew how wonderful he was.

"You don't need to try so hard. I won't hate you. I'll be with you...forever."

Both were experts at keeping themselves bottled up—and that drew them together like a pair of magnets.

Renri sucked in a breath.

She knew. She was no stranger to containing her own feelings.

Just as she needed him, he needed her.



Even if our feelings aren't the same.

He needed her; she wasn't the only one who wanted him. This was beyond their act.

She had to hold back the tears of joy at the realization.

"Renri..."

She avoided saying anything too affectionate, but she couldn't resist saying something now that he seemed to want this.

"You really don't have to try. Because I... I would never hate you."

I really want to say "I love you."

"Not now, not ever."

How I wish I could.

The bridge connecting them was still unstable.

"Please believe me..."

That was the most she could say at that moment.

Yet she didn't realize that she had expressed her affection far more clearly than a simple *I love you* could.

"..."

Renri's eyes grew wide, and it was a few moments before his smile returned.

"...Thank you. I won't hate you, either." There was an odd look in his eyes, as though he comprehended everything. "I promise, even if you do end up hating me, I will never hate you. Ever." Then he asked a strange question. "And you don't know why, do you?"

I don't.

Ayame had no idea. Nothing except that there was a lonely hole in both their chests—and that it didn't matter if it took time for them to fill it.

I will dedicate my whole life.

No matter how long it took.

I want to live with him.

That was her simple, earnest desire.

“...Let’s go home, Ayame.”

That was the last time they held hands.

Ayame’s pain reached a fitting conclusion.

Time flowed forward to the year Reimei 20.

In the middle of the ocean was the archipelago of Yamato, where the Agents of the Four Seasons had become embroiled in a great commotion.

The kidnapped goddess had returned to the country, also called the Eastern Cherry Blossom due to the archipelago’s resemblance to a broken cherry blossom branch.

It had been ten years since young Hinagiku Kayo was last seen.

The insurgents, enemies of the Agents of the Four Seasons, had snatched the Goddess of Spring away.

Hinagiku went on her first miraculous journey accompanied by her loyal retainer, Guard Sakura Himedaka.

There were those who supported her and those who tried to get in her way.

While Spring took a rest in the Summer villa, the insurgents launched a surprise attack.

The attackers belonged to the extremist group New Year. New Year also launched an attack on the Autumn villa, the home of Agent of Autumn Nadeshiko Iwaizuki and her Guard Rindo Azami.

It was a repeat of Hinagiku Kayo's kidnapping ten years prior—New Year abducted the Agent of Autumn.

The drama further developed from there.

Spring requested Summer for help in rescuing the Agent of Autumn.

Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki and his Guard Itecho Kangetsu agreed with the plan.

Guard of Autumn Rindo Azami accepted the help.

All four Agents and Guards of the Four Seasons joined hands.

When New Year's negotiations with the Four Seasons Agency broke down, the story unfolded rapidly.

The Summer sisters and the Guard of Autumn headed to New Year's hideout to rescue Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

Spring found themselves under attack at the Four Seasons Agency building.

Winter was ambushed by another New Year squad on their way to the Agency.

On this same day, Summer was thrown into danger in a fight against the insurgents.

Ruri was shot by a sniper in the middle of the fight. Ayame, her Guard, was unable to fulfill her duty and let her dearest sister die.

Lamenting her sister's death, Ayame tried to follow in her steps, when Autumn arrived just in time to stop her.

Fortunately, Nadeshiko's powers were able to heal Ruri's body, and Summer was back together.

The fight ended thanks to Spring and Winter's efforts on the other side.

Spring fought back against New Year at the Agency building, and the insurgents were finally arrested once Winter arrived to give support.

The head of New Year and her aide, alongside a few other of their terrorists, were taken in—the battle ended with victory for the Four Seasons. So ended Spring's incident.

A grand finale for sure, but the problems weren't over.

Although it was only temporary, Agent of Summer Ruri Hazakura had died. And when the Agent of the Four Seasons died, the gods chose a replacement.

The young life most fit for the role among a clan that had survived from the era of the gods was transformed.

Who knew what the gods were thinking when they chose Ayame Hazakura as the next Agent of Summer.

The issue was the resurrection that had occurred after the new Agent of Summer was born.

Ayame's powers were not taken away.

Ruri came back with her powers intact, too.

For the first time in history, twin goddesses were born, and the Town of Summer was plunged into chaos.

Humans do not like a lack of precedent, especially in an insular village.

As expected, the girls were criticized for being unnatural.

Meetings were held to decide whether to treat this new thing as good or bad, unbeknownst to the two in question. And the resulting label given by the heads and inhabitants of the Town of Summer was far too cruel to the Hazakura sisters.

They were labeled a bad omen.

They were out of tradition. Their existence was a representation of their own selfish acts, or so it was said.

They demanded that the unnatural beings be closely monitored. Not only were their movements restricted, but it was concluded that they had to be careful not to pass this anomaly down generations.

The twin goddesses' weddings were canceled. This was judged to be the right way to handle the bad omen.

No one cared to respect Ruri and Ayame's wishes.

Right now, Ayame was lying languidly in her room in the Hazakura mansion.

The room was a mess, as if it had been ransacked—a representation of her mental state.

Time moved on without celebrating summer.

"I'm sorry, Ayame," Ruri cried to her sister, who was lying down like a corpse.

"It's my fault you're a goddess now. I'm sorry. I know no apologizing can make up for it... But I'm sorry... I... I... If only I... I hadn't..."

Ruri's tears fell on Ayame's face.

Why are you apologizing?

Tears rolled down Ayame's cheeks—though she didn't know which sister they belonged to. Either way, she felt so bad for Ruri, so miserable for herself, her chest was imploding.

Ayame knew her sister had done nothing wrong. It was her fault for not being able to protect her.

“...I should’ve stayed...”

She ended up ruining Ruri’s marriage, after she finally had opened up to her fiancé.

Nothing she did ever went right.

Was that just her fate?

“Stop. It’s not your fault, Ruri. C’mere.”

Ruri clung to Ayame in tears, the same way she had when her sister volunteered to be her Guard.

As she tried consoling Ruri, Ayame realized.

There was one good thing that came out of this.

Renri.

Perhaps this was a good turn of events for him.

It was wrong for him to end up with her, she felt.

The broken engagement was a blight on his honor, but it saved his future.

Yes. Let’s see it that way.

One day, he would find a fitting partner, and he’d forget all about her.

“Let’s just forget about everything, Ruri.”

If you did something wrong, karma would come back to bite you. That was how the world worked.

Maybe that was why she was destined to give herself for Yamato’s summer.

So she should accept her fate.

At least she got to experience love, if only for a moment.

Now she only had to go back to how she used to be—and let her feelings die.

After all, a goddess had no choice but to die for the world.

Nothing good could come of this.

Nothing good could come out of a god and a human being together.

That's what came to mind when I saw the note saying *Don't look for me*. What a cliché.

I hated this body. I couldn't even run after them. I'd given up on so many aspects of my life, but this—this was more than I could take. I crushed the note in tears. Time continued cruelly, forcing its duties on me.

I had to shoot that arrow into the sky even on the days I was left behind. Night wouldn't come otherwise.

I did not understand the need for this role in the past, but now I do.

There were people out there who couldn't cry or find a place to hide, unless it was night.

So today, unable to go look for my own family, I brought yet another night.

What could I have done?

Everything was still in the room. They fled with only what they had on their person.

Did they want to get away from me that badly? They could've said goodbye. This was out of the blue. I knew *she* would leave me eventually.

What I didn't expect was for *him* to leave me, too.

Why, Eken?

You never betrayed me, even when everyone else did.

Didn't you think I could break, and night would never come again?

Let me make this clear. Even if you hated me, I was the only one who could protect you two.

What were you thinking? You think you can just run away? You'll get yourself killed.

You should've told me if you wanted to stay away from me. I could've sent you off properly myself.

Was I the only one who considered us a family?

But even on the days I wished my life would end, I could not renounce my being as god.

"It's in your hands now, Eken."

I whispered like always as I shot the arrow.

What was the point in muttering the name of someone gone? It only hurts.

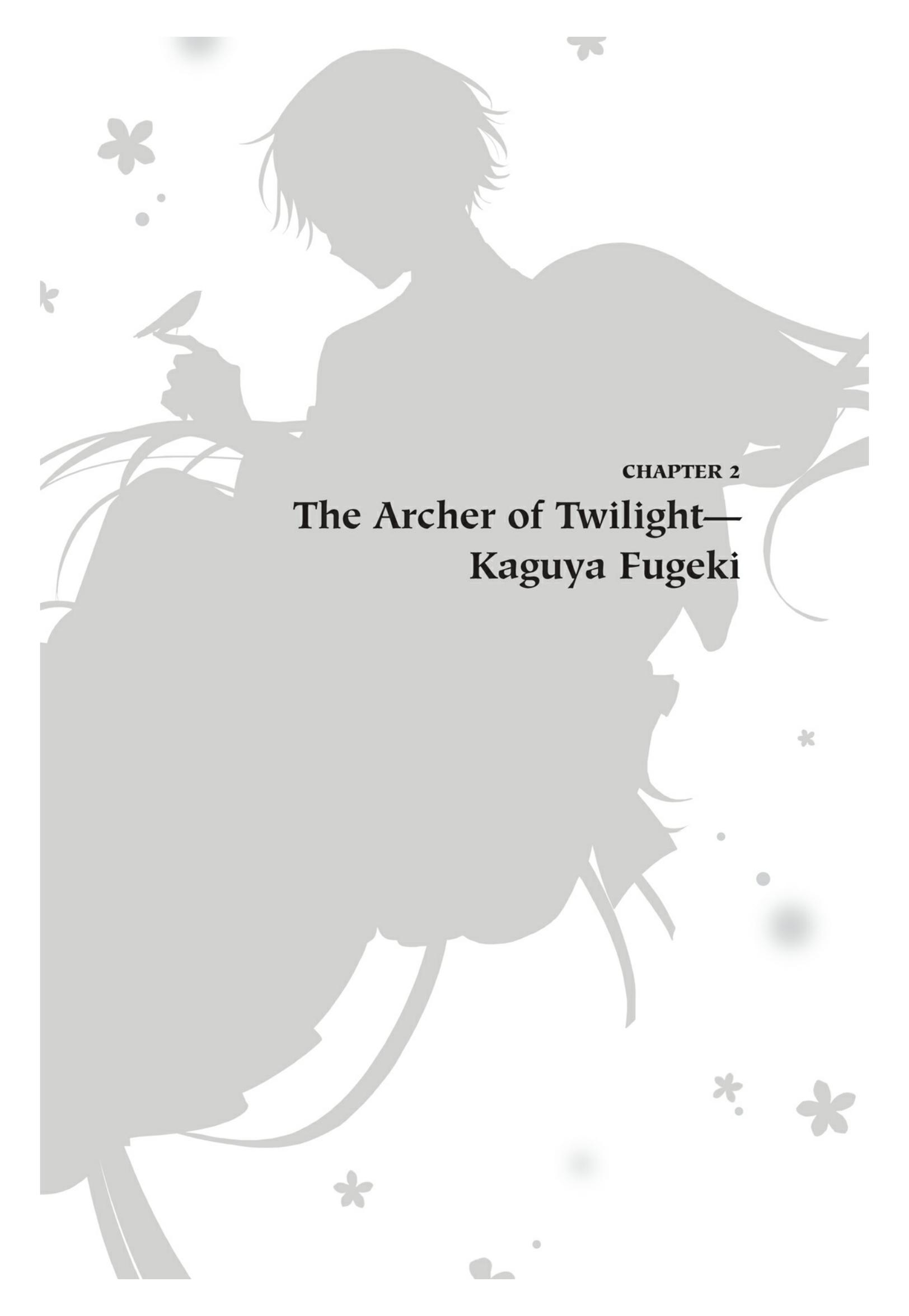
Before letting go of my consciousness, I hoped either of them would be back by the time I opened my eyes.

"..."

But my life was too lonely for that.

Seriously, how did it come to this?

Come back. Don't leave me alone.



CHAPTER 2

**The Archer of Twilight—
Kaguya Fugeki**

The summer wind enveloped the God of Twilight as he looked up at the midday moon.

“It’s almost impaled.”

He muttered sourly.

It was summer, Reimei 20. Ryugu, Yamato.

Yamato was divided into five big areas, starting from the north: Enishi, Teishu, Iyo, Tsukushi, and Ryugu.

The God of Twilight was in the famous Mount Ryugu at the southernmost edge of Yamato, standing before the entrance of a secret mountain path.

“I wonder if I could shoot the moon...”

From his point of view, the tip of the mountain appeared to be stabbing the moon.

The imagery made him ponder the idea. Perhaps it wasn’t something he should think, but he did come across as the type who would.

“I’m so tired... I don’t wanna work...”

He was in his midthirties. He looked generally unhealthy, his back a bit hunched and his expression lacking vigor. He had insomniac bags under his eyes. His aura was that of a cloudy sky. Perhaps the perfect way to describe him.

That said, there was something chivalrous about him—a simple, friendly smile from him could win over men and women.

“...They should give me a day of rest, at least.”

He had short, wavy hair and strong facial features. He had that refinement characteristic of older men.

He was about to climb the mountain, wearing a water-resistant jacket and stretchy pants.

“Why do I have to go up this stupid mountain every day...?”

“Lord Kaguya.”

“I wanna go home...”

“Lord Kaguya.”

“I wanna go home and drink...”

“Lord Kaguya!”

He was the perfect man on the outside, but it was wasted on the man he was inside.

“You shouldn’t be saying those things just before the holy ritual!” his partner shouted with frustration.

Kaguya turned to look at her—she was a young woman in her twenties.

“Mount Ryugu is a sacred mountain blessed with leylines. You should be praising its beauty, not calling it stupid. What if the mountain gods hear you?!”

Despite her anger, she was hardly intimidating.

Her face wasn’t well suited to strong expressions. She had short and unkempt brown hair, big eyes, a soprano voice, and the features of a pure and fragile maiden. The only part about her that could be intimidating was that she was taller than Kaguya, and her custom-made combat suit.

“...Tsukihi.” Kaguya was unfazed. He raised his eyes a little and continued complaining. “Just leave me alone, okay? I don’t care about any mountain gods.”

“Ahhh, you heathen! Heathen!”

They argued like little kids, and the winner was quickly decided.

“Yes. What, I can’t even grumble now, Miss Special Agent?”

“Ngh...”

Tsukihi lost. She immediately pursed her lips at Kaguya’s comment.

Special Agents were the equivalent of what another country might call the Secret Service. Yamato’s policing authority was held by National Security, and

its Special Agents worked to protect VIPs. There were seven other men on the same post as Tsukihi around them. Naturally, Kaguya was the one they were guarding. Kaguya tried to land another verbal blow on Tsukihi, but the other Special Agents admonished him before he could.

“Again with the childish arguments, Lord Kaguya?”

“Please stop grumbling every single day. Captain Aragami is right to chastise you.”

“She’ll drag you over there in the end anyway... Do you just want the attention?”

Their conversation established that Tsukihi Aragami was the leader of this Special Agent squad.

It was not an easy feat to become captain of a National Security VIP protection squad. It required quite a bit of talent. Kaguya should show more respect for her, and yet...

“Look, kids... Do I look like I want the attention? Can’t you see I don’t like her scolding? First of all, is there really a god in this mountain? I’ve never heard of it.”

““Heathen.””

All the men spoke in unison.

“Why must you say those things?”

“Please keep in mind your standing when speaking. Captain Aragami has said nothing wrong.”

“You must realize the sacredness of your job. This is the largest mountain in Ryugu, and this is where you can find the Ryugu Shrine. It is a miraculous place. We may not see it, but there must be a holy being in here. Remember, they say there are gods everywhere. The problem isn’t whether or not there really is a mountain god here.”

The lax disposition was shared among all of them. Attacked from all fronts, Kaguya stared at Tsukihi.

“...Why does no one ever take my side?”

The miserable expression on Tsukihi's face was replaced by a strained smile; she was amused by the discussion.

This sort of back-and-forth was all too common. Kaguya would complain. Tsukihi or her subordinates would chastise him. Kaguya would smirk. The usual routine for close associates.

"Lord Kaguya, I'm afraid to say, they *are* on my side, fundamentally. They're my subordinates."

"Much to my dismay. I'm surrounded by enemies... But oh well."

"That isn't true. They're my subordinates, and I am your Special Agent. Which means we are all your allies."

"..."

"You are a valuable individual, Lord Kaguya." Tsukihi spoke softly, the way one would to a child. "Your behavior affects everything, for good and bad."

Kaguya found somewhere else to look, but Tsukihi kept her eyes on him.

"Someone of your standing inevitably has big responsibilities. They may be hard at times... But please keep your decorum in this holy place."

Tsukihi's reverence made Kaguya remember who he was.

"You are the master of night in Yamato, Lord Kaguya Fugeki. The Archer of Twilight."

The ones who manifested the seasons with the powers granted by the gods were called the Agents of the Four Seasons.

The ones to manifest morning and night with their holy blessings were called the Archers of Oracle.

Both were collective names; specifically, the master of morning was the Archer of Dawn; the master of night was the Archer of Twilight.

Collectively, they were the Archers of Oracle.

All around the world, since ancient times, there had been Archers to bring light and darkness.

They took shifts at the sacred mountain to shoot morning and night.

The Archer of Dawn broke the night sky canopy to reveal the morning.

The Archer of Twilight broke the morning sky canopy to reveal the night.

Their arrows slashed the skies open, then vanished like magic.

The sun and moon were beyond the canopy; no night, dusk, or daybreak would reach the land if it was not broken. They were like regenerating domes around the land and sea.

The canopy was invisible and untouchable—only the Archers of Oracle could slash it open.

The magic dome was called the Guardian Canopy.

The Archers of Oracle were in charge of slashing open the Guardian Canopy every day to bring morning and night to the world.

Why was the world covered by the canopy?

This mystery had remained since the time of creation, but most accepted the legend: that it was formed from the favor and trials of the gods by their blessings and miracles.

The Agents of the Four Seasons only worked in their respective time of the year, but the Archers of Oracle had no rest. They climbed the holy mountain every day.

Rain or shine, freezing cold or sweltering heat—it didn't matter to the Archers. Dawn and twilight had to come every day.

"...I know, Tsukihi."

Kaguya had been the Archer of Twilight since a young age, and he had accepted his lot in life.

But that didn't change the fact it was difficult.

"But...you don't have to attack me that hard."

Of course he would want to grumble. He may be a god, but he was human, too.

“I didn’t mean to...”

Tsukihi panicked as sadness crossed Kaguya’s face.

“...Um, I wasn’t rebuking you for complaining, just what you were saying... I’m well aware your position is a difficult one to be in.”

Kaguya stared at Tsukihi with a frown.

“I’m sorry... I wasn’t considerate enough.”

“...”

“Did I make you mad...? I was just trying to be your guardian.” Tsukihi’s voice became smaller and smaller the longer Kaguya stayed silent. “...Did I aggravate you so much you don’t even want to answer...?”

She looked at him with sadness.

“...”

Still silent, Kaguya looked away from her and to her subordinates watching.

No one said anything, but they clearly wanted him to do something about it. Kaguya looked at Tsukihi again. She reminded him of a big dog that had just been scolded.

Now I’m the villain.

He couldn’t even be annoyed at this point.

“Tsukihi...”

This direct show of sincerity naturally dissipated all his negative feelings.

“We haven’t been together long, but you should know by now that you shouldn’t take me that seriously.”

As the others had already pointed out, his comments certainly weren’t appropriate.

He was divinity, and he shouldn’t have made light of the gods in a holy place.

The problem wasn’t who could be listening or not.

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault. Let’s move on, okay?”

Kaguya immediately apologized for his actions. He didn’t dislike his honest Special Agent, after all.

“But... What I said made you...”

“No, you did nothing wrong. I shouldn’t have said that at the foot of the mountain. I know you’re devout, and saying that hurt you...”

He liked her enough that he wanted her to smile again soon, in fact.

“I’m older than you; I shouldn’t have embarrassed myself like that. Sorry.”

“...”

“Tsukihi?”

“...Lord Kaguya... You don’t like talking to me anymore, do you?” Tsukihi frowned.

He realized this wasn’t going to be over quick, unfortunately.

“The issue was whether I hurt you just now, Lord Kaguya.”

“Ah, yes?”

“But you dropped the topic. We should be talking about it. But you gave up on scolding me. Please, go ahead. I want you to say what’s on your chest.”

Tsukihi Aragami was an exceedingly serious person.

Yeah. I forgot what she was like.

Kaguya got antsy by the second, while Tsukihi got gloomier by the second.

“No, no. See, I didn’t mean to give up on communicating!”

“...”

She was a sad puppy now, and Kaguya backpedaled furiously.

“It’s just, I... There’s so much on my plate... And I mean, you know, my mood tends to be a bit erratic, so to speak!”

“That I understand. I know how hard your position is...”

Nothing was working.

“And... Oh, the pressure’s low today, so my head hurts... And I’ve got a migraine, so I was just in a bad mood!”

“Is that so? Do you want some painkillers?”

“No, thank you. The point is, I didn’t mean to push you away. Got it?”

“Got it... Is that true...?”

“Don’t ask for confirmation right after you said *got it*. It’s true. I wouldn’t lie.”

Kaguya’s resting face was glum, but he tried hard to smile for her sake. His face muscles hurt.

Tsukihi watched him suspiciously for a bit before smiling again.

“If you say so...”

She spoke with a relieved tone and a bright smile. Kaguya wanted to close his eyes.

Kaguya had a darker personality, and Tsukihi was too bright for him.

Entirely unaware of his thoughts, Tsukihi said, “Um... Lord Kaguya.”

“Yes, Tsukihi?” he responded cordially, despite the fatigue.

“If you ever find me unpleasant... and want to make me quit...”

“What? You wanna quit?”

“No, no. I’m speaking hypothetically, but if you did...”

“I won’t,” Kaguya told her firmly, although Tsukihi’s smile seemed strained at the interruption.

“What I wanted to say was, if it ever happens...please give me a chance to make up for it.”

“...”

“There were other candidates for your Special Agent. A replacement could come if you wanted them to. But I want to protect you to the very end. I will serve you more diligently than anyone else. Even if you find me annoying, I want you to believe me...”

Her sincerity and dedication took Kaguya by surprise.

“...”

The grouchy god couldn't answer right away; his lips felt glued together.

“...Don't worry. There's no replacement for someone as skilled as you. And you're one of mine anyway, so the higher-ups won't think about it, either.”

“Yours...? You mean my faith? It's true I revere the living gods, but...”

“Yes, that. Your family is also comparatively devoted... Your faith must've been one of the reasons why you were chosen. In any case, our society is a closed one. They wouldn't let in someone who understands nothing about our domain. It's no wonder you were recommended to be my bodyguard. You won't be getting replaced unless something grave happens. It'd be hard to find someone like you. No need to worry about your career.”

The gods incarnate had enemies, but they also had believers, and Tsukihi was one of the latter.

Kaguya said that to try and give her peace of mind, but her eyes were doing that sad puppy thing again.

“Lord Kaguya... No, you see, I simply enjoy my time serving you. I like going up the mountain, looking at the beach on our way back, eating a lot at the mansion... I treasure every day.”

Why don't you understand? She was asking.

Kaguya recoiled.

“I just don't want someone who hasn't always been here with you to take you away from me.”

“...I imagine you say that from a place of faith, but please stop. I'm getting embarrassed...”

That was when the subordinates decided to put a stop to their endless conversation.

“Can we move on, Lord Kaguya, Captain Aragami?”

“We've been waiting here for too long.”

“I finished a whole cig while you talked.”

Indeed, this conversation was running long. Both hurriedly tried to get back on track.

“Y-yes, let’s move on.”

“Gotta be more careful. Sorry, guys. Let’s go.”

Tsukihi and Kaguya climbed the secret path up Mount Ryugu side by side.

The other seven walked a bit farther behind.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

A moment of silence. The men looked at each other.

“All’s well that ends well,” one said.

The rest nodded in response.

Then they began talking with each other.

“They’ve been clashing less lately, huh?”

“Yeah... They’re starting to get along, in their own way. That’s good.”

They had pretended to be fed up with Kaguya and Tsukihi’s exchange, but they were actually watching warmly over them.

As they were in the middle of a job, they stayed on watch for their surroundings while quietly continuing their discussion.

“Captain Aragami is great at her job.”

“Yeah, we don’t want Lord Kaguya to coop himself up in the mountain again... Hopefully he’s back in shape soon...”

The rest agreed.

“Yup... But it’ll take time. I hope they find a new Custodian before it’s time to leave Ryugu...”

“It won’t be easy. Not when he finally welcomed *us*.”

“We’ve got to go back to the way it was, though... The Agents of the Four Seasons have their Guards; the Archers of Oracle have their Custodians. That’s

how it's gotta be. We don't know how the current state of things might affect the rituals down the line..."

Their conversation underlined how strange Kaguya's current circumstances were.

As they said, National Security deploying a special unit to protect the Archer of Twilight was an extraordinary case. The Archers of Oracle had their own proper aides, just like the Agents of the Four Seasons.

These were called the Custodians, and they were also chosen from the bloodline.

But Kaguya's current guardians were the Special Agents led by Tsukihi Aragami. There was no Custodian to be seen.

"We must return to the proper way of things before something happens... Lord Kaguya needs his Custodian."

The Archer of Twilight's current state was unheard-of.

"...I'm sure National Security is very proud of themselves, but it's only a source of shame for the Fugeki clan."

"Yeah. Not to mention we're only here because Lord Kaguya doesn't want someone from the clan..."

"Well, that's their fault for handling it so badly. Honestly, they should be grateful that he didn't run off and take night with him."

The others nodded, then lowered their voices even further.

"So... What'd you think happened to the Custodian and his wife?"

"They haven't found them..."

"Or maybe they did and...took care of them, if you catch my drift."

"That couldn't be. Lord Kaguya already ordered us not to charge them with the crime if they did."

"...That was an official thing?"

"He basically told them to take them in and protect them. The Custodian could return if he wanted, too."

“He’s still waiting for the Custodian after all that...?”

The Special Agents turned to look at Kaguya’s hunched back.

There was an aura of melancholy coming from him.

Everyone wanted to sigh.

“No, stop. It hurts just to think about it.”

“I wouldn’t forgive them. I mean, he can’t even leave this place...”

“He may be a tough nut to crack, but he’s still a good guy...”

“Too good, if you ask me.”

“Why would he forgive them?”

“That’s the kind of guy he is... Let’s just show him our support.”

They all nodded.

“We can’t do it forever... But let’s be his allies while we can. Wouldn’t feel right otherwise.”

Tsukihi and Kaguya beckoned them to hurry up, as they were falling behind.

The other guardians stopped chatting and hurried up the mountain.

The chirping of the birds, the cries of the insects, and the gossiping of the humans—all those voices joined together as time kept on moving forward.

It was six thirty PM by the time they arrived at the top of the mountain.

Kaguya and the rest arrived at a protected area on Mount Ryugu, where the most precious flora and fauna of Yamato lived.

There were natural trails one could walk in some protected areas, but anything higher than level eight in Mount Ryugu was closed off.

The group entered the mountain—not using the public mountain trail—and stopped at level nine.

There was a spot artificially leveled and cleared of trees. That was their destination. There were public trails in this mountain full of leylines, but they took another way up.

As the locals were prohibited from entering there, they didn't encounter anyone on their way up. As was the case with the Agents of the Four Seasons, the public was not allowed to see the ritual of the Archers.

They took a break once they arrived. They rehydrated, stretched, and spent the time as they wished. Kaguya remained standing, instead of sitting on his waiting chair, and stretched.

Tsukihi brought him a sports drink.

"There's still some time. Please rest until then."

"Yeah. You drink some water, too. Don't want you dehydrated. We can't leave the mountain right away, after all."

"Yes. I must say...the mountain is so green already."

Tsukihi looked around at the lush foliage of summer.

Wind blew in between the leaves, gently caressing the sweaty skin of everyone there.

It was a pleasant afternoon.

"I didn't want spring to leave again...but this isn't so bad."

Kaguya nodded in agreement. "Summer's nice, too."

"It was just the first spring in ten years; it felt bad to let it go. It's already been a few months since the Agent of Spring suddenly came back to Mount Ryugu, huh..."

"Yeah, that was a shocker..."

"I could hardly believe it! It came out of nowhere; it was crazy out there!"

"Yeah, I remember your face when you came running to tell me sunset would be changing time."

"W-well, it's not like when it changes from autumn to winter! And I was so shocked... Sorry..."

“I hadn’t told you we didn’t need to do a major adjustment. It’s not your fault.”

They were discussing the timing of sunset and sunrise. The time the Archer of Twilight and the Archer of Dawn shot their arrows changed depending on the season.

Although the Agents of the Four Seasons and the Archers of Oracle never interacted, they were connected through this shift.

That said, the timing of sunrise and sunset didn’t have to be strictly kept.

Typhoons were frequent in Ryugu. There were times when the Agents couldn’t take a flight to Ryugu and had to delay the coming of the season. An absolute adjustment was only possible a few days after the Agent left.

Days were long in summer and short in winter.

Kaguya hadn’t carried out the ritual right away precisely because of this hour shift.

“...I thought the Agent of Spring would lose heart halfway through, but she really manifested it all the way to Enishi. That’s very commendable... I wouldn’t be able to do that.”

The respect in Kaguya’s voice was joined by pity.

Although the Archers of Oracle didn’t have much contact with the Agents of the Four Seasons, they were notified of the necessary information for their work. Kaguya hadn’t met the Agent of Spring, but he knew that the insurgents kidnapped her when she was six.

The Agents of the Four Seasons had a natural enemy: the insurgents.

These terrorists were not a monolith, but there were two broad types: the reformists and the radicals.

The reformists mainly tried to get the government to use the powers of the Agents more broadly for the world and the people—for the economy, for example, or to rescue people in disasters, to influence wars, and so on.

The Agents were only meant to bring the seasons and would not fulfill any other requests.

Inevitably, they clashed with the reformists.

Ten years ago, the Agent of Spring had been used as a bargaining chip with the government, and just this year, the Agent of Autumn had been used for the same purpose.

They had a lofty goal on paper, but in reality, they were just another violent group. The Agents were their outlet for violence and a means to oppose the government.

The radicals had simpler motivations, on the other hand.

Most of them were descendants of people who had tried to oppose the manifestation of the seasons for various reasons and been beaten back in battle. Due to these circumstances, there were generations of people who hated one particular season. That resentment was passed down through the years, leading their descendants to hunt the Agents.

The act itself had no meaning, as the supernatural system dictated that a new Agent was born the moment the former died. Yet they kept hunting generation to generation without rest, in a bloody and endless game of cat and mouse.

Thus, the radicals had more of a cultish reputation than the reformists.

Hinagiku Kayo, the girl kidnapped ten years prior, was still in training to become the Agent of Spring. She was living with the Agent of Winter at his Town in order to maintain the tradition of the Season Descent when the insurgents attacked.

The attack was meant to target the Agent of Winter, but Hinagiku offered herself to save the other three—Winter, his retainer, and Hinagiku's own Guard. Reformist insurgent group New Year took her away, and she received no outside help until she escaped their hideout on her own years later. Just this year, the independent organization managing the Agents, the Four Seasons Agency, finally announced the return of Spring.

Tsukihi murmured with pain in her chest:

“She really deserves so much respect. I hope the joy of the people has brought her some solace...”

“I wonder... The voices of the people rarely reach us.”

“...”

Kaguya didn't notice how sad those words made Tsukihi—after all, she was part of “the people” herself.

“Tsukihi, you weren't in National Security ten years back, were you?”

“No. It wasn't until after that.”

“I'd just gotten married back then, too...”

Tsukihi pursed her lips awkwardly at the word.

“After I heard that little girl had been kidnapped... Every time I saw one of the bigwigs, I asked what happened to her. I didn't think she would be gone for so long. There was no spring, so we knew she was alive, captive by the insurgents... When I first heard from the Agency about the return of spring, I was sad. I thought she had died...”

Kaguya paused for a moment before smiling.

“But she was still alive...”

His joy was audible in his voice.

“Indeed she was.”

Tsukihi smiled, too. She loved this warm side of her ward.

“I asked about it, and it wasn't that a new one had been born, but the same kidnapped girl came back. When I heard about it... This grown man was on the verge of tears, I'll tell ya...”

This man might have appeared grumpy, but in truth, he was kind.

“As a fellow god incarnate, the news brought me so much joy. I can't stay down in the dumps forever. She had it much worse—”

Tsukihi immediately cut off his self-deprecation. “You deserve credit, too,

Lord Kaguya.”

Her voice was strong; it allowed no reply.

“The Lady Spring had it hard, too, but you’ve had your own problems. And yet you keep going up this mountain every day to bring us night. Don’t put yourself down...”

Tsukihi’s words were full of the gratitude she felt. Kaguya looked taken aback, but he soon found the words he wanted.

“Listen... I was waiting for my Custodian to come back, but at this rate, we’ll need a pinch hitter...”

Tsukihi immediately understood what he meant to say.

“So until he comes back... What do you say? I think I could keep hanging in there with you...”

Her eyes grew round. She couldn’t keep the joy from showing on her face—but she tried anyway. “...Lord Kaguya.”

“Sorry, you don’t want to, do you?”

“Not at all! I’m glad to hear that.”

“Just thankful for the thought?”

“No... I...”

Kaguya lowered his gaze, and she grabbed his arm to get his attention again.

His hurt feelings overwhelmed her as their eyes met.

“If I said I would love to, would you make me your Custodian from today on?”

“I...”

“Our current arrangement is only temporary. We’ll have to leave eventually. I realize someone from National Security unrelated to the Fugeki clan couldn’t be a Custodian. There’s different organizations behind us. I don’t have the right... And the Fugeki clan doesn’t want a government agency to interfere even further. They take pride in being independent, like the Four Seasons Agency... Right?”

Kaguya didn't look disappointed; he knew the answer he would get.

"...Yes. That's right. I'm under supervision, and you're under the government..."

There was sadness in his voice.

"This arrangement is already a huge favor. It's the biggest concession the clan can make... It would be too selfish...to ask for more..."

"Lord Kaguya..."

"I'm sorry, Tsukihi. I just wanted to say it out loud... Just forget about it..."

Kaguya smiled so that she wouldn't worry anymore, but the mood around them was generally downhearted.

The god and believer remained side by side and kept on chatting.

Eventually, the time arrived, and Kaguya got to work.

"Lord Kaguya, if you please."

"Okay."

Finally, the ritual to bring night began.

Tsukihi and her men watched anxiously as Kaguya became the Archer of Twilight.

He breathed deeply, filling his chest with mountain air.

The difference between the Archers of Oracle and the Agents of the Four Seasons was that the former did not need a special ritual in order to use their large-scale powers.

They needed no song or dance, nor even a bow and arrow.

The only thing they needed was a holy mountain and its leylines, and the blood of the clans who contracted with the gods of morning and night in the ancient past. Gender didn't matter, but only the chosen ones could bear the

gods' blessings.

Beautiful light particles enveloped Kaguya's body, dancing in the air as they converged in the shape of a giant bow.

Kaguya grabbed the bowstring and aimed at the sky.

The sound of electricity strengthened as he pulled the string.

"Tsukihi, it's here."

The usual Kaguya was gone. Any acquaintance of his would notice the change on his face.

Kaguya meant to say that the divine entity had entered his body.

The Archers of Oracle were closer to the gods than the Agents of the Four Seasons, in a way.

They used their power by clearly allowing something else to take over.

The *Oracle* in *Archers of Oracle* meant, simply, a person who served the gods.

The *Fugeki* in the name of Kaguya's bloodline meant the same. The *fu* part took the character used for oracle women. The *geki* character was used for oracle men. In a sense, *Fugeki* was both their name and their job title. Every member of the clan had Fugeki as their last name. They were servants to the system of this world created by the gods, and the Archers of Dawn and Twilight stood at the zenith.

They gave their lives to bring day and night in the place of the gods.

Kaguya took a firing stance, and the servant of the gods, Tsukihi, commanded: "Release!"

The arrow of light flew into the sky.



The Archers of Oracle—what better way to describe them.

The light flared with a great boom, but only for a moment—the arrow immediately disappeared.

Kaguya softly collapsed on his back. Tsukihi ran to hold him up.

Although she was taller, he was heavier. Still, she did not budge.

With the help of a couple of men, she moved Kaguya to the rug they had laid out. His duty was done.

The Archers of Oracle lost consciousness upon releasing the arrow created through their divine power.

Apparently, it was due to the sudden release of a great volume of power, and it did not affect their health.

The Custodian's job was to protect the secrets of the ritual, as well as to guard the body of the unconscious Archer. Anyone would be afraid to leave their unconscious body in the hands of a stranger. The Archer needed to build a trusting relationship with their partner first. Back when Tsukihi's unit took over, Kaguya's face as he lay unconscious had been stern and severe.

"Lord Kaguya..."

Now, as Tsukihi eased the wrinkles on his brow, his face calmed. Kaguya had said she didn't need to do anything, but still, she held his hand to check his pulse. It also gave her peace of mind. Kaguya's breathing as he slept was shallow—he really could have been dead. She waited anxiously for a while, until the color of the sky above their heads changed.

"Sunset," said one of Tsukihi's subordinates, and the tension relaxed. Applause followed.

Kaguya's arrow successfully tore apart the sky and revealed the night canopy.

The blue sky slowly turned dark, gradually changing to red.

"...All good?"

Tsukihi moved her head at the sound of the hoarse voice.

Kaguya had finally woken up.

Tsukihi smiled. “Yes. Congratulations, Lord Archer of Twilight. Another night in Yamato is here, thanks to you. It’s a beautiful dusk.”

Kaguya looked at Tsukihi, bright under the sunset rays, and smiled.

The group remained there until the light was so dim they could hardly tell each other apart. Then they got ready to leave.

Kaguya’s job was done now. Now he could go back home and spend his free time like any other person before going to sleep until daybreak. Then, in the afternoon, he would have to go back to the mountain, and so the endless cycle went.

“Must be around time for Kaya to wake up and get ready.”

“The Lady Dawn?”

“Yeah. Or maybe she’s still asleep, considering how much Yuzuru complains about how hard she is to wake up.”

“The Lord Custodian said so? She certainly didn’t seem the type...”

“She’s good at keeping up appearances, unlike me. I’ve known her longer, though, so I know what she’s really like... I think she trusts Yuzuru a great deal. The job requires you to follow protocol, but you gotta have some time to relax.”

Tsukihi wondered if he trusted her, then.

“Tsukihi?”

“Ah, uh... I should turn on the flashlight.” She changed topics to ease her anxiety. “The mountain gets pre...tty... da...”

She trailed off.

Something dreadful had appeared when she turned the flashlight on.

“Huh...?”

She saw something in the direction she just so happened to be pointing. At

first, she thought a small mountain had appeared.

It was that big. It was hairy, its breathing was heavy, and its eyes were bright.

She couldn't see its full form in the dark.

"...!"

But she immediately knew it was a wild beast.

Tsukihi's agitation lasted only a moment. "Lord Kaguya!!"

She got a hunch the thing was coming after them, and she tackled Kaguya away before the mysterious creature could crash into him.

He tried to minimize the impact, but dull pain hit his body.

"Enemy at three o'clock!" Tsukihi called while swiftly grabbing hold of her gun and firing warning shots. The bangs echoed in the darkness.

"...?!"

Kaguya tried to ask Tsukihi what was going on, but he then noticed the thing's presence and immediately gulped his words down.

A bear?

Bears didn't live in Ryugu.

A boar, then?

It was too large. The beast ran to the trees, but only to hide; they could hear its heavy footfalls around them. Tsukihi gave another command, and a volley of gunshots rang out.

The beast didn't give any cries of pain—it only kept running through the grass. They could hear growls, but not enough to identify the animal. It was still after them.

"Keep firing warning shots! Lord Kaguya! Can you stand up?"

Tsukihi's hand emerged from the darkness to grab Kaguya's arm and forcefully pull him up.

"Sh-should you be firing guns?!" he asked. "This is a protected area! Holy land!"

“I understand killing would be bad, but we need to neutralize it or it will get in the way of tomorrow’s ritual! We’ll make sure not to harm any other creature! Just follow my directions!”

“O-okay.”

One of the agents used the pause in their conversations to yell, “Listen!”

“Formation Lizard!” Tsukihi called. “Three of you follow me, the rest take Lord Kaguya to the shed on level eight!”

The other Special Agents were moving before they even received the order. They surrounded the confused Kaguya and took the emergency formation. He watched Tsukihi’s movements from his position within the human wall.

She took two survival knives out of her uniform, one in each hand, and charged. Kaguya gasped; she was going for close-quarters combat?

“Lord Kaguya! Let’s move! We must go down to the eighth level!” one of the men yelled, and immediately, others grabbed Kaguya by the armpits to drag him away. Tsukihi got farther and farther away.

“There’s too many of you over here!” he shouted. “Go help her! Tsukihi may be strong, but she can’t take that down on her own!”

They yelled back at him.

“The captain was once in Porcupine!”

“Not to mention one of the elite soldiers! That’s no simple feat!”

“We follow her because she’s earned it! Trust her!”

They spoke of her as a special entity, and they had referenced multiple things that would convince anyone who knew what they were.

National Security was a government organization with policing authority in Yamato. They were tasked with protecting the land and its people.

Inside National Security, there was a special squad called Porcupine.

An anti-terrorist squad—what would be called a task force overseas. Being accepted into it at all was overwhelming proof of her strength, and Tsukihi had achieved a further accolade within it.

She was an elite soldier—the best of the best.

National Security had an “elite soldier training course,” a program known for its hellish coaching to instruct soldiers with the strongest bodies and minds.

Most dropped out. Very few people within National Security held the title of elite soldier, and every other person in the organization looked up to those who did, no questions asked.

The men were proud of their captain.

“She’s the first female elite soldier!” one said. “Don’t sell her short!” He brushed off Kaguya’s worries.

Tsukihi would be very glad to hear that, if she were here.

“I know, but...!”

Kaguya looked back; it was too dark to see. He could only hear the sound of battle.

“Listen to her! You would only be disgracing her if you go back!”

“Yes, and we would be in trouble if something happened to you, too! She’d kill us! Just come on, and let’s go! Run, if not for yourself, then for her and us! You don’t even have to run, just pick up the pace!”

“Damn it...!”

As Kaguya was pulled away, he gave up and ran.

Running down a mountain in the dark was dangerous, but fortunately, everyone reached the shed on level eight unharmed. Still, the tension did not dissipate.

“I’ll notify National Security of the situation. We’d be better going farther down...but let’s wait here for now.”

“The base is at the foot of the mountain. Surely they’re within range?”

“Anyone heard anything from the captain?”

“Not yet. Lord Kaguya, take a seat. No need to walk all over the shed.”

While everyone else was busy, Kaguya sat on the bench.

As the eighth level was open to the public, the shed was big and clean.

The lights were kept dim in case any more beasts would be drawn to them, but it was still better than the darkness he had brought. Not better enough to rest, though.

Tsukihi. Guys.

The faces of those left behind came to mind.

Kaguya could do nothing but watch his clenched fists and let the time flow helplessly. He punched his knees again and again, frustrated by his own powerlessness.

Calm down. This unit's made up of the cream of the crop from National Security.

Tsukihi and the other three had to be fine. He hoped.

How much time had passed since they reached the shed?

“Call from the captain!” one of the men called, finally receiving some news. “No casualties on our side, but the enemy got away!”

“They’re okay?! Is anyone hurt?!”

The call was short, relaying only the essentials. Kaguya didn’t get to hear Tsukihi’s voice.

“They only got some scratches. Getting you to safety is the priority, so we’ll wait for them to come here and we’ll escort you down the mountain. I think we’ll ask the local hunting association to lend a hand later.”

“I see... I won’t rest easy until I see they’re safe, but at least I’m glad they’re alive...”

“Please rest easy, Lord Kaguya. You’re pale.”

“...I mean, I’d never seen a beast like that... I’m just so worried... I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

The man smiled a little at how overly worried Kaguya was about them.

“The captain said something else: *We will hunt it down if we come across it on the way down.*”

“So they let it go on purpose?”

“No, not at all. I just think they were trying to capture it alive, in consideration for what you said.”

Kaguya regretted his words. He’d told her not to use guns, but he hadn’t been thinking.

There was a good reason why—even just firing warning shots could hurt or kill other creatures in the protected area. And killing in a holy place would taint it, at least according to religious ideas. The Archers of Oracle were deeply tied to the mountain. Staining it in any way was strictly prohibited. Tsukihi, believer in the gods incarnate, knew this as well.

Her main reason for switching to knives was probably concern for the other creatures, but she didn’t want to kill the mysterious attacker, either. And that allowed it to escape.

“We should’ve killed it right away, under normal circumstances. It attacked a person—and not any person, but one in charge of bringing night to Yamato.”

“...I was too naive... Sorry. I’ll apologize to Tsukihi.”

“As long as you understand. The captain herself insisted not to kill it, too, and you said nothing wrong, considering your position. But I don’t think we can let it go this time. We’ll have to get help from the hunters... Apparently, it’s a wolf.”

“What...?”

“Despite its size, they said it seemed to have wolf features.”

Kaguya tried to picture a wolf, although he’d never seen one in person.

“Okay, but... there’s no wolves in Yamato, is there? Except for in zoos, obviously...”

“That’s right. And that is what makes it scary... In any case, let’s ask the captain the details once she gets here.”

Soon after, Tsukihi and her men reunited with them, and they got to go down

the mountain together.

As Kaguya's group left the mountain, another National Security squad entered the mountain accompanied by the local hunters association. They tried to track down the wolf, but it didn't leave any trace, even after the rampage at the holy site.

The search ended in vain, and the wolf continued to appear to torment Kaguya and the rest.

They were all at a loss.

There were records of wolves living in Yamato in the ancient past, but they were extinct in Reimei 20. In other countries, they were a protected species due to their decreasing numbers.

This beast shouldn't be here at all, much less constantly showing up to harry the Archer of Twilight. This wasn't something to be taken lightly.

The attacks on humans also raised the chances of it having rabies. It was bigger than an adult man and posed a great threat to the public—so Mount Ryugu was closed off. The people were safe outside the mountain, but Kaguya couldn't afford the luxury.

He had to go up to the sacred spot every day, no matter what.

Security surrounding the Archer of Twilight was boosted, and they had to investigate why a wolf that shouldn't exist in Yamato would be on this mountain.

No wolves had escaped from any nearby zoos. The theory was that an illegal animal dealer had lost one somehow, but then, a different possibility was brought up.

“Couldn't it be because of impacts on the ecosystem due to Spring's absence?”

The entire environment of Yamato had been affected.

The ecosystem could be damaged by pollution and changes in the

environment.

For example, when humans burned or cut down trees, the animals living there lost their homes and food, and in the worst cases, this could even lead species to extinction.

Humans, too, were affected by changes in the environment.

Eating fish born in polluted waters had negative effects that would spread from prey to predator.

Indiscriminate hunting was also a cause of environmental destruction.

External factors piled up with a snowball effect to wreck the ecosystem.

One of Yamato's Agents of the Four Seasons was kidnapped by the insurgents, and the tragedy left ten years of no spring—only the cycle of summer, autumn, and winter remained.

Summer and autumn remained unchanged, while winter was longer to cover spring's absence.

Abnormalities in Yamato's ecosystem had already been reported by Reimei 20.

Plants had been lost in the long periods of cold, and animals died unable to secure food. The number of endangered species rose.

That wasn't all—anomalous life forms appeared.

By the fourth springless year, reports of enlarged fish, animals, and plants began to pop up.

There were also behavioral changes.

Creatures that were normally serene attacked in populated areas, and reports of mass suicides rose each year.

Although the cases weren't abundant, the Yamato government had been fielding questions on these topics for the past ten years.

Considering the current state of Yamato, the wolf could be explained in this way as well.

At this time, that was only one of the many possibilities.

There were plenty of other absurd theories, and these meetings were for discussing all the possibilities.

This particular theory got attention not because it was unlikely, but because it was intriguing.

The Archer reported the wolf's appearance again after that, but considering it only appeared in the darkness and vanished like a shadow, they named it the Dark Wolf.

The case came to be known as the Dark Wolf mystery. The Archer's group continued dealing with it on-site, when other associations related to the gods incarnate began to investigate all avenues, including the environmental changes.

Several organizations rallied to solve this mystery: the Fugeki clan, who raised and protected the Archer of Twilight and Archer of Dawn; National Security, who held policing authority and protected the people of Yamato; and the Environmental Protection Agency, a government organization.

However, this was only at the beginning. Once talk of environmental destruction came up, the Environmental Protection Agency requested that an expert in the seasons join them.

Thus, the Towns of the Four Seasons became involved, as did the Four Seasons Agency, who aided the Agents of the Four Seasons' efforts. People from both organizations were summoned.

Now that the two organizations who oversaw Yamato's Agents were involved, data on them was shared. The truth behind what happened was concealed in order to keep them safe, but without the full story, a few people saw the gods incarnate's actions as problematic. Discussions derailed, and the worst idea popped up.

What if it was divine punishment?

What if the Gods of the Four Seasons were angered by the lack of decorum and diligence of their human representatives?

The wolf was a clear, visible threat, but trouble had come up before this.

What if the changes in the environment were but a shred of the gods' wrath, and the worst disaster was to come?

The believers of this theory listed out the egregious actions of the Agents: The springless decade of Yamato.

The two years of that decade that Spring had simply abandoned her duties due to psychological problems.

Summer forcing Autumn to revive a dead person.

The birth of twin goddesses as consequence.

Autumn's choice to revive the first Summer when another Summer had already been born.

And Winter at the root of the incident ten years prior. Spring's absence was Winter's fault.

All Agents in this generation were selfish, they said. Their reckless actions had brought on the gods' anger.

The discussions often devolved into excoriation.

It was easy to understand the theory had only been brought up by those who disliked the current generation. Immediately, others objected, saying it was disrespectful to condemn the gods incarnate so unilaterally.

The discussion turned heated as new factions formed, regardless of former affiliations. This topic saw greater attention than talk of why a supposedly extinct wolf would appear on Mount Ryugu.

The more contentious a topic was, the easier it was to lose the point in discussing it.

Theories of a wolf escaping a dealer or poacher were left in the dust by talk of

environmental destruction and divine punishment.

Unfortunately for the Agents of the Four Seasons, leaders within the Towns began supporting such theories.

The families who managed the Towns, the bigwigs, had authority in every sector.

Few people inside the Towns and the Agency could go against the leaders of their homeland. There were members from the general population in the Four Seasons Agency, but many got in through the Towns.

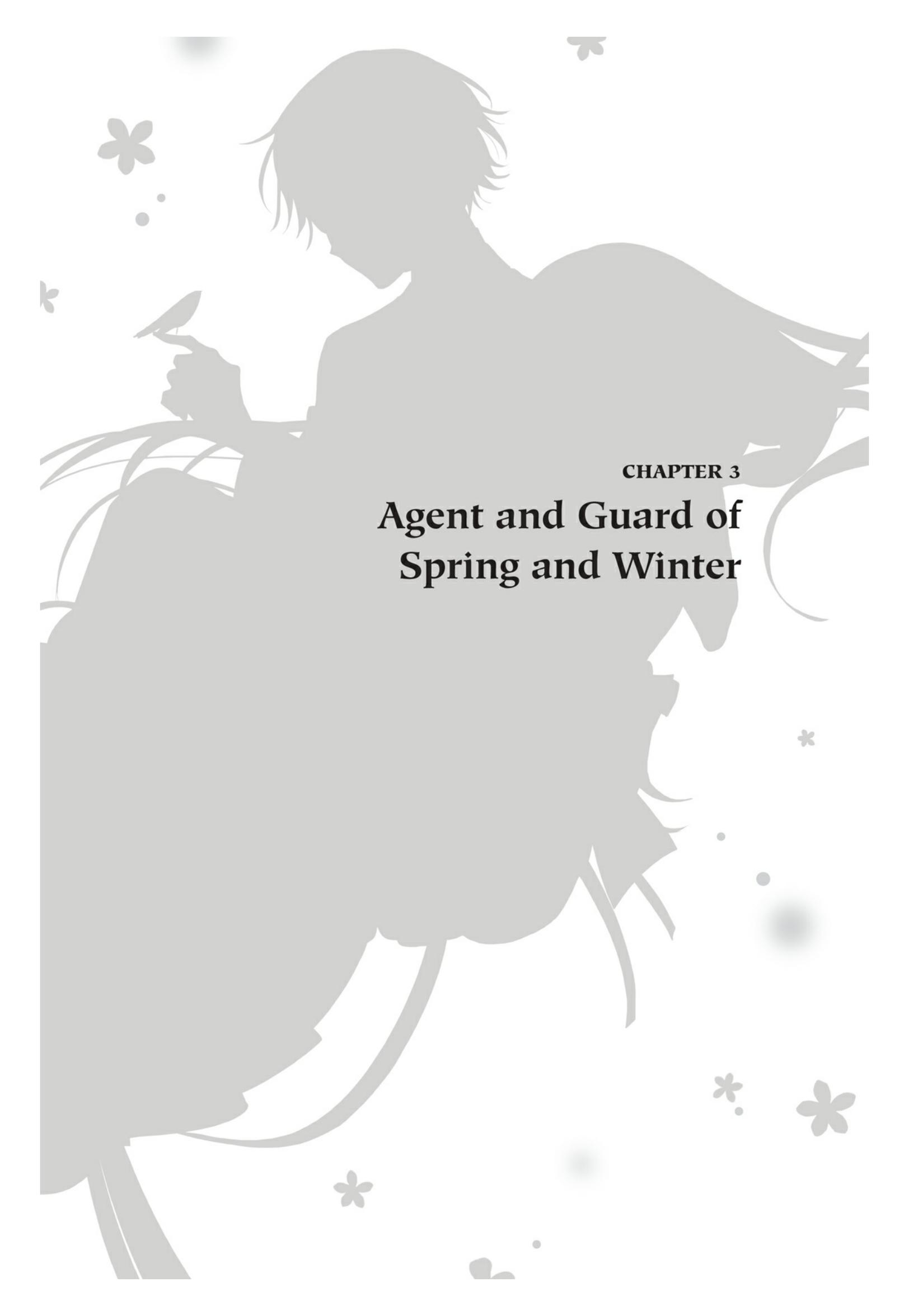
The Towns were small enough that being an outsider made it nearly impossible to succeed there, or even live there at all. And it wasn't only on an individual basis—entire clans could receive a bad reputation.

The vertical structure of this society caused some supporters of the Agents to eventually switch sides. It was the way of things; many people inevitably side with those in power no matter how outlandish their ideas might be. The sycophants were more concerned with the goodwill of the most influential people than protecting the Agents.

And so the trend in the Four Seasons society favored the divine punishment theory as the correct one.

Eventually, the Agents began to be blamed for things that had nothing to do with them at all.

After all, the pain didn't matter to the ones causing it.



CHAPTER 3

**Agent and Guard of
Spring and Winter**

Each Agent had their own home base.

The Towns for each of the Agents' bloodlines were divided by region.

The Town of Spring was in Teishu. The Town of Summer was in Iyo. The Town of Autumn was in Tsukushi. The Town of Winter was in Enishi.

None of them could be found on a map.

The Archers of Oracle had their bases in the north and south.

The Archer of Dawn had the sacred mountain in Enishi, while the Archer of Twilight had Mount Ryugu.

The story now shifts to the base of the Agent of Spring—the center of Yamato, Teishu.

July 22, Reimei 20. Summer solar term: Taisho.

The summer sun had brought pleasant warmth to the world, and the season had drawn the people of Teishu outside in droves.

The crowds were particularly dense in this famous leisure facility in the capital of Yamato.

The amusement park had only opened one hour ago, and there was hardly a quiet corner to be found.

Two girls stood before the entrance gates, clearly overwhelmed by the crowds.

“Saku...ra...”

“Don't worry, Lady Hinagiku. I will protect you at all costs.”

Their long hair swayed in the summer wind.

The two were dressed in fashionable clothing for girls their age, and they were clearly close.

One girl's hair was a luxurious amber color, waving like angel wings. Her eyes were a rare citrine, her cheeks rosy, and her lips like cherry. She could have been sculpted personally by the gods—she was Yamato's Agent of Spring, Hinagiku Kayo.

“So...many...people...”

Her peculiar, stuttering manner of speech caused many to think she was younger than she was. Her voice was sweet as sugar, its timbre charming like the Kalavinka's song.

“...Should we not have come here?”

The girl who responded had hair like cherry blossoms in the dark, a silky smooth gradient of jet-black to ashen cherry. She was so beautiful even the flowers would flush, and her big, catlike eyes were intently set on her Lady Hinagiku.

“No, don't say...that. Hinagiku's...happy to...be out...side.”

It was the first time Spring visited an amusement park—invited by Winter, no less.

The place was near Teito, base of Spring in Teishu: Teishu Fairytale Kingdom.

The theme of the park was a fictional fairy-tale land.

There were five towns inside Fairytale Kingdom, divided into the elements of sky, forest, sea, light, and dark. It had all the typical diversions of an amusement park, as well as restaurants. There were mascot characters for every town that were quite popular with the visitors.

The two girls were waiting for Winter.

To organize the chronology: the Dark Wolf mystery in Ryugu was already a hot topic of debate, and over at the Town of Summer, the Hazakura sisters were having a hard time after their engagements were canceled. These two, however, didn't yet know what had happened to Ruri and Ayame.

“...Lady Hinagiku, you don't have to force yourself to be here if you don't

want to. We can still go back. We wouldn't want you to get sick because of this. I'm sure Rosei and Itecho will understand."

"N-no! Hinagiku...wants to...hang out."

Hinagiku's expression fell for a moment hearing that. She clung to Sakura without thinking. Sakura was taken aback by the hug, but she embraced her back.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

Under the blazing sun, a hug was a little too warm, but that wasn't enough to discourage them at all. Sakura rubbed Hinagiku's back.

"Yeah. You've been looking forward to this all morning... And you want them to see you dressed up for this outing, don't you?"

Hinagiku raised her head from Sakura's arms.

"You...know how...Hinagiku...feels?" asked the dainty girl shyly.

The sight was a gut punch to her retainer. "Of course. There's almost nothing I don't know about you, Lady Hinagiku."

"Why...?"

"Because I love you."

Hinagiku happily accepted Sakura's proud declaration of love and returned it.

"Hinagiku...also knows...you because of...love. You said...those clothes...didn't fit...you, but they...do. You look...cute. You're cute, Sakura."

Hinagiku stared at Sakura's clothing. She was wearing a skirt for once. Sakura blushed and fidgeted at the compliment as Hinagiku watched with a smile.

"Ummm... Trying this on was a challenge, but it was worth it to hear you call me cute. You look great, too."

"Hinagiku...always looks...good thanks...to your...choice of...clothes."

Despite the compliment, Sakura got self-conscious. "Lady Hinagiku...," she began, just in case, "are you sure you're okay with me choosing your garments all the time?"

“Very sure. Thank...you for...doing that...Sakura.”

The bright look in her eyes tugged at Sakura’s heartstrings, and she hugged her lady tight once again.

They let each other go but kept their hands together as they waited for Winter.

“Back on topic, Lady Hinagiku... Most people in the amusement park will be harmless civilians. I will eliminate any threat before you even realize it, so rest assured and enjoy your day out. Although it doesn’t sit well with me, I will make sure you have a perfect day with Rosei.”

“Thanks...” Hinagiku nodded, then realized. “Eliminate...?”

It was a strong word.

Sakura nodded boldly. “I will eliminate them.”

Hinagiku stared at her for a while, picturing different scenarios of what that could mean. Frightened, she shook her head.

“S-Sakura...you shouldn’t...do bad...things... Even to bad...people.”

Sakura frowned and sighed. *She still worries about others after all that happened?*

Sakura reminisced a little about what had happened a few months ago.

Hinagiku had encountered the one who had abducted her and attempted to raise her as a surrogate mother with a twisted sense of love. She had almost been kidnapped a second time, but fortunately, she was safe in the end.

Hinagiku could afford to be crueler to those who harmed her, and yet she refused.

That is one of her best qualities, but it also puts her in danger.

“Okay? Don’t...do it.” The Goddess of Spring watched her retainer for confirmation.

A flowery fragrance tickled Sakura’s nose; the Agent of Spring didn’t need perfume.

That smell could make Sakura do anything she wanted.

But immediately, she came back to her senses and argued back, for the sake of her lady's safety.

"L-Lady Hinagiku... That would be too kind, and we can't just let bad people walk all over us..."

"Hinagiku's...not just...thinking about...the bad...guys."

"What do you mean?"

"Hinagiku doesn't...want you to...do bad...things. You could...get hurt."

"Lady Hinagiku..."

Ahhh.

"There are...bad people who...you can't...reason with. That's what...Ms. Misuzu...said. That...no matter how...much you...ask for...them to stop, they...wouldn't. There's really...really scary people...out there. And Hinagiku...doesn't want...you to go...and get on...their bad side...willingly. Hinagiku's...so...so scared...about that...happening to...you."

You are always so kind.

She worried about retaliation against Sakura if she was too violent. She knew firsthand how dreadful human malice could be. Even though trauma had left her mentally younger than she was, she was very thoughtful in some ways. Hinagiku knew fully well how extremely devoted Sakura was as her Guard.

"Hinagiku...loves you...and doesn't...want you...to get...in danger. Don't...do anything...scary...if you don't have to...please."

Although she certainly had sympathy for the theoretical wrongdoers, her true intentions lay in her worry for her Guard. Sakura's wish to protect her lady got even stronger, and she rushed to reassure her.

"Apologies. I didn't explain well enough. I only meant I would be taking away any suspicious persons or insolent individuals who would try to talk to you without permission. I would hand them over to National Security."

"Sakura... Okay. Thank...you." Hinagiku sighed in relief.

"As for any insurgents, I would make them regret ever having been born."

Hinagiku's sigh became another gasp. "S-Sakura... W-were you...listening...?"

Sakura nodded with utmost seriousness. "I was. You're kind, and that's why I must be cruel in turn and maintain the balance."

"Y-you...missed the...point..." Hinagiku despaired.

"It's a shame I couldn't bring my blade to this place. At least I got permission to hide a dagger and gun under my skirt. I have to protect you, so I needed to be armed."

Sakura flipped her skirt slightly at Hinagiku to show her the thigh holster. If anyone happened to get a peek at it, it was designed to look like any regular garter.

"Eep! Don't...do that! A-awawa..."

Hinagiku hurriedly pushed Sakura's skirt down, and Sakura's courage faltered. She took pride in her position as Guard and swordswoman. The role tended to bring out her bravado, but she realized her error and blushed.

"Um... I am wearing shorts underneath... You see, Lady Hinagiku, kicks are a big part of the Kangetsu style of fighting..."

"Still! You shouldn't...do that!" Hinagiku scolded, and Sakura sheepishly lowered the hem of her skirt.

"I'm sorry...for the improper behavior."

Hinagiku diligently readjusted the skirt herself, reversing their roles as lady and retainer. Sakura was elated by her flustered kindness.

"Don't forget...you're a girl! And today...Lord Itecho...and Lord Rosei...will be coming."

"Y-yes... I'm sorry. Ummm... I will say, although I came prepared, I will try not to make those preparations necessary. I will follow your will. I am not some disobedient mongrel."

"It's...not an order...and you're...not a dog."

"Lady Hinagiku..."

"Sakura...you are Hinagiku's...most beloved...friend."

Her lady's words warmed Sakura's heart.

"Yes, Lady Hinagiku. Despite everything I said, I vow not to do anything that could worry you. I've already discussed security for today with Itecho, countless times. And he said they will keep us safe under Winter's wing. I hate to say it, but we can trust them more than anyone. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes... Hinagiku doesn't...doubt that. Winter has...done so much...for us. And they're...still watching...out for us, right? Hinagiku...can already...see a...few people...here. They're always...dressed dif...ferent, though. It...takes some...time to...tell."

Sakura, surprised by her perceptive eye, looked around.

"Yes, Winter's escorts will be following us at all times. Agency staff is monitoring the surveillance systems here. And the two assigned to us are on standby at the parking lot."

"It feels...bad. They're...working so...hard while...we're out having fun."

"Winter requested it. And don't forget you have your Guard by your side."

"That's what...makes me...feel the safest."

Sakura grinned and held her little hand tighter.

Three at the east, two at the west.

She counted the number of escorts while smiling at Hinagiku.

One at the front and two behind.

As the pair walked, the escorts trailed at a distance and blended in with the crowds.

Winter's escorts are good. I wouldn't be able to tell they're here if I didn't already know their faces.

The presence of a perfect security formation gave her peace of mind, but at the same time, she felt sorry and a little frustrated.

If only we had something to this level...

She imagined her ideal scenario—maybe it would come one day, but that day wouldn't be anytime soon.

The lady and retainer of Spring had few allies.

For starters, the Town of Spring gave up on finding Hinagiku after three months—she could not trust them after that.

They had been betrayed by the Spring staff at the Four Seasons Agency more recently, too, when the reformist organization New Year bought them out.

New escorts had replaced the traitors at the Agency, but she did not trust them.

The events furthered her misgivings about everything around them.

Winter was the only lifeline they had, after a reunion a decade in the making.

Rosei and Itecho had secretly sent two Winter agents to protect the lady and retainer of Spring before their reunion, but now, they had been officially deployed in the same capacity. The measure, of course, was an exception among exceptions.

Hinagiku could talk without fear with the pair who escorted them during the events back in spring, too, which made Sakura more than grateful.

Sakura was constantly worried about how to protect the girl who had been kidnapped ten years prior.

The rumors about divine punishment and environmental issues have been getting Lady Hinagiku down again.

The Dark Wolf had attacked the Archer of Twilight, and one possible cause was the absence of spring. From there, the theory had grown to “divine punishment.” Agency staff had notified them about both theories.

The other seasons must’ve been told, too.

She didn’t need to ask to realize that Rosei had invited Hinagiku on this outing in order to cheer her up after hearing the rumors. He probably wanted to see how she was holding up, too.

They had accepted the invitation in consideration of how much Winter had done for them, too.

And I want her to cheer up. It is her first summer after completing her duty.

Sakura wanted Hinagiku to have a calm, pleasant time. Her love was like the quiet glow of a paper lantern; things had been incredibly hard for her for so long, and she had finally brightened up when the object of that love had asked her out to the amusement park. Surely she deserved to relax at the amusement park for one day—the divine punishment theorists and their criticism be damned.

Everyone keeps saying it's because of the Agent of Spring's absence, as if it's her fault.

The baseless rumors going around were only a source of ire for Hinagiku's Guard.

No one tried to rescue her.

Different people would have different opinions on Spring's absence.

Eight years kidnapped plus two blank years.

She was away for ten years total, but the two after her return were the most frequently brought up.

Many people from the Town of Spring saw Hinagiku's refusal to manifest spring for two years as selfishness.

At first, few people outside of the Town of Spring knew about these two years, but now it was widely known thanks to the rumors. Even more people would think of the Agent of Spring as slothful.

"She could've brought spring right after returning, but she didn't."

It wasn't wrong to think that. That was what the people wanted, after all, and the seasons had a significant impact on everyone's lives.

But does she not have rights as a person herself?

Anyone who knew her personally would be furious at the theory.

Hinagiku's psyche had collapsed after the eight years spent in captivity. Her soul died and created a new identity.

She had said it herself in so many words: *"Hinagiku is dead."*

The two years without spring were a consequence of her exhaustion after the long confinement and the realization that rescue efforts were cut off rather quickly. She could barely go on living, much less summon much of a manifestation.

Agents brought the seasons through their hearts; to perform their work on such a grand scale, they needed to be healthy in body and mind. If anything, two years was quick for her to be back on her feet.

The Agents of the Four Seasons are not just tools.

It was unfair for them to point to the two years she spent fighting mental illness while ignoring the eight years they left her for dead.

They had no idea what she was like back then.

Sakura understood that it was normal to want to hold an Agent accountable for her job.

Hinagiku was even more aware of it. She could never take those two years back. There was nothing that could be done now.

She couldn't enjoy the rest she had after finishing her work, and she spent day after day dejected in her bed.

Everyone saying those stupid things should go to hell.

Hinagiku accepted the blame, but Sakura could never.

You never tried to save her. You all abandoned us.

No one knew those two years Hinagiku spent broken.

And you try to pin the blame on her?

Sakura could never forget all those days Hinagiku had told her to just forget

about her and let her die.

That sadness could never go away.

“Sakura... Sorry for...worrying you,” Hinagiku finally said after Sakura fell silent.

Sakura came back to her senses. “No, there’s nothing to apologize for. Please let me know of anything that might be on your mind.”

Stop. We’re here to have fun. To let her have fun.

“Okay. It’s Hinagiku’s...first time...in an amuse...ment park. Hopefully you... enjoy it, too.”

Hinagiku wanted her to have a good time, too; she didn’t even have to say it aloud for Sakura to know. Sakura’s feelings for her lady, of respect and love, perhaps even romantic in a way, left her powerless.

“Yes, Lady Hinagiku.” Sakura held back the tears.

Hinagiku merrily swung her hand held with Sakura’s. “Ah, it’s...Lord Itecho.”

“Rosei’s here, too.”

The two men approached Spring—a young man with a noble comportment and a man somewhat older than him with an attractive maturity around him. Both wore casual clothing that wouldn’t seem out of place here.

“Sorry to make you wait. Took a while to get the tickets.”

“Hello, Sakura, Lady Hinagiku.”

The younger man was Rosei Kantsubaki, and the divine beauty of his finely chiseled features drew quite a bit of attention even in the middle of a crowd.

“It’s a good place, here. They’re letting us right in since we notified them we’d be coming. We’ll be undercover, but we’ll still receive the VIP treatment. Just let the guide know if anything goes wrong, and they’ll do almost anything.”

The other man was Itecho Kangetsu, and he was still attractive enough not to be completely outshone by Rosei’s ethereal light.

“Let’s hope nothing goes wrong. There’s also our escorts, so you can rest easy.”

They were Yamato's Agent of Winter and his Agent Guard.

"...Lady Hinagiku, you look lovely in that summer dress." Suave Itecho complimented her outfit.

After taking in the sight of Hinagiku, he turned to look at Sakura, too.

"And Sakura..."

She cut him off: "Not a word."

Itecho cocked his head. "Not even that you're cute?"

"No!"

"Too late."

"Stop it!"

"Okay, okay. But is that anything to get mad about?"

Hinagiku giggled at their exchange.

Rosei quickly interjected. "I was thinking just that! Hina... Y-you look great. Sakura, too."

He wasn't used to saying these kinds of words, and he tried very hard to swallow down the embarrassment.

"You're both very cute. Seriously. I'm not just saying it."

Hinagiku blushed.

Sakura didn't care what he said about her, but seeing her beloved lady flush at Rosei's words turned her stomach. At least Hinagiku's outfit got a compliment; it was something a retainer could take pride in. Hinagiku and Sakura looked at each other and silently shared their joy at the results of the choice to dress up.

"Thank...you, Lord...Rosei, Lord...Itecho. Hinagiku's...glad to...hear that. You two...look...great, too."

"Listen, Itecho—you too, Rosei. You don't need to say anything about me. Just compliment Lady Hinagiku, okay?" Sakura paused before changing tone. "In any case, I thank you for all the arrangements. I want to thank all Winter escorts

directly later on.”

“It’s nothing. We’re the ones who asked you to come here, after all.”

“Rosei’s right, Sakura. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, it’s too much. I feel bad having you receive us like this when Teishu is our home base. As the Guard of Spring, it feels like a failure...”

“I’m telling you not to worry about it...,” Itecho said. “Speaking of which, how are Todo and Shimotsuki doing? Hopefully they aren’t causing you any trouble.”

“None at all. They’re very kind. Right, Lady Hinagiku?”

“Yes, they’re...both...so kind. So helpful.”

“I see. Let’s go thank them later on. Now then, you have them usually, but you’ll be relying on me today. Please let me know if you need anything. You too, Lady Hinagiku.”

The conversation ended there. Not awkwardly, but a bit bashfully, perhaps—it was a gentle silence.

The simple fact that Spring and Winter were hanging out together like this was a miracle. That shy bliss showed in their faces.

Finally, the day had come when they could meet like this.

All of them knew how special the occasion was.

“Hina... Sakura.” Rosei broke the peaceful mood with a serious look on his face. “Listen... I want you to hear this first of all.”

He looked down, away from Hinagiku and Sakura.

“Being with the Agent of Winter...might have you worried about an insurgent attack... But I’m stronger now. Really. I’m not like I was ten years ago.”

He raised his head again and looked Lady Spring in the eye, then at her retainer.

“No matter what happens, I will protect you both. Don’t worry about anything.”

Rosei cracked a wry smile. He realized he was raining on their parade, but he

wanted to say it. He wanted to be sincere.

Rosei.

Sakura was at a loss for words. Hinagiku seemed flustered, too.

Even Itecho looked surprised. Clearly that wasn't part of the plan.

Spring's kidnapping was most likely Winter's fault. Rosei must've heard the divine punishment theory, and how Winter's shortcomings caused it. But that was nothing new. He'd heard these things constantly for the last decade, and it only so happened that it was the topic of the day again. Rosei was used to the gossip. That said, he wasn't immune to it.

While being the Solitary King of Winter, he was but a young and sensible twenty-year-old.

Lady Hinagiku will say something to smooth over it, Sakura thought in the middle of the tension.

Her lady was not the sort of girl who would look away from other people's sorrow. She would say something to comfort Rosei, something warm like vernal sunlight.

Sakura didn't have to go out of her way to say anything, but she began to wonder if she was right to stay silent.

Rosei did say he would protect Sakura, too.

Was it right to stay silent and let Hinagiku be the only one to reply?

After all, it was Sakura who most evidently expressed her resentment toward Winter.

Rosei and Itecho came to the Agency to help us when New Year attacked.

They had stayed in Teishu out of concern for the Spring girls for a while after that.

They even sent us their escorts.

The two Itecho had mentioned belonged to Winter, and they would not normally be handed over to others. It was like Hinagiku handing Sakura over to another season, and it would weaken Rosei's own security.

The two escorts in question were survivors of the events ten years prior, and said they accompanied them out of gratitude for Hinagiku, but it was still too good a deal. Hinagiku used to be on edge, watching out for anything around and lashing out at anyone that came near, but now she could afford to be much calmer. She could just accept Winter's support as a matter of course, but she wasn't that callous.

Sakura knew how grateful she should be for help from others because she had spent so long guarding Hinagiku on her own.

"Rosei." Sakura decided to be blunt. "Look, I know you've become stronger."

She couldn't let bygones be bygones just yet, but she realized something was changing within her.

"Do you really need to say that out loud after I froze the expressway?"

Sakura was choosing to deal with Winter head-on, letting them in, trying to trust them once more.

"...Everyone grumbles about that...but I'm glad you did."

Going through a battle she couldn't win alone changed her.

"I'm glad you spared no effort to help Lady Hinagiku... It was thanks to you that we're here today. Honestly, I'm grateful for all your consideration. I know it wasn't easy to let go of your escorts, so...um, thank you. Todo and Shimotsuki are fantastic...and...um... What I'm trying to say is..."

Sakura cut herself off and looked straight at Rosei and Itecho.

"After seeing what you did, I've decided to start trusting you a little. Rosei, Itecho... I can take it... Winter...isn't Spring's enemy, are you?"

She asked, as though pleading, as though begging.

"Sakura..." Rosei said her name hoarsely.

It brought to mind the image of young Sakura coming to the Town of Winter to ask to rescue Hinagiku. She had been thrown out from the Town of Spring as punishment for not protecting her Agent, and she had lived in the Town of Winter with Rosei and Itecho for five years. When Winter eventually dropped the search, she had fled in despair. From Winter's point of view, Sakura was

another girl they had failed in the past.

This same girl was now trying to open her heart again. There was worry in her eyes as she looked at the lord and retainer of Winter, but Rosei and Itecho nodded firmly to reassure her.

“Believe us. Winter will protect Spring. Right, Itecho?”

“Of course. And not just Lady Hinagiku. We’ll protect you, too...”

Sakura sighed and closed her eyes in relief. “You hear that, Lady Hinagiku? What do you think?”

Hinagiku had been fidgeting during the whole exchange, but once she realized no one was arguing, she wore a peaceful smile.

“Hinagiku...feels...safer...with Lord...Rosei and...Lord Itecho...here!”

Itecho and Rosei nodded deeply, savoring her answer.

“...But let me tell you now, you won’t be doing everything. The Four Seasons Alliance remains intact, so we’ll run to help you if you’re ever in danger. We’re on equal footing, okay?”

Rosei didn’t immediately react; there was a brief silence before he remembered. “Oh, right. I forgot about that.”

Sakura was flabbergasted. How could he say that about their precious alliance?

“Man... That’s why they call you the Gloomy Blizzardman.”

Sakura was a bit worried about him. Due to his past, he devoted himself fervently to Hinagiku and Sakura, but he had little interest in anything or anyone else.

“If you keep this up, you’ll have a hard time holding on to your friends.”

Sakura acted as though she didn’t care about anyone but Hinagiku, but really, she treasured her relationships. She was closer to Summer and Autumn than Rosei was.

“Stop using that nickname... And are they my friends?”

“Of course they are.”

“I—I see...”

Clearly, this kind of relationship was new to him.

“I’m just not used to it, sorry. But you do realize our current bond isn’t normal, right? Seasons don’t usually bother with each other, much less have all four in contact like this.”

Sakura waited for Rosei to finish with his excuses before replying.

“I won’t force you to be friendly, but there’s no good reason not to cooperate. We didn’t help each other ten years ago, but we did this time, and that’s how we rescued Lady Nadeshiko. There is no room for doubt about that. Honestly, I don’t think we could’ve made it if even one of us were missing. And it was only possible thanks to you and Itecho convincing the higher-ups at every Town to let us cooperate.”

“...I don’t think they were really convinced. They only accepted because I showed up and gave them a push. They were so arrogant, like, *go ahead and see if you can*. They said that to *me*.”

“And we *could*.”

“Yeah, we sure showed them... And thanks to that, we solved everything pretty quick...”

“Exactly. I know you need to be the cool lone hero and rush in to solve everything yourself, but...”

“I’m not trying to be a hero!”

“We’re all alone, essentially. You should take care of your link with Summer and Autumn. Who knows what could happen in the future...”

“Right... I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

“The problem’s that you’re not used to having any friends other than us, isn’t it?”

“...Aw.”

“You don’t seem very fond of Lady Ruri... But she treats you well, right? So does Lady Ayame, and Lady Nadeshiko, and Lord Azami, right? And you just

forget about them? You're supposed to be the father of all seasons, Gloomy Blizzardman. Can't you be cordial, at least? Did you send them a thank-you after things wrapped up?"

Sakura was treating him like her troublesome little brother, and Rosei couldn't take any more of it. "You're turning out like Itecho!"

"Hinagiku...wants every...one to...be good. To value...their bond...with everyone...else."

"See? You should learn from Lady Hinagiku. Summer and Autumn love her pure soul."

"No... Hinagiku...loves...everyone. We should...hang out...with Summer...and Autumn, too."

"Hina...," said Rosei. "Right. We should go to the beach. Not a pool. The beach."

The awkwardness was broken suddenly by the youngsters' light spirits.

Itecho been watching them with a quiet smile, and he briefly lifted his sunglasses to wipe his eyes. Only Sakura noticed.

This is really getting to him.

The conversation must have affected him on a deeper level, considering how much he had been through up to then.

As the eldest among the four, he must've been overjoyed at seeing the young people he watched grow up be safe and sound now. Sakura shifted aside a little to shield him from view, keeping her face neutral.

"All right, let's go. Rosei, you remember the arrangement?"

Rosei and Hinagiku bashfully stood together. They would walk at the front with Itecho and Sakura behind them.

"This takes me back. Sakura, can I hold Hina's hand? Tell me I can."

"You wish... Argh, I want to tell you no, but I'll allow it just for today. Lady Hinagiku, if he bothers you, please go ahead and shove him away. That said, you must be holding someone else's hand at all times to not get lost."

“H-he’s no...bother.”

“You hear that, Sakura? You hear that?”

Sakura clicked her tongue. The formation was complete, much to her chagrin.

They used to spend time like this way back when. The gods incarnate would look back, and their Guards would be right there. It was the most comfortable formation for Hinagiku and Rosei. The two in question held hands shyly.

Sakura glanced at Itecho’s face and saw he was back to normal now. She sighed in relief and felt a smile form on her face again.

“Itecho, it’s our first time at an amusement park,” she said. “Tell us if we do anything wrong.”

Itecho looked surprised for a moment, but he soon glanced at her with kindness.

“...Just act like everyone else does. I’ll take a bunch of pictures of you having fun with Lady Hinagiku.”

“Not me. Give me pictures of her alone. And take me to the best attractions.”

“All right, I’ve got you.”

“Hinagiku wants...that. Those things...the others are...wearing on...their heads!”

“All right, let’s go buy that first. Where’d they sell them, Itecho?”

“Right by the entrance. Lady Hinagiku, allow me your bag.”

So began Spring and Winter’s summer day.

The first thing they did inside Teishu Fairytale Kingdom was buy headbands and hats with the design of the park’s mascots. Wearing them made visitors feel like true residents of the kingdom—although these particular visitors had assumed Hinagiku would be the only one.

“We’re all...wearing them...right?!”

No one could say no. Hinagiku wore a bunny-ear headband, Sakura a cat-ear headband. Rosei wore a magician hat, and Itecho a pirate hat—all Hinagiku's choices. A mixed-species, mixed-job party was born.

“Sakura, don't you dare try to take that off. Hina chose it for you.”

“But...I...I can't... Get off me, Rosei! Don't touch my head!”

After a bit of a struggle, the group moved on.

The theme park was divided into different areas, and they followed the typical route: from the sky area, to the forest, to the sea, light, and then dark. They paired up differently at each area.

“H-Hinagiku hit the wall... O-oh, no, Sakura... W-will we...have to...pay for it?”

“The kid over there hit it, too, so I don't think so. Let's just go to the finish line!”

Sakura and Hinagiku raced in go-karts.

“I don't get this,” said Rosei, meanwhile. “Why not just smash through the walls if the goal is to get out?”

“That wouldn't be fun. Learn from Lady Hinagiku and Sakura. They're cooperating.”

“Just take over. Call me when you need some ice.”

“Rosei, there won't be any time we'll be needing ice for this.”

Rosei and Itecho struggled with the escape room.

“Itecho, are you okay? I should've given you this before getting on... But here's a motion sickness pill. And some water.”

“Sakura... Thank you. I wasn't expecting that. I never get carsick.”

“It's because you did multiple rides in a row. Rosei says he wants another four rounds at the roller coaster, though.”

“I'll make him reconsider...”

Itecho and Sakura had trouble keeping Rosei on a leash.

They were having a great time, strolling around the park and chatting together.

Although they tried switching up pairs from time to time, in the end, they naturally reverted to Hinagiku and Rosei, and Sakura and Itecho.

When Hinagiku and Rosei were walking on ahead, engrossed in a conversation, Sakura took advantage of the moment to quietly take off her headband.

“What’s wrong? Your temples hurt? I’ll fix it for you,” Itecho said as she hesitated whether to put it back on.

She looked up at him. “No, it doesn’t hurt. And I don’t think you can fix this thing anyway.”

“I could loosen it for you.”

Sakura’s mentor was a refined gentleman in appearance and bearing, but his strength was superhuman. Sakura shook her head. She wanted the headband intact as a memento, and Itecho could easily break it.

“You’re not putting it back on? It looks good on you.”

He didn’t seem to be teasing, but still, Sakura argued back.

“...No it doesn’t. It’s way too cutesy.”

“Why? It fits well with your black hair. Or do you not like cats?” His tone was so soothing it left her shy and a little annoyed.

He’s treating me like a child again.

Although Itecho had recognized she looked more mature now, he still apparently didn’t see her as a woman at all. She badly wanted to ask him to, but her reason quickly quelled the impulse.

The way they felt about each other was just too different.

Sakura used to be in love with Itecho.

Why did I even like this guy?

Her romantic feelings had been sealed off for a time, but she found no one else to fall in love with; only Itecho Kangetsu remained in a corner of her heart.

Meanwhile, Itecho still saw her as the younger colleague he took in five years back.

“...I mean, I guess if you were to ask me, ‘pretty’ suits you more than ‘cute’... But still, that doesn’t mean it looks bad on you. It *is* cute. Keep it on.”

He’d acted like her guardian back when they lived together in the Town of Winter, but she felt like he was taking the role even more insistently now. He was like an older brother wanting to care for his little sister who lived far away.

You thick, dense, smug, personal-space-invading Casanova jerk.

She kept her insults to herself.

I’d only feel stupid saying them out loud.

She resisted the urge to sigh.

“...Itecho, I’m a Guard. This is something normal people wear for fun.”

Itecho did like Sakura in his own way. “From Lady Hinagiku’s perspective, you are one of the normal people. Sakura, you’ve suffered more than the average person due to my shortcomings...”

He cared for her as her swordsmanship teacher, as her elder, and as her comrade and roommate after losing Hinagiku.

“But I want you to make some good memories from now on...”

He cared a lot for her, and she did have some special place in his heart. There was no doubt about that. It just so happened his feelings weren’t romantic.

Of course. I’m not worthy of him.

Itecho Kangetsu was an unequivocally suave, mature man. Anyone who deserved to be by his side had to be his equal, in Sakura’s opinion.

It’s stupid of me to have any feelings for him.

And most of all, they were both Guards. They had no time to meet other than when their lord and lady met.

Itecho would naturally look for a partner at the Town of Winter. He would go for someone who would await his return back at the Town.

This love of hers was not realistic.

I'm so stupid.

Sakura had to do away with these feelings as soon as possible. She had to make an effort to discard these feelings for both their sakes; he still played the part of a kind mentor.

There was no way Itecho wanted romantic love from Sakura, she was sure of it.

Lady Hinagiku is back. That's enough for me in life.

This romance was unneeded.

Despite the feelings taking root, she decided to remain nothing more than a colleague.

“...Will wearing this silly thing make for a good memory?”

He must not notice her feelings.

“Yes. You might look back fondly on it.”

“It's just embarrassing... I think it would be more of an awkward memory for me...”

“What about me, then? I'm a pirate here, see?”

Itecho pinched his pirate hat. His awkward expression made Sakura chuckle.

Her feelings had pained her deeply just moments ago.

But now that she really looked at him, Itecho Kangetsu wearing a pirate hat was hilarious.

“...Touché. It looks good on you, though.”

Itecho laughed out loud, too. “I see what you mean. We're Guards. We're supposed to guard our masters, not play around with them. We shouldn't lose sight of our duty...”

“Exactly. Lady Hinagiku is my lady and I am her servant,” Sakura replied. “We have to remember our place.”

“But you see...,” Itecho replied gently, “This *is* what Lady Hinagiku wants. You

should make an effort to enjoy yourself along with her.”

“...You think?”

“Yeah. Adults have to do that or the kids will shut themselves off. You should do everything she wants to do with you.”

“Isn’t that contradicting what you just said?”

“No. You’re simply following Lady Hinagiku’s wishes, which is an important part of a Guard’s job. You told me that after she came back...she shut herself in the Town of Spring. Her psyche collapsed...”

“Yes...”

He was talking about those two empty years. Sakura’s gaze fell.

“Today will remain in her memory more than we could imagine. Remember, ten years of her childhood were taken away from her... Not to mention her psyche now is still childlike. Lady Hinagiku can’t get those years back, but someone else can fill that void with some good memories...”

Sakura considered what he meant. Hinagiku needed someone else’s help to fill in that blank. She looked up at him and pointed at herself.

“And that should be me...?”

“Exactly.”

Itecho smiled in satisfaction at the answer, but Sakura’s hand wavered in the air.

“And...Rosei.”

She pointed at Rosei’s back before them. Then, hesitatingly, she pointed at Itecho.

“...And you...?”

Itecho’s eyes grew round behind his sunglasses. Sakura took the reaction as confusion. Although Rosei liked Hinagiku, perhaps she shouldn’t have dragged another season’s Guard into this, even if Hinagiku did cherish him as an older brother of sorts.

“Oh, you’re not...?”

Sakura hurriedly lowered her hand with a mix of regret and embarrassment, but Itecho grabbed it forcefully.

“No, you’re right,” he said softly, no hesitation. “You’re right...”

His voice was always so gentle and sweet, and his hand holding hers was hot. Maybe that was just the summer sun.

“...You’re such a kind girl,” Itecho murmured quietly. He seemed to struggle to say it.

For whatever reason, he didn’t let go. He fixed his sunglasses with his other hand and faced away from her. He walked all the same.

They were in the middle of a theme park filled with crowds. There were other people holding hands—parents and children, couples, even friends. And Rosei and Hinagiku.

So if they held hands for a little while, no one would bat an eye.

Yet Sakura couldn’t help but turn red.

She had no idea what he was thinking or what to say. She only let herself be led along until he let go.

Itecho was back to normal by then. He smiled softly.

“Sakura, thank you for including me... But you are the biggest factor in filling her void. She’ll feel lonely if you don’t enjoy yourself with her... And if you’re still not sure, take it as an order from your lady. She said she wanted *all of us* together.”

As he finished his lecture, he stroked his chin with a wry smile.

“Maybe I’m being full of myself...”

Itecho was Sakura’s mentor; he had a tendency of lecturing her like that.

Not to mention Itecho couldn’t stop himself from helping out; he was just one of those people.

“You’re already a grown woman... You don’t need me to give you advice...”

He wanted to dedicate himself to others—to be needed by others.

Sakura understood the delicate side of this flawless adult man.

“...Don’t decide that for me.”

She liked that part of him, too. It made her want to tell him everything was okay.

“I...need it...”

She knew he was strong, which was why she wanted to support him in his time of need.

Sakura’s love was always supportive.

“...There’s still plenty for you to teach me. I may be more skilled with the sword now, but I’m still learning how to serve my lady. How to carry out the rites, what not to do... I needed you to teach me so much still... I had a rough time the day of. And you must’ve seen it...”

“Sakura, it was your first time. Don’t beat yourself up over that...”

“That’s no excuse. Embarrassing myself means embarrassing Lady Hinagiku... And if it wasn’t, I think I’m still lacking in common sense. I don’t have parents... I don’t know a lot of things people normally do... I really feel that when I’m in those events.”

Sakura wanted him to watch over her for a while longer. Whenever she was sad, whenever she wanted to break down in tears—it was always Itecho’s back that came to mind.

Sakura whispered in prayer. “...I still... I still need you to point out where I’m falling short. You’re... You are my one and only mentor...remember...?”

She had no idea how important those words would be to him.

“Sakura...”

She had her eyes cast down; she couldn’t see how he reacted to her statement. She fidgeted with the cute headband in her hands, still unconvinced to put it back on.

“I have more problems than ever nowadays. I’ll need you to advise me even more... Teacher...”

“All right... Ask me for anything you need. I’ll help you out more than anyone else.”

His large hand fell onto Sakura’s head. She shivered in surprise.

Perhaps due to the reaction, the weight disappeared right away. As Sakura realized he had tried to cheer her up with a head pat, she absolutely could not look at him. Her cheeks were on fire. It always happened whenever he touched her.

Sakura changed the topic, trying to take her mind and heart away from that.

“A-anyway... There could be divine-punishment-theory supporters among the Agency escorts today. We should be careful not to give them more fuel to add to the fire.”

“...Oh, that? Don’t even give that ridiculous delusion any attention. Absolute fools...”

“I know. It’s stupid. The Spring Agency staff member that notified us about it wasn’t trying to harass us, just warn us that something might happen. They told us to look out for the possibility of a hate crime...”

Itecho sighed. “Some people do take that absurd theory seriously... That much is true. We should be careful.”

Sakura nodded. “...I know how to shield Lady Hinagiku from basic violence, but I don’t know what to do for her in the face of such slander. I’m already on the Town and Agency’s bad side... The criticism might be partly due to my behavior...”

She fiddled with the headband further, until Itecho took it away from her.

Sakura finally looked up, and her eyes met his.

“Stand tall.” His voice always echoed clearly in her ears. “Times like these, you need to just shake it off. Spring did her job. Unless she gets a special summons, this is her time to rest. It would be preposterous to complain about the Agent and her Guard spending time reforging old bonds. Rosei is worried about it, too, but see how he’s as haughty as ever? That’s due to my...admittedly not entirely good teachings.”

Sakura tilted her head, utterly confused by what he meant.

“The gods incarnate bring the seasons to the world. I told him to be a man who wouldn’t be taken lightly. Who would be revered as the miracle he is.”

“Huh?” Sakura muttered. That was a hell of a way to raise a kid.

He wasn’t just born with his nose in the air?

Rosei had been aloof and conceited from the moment she met him; she thought that was just his nature.

Itecho smirked a little as he realized what she was thinking.

“...Don’t get me wrong, he was born that way, too... But my guidance also played a part. He has to be that way. If the Town’s leadership, the grown-ups, or anyone else ever looked down on him, he has to brush it all off. He is the king of winter.”

“Why is that...?”

His reply was like a knife in Sakura’s heart: “Because otherwise, they would eat all of us alive.”

Sakura blinked, finally understanding what he meant.

Rosei was the Agent of Winter—the forefather of the Four Seasons. He was, in essence, the king of all Seasons. A weak king would be overthrown. Another would take over his domain.

His domain in this case was his dignity as Agent.

“The head of the Four Seasons has to hold his head high in order to maintain the respect for the others. And Spring’s behavior affects Summer and Autumn, too.”

They were already treated as cogs in the machine of the world; if it ever got worse, then Hinagiku, and the next generation, and the following after that, would become mere puppets to those who use them.

Rosei was the bastion of the Agents.

“So if anyone says anything, Spring should brush it off. I do the same.”

“...Got it,” Sakura replied, and Itecho put the cat ears back on her head.

It felt odd to do that after having such a serious conversation. She chuckled. “...That’s why you chose the amusement park? To explicitly show the divine punishment supporters that we don’t care?”

“No, Rosei just wanted to come here with Lady Hinagiku. I was against it at first, since getting security in order would be an ordeal, but I gave in in the end. Glad to see they’re enjoying themselves, though...”

“He really just acts like a king, with or without your teachings.”

Then Rosei and Hinagiku turned around. The two of them had gone a bit far ahead, so they beckoned them to come closer.

Itecho and Sakura looked at each other before running up to them with a smile.

They continued walking around the theme park without running into anyone suspicious.

“They say...that one’s...popular, Sakura!”

They had been discussing their last attraction before lunch, and Hinagiku pointed excitedly at a building.

“Huh?”

Sakura froze. It was a haunted mansion. She could already hear the screams coming from inside the Western-style structure.

“That’s... That horrifying thing is popular...? Wouldn’t everyone enjoy...a house full of the mascots or something...?”

Hinagiku raised her eyebrows at the reaction.

“Ah, r-right... You don’t...like scary...stuff...like ghosts...”

“Yeah, I remember you getting mad whenever we told horror stories. You said you wouldn’t be able to sleep,” said Rosei.

“Wanna go somewhere else, Sakura?” asked Itecho. “You don’t have to force

yourself.”

Sakura was sweating as she looked at Hinagiku; she seemed so disappointed. How could a retainer dare to let her lady go without experiencing the biggest attraction in the park?

“Let’s go. I’ll be okay, Lady Hinagiku.”

“No... Don’t...force your...self. Hinagiku doesn’t...want to...torture you...”

“It’s not torture. There’s no way this kiddie attraction will scare me,” Sakura declared boldly.

Hinagiku, Rosei, and Itecho glanced at each other in worry.

But Sakura insisted, and they all got in line. Their turn soon came.

They would ride a boat down a river to see the tragedy of a cursed village.

The limit was two people per boat, which meant they had to split the group in two. They had tried all combinations on the attractions up to now; with that in mind, Rosei said, “Get on with me, Hina. Itecho, you protect Sakura.”

It was a good pair up. One of the boys needed to get on with Hinagiku to protect her, as Sakura was too scared. And the safest choice for Sakura’s partner was her mentor and support since childhood. Despite what she said, both Rosei and Hinagiku knew she trusted Itecho.

Hinagiku nodded, and so did Itecho. Sakura was too scared by the park staff in ghost makeup to pay much attention.

“Sakura, are you ready? Take off your ears or they might fall into the water.”

“Huh? Errr, yeah... I’m getting on the boat with you?”

“Yes. Let’s go. Watch your step.”

Itecho led Sakura onto the boat. Even the sound of the waves was scary.

The safety bar was very simple, as was the bench seat.

This means there won’t be any sudden movement like on the roller coasters.

Although she was able to analyze the situation, the fear didn’t fade away.

“Have a nice trip!”

The ghost staff sent them off with a cheery voice. The inside of the attraction was dark, as cursed villages were wont to be, and a cold wind blew from time to time to remind them of its desolation.

A narrator recounted the tragedy with a voice that echoed throughout the whole attraction. Realistic, deathly pale animatronics muttered mechanically at the guests. “You won’t go back home ever again...”

“...We won’t?” Sakura asked fearfully, and Itecho replied earnestly.

“That’s just the ride. We will. And don’t get up, you’ll fall off.”

“But what if it’s true...? Eek! S-something just hit my face!”

“Just a splash of water.”

Sakura was so terrified of the place itself that everything got an extreme reaction from her. “Th-the-the-the boat is rocking!”

“They want you to think a ghost is rocking it.”

“Don’t say that!!”

“Sakura, I’m just explaining the scene... Calm down... Are you that scared? I’m having fun...”

“Well, I’m not... I’m not having any fun...!”

The creator of the haunted mansion would have cried for joy watching Sakura. She was the ideal guest for this attraction.

Meanwhile, Hinagiku and Rosei were enjoying the ride in their own odd way.

The boat gently floated onto the river.

“Lord Rosei, the ghosts...are rocking...the boat. You think...we were...heavy for...them to push?”

“I doubt it. Hey, I wonder how this thing works. Is it programmed to rock once it reaches a specific location?”

They were halfway through without a hint of fear.

“Lord Rosei, look, a mimosa...tree. This...story takes...place in...summer.”

“You’re very knowledgeable. You know when the flowers bloom? Well, of course you would.”

The story went on as a mysterious epidemic spread, dead villagers turned into ghosts, and the ghosts began killing the living villagers. The loud noises startled Hinagiku, but the fictional tragedy didn’t scare her. She just watched the murderers with their hatchets.

Rosei turned around. It was too dark to see anything clearly, but he could tell Sakura and Itecho were snuggling together.

That’s what I wanted. I wanted her to get scared.

Rosei turned his attention back to Hinagiku, who was clapping as a zombie burst out of a grave.

It is that side of hers that made me fall for her, though.

Although things didn’t go the way he expected, he was still glad that Hinagiku was having fun.

The boat soon reached the final stage.

The scary part was over, and sad music played as firefly-like lights glowed in the darkness. They represented the souls of the murdered resting in peace.

The sight was fantastically beautiful, like the inside of a planetarium.

“It’s over...? These things don’t really scare me, but I was surprised to see it didn’t scare you, either.”

Hinagiku nodded, then frowned pensively. “Maybe...it would’ve...been scary...before...”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, but...”

“But what?”

“In dreams...Hinagiku met...Mother, so...this sort of...thing stopped...being

scary.”

Rosei straightened his back. Her mother, Kobai, had already passed away.

Kobai was the previous Agent of Spring, and Hinagiku was chosen as her replacement after her death.

Normally, successors were chosen supernaturally regardless of parentage—this was an exception.

The Town of Spring saw this as ominous, and her father blamed Hinagiku as though she had killed her mother. It was no exaggeration to say Hinagiku’s suffering began with her mother’s death.

“B-but...*she* was...also there... The previous Hinagiku...was in...the dream...”

The unblessed new Agent of Spring had visited the Town of Winter when she was six, and the insurgents kidnapped her.

Eventually, Hinagiku died in her captivity. Not bodily, but mentally.

“Both of...them...spoke with...Hinagiku...”

So was the new Hinagiku born.

“Mother...asked that...even though...it would...be hard, if...Hinagiku could...keep...going. And Hinagiku...said that...Hinagiku would...keep...trying...”

Rosei had fallen in love with the dead Hinagiku. This one had a different personality and manner of speech.

“That was...a dream...but...”

Yet Rosei was still in love.

“Later...Hinagiku thought...that maybe...they came...to see...Hinagiku...because...Hinagiku had...hung in...there.”

He was in love with Hinagiku Kayo, who had stood up after her own death, chosen to keep on fighting, and brought back spring. Rosei’s Spring smiled gallantly in the darkness.

“Fear...brings...sadness. So Hinagiku...decided to...not fear...anymore.”

There was both sorrow and strength in her words.

“Because they...are watching...over...Hinagiku.”

Rosei grabbed Hinagiku’s hand.

“Lord... Rosei.”

Hinagiku was startled. Being with the God of Winter always made her heart race.

It was in part due to the lingering feelings of her old self.

“I think the same. I’m sure they showed up because of your efforts, Hina.”

But it was also because this boy, who had started calling her *Hina* after she insisted she was not the same anymore, still loved her.

She felt herself falling for him, as though it was predestined.

“You’re always doing your best. You’re amazing.” Rosei did not reject Hinagiku.

It seemed like he saw her as the same Hinagiku, but he also treated her like a different girl. On top of that, he showered her with kind affection like light snowfall.

That touch made Hinagiku’s heart give a squeeze as her pulse accelerated.

“Has Hinagiku...been making...such an...effort in...your eyes...?”

“Yes...”

She didn’t know when this snowfall would stop, or if it ever would.

What a blessing it would be if it never ended.

“Lord...Rosei...”

Hinagiku squeezed his hand. Rosei immediately squeezed hers back just as strongly.

Hinagiku wanted to show her affection for him, too, but she didn’t know how.

For some reason, she could tell Sakura she loved her without hesitation, yet she couldn’t do the same for Rosei. Just thinking about it made her face heat up and her throat dry up.

What if Rosei found it troublesome?

She would never recover. Just imagining it made her eyes well up.

“You always...do every...thing for...Hinagiku. But Hinagiku...can’t do...anything back.”

She wanted to get closer, but she lacked the courage.

“That’s not true.”

“It...is. You sent...escorts to...Teishu...for Hinagiku’s...sake. You praise...Hinagiku’s...efforts...”

“I do it because I want to.”

“But...is there any...thing that...Hinagiku...could do?” Hinagiku asked, and Rosei felt like he could die from love.

There was only one thing he wanted to ask from her.

What a blessing it would be if you could love me back.

He had prayed. He had waited for ten years for her to come back.

They had finally reunited. Past and present, he fell in love with her again. He deeply wanted his feelings to be requited, but Hinagiku’s wouldn’t bloom that easily.

“...I...am happy enough to be able to see you,” Rosei said. He had only begun atoning. “I can’t ask you to do anything for me—”

Rosei’s affection was spilling over, and he couldn’t rein it in.

“...I shouldn’t even be making you hang out with me like this. It took me a ton of courage to ask you out here. I worried you might turn me down... I can only be here with you because you and Sakura forgave me and didn’t tell me to get lost... That’s the only thing keeping Winter and Spring together.”

Although he loved her, there was a reason why he refrained from doing anything decisive.

“I can do whatever for you, but you...shouldn’t need to for me.”

The past held back his feelings for Hinagiku.

“In fact, just tell me if you want something. I’ll do anything.”

If it hadn't been for the emergency in spring, he could have gone his whole life only loving her from afar.

He never would have imagined he would be here. He could do nothing but show his good faith. He let go of her hand as well as his courage.

“...”

Hinagiku stared at him for a moment; then the surprise on her face changed to sadness.

Her chest hurt as she realized he had let go of her heart, too.

Rosei thought he was showing self-control, but Hinagiku only felt hollowness.

“Will we...be like...this...forever...?”

She was so sad.

“Huh?”

Hinagiku's voice trembled. “Will Hinagiku...always...make you...suffer...?”

A sea of tears was forming in her eyes.

“Hina?”

Hinagiku had waited for Rosei for ten years, too, and finally met him again.

“When you...got here...you looked...like...you were...sorry. You said...you would...protect us. Hinagiku was...glad to hear...that.”

After reuniting, he'd said she didn't need to be the former Hinagiku, that she was all right as she was now.

“But... It...hurts...”

Hinagiku was grateful for his acceptance, far more than he could imagine. Nothing made her feel more welcome here than his approval.

You gave me your gentle heart, and I want to return it in kind.

I'd roused the courage to give you my heart, and yet.

“Hinagiku...is the...only one...who gets to be...happy...”

Rosei had kicked the ladder down and pushed her away, saying he didn't need

anything from her.

“Does Hinagiku...only make you...sorry?”

You welcomed me back.

“We can’t...even be...friends?”

You said you were happy I was back.

“Will we...always be...like this...?”

Why do you push me away? Hinagiku’s citrine eyes asked.

He had basically told her that she was only a crime for which he had to atone.

“Hina, no, I...!”

“In that...case...”

She wanted to head somewhere brighter, along with Rosei, who had been hurt in the same way. They were just at the starting point.

“Then maybe...we should...not see...each other...any...more...”

Their journey had only just begun, but Hinagiku was looking up at the wall separating them.

Now it was Rosei’s voice trembling.

“N-no! That’s not it!”

His feelings plummeted. The desperation and fear twisted his tongue.

“Guilt isn’t all I feel! I want to be with you! Forever and ever, if I could! You’re not just a reason for me to feel guilty... I am happy when I’m with you...!”

Rosei’s chest hurt. He couldn’t be like he always was when he was with Hinagiku.

“But it *is* my fault...”

It stirred him up inside, the way it had ever since she stole his heart in childhood.

“...They kidnapped you...because of me...”

Every word and movement was caught in the mire of his own turmoil.

“We can’t forget that...”

Otherwise, I would pursue you freely.

“...Right?”

Hinagiku softly shook her head. “Not...true.”

“It is...!”

“No. Hinagiku...knows,” Hinagiku insisted. “The crime...is on the... insurgents. Everyone...else ten...years ago...was a...victim. Hinagiku...knows this.”

She would not agree with his view of it.

“It’s not...your fault, Lord...Rosei...”

Rosei rejected those words more fiercely than anything, but it was also what he most needed to hear.

“Hinagiku...is a...child...compared to...everyone...else. You may...think that... what Hinagiku...says some...times...is weird. But...Hinagiku...can say...with confidence...that this...is correct. Lord...Rosei, you...and...Lord...Itecho... protected...Hinagiku back...then...”

Hearing Hinagiku say it pierced the weakest spot in Rosei’s heart.

“It’s not...Winter’s...fault...”

How can you say that?

“Lord Rosei... If Hinagiku...can ask for...anything, then...please...stop... apologizing. And please...tell Hinagiku...what you want...Hinagiku to...do for... you...”

Rosei wanted her to punish him, but she would not.

“We’re...friends. Please...stop only...apologizing...”

She loved more deeply than others, as one who had suffered more than most. Even though she had broken long ago already, she stood back up. She wished for Rosei to get back on his feet and look to the future, too.

She wanted him to see that he didn’t need any more wrath and hatred.

“Lord...Rosei... Please...”

The choice was not wrong. Although the tragedy had passed, it didn't erase the past. Hinagiku's mind remained immature, and Rosei's thoughts remained a danger to his own life.

The reality of their wounds would never disappear. Wounds of the body could disappear as they healed, but not of the mind.

"...Is what...Hinagiku is...saying...dumb...after all...?"

They had to mourn the dead Hinagiku and keep moving toward the future.

For that, they needed each other. Hinagiku realized this. Which was why she wished for him not to push her away.

I can't support you if I'm away from you.

"No, it's not... You... You really don't mind me being your friend?"

"No..."

"..."

Rosei's vision was already blurring with tears as he looked at Hinagiku.

"Then...if I'm allowed to ask you, as your friend..."

He felt just asking for this was a sin—but if he was allowed to say it, he wanted to.

"I want to be with you as much as possible."

Joy filled Hinagiku's face.

"I'm in Enishi, and you're in Teishu, so we can't meet all the time... But if we talk closely like this when we do meet... That would make me so happy I could fly... That's what I want."

Rosei reached out to intertwine his fingers with hers, and Hinagiku returned the grip.

"Lord...Rosei... Hinagiku will...go see...you."

"...I'll go see you, too."

"Hinagiku also...wants to...do that with...you. Let's be...together...a lot...a whole lot..."

“Yes...”

Hinagiku finally smiled with relief, and Rosei cracked a faint smile as well.

“...” But then, Hinagiku’s smile slowly faded.

“...Hina?”

Rosei looked at her with confusion.

“Lord...Rosei, if...you ever...eventually...get tired...of being with...Hinagiku, then don’t...force yourself...to meet...,” she said apologetically.

“What...?”

“Hinagiku wants...to be with...you, but...not force...you...”

Rosei was baffled. “...Why would you think that? I want to be with you. I just said it.”

“But...compared to...Hinagiku, you’re...a grown-up,” she said sadly. “...When Hina...giku...says something...people...seem...upset. Conver...sations...rarely...go on for...long... The same...could happen...with you...”

Hinagiku kept quiet. People in the field knew that the Agent of Spring’s psyche was stuck in childhood. They knew about her long confinement, and that her speech had been impeded by long exposure to so many terrors. Many walked on eggshells whenever she spoke. She had noticed this and reached her own conclusions.

“...That’s why you said that...about you saying dumb things?”

Hinagiku was secretly worried about the reactions of the people talking to her.

“Hina...”

This was something that couldn’t be helped. The people being careful around her meant her no harm, either.

Which only hurt Hinagiku all the more. It was hard to tell whether this problem would solve itself naturally as the years went by.

It could be that her mind and way of speaking would remain this way for the rest of her life.

“That will never happen with me. It’s my fault if you think like that...”

Hinagiku’s presence reminded him of how sad he’d been ten years ago.

“No...”

“Because I couldn’t protect you...”

Hinagiku looked sad again, but Rosei forged ahead...

“...I’m really sorry... But see...”

Rosei squeezed her hand again. Her hand was so small—too small for a sixteen-year-old girl.

He wanted to cry. If only he had saved her that day, in that moment, then she wouldn’t suffer this way.

“...I didn’t...want to grow up without you, either...”

He couldn’t hold back the tears anymore.

“...I wanted to grow up alongside you...”

He couldn’t take it; the dam overflowed.



All his feelings for her spilled down his face, pushed over by all the guilt and regret he had lived with until that day.

“I didn’t want to grow up...to live like nothing had happened, while you were out there hurting.”

The self-pity increased the more he said. *Why? Why?* The word circled around his head.

“I wanted...to be with you...as we both grew up...”

“Lord...Rosei...”

“I didn’t want to make you say those things...”

Rosei covered his face with one hand. The tears were getting in the way.

He cursed himself. He had no right to cry.

He was embarrassed. He was furious with himself, and sad, too.

“I wanted to give you only happiness...”

Hinagiku was tearing up, too; she wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“Lord...Rosei, no... Sorry...Hinagiku...is okay...”

“...Don’t you apologize.”

“No, no... It’s...okay... Hinagiku will...grow up...soon...” She was flustered, dejected, and very brave. “It’ll be...soon. It’s just...taking a bit...more than... you... Don’t...cry...”

All that did was make him cry more.

“Hinagiku was...worrying just...now, but...Hinagiku knows...that it’s...okay.”

I wanted to grow up with you.

Why couldn’t such a small wish be granted?

“Hinagiku...knows...that...you...” Hinagiku let go of Rosei’s hand and caressed his cheek. As she wiped away his tears, more fell onto her hand.

“You...will wait...no matter...what Hinagiku...looks like...”

“Hina...”

Why?

“Right...? You will...wait for...Hinagiku to...grow up...”

Why do you always...

The love and sorrow could almost suffocate him.

...melt the snow away with your kindness like that?

Rosei had to give up. Listing pros and cons wouldn't work on Hinagiku Kayo. No attempt at bargaining would mean anything to her.

“Do you...remember? When we were...little, Hinagiku...was so...slow.”

There was only a pure prayer for her beloved.

“But you...always waited...”

Before breaking, and even now, Hinagiku was always a warm light to Rosei.

“So even if...Hinagiku is...a child, and even if...Hinagiku is...behind... Hinagiku is not...afraid. Even if...we're not...equally grown...ups... Hinagiku knows...” She smiled through her tears. “That you will...be waiting.”

Hinagiku put all her trust in him into those words.

“...Hina.”

It still hurt, but he could breathe again now.

“...This is also...a plea. Will you...wait for...Hinagiku? It won't...take long...”

He wanted to tell her. Once she was more mature, as she said.

I want to tell you I love you.

“...All right. I'll wait... But Hina... You can take your time...”

If it meant he would get to tell her one day, he could do anything.

“Don't push yourself too hard. Take your time growing up. I'll always be waiting for you.”

“Yes... Lord Rosei... Hinagiku will...grow up...little by...little...”

They drifted toward each other and nestled together. There was no gap for loneliness to enter.

Rosei wiped Hinagiku's tears, and Hinagiku wiped Rosei's.

The joy of the other's touch brought a fresh wave, and they repeated this a few times until they calmed down.

"Hina, don't tell anyone I cried."

"You also...promise not...to tell any...one that...Hinagiku cried."

They pledged not to tell their Guards what happened today.

Although they had differing personalities and upbringings, their Guards were the people they cared for the most.

"Let's make some other secrets together that aren't as embarrassing next time..." Rosei said bashfully, and Hinagiku giggled.

"Yes, Lord...Rosei."

So ended the boat trip.

The precious time together flew by.

After the haunted ride, they walked around the theme park a little more until it was time for lunch. They entered a restaurant for a light meal and took a seat.

It was a fast-food-style place, where orders would be made and received at the counter, so they had to split up: someone ordered while someone else reserved the seats.

Sakura volunteered to go place the order, and Rosei stood up saying he'd go with her.

Hinagiku and Itecho were still within sight, thankfully. The pair at the counter couldn't hear what they said, but they could see the smiles on their faces. Rosei looked around before speaking.

"Hey, Sakura." He'd offered to help her because he wanted some time with her.

"What is it, Rosei?"

“Today, did you...”

...get closer to Itecho? Rosei suddenly hesitated to say.

I'd only cause needless trouble if I say that.

Rosei knew about her feelings after five years living together, and he wanted it to go well for her.

“Did you have fun?”

Hinagiku was the dearest girl to him, but Sakura was second place.

Sakura looked at him and chuckled. “I’m in a theme park with Lady Hinagiku. How couldn’t I?”

Rosei sighed in relief, then chuckled himself. “I see. I’m having fun, too.” He only showed that childlike smile to people he trusted.

Seeing his grumpy mask melt into something warmer was a sight to behold. Sakura tried to hide her surprise by bashfully pinching his cheek.

“Ow.”

“Keep a straight face, young man.”

“Cwan’t I even ghmile?” Rosei said.

“...Sorry. It’s just that your huge grin took me off guard.”

Only she and Itecho could do this to the Agent of Winter.

Sakura finally let him go, and Rosei rubbed his cheek petulantly. “Sakura, you should be grateful I’m a generous man. You’d be an ice cube by now, insolent young lady.”

“Uh-huh. Who do you think you are?”

“Lord Rosei Kantsubaki, Agent of Winter.”

“Uh-huh. Well, Lord Rosei Kantsubaki...you might want to be careful what you say to me.”

“...Why?”

“I might just tell Lady Hinagiku all those embarrassing stories from your childhood.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Don’t *you* dare. Know your place, kid.”

“You sneaky little...!”

“Call me what you want, loser.”

“You weren’t like this to me back then...”

“I’ve been forged in the fires of a harsh world. Blame society.”

“...You can try to logic it away, but I know you just enjoy using Hina to tease me.”

They bantered like siblings.

“Honestly, I’m already letting you two be,” said Sakura.

“Huh...?” Rosei was taken aback.

“I let you be alone today, right?”

“Y-yeah.”

“So...report any developments to me.”

Rosei turned red and glanced at Hina.

Hinagiku waved, and so did Itecho. Rosei awkwardly waved back before looking at Sakura again.

“...You were being considerate?”

“I hate to say it, but yes.”

Rosei instinctively looked at her with respect. “So... I can’t tell whether you’re against or for us being together.”

“...What? Of course I am.”

“...Of course which?”

Sakura sighed. “You really only have eyes for her, huh? You think I would’ve let you do what you did today before?”

It was then that Rosei finally realized how much space Sakura had given them.

They only got to spend time together in the theme park because Sakura

allowed it.

Right. She would've never let this happen back then.

Hinagiku was Sakura's dear friend, too.

"You realize I'm standing here and watching as a man takes my beloved lady from me? That should be enough to tell you what I think."

Obviously, she didn't enjoy watching it happen.

"I... Sorry, it's just..."

After how obstinate Sakura had been, Rosei couldn't believe the change. Still, it wasn't the past Sakura he should believe in now, but the one here with him now.

"Sorry, I was inconsiderate. Thank you."

Worried she had been too harsh, Sakura spoke softly in return.

"...It's fine. Not like I did it entirely out of the goodness of my heart. I am using your relationship, so don't apologize. It'll only make things harder for me."

"Using it how...?"

"Taking advantage of your standing and privilege." Sakura sneered.

Rosei blinked in surprise.

"You forgot? You told me to conduct myself as a Guard."

Indeed, Rosei had said that during the Agency Council.

Rosei did a lot, in his own way, to strengthen Sakura's position.

"The best way to protect Lady Hinagiku at the moment is to have her under your wing. We're isolated among the four seasons... Rejecting your support and favor would be a stupid thing to do, as Guard of Spring. I have no family to rely on... There's not much I can do for her. I wouldn't welcome you this way if you weren't Winter. It's a decision I made as a Guard. You're being taken advantage of."

"C'mon... Don't try to play the bad guy. You're not taking advantage of me."

Supporting Spring was perfectly natural for him, and it would hurt to have

that support rejected. And when it came to Sakura, rejection was a likely outcome.

The fact that she didn't was a show of respect toward Winter, in addition to what she'd said about doing what was best for Hinagiku.

The young Goddess of Spring was Sakura's reason for living.

"I am. I'm welcoming your help despite my jealousy."

Which was why she refrained from denying it and saying what she really wanted to.

"I realize it's terrible of me. Itecho would probably be upset, too. But no matter what anyone thinks...I'll do what is best for Lady Hinagiku. I want to keep her away from anything that could hurt her... I want her to be happy..."

Sakura would kill her own feelings for Hinagiku.

Rosei wanted to sigh.

Sakura didn't consider her own life to be a happy one, but it was downright idyllic compared to Hinagiku's.

It wasn't a competition, but it still made Sakura feel less than.

She felt she could never match Hinagiku.

"Lady Hinagiku wants to be with you...," Sakura said. "And if I'm getting in the way, she can't be happy..."

"Sakura."

"In reality...I don't want you to take her away from me. But a Guard must do away with her personal feelings."

"Sakura... Listen to me."

"I hate it... But she did tell me I'm the girl she loves the most. We promised to be together in the next life if there is one. So...I'll bear with it... For her sake..."

"All right! All right. This really hurts to hear; stop it..."

Sakura frowned, wondering what would hurt about what she said, before continuing.

“In any case, I won’t go out of my way to support you. Do your best, but do it on your own. You can use me, too. And if you ever hurt her, I’ll go all the way to Enishi to execute you.”

“All right, sure, you can come punch me in the face whenever you want...”

Sakura was taken aback by how Rosei was just accepting this.

“What, you want me to punch you that bad?” Sakura clenched her fist jokingly, but Rosei nodded.

“I was prepared to get a few broken bones when I met you again.”

“...”

“But in the end...you were friendly...”

“...Hah.”

“You just made me realize how much I was relying on that now...”

“I’m not trying to be friendly with you.”

“Huh?”

“We’re not friends.”

“No way. You just teased me today about being a Gloomy Blizzardman because I have no friends other than you.”

“I wasn’t being serious.”

“Then be serious. I really have no friends other than you two.”

“Hey, the line’s moving forward.”

“Sakura, c’mon. We’re friends, aren’t we? You’re just playing with me, right?”

“Yes, I am playing with you.”

Despite everything, the relationship they were rebuilding was not so bad.

The line steadily shortened as they were talking, and Sakura and Rosei’s turn finally came.

As they were going back to their seats with drinks for everyone, a boy around ten years old approached them.

He was well-mannered and had very straight hair. He ran up to Sakura with a smile on his face, and his voice sounded quite mature for his age.

“Long time no see, Lady Himedaka.”

Sakura blinked before quickly responding to the mysterious boy.

She acted like she was speaking to a child, but her voice was low.

“...That’s surprising... Aboshi?”

They were acquaintances.

“Meeting you here, I would’ve mistaken you for any other child. Don’t tell me *he’s* planning to make contact with Lady Hinagiku right here.”

Her use of the honorific revealed he must have some fairly high standing, or that at the very least, she chose to respect him.

“Not at all. We wouldn’t want to intrude on your day out. It’s just I have a message I have to give you as soon as possible.”

Rosei looked back and forth between them.

“If you’re coming while Winter is present, I imagine this is for more ears than mine.”

“Indeed, Lady Himedaka. Agent of Winter, Lord Rosei Kantsubaki. I must warn you and your Guard, Lord Itecho Kangetsu, as well. Would you spare me some time tonight?”

“What about Lady Hinagiku’s security?”

“We prepared your accommodations for tonight. How about once Lady Hinagiku is asleep? Lord Zansetsu’s personal soldiers will guard the room. As per his orders, there will be no other guests on your floor. If you may wait in the room next door, my lord will come see you.”

“...”

“What do you say, Lady Himedaka? Will that give you peace of mind?”

“...I’ll say I’m scared of Lord Zansetsu’s power.”

The boy giggled. “Please. He’s taken a liking to you. He’d be sad to see you so distant.”

“Is he, really? Anyway, all right. I have no reason to turn him down... Rosei, you’re staying at the same hotel, right? You got time to spare?”

Rosei listened to the conversation in silence and with a frown.

“Rosei, this is...”

“No, Sakura, hold on,” Rosei said coldly. “Don’t introduce him.”

The boy was petrified. Rosei was no longer the timid guy Sakura had been yanking around.

“Boy. You’re affiliated with the Four Seasons, yes? And you haven’t given me a proper greeting yet? Insolent.”

He was again the king of winter, a man cold to everyone but those he had opened his heart to.

The contrast was especially stark in light of the banter he’d just been sharing with Sakura.

The boy’s face turned pale, and he immediately bowed deeply.

“My deepest apologies, Lord Winter... Please forgive me...”

“Cut him some slack, Rosei. He’s just an envoy.”

“Then he should be especially diligent. Your conduct sends a bad impression of the one you represent. You should be aware of your own position. Keep this in mind at all times.”

“Yes, it is as you say... I’m sorry, I, errr...”

“Aboshi, please, there’s no need for such formalities. You can go. I’ll explain everything to Rosei.”

Sakura covered for him, and the boy hesitated before bowing again and running away.

“...So, who was that?”

“Rosei... Aboshi didn’t greet you right away, but he wasn’t being insolent. Don’t bully the kid...”

“It’s not bullying. I have an image to maintain... So?”

“Sorry about that. He’s from my orphanage in the Town of Spring—orphans are sent to this place called the Mercy Refuge. We’re colleagues in that we’re both fortunate enough to serve noble people... I don’t think he meant to ignore you. It’s just that he gets excited when he sees me and won’t stop talking.”

“...”

“...So please don’t give him that look next time you meet him. Also...you *will* regret that haughtiness, this time at least.”

“...Okay, I guess I was inconsiderate. I’ll apologize if I get the opportunity... That said, I’m not going to bow to anyone, no matter how powerful they are. Even if they’re big enough to make me regret it.”

“You’re pride personified, eh? Well, the one he represents probably isn’t what you’re imagining.”

Sakura shifted her glance over to Hinagiku looking curiously at them.

Itecho also looked at them, noticing something was up.

Sakura smiled to pretend it was nothing and whispered to Rosei: “...Aboshi’s lord is part of your sweetheart’s family.”

“Wha...? But Hina’s...”

She was estranged from her father, Shungetsu Kayo, and her mother, Kobai Yukiyanagi, had passed away.

There were few family members left.

“Lord Zansetsu Kayo—Lady Hinagiku’s older brother. Half brother, that is.”

Rosei nearly dropped the drinks.

There was only one question in my mind then.

I died once, then came back by some sort of miracle. I was taken to the hospital, where my family gathered and celebrated my survival.

There's nothing to celebrate about this, though.

I was the only one looking calmly at the facts.

This is no reason to celebrate.

Everything said to me and about my survival was kind. The hospital room was overflowing with emotion.

Meanwhile, I was desperate. Anxious.

How could nobody tell? This wasn't good.

My death could've solved so many things, but now that I was back, it was all ruined.

Why didn't you let me die?

"I'm so glad you're alive..."

Dad was holding my hand—the same hand he'd let go of so many times before.

Are you, Dad?

You wouldn't have to suffer under the Town's bigwig's boots if I weren't here.

"Don't do anything rash ever again, Ruri..."

Mom was crying.

Are you serious, Mom?

It was hard on you, having a goddess as your daughter. Wouldn't you be better off without her?

"...Thank you, everyone."

I knew I wouldn't hurt these kind people so long as I said that.

I doubted them, but I loved my family.

"I'm so lucky."

I could keep going because I loved them. I could bring summer for them.

I could sing and dance.

I could do it as much as I needed.

I'll do my best—so please love me. I'd spend my whole life shouting those words at my family.

"I'm so glad. I'm so happy right now."

Which was why I could say: This was nothing good for them.

Having an Agent in the family was not a normal thing. They had to know after eighteen years raising me. They would have been better off if I had died then. Right?

"I'll recover soon."

I kept the question to myself.

Because I'd heard that Ayame had become a second Agent of Summer.

Ahhh. It couldn't have been worse. I dragged her down with me.

Ahhh. Why? How am I supposed to face her now?

Ahhh. One more sin for the pile. One more inevitable change for

the worse.

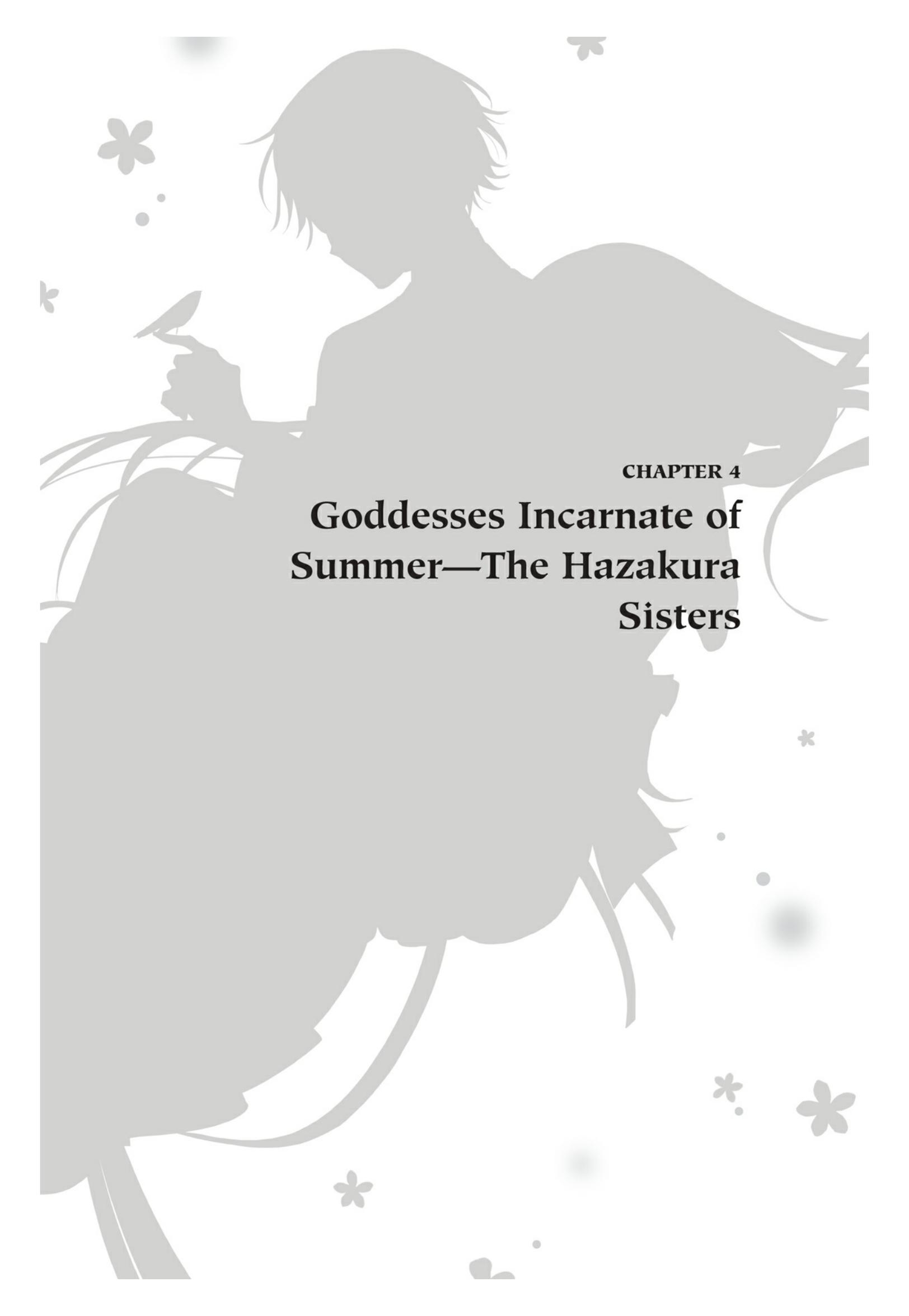
Ahhh. Now we're having our weddings canceled. They're kicking us while we're down.

Ahhh. I don't want to be the kind of daughter that's most loved when she dies.

And the bad things kept on coming. I could only hang my head like a sinner.

I could only say.

See? I was better off ****.



CHAPTER 4

**Goddesses Incarnate of
Summer—The Hazakura
Sisters**

Reimei 20, July 22. Town of Summer: the Hazakura residence.

It was the same day Spring and Winter met at Fairytale Kingdom, though earlier in the day.

“Ruri, please... Leave me alone...”

The misfortune befalling the Summer twins went on in silence, unbeknownst to the other Agents.

One of the twin goddesses, Ruri Hazakura, stood before the shut door.

“.....Sis.”

She had been talking to her sister in her room before being kicked out.

Ayame was in terrible shape, but Ruri wasn't doing too well herself.

Her cherry skin and lips and blackberry hair had lost their luster.

Ayame's beautiful face and its twin were shadowed and ill. Neither of them looked like a Goddess of Summer. Normally, Agents were lively during their own season, but the Hazakura sisters were weathered down like never before.

“Ayame...”

She received no response from the other side of the door. Tears formed in her eyes. Her fingers curled into the fabric of her dress, wrinkling it around her chest.

“I'm sorry...”

She had no idea whether her teary voice reached her sister.

After the incident in spring, Ruri and Ayame set out on their journey to manifest summer on its first solar term, on May 5.

Halfway through, they had joined in the Agency Council in the Yamato Shrine in Teishu.

They continued their journey from there, and the sisters succeeded in bringing summer to all of Yamato.

Once they returned triumphantly to the Town of Summer, the leadership brought up the birth of the twin sisters as reason to break off their wedding plans.

It had been a few days since they were forced to relinquish their marriages.

What in the world was wrong with having twin goddesses?

The first thing everyone pointed out was how Ruri had been revived after Ayame had already succeeded her as the Agent of Summer.

Why didn't anyone stop to think that the second Agent's powers wouldn't disappear upon the first's revival? they said. If they both manifested the season simultaneously, or even by turns, it could have a deleterious impact on the land.

What they were criticizing was the unnatural situation produced by the resurrection, and this criticism was coming directly from the Town of Summer's government, the Summer Administration.

The Townchief was the head of this organization.

The Towns were divided into each of the four seasons, and each Town had its own government: the Spring Administration, the Summer Administration, the Autumn Administration, and the Winter Administration.

The corresponding Townchief held the highest power in the administration.

The administration was located inside the *honden*, the temple and place of worship for the corresponding season, which included the residential zone where the Agent lived separated from their family.

After their journey to manifest summer, Ruri and Ayame were called to the Townchief's office in the *honden* and received a strict scolding.

"New Agent of Summer, Lady Ayame Hazakura... Why did you resurrect your sister, the past goddess?"

That was the first thing Townchief of Summer, Seiran Matsukaze, had said.

He was the eldest of the prestigious house of Matsukaze, successor of one of the so-called bigwigs. It had only been a few years since he was appointed. He was dressed in an off-white kimono; his body was thin like a stripped tree, and his eyes were sharp—one glare from him had the power to silence anyone.

“...Why...?”

Ayame was confused by Seiran’s question.

Ruri stopped breathing. Their parents had nothing to say.

Of course they reacted this way—the Hazakura family was called here to be condemned for being all alive.

“...Because I...wasn’t able to...protect her...”

Ayame could hear her own heartbeat in the middle of the quiet office.

Why?

Ayame first asked herself.

Why did Ruri Hazakura die?

Because her Guard couldn’t protect her.

Why did Ruri Hazakura come back to life?

Because Autumn saved us before I could kill myself.

Why did Autumn resurrect her?

Because I love my little sister.

Because Ayame had loved Ruri so much she wanted to die and join her in questioning the God of Summer.

Why? Why? Why?

“...So, I...”

There was an answer to the cruel question, but it was hard for her to say it out loud. The guilt of even thinking it made her want to hang herself.

No, collect yourself. Be careful with what you say.

Ayame rebuked herself. She knew that the whole family being called to Seiran's office meant trouble.

She wasn't sure what exactly their situation was, but she couldn't imagine a possibility where it was good.

He's trying to hurt us.

Seiran's disgust for the family was on full display.

He's condemning us.

He was attacking them, torturing them psychologically. She had to tread carefully. He wouldn't be an easy opponent to handle.

And he's dragging Dad and Mom into it.

Ayame looked at her parents, who were sitting on the sofa right next to her. She took a deep breath. She wasn't only protecting herself by dealing with the man before her.

Ruri and Ayame's parents were not directly under the Townchief, but they had management jobs in one of the administration's departments.

Whatever she said could affect her parents, or even their whole department.

What's the right thing to say? How do I protect everyone?

Before she had decided what to say to Seiran, her father spoke instead.

"Townchief!!"

She had never heard him this angry.

"Townchief, you can't be serious! What did my daughters ever do?! Ruri dedicated herself to Yamato as the Agent of Summer, and Ayame was as loyal and hardworking a Guard as you'll ever meet! Ruri lost her life because of that! What's wrong about trying to save her?!"

The twins' father was a gentle and quiet man. He never showed even an ounce of anger unless it was truly warranted—and it certainly was now. His wife's eyes were burning as well.

“How dare you say that to her face! This is unthinkable! Ayame doesn’t deserve to hear this, either!”

Ruri and Ayame were shocked. They had never expected to hear their parents say anything like this. As far as they had always known, their parents kept their heads down and followed authority.

They wouldn’t go so far as to say their mother and father didn’t love them, but they had certainly kept their distance ever since they began working in the realm of the gods.

They had no idea what to do with their children—one a goddess, and one bound in service to her.

They had wanted normal kids; the sisters could tell as much. But that childhood had been cut short and replaced with duties and responsibilities. The girls couldn’t go ask for love directly as they did as children.

This relationship had been uncomfortable for the longest time, but now their parents were going to war for their daughters.

“Dad... Mom...”

Ruri whispered in joy from Ayame’s side. Ayame felt her chest warm up, too—but that warmth did not last long.

“Are you being serious, Hazakura?”

The Hazakura name carried some weight in the Town, but Seiran showed them no deference. In fact, he looked as though he was about to be sick with disgust.

“Your love for your children has left you blind. Can you not even see what’s wrong?”

He gestured at Ruri and Ayame as he said *what’s wrong* to emphasize what he meant.

“It’s your children throwing the Town into chaos.”

The sisters gulped.

The Townchief was good at making people uncomfortable.

Ayame could feel it; they had to tread extremely carefully, or things could get even worse. This man was terrifying through the power of his soul alone.

Her parents tried to argue again, but Ayame silenced them with a look and intervened.

"She died because of my failure to protect her... It was then that the Agent and Guard of Autumn..." Ayame hid her feelings as best she could.

"I heard in the report that you were about to follow after her when they arrived to stop you, too."

"...Yes."

Seiran sighed. *"...Since it seems you still don't comprehend, I'll be direct... I did not ask about your feelings or motivations. I was asking a rhetorical question in the hopes you might realize the gravity of your actions. I wasn't expecting to contend with this level of ignorance..."*

Seiran turned toward their parents with a face full of hatred.

"Has it occurred to you that you may have been coddling your daughters because of their status?"

His words were deadly poison.

"Mom and Dad have nothing to do with this!" Ruri leaped to her feet so rapidly the couch slid slightly on the floor.

Ayame hurriedly tried to pull her back down, but Ruri leaned across the table to yell at Seiran sitting firmly on the other side.

"And stop blaming Ayame, too! It's my fault I died! What's the point blaming those who helped me?! What right do you have to say anything about this when you weren't even fighting there?"

"Ruri, sit down..."

"No! Ayame, don't you see?! This is ridiculous! Not even the Townchief gets to say any of this!"

Seiran heaved another heavy sigh—he was drawing it out to make a point.

"...Lady Ruri, with all due respect to your status, could you please shut up? You

are dead for the purposes of this meeting.”

Silence fell before a shuddering rage filled the room.

“...What?” Ruri’s voice cracked.

Seiran had gone too far, even for the ruler of the Town of Summer.

The leadership tended to hold contempt for the Agents of the Four Seasons, but it was mostly behind their backs; few people acted like this to their faces.

A natural response to such blatant disrespect was anger...

“You shouldn’t even be here...”

...but another was fear. Dread soon crept in, as if they were facing a monster that couldn’t understand human speech. They wanted to converse, but he had no intention of hearing them out.

Still, Ayame mustered the courage.

“Townchief, that is too far!!” she yelled, but the Townchief only roared back at her.

“This reaction is very much appropriate for what you did!”

Ayame’s ears rang, and her hand gripped Ruri.

“Listen here. You knew you had become the Agent of Summer, so why did you revive the previous one?”

Ruri was trembling; she had been completely cowed by Seiran.

“Why did you not think about what that could bring?! Why were you so damn selfish?!”

He was trying to wrestle them into submission; he knew the fear he was creating.

“Open your eyes to what you did! You’ve done evil here!”

For him to censure them so harshly, he had to have a considerable number of supporters. The Townchief of Summer was not foolish enough to summon them here to deliver a personal opinion.

Ruri and Ayame had been shot down.

Nothing had been said after the uproar in spring, so the girls had hoped they were in the clear.

There were too many other issues to solve after that, so perhaps this one had been on the back burner. Still, it was dirty to send the girls off to manifest summer before rounding on them like this. And in front of their parents, no less.

Having the family together forced them to choose their words carefully so as not to accidentally impact the other. And while they were busy navigating the minefield, Seiran continued slicing the family apart with his words.

“Twin goddesses manifesting the season—who knows how that could affect the land. You’d have to be completely oblivious not to even consider it. The world works in very particular ways, and you’ve just twisted them. Even if it was the Agent of Autumn’s powers, reviving a dead Agent is a blight on tradition!”

Ruri and Ayame had faced all sorts of violence. They had fought terrorists. And here was Seiran terrorizing them with his suffocating lecture.

Ayame was the most affected; she was the one who had asked the Agent of Autumn to revive Ruri.

If he said that all this had happened because she lacked the skill to keep her sister alive, she could not deny it.

“...There are many outside the Summer Administration who have issue with how we’ve responded to the contingency. Having twin goddesses is grotesque. We must keep investigating to make sure there are no abnormalities in the land as this year’s season ends, and through autumn, winter, spring, and the manifestation of next summer. Who will be doing such research? Not you, at any rate. And you’re not even thinking about this. I must be careful with what to do with you two, as Townchief of Summer. For starters...”

Seiran’s following words destroyed the Agents’ lives:

“You will do away with both your engagements.”

That was what he’d wanted to say all along. Seiran continued in a sneer.

“The respective families have already given their consent and acknowledged

that they do not want to become part of a potentially star-crossed family. Now I ask for yours.”

Ayame and Ruri both nearly fainted on the spot.

And so, the twin goddesses were seen as selfish and ill-omened.

The branding of *bad omen* was too deep in a village society.

In the past, they could've well been locked up somewhere away from the Town, while the rest of the family responsible for bringing them into the world would be ostracized along with them.

They were spared from the misfortune because it happened to the Agents of the Four Seasons.

They were lucky it ended with broken engagements; the Hazakura family received no further punishment.

Now the sisters just had to endure this for the rest of their lives, and all would be well—at least, in the view of the locals. Although the Agents were venerated, they were ultimately cogs in the machine of the seasons.

The Agents could not go against the leadership's decision when they had their family held hostage.

Their parents still had their lives ahead of them, and they had to keep in good standing with Seiran and the other bigwigs.

Neither Ruri nor Ayame wanted to see their parents worn down by constant condemnation.

So they had no choice but to acquiesce to the humiliation.

In this day and age, the only reason their wills could be ignored to this extent was due to the nature of these isolated societies.

The lineage of these families reached back to the age of the gods, keeping their power high and branching off into a pyramid-shaped society. Although the

people who thrived changed from generation to generation, only one clan held real power over the Town.

It was an unspoken agreement that being on the bad side of the wrong people would bring down misfortune on not only the person in question—not only their family, even—but their whole bloodline.

Those who went against customs and orders were eliminated. And the Agents of the Four Seasons were no exception.

After all, the Agent was chosen supernaturally. The family who produced one out of nowhere received honor, but nothing more.

Ruri and Ayame's family, the Hazakura, had some status within the Town of Summer. They were in a position to get most of what they wanted, but not this time.

"I'm sorry, Ayame. I didn't know," Ruri was apologizing in the present day.

The cancelation of her engagement was not the only reason Ayame Hazakura was lying in tears like a corpse.

"...I had no idea you were doing all that for me..."

After the shocking meeting with Seiran, Ayame spent the next several days talking to him and other VIPs to convince them to let at least Ruri marry.

But no matter what she said, Seiran would get in the way with his complaints.

She did not even get the chance to speak with any of the other bigwigs before she was turned away at the door.

In the end, she visited Seiran's mansion over and over, trying to find a way to persuade him, until they finally started turning her away there, too, and her parents and relatives told her to give up.

Ayame was heartbroken, even more than Ruri.

Why did I shut myself in?

Ruri had locked herself in her room after returning to the Town and hearing that her engagement was canceled.

She could've gone on a rampage like she did when Ayame announced her

own engagement, but she had lost all energy.

She had brought this not only upon herself but upon her sister, too. All because her revival had brought about this twisted form of the Agent of Summer. The despair she felt after having lived her whole life only for her sister was indescribable.

That was not the only thing that took the fight out of her—that Seiran had said her fiancé had already accepted the engagement’s annulment grieved her.

Although Ruri’s match had been made by their parents, she had fostered a faint romance through the ups and downs. She’d begun to imagine a future where she could be happy with him at her side and not Ayame. But it had all collapsed. She tried calling her fiancé, but the number had been disconnected. It was a shock she could never forget.

He had quietly accepted this injustice, and she had sequestered herself in bed after the blow. She just lay there in bed and cried, until her mind finally started working again and wondered what Ayame could be doing. When she came out of her room, she learned Ayame was shutting herself in, too.

Ruri hurried to Ayame’s room and found her drowning in tears. It was as though her soul had been sucked right out of her.

“Ayame, I’m sorry...”

So we go back to the beginning.

Ruri had been chased away, and now she was looking for the words to say in front of the door.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

She heard sobbing from inside the room but no answer.

“Want me to bring you some food? Tell me if there’s anything you want...”

Please say something.

There was only one thing Ayame would want.

“You go eat, Ruri...”

I don’t want you right now.

“Please, just leave me alone... Please.”

That was Ayame’s request.

*See? I was better off ****.* The forbidden thought crept into her mind.

“I’m sorry, Ruri... I just want to be left alone...”

“...Sis...”

“I’m sorry, Ruri,” Ayame whispered in tears again.

*I knew I was better off ****.*

Ruri tried to dismiss that echoing voice, but it wouldn’t go away. So there it stayed.

“I’m really, really sorry, Ruri... I’m sorry I’m such a disappointing sister...”

*I should’ve ****.*

The echo grew.

“...”

Ruri couldn’t go away from the door.

Ruri had been shutting herself in the Summer villa just until a few months ago. She thought it was fair retaliation against her sister for abandoning her, but now she realized how foolish she had been.

Ruri traced her fingers across the door before leaving.

The Hazakura residence was a Western-style mansion, just like the Summer villa. The big building was three stories high.

Ruri’s room was a little ways away from Ayame’s.

It hadn’t changed since she was a kid. It was full of plushies, decorative plants, and wooden furniture with a green-and-white interior design, giving off a gentle mood.

When she arrived back at her room, Ruri’s familiars—dogs, cats, and birds—

played at her feet, whining and meowing and chirping with worry. The Agent of Summer had the power to communicate with all living beings by using Life Operation. She knew they were trying to cheer her up.

“...Thank you, guys...”

Ruri dragged her feet across the room and flopped onto the bed, bouncing a little on the mattress.

Her little creatures jumped up to the bed and snuggled with her in a pile in an attempt to soothe her loneliness. Amid all the fur and feathers, Ruri pondered about what to do next.

Originally, she was to be married next year. Ayame’s wedding was to take place in early autumn this year.

Ruri’s fiancé would take her place as Agent Guard, meaning Ayame’s term would end this same year. She would show Ruri’s fiancé the ropes after the wedding and retire once he could properly take over. But that plan was ruined. The gifts Ruri had bought for her sister’s wedding had nowhere to go now.

I wish I could ask someone for help.

The twins weren’t even given a chance to speak to their fiancés one last time. They’d changed their phone numbers, too, leaving Ruri and Ayame completely in the dark. It was obvious Ruri wouldn’t get a chance to see her fiancé even if she went to his house, considering how thoroughly she’d been cut out.

Not that she had the courage to go there in the first place.

The tears welled up again. Then her phone rang; she wiped the tears away and looked at the screen, hoping it could somehow be her fiancé calling from this unknown number.

“...Hello?”

It wasn’t who she expected.

“Lady Ruri, I apologize for calling so early in the morning... How are you doing?”

It was the voice of the man who was most likely to hear her out.

Ruri's cats and dogs were startled as she jolted upright and shifted her phone to her other hand.

"Lady Ruri? Can you hear me?"

She had gotten close to him back in spring—the Guard of Autumn.

"It's me. Rindo. Please answer me."

Rindo Azami. They had become comrades-in-arms when the Four Seasons fought together.

"I've heard things have gotten rough for you. Is there anything I could help with?"

Ruri's eyes stung hotly. "L-Lord Rindooo...!" she wailed. "Lord Rindo, I—I, th—there's... there's so much I want to say..."

Rindo had told her that, after the Autumn villa was destroyed, the lady and retainer of Autumn had moved to the Town. The call must've been coming from the Town of Autumn's *honden*. Ruri couldn't hear any noise in the background, so perhaps he was away from Nadeshiko.

"Talk to me. That's why I called. Please don't cry."

"Lord Rindo..."

She already looked up to him; this call was salvation to her. Simply talking to a sympathetic and sincerely worried ear could change your outlook entirely. Especially when it was a big brother figure like Rindo was for her.

Ruri told him about the broken engagements, about Ayame's despair, and about how they had no way to amend the situation.

"I see...," Rindo said. *"...That's a shame... It's awful that they would cancel your weddings like that..."*

"Yeah... By the way, who told you about it? Who's your sources?"

"I don't know the details...," Rindo said evasively. *"But I believe it's the leader of Maverick Rabbit Horn. I received an email outlining the status of the other agents..."*

Ruri was confused. She wasn't familiar with that term.

“You’re not aware? It’s an emerging issue in the Town of Summer.”

Ruri thought hard as she could, but she had no idea.

“I was on the manifestation journey, and I’ve been inside ever since coming back... Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I see... I’ll explain, then... As you know, a horned rabbit does not exist. That’s where the name comes from. Their opponent would be Doyen Turtle.”

That only confused her further. First rabbits, now turtles?

“Their name comes from the image of a cunning, unyielding elder turtle. One could say that our current circumstances are because of Doyen Turtle’s control. Maverick Rabbit Horn is in opposition to that.”

“I’m gone for a minute, and we’ve got new factions...”

“No, they’ve been there forever. They were just given the names recently. Basically, it’s conservatism versus progressivism.”

That explanation cleared up Ruri’s confusion.

Conservatism was the philosophy of conserving tradition and opposing change and reform.

Progressivism was the opposite, trying to overturn tradition and build something new.

Both conservatism and progressivism had their good and bad points.

Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn were the conservative and progressive forces, respectively, of each Town.

“That said, the names are used for those who act beyond the core philosophies of conservatism and progressivism. Doyen Turtle is basically the bigwigs controlling each Town—the families who hold absolute power. They don’t just uphold tradition; they hoard their privileges and act for their own benefit, finding whatever excuses they can to maintain their power. Crafty

turtles indeed. Aren't there people like that in the Town of Summer?"

"I can't say there aren't... My parents always say we shouldn't go against the most powerful ones. Who knows what they could do if we did... There's definitely something."

"Indeed. And their opponents are Maverick Rabbit Horn. The 'Maverick' is there to emphasize the importance of every person raising their voice individually, apparently... They're a group of people who aren't from prestigious families and are tired of the leadership's methods. The opposition has been there before. Naturally, the veteran soldier and the private have different ideologies and experiences, as they were born in different times. The incident this spring showed that the Towns of the Four Seasons have to rethink how we do things, and the opposition grew intense enough that they were named Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn. Basically, we shed light on the Towns' dark side. Then the Dark Wolf mystery and the divine punishment theory happened, which only stirred the pot more..."

"Whoa, hold on, this got a lot more complicated... Keep it simple!"

Ruri vainly tried to make sense of the terminology and situation. One thing she did understand was that the turtle and the rabbit hated each other.

"Ummm... I'll try to make it simpler, then. You understand that the power in the Towns is concentrated into certain families, right?"

"Yeah."

"And it's really bad to make them angry. They have the power to do anything they want to you or your family. They could put you out of a job or put pressure on you in other ways..."

"...We shouldn't be saying that out loud, but yeah..."

"The Hazakura family is old and prestigious, so you haven't been a target so far, but that sort of thing happens commonly elsewhere."

"..."

Ruri had no reply to that. She knew she was a sheltered girl.

"Everything would be great if all the bigwigs were good people, but there are

plenty of bad apples in every Town. They've been getting all the respect and gotten away with everything forever... And as these privileges are passed down to their children and grandchildren, they ensure that they are able to stay in power forever. Throughout the long history of the Towns, some less-than-fantastic people have come to hold that power."

Ruri understood that. Whenever their relatives gathered, they always talked about the bigwigs and other families.

Such and such family messed up and was judged by the higher-ups; such and such family made a comeback with their engagement. She'd heard their animated conversations since childhood; the thought of respecting the bigwigs had been naturally passed down to her.

"The same thing happens historically outside the Towns, too. There are people with noble intentions in power, and just as many without. And for whatever reason, the bad actors tend to have better success. And what happens when those in power make liberal use of it? Many people will obey them or kick down others just to get on their good side, even if they know they're doing wrong."

Rindo seriously explained as he would to a child.

Ruri seriously nodded in understanding.

"But enough about that—."

"You're going on to another topic...? Can I keep up?"

"You're keeping up fine, and we'll get back to the point. You see...there were two types of people who aided New Year back in spring."

Ruri frowned. She had personally experienced the betrayal of the ones who leaked intel to the extremist group.

"First, there's those who did it for the thrill. Idiots who wanted to do crime for the money or simply the excitement."

"Idiots, truly..."

"Many of them were close relatives of the bigwigs."

"Unbelievable idiots..."

She had heard about the reasons, but hearing it from a person she trusted made her all the more baffled by their choices.

“The other type is those with grudges.”

“Grudges... Against who?”

“Those who suffered under the tyranny of Doyen Turtle. People who aided New Year because of their hatred for the Town and the Four Seasons Agency themselves. As you know, it’s difficult to find a job inside the Town or get to a good position inside the Agency without the proper contacts... Sometimes a prestigious background just wins out over effort. They don’t care about the Agents, but they also hate the current system in the Towns and the Agency. There were plenty of people determined to help terrorists just to give the politicians a hard time.”

“Why don’t they care about us?!”

“...Many people can’t see the Agents of the Four Seasons as anything more than a mechanism, after all...”

Teary as they were, Ruri’s eyes turned sharp. “Ayame and I could crush the Town if we wanted to...”

“...Let’s set that aside for now. Back on topic, don’t you think that the problem isn’t the traitors themselves but the environment that allowed them to turn out like that?”

“The environment...?”

“The treatment of the Agents depends quite a lot on the opinions of the Town’s heavy hitters. That’s part of the environment. You’re seen as a tool because they allow it.”

“...True.”

“According to National Security’s investigations, most of those arrested from the Agency cited a suffocating pressure as the reason behind their crimes, both those in it for the thrill and those with grudges. New Year infiltrated and specifically targeted those who wanted to get away from this closed society. Right now the blame is trending away from specific people and toward

questioning the systems of the Agency and the Towns. And those who proposed this are referred to as Maverick Rabbit Horn."

No one's hands were entirely clean.

However, the spring contingency had exposed a part too dirty to ignore.

"Wait, isn't that good? So Maverick Rabbit Horn's the good guys?" Ruri sincerely wanted them to succeed.

If they could change the minds of the higher-ups, maybe the marriages weren't completely dead.

But Rindo smashed her faint hope.

"Not entirely."

"Why?"

"Because the ones with the grudges want to open a hole in this rotten system—or make the bigwigs squirm at least. They're hoping a riot will shame them. Some of them only use the ideals as an excuse."

"Th-that's bad..."

"Well, it's only a minority that's on the extreme side... Also, most people with Maverick Rabbit Horn are young or in families without power. The people revolting now are the ones who've been run into the ground. Those with the proper ideals are also upset at what's happening to the Agents and want to protect you."

"Th-that's good... Hopefully we get more people like that..."

"But that's not good for Doyen Turtle."

"Huh...?"

Rindo whispered as though he was playing with Ruri.

"They wouldn't be affected so long as Maverick Rabbit Horn kept quiet. They wouldn't have to hear any grievances. Only other people would suffer. They could live happily. That's the worst part of Doyen Turtle."

"..."

“The people thinking those things will want to do something to stop the criticism.”

“...Lord Rindo?”

His voice turned harder.

“They want the attention going elsewhere... They want to pin the blame for everything inconvenient that’s happening on someone else. Doyen Turtle wants someone else to be the target.”

Rindo didn’t stop talking. As his emotions heated up, Ruri turned colder, but Rindo paid no heed.

“And what better target than where the storm began... Haven’t you realized, Lady Ruri?”

Ruri finally began connecting the dots.

She saw the picture clearly.

“The divine punishment theory is being spread by the members of Doyen Turtle who are worried about their reputation.”

She could clearly see the malice.

“It seems we...did something huge without realizing.”

It was so dark she wanted to look away.

“We joined forces across seasons and drove the insurgents away, and we exposed traitors and rebels from the Agency and Towns in the process. Many people from Doyen Turtle families were arrested. They’re in a terrible position right now.”

Ruri was feeling dizzy. The Agents lived for the people, and the Towns and the Agency were supposed to support them.

But they were abandoning their duty and attacking the Agents to protect themselves.

“That’s why that theory is spreading—to take the attention away from themselves. Didn’t you find it strange why your weddings would be called off?”

It was foolish—but the ones doing the attacking clearly didn’t think so.

“Treating you like a bad omen is only their cover story—they want to throw their weight around and bring you to heel. They’re taking advantage of the excuse. This can’t go on.”

Everything began to make sense as she listened to him.

I knew it.

The words came to mind.

*I should’ve ****.*

The voice in her head was cold and blunt.

“The more we capitulate, the worse things will turn out. We can’t stay quiet, and we can’t assume all is lost and run away. I want you to fight back. I am certain that it will be you two who can break through this wall.”

*You should’ve ****.*

Being hated always hurt, especially when she tried not to be.

And especially when she only lived to be loved.

“So Lady Ruri, in Ryugu...” Rindo paused in his passionate speech. *“...Lady Ruri?”*

He’d realized Ruri wasn’t talking.

“I—I...”

Ruri’s voice trembled.

“Lady Ruri, what’s wrong?”

“I—I... I don’t know what...”

“What do you mean?”

“I...”

He meant to stoke the fires of her resistance, to pull her out of her funk and

convince her to stand up.

“Lady Ruri...?”

But he did not.

What Ruri said next was like a dagger in Rindo’s heart.

“I really should’ve died...”

“What...?” He didn’t understand.

“What should I...”

“What are you saying...?” His speech had dried up. *“Why would you think that?”*

His voice trembled.

“Because now I know... I gave them a reason to attack everyone...”

Rindo wanted to say that wasn’t what he was getting at, but Ruri spoke first.

“I realize I’m shunned.”

“Lady Ruri... Why? There’s no reason for Summer to be the only ones—”

“I know. But now Summer’s problems are affecting Autumn, right?”

“That’s... No, I wasn’t trying to say that...!”

That hateful voice echoed in Ruri’s head again.

“Spring’s getting the worse of it, but everyone knows that it’s the fault of the adults for not saving her after they kidnapped her. Lady Hinagiku did nothing wrong. I’m the only one you can say made a mistake.”

*See? I should’ve ****.*

“I came back to life, and I shouldn’t have.”

*See? I should’ve ****.*

“You did nothing wrong. Neither did Nadeshiko.”

*See? I should’ve ****.*

“You just tried to help me. That’s not wrong.”

*See? I should've ****.*

“Ayame was just about to get married and quit being a Guard, but now she’s an Agent, and her wedding was called off. Because of me.”

*See? I should've ****.*

“It’s all my fault...”

She didn’t want to make Rindo feel bad, but she couldn’t stop herself from laying her thoughts bare.

All the emotions she’d bottled up were finally pouring out. She wanted to condemn herself out loud.

“See? I should’ve died.”

Why was she the only one aware of this?

Ruri was painfully certain.

“...I’m sure even Ayame thinks that...”

Ruri covered her eyes with a hand, sick of everything. She didn’t want to see the painful reality before her.

If only she could melt away with the tears; that way she wouldn’t have to trouble anyone with taking care of the corpse, either.

I would've rather stayed dead if it meant they wouldn't hate me.

She did not wish for this fate.

Why's it always like this? Why am I always like this?

All the efforts she’d ever made were wasted.

No matter what she did, she caused little troubles to others;, and little by little, she became disliked.

Everyone experienced that sort of thing, but Ruri’s world was too small.

She couldn't stand it. This was too much for a girl whose desire to be loved was her greatest motivation.

If she couldn't be loved, then she was better off dead.

If only I wasn't a goddess.

Ruri thought of pointless what-ifs.

If she hadn't been chosen in that moment, her life would have been different. She'd dreamed of it thousands of times now.

If anyone else could've been made god or goddess, she wouldn't have to stand this despair and shame. Perhaps she could've been loved easily.

Why?

But those what-ifs were meaningless.

I didn't want to be a goddess.

She was the chosen one, and she had no choice but to bear her duty as sacrifice. Crying wouldn't solve anything.

No one else could live Ruri Hazakura's life.

"...Lady Ruri."

Even just a peaceful life was beyond the goddess's grasp.

There was both anger and sadness in Rindo's voice.

"Why would you...?"

He rebuked her as he tried to protect her.

"Please don't say...you should've died..."

"But...I'm worthless..."

"That's not true. I know how you try to be cheery for the sake of other people."

"...I don't."

"You're a gentle girl. You don't let anyone see you sad, even when you are."

Rindo looked for the words to change Ruri's mind.

"I know how truly kind you are..."

"It's not true..."

"It is."

"No, it's not..."

"You're the only who thinks that."

"..."

"You're a wonderful person that should stay alive. I'm not the only one who thinks so; plenty of people do."

Ruri sobbed. *"That's not true."*

If it was... If she was the kind of person Rindo said... If she was a gentle girl who everyone liked...her life wouldn't have turned out this way.

"What is happening right now is not your fault," Rindo said. *"Has anyone whose opinion matters to you said so?"*

"...No, but..."

"Of course not. The people around you care for you. They wouldn't think that."

"There's at least one... Ayame—"

"Stop it, Lady Ruri." He cut her off. *"There's no one else who loves her little sister as much as Ayame does... You know that. Why would you say that?"*

"Because... It's my fault..."

"Did Lady Ayame say that?"

"I-I'm saying it because she won't! She's keeping it to herself!" Ruri cried again as she thought of her sister shutting herself in her room. *"But she really wants to, so I gotta say it for her! That I should've died!"*

"..."

"Everyone's just not saying it out loud..."

“What you’re saying makes no sense, but I understand why you’re saying it. Listen. You only think that because people who have it in for you are putting pressure on you. You wouldn’t have blamed yourself to this extent if it wasn’t for the divine punishment theory and all that talk about environmental destruction, would you? Think about it.”

“But...”

“I love you two, and I can’t stand how you’re being dragged around like this. I told you about all of this...because I want you to take a stand. But...I don’t think I should have, at least not right now... I’m really sorry.”

Ruri wanted to say he had nothing to apologize for, but her throat was too tight.

Tears dropped one after the other, and Rindo spoke again.

“You are not strong because of your noble standing—you try to be strong for others. I forgot that. I should’ve known it would be hard on you after all that’s happened... I apologize. But let me say this. You should not have died.”

“...”

“Believe me. Many people are glad that you’re alive, including me. Don’t discount our feelings.”

Saying she was better off dead was disrespectful to those who saved her. To her family, who had cried seeing her alive again.

“...I’m... I’m sorry...”

So Ruri had resisted it all this time, but she wanted to say it out loud. She apologized in between sobs.

“I’m sorry, Lord Rindo... I’m sorry for saying that...”

“No...”

“I just wanted someone to hear it...”

“It’s only natural considering your position. Yeah...you must have gone through so much up to now. And after coming back, now your sister is an Agent... These are hard burdens to carry...”

“It was shameless of me to say that to you after you saved me... Nadeshiko went to all that effort, and I’m just... I’m sorry... I’m just... I’m just so...”

Her past raced across her mind. How she troubled her parents and sister by trying to get their attention.

How she was rescued when they were supposed to be saving the Agent of Autumn.

How she tried to cheerfully support her sister through the worry of being a goddess, but then she shut herself in the moment she heard about their weddings being called off.

All of it was so embarrassing, so sad, so damned *stupid*. She cursed herself.

“Nothing goes right, no matter what I try...”

She couldn’t keep it in anymore.

Why did it come to this? How was she supposed to repay her debts? Would someone else have been able to handle it better? She had no idea—only that her chest hurt. She wailed like a small child, and she couldn’t even speak.

Still, Rindo did not hang up. Once Ruri’s crying and sniffing had calmed down, he said, “*Lady Ruri... Are you okay? Do you have a towel and water around?*”

“I’m... fine...”

“*...I wish I could be there with you now.*”

His voice was sincere.

“...No, everyone’s in trouble right now... Stay by Nadeshiko’s side... I’m really sorry... But I feel better now... Just having someone to listen is better than anything, I think...”

“*Was I of any help...?*”

“Yes, a lot...”

Rindo had said she wasn’t better off dead, and that saved her. She was

calming down, and Rindo noticed; he spoke softly.

"I see... I'm glad I could lend you an ear."

"Thank you... And, um... Would you mind not telling anyone? I won't say that anymore... Forget that I said it..."

"Lady Ruri..."

Nothing had really changed, but just having someone there to hear her soothed her. She talked of her troubles to her new friend, he heard her out, and she let it all out in tears.

"Thank you, really." Her heart felt much lighter now.

"...That said, I think you should talk about it to Lady Ayame and your parents..."

"No. I'm causing enough trouble as it is. They'll think I'm being selfish."

"They wouldn't."

"...Even if they don't, I know I hurt you with it. I want to keep this secret... Please."

"I understand..."

"Also... One more thing... You were about to say something, right?"

Rindo mumbled. *"I, errr..."*

"Sorry I cut you off... You listened to me, so I'll listen to you... And I want you to tell me. You said something about Ryugu? Can I do anything over there?"

"Yes, but it might be hard on you now."

Tears were still in Ruri's eyes as she smiled. "It's okay. I'm calmer now. Tell me."

"..."

"Lord Rindo?"

She could feel his hesitation on the other side of the line, and she felt bad about interrupting him before.

After a while, Rindo made up his mind.

"...I think hearing this will sadden you..."

"What is it...?"

"My sources say...the Dark Wolf mystery in Ryugu isn't over yet. The Agents are being attacked for multiple reasons...but I think this could be the chance to clear your names."

"How...?"

"Lady Ruri, you have the power of Life Operation. Couldn't you control the Dark Wolf?"

Ruri's jaw dropped.

"If you could, then you might be able to shake the superstition."

She blinked repeatedly for a while, her face turning brighter as she made sense of what he was saying.

"So...wanna try going to Ryugu?"

Finally, there was a hint of strength in her teary voice.

"R-right...! If the environment is really a problem, and it's because of animals... Then there might be something I can do!"

"Yes, and you are the only one in Yamato who could do that. Well, you and Lady Ayame..."

It was like stepping out of a cave and seeing the whole world before her.

The hurt and shame had kicked her down so far she thought she could never get back up again.

"And that could take some of the heat off Lady Hinagiku, maybe? I could help everyone..."

But knowing that there was something she could do gave her hope.

"They say it's our fault, so why don't we go solve it ourselves?!" Ruri cheered.

Meanwhile, Rindo kept his voice low. *"...Right. But it is dangerous... And people might stop you if you tell them about it."*

"Yeah... They've got us on a leash short enough as it is... We gotta go in

secret.” As she spoke, she was already moving. She was always best at acting before thinking.

Holding the phone to her ear, she got off the bed and grabbed her tablet from her desk.

She could still move around. She wasn’t dead. Why not put up a fight to the very end?

“So I’d like to get in touch with the Lord Archer of Twilight... But we don’t know anything about that side.”

“We certainly don’t... Not even me. All I know is that the Archers climb the mountains in the sacred region with enough time to slash open the canopy.”

“Okay, Mount Ryugu, then.” Ruri tapped swiftly at her tablet while talking, then swiped her finger across the screen.

“Lady Ruri, if you ever feel like doing it, I could get you a plane tick—”

“Got it already.”

“What?!”

Ruri had two plane tickets to Ryugu.

“We’re taking the last flight tonight, so we won’t get to snoop around right away, but we’ll be there.”

“...Your drive never fails to impress.”

“Hee-hee...”

“This is about as much as I can do for you... Nadeshiko and I will be busy preparing for autumn for a while. I can still answer your texts, so please let me know if there’s any progress.”

“All right. I’ll show everyone what I’m made of!”

“Lady Ruri...”

“See ya, Lord Rindo.”

“...Yes. See you later, Lady Ruri.”

And so Ruri Hazakura decided to head over to Ryugu and solve the root of her problems: the Dark Wolf mystery.

Meanwhile, another form of trouble was brewing in the Town of Autumn in Tsukushi.

The Autumn *honden*—the current location of the Agent of Autumn Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

A beautiful young man with tanned skin stood in a corner of the room, holding his phone with a stern expression.

It seemed like the call wasn't going well, as he tilted his head and furrowed his eyebrows. His yellow chrysanthemum hair brushed softly against his cheek.

“Rindo.”

Guard of Autumn Rindo Azami turned in the direction of the voice.

His beloved lady was watching him with worry.

“Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame won't answer...?”

Rindo's phone was beeping to indicate a failed call.

“No... It's been like this since yesterday... I tried calling from your phone, but that number isn't getting through, either...” His lady immediately scrunched up her face, and Rindo hurriedly added, “They wouldn't do this out of nowhere. Something must've happened.”

“They don't hate us...?”

“...No.” Rindo picked up his beloved princess and pondered.

What is going on?

He smiled at her, concealing his worry.

Summer manifestation is over. They can't be under attack from insurgents.

“Nadeshiko, I'll look for a chance to talk with the other Agents, too. Let's see

if they can get in touch with Summer.”

“Yes... But what if we’re the only ones who can’t...?”

“No, that couldn’t be. They promised to meet us once their journey was over... We even talked about going to the beach...”

“What if we made them mad...?”

It could be due to the ongoing criticism of the Agents.

“That couldn’t be.”

I can’t tell Nadeshiko that.

Rindo hugged her tight to hide his anxiety, although he took care not to suffocate her.

Lady Ruri, Lady Ayame, are you okay?

Rindo Azami had no way of knowing that someone was currently using his name to speak with Ruri.

The malice surrounding the Agents was growing ever larger.

No one yet noticed the hands wrapping around their necks.

The first time I saw her was on a summer day.

The heat was so strong, it was as though the Flame Emperor himself had taken the whole world in his embrace.

I immediately regretted leaving the mansion, but that didn't stop me.

I'd only heard of this little sister of mine, but it had been quite some time since she became Agent of Spring.

I'd never thought about meeting her, until this moment.

After her predecessor Kobai Yukiyanagi passed away, her daughter replaced her as sacrificial goddess.

I was twisted, and the suddenness of my desire to meet her made that abundantly clear.

Just how unlucky did one have to be to suffer that fate? It was like going out to see a butterfly with its wings clipped off.

If I could meet myself in that moment, I would have strangled myself and ensured the corpse would never be found.

I was so foolish, even taking into account the hatred that had defined my childhood.

Perhaps I always thought everything was so terrible for me because of that woman and her daughter. My father took her as a mistress, got her pregnant, and my mother had lost her mind about it. My father only saw my mother as a tool for his success; he didn't care about me, either.

My interpersonal relationships were so messed up I had no idea who was wrong anymore.

I was raised in a hell designed to impress upon me that people were fundamentally vile and base.

Which was why I was happy to know divine punishment had

befallen the girl who had most likely lived without the tiniest hardship in the world.

No one in the Towns wanted to become an Agent of the Four Seasons. But she deserved it!

The feeling vanished as soon as I arrived at her house. Which was why, looking back, I could only laugh at how damn foolish I was.

It was not a mansion a Kayo daughter would live in.

The fence was dirty. The Town's local idiots had graffitied all over it. Why didn't anyone erase it? This wasn't a home for the venerated divine.

Even setting aside her position, this wasn't even a home for a Kayo. Why would the Townchief allow this?

Did my father know about this mess? A barrage of questions popped into my head, but only one answer.

Of course they knew. That pair was too controlling not to. Then why weren't they doing anything about it?

“ ... ”

It hadn't been too long since the funeral.

Was this really the house of someone who should be protected?

Should I not have come here? Was it better for me not to know this? Doubt began eating at me.

I felt that something awaited me there—something that would make it impossible for me to hate her. And I couldn't have that. I wanted to hate her.

Still, it didn't sit right with me to go home without even seeing her.

I walked into that filthy house—right in through the front door. No one came to take a look at me.

I heard she's five or six. How many people are taking care of her?

I was baffled by how thin the security was that anyone could get inside just like that.

Isn't she the daughter of the woman my father truly loved?

My father valued his successor, so I never lacked education, clothing, food, or shelter.

I was given the treatment and respect due to the name Kayo.

But what about her?

I began feeling worse and worse. I was here to see a real brat.

She would have been a dumb little girl brought up with love, without any worry in the world, who finally got her just deserts by becoming a goddess incarnate. I had so much ready to say to her.

"Your mother seduced my father."

"You and your mother drove my mother insane."

"Why were you even born?"

"You're not worthy of the Kayo name, bastard child."

"Nobody in Town likes you."

"You got what you deserved becoming an Agent. Divine punishment."

"You have no idea how hard life has been for me."

I had all the abuse I could come up with ready and waiting.

I was going to make her cry. I was going to make her pay for what she did to me.

It's true. I really had all that in mind. I hated my sister. I hated her so much I wanted her to die.

Finally, I could hurt her, and maybe that would make me hurt a little less.

I was serious.

As I walked around the mansion enthusiastically, I heard a sound.

Someone was crying.

All my vile thoughts came to a halt, and anxiety took over my body.

I looked around. Nobody was running to the crying child.

“...”

I waited in silence. It seemed no one was there. There had to be someone here to take care of her, even if they didn't live here. Where were they? But all I could hear was the crying.

In that moment, deep inside, I knew it.

The child, not even ten, had been left alone on this boiling hot day. It wasn't hard to extrapolate the rest of her life from there.

I'd only assumed she was loved.

This child was thrown away into this mansion like a piece of trash into the can, and the lid had been clapped on top to protect everyone else from the smell. She was a spurned sacrifice for the world.

I slid the door slightly to peek at my sister's room.

To my annoyance, my heart was racing.

She was so small.

She was so, so small, so much more tender than I.

She was so young, she wouldn't have understood my hatred even if I had subjected her to it.

She was abandoned, too—hunkered on the tatami, bawling her

eyes out.

Why was no one running up to check on her?

What were the adults doing? She was the Agent of Spring, the incarnation of the season here. Why?

In between sobs, she cried, "*Mother,*" "*Why can't we be together?*" "*Take me with you.*"

I couldn't take it anymore. I left.

I shouldn't have seen that. I shouldn't have seen that. I shouldn't have seen that.

The thought circled around my head.

The only thing I found in that mansion was a small child crying because of her loneliness and the whims of the adults.

Ever since that day, my sister took root in my heart.

I thought about her morning, noon, and night, wondering what she could be doing.

I didn't just want to bully a child.

She wasn't what I was expecting.

I thought she was more special, more loved, more deserving of my criticism, and that I was the one with real problems.

The thought made me want to hate you.

I wanted to keep it. I wish I could've kept my hatred.

I was still deciding whether to love you, Hinagiku—but then, you died.



CHAPTER 5

Zansetsu Kayo

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Zansetsu Kayo, with the Spring Administration.”

Spring and Winter’s fun time in Teishu had already passed.

The hands of the clock indicated it was already past ten PM. Four people were gathered in a room of the hotel, stern looks on their faces.

Guard of Spring Sakura Himedaka, Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki, and his Guard Itecho Kangetsu.

And a big name in the Town of Spring.

The Spring Administration was the institution led by the Townchief to run the Town. Each Town had its own administration, each with their own policies.

The man was not a big name only for his association with the administration.

His mother was a Shirafuji, a family with a long history in Teishu—descendants of a clan sometimes called “real estate royalty” for the soaring prices of the lands and mountains in their property. His father was the next in line as Townchief of Spring, Shungetsu Kayo. Zansetsu’s was Hinagiku’s half brother.

“Now then, where to begin...”

Zansetsu’s name meant “remaining snow,” and he certainly looked the part. He was in his early twenties.

He wore an elegant kimono. His skin was translucent as snow, and his hair was similarly pale. He would be more fitting in Winter rather than Spring.

His features were fine, beautiful, ephemeral—he probably got them from his mother. Meanwhile, he carried himself with so much dignity and allure he might as well have a steel plate on his back.

He doesn’t look like Hinagiku.

Rosei studied him carefully. If Hinagiku was a dainty flower, Zansetsu would be the lone moon on the cold sky. His looks and aura were entirely different. Rosei couldn’t believe they were related, even as half siblings.

Can we really trust him?

His mother had tried to kill Kobai and Hinagiku in a jealous rage.

Although Hinagiku's father and mother had been in love to begin with and Zansetsu's mother tore apart their relationship, the fact remained that Shungetsu Kayo committed adultery. There was no defending her violent acts, but his wife was right to be angry.

Zansetsu Kayo was the child of the jilted wife.

It was clear his relationship with Hinagiku was a complicated one. From his point of view, he was the legitimate heir, while Hinagiku was the child of his father's lover and the reason for his mother's mental collapse. Not someone he would be fond of.

Rosei glanced at Sakura. She noticed and nodded at him not to worry.

Sakura trusts him, huh.

Rosei had heard about Zansetsu's circumstances ahead of this meeting, as well as the relationship between him and Sakura.

Simply put, they both watched over Hinagiku.

After Hinagiku escaped from the New Year hideout and returned to the Town of Spring and Sakura came back as well, he'd contacted her and asked her to protect his sister.

So they were connected in secret to Hinagiku.

Zansetsu wanted to protect his sister but couldn't do so visibly due to his standing and his mother's standpoint; so he decided to contact her Guard.

Apparently, he had been watching over Hinagiku through Sakura.

His outlook had changed after the Four Seasons collaboration.

Everyone involved had predicted a major terrorist attack, and more people among the Towns had been saying they should prepare with increased support for the Agents.

Some hesitated and objected to Zansetsu's involvement, but ultimately, the winning position was that they should not make light of the fact that the

insurgents had attacked the Agent of Spring as soon as she came back.

The Agents and Guards of the Four Seasons' unprecedented collaboration also became a trigger for their action.

The fight against New Year had ended before he could offer any assistance, but as he had been watching the situation, he managed to secure lodging for each Agent shortly afterward. Currently, he was giving personal financial assistance to the lady and retainer of Spring.

For that reason, Hinagiku and Sakura did not go back to the Town but stayed the Teito Reception Hall for foreign VIPs with full security at all times.

Only the grandson of the real estate royalty could have offered such assistance.

It's suspicious.

Rosei knew a supporter had found lodging for them right after the terrorist attack, but he had no idea it had been Zansetsu. Winter stayed at the Teito Reception Hall, too, but Rosei still didn't trust it. Zansetsu's open and honest support out of his own pocket was commendable, and yet Rosei couldn't bring himself to trust him.

It was partly because Rosei didn't trust the Town of Spring in general.

They had given up looking for Hinagiku three months after her kidnapping and left all responsibility to the Town of Winter.

He couldn't forgive their actions even if years had passed since.

Rosei was sure the same ones who chose to leave Hinagiku behind were still alive and thinking only of themselves in their government of the Town of Spring.

And Zansetsu was affiliated with the Spring Administration. He was the grandchild of the Townchief who chose to abandon Hinagiku.

How am I supposed to trust him?

Rosei suspected Zansetsu was only pretending to be their ally.

Nothing we can do now but feel each other out.

Rosei looked at Itecho.

Sakura had told him about Zansetsu before this, Rosei heard.

Itecho looked calm and collected—but then, he always did. He hadn't told his lord about it because he was watching the situation carefully.

You should've told me. Rosei glared at him.

"Lord Zansetsu," Sakura said. She looked at the wall to the other room with worry.

As though he had some idea what she was worried about, Zansetsu responded with an even softer voice than before. "Don't worry, Sakura Himedaka. There's guards before the door, and Tsubame's inside."

He spoke more gently than Rosei had imagined possible. But it was what Zansetsu had said that had him lifting an eyebrow.

Zansetsu noticed and added, "I forgot to mention. Tsubame is my retainer. Tsubame Aboshi... You've met him before, Lord Winter. I heard he was rude to you, and I apologize. We are truly sorry."

Rosei remembered the boy Sakura told him not to bully.

He replied flatly. "Nothing to worry about. I apologize for mistreating your retainer."

Zansetsu's lips curved at the sound of that.

The smile made him look younger. Rosei had heard he was in his twenties, which meant he was close to Rosei in age.

"No, you only treated him properly as an envoy rather than handling him like a child. My failure in instructing him caused you trouble—it was a natural reaction. I'm not as free walking around outside, so I will be asking him to relay messages in the future, as well." Zansetsu bowed quietly. "Please watch over him as he grows."

"I understand," Rosei said. "Please raise your head. Also, should we take a seat for talking?"

Everyone sat down on the sofas.

This young man had reserved a popular hotel close to Teishu Fairytale

Kingdom. As it had plenty of foreign guests, the rooms were furnished for daily life necessities in addition to sleeping. They were in a big parlor room meant for conversation and relaxation. Hinagiku was sleeping in the room next door.

“So, Mr. Zansetsu... Do you mind if I call you that? There’s something I want to ask before hearing you out...”

Zansetsu nodded. “Of course, allow me to say that I’m grateful you accepted my sudden summons.”

There was too much he wanted to ask, but Rosei began with the simplest question.

“If this conversation is so important, why isn’t Hinagiku Kayo with us?”

Zansetsu didn’t flinch, but there was sorrow in his glance as he looked at Rosei.

“Sakura said you are providing Spring with free lodging in the Teito Reception Hall. That is no easy feat, even with your assets. I imagine Hina...the Agent of Spring would be grateful, so why not meet her? Why is she being shut out?”

Zansetsu smiled wryly. “So we’re starting there... You don’t mince words, Lord Winter.”

Still, Zansetsu didn’t seem intent on keeping the information to himself. He glanced at the wall in the direction of Hinagiku’s room before returning his attention to Rosei.

“The reason is very simple. My sister would be scared of me.”

Rosei blinked. *He said my sister. He really recognizes her as family?*

He was surprised to hear that, for starters.

“I’m the son of the woman who tried to kill her. It’s not hard to imagine how she’d react upon meeting me. And I don’t want to scare her.”

“But...”

“That’s why I won’t meet with her. That’s all. It’d be better for you to relay the information to her later on.” His answer was concise.

“You don’t want to be thanked...,” Rosei said, “and you don’t want to come in

contact with her. That only brings more questions. Why, then, would you want to help her?”

“Guilt.”

Again, concise.

Rosei gave up on trying to read his expression. He exposed nothing. Rosei had no way of shaking him up other than his words.

“...You mean for your mother?”

“Ha-hah!” Zansetsu cackled.

“Why did you laugh?”

“I’m just embarrassed to know how famous my mother’s actions are.”

Maybe he didn’t want that to be brought up.

Suddenly, Zansetsu launched into a longer speech.

“It pains me to hear about her. That said, it is my father, Shungetsu Kayo, who should atone for that sin. I can’t be held accountable for that. I’m still ashamed as her son, but still...”

Zansetsu brushed his long eyelashes together. Everything he said sounded like a quiet murmur in the middle of the snow.

His interior was concealed in a world of winter.

“My reason for helping her...is that I regret that my hatred caused me to desert her.”

“...”

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t brought up in a good family environment,” Zansetsu said bitterly. “I wanted to pin the blame on something, and she was as good a target as any. The adults also slandered her, and I adopted that way of thinking as well. I thought she was the perfect outlet for my anger... and I was wrong.”

Rosei’s glance grew more wary, and still, Zansetsu did not look away.

“Now I understand I was wrong in hating my sister. I didn’t realize in childhood, only as I grew up.”

He plainly received Rosei's glare and muttered like falling snow.

"That realization came as a blow. I wondered if I should speak to her, if maybe our shared parental woes might bring us together. On the other hand, I didn't want to intrude. I went back and forth over the days and months..."

He spoke so quietly that his sincerity wasn't completely clear.

But his next words were full of pain.

"And then, the insurgents took her away."

Now it was Zansetsu glaring at Rosei. At Itecho, too.

"She was kidnapped in the Town of Winter."

Rosei knew what his eyes were saying: *Do not forget your own sin.*

"Everything became clear to me then. The state of affairs in the Town of Spring after my sister was kidnapped was...abhorrent. They considered it a boon. If she just died, it would remove a stain on the Town. The bloodshed brought about by my parents and Kobai Yukiyanagi is something to be ashamed of...but she had nothing to do with it. It was a groundless charge. I knew how it felt to be treated as a blight. After all, I was born from a woman my father didn't care about."

His words were flowing like a waterfall, overwhelming Rosei.

"I couldn't believe them. She and I were victims caught in the mess of our parents. I wanted them to focus on rescuing their Agent and stop putting their own personal feelings into it... The words I wanted to say wouldn't come out. I could only wait for Hinagiku's return as my distrust in my father, the Townchief, and everyone around them grew..."

Anger and resentment filled his every word.

"After three months of that, the Town of Spring simply pulled away from the search."

The way he spoke of the Town of Spring was reminiscent of Sakura's.

"I was floored."

Zansetsu's voice remained quiet, but the weight of the emotions behind it

made Rosei's back sweat. He could feel the heat of a fire blazing out of control behind his clean face.

Zansetsu looked at Sakura. "Then I learned that even her nine-year-old retainer, who had been *shot* as she tried to protect her Agent, was also driven away from the Town. Even if I'd still hated her then, I couldn't possibly have after that. I felt unleashed from a curse. The source of that evil was the adults, not that child." The snowfall was black, like a curse. "I'm sorry I could do nothing, Sakura Himedaka."

Zansetsu bowed again.

Sakura shook her head and asked him to raise his head. "I...resent the Town as well, but you were a child yourself ten years ago. I can't bring myself to hate you. It would be unfair...and even though you are the Townchief's grandson, I doubt the adults would have listened to you. It would've only caused trouble..."

"...I'm ashamed. I had no power or courage then."

"...Neither did I. I wasn't able to help Lady Hinagiku. I'm partly to blame for not being able to protect your sister."

"...I must say your own words back to you. You were only a child. You could not have protected her. I have no intention of hating you, either."

The implication was that the one to blame was Winter.

Rosei said nothing about it, as there was nothing he could say.

Although he still had his misgivings about this young man's intentions, he was able to understand him, if just a little.

So he's one of us who regrets what happened ten years ago.

While they did have that in common, he was in a special position. He had had nothing to do with the incident itself.

One could say that all of his feelings were simply one-sided.

He hated her, worried about her, and despaired all on his own.

And in the end, on his own, he began to think of his half sister as family and wanted to protect her.

He was doing what he didn't get to do back then, after a great detour, and one-sidedly.

What a sad man.

But Rosei did not hate him.

"...That's why I want to help her... My sister came back after eight years. I heard she had a mental breakdown. I should have talked to her, but I...I didn't have the courage. We've never spoken to each other; she isn't even aware of me—what could I say to her? Still, I couldn't keep ignoring her. So I decided to watch over her through Sakura Himedaka."

Rosei understood why Zansetsu did what he did after hearing all this.

I still can't trust him, but what he says makes sense.

Perhaps knowing what he was thinking, Sakura added, "Lord Zansetsu couldn't act openly, but he informed me and did his part in order to prevent Lady Hinagiku's replacement."

Rosei and Itecho sat up.

"They were going to replace her?"

Sakura closed her eyes, remembering the past two years. "It was considered when she was refusing to manifest."

"I never knew that!" Rosei shouted in agitation, and Sakura motioned for him to sit down.

"Of course you didn't... The Town of Spring was hiding the fact she was alive back then... At first it was just complaints. *If she's useless, they should just replace her...*"

"Fuck off!"

"I agree... But there were a few people who thought that way."

"..."

"Now that you're here, we want spring. Bring it—or die, they said."

Sakura clicked her tongue; just remembering it brought a surge of hatred.

“I begged the Townchief and Lord Zansetsu to protect Lady Hinagiku, and the Kayos guarded her. I would spot any suspicious people, relay the information, and they would move them away from Lady Hinagiku...”

Sakura’s trust in Zansetsu must have been built then; she sent him a grateful glance.

“I did very little. It was mainly the Townchief and my father. Perhaps they were finally feeling bad about having her assassinated after abandoning her for such a long time. Or perhaps they only feared that the replacement of the Kayo Agent of Spring would leave a stain on the family name... Either way, they acted to prevent it. My opinion is that the latter is the real reason.”

Sakura was surprised. “Your father, too...?”

“Don’t you dare thank him, Sakura Himedaka. And do not expect anything more from them in the future.”

Sakura wasn’t happy to hear about it, but at the very least, she saw it as a positive. “Still, I’m glad he did that.”

Whatever the reason, multiple people protected Hinagiku.

She wasn’t alone back then. Hinagiku hadn’t been truly abandoned by her family.

She had no intention of relying on them again, but the knowledge alleviated a bit of their past loneliness.

“I had my hands full giving Lady Hinagiku emotional support back then,” said Sakura. “I could have put her in danger if it weren’t for the help behind the scenes.”

“...You did very well.”

“I am especially grateful to you, Lord Zansetsu. I could count on one hand the times we met during these two years, but just knowing there was someone else worried about her was a great comfort to me...”

Out of respect for Sakura’s current state, Zansetsu no longer spoke ill of anyone else.

Instead, he said something that made her raise her head again.

“...I put too much weight on you. I didn’t say it much, but I am thankful for your protecting my sister. She would not have come back without you.”

Sakura smiled, full of joy as she met his gaze.

“Thank you, Lord Zansetsu...”

“You owe no one your thanks. The help is justly given.”

“No, please allow me to say it. Thank you...”

Sakura and Zansetsu talked and looked at each other in a way only they could understand.

“...?”

Rosei looked left and right.

What’s going on, here?

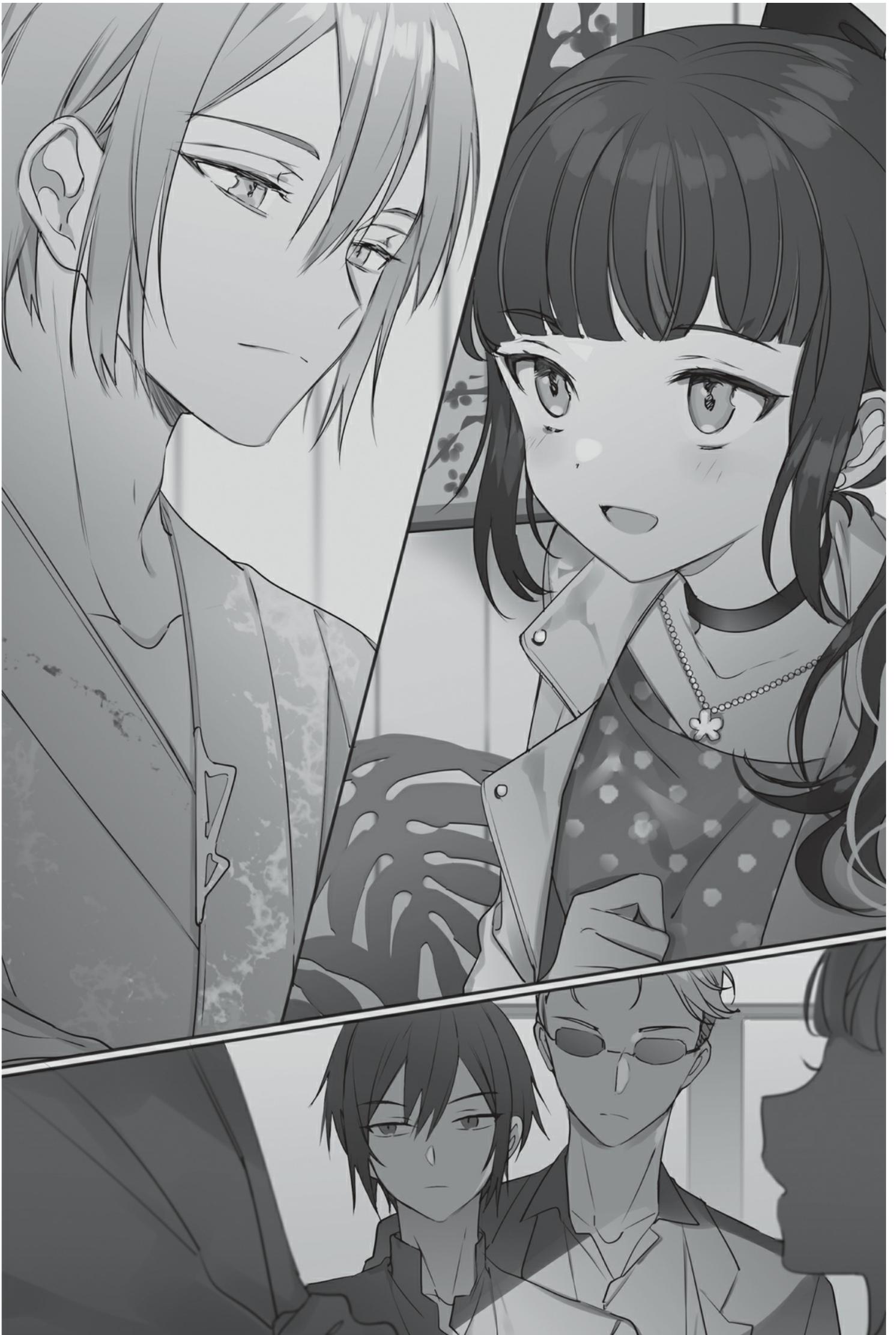
He glanced at Itecho to see his reaction, but he only watched with a blank expression. He revealed nothing, like stone, but that was typical.

C’mon, nothing?

Rosei resisted the urge to click his tongue. Sakura only seemed to think of Zansetsu as Hinagiku’s half brother and their supporter, but it was strange how Zansetsu’s gentleness seemed reserved only for her.

All right, I gotta do something about this. Rosei cut into the conversation, breaking whatever vibe was building.

“I understand your position now, Mr. Zansetsu. Let’s cut to the chase, then.”



After a short pause, Zansetsu turned to look at him.

“Considering how much you care for your sister, I imagine it has something to do with her safety.”

“...Yes. Not only her safety, though. This is a warning for all Agents of the Four Seasons.”

“A warning...?”

Zansetsu nodded. “Have you heard of the rabbit and the turtle?”

While Rosei raised an eyebrow, Itecho finally broke his silence. “Maverick Rabbit Horn and Doyen Turtle.”

Rosei then remembered. “Oh, that. The progressives and conservatives, right? If I recall correctly, the families who had some arrested also spread the divine punishment theory... and that’s Doyen Turtle?”

“You got the gist of it,” Itecho said before looking at Sakura.

She nodded. “I’ve also heard about it, and I think I understand. I received an explanation alongside the communication on the divine punishment theory. I haven’t gone back to the Town, so I don’t know the full picture, but it seems the argument has been happening in all Towns, right?”

Rosei looked at Itecho, and he answered.

“Only a few people say it out loud. In the Town of Winter...those spreading it are from families opposing the Kantsubaki and the Kangetsu. I get the impression that a lot of them are getting carried away by the heat of the arguments... Basically, they won’t listen. There’s too many people convinced they’re the only ones in the right. Not many say anything directly to Rosei, but quite a few come to me when I’m alone.”

“Hah! I know one way to cool them off...”

Rosei snorted, but coming from the holder of Life Coagulation, it wasn’t just a figure of speech.

Itecho shook his head to placate him. “You’ll do nothing of the sort. I won’t let them insult my lord; I’ll take care of them. Sakura, have you been in contact

with Summer and Autumn? How's the situation over there?"

"I did a while ago, but not after the divine punishment theory came up... I'm too...afraid to call them, being Spring and all..."

The divine punishment theory had originated when the seasons joined forces. Naturally she would feel reluctant to call them.

"...I want to apologize to everyone. Starting with you, Winter," Sakura said. "Specifically, I'm only apologizing that you've been dragged into these vulgar rumors... But I must stress...that Lady Hinagiku did nothing wrong..."

"Sakura...," Itecho said. "Don't worry. We know. No one here thinks that. I'll speak with Summer and Autumn."

Once Itecho was finished speaking, Zansetsu continued.

"I take it you all think that the divine punishment theory must be affecting all Towns?"

Sakura, Rosei, and Itecho nodded.

"There is a big argument in the Town of Spring," Zansetsu said. "They're taking advantage of my sister's absence to decry the Agents. I suspect some of them are simply envious of the Kayo family, but the situation is awful."

He sounded truly fed up with it.

"The reason I summoned all of you here is because...if you are amenable, I want Spring to accompany Winter and get far away from the Town for the time being."

"...Accompany Winter?" Sakura's face asked why.

Zansetsu grimaced. "The argument is getting out of control. Some individuals have begun to consider meting out justice themselves in the name of God and purging the Agents... Just the other day, a disturbing gathering was discovered in the Town of Spring. The divine-punishment-theory believers are organizing for something unfavorable. I don't want to scare you, but..."

Zansetsu paused for a moment.

“I want you to assume all Agents of the Four Seasons are at risk of replacement.”

The three of them were frozen in place.

They were used to their lives being in danger. They had just fought the insurgents in spring. However, battling an enemy was not as shocking as having to go to war against their own.

“We might be in a transitional period. Nothing has shaken up all four Towns like this in recent years.”

Zansetsu spoke without faltering.

“The Agents of the Four Seasons joined hands, and the Towns, Agency, and National Security collaborated with the insurgents. You might not realize it, but the closed world you live in has been dramatically upset. On the surface, it looks like only the Agents and their Guards are in danger, but that’s not the end of it. The conflict between Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn is proof of this. Those who are losing respect will try to shoot down any unwanted change. Some will use force to placate the opposition. This divine punishment theory is only the beginning. We cannot remain on the defense; if we submit, we will die. Please, I want you to maintain the cooperation between the Four Seasons. I’m here to help you with that...”

Zansetsu had quite a way with words. His statement was strong enough to encourage Rosei, Itecho, and Sakura, but at the same time, it roused anxiety.

“Lady Hinagiku... I must make sure she’s safe...!” Sakura stood up to leave that very moment, pale in the face.

Zansetsu grabbed her.

“Sakura Himedaka! She’s okay! It won’t happen now! The trouble brewing in the Town has been purged for now!”

“No, we don’t know what might happen!”

“It’s fine! Tsubame is in her room!”

“You came to warn us because that gathering wasn’t just a bunch of idiots horsing around! I must go back to her side. Let me go!”

“I called you here to set up a plan to protect her. Let me finish first...”

Sakura shook her head and started dragging Zansetsu behind her.

Itecho stepped in, grabbing Zansetsu’s arm as well.

Both of them looked up at him.

“...Mr. Kayo... Give us three minutes,” Itecho said quietly, his face even more devoid of emotion than usual. “Give her time to see Lady Hinagiku’s face and confirm her well-being. This is all very sudden, and you’ve gotten her worked up.”

Itecho’s voice was extremely calm. His tall stature also gave her an imposing aura as he talked from above. He was being polite, but he would not take no for an answer.

Zansetsu glared at him, but Itecho did not falter.

“...Sakura, once you’ve checked on her, you can come back here and keep talking, yes? Mr. Kayo took the time out of his schedule to come here and called all of us to hear him out. We’ve yet to get to the main topic, and if Winter and Spring are going to collaborate, you need to be in this meeting. We must get everything ready while Lady Hinagiku is asleep.”

“Itecho...”

“Our escorts are also out here in the hallway. You’ll feel better once you see them there, right?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, go see her.”

Sakura gave Zansetsu an apologetic glance. “I’ll be right back, Lord Zansetsu. Rosei, I’ll check in on her!”

Zansetsu couldn’t bring himself to say no after seeing the tears forming in her eyes.

Sakura trotted out of the room.

The men were left behind in heavy silence. After a while, Zansetsu broke it with a low mutter. “Mind letting me go?”

“Apologies.” Itecho released Zansetsu’s hand.

“...You think you’re Sakura Himedaka’s big brother, too?”

“What...?”

Itecho had no idea what he was talking about at first. Then he remembered what Zansetsu’s sister called him—Hinagiku would lovingly call him Brother.

“She’s Spring, too, by the way. Not Winter.”

Zansetsu seemed to know about the relationship between Hinagiku and Itecho, and he didn’t think well of it. Not that Itecho could do anything about it; Hinagiku was the one who chose to call him.

While Itecho remained confused, Zansetsu revealed his true feelings—which were not quite hatred, but certainly contained disgust.

Rosei turned pale just as Sakura did, and the air turned cold.

However, Rosei recovered quickly. He got between the two and said:

“Let’s sit down. Mr. Zansetsu, I apologize if my Guard did anything to upset you.”

“...No, I...”

“But we can argue later. We have other things to take care of first. Mr. Zansetsu, is it true you reserved the entire floor?”

“Yes...”

Zansetsu couldn’t be rude to the Agent of Winter; he straightened his back.

“Half of our escorts are out in the hallway, and the others are resting in our room. Mind if we call everyone here?”

“Right now...? As I said, there’s no immediate danger. I only meant to discuss precautions going forward, as there is trouble on the horizon...”

“I understand, but it’s clear our security needs a boost.”

“...!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to slight you. We’re only trying to give your kindness the attention it deserves. We had no idea the idiots at the Town of Spring were already gathering; thank you for telling us. We need to reinforce our security, and it’s difficult to guard anyone from a different floor. Let’s move rooms, although of course we won’t intrude on the women. You might be wary of a traitor being within our ranks, but I will personally take care of any if that’s the case.”

Zansetsu stared closely at Rosei, trying to figure out whether he was being sincere.

“We let the traitors during the spring contingency go free to use them as informants, but that was only an emergency measure. The Agent of Autumn’s life was in danger then. We won’t be so merciful this time. Let us move our escort here. We also have security equipment meant for me—surveillance cameras we can screen share. I don’t want to...spy on a girl sleeping...but it should be for the best. Sakura knows how to use it. I’ll leave it in her hands. That way, she can keep an eye on her while we talk.”

“...I understand. I’ll get the hotel staff to hand us the card keys.” Zansetsu sighed. “...Is this the danger my sister has been living through...?”

Zansetsu looked toward Hinagiku’s room, and a touch of pity entered his voice. She was still sleeping, unaware of what was waiting for her.

“I should have worried more...,” he said gloomily, and finally, Rosei felt some kinship with him.

“Not at all. In fact, you acted quite quickly for someone whose life isn’t constantly being threatened.”

“...”

“I’m commending you on this. Honest.”

In the end, they reinforced security before resuming the meeting.

Putting everything in order: After finding and suppressing a gathering of divine punishment theorists, Zansetsu worried about his sister's safety. Having heard Spring and Winter were meeting, he contacted them. He moved quickly, just as Rosei pointed out. In fact, this was about as quickly as this meeting could have been held. The only thing he could do, as one deeply involved in the Town of Spring, was to support Hinagiku financially under the guise of a dutiful relative. He planned to rely on Rosei for the actual defense against any real violence, and meeting with them allowed him to warn Winter as well.

The group Zansetsu had mentioned was thinking of replacing Hinagiku.

The Town of Spring just happened to be the first—it was only a matter of time before the same happened to the other Seasons. Now Spring, Winter, and Zansetsu had a common goal: Prevent the replacement of any Agents.

The meeting resumed, still without Hinagiku and with less tension than before.

“Mr. Zansetsu, let me ask. We have no problem taking care of Spring's security. We would have done so even if you hadn't asked. That said, I was the reason why your sister was kidnapped. From your point of view...I imagine you wouldn't want to leave her in my hands. But you will?”

Zansetsu nodded sincerely. “In taking steps to protect her from afar, I took time to investigate you, Lord Winter. I've also heard of your wish to protect her with your life, if necessary... I take it you care deeply for her...”

“...Yeah.”

“And that you covered an expressway in ice just to rescue her.”

“Uh, I, well... Yeah...”

“Doesn't matter if it's love or guilt. A god incarnate that cares that much for her will be her strongest protector. And the insurgents are lying low now that New Year has collapsed...”

Zansetsu knew about Rosei's feelings for Hinagiku—as well as the fact that his dedication came from both love and guilt.

“...So can I take this as permission to deepen my bond with your sister?” Rosei

asked.

“ ... ”

The silence spoke volumes. Of course it wouldn't sit right with him. Rosei was the reason Hinagiku was kidnapped in the first place. Zansetsu didn't want to recognize him as her boyfriend, but still wanted Rosei to guard her. There was much to worry about, but Hinagiku's life came first.

“...It's only a matter of what's best for her. What happened in spring is over and done, but we can't yet trust anyone from National Security, or the Agency, or the Towns. Inevitably...I can only trust emotion. What's best for her is to be under the protection of someone who truly cares for her.”

Zansetsu had reached the conclusion because he also acted out of emotion, beyond pros and cons, so he wouldn't directly renounce Rosei's feelings. His line of thought resembled Sakura's, in a way.

“...I see. Good thing I froze that expressway, then, eh? Never thought that would vouch for me so well. We should do it more, Itecho.”

“Don't you dare.”

The only ones who could be trusted to protect Spring were Sakura and the two escorts from Winter. There was no reason not to use Rosei, now that he was a far more powerful ally than he was ten years ago.

Thus, it was decided that the lady and retainer of Spring would stay under the wing of the lord and retainer of Winter, and so it would remain until the divine punishment theorists stopped giving them reason to believe such measures were necessary. The question now was where to stay.

Going back to the Town was out of the question. The choices were either stay in the villa, have Winter stay at the Teito Reception Hall, or move locations periodically.

“I don't think it would be good to stay in one place right now,” Sakura said. She favored the third option. “What happened in spring will happen again, I think. After the attack on the Summer villa, the other seasons were made to stay in one place and forbidden from going outside. Because the attackers also knocked out the power, Autumn chose to stay in a highly secured fortress,

where they also had the advantage of being able to disorient the enemy. Someone must have leaked the location of the Autumn villa and the fact the Agent would be found there. I still can't believe Her Imperial Highness saw fit to launch a damned *missile* into the villa... But in any case, that was part of why the attack on the Autumn villa succeeded. The Teito Reception Hall has good security, considering they receive foreign VIPs here...but even if we come back eventually, I think it's best we keep moving around for now. Especially Spring and Summer. Lord Zansetsu, correct me if I'm wrong, but these two Seasons are the most likely to get replaced, aren't they?"

"...I'd rather not say it out loud...but you are correct. You've already finished manifesting your seasons."

Rosei's jaw dropped slightly.

Zansetsu strove to keep calm as he continued. "My sister was at risk of replacement because she couldn't manifest spring for two years. Some people thought it was preferable even considering the training period of the new Agent. And currently, Spring and Summer have already come. If the divine punishment theorists make their move, the best time would be right after the season manifestation. It takes a year to train the next Agent, so the next manifestation of the season wouldn't be too long delayed. After all, the biggest disadvantage of a replacement is that a newly born Agent can't do big-scale manifestation right away."

It was the very simple and cruel cycle of the seasons.

A new Agent was chosen the moment one died, but the new Agent had to train for around a year before mastering their powers enough to bring the season on a large scale. The most efficient way to replace an Agent was to kill them the moment they finished manifesting.

That would give the new Agent a full year to train, and the cycle of seasons could continue relatively uninterrupted.

Under that logic, Autumn and Winter were still relatively safe. If either of them died now, the new Agent would not be able to perform their duties right away. There would be a hole in the seasons this year, which would disrupt the lives of everyone in Yamato.

Thus, the ones most directly danger were Spring and Summer. Next year's spring and summer would be late, but not missing entirely.

Of course, Spring and Summer themselves didn't matter in any of this.

Zansetsu continued. "...That said, it doesn't mean Winter and Autumn are absolutely safe. For starters, we know from our investigation that the divine punishment theory began with those who were negatively affected by the incident in spring. They sold out to the insurgents for personal gain, or even just to satisfy their own emotions; it's not hard to imagine the proper cycle of the seasons might not factor into their violent choices. Logical reason often falls by the wayside when it comes to violent crime in the rest of the world, and that's true for our world as well. We won't always be able to make sense of their attacks, so we must be watch out for both premeditated assassination attempts and apparently random attacks."

Consequently, they had to stay away from the Towns; anything they did, they had to be cautious of the divine punishment theorists.

"My mother's family owns land in Teishu, but their business in real estate and tourism gives them a farther reach than that. I can supply you with lodging outside of Teishu, too. As Sakura Himedaka says, the best idea is to move every few days. I hear Summer and Autumn are in their respective Towns currently, but they should also leave. And their villas were attacked in spring, so those aren't an option, correct? If you could reach out, I can arrange a place to receive them tomorrow."

With Zansetsu's advice, the three decided to get in touch with the Hazakura sisters and Autumn immediately despite the hour.

That was when the first problem arose.

"L-Lord Kangetsu?" said Rindo Azami, flustered at the call from his senior. *"It's been a while. How have you been?"*

"Azami. Sorry for calling so late; there's a few things I want to ask."

"It's no trouble at all; I also wanted to ask Winter a few things!"

"What is it? You go first."

“Thank you. Lord Kangetsu, have you been in touch with the other Agents or Guards?”

“Not in a while, personally... Rosei has only been talking to Spring, I believe. They’re here with us right now, in fact. Lady Hinagiku is asleep, but Sakura’s here listening.”

“Huh? They’re with you?! In that case...could you call Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame from another phone?”

“You can’t get ahold of them? We were just about to get in touch with Summer...”

“I’ve tried a few times... They haven’t responded to my texts, either... I want to know they’re safe. Please.”

Itecho stayed on the line with Rindo as he got Rosei and Sakura to contact the sisters. Rosei called Ruri, and Sakura called Ayame.

They tried a few times, but as Rindo said, they wouldn’t answer. Something was up if no one could contact either of them.

“...They’re not answering. Maybe they’re asleep?”

“No, Lady Ayame always wakes up when she hears the phone ringing. It’s part of a Guard’s job. Right, Itecho?”

“Yes... This is concerning,” said Itecho. “I’ll have a relative check on them. My cousin married into the Town of Summer. Hopefully she can get—”

No,” Zansetsu interrupted, “let me ask an acquaintance from the Summer Administration. From what Autumn says, this has been going on for a while. It’d be faster to ask the administration if they are well.”

“You’re close with Summer, too, Mr. Zansetsu?” Rosei asked, and Zansetsu nodded.

“I’ll ask a member of Maverick Rabbit Horn.”

“...Wait, you’re a member?”

Zansetsu chuckled. “Let me state that they’re not as dangerous as you might think. For starters, I am a Kayo, not in a position to be oppressed by the

authority... I would better fit in Doyen Turtle, I suppose... Which is why Maverick Rabbit Horn didn't accept me at first."

Zansetsu shrugged as he pulled out his phone.

"But I told them that I'm fed up with the rotten politics my grandmother permits. I did not join the administration under my father's orders. I wanted to change things in my generation. I began talking with colleagues who share my ideas...and as we exchanged opinions, I found allies in other Towns, as well. I'll ask one of my community. I think they'll move right away... I'll tell them we're asking so late at night in order to alleviate the Agents' worries."

Without a phone connection, their only hope was to depend on someone in Iyo. They left Zansetsu to take care of contacting the Hazakura sisters.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," Rindo said, "but I've been so worried..."

"It's no problem. This was needed. Now, Azami, I want you to listen. We're watching out for the divine punishment theorists, and..."

Itecho relayed the situation to Rindo and suggested he get away from the Town.

Rindo had his own worries and agreed right away.

The Town of Autumn was in Tsukushi. Looking for accommodations within Tsukushi would be the fastest way to evacuate, but Rindo wanted to join them to exchange information.

"I think it would be best for explaining to Nadeshiko...so she understands that it's happening to all Agents... I'm sorry to ask you to accommodate a kid, but..."

"No, I understand you. A child needs a proper explanation. Especially in this case, since simply telling her the facts would only confuse her. Lady Hinagiku and Sakura are here, too, and she knows me and Rosei as well. It'd be best to tell her when she has some familiar faces nearby so she won't worry. Particularly after what happened... I hate having to tell her the Town isn't safe and she must escape somewhere she doesn't know... Us grown-ups have to protect her."

"...Thank you, Lord Kangetsu. Really. It's sudden, but we'll head out

tomorrow...or today, technically, since it's already past midnight."

"Got it. I'll send our escorts to the airport. Contact us at any time."

Now that Autumn was coming, they would have to stay at this hotel for at least one more day.

It was about time they disbanded to sleep, but then, Zansetsu got a phone call.

"...Good job. Thank you."

Zansetsu finished the call, and his voice was uncertain as he announced:

"Bad news... Ayame and Ruri Hazakura have vanished from the Town of Summer."

Everything was moving slowly but surely.

I wanted a special love.

Father, mother, brother, sister. I wanted to be included in this family.

“You’re an eyesore... If only you’d been a girl, at least.”

For some reason, everyone was harsh on me. And only me.

“What if you make Father hate me?”

I learned later on that my family would be considered “dysfunctional.”

“It’ll be fine; just bear with it.”

Apparently, plenty of families sacrificed one scapegoat to keep things running smoothly for the rest.

“Just bear with it, Renri.”

Play the part.

“Don’t be better than your brother.”

Stay worse.

“Listen to your sister.”

Be the sacrifice.

“Why can’t you do anything, Renri?”

I did as they pleased. I was the incompetent son. I was the sacrifice.

Because I wanted to be loved.

How foolish children are.

After everything I’d been through, I always worried whenever I saw a lonely child.

It happened on the day of the annual spring tea party. We were in the garden of one of the bigwigs, which contained cherry blossom trees of all kinds. The pale pink petals were like a sea.

The trees had been planted to resemble a famous cherry blossom site in the Town of Spring, and it was so beautiful that even as a child I was impressed by it. No need to go look for a good spot for flower viewing outside when you have this at home.

The splendid tea party was going well thanks to the spring brought about by Lady Kobai Yukiyanagi.

But to be quite honest, I wasn’t having a good time.

Just finish already.

This was a time and place for the grown-ups to gossip and feel each other out; for a child, it was just boring. The rest were playing in the garden, and I could’ve joined them, but not really. I never knew what to do at times like these, other

than stare at what happened to be in front of me.

The petals gently danced. The birds sang, and the greenery rustled in harmony.

The kids ran behind the petals like young foals, as the grown-ups watched with warm eyes.

It was all peace, all beauty, and all fake. There was no place for me in the scenic spring banquet. The beauty of the pink clouds faded away in melancholy.

It's like I'm invisible.

The only children around my age were my siblings' friends. They did not want me to join them, and I knew this.

My parents also tacitly accepted it. I had no choice but to be invisible.

Bear with it.

Play the part.

Stay worse.

Be the sacrifice.

Be the incompetent clown.

Let everyone make fun of you.

As stupid as it might sound, I had to follow the rules, or I would lose what little standing in this family I had.

Being the clown had been my survival strategy for as long as I could remember. Everyone was happy so long as I acted stupid.

I just wanna go home and be alone.

It was then that I saw her.

The cherry blossom rain had fallen on her long, lustrous black hair.

She was about four or five and impossible to ignore.

“Are you by yourself?”

I had no idea then, but it was the first time the Hazakura sisters made their public appearance.

“Where’re your parents?”

“...”

Young Ayame Hazakura was sitting on a bench in the tea party’s wide garden.

Her eyes were set on a girl with the same face as her. The girl was crying; she must’ve fallen down or dropped her snacks. Her mother was gently picking her up.

Children usually stayed close to their mothers; was the girl on the bench used to this? Perhaps it was normal for her to be left waiting alone.

“Are you twins? I’ve never seen one.”

“...”

“It’s interesting.”

“...”

“That girl won’t stop crying... You don’t mind her stealing your mom?”

She didn’t like that; she looked away and snapped, *“Don’t talk bad about Ruri.”*

Her pronunciation was childish, but her will was strong. I was shocked. She didn’t like it when people weren’t nice to her family?

“She’s my baby sister.”

I later learned that this was the normal response, but I couldn’t make sense of it at the time. After all, my family said those things all the time.

I found it strange, too, but for a child, their family is their whole world, and mine was not kind. So I just assumed this girl didn’t belong within her own

family, either.

“Sorry about that... It’s just, I don’t get along with my siblings. I thought it would be the same for you.”

“...Don’t say bad things about her.”

“I didn’t mean it, sorry.”

As I apologized, the girl turned her pretty, enchanting eyes at me.

“...Did someone steal your mom? Is that why you’re alone? You don’t play with your siblings?”

I chuckled at the barrage of questions. *“No, it’s just I’m the lowest in my family. I’m like the one who gets bullied by everyone, so I have no one to play with.”*

She looked at me with surprise as if she had never seen anyone like me before.

“But you’re family?”

“...Yeah. Does yours get along?”

“Yeah. Like normal.”

“Normal is good. I’m jealous...”

As I sighed, she asked with the most consideration a child could have, *“Why... does your family...bully you?”*

That’s what I want to know.

“Maybe because I don’t talk back? I don’t complain when they bully me...”

“They should get along with you. You’re family.”

“Yeah. But I think some people can’t live without being mean to someone else.”

“Why...?”

“Because when they’re mean and see someone sad, they think they’re better, maybe...?”

“...That’s weird.”

“Yeah. I think it is, too...”

“Why don’t you tell them you don’t like it?”

“I want to... But what if they stop giving me food because of that?”

“...”

“I can’t live without that. I’m a kid.” She looked so sad, even though this wasn’t really her problem.

This is normal.

I was sure of it, and I was terribly relieved. This was the reaction I wanted from the world. I wanted people to empathize with others’ problems, to protect the weak, to take care of the feelings of the many without sacrificing the few. I knew it worked that way in stories, but I wanted it in the real world, too.

I see. We’re weird.

How much would’ve been different if she were my sister?

All those days I spent hugging my knees and crying, all those days I spent furious after the humiliation, all those days the difference in the love shown to me left me disillusioned—she could’ve been on my side. Maybe I could’ve at least coexisted, even if we argued.

Why can’t my family be like that?

“...”

I had an answer of my own, despite my immaturity.

Both my father and my mother lived to please the bigwigs and their relatives. They also endured undeserved anger to protect their family. My brother and sister had a lot of duties to fulfill as the elders.

Taking it out on the youngest child was their way to vent.

That was all. The fact that we were all family meant nothing to them.

A family was just the smallest unit of society. The home I imagined was just that—a fantasy.

Perhaps a real family existed out there somewhere, but it wasn’t mine. And

that was it.

The Town isn't built to have warm families in the first place.

Everyone wanted someone to hurt in order to manage their own pain. When you hurt someone, you were above them. That pleasure just reinforced it.

It's no pleasure for me.

Emptiness came and went from my chest. Knowing the pain of being hurt, I couldn't think of passing it on to someone else. So I chose to keep quiet and be the family clown. I was worried that dropping the act would sadden them—and I didn't want to hurt them.

Stupid.

I know. But there was no other way for me to prove myself. I had to be the idiot to keep my family happy and protect myself. I tried asking myself if the day I could stop would ever come, but that was a question I couldn't answer.

"You..."

She looked at me with worry after I'd been quiet for so long.

"Yeah?"

She timidly walked up to me and reached out. She grabbed my sleeve hesitantly.

"Do you...want to come...to my house?"

She suggested something impossible.

"Huh?"

What are you saying?

That was unreasonable, the babbling of a child. That question couldn't save me.

And still, she looked straight at me.

"You can come to my house..."

Her eyes were so firm I realized that if I said yes, she might really do it.

No. You have no power.

Her kindness was meaningless.

It wasn't realistic. Neither my parents nor hers would accept it.

"We have a room for guests... And if Mom and Dad say no, you can live in my room..."

She looked smart; she should know this wasn't an option. But she was saying it anyway.

"Do you want to?" she said anxiously, shyly. *"I can let you stay..."*

I could run away.

"..."

She said the one thing no one else ever told me.

"...Thank you."

That alone was huge. I was so happy just to get a little consideration.

"Thank you... But I'll try to bear it...a little longer."

From that moment on, she was my light.

"...Would you like to play in the meantime? I have nothing to do until my parents decide to go home," I said.

"...Okay. We'll play... Will that cheer you up?"

"Yes. I'll make you a flower crown. Know how to make one? You have to be very careful, or it'll come apart. It took me a while to learn. Let's go with those flowers over there."

"...Can you make two?"

"Sure. For your sister, right? I can make as many as you want."

I had a few more opportunities to see her after that. Once at an event my parents took me to, and at the Town festival.

When we met again as adults, she didn't remember me.

“What’s your name?”

But I did.

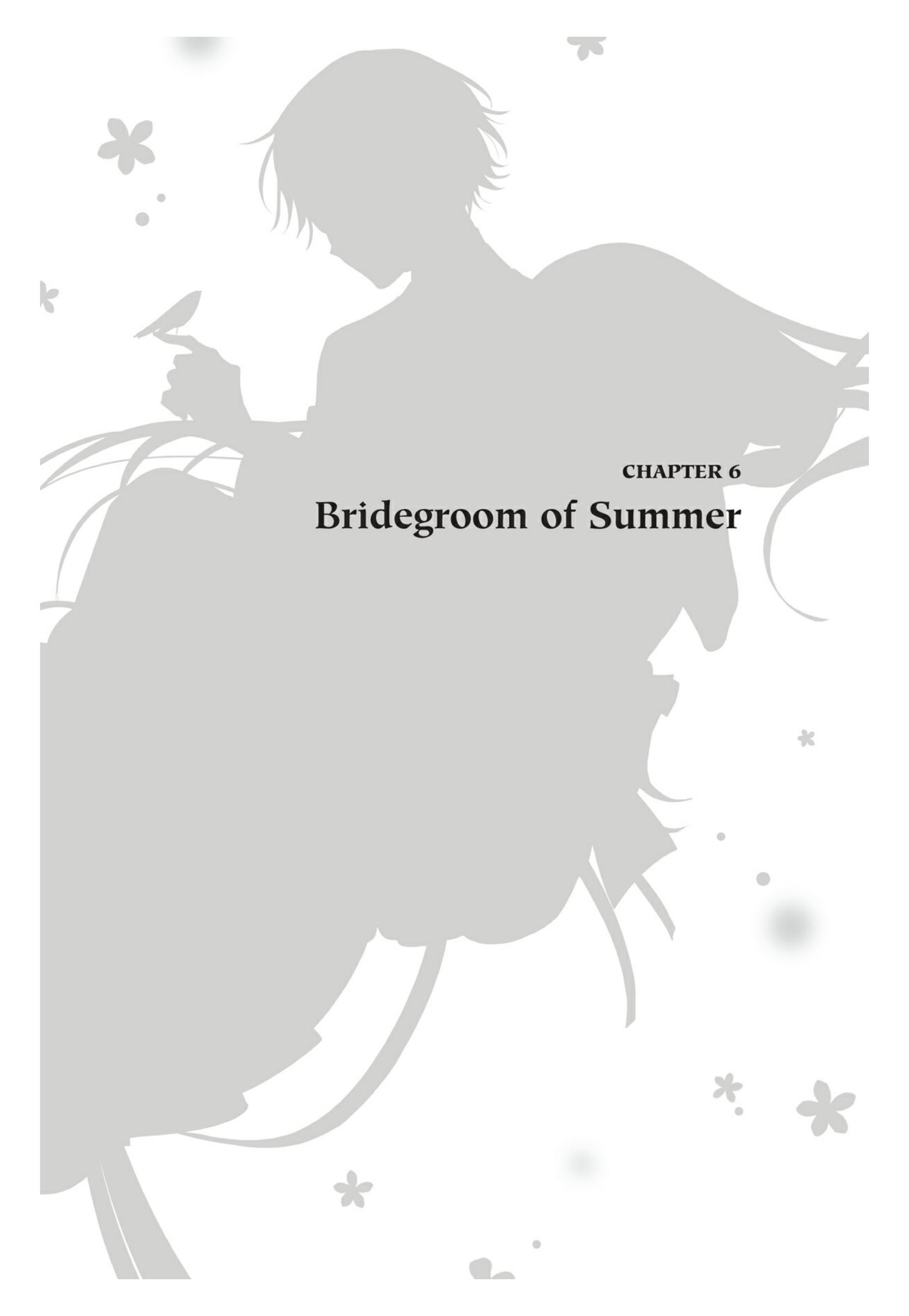
“Ayame.”

I remembered you, Ayame.

“I’m Renri.”

But I guess it’s natural that you didn’t.

Because I can't be special for anyone.



CHAPTER 6
Bridegroom of Summer

Reimei 20, July 22. The stage shifts back to the Town of Summer.

A young man stood in the woods at the outskirts of the Town.

His hair was bright, pastel pink; his features refined. He was a modern-day pretty boy.

The most noticeable thing about him at the moment, though, was the abundance of scratches on his face.

“...”

He took a phone out of his pants pocket.

He tried calling someone, but they didn't respond.

Again.

The wounded young man thought to himself.

I should've been more careful.

He was the second son of the Rouo family, Renri Rouo, and Ayame Hazakura's fiancé until a short time ago.

Something's up.

Renri sighed.

When his parents had informed him the wedding was off, they had asked him to delete Ayame's number, too. He did so, but he had already memorized it. He had tried calling her every time he thought of it, like now, but she never picked up.

He tried other landlines, too, but none of them would reach her.

Did she change her number?

He stared at the silent phone in his hand with vexation.

He thought back on recent events.

Renri had been deepening his bond with Ayame Hazakura steadily after becoming affianced. Although the marriage was arranged, only Ayame considered it as such.

Renri had undeniable affection for her.

They'd met at a young age, and many things had led to the feelings he had for her now.

That said, the only conversations they had were at Town events; their relationship was nothing special.

He was a forgettable boy to her, but she was an unforgettable girl to him.

Had her sister Ruri not been chosen as Agent of the Four Seasons, the story could have gone differently. Those chosen as gods incarnate were brought up in isolation inside the Town. When Ayame became her Guard, she inevitably followed in that lifestyle.

Ayame's childhood memories were limited to her small circle of relationships.

Meanwhile, every time summer came, every time he saw her in the Town, he thought about it.

That said, he never hoped for anything to happen, nor did he have any intention to make a move.

Her sister became Agent of Summer, and she became her Guard.

She's so kind, so responsible, so good... She must've wanted to help her sister out.

I just hope she doesn't get hurt.

He simply prayed without hope of anything in return.

He cherished his memories with the girl he'd met when he was a boy; his fixation was sweetly innocent.

Their lives intersected a few times, but they soon went their separate ways without deepening their connection.

The chance arrived when Ayame ran away from home.

He was just helping a lost girl, then found out it was Ayame grown up.

At first, she was terribly wary of him, but as they kept talking, she opened up.

She had faint memories of him and apologized for the rudeness. He'd been disappointed to learn she forgot him, but the more they talked, the more he perked up.

Ayame Hazakura was already out of reach for Renri.

I can't believe it was her. I'm so happy. Good deeds bring good luck.

But at least he got to talk with that girl from the garden again—that brought him joy.

I'll see her home.

He had no intention of forcing a friendship. It was clear his feelings were one-sided, and he didn't want to trouble her. Their relationship would end once he got her home.

If she thought of him as a good person, that was enough.

They wouldn't meet again after that—or so he thought.

“...I want to change... I want to be free... It’s suffocating being in this Town...”

The rest happened just as Ayame remembered.

Ayame’s tearful confession pulled at his heart. He ached to know how the girl he’d met back then had grown up to have such anxieties.

He wanted to do something for her, but her problems were not easily solved.

Ayame’s position in the Town was special. Not only was she a Hazakura—she was the Agent Guard. If she wanted freedom, she had no choice but to wait until she was dismissed.

There were a few conditions under which she could get dismissed, but considering the Town’s customs, the most likely was Ruri marrying and having her husband as a new Guard. It wouldn’t be that long until then.

She just had to wait. Just like Renri.

Renri would also one day be freed from his family. Were he to marry, he would be allowed to build his own home elsewhere, away from his parents.

Renri was the youngest in the family. Unless he fell gravely ill, everyone else would die first.

He just had to endure it. It wasn’t impossible.

Ayame, too, must have lived with her feelings hidden from everyone else. She swallowed all her pain in utter silence.

Renri simply had to guide the lost lamb.

He could tell her that she simply had to endure it and wait, as she’d done all this time. And to search for an ally.

He could tell her to choose someone who wouldn’t hurt her or make her sad, who would help her, support her, and make her happy, so she could escape this suffocating place.

Run, Ayame.

He just had to give her the advice.

"...I don't...wanna...go home... I don't wanna...go...home..."

But Ayame cried.

She was famous for being a calm and collected, brilliant Guard—but she was so crushed under the weight of it that she was crying and sobbing in front of a man she forgot existed.

Even though he hadn't seen her for years, he could easily tell she was about to break.

She couldn't take another step forward; she couldn't even wipe her own tears away. Running would take more courage than she had.

If someone didn't support her right here, right now, she would collapse.

Renri thought for a while about what to do as he watched Ayame sob.

She had no allies. She needed someone unrestricted by their standing, political or familial, to tell her it would be okay.

Her problems would not be solved immediately; that was a hard fact. But hearts changed simply by having someone to comfort them. Renri knew this firsthand.

Am I not allowed to support her?

Renri had a revelation—he fulfilled the necessary conditions. It was not conceit; it was true.

Luckily, Renri was going to be transferred to work at an Agency medical facility in Teishu in the near future. If his future wife wanted to follow him, she would be able to leave the Town without any suspicion.

He was also ready to love.

For a long while, he'd believed that if he ever met a good person who wished to live together with him, he would cherish them and love them. That wish was

born from the lack of love he'd experienced himself.

Besides, Ayame herself had asked him to live with her before.

He was only doing the same for her now. He was asking her to come to his house.

It was just helping someone out. It wasn't wrong. This was no devil's temptation.

Justify it all you want.

No. In reality, he just wanted this girl.

He shouldn't trick a person who was grieving.

But what if that could save her?

She deserves someone better.

He knew that, but she wasn't with someone better now. Renri was the one she had told about her pain.

Is it so wrong to want a flower no one else has picked?

Renri didn't go out of his way to take her.

She came to him. She needed help.

Wouldn't it be worse to coldly send her away?

If it's a sin, then I'll gladly bear it.

The time had come for him to renounce his role as the clown.

"Ayame, I..."

Thinking back on it now, she had been his first love for years.

"Right now, I'm in marriage talks, and I want to decline the arrangement my parents are making. I want to get out, too. I want to marry someone I could fight with for our freedom."

He just didn't realize it was love; he had never been loved.

"That is, not because of romance... It would be entirely for my self-interests."

Now that he knew, he could do anything.

"But in exchange, that person would also be able to live freely. We could support each other without interfering with each other's freedom. So...more like friends... What do you say, Ayame?"

If she could look at this fool...

"We would have to lie to everyone, but well, what do you think? Would you marry me... as a cover?"

If she could look his way, only once...

He could offer her more than just love—he could offer his own life.

"I'll cherish you."

Ayame did not drag Renri into her life. Renri wanted Ayame.

He gave her a favorable offer, knowing she would be cautious. If he simply asked her to love him, he knew she wouldn't accept. He was unaware of Ayame's thoughts, but she said yes.

The Rouo family promptly agreed.

The Hazakura name was better than the one they had initially considered. The sacrificial clown, the lesser son, had finally proved useful. His parents' thoughts were clear as day, but he didn't care. Renri's current family was not important; all he cared about was the family he was going to have.

The Hazakura family had quickly arranged Ruri's partner to protect her, but they let Ayame choose freely in deference to everything she'd been through. They let her marry whomever she liked.

Once that was settled, it was Renri's fight to turn an arranged marriage into real love.

He made an effort to win her over, and thankfully, Ayame didn't seem to dislike him.

She would keep her distance, but the more they talked, the more familiarity she allowed.

Ayame was just the kind of person he thought she was—quiet, but kind and caring.

He had hope in the future after their marriage. He would have enough time to convince her to like him.

One day. If only just a little.

It was his pure wish.

Being immersed in love, he was not prepared for the sudden attack.

“...”

Now Renri and Ayame had no relation whatsoever. They were ex-fiancés and nothing more.

The Hazakura sisters were under attack by the Town, and he was unable to shield them.

But even if he had no connection to them now, he wanted to help her. He also wanted to ask her a question: *Do you hate me now?*

Did she think he was useless as an accomplice? Was she no longer interested? Did she not need him anymore?

He could easily picture her saying yes.

Just...let me talk to you one last time, at least.

Even if she hated him now, there had to be something he could do for her.

“Ayame...”

The moment he whispered his beloved's name...

“Renri, let’s go.”

...Renri twitched at the voice coming from behind and turned around fearfully.

It was a man slightly older than him.

“Leaving the Town will be hard if someone sees us. Unlike them, we know where they’re heading.”

The voice sounded like it would belong to a soft, reserved person.

“Let’s go get our brides.”

But his stance was bold.

“...Kimikage.”

“Just call me Raicho. We’ll be family, remember?”

“...R-Raicho.”

“Don’t be that afraid... We’re on the same team.”

Raicho Kimikage—Ruri Hazakura’s ex-fiancé—tilted his head with a charming smile.

His body was supremely healthy. Although he wasn’t brawny, he had sturdy and well-toned arms and legs. He cast a broad shadow, like a wall of stone.

He had a hard face and sharp, hawklike eyes. His mouth was big and his lips red like blood. He was in his early twenties, and his all-black, military-like outfit suited him well.

“I want to get along with you, Renri. After all, you’ll be my Ruri’s brother-in-law. The sisters get along so well, it’d be great if we could, too. Please trust me. I got you out of your house, right?”

“...”

“I got you out of your house, right?”

“Yes...”

Raicho wished to be friends, but Renri was scared.

They had only one thing in common: Their marriages to the Hazakura sisters

were broken off.

They had seen each other at family reunions but never truly talked.

They had planned to after getting married; they would get along as they met each other at events throughout the year, but that was it.

They hadn't seen each other after the engagements were broken, and they didn't know each other's contact information.

But then, Raicho showed up at the Rouo house.

Renri had been locked up at the family's warehouse.

His father and brother had found him relentlessly protesting the decision and dragged him back home. After he had been tame for so many years, they could not stand his sudden rebellion.

In the end, they beat him, tied his hands, and locked him in the warehouse. There was no ventilation inside, and in the middle of summer, it was downright dangerous.

Then, he heard a voice from outside.

"Let me help you out, Renri."

It was like a fairy tale, when a wizard came to a lost child.

Renri worried that he might have finally lost it and started hallucinating.

"Keep your head down."

But the next moment, the sound of an explosion made him realize it was real.

He'd been throwing himself at that stubborn door over and over, and it

crumpled inward in a terrifying instant. If he'd been a bit closer, it could have crushed him.

Light streamed into the closed room, falling across the visitor.

The first thing Renri saw was his long legs. Then a torso like a stone wall.

Finally, he recognized the man's face.

"...Kimikage...?"

The other Hazakura bridegroom had kicked down the sturdy door—Raicho Kimikage.

The warehouse's door was wooden, but not easily destroyed with a kick. Raicho's grin on the other side of the sawdust rain could have belonged to a savior or the devil.

"It's been a while, Renri. This place is so dirty. You don't clean it?"

Raicho greeted him with a big, warm smile despite the situation.

"Are you okay? I'm here now, so you're safe."

"..."

"Hello? Renri?"

Renri was speechless; his relationship with this man was already uncertain, and this was a shocking way to meet again.

They stared at each other for a while like animals in the wild.

"Weird. Rescues always jump at you in tears of gratitude when they do this in manga... Oh well."

Impatient, Raicho entered the storage. He took off Renri's duct tape handcuffs.

"My goodness." He winced at the sight of the bruises on Renri's face. "...How could they...? You should've punched back."

He spoke with sincere worry, and Renri's brain finally switched back to normal.

The only thing he understood was that Raicho had saved him.

Renri opened his dry mouth to try and express his gratitude.

“Ummm, thank you... They had me locked up in here... But why are you here?”

Raicho winked so perfectly one had to wonder if he practiced in front of a mirror.

“You didn’t show up for work at the medical office, so out of curiosity, I accessed your house’s surveillance system. I happened to see you getting beaten by your family and figured I should come help you.”

“...What?”

“Good thing the camera caught the fight. I was able to get over here quick.”

“...”

“Renri?”

“...Um, how did you...get into our surveillance system?”

“By hacking it, obviously.”

“What?”

“Do you not know what hacking is?”

“...”

Renri hummed.

He knew his family was weird, but an alarm in his head warned him this guy was a different kind of weird.

He’s trouble.

Maybe the kind of weird he shouldn’t get very close to.

Renri instinctively tensed to run, but the room was too small, and the only exit was blocked. Raicho ignored Renri’s fear as he continued.

“I’m glad I decided to do this. I’m not usually so kind...but I thought I ought to help you. Gotta say, it feels good helping people out.”

His expression was appropriately exhilarated, and he was grinning wide enough that Renri could see his canines. Despite his brutish build and way of speaking, his adorable smile was almost doglike.

“Don’t worry, your house isn’t the only one I’ve hacked into. Nothing to fear, right?”

“Uh... That’s even worse...”

Renri was too scared to lie.

“No, it’s not. I’m not just spying on people. You’re a doctor, right?”

Renri nodded, unsure where this conversation was going now.

The Rouo clan managed the Town’s medical office, although Renri was part of a branch family.

Members of the clan were generally required to work in medicine. Locking Renri up meant staff would be down a member—but his father and brother wanted to punish him that badly.

The medical office was extremely busy at the moment, so the nurses probably hated them for it.

Not that this was the time to be worrying about work. Renri was still in danger.

“I, erm... I can’t really say any specifics due to my contracts... But I was a specialist in combat and security.”

“...Of course, you’re a Kimikage...”

“Yes! My family is responsible for the Town’s security. The whole bloodline is obsessed with protecting and overseeing the Town. It’s almost degenerate.”

“...”

Renri felt something was wrong in his choice of words but decided to not point it out so the conversation could move on.

“The one I’m supposed to guard is Ruri, so I’ve been watching over her through the security systems of the whole Town. I set up cameras in the blind spots, too.”

“Is...the Kimikage family just allowed to do that...?”

“Not technically... But we’re in an emergency situation here. I did it because I want to protect her. I don’t care about what my family says.”

“...”

“So now that you understand, you’re not scared anymore, right?”

He spoke softly, but he was only confessing to misusing his power to spy on people. He showed no remorse.

It’s terrifying—a twisted sense of justice without malice.

Renri’s assessment of the danger Raicho posed was rising further and further.

In any case, he knew he shouldn’t upset Raicho now. He pretended to be calm and asked what Raicho had in mind: *“Um...Kimikage?”*

“Yes, Renri?”

“...You’re watching over Ruri...even after your marriage was called off?”

“Of course. It’s not as though she hates me now, so why would I stop protecting her?”

“But you’re not getting married...”

Raicho frowned for the first time, and the expression was overwhelming.

Renri braced himself for a storm of fury, but Raicho only whined like a child.

“Yes I will! I have to! Ever since it was decided I would marry Ruri, I’ve been working hard to become a man capable of protecting the goddess’s avatar. They can’t tell me to go marry a regular girl now!”

“They can’t...?”

“What’s the point protecting a normal woman?”

“...That’s the reason?”

“I also like Ruri.”

“Oh, you do...”

“Of course. I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t. Who do you take me for?”

A crazy dude.

Even so, Renri was relieved. He hadn’t given up on his fiancée, either.

Although he didn’t agree with Raicho’s methods, and he didn’t want to be his

friend, he felt kinship with him on that point.

"I've been lying low up to now, but the time has finally come to act. Renri, come with me. Ruri and Ayame have left the Town."

"Huh...? Wh-why...?"

"Someone set them up."

"Why would they do that...?"

"To kill one of them. What else could it be?"

Time froze for Renri. *Kill one of them?*

His mind went blank. He didn't understand.

"Or both. Fifty-fifty chance."

Raicho was saying such terrible things without hesitation.

"Wh-why would they do that?!"

"It's gonna take a while to explain, so let's leave first."

"B-but!"

"I know you want to know, but we have to run. If your family finds you, they'll lock you up again. You're not in very good position within your family, are you?"

He tapped Renri's cheek, which stung slightly.

"I don't think they'll want you getting out for a while, considering they did this already."

It was a hard pill to swallow, but true.

His father and brother were trying to hurt him and keep him on lockdown.

He couldn't hide the wounds under his clothes; he couldn't explain them away by saying he fell down the stairs.

Rumors of Renri getting into a fight would quickly circulate around the small Town; rumors and tips were how a village society kept order.

And if no one knew who had harmed Renri, then his family would be under suspicion. And given the Rouo family was in charge of the medical office, those

rumors would not go well for them.

Both his father and brother worked at the medical office; and nobody wanted to be the patient of a violent doctor. All the trust they had built up to now would crumble.

They wouldn't do that to their own reputation.

They would probably tell the office Renri was sick and had to rest for a while.

Their rebellious son was just a disgrace now.

They'd tried to break his spirit by punching him, kicking him, and locking him up. They cared more about their reputation than their son.

Raicho was right; they couldn't waste time here. They had to get out of here now. His home was not a safe place, and his family was not his ally.

Ayame.

That childhood memory returned again, of the girl who said he could run away from his house.

So much time had passed since.

What's she doing now? Is she all right?

He had no room in his heart for the people who had hurt him. All of it belonged to Ayame.

The time to run away from his family had finally come.

"Renri, my sources know where they're going. To tell the truth, I was going to go alone. But you seemed to care so much about Ayame... Am I wrong?"

"You're not."

"Then pull yourself together. Are you coming? The more people at my side fighting, the better."

"..."

Can I trust him?

There was no doubt it would be better not to get involved with this dangerous person and his temptations.

But Renri had no one else to rely on.

I have nothing.

He didn't have supernatural powers.

He didn't have control over the Town's surveillance system.

He didn't have the strength or experience to fight.

He'd worked hard to become a doctor, but now he was about to throw that job away.

He had nothing someone would need in this situation.

He was just Renri. If Raicho wanted someone capable of fighting, Renri was not it. Turning him down would be the safest option.

But.

He did have one weapon in this fight.

No one beats me on this.

His feelings for Ayame—a devoted love that he had held in for propriety's sake longer than anyone.

"...Will I be of any help?"

He asked, praying.

He had nothing but love—so he had no reason to stay here knowing she was in danger.

"If you think I'm any use...I'll go."

Renri Rouo finally chose to live as a human.

He was free from his parents' constraints, from his own restraints—free to do what he truly wanted to do. And the only thing he wanted at this moment was for his fiancée to be safe.

And of course, he wanted to help her sister, too.

It was presumptuous of him to wish for it when he had no power of his own to make it real. But he didn't want to bury his own feelings anymore.

Ayame.

He didn't know what he could do.

I still love you.

Nothing, in all likelihood.

I love you.

Still, he wanted to run toward her.

Please be safe.

Because he loved her.

"I want to help Ayame and Ruri. Please take me with you."

Raicho clapped in satisfaction. *"I knew you'd say that!"* He embraced Renri with a huge smile on his face. *"You're braver than I expected! Even when your family was beating the stuffing out of you, you didn't let that stop you—I knew you had potential! I knew you would follow me!"*

"You watched the whole thing...?"

"Yes. Ah! Errr... Yeah."

"..."

"But I didn't watch everything. I took a bath at one point—I thought I ought to meet you clean. Appearances are important, especially when you're meeting relatives, and I didn't want you thinking I stink. I didn't want you to hate me... I didn't just watch you get pummeled for hours."

What a weirdo.

Be that as it may, Renri decided to follow him.

And so we return to the story at hand.

“Are you satisfied now, Renri?” Raicho asked.

Renri stared at his phone.

“We need to catch up with them. Before anyone else notices they’re missing.”

“...Shouldn’t we go talk to their parents?”

Raicho shook his head firmly. “National Security will act even without my information. They’ve got the cameras on public transit and the road, so they shouldn’t have trouble tracking the girls. Those twins aren’t exactly subtle. I know you don’t want them to worry, but we can’t be sure we can trust them. Whoever made Ayame and Ruri leave is in this Town. We have to move fast and find whoever it is before they find Ayame and Ruri. We have to act before anyone else does.”

“I understand... I’m sorry. Let’s go.”

Renri was still unsure, but his voice was clearer than before. He stepped up beside Raicho, who smiled at him.

“While we’re on the way, please fill me in on what exactly is going on.”

“Of course. I got the car parked over there. We’ve got a long drive.”

“Where are we going?”

Raicho grinned and whispered:

“Way down south. Ryugu.”

The pieces on the board moved one by one.

The lonely beast ran.

Radiant stars were strewn in a captivating pattern across the dark sky.

Night was a beast's ally.

"There are people out there who need the night. Not just for sleep—the darkness is a necessity for them to escape their prisons."

His master's words echoed in his head. He hadn't understood at first, but now it was clear.

Night was an ally to a beast on the run.

"Catch it!!"

The beast accelerated at the call from his pursuers. His legs kicked the ground away; they had always been praised for their strength.

Lord Kaguya.

He had simply wanted to meet him.

The guilt was like a weight on his chest. He wanted to explain himself for what he did.

Kaguya had to be on the mountain, shooting his arrow, surrounded by enemies.

I should've made up my mind sooner.

The situation was nothing but confusing. The ignorant beast had no choice but to obey, having been told it would be for the best.

No, that is also an excuse.

It was true he had acted out of concern for his master.

Yet the fact remained that he let someone else decide what was right.

Now he would never listen to anyone else.

Lord Kaguya—only he was allowed to command him.

So the beast ran across the night.

He crossed rivers, he crossed valleys, he crossed seas before returning to that island full of memories.

He had to meet his master before his pursuers reached him. What could he be doing now?

He couldn't be doing very well. Would he believe that he was being lied to?

Lord Kaguya would probably push him away. Even so, he wanted to meet him.

I wanted to see you one last time.

If he could just explain himself, even if he was rejected, that would be fine. The chance of that was high.

But I can still use that.

That fact made him run toward his master.

Despite what happened, our connection hasn't vanished.

That gave the beast hope.

He tried it a few times on his way, just to check, and it didn't seem to be diminishing.

That alone gave him solace despite the distance.

He was able to use it today again. Perhaps he was still needed.

The beast climbed the mountain as his thoughts were filled with his master.

Lord Kaguya, Lord Kaguya.

He ran up the familiar mountain trail. He had to be in the

mountain's sacred zone at this time.

Lord Kaguya, it's me. I'm back.

Were you not waiting for me?

I could do anything for you. And I will do anything for you.

If you still need me. So please...

“Night came to Yamato again thanks to you. It's a beautiful twilight.”

Then the beast saw reality. The master he threw his life away to protect was smiling at his new servant.

“Tsukihi.”

Even as a beast, he was also a pet. He knew from a glance how much his master loved his servant. Despair boiled in the pit of his stomach as he wondered, for what purpose did he sin? Had Lord Kaguya already forgotten about them? The emotions were taking control of his body.

Lord Kaguya.

He wanted him to look this way.

Lord Kaguya.

He wanted him to hear his cry.

Lord Kaguya.

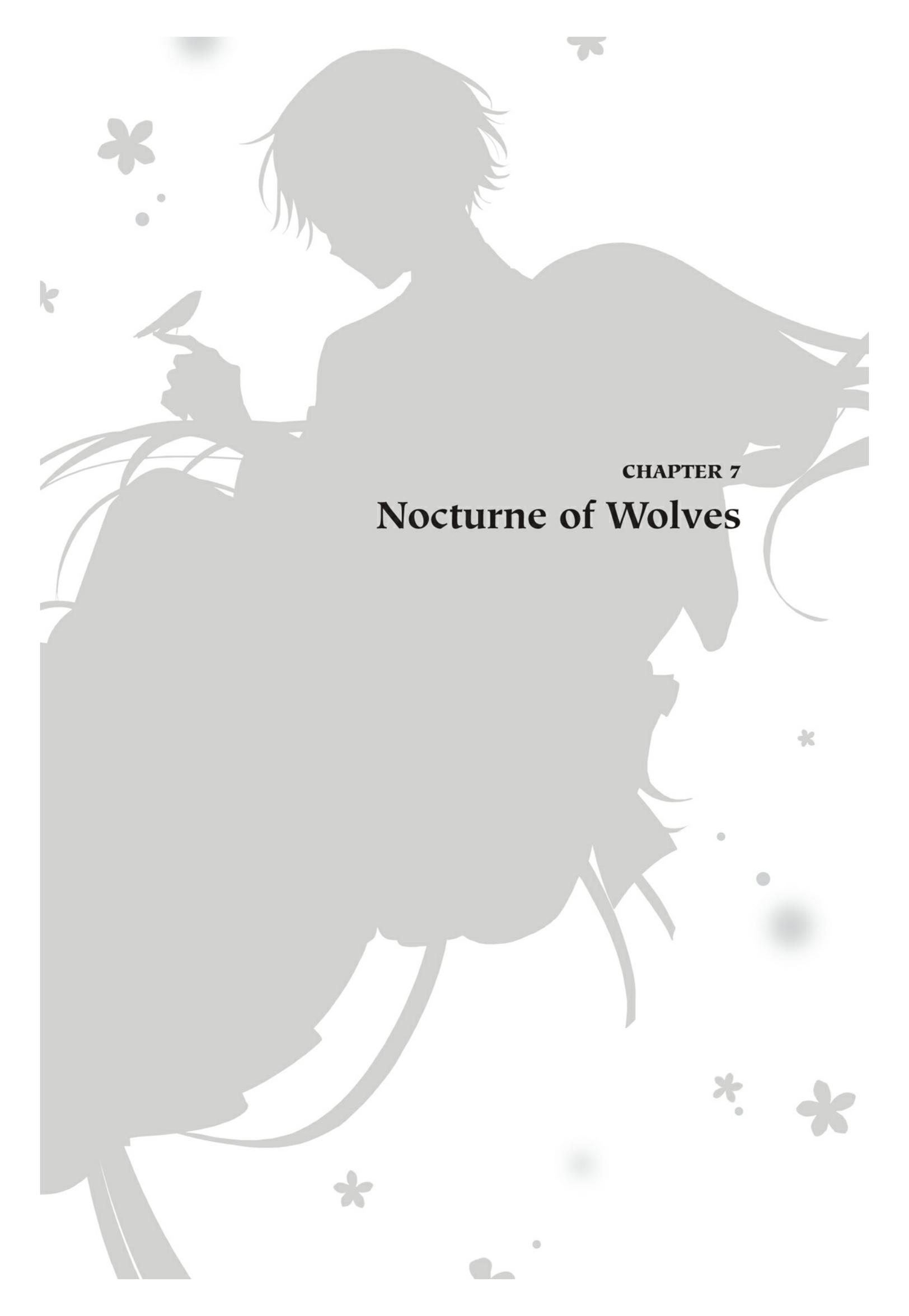
He wanted to ask why.

Lord Kaguya.

He wanted the connection.

Lord Kaguya, have you forgotten about me?

No one ever talked about who had killed the boy and turned him into a wolf.

A large, light gray silhouette of a person with long, wavy hair is the central focus. The person is shown in profile, looking down at a single leaf held in their right hand. The background is white and decorated with various light gray motifs: small flowers, butterflies, and circular dots. The overall style is minimalist and artistic.

CHAPTER 7

Nocturne of Wolves

The tumultuous Taisho day ended, and the morning of July 23 came to all.

Spring and Winter woke up in the lodging provided by Zansetsu Kayo.

The Autumn pair was on their way to Teishu after hearing of the replacement.

The Summer twins had arrived late at night in Ryugu after sneaking out of their Town.

Archer of Twilight Kaguya Fugeki was in his own home.

He lived hidden in the forest near Mount Ryugu.

The forest itself was considered private property and off-limits to the public. As it was away from any settlements, shopping wasn't terribly convenient, but it was the best location to reach the mountain in the shortest amount of time. Mount Ryugu was the Archer's workplace, the better to have a short commute.

Kaguya Fugeki's residence resembled a resort hotel, with a barely tended garden and pool and tall fences surrounding the premises.

He had no gardener. The flowers bloomed naturally, and the butterflies attended them.

Time to get up, I guess.

Kaguya stretched as he woke up in a corner of the beautiful mansion, bracing himself for another day of work.

The first thing he did in the morning was pull back the blackout curtains, then open the window and look at the sky. The beautifully painted blue of the morning canopy set his heart at ease.

Thank you for the morning, Kaya.

The Archer of Dawn was his only colleague, over in Enishi, and he commended her work.

It was still early in the morning, but Kaguya got ready for breakfast. He went down the spiral stairs one story from the third floor and entered the hall. He could see his guards running outside. Kaguya raised a hand, and they greeted him back.

He entered the kitchen and saw the other one on kitchen duty today already wearing an apron and in the middle of work.

Tsukihi today, eh?

Special Agent Tsukihi Aragami was staring at a lump of beef on the cutting board.

Yakiniku?

She did love food; it wouldn't be the strangest choice.

"Good morning, Tsukihi."

Tsukihi jumped before raising her head. "Good morning, Lord Kaguya."

Her voice was cheery, but her expression dark.

"Did you sleep well? You were drinking last night with everyone, weren't you? Hopefully you're not hungover."

Tsukihi had been terribly busy guarding Kaguya since the Dark Wolf mystery began.

His guard held meetings every day and worked on plans to get Kaguya safely back to his mansion. Despite the extra work, she had never let her worry show on her face.

You look exhausted, he thought.

"You should join us today. You don't look good. Did you sleep well?" Worried, Kaguya began to interrogate her.

"I—I did."

"Really?"

"..."

It was so like her to not lie in this situation. Kaguya smiled wryly. "...We've

been drinking every night recently, so if you can't sleep, then you should join us. Ah, did you finish making breakfast?"

"Um... The rolled omelets are ready, and I'm waiting for the rice to get done. I was thinking about making a bit more. The miso soup isn't ready yet. I had one of the guys go buy the ingredients."

"All right. I'll take care of the miso. How about we use up the sausages? The guys will be getting more anyway, right?"

Kaguya grabbed his own personal apron and put it on. The Archer of Twilight and his Secret Agent would not normally cook together, but for the sake of security, Tsukihi and her subordinates had begun staying at the mansion. After enough time using the kitchen, they began sharing a table and helping each other.

"Thank you for helping every day."

"Oh, no, I just like cooking."

It was worth it when there were other people to enjoy what he made. He took the ingredients out of the fridge and noticed something.

"What's with the big hunk of meat, by the way? Did we buy that? Don't you think it's a little heavy for breakfast...? Are kids these days into having beef in the morning...?"

Kaguya went on to suggest slicing it thin and stir-frying it with vegetables, but Tsukihi shook her head.

"No... This is our secret weapon."

Kaguya frowned. "It's...a weapon." He repeated the word, but he was definitely looking at beef. "As in...dangerously delicious?"

Or maybe she meant it in the way love is a secret ingredient?

"No. We'll throw it at that stupid damn mutt, and while it's busy, we'll shoot him with tranquilizers."

"It's a mutt now."

"...Yes."

“Isn’t that a little desperate, Tsukihi? Did the higher-ups yell at you or something?”

“...”

Ah. Kaguya had been stressed since the Dark Wolf appeared, too, but Tsukihi appeared to be cracking under the pressure. He’d seen her in video conferences a few times, as well as her apologizing at the phone. She wasn’t joining the evening revelry because she was busy writing up reports.

“Don’t they realize you’re the reason we’ve gotten away safely every time?”

“...Thank you for your kind words.”

“I’m not trying to comfort you. Just stating the facts. No one’s been hurt.”

“We’ve been able to protect you but not get rid of it. We only wear you out... It’s understandable that they would be mad.”

“No, it’s not...”

“If this goes on for too long, they said they could send another leader more appropriate for the job...”

“What?” Kaguya yelped.

Tsukihi flinched again and continued apologetically: “...They say I’m unfit for the role of your Special Agent...”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m not... They said so yesterday. They might leave everyone else and just change the leader...”

Kaguya was at a loss for words.

This is ridiculous.

He couldn’t just build a new relationship with a stranger. He only managed to make it day after day because of the people that were here with him. They were all friendly. He didn’t want a single one of them gone. And they were considering replacing the leader, no less.

No way.

Tsukihi could be gone. He knew she couldn't stay forever, but he never imagined that it would be this soon.

"I'll have to speak with National Security."

He couldn't let her go.

Kaguya hid it well, but he was fuming inside. He was always short-tempered, but the fuse blew up almost immediately this time. His wrath was not directed at Tsukihi, but she hung her head anyway.

So this was what had her so down.

"You're the one who restored my life..."

"..."

"I can't let you go... Can't you tell the higher-ups I won't allow it?"

"...Lord Kaguya."

Tsukihi was between a rock and a hard place. She bit her lip in silence. Kaguya didn't want to torment her, but it always ended up this way. She wasn't part of the world of the living gods, just a member of National Security.

The Dark Wolf mystery was bringing her bosses down on her, and now Kaguya was putting her on the spot.

"Why not?"

"They'll suspect favoritism..."

Kaguya blinked a couple of times. It took him a few seconds to process what she said. "What? Like I'm favoring you?"

"Yes. People have already said I was chosen for the job because I curried favor with the higher-ups, and if you get the final word here...the perception will get stronger... The people trying to bring me down will seize on it as evidence..." Tsukihi mumbled. "So having you stand up for me will only make things worse."

Favoritism?

He pondered the meaning of the word. It was true he cherished her.

Sure, of course, so what?

She put his life back together. She saved him.

If asked whether he liked her or not, of course he did. He wanted to cherish her, as awkward as he was. But it wasn't just her—the same went for everyone in the unit.

“...How, exactly, would it be bad?”

“They'll think I'm sucking up to you...”

“I'm no politician or anything, though. They think I'm giving you some kind of privilege?”

“Yes... And I asked you myself not to dismiss me...so it's not entirely untrue. And I regret that...”

“No, no, no, what? That's ridiculous! You— That was just one part of the bigger picture of that conversation. And what about your subordinates, then? I'm chummy with them, too. Am I showing them favoritism? Why would they go against you specifically?”

“...” Tsukihi said nothing. She didn't want to admit it was because of her gender.

National Security had more contemporary values than the Towns of the Four Seasons and the Fugeki clan; this kind of slander would usually be called out. The fact that it wasn't meant that either the ones trying to take her down were quite powerful, or they were being more judicious and spreading rumors instead of being loud.

Kaguya sighed and steeled himself. “All right. I'll give them a call.”

Tsukihi grabbed his arm before he could leave the kitchen. “T-to who?!”

“The bigwigs at my clan.”

“D-don't! They'll kick me out even faster!”

“It is a fact that I care for you and your subordinates. But it's nothing like what you were talking about. I'll make them understand that you were so friendly in order to help me put myself together. That criticism is way off the mark.”

“Lord Kaguya, no...!”

“You won’t stop me!”

“Wait! This is also part of an internal power struggle in National Security!”

Now there was another weird problem.

“...What? Factions?”

“I told you there were other candidates for your Special Agent, remember?”

Indeed she did. But that didn’t matter anymore, since Tsukihi was selected.

“The one who recommended me...has a rival that wants another candidate in place. That’s part of why people are coming after me, too. They’re poking at my weaknesses because I haven’t been able to solve the Dark Wolf case. An ultimatum from you won’t make them shut up—just results.”

Kaguya wanted to tear his hair out.

“...That’s so damn stupid! So you’re even less at fault! Someone else could be doing exactly what you are, and the higher-ups wouldn’t be doing this to you!”

“Lord Kaguya...”

Tsukihi’s tiny shoulders shrank further.

“No... No, I’m not angry with you... Sorry for yelling...” Kaguya tried to calm his rage. He took two deep breaths. “Tsukihi... Do you want to go back to Teishu?”

First, he had to know what she wanted. As he expected, she shook her head.

“I...don’t. You said you would let me be by your side.”

“Yeah... I did.”

“And this unit...is my unit.”

“It is.”

“I’ve been working very hard with you up to this point...”

“Yes.”

Tsukihi’s lips trembled, though she did not cry. “I don’t want them to...take away the place...I built for myself here...”

Kaguya reached out to her, but before he could touch her shoulder, he

stopped.

Tsukihi was not the only one doing things that could be misunderstood.

Maybe it's my fault.

Kaguya believed his feelings for Tsukihi were not romantic. Because they were not equals. He was the recipient of her service.

It's not right to feel that way for someone working for you.

He liked her, but as a friend.

It's not right.

So he told himself as he considered how to get her to stay.

“Okay... I'll do my best to solve the case, too.”

“Lord Kaguya...”

“Either way, I'm going to do something. I'll...refrain from protesting, but there's something I want to know about the Dark Wolf.”

“...What would that be?”

Kaguya looked around to make sure no one could hear. “I have a suspicion. We'll have to share this with the rest of the unit, but...no one else. This is top-secret. I want you to swear you won't tell anyone.”

It was the first time he said something like this; Tsukihi nodded with surprise.

“I will tell no one. I promise.”

“Thank you... All right, here it is...”

Kaguya braced himself and whispered.

“The wolf might be someone who doesn't exist...”

It sounded like a riddle.

“Wha...?” As expected, Tsukihi seemed confused.

Kaguya continued, “We might be seeing an illusion.”

“Lord Kaguya...?” Tsukihi briefly wondered whether Kaguya had gone mad in the chaos.

Yet he looked even calmer than she was. It didn’t seem like he was lying.

“I’m telling you the truth, Tsukihi.”

It was like he’d just read her mind.

“And the one doing it...might be my lost Custodian. It’s the only explanation I can come up with.”

“...” Tsukihi’s eyes grew round.

“...Don’t believe me?”

Tsukihi shook her head quickly. Choosing not to believe him now would destroy all the trust they built. “...I can’t make sense of that, but I do believe you. I can’t think you would joke around in a situation like this. But could you please explain it in a way I can understand?”

She stepped closer, and Kaguya felt a wave of relief.

“Of course... Sorry, I don’t blame you for thinking I’m saying something crazy.”

“It’s okay. So what do you mean the Dark Wolf is an illusion? Your Custodian is involved?”

“Yeah. I think it’s my former Custodian, Eken Fugeki.”

Tsukihi tried to put things in order to clear up her confusion.

She brought up what first came to mind. “That’s...the one who fell in love with your wife...and ran away, right?”

The mood got awkward for a moment.

“...That’s right, but it hurts to hear...” Kaguya frowned, but Tsukihi continued without pause.

“The one who would have been beheaded for his crimes in the good old days?”

“There’s no need to go that far. And it’s not certain that they were really involved romantically. I just thought so because they left together... I mean, just

circumstantially... But neither of them was ever found, so we don't know the truth."

"In any case, he hurt you. And that's a grave crime, in my opinion."

"No... I had my faults. I drove them away."

"You're not exactly in a normal position! She should have been prepared to serve you when she married you!"

"...Maybe, but that's not really how love works... And besides, there's no denying being tied down to an Archer really limits your life. I can't go anywhere because my duties are here... So I'd end up forcing my family to do the same."

Tsukihi put on a rare display of anger. "Like I said... She should've known...!"

He understood she was angry for his sake, and he accepted it in silence.

"You can understand something logically and feel differently when you experience it for real. Not to mention, if she said she wanted to divorce, her relatives would attack her... She was in a tough spot. That's why I think she chose to run away from me and her family..."

"..." Tsukihi's fury wasn't directed at him, but it burned just the same.

She couldn't stand to see Kaguya defend those who had hurt him.

"I'm not saying this just to be a good person. Tohko—I mean, my wife—was in a position that deserves sympathy. That is just a fact."

"But...!"

"She married me because the bigwigs told her to, because of her age... I was young and lonely, so I did what they told me to. Don't be too harsh on her. Or on Eken... They might be gone, but they were my family."

And it's my fault.

Kaguya looked at impatient Tsukihi while thinking about what led to the situation.

It all began a few months prior, when his wife and Custodian disappeared.

He normally woke up to the smell of tea; that day was the exception.

“Eken? Tohko?”

He called and received no response. He thought they must have gone out on an early morning walk, but he waited and waited. He prepared breakfast for the three of them, assuming they’d surely come back hungry, but the time was ticking onward. Worried, he tried calling them, but the machine told him the phone was turned off. As he looked around the house, he found a note—it was then that he understood.

Oh, they abandoned me.

They would never come back to him.

Kaguya briefly considered the possibility of a crime.

He stood there in a stupor before thinking it could have been the insurgents, but that didn’t make any sense. Why wouldn’t they have come after him, then? He arrived at his original conclusion. They had abandoned him.

Kaguya’s family consisted of his wife and his young Custodian.

Thinking back, everything had started going wrong when he got married.

“Marry the god. Live with him. Do not leave the island. You are the god’s wife.”

Tohko had been telling him about her orders ever since their wedding.

He’d told her to go back to her parents, but she said that it was best for her family to stay with him. That was how Kaguya found out that the family who produced an Archer’s spouse received financial support. And her family was pressing the point due to his older brother’s grave illness. She’d sacrificed herself for the sake of her family.

Everything about their marriage was sad and inadequate.

The Archers of Oracle could not leave the sacred mountain; they had to shoot their arrows. Kaguya had to spend his whole life there. Her wife was still in her prime; making her stay with him was too cruel. So he was always prepared for her to cut him off.

He'd expected her to leave. What truly shocked him was that his Custodian, only sixteen years old, had left on the same day.

Like the bond between Agent and Guard, the relationship of trust between an Archer and Custodian ran deeper than most.

Unless Kaguya was delusional, his relationship with his Custodian was excellent.

Kaguya was over thirty, and Eken was a teenager. Rather than being friends or brothers with an age gap, or even master and pupil, they were like father and son. Close family. The young boy's affection meant a lot. But he'd left along with Kaguya's wife.

Why you, Eken?

His Custodian's departure hurt more than his wife's, although his friction with Tohko was not the only reason.

A god incarnate and their closest aide, as though by the work of some superior power, were drawn to each other in a relationship of mutual dependence. It was the same as an Agent of the Four Seasons and their Guard. After notifying the Fugeki clan and National Security of their disappearance, he strove to keep his spirits up and do his job, but soon, a higher-up of the Fugeki clan made the worst possible suggestion—immediately replacing his wife and Custodian.

Shitty old men.

Kaguya wanted no replacement.

If the two were ever found and amenable to the idea, he wanted them back.

Whatever happened, he still had sentiments for his family.

Even knowing this, the Fugekis had dared to suggest he could just find a new one.

This nearly decimated Kaguya's mental strength. He was ready to never get involved with anyone ever again.

He escaped the mansion and hid in the forest, away from everyone. Anyone who came to see him, he drove away—and if they refused, he threatened to stop shooting his arrows.

It was then that Tsukihi and her unit arrived.

Anyone the clan sent to protect and surveil him was driven away; so National Security had selected a Special Agent for him to make sure he was at least still breathing. The Fugeki clan likely thought that he would crawl back into his box if confronted with enough authority.

However, under Tsukihi's command, the unit both oversaw his day-to-day and took his own desires into account. Kaguya and the security unit slowly built a trusting relationship. It was thanks to them that Kaguya was able to go back to living with other people.

And Tsukihi became the one he trusted most to counsel him.

“Lord Kaguya...did I offend you?”

“No, I...” Reminiscing about everything had made him go silent, and he rushed to add, “I’m sorry. No, don’t worry. I know you’re just concerned for me.”

“...I am.”

“Going back on topic, there’s good reason for why I think that wolf is Eken’s doing.”

“...Is Eken Fugeki special?”

“In a way. Not Eken himself, but the role of the Custodian.”

“...?”

“The Archer of Twilight’s Custodian has the power to control illusions.”

Tsukihi’s eyes grew wide. “...The Custodian? Not the Archer?”

“Yes. You could say it’s so that the ritual doesn’t get leaked to the outside. For example, if a regular person gets lost and enters our secret mountain trail, you can manipulate the scenery so they won’t keep going; or if a big animal comes in, you show them a predator so they go away. Making a wolf to attack people... is taboo. And they say a Custodian loses their power if they lose their connection and trust with the Archer, so I’m not sure it could be him...”

“ ... ”

“Maybe it’s possible because I haven’t taken in a new Custodian... Uh, was that hard to understand? Sorry.”

“Oh, no... I just thought it made sense.” Tsukihi pondered as she replied. “After all, unlike the Agents of the Four Seasons, the Archers have a set sacred area in the mountain for their ritual.”

“Yeah.”

“They’ve had to find a way to avoid insurgents and bears going up the mountain since ancient times. And hide the sacred area. They couldn’t do the ritual if people got in the way.”

She became more eloquent as she spoke, convinced of what she was saying.

“So it makes sense that the Custodian would have the power to deceive others. An acquired power.”

“ ... ”

Now it was Kaguya with his mouth shut.

“Lord Kaguya?”

“...Nothing, I was just surprised you could figure all that out so quickly.”

“You think I’m not very bright, don’t you? I have a pretty good education, if I do say so myself. I even dabbled in theology in college.”

Now it all made sense. He was reminded of how special a girl Tsukihi Aragami was. Her understanding was a product of both nature and nurture.

“The powers have never been inborn; just as humans evolved to gain new skills, the gods grant them powers they did not have at first... Or so most people

think. There's been a lot of research on this. For example, the Agents of the Four Seasons are capable of self-defense, so they have means to strike back against the insurgents... Do you not have any, Lord Kaguya?"

"No. I've never shot a person... But we're in a safer environment than the Agents to begin with, so maybe the power for our arrows to attack people was never necessary. Instead, the Custodians got the power to conceal the Archers."

"Yes. I was surprised, but I've reached the conclusion it's not that strange for them to receive such a blessing."

Tsukihi nodded fervently, as though she had answered a test question correctly.

"Ah, but..." Still, she faced her own problems. "Lord Kaguya..."

"Yes, Tsukihi?"

"That means that your former Custodian is using an illusion on us?"

"Yes."

"So we're up against supernatural powers?"

"Yes..."

"And we don't have any experts to help us?"

"There are no experts. If anything, it would be me, but I never considered the possibility of going up against him... We'll have to think about what to do next."

Tsukihi turned pale. "C-can we win? Guns don't work on illusions..."

"Well... This has to be the first time in history a Custodian has fought an Archer. Both end up in a strong bond that should make them unable to betray each other. That goes for me, too. It's only human for us to argue, of course, but killing each other is out of the question. And now that I think about it, the wolf has never tried any definitive attack... That gives more credibility to the Eken theory..."

Tsukihi ran a hand through her hair.

"Now, we don't know for sure!" Kaguya rushed to add. "I might be completely off. We can't deny that it could be a real wolf. It's just... I find it strange that the

hunters association hasn't been able to track it down..."

"Right... I think the same. Lord Kaguya, if it is Eken Fugeki as you say..." Tsukihi paused. "Will you be okay?"

She wasn't talking about the combat plans or execution—she meant Kaguya himself.

This is why I need you.

Kaguya smiled awkwardly. At every moment, Tsukihi worried first about his feelings. That was why he was able to push through.

"...Thank you. I'll be okay."

He wanted to trust again.

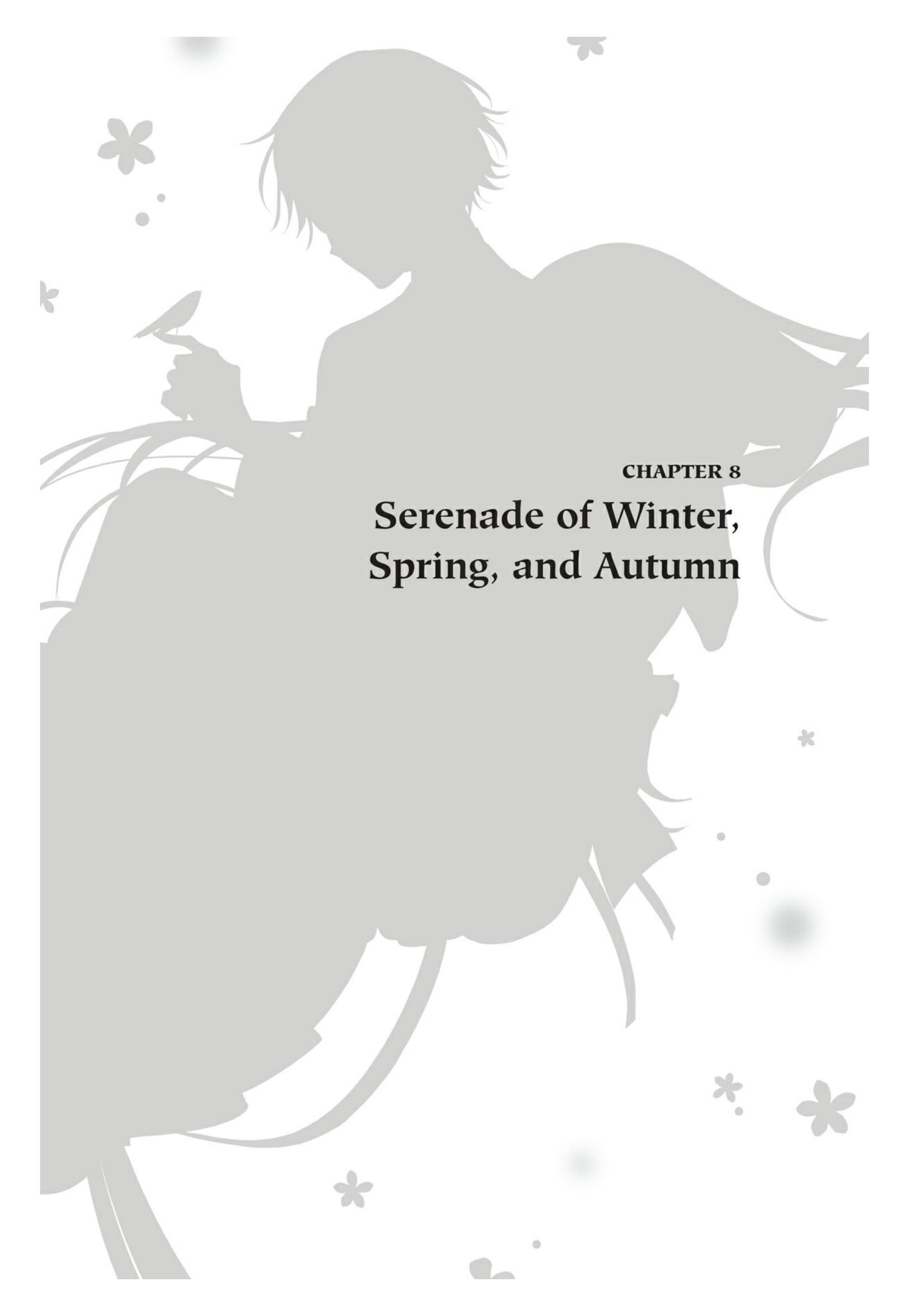
"Let's worry about you first. Let's see if we can keep you here...without worsening your reputation."

"Lord Kaguya..."

It was now time for him to pay her back for all the protection she'd given him.

"Even if we have to say goodbye one day, that won't be today. Right?"

Kaguya's quiet reassurance was more for him than for Tsukihi.



CHAPTER 8

**Serenade of Winter,
Spring, and Autumn**

July 23—Teishu, Teito.

The young Goddess of Autumn watched the sudden downpour through the car window.

The raindrops danced on the glass, blown by the wind. Feeling a hand on her shoulder, she turned her face to the side.

“Nadeshiko, we’ll arrive soon.”

Nadeshiko nodded at her charming Guard.

“Rindo, the gifts...”

“Yes, I have them here.”

“Will they like them...?”

“I’m sure they will.”

His voice was so sweet she would believe any lie. He didn’t look at anyone else this way, and there was something bewitching about it.

“If I got the gifts you picked, I’d love them.”

It was an ample offering to his Autumn Goddess.

“Hee-hee... You’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not.”

“But you don’t like sweets...”

“I don’t hate them, either.”

“So you like everything...?”

“Not everything.”

“...But you like what I picked?”

Her words would sound conceited to those who didn’t know their relationship, but Rindo seemed happy to hear them. She guessed right.

“Of course, my princess.”

The pretentious line sounded charismatic coming from him.

Agent of Autumn Nadeshiko Iwaizuki and her Guard Rindo Azami traveled early in the morning to meet with Spring and Winter. They took a flight from Tsukushi to Teishu, then were escorted by Winter’s team to the hotel. The car finally came to a stop, and the trip was over.

“Are you okay, Nadeshiko?”

Since they entered from the back entrance for VIPs to avoid being seen, they got a bit wet from the rain. Well, Rindo did at any rate, shielding Nadeshiko. The distance didn’t warrant using an umbrella, and he didn’t want her feet touching the ground, so he carried her to the door.

“I’m okay... But the rain got you.” Nadeshiko’s forget-me-not-colored eyes frowned in worry. “Don’t get sick...”

Her tiny maple leaf hands touched Rindo’s wet cheeks, and he simply smiled. “You’re such a worrywart. A few drops won’t make me sick.”

Nadeshiko asked him to put her down and took a silk hand towel out from her drawstring pouch.

She was so terribly mature and enigmatic when she worried about her Guard, and he could never say no to her.

“Crouch down,” she said.

She wouldn’t take no for an answer, either. In times like this, he was reminded she was the Autumn Queen.

They had to meet the other Agents and Guards as soon as possible, but Rindo bent a knee in the hotel hallway.

Nadeshiko reached out to his hair and shoulders to wipe them.

Her walnut-colored curls swayed.

Rindo stared at his master fervently caring for him, containing his bliss.

The wounds from the violence she suffered in spring had fortunately healed already, perhaps in part thanks to her youth. She didn't even have a scar; her angelic face remained impeccable. The sight of her fresh-snow skin moved him—it was like a reward for how carefully he tended her wounds.



Now I know how the other Guards feel.

He had always cherished her, even without realizing it, but now he was fully aware of how much he cared for her. He wanted to spoil and protect her.

She is my Autumn.

This was not like taking care of a doll; he would have to devote all of himself to her, to a degree that wasn't possible for someone motivated only by his own interests.

She is my woman.

He remembered what Guard of Spring Sakura Himedaka said: *"She's your woman."*

I want to do anything for her.

It seemed Rindo's overprotectiveness had rubbed off on her.

He thought she would give him a quick wipe, but she was quite thorough. She brushed his hair up to dry his forehead, and Rindo naturally closed his eyes. The towel moved from his nose to his cheek and, finally, he felt the sensation of soft lips on his cheek.

"...You kissed me, Princess?" he asked, and heard a giggle. He opened his eyes.

"No, I just wiped a drop of rain."

"Really? That can't be it."

"It's true. Now close your eyes again."

"As you wish..."

He followed the order and, the moment he felt Nadeshiko's breath on him, he opened his eyes and grabbed her chin. After taking a good look at her startled reaction, he returned the favor by kissing her on the cheek. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Nadeshiko's eyes grew wide. As the coup de grâce, he whispered into her ear. "You're a liar, Nadeshiko."

Nadeshiko's face was dyed rosy.

Rindo smiled with satisfaction.

"You're a meany," Nadeshiko said.

"How? You're the one teasing me all the time lately."

"...It's not teasing. You are my knight and prince, so what's wrong with the princess giving you a kiss?"

"That's true. And I'm worthy of it."

"And besides, I thought, since I was hiding behind you... I thought it was the perfect time... Before we met with the other seasons... You didn't like it...?"

"Perish the thought. How could I dislike such an honor? And you hadn't done it today, right?"

"No, I hadn't..."

The Winter escorts waited a little farther away while the conversation took place. Rindo could feel their annoyance, and maybe something like envy.

The annoyance was only natural for keeping them waiting, and Nadeshiko's esteem was an honor for any retainer.

Once the interaction ended, Rindo turned back with a friendly smile and apologized.

He used to give off a cheeky impression, but his expression was always peaceful after he talked with his lady.

"Are you engaged or something?" the annoyed escort asked.

Rindo was taken aback. "No? What gave you that impression...?"

"Nothing, it's just... Our Agent and Guard's relationship is pretty different."

He meant Rosei and Itecho.

Now it was Rindo's turn to be annoyed. "Of course we would seem different from Lord Kantsubaki and Lord Kangetsu. They're like brothers."

"But you call each other Princess and Prince... And you seem so close..."

"Oh... That's just a game we've been playing for a while..."

Any girl her age wants to play prince and princess.

Being called out for arguing would be one thing, but why would someone be so confused that they got along? Nadeshiko listened in silence while holding Rindo's hand.

"I heard you've lived outside of Yamato, Lord Azami. Is that a custom there?"

The Winter escort pointed at his cheek. He meant the kiss.

Oh.

Rindo finally understood what he meant. The Town of Winter was a predominantly male society with few women, and the current Agent and Guard of Winter were both men. The touchiness must have seemed strange.

It also felt a bit like this man was going out of his way to find fault. It took Rindo a while to realize since no one in the security team at the Town of Autumn gave them suspicious looks for how close they were. It made sense why this man would have misgivings.

You just don't know how lonely she is.

Rindo thought of her parents, who came to see her so rarely she'd forgotten what they looked like—if they ever visited at all.

You just don't know about the special feelings between a god incarnate and their Guard.

The Agents and Guards of the Four Seasons understood the special fixation and codependence between master and retainer, so they never said anything like the Winter escort just had.

Rindo glanced at Nadeshiko. Her expression was stiff. He held her hand a little tighter and said, "I wonder. I've been to many countries, and customs vary. I believe most places show affection simply by hugging or touching cheeks together. So rather than it being foreign influence, I would say it's because of her in particular. Would you like one, too?"

"What?"

"If you're that worried about it, I could kiss your cheek. In good faith."

He had absolutely no intention of doing so; he was simply striking back for intruding into another season's matters.

But despite his joking grin, Nadeshiko immediately shouted, "No!" She rarely raised her voice like that.

"Nadeshiko...?"

"No!" Tears began welling up in her eyes. "Rindo, you're mine..." Her voice cracked as she asked the escort, "Do you like Rindo...?"

The Winter escort had made the Goddess of Autumn cry, and he was appropriately terrified.

"I-I'm sorry, Lady Autumn!"

"Don't apologize... Just answer the question..."

The man was just a colleague; he didn't have any special feelings toward Rindo. But if he said yes, then the Agent of Autumn would burst in jealousy; if he said no, he was representing the Town of Winter poorly.

"Lady Autumn, Lord Guard... I should not have said that. Please forgive me."

The Winter escort recognized Nadeshiko was the one in charge of their relationship and looked at Rindo for help.

Rindo picked Nadeshiko up with a chuckle. He was happy the escort understood now, but at the same time, he felt sad. It reminded him that they would one day have to forsake this proximity.

But that won't be for another ten years.

For now, he wanted to fulfill Nadeshiko's wish to be her prince, right up until the day she said she didn't need it anymore. Once the time came, she would surely find someone dearer to her than her guardian.

"Nadeshiko... I am yours and only yours. Please forgive him. I went a bit too far trying to show that there's nothing wrong with our relationship. I apologize."

Nadeshiko reflected on what he said silently as she held him tight.

After a while, she turned to look at the Winter escort, the tears nearly spilling over.

“Thank you for showing us here... You were very kind... But don’t ask Rindo to kiss you... He’s mine...”

“Indeed, Lady Autumn. It was never my intention.”

“You won’t ask him to kiss you anymore?”

He’d never asked in the first place, but still the Winter escort shook his head again and again. Rindo had to hold back his laughter.

“I’m sorry, Lady Autumn, Lord Guard... I ended up taking your time. Let me show you to our lord’s room.”

“No, I’m sorry for making you wait. And thank you. Let’s go, Nadeshiko.”

Rindo figured it would be faster to carry her there, so he followed the Winter escorts without putting her down. He lowered his glance to her face and saw she was still glum.

Rindo took advantage of the others looking ahead and gave Nadeshiko a kiss on her snowy forehead.

Nadeshiko’s eyes grew wide.

He put a finger to his lips, and she finally smiled again.

The Winter escorts showed Autumn to the hotel room full of prominent figures.

“Nadeshiko...long time...no...see. Hello, Lord...Azami.”

Agent of Spring Hinagiku Kayo.

“You can place your belongings here, Lord Azami. Lady Nadeshiko, you must be tired from the long trip. Please take a seat.”

Guard of Spring Sakura Himedaka.

“Mr. Azami, good to have you here. Yes, please sit down. And Nadeshiko—you’ve gotten big, haven’t you?”

Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki.

“I’ll bring you a drink, Lady Nadeshiko. Would you like some juice? Azami, am

I recalling correctly that you like iced coffee?”

Guard of Winter Itecho Kangetsu.

The gods incarnate and their Guards welcomed the lady and retainer of Autumn.

“Thank you for all your thoughtfulness. We are glad to accompany you here today.”

“It’s been a while, everyone. Thank you for receiving us. A-and we got some gifts...”

Nadeshiko politely bowed, and her two elder gods incarnate urged her to sit down. Rindo finally relaxed, too. Although he didn’t show it on his face, he’d worried the entire way here. He’d had almost no relationship with anyone in the room before spring, but now he felt more at home with them than the people of the Town.

I can trust them not to harm Nadeshiko.

That was more important than anything to him. And what worried him the most.

I hope Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame are okay.

The absent Hazakura twins were Autumn’s sworn allies. He hoped to get Spring and Winter’s knowledge on what happened to Summer and solve the case.

Once the greetings were over, they carefully explained to Nadeshiko why the Agents were gathered there. The current Agents were under fire for different reasons, and rumors were making the rounds that the gods were punishing them. The rumors came from families who were involved in the crimes back in spring, and there were people pushing back against them. The two factions were called Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn. The Agents were here to protect themselves from the bad people who used the divine punishment theory as an excuse to “replace” them—and they couldn’t get ahold of the Hazakura twins of Summer.

Unlike earlier, Nadeshiko did not shout or cry as she heard the explanation.

She listened to the facts and asked about anything she didn't understand.

Meanwhile, Rindo could only hold her hand so she wouldn't be afraid.

"So we're here to fight together," Nadeshiko concluded.

She was not wrong. They had to come together while the enemy remained in the shadows.

"Environmental destruction, divine punishment... It all sounds scary... And if we don't help each other, something scary like what happened in spring could happen again..." Nadeshiko sorrowfully brushed the notepad on the table.

There was a rectangular table in the middle of the sofas, where Itecho had placed a notepad outlining the situation so Nadeshiko would easily understand.

Thanks to their slow explanation, she didn't seem confused. Now she simply had to brace herself as an Agent.

Rosei was sitting across from Nadeshiko. "Yes. We wanted Summer to be here, too... But we can't get ahold of them. According to National Security's investigations, they might be in Ryugu. They were seen on a plane there from the Iyo airport."

"Ryugu... Where Mister Growly is... Where I go to manifest Autumn, right?"

"Mister Growly...?"

"Ah, apologies, Lord Kantsubaki. She means the wolf. I used the nickname to avoid scaring her."

Rosei smiled awkwardly at Rindo's explanation. *You sure got your own problems, huh?* Rosei thought. "Yes, it's where...Mister Growly appeared," he said aloud. "More precisely, they must've headed to Mount Ryugu."

Despite the tense topic, everyone else smiled in amusement at Rosei's show of kindness.

"What?! She's a kid, so..."

"We know, Rosei. Nobody said anything. Yeah, let's call it Mister Growly."

Rosei shivered in embarrassment at the reply and their warm glances, and he chose to immediately recant. "Nadeshiko. It's a wolf. We're calling it the Dark

Wolf. I'm not saying Mister Growly anymore."

Nadeshiko smiled. "Okay, Lord Rosei."

She was happy to know the King of Winter had tried being considerate with her.

Meanwhile, Hinagiku's expression softened at her sweetheart's shyness. Then, to no one in particular, she muttered, "But...why...would they...go to... Ryugu...?"

They had already relayed the information to Hinagiku, without Zansetsu.

The current meeting was primarily meant to give her and Nadeshiko a detailed explanation, as well as making sure everyone else was on the same page.

"If we know for sure they went to Ryugu," Sakura replied, "then most likely they're there to solve the Dark Wolf mystery..."

Hinagiku looked at Sakura, wide-eyed. "Is that...because...Lady Ruri...and Lady...Ayame...can be...friends with...animals...?"

"Yes, the Agents of Summer have the power of Life Operation. They most likely headed to Ryugu to try and tame the Dark Wolf... After all, the divine punishment theory gained steam due to the Dark Wolf attacking the Lord Archer of Twilight. But then they forgot about that issue and switched to running down the Agents..."

Rindo nodded. "I heard only the possibility of environmental issues came up when the Fugeki clan, National Security, and the Environmental Protection Agency got together to talk about the Dark Wolf. It wasn't until the experts of the Four Seasons' meeting that the divine punishment theory was brought up. It does seem like the Fugeki clan was forgotten after that. They haven't officially come to protest, but the Four Seasons' side is already deep in an argument about it."

"That's the thing. I found it strange that they've kept quiet all this time... What could they have in mind?"

Hinagiku tilted her head, so Sakura explained:

“Um... The Fugeki clan is the organization that manages the Archers of Oracle—that is, the Archer of Dawn and the Archer of Twilight, who bring day and night. Consider them a mix of their versions of the Four Seasons Towns and Agency. They don’t have a huge building in Teishu like the agency, or notify each region like when we go on our season journey, nor do they do anything in public. They keep everything secret.”

Hinagiku blinked. “Why...do they...keep it...secret?”

“Because they can, it seems. They’re better situated than us for it. They don’t move around. They don’t need the different regions to cooperate, and they don’t get the attention of the press like we do for the cherry blossom front. Morning and night come every day. So naturally, they have little involvement with the insurgents or other cults. Comparatively, they’re safer than us.” Sakura paused before concluding, “And...it seems the Fugeki clan excels at some way to conceal information? They are from an entirely different divine bloodline, so I imagine they have different know-how. They’re pretty mysterious even to the other gods incarnate.”

Hinagiku understood, although Nadeshiko clearly still didn’t.

Sakura was used to speaking simply for Hinagiku, but it seemed she had to simplify it even further. She looked at Rindo to pass the baton.

“Nadeshiko, we leave for our journey in the Risshu solar term, remember? That’s the start of autumn.”

“Yes.”

“You have to cross all of Yamato to bring the season to the whole country. Spring and Summer start from Ryugu to Enishi, and Autumn and Winter start from Enishi to Ryugu. Since our route doesn’t change, the insurgents can attack us easily. The news always says things like ‘Autumn has arrived in such and such place,’ so they can find us no problem. And everyone’s attention is on us because it happens once a year.”

“...Yes. I wish I could teleport...”

“If only. But we can’t, sadly. And we must bring the season even if the insurgents find us or if they report us in the news. The Agents of the Four

Seasons are roaming gods—not limited to one place.”

Nadeshiko hadn’t heard of the concept.

“The advantage is that we can meet each other like we’re doing right now.”

Nadeshiko remembered the long trip from the Town of Autumn to the Tsukushi airport, to the Teishu airport, and to the hotel—that became her picture of a “roaming” goddess.

“The Archer of Twilight and the Archer of Dawn can’t come to Teishu...?”

“They are stationary. Not only can’t they come to Teishu, they can’t go stay anywhere else at all. They have to shoot their arrows from their sacred zone, or morning and night won’t come. They can’t ever leave the sacred area.”

Nadeshiko was beginning to understand. “They can’t go out...like us.”

“No.”

“But also...people bother them less?”

Rindo smiled and fluffed Nadeshiko’s curly hair. “Exactly.”

Nadeshiko smiled. “And because of that, the insurgents can’t do scary things... But the Archers can’t go anywhere... They can’t see all the beautiful places of Yamato...”

If someone asked if she would want to trade places with an Archer, she wouldn’t be sure how to answer.

The Agents traveled the land to bring the seasons.

Traveling was dangerous, but as Nadeshiko said, it also allowed one to enjoy the beauty of nature in different places.

“They can’t go see friends in trouble far away... They can’t go to beautiful places...”

“But in exchange, their lives are rarely at risk...”

“Mm-hmm. That’s good.” Nadeshiko clung to Rindo.

Ever since spring, Nadeshiko had gotten into the habit of touching Rindo to fill the hole fear had left in her heart.

Feeling the touch of the person who cared most about her eased her anxiety and let her see past the injustices. There was so much to take in that it wouldn't be strange for her to throw a tantrum in confusion, but she did not. She had already experienced being held hostage by the insurgents.

It was clear she was ready to leave it all in the grown-ups' hands.

"It's good they don't have to worry about scary things..."

Rindo put his hands on Nadeshiko's shoulders to soothe her anxiety.

Then he turned to look at Rosei, who was serving as the de facto leader.

"...Lord Kantsubaki, what will we do about Summer?"

"We should go help them," Rosei replied. "It worries me that we can't get in touch with them."

Rindo was surprised at how quickly he answered. "So you are planning to save Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame?"

"Huh...? Are you not?"

"No, I mean, let's go save them!" Rindo leaned forward. "Sorry, it's just that I heard you didn't like Lady Ruri... I had a bit of doubt that you might actually help us... But it seems those fears were misplaced. It is an honor to have Lord Winter help us."

"It's true I don't like her, but I'd feel bad if she died."

""Rosei!"" Sakura and Itecho yelled in unison.

"Lord...Rosei..." Hinagiku scolded him.

Rosei looked awkward. "Okay, I didn't put that well... What I mean is that I don't have any intention to let one of us fall into danger. I want to keep our collaboration efforts. We should help them even if they don't want us to. Don't worry, Mr. Azami. This was already decided before you even arrived. The only question is who we'll send to do it."

The people gathered in the hotel were lady and retainer of Spring, lady and retainer of Autumn, lord and retainer of Winter, Winter's escorts, and the Four Seasons Agency Winter staff. They had to decide who would leave to search for

Summer while keeping the Agents safe.

“Should I have Autumn’s security team move?” Rindo quickly suggested. “Publicly, Nadeshiko and I are still in the Town. Our security team pulled some strings to let us go in secret. I could call them here. And since we need as many hands on deck as we can get, how about we have Winter’s escorts join in? What do you say, Lord Kangetsu?”

Itecho thought about the suggestion before nodding. “Yeah... It’d be good to send a few of our escorts along with Autumn’s. National Security will be doing their own search, but it could be a good idea to officially declare that the Four Seasons will be joining hands to collaborate with them. That would do something to curb anyone up to no good.”

Rosei watched them talk thoughtfully. “Doesn’t sound bad, but I think we’re missing something...”

“And that would be?”

After Rindo’s question, Rosei glanced at Nadeshiko with worry.

“...I don’t want to scare Nadeshiko, but...”

“Don’t worry about me, Lord Rosei.”

Rosei looked back at Rindo for confirmation and waited until he had received it. “Well, then. Let me say this so we’re all on the same page. I think the two Agents of Summer are at risk of replacement in Ryugu.”

Silence fell.

“They are in danger as we speak. I think we all know this deep down.”

Though no one said it out loud, everyone feared it.

The twins had gone to Ryugu alone and were out of everyone’s reach—they were already in great danger.

Rosei didn’t want to scare anyone, but there was no one else who would state the facts as plainly as he could.

“No one outside of us can get in touch with them, either. That in mind, it’s most likely someone called them out to Ryugu where they could easily kill

them. They're sitting ducks. Those trying to get them replaced will not let the chance slip by. It'd be hard to do anything inside the Town. But what about outside? They could even make it look like an accident."

Indeed, they were the easiest to kill.

He showed no distress as he laid out the terrible facts.

"Setting aside why they went to Ryugu alone, we must consider the worst. If there is someone who wants them replaced and is going after their lives, whoever it is will be duly prepared. Sending the escorts *will* limit the options of their attackers, but I don't think they'll be enough. Escorts can't apply enough pressure to get these people to stand down. For that, it'd be better for me to go."

"Rosei..."

"Shut up, Itecho."

"I haven't said anything yet," Itecho protested. "I know what you're getting at, but how are we going to protect ourselves? If you go, that means I go. And if we go, then Lady Hinagiku..."

"That's what scares me. I don't want to leave Hina unguarded." Rosei hesitated for a moment. "Which is why... How about we all go?"

Every jaw dropped.

"Rosei... Are you being serious right now?" Itecho objected, but Rosei responded firmly.

"I am. Itecho, you know we're in danger no matter where we are. We've been here for two days already. It's about time we moved anyway, so why not make it Ryugu? And if we all go to Ryugu, that will be the best deterrence against whoever's after the Agents of Summer. They'll think twice before doing anything once they know the Four Seasons are there. Mr. Azami, I have a question for you."

"Y-yes?" Rindo straightened up.

"You are a master of the martial arts. I heard you put up an excellent fight against New Year. Now please think about it. If you were plotting to replace

them, would you go up against this group?"

Rindo considered his hypothetical opponents.

At the vanguard was the Winter staff from the Agency and Winter escorts trained to fight against terrorist attacks.

In the center, you had the Guards of the Four Seasons who defeated New Year.

And they all served the Agent of Spring, who single-handedly destroyed New Year's former hideout; the Agent of Autumn, who was beginning to master the power of Life Putrefaction; and the Agent of Winter, who froze over the Teishu expressway.

"Errr... Maybe if I had a tank."

It was mainly Rosei he was afraid of.

The power of Life Coagulation was beyond human knowledge, and Rosei was quite aggressive himself.

Considering his temperament, he would show no mercy to his enemy. He was kind to his friends and colleagues but cold to everyone else.

"I think it'd be harder for them to make a move if we keep together. We're not up against insurgents this time—our enemy is from within the Towns. We will likely be going up against people who will try to use assassination techniques. They won't show themselves to murder us in broad daylight. And that in mind...doesn't it sound better for us to go ahead and show ourselves? They can't be too forceful. They're trying to torment us by leaking intel and spreading rumors of the divine punishment theory. They want us to despair. We'll be better aware of what they're plotting if we just show up to Ryugu with our heads held high. We can make up as many reasons to go there as we need."

Itecho was getting a headache.

Security would have to go up a notch if everyone was going. As a Guard, he'd rather be spared the work.

What made the migraine worse, though, was that his reckless lord was entirely right.

This would be a better deterrent against everyone than simply sending Autumn's and Winter's escorts.

They had already proved what happened when the Agents of the Four Seasons joined forces back in spring.

What Rosei wanted to say was this:

"They know what happens to those who start a fight with us."

"...I'd gladly go if it's just you and me..."

Itecho wasn't sure about taking the women. They were finally out of danger now; did he have the courage to let them imperil themselves yet again?

Spring and Autumn had been threatened enough by the insurgents. He didn't want them to experience that fear again. He wanted them to stay in a safe place.

Either way, he had to confirm how they felt.

"Lady Nadeshiko, what do you think of the idea?"

Itecho asked her first. The good-looking man in sunglasses was a bit overpowering.

That said, thanks to Itecho's soft demeanor and his efforts with the notebook to explain things to Nadeshiko, she wasn't startled by the question.

She knew he was a kind man.

"Um, I... I..."

Still, she didn't fully understand everything or how to answer.

Itecho looked awkwardly at her before adding an even simpler explanation.

"Don't worry, I can explain it as many times as you need. The Ladies Summer went to Ryugu. The airport cameras showed that they went because they wanted to. Probably to solve the Dark Wolf mystery. You got all of that?" he asked softly, and Nadeshiko nodded with a bright smile.

“Mm-hmm, I understand. Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame can speak with the wolf, right?”

“Yes. But we’re worried about them. Someone from their Town might try to replace them... And I think they don’t know about this.”

“Rindo and I didn’t know until you told us.”

“Exactly. We didn’t realize how serious the situation was until we were informed about it yesterday, either. We must get them to safety immediately.”

“We have to look for them.”

“Yes, and other people also know that they went to Ryugu, so National Security and people from the Towns will go there, too.”

“Are they good guys...?”

Itecho was sad at how problematic the whole situation was that a girl less than ten years old had to ask that.

“That’s what we don’t know, I fear...”

“You’re afraid...? But you’re Rindo’s super senior?”

“I am afraid. I have the duty to protect all of you, and I don’t want anyone to get hurt. I don’t mind it if I get hurt, but I don’t want any of you to suffer...”

Nadeshiko realized he was being entirely honest. She nodded with a frown.

“Unfortunately...many of the good guys turned out to be bad guys back in spring. There might be bad guys among those searching for Summer. Actually... it’s more likely that it would be the bad guys going to Ryugu to hurt Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame...”

“That’s scary.”

“...It is. We might come across scary people if we go to Ryugu. But if all of us join together, the bad guys might stop trying to hurt them. And we will show them no mercy. We might be able to scare them away. And then we could get Summer to safety.”

“...Yes, I understand it very well now, Lord Itecho. I thank you.”

“Thank you, Lord Kangetsu.”

Itecho wore a faint smile.

Rindo's gratitude naturally welled up inside him.

I can tell this is the man who brought up Lord Kantsubaki.

As the one who had served Rosei since childhood, Itecho understood that, even in situations where the grown-ups had to take care of things, one mustn't make the Agent feel alienated.

Thanks to him, Nadeshiko could think for herself.

"Winter—well, Rosei—is set on going, so I will be going, too," said Itecho. "What do you say, Autumn?"

"Autumn will go." Nadeshiko responded immediately.

"Nadeshiko," said Rindo, and she looked up at him.

"We will help Lady Ayame and Lady Ruri. We must pay them back for helping me." The youngest goddess firmly stated her will. "Rindo, this is the time to give back to them, right?"

It wasn't just a child's words.

No adult was making her say this.

Nadeshiko thought for herself and made her decision as Agent of Autumn.

Rindo was proud to serve this goddess. "Yes, Nadeshiko. This is the time... Although it might be dangerous..."

"I will protect you, Rindo."

"That's my job. If you've made your mind up, then I'll do the same. I will protect you."

"Let's protect each other, then."

Once Nadeshiko and Rindo had answered, Itecho turned to look at Spring.

Sakura had her hand up to her chin in thought. As for Hinagiku...

"Spring...agrees...to go to...Ryugu."

She was already decided.

Ahhh.

Sakura sighed internally. "...Lady Hinagiku."

She would never listen to her retainer's advice in times like this.

"Saku...ra. Let's... go."

"...I wasn't sure about it, considering the danger. You are already under threat as it is."

"Yes... But, but... Who is...in the most...danger right...now?"

That's unfair.

Still, like a pious believer, she looked straight at Hinagiku.

"It's...Summer..."

In truth, none of this was unfair. Hinagiku wasn't being cunning. Her virtue was just so pure that Sakura had no choice but to agree.

"Back in...spring, they...said yes...to what we...asked, even...though...it was... dangerous."

Sakura couldn't say no when Hinagiku's eyes asked her to do the right thing.

"They...didn't say...no when we...asked them...to come...help...Nadeshiko. Because Nade...shiko was...in danger. And we...had to...act right...away. That's what...Ayame...said. Lady Ruri...also agreed...right away. She said...to not...worry and...go ahead...to Teishu. Remember?"

"Yes..."

"And now...Hinagiku thinks...that it's...our time to...help...them."

It always ends up like this.

Everything that was causing Sakura a headache was blown away by the spring cherry blossom flurry.

It doesn't matter how hard I think. My brain stops once she shows me the way.

She didn't hate it. In fact, she took pride in it. But at the same time, it scared her.

You are too kind.

That kindness had killed Hinagiku Kayo. It wasn't the direct cause of her death, but she gave up years of her life to protect someone else. So much would have been different if she just lived for her own sake. Sakura couldn't feel at ease when she was with Hinagiku. The anxiety was always there.

But that's why I...

She knelt and lowered her head.

"Lady Hinagiku..."

That's why you are my goddess.

"Sakura... Hinagiku knows...how much you...think and...worry. But Hinagiku... wants to...make sure...that they're...safe. It's Spring's...turn...to help...Summer. Can't...we?"

Hinagiku didn't come off too strong because she knew her retainer didn't want to go to Ryugu for her own safety. She looked down in apology after she asked.

"...I understand, Lady Hinagiku."

Sakura asked her to raise her head.

"If that is your wish, I have but to obey. But will you follow my lead, Lady Hinagiku? Do not forget that you are also at risk of replacement."

Hinagiku raised her head and looked at Sakura with strong will burning in her eyes.

"We will retreat the moment I sense danger. I want to make sure that Summer is safe, too... But my lady's safety comes first. It may seem heartless to you, but will you understand?"

"Yes. Hinagiku will...follow your...lead."

Hinagiku grabbed Sakura's hand and gripped it tight. Sakura nodded firmly. Then she looked at Rosei.

"I don't oppose all of us going there, but I have to point out one risk. Wouldn't the insurgents hear about it and join forces as well?"

Rosei crossed his arms thoughtfully.

“I know what you mean,” he said, before launching into his argument like a bona fide lawyer. “But you just pointed out how their forces aren’t enough to corner us. As I see it, the reformists will lie low for a while. The spring ordeal was big news in the major press. Public opinion is leaning against the insurgents. In times of peace, some idiots do agree with their bullshit about getting us to use our powers for the sake of the country, but support for that viewpoint is plummeting. After all, that attack was the reason National Security and the fire department had to run to the Four Seasons Agency smack in the middle of Teito and issue an evacuation order for the surrounding area. I also shut down an expressway because the insurgents attacked me. It got in the way of their lives, and they’re mad about it. The insurgents needed the public opinion on their side if they wanted to argue that we should use our powers for the common man, but the common man hates them now.”

Rosei snorted.

“Short-sighted imbeciles. That’s what they get for trying to solve everything with violence.”

As if you’re one to talk, Sakura and Itecho said with a glare, but Rosei ignored them.

“New Year went too far with their terrorist attacks in broad daylight. That was their leader’s mistake. And now it’s affecting the other insurgents. Every other organization must be lying low right now. All commercial and public facilities around the country are increasing security to protect against the possibility of getting involved in another terrorist attack. This isn’t the time for them to make their move. Some of the reformists are out for blood, and they might be the exception... But as long as they’re not gigantic idiots, even they should know they’re better off hiding for a while. If they don’t want us or the people to string them up.”

Sakura looked at him with sincere approval.

“Rosei... You’ve learned how to think...” She was acting like an aunt seeing her nephew all grown up after years apart.

Rosei pouted. “I’ve always been able to think. And I’m the one who’s always

at most danger of getting killed. Gathering and analyzing intel is very important when you don't know when they might be after you." He coughed before getting back on topic. "Anyway, while the reformists are lying low, the problem is the radicals. That said, I suspect they would hesitate, too."

"Why do you think that?" Sakura asked.

Rosei shrugged. "We crushed the head of the biggest reformist organization. Every insurgent should know by now that they don't stand a chance against us without the appropriate firepower. It'd be safer for us to stay together. Although...if there's an organization with Misuzu Henderson's access to weapons, and they shoot their shot... We might not make it..."

Rosei avoided specifying a missile strike out of consideration for Nadeshiko.

"Well, yeah... We couldn't do anything at that point."

"The fact is still that the insurgents will be on high alert. Any objections?"

"..." Sakura kept quiet for a while. "No objections... But I have concerns," she said. "If we're all going there, along with finding and securing Summer, I would like to solve the Dark Wolf mystery... What do you all think about that, honestly? Let me know your thoughts—what you think it is, what you think is best for us to do about it. Spring has a few of our own."

Sakura mustered the courage to ask while still holding Hinagiku's hand.

This incident was full of complications. First, the Dark Wolf had appeared in Ryugu. As people talked about it, the possibility of Spring's absence altering the environment came up. This ended up giving birth to the divine punishment theory.

The theory had evolved beyond the Dark Wolf mystery and caused controversy in the Four Seasons space. It heated up the opposition between conservatives (Doyen Turtle) and progressives (Maverick Rabbit Horn). The spread of the theory made people come out in public about their displeasure with the current generation of Agents.

Just the other day, people plotting to replace the Agent of Spring had

gathered in the Town of Spring.

Hinagiku Kayo's half brother, Zansetsu Kayo, suggested all Agents temporarily leave their Towns, but they were unable to reach Summer.

The two Agents of Summer had just finished their seasonal journey and were most at risk of getting killed. Spring's long absence had caused arguing, criticism, and opposition that led to violence.

Spring's reputation was damaged, and they had endangered the other seasons. Sakura wanted to know what they really thought, good and bad.

Thankfully, Autumn and Winter immediately denied Spring had any responsibility.

Hinagiku and Sakura looked at each other in relief; the sight of it made Rosei's chest hurt.

I have to protect them from everything.

And in order to do that, they had to solve the Dark Wolf mystery, as Sakura said.

Rosei decided to state his view of the case. "These are just my personal thoughts, but...I don't think the Dark Wolf has anything to do with Spring's absence. There have been anomalies in the environment across Yamato over these ten years, but how does it relate to this wolf? The animal doesn't even exist in Yamato."

Everyone present thought the same.

Although wolves could be found on other continents, they were extinct in Yamato. Would environmental changes really bring one to Ryugu?

"It's understandable that it came up in conversation, since the Environmental Protection Agency was present. Meetings like this are meant to consider all possibilities. The Archer of Twilight was attacked, at his sacred area. It makes sense that the influence of the Agents of the Four Seasons would come to mind when it affects another god. But it should've been just one of many possibilities."

Rosei crossed his arms. He frowned, getting more and more annoyed as he

talked.

“Any idiot would realize the most reasonable explanation is that it escaped from somewhere. Just think about it. Maybe it’d make sense if the gap had been thirty or forty years long... But you think a decade is enough to bring wolves back to Mount Ryugu? That’s the southernmost part of the country. And I was keeping Yamato in winter while spring was gone. If anything, the environmental destruction that could’ve happened in Ryugu would be the *extinction* of animals due to the cold.”

Rosei turned to look at Itecho, who agreed right away.

“Yes. They’re forcing the logic.”

Itecho was fed up with the argument, too. His face soured.

“And what you just said should have come up. The theories surrounding the Dark Wolf mystery have no veracity whatsoever. The real reason will remain unknown until we investigate the place; we can be sure that the rumors are just Doyen Turtle’s supporters trying to ruin the Agents’ reputations.”

Rindo and Nadeshiko also nodded.

Sakura thought for a moment with a growl. “I’m going to say something stupid now. Don’t make fun of me, okay? I just want to make sure there are no remaining arguments against Spring. There are wolves that can stand the cold, but not the heat. Couldn’t it be that kind?”

Rosei sighed.

“...I mean, I’ll deny it until you’re content, Sakura...but are you saying it was born because of the cold?”

“Yes. Let’s say it was that, and a few other things with miraculous odds...”

“And a cold-weather wolf popped up in Mount Ryugu after ten years? There’s been no similar reports elsewhere. I’d consider it if it were an animal that used to live on Mount Ryugu adapting to the environment, but there are no wolves in Yamato. What you said are just convenient excuses for the Agents’ critics. Let’s stop it. We’ll be here all day if we go down this path.”

Hinagiku interjected anxiously. “Hinagiku heard...that a lot...of people...think

that...the wolf...appeared...like magic...due to...divine...punishment. Maybe the...environment...doesn't really...have any...thing to do...with it."

Rosei realized that Spring was more hurt about this issue than he thought.

Hinagiku, too?

It was like a brainwashing technique—running them down so much that they started to think it might be true.

Rosei looked Hinagiku straight in the eye.

"Hina, that is just a theory that came out of the discussions around the environmental issues. If we accept it, then they can make everything out to be our fault. They're just saying that so they can break our alliance and turn us into puppets. Don't you realize, Hina?"

"But you're...not at...fault. It's all...Hinagiku's...fault."

"You think that the Gods of the Four Seasons are mad that you were missing for ten years, and they messed the ecosystem up and made the Dark Wolf attack the Archer of Twilight because of it? Why wouldn't they punish you more directly? Why even involve Twilight?"

"The Lord... Archer shoots...his arrow...in Mount...Ryugu. The Agents...also manifest...the season...there. Maybe the...Lord Archer...just got...caught in...the middle, but it's...really because...of spring's...absence that...bad things are...happening? Maybe we just...don't know yet...and there's more...strange...things...happening...in other...places. We just...happened to...find out about...this. Maybe the...gods are...mad at...Hinagiku and...decided to punish...everyone el—"

Rosei cut Hinagiku off.

"Listen to me. I've been doing this the longest of everyone here. The gods are not interested in us."

Hinagiku blinked. "Not...interested?"

"To put it harshly, yeah. We're just tools to them to keep the world turning. We can call any bad thing divine punishment, but it's all happening among humans. Not the gods' will."

Rosei had prayed to the gods enough that there was weight to his words.

“Whether we live or die, they won’t move a finger.”

Rosei had prayed for ten years to help Hinagiku. He begged them to kill him, too. But neither wish was granted.

“I can assure you the gods won’t punish us. Or help us.”

Unbeknownst to anyone, the girl who had saved the Town of Winter died.

Miracles didn’t happen. Rosei had kept on living as though trapped in a curse, dreaming of Hinagiku’s return. No one had saved her—she escaped by herself.

Their present was only achieved through their own hands, their own tears and blood and determination.

So Rosei was certain of this. While they were gods incarnate, no hand of God ever interfered.

“The gods are not punishing us. I’m positive.”

No one argued this time.

Everyone kept their thoughts to themselves.

Everyone felt they had argued enough, and the subject came to a close.

Now that it was decided everyone would go to Ryugu, there was much to do.

While they were getting ready to depart, Sakura went out to the hallway, phone in hand. She soon came back and called Itecho and Rindo.

“Itecho, Lord Azami.”

Itecho was in the middle of discussing security with Rindo.

“Can we talk right now?” Sakura asked. “I just told Lord Zansetsu about our

plans.”

Rindo turned to look at her, too.

“Long story short, he’s in.” Sakura glanced at Hinagiku.

She was having a pleasant talk with Rosei and Nadeshiko, and Sakura was glad to see it. Her voice lowered a little to keep the others from hearing.

“At first, he complained it was too dangerous, but in the end, he respected Lady Hinagiku’s desire to help Summer. He said to go to the Teishu airport. They’ll let us use the Agency jet.”

The Agents of Spring and Summer traveled from Ryugu to Enishi, and Autumn and Winter from Enishi to Ryugu, and the plane was one of their modes of transportation.

They mainly used cars for local travel, although they sometimes used public transit. They used airplanes anytime they had to cross the sea.

For that reason, the Four Seasons Agency had a private jet that they shared with all four of them. Despite the maintenance costs, they only used it once every few months, and it was better to avoid taking public flights in case the insurgents decided to try something.

As the Summer twins had finished their journey, the jet was on standby until Autumn’s turn came.

“We’re moving a lot of people this time—Agents, Guards, Winter’s escorts, and even Agency staff. The escorts and Agency staff will take civilian planes, and we’ll meet them at the airport. Sound okay? He said it’d be better for the Agents and Guards to take the private jet.”

Rindo agreed. “Yes. After all, the point is to have Spring, Autumn, and Winter moving together. I was just talking with Lord Kangetsu about the plane trip. There aren’t many seats open to move right away... Taking so many people at once would be difficult.”

Itecho thought for a while before agreeing as well. “Yeah. If we can use it, then good. It’s amazing he got the permission. Can we really take the jet on such short notice? It usually takes more time to make the request and get the

plane in order... I guess the Kayo heir has his connections?"

Sakura answered hesitatingly. "No idea. There's a lot we don't know about him... So, Itecho, did you get to relay the notice that the Agents of the Four Seasons will be going to Ryugu to look for the missing Agents of Summer?"

"Not really... I'll talk to the Agency staff from Winter guarding the hotel right now. They'll try to stop us, but they have no persuasive or physical power to make the Four Seasons Alliance stay here. They've already been betrayed by Ishihara. Not to mention it was us who saved the Agency building from blowing up. They've got no leg to stand on after so many of their people have been arrested already."

Itecho made a pause before continuing with less certainty.

"But...there are some who genuinely want to help. Most of them do, actually... I don't want them to lose their jobs, so we'll have them come with us. They'll have to report back to the Agency, the information will be passed along immediately, and that'll be enough. If they come out and show their true colors as we go on ahead, then that's good, too. Do you agree, Azami?"

"Yes. There's a lot of internal conflict within the Agency. It's true we have allies in there...but sadly, we can't tell who they are. We had Nagatsuki. So it's better we keep them at a distance. Nadeshiko and I can stay in Ryugu up until right before Risshu. After that, we'll have to go on our manifestation, so hopefully this fight doesn't go on for too long."

"Right. We'll ignore all the Towns and deal with the Agency like that," Sakura said. "Lord Zansetsu also said there was no need for us to get permission from the Towns and the Agency like back in spring. We have a good reason to go to Ryugu, and whoever tries to stop us does not. We'll just tell them to come along if they're so worried, and wait for Doyen Turtle and their supporters to make their move."

Itecho furrowed his brow at Sakura's enthusiasm. "...It's like the Kayo heir is your boss or something."

Sakura chuckled. "Maybe. My only master is Lady Hinagiku...but Lord Zansetsu is a big source of support. Perhaps the relationship is close to that. He leaves me to deal with what I can, and he notices what I need to help me out. He's a

pretty nice boss.”

“I see...”

Itecho felt conflicted about it as Sakura continued:

“Also, it seems Lord Zansetsu will leave before us. I want to go thank him and see him off. May I leave the room for ten minutes? I can let you take care of Lady Hinagiku now...”

“Mind if I go greet him, too?” Rindo said. “I would like to thank him personally, considering he’s helping Autumn, too.”

Autumn couldn’t participate in yesterday’s meeting. Rindo had only heard about Zansetsu from other people, so of course he wanted to see the man who would be helping them in the future.

Itecho said yes and the two of them left.

Rindo and Sakura came back half an hour later.

That was longer than expected. Itecho was about to ask if they had a lively conversation, but he refrained.

“Sorry we’re late, Itecho...”

“Was there any problem in the meanwhile, Lord Kangetsu?”

Something had definitely happened. Sakura, in particular, was so red Itecho wondered if she suddenly had a fever.

She looked away the moment her eyes met Itecho’s.

“What’s wrong, Sakura?” Itecho reached out to her, but she darted behind Rindo.

“N-nothing!”

The rejection hurt him a little.

Rindo smiled awkwardly. “...Lady Himedaka, hiding behind me doesn’t exactly

make your case...”

“What happened, really?”

Itecho received no answer.

If they were being this tight-lipped, it had to be difficult to talk about.

Itecho took both of them out to the hallway.

Did they argue or something?

He worried Zansetsu had dropped his support or gotten angry with the Guards, but it didn't seem like that kind of issue.

“Sakura, Azami, let's find somewhere to talk.”

They walked for a while and, once the three of them were alone, Sakura faltered as she tried to explain.

“Y-you see, Itecho... It's not something I should tell you... It'd only trouble you.”

“Sakura...you can't say that while you're making that face. Clearly something happened. Tell me if you're worried.”

“...”

“Please. I can't help you if you don't tell me...”

Sakura seemed to be moved by his kindness, but she bit her lip and muttered. “But...it makes no sense to tell you...”

She kept her glance low, unable to look at Itecho.

“Lord Azami... What should I do...?”

“Huh?! You're asking me?!” Rindo was flustered. “Uh... I can't say anything. I shouldn't have heard any of it to begin with...”

“Don't say that! You have more experience than I do!”

“Who do you take me for? Just tell him. He'll be in contact with Mr. Zansetsu hereafter, so it'd be better for him to know so he can be considerate.”

“Considerate about what...?”

“About giving them some time alone or something?” Rindo said.

“N-n-n-no!” Sakura got teary-eyed. It was rare to see her so flustered.

“Time...alone?” Itecho got a bad feeling about this; it sounded like a loud cracking in his mind.

“Come on, you’re making him worry.” Rindo slowly revealed more details, not knowing how Itecho felt as he listened. “You two are like mentor and apprentice, right? I think he’d be a better counselor than me. And he’ll find out soon anyway.”

A sound like branches splitting apart.

“I mean, he said it out loud while I was present.”

It was loud, and irritating, and echoing.

“And he’ll be making a play for you in front of everyone else eventually...”

The sound of something dear breaking.

“They often tell me I’m dense, but even I could tell.”

Like wind blowing away the cherry blossoms on that branch.

“Sakura...?”

She blinked awkwardly as she said, “Um... Lord Zansetsu said he’ll support...”

The thing he’d protected dearly in his heart was cruelly broken apart.

“Support what...? You...?”

The cherry blossom tree.

The cherry blossom tree that had been living there ever since he’d met this girl.

“I can support you. If you need anything...”

“But you’re from the Town of Winter. Support in the Town of Spring...I’m a black sheep in the Town. I’m a Himedaka, but the family ignores me. There’s no guarantee that there won’t be pressure again to get me to quit as Lady Hinagiku’s Guard...”

“How does that...connect to his making a play?”

He saw a hand snapping a branch of that tree.

“...Lord Zansetsu asked me to be his fiancée so he could protect me officially.”

Flower thief, Itecho thought.

It meant more or less how it sounded—someone who broke off a branch on their way back from flower viewing.

Or one who encroached on something precious someone else tried to protect.

The moment he looked away, the girl he cherished the most was being taken away from him.

She was no longer a child.

So quickly?

He wasn't unaware of it, but he hadn't really thought the time was coming.

Why?

More people would appear in the future, bewitched by the beauty of the cherry blossoms. Itecho simply wasn't prepared.

We only just met again.

The first flower thief had shown up. Itecho's feelings didn't matter.

We hadn't yet...

And on top of it, the cherry blossom tree was thinking of accepting it.

Sakura's voice trembled as she spoke. “It's true that being the Kayo heir's fiancée would be a strong position...” She shot a questioning glance at Itecho. “But I'm not up to that, am I? I'm not enough for him...or marriage in general...”

Itecho clenched his fist at the sound of that.

“Just looking at the facts, it's not a bad idea, and that's what's troublesome about it,” Rindo said. “Marrying your lady's brother would solidify your

standing. You would become family with Lady Kayo. It's all up to what you feel, Lady Himedaka..."

Rindo was evasive in giving his actual opinion, but he wanted her to give it due consideration.

"I don't think I have much of a choice..."

"That's not true. Nobody's forcing you, so think carefully about it. Even if it is for your lady's sake, do you want to choose your marriage for purely practical reasons?"

"But that's what every descendant of the Four Seasons does, isn't it? Actually, I'm amazed that he would be okay with me as his wife. He should have plenty of other options..."

"You think too little of yourself... Wouldn't it mean that he chose you over anyone else? Lord Kangetsu, say something to her. If you don't...she'll just get married because he said so. She's still young; it's too soon for her... Her life is just beginning..." Rindo urged.

Itecho finally forced himself to speak. "...You didn't say no right away?"

Sakura reacted like a scolded kitten. "...No."

"What did he say?"

"That he'd wait... That he's in no hurry... That he wants me to think about it..."

"And you...want to say yes?"

Why did I think I had more time?

Sakura set her feelings aside and stated the objective facts.

"...I think it would be the best for Lady Hinagiku's sake..."

Itecho heard the branch snap. The cherry blossoms were gone.



Why was I chosen to be the goddess?

I asked many people that question when I was little.

Mom said:

"Because your smile shines bright like the summer sun."

Dad said:

"Because you're cheery and bright, perfect for being the girl of summer."

Someone from the Agency said:

"It is the will of the God of Summer. You happened to have the appropriate talent."

A higher-up in the Town said:

"Poor thing... You are a noble sacrifice."

One of my birds said:

"It'll keep going until you die. It's over if you die."

Nobody gave me a reason I could accept.

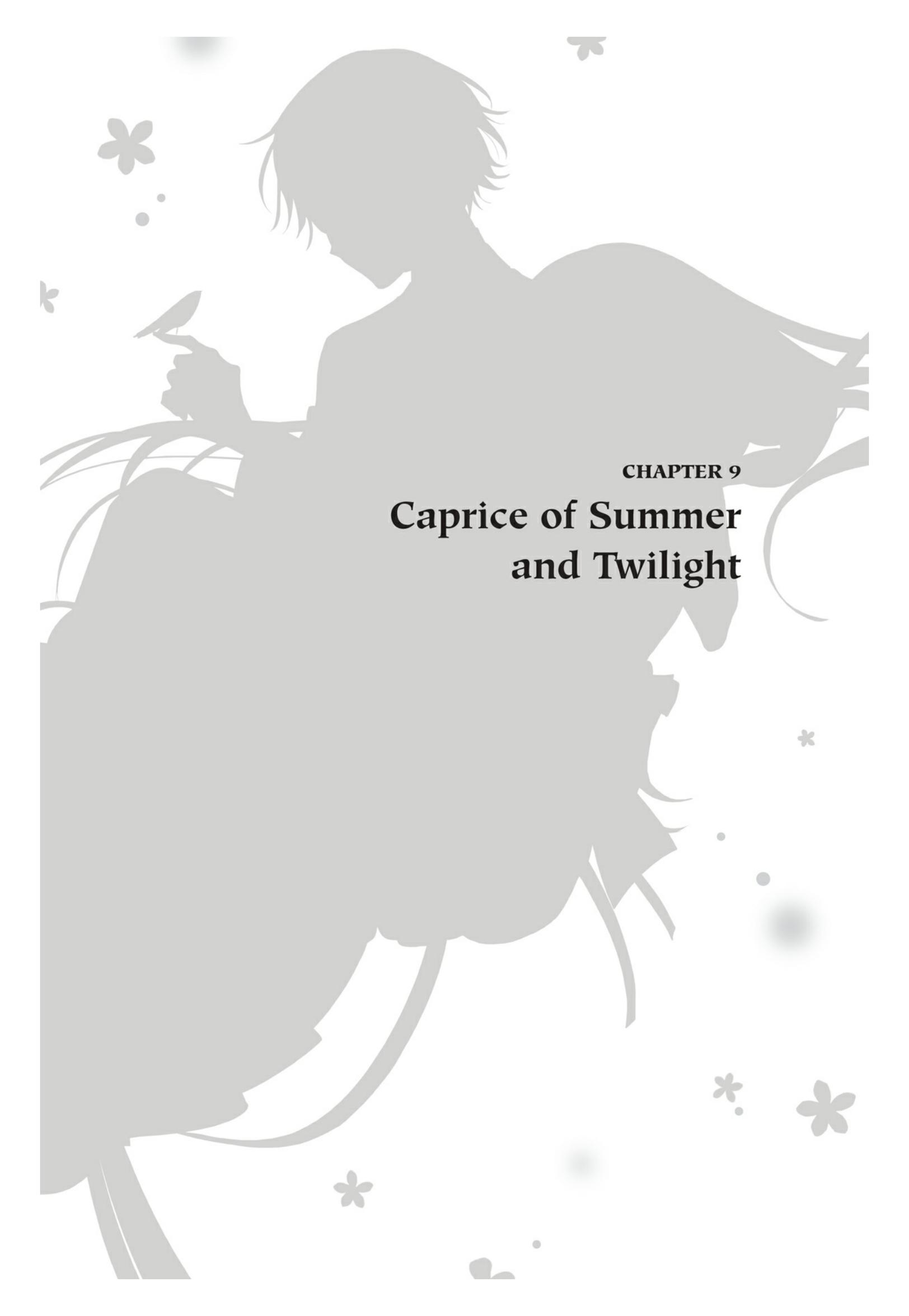
In the end, I asked Ayame.

"Sis, why was I chosen as goddess?"

Ayame looked down in sadness, then whispered, *"I'm sorry."*

That was when I knew the pain would not end until my life did.

But I wanted to strike back against fate, just once.



CHAPTER 9
**Caprice of Summer
and Twilight**

As Spring, Autumn, and Winter decided to go to Ryugu, the Hazakura sisters had already set foot on the southern island.

Let us go over their actions first.

Ruri Hazakura decided to solve the Dark Wolf mystery in order to clear the Agents' names, unaware that the suggestion had come from someone pretending to be Rindo Azami.

Immediately after the call, she gathered the bare essentials, headed to Ayame's room, and explained everything to convince her to go to Ryugu together.

Ayame, still heartbroken, did not respond.

It hadn't been long since she asked to be left alone.

Why couldn't Ruri do as she said?

Ayame had lost all will, as though her soul had been sucked right out of her.

She remained stubbornly silent.

"Since you're not saying no, I'll take that as a yes. I'll grab your stuff."

And Ruri did exactly that.

She had her birds brush Ayame's hair, spread on the floor, and her puppies grab her dress from her closet.

"Let's get you changed."

Ayame felt like a baby as she powerlessly let herself be changed. Perhaps she was one, in spirit.

She had been plunged into despair, devoid of all will, unable to move. She needed the same care as an infant just to stay alive.

Ayame would have already intervened had she been her usual self.

But the only thing she could do now was watch Ruri do everything.

“Ruri... What are you doing?” Ayame asked like a child, and Ruri nearly broke into tears for a moment, before smiling back at her.

“You don’t worry about anything!”

“Anything...?”

“Anything. I’ll take care of all of it. Sorry, I just can’t leave you here... I’ll drag you out, but don’t you worry.”

Meanwhile, it looked as though Ruri had strengthened her spirit.

“I’ll protect you, Ayame.”

They were runaways.

They were leaving in the middle of the day and had to go out before anyone could stop them. Ruri dragged limp Ayame out of the mansion.

Normally, someone would have come after them right away, but it had been days since both of them shut themselves in their rooms. Everyone was leaving them alone. Their depression worked in their favor.

“Ruri, seriously, what are you doing...?”

Ruri tried to quell Ayame’s fear. *“Just leave it to me! It’ll be better than what we’ve been doing these days, that’s for sure! Just get on the bike, please!”*

“We can’t ride double...”

“Laws don’t apply in emergencies!”

“Yes, they do.”

But they both got on the bike and successfully sneaked out of the town.

Ruri’s inability to drive worked against them.

“...Um, are we leaving the Town...?”

“We’re going somewhere we can take a taxi! You just hang on to me! Trust me!”

After a few hours of desperate cycling, they finally arrived at a public road. The wind brushed her face as they moved through the summer forest, her little sister’s back drenched in sweat, and the outside landscape glittering under the

sun flashed past them.

“Ruri... Am I dreaming?”

She had never experienced something like this—letting her sister take the lead.

“If that makes you feel better, you can think so.”

“...Wow. Ruri... We can leave home together...”

“What’re you talking about now? Gosh... I’m drenched... My legs are on fire... But I already called a taxi... Ugh... It hurts so much, though.”

Money took care of things after that, as they departed to the Iyo airport.

“...This is a dream, isn’t it?”

“Sis... I’m sorry... I’m just so tired... I’ll pass out during the flight... Be a good girl, okay?”

Then, they arrived at Ryugu.

Ayame experienced it all like a dream.

Although she was moving her body, she felt like she was just being carried around, transported from place to place until they got to Ryugu. She didn’t start to wake up until she saw the blue sky beyond the window of the plane.

But it was already too late.

Her sister was already taking her to the southern island.

So we arrive at the afternoon of July 23. The Hazakura sisters stayed at a resort hotel in Ryugu.

They could get to the top of the mountain by the time the Archer of Twilight would be attacked if they began hiking Mount Ryugu right away. It was highly likely they would meet the Dark Wolf. Ruri was already preparing for their departure; Ayame simply watched. Their relationship had been turned on its head.

“ ... ”

Ayame grabbed her phone. She had missed a million calls from her parents. She turned off the location services and texted them she was all right, but she was worried if this was truly okay.

As she went back her text history, her finger came to a sudden stop. She saw Renri's last text.

“Things aren't looking good, but don't worry about me. You only worry about getting back home safely.”

It was back when the cancelation of their weddings was beginning to feel real, but not for certain.

It felt like such a long time ago, tears began to form in her eyes. She could hear the words in Renri's voice. She could feel the scar of his absence on her chest.

Renri.

What was he doing now? Had he given up on her? Was he looking for a new partner already?

Does he hate me?

She'd strung him along, and now he would be known as the ex-fiancé of one of the cursed twins. He probably resented her now.

Please, no. I don't want him to hate me.

Just thinking about him made a tear roll down her cheek.

“It's okay, Ayame.” Ruri had finished preparing for the hike and came up to her and patted her head. “Your situation with Renri might change if we solve the Dark Wolf mystery. That's exactly what I'm hoping for, actually... Let's show them we're not cursed. Let's rub that nasty Townchief's face in it.”

“ ... ”

“And not just for ourselves. We can help Lady Hinagiku.”

“...Lady Kayo.”

Right. Ayame remembered she and her sister weren't the only ones going

through all this.

Ruri softly explained her plan. “We’ll deal with the Dark Wolf making trouble in Mount Ryugu. We’ll talk to it and ask why it’s doing all that, and we’ll find out if this really happened because we didn’t have spring.”

“If we solve it...they’ll stop criticizing everyone else...?”

The divine punishment theory plagued them in many ways. Hinagiku’s beloved Guard Sakura must’ve hurt, too. What could be better than helping them as well?

“Yes! At the very least, that’s what Lord Rindo thinks. He told me to go to Ryugu.”

Rindo’s advice had become her source of energy.

Summer and Autumn had become close ever since spring. Rindo Azami had become a friend and brother-like figure to Ruri and Ayame.

“...”

But now that her mind was coming back to life, Ayame had her suspicions. “... That’s strange. He’s so cautious and always tries to keep everyone out of danger, but now he tells us to do this? I mean, maybe with escorts...but just the two of us...?”

“Huh? But that’s because it’d help everyone! We can save the reputations of the Agents...”

“...But it’s too reckless... It would be better if we got help officially from all places instead. I’m pretty sure Lord Azami would understand that...”

“...” Ruri grumbled as she pondered Ayame’s comment. “I mean, yeah, when he called me, I thought he sounded a bit weird... Like his way of talking wasn’t very like him—almost too gung-ho? I’m not sure how to put it... But that’s not too weird, right? I mean, Autumn is in a bad position, too, and...because of us. We’re the only ones who can do this, so I just guess that’s what had him so eager... And, like, knowing him, he probably wants to save Nadeshiko’s reputation. It’s not the most typical for him, but everybody acts weird under pressure, right?”

Ayame had just experienced it herself, when Ruri dragged her all the way to Ryugu.

Still, something's off.

The Rindo Azami she knew would never want a girl, even one with the powers of a god, to throw herself into danger. He was a retainer of one himself, after all.

He even excluded them from the group to infiltrate New Year's base. He'd asked them to stay somewhere safe. Once the fight broke out, the Hazakura sisters moved to save Nadeshiko, but that wasn't what Rindo wanted.

Rindo Azami always tried to protect women and children.

The man she knew, even if he suggested going to Ryugu, would absolutely have come with them.

But it makes sense that he would also want help.

The situation had to be wearing him down, too. As Ruri pointed out, it wasn't that strange for him to worry about his lady. He would want help from anyone he could get.

Ayame convinced herself before changing the subject. "Ruri, have the other Agents called you?"

"No. I haven't, either, since it'd be awkward... I think everyone feels the same."

"...Yeah."

"Wanna try calling someone? Lord Rindo sent me a text asking how we were."

"He sent me one, too...," said Ayame. "Hey, mind if I text Lady Himedaka and Lord Kangetsu? I think we might be rushing into this, and they'll help us make the right decision. We have to tell them what we're doing. It could end up affecting them... Which means they could also give us some pointers."

Ruri imagined Sakura and Itecho. Indeed, Sakura would point out the dangers by taking Summer's perspective, and Itecho would tell them what they were missing from an objective point of view.

“All right. I don’t think they’d just get mad anyway. Tell me once they reply back.”

“Yes... But Lady Himedaka hasn’t answered the text I sent her a while ago. Maybe she won’t reply...”

“Really? Maybe she’s busy.”

Ayame shrugged, then slumped a little. “You think she hates us now...?”

“Wha?! N-no, I think she just has a lot on her plate. Spring would be under fire the most...”

“Yes... Maybe she’s just worried and keeping a distance for a while.”

“Yeah, and in the worst case, we could just go see them and problem solved. They wouldn’t avoid us for no reason... Or at least, that’s what I want to believe...”

“And our trip to Mount Ryugu will also lift a little of their burden, too...”

Will we be safe on the way?

Ayame began worrying about their security. “Ruri. I don’t have a gun or a sword. It’s my job to protect you, but...”

“Don’t worry. We got the bugs and the animals. They’ll all protect us. And you can do it, too...since you’re also the Agent of Summer now...”

“...”

“And don’t forget—you’ve got me.”

Ayame kept quiet for a while before nodding with determination. “Yeah. I’ll be okay so long as I’m with you...”

Ruri grinned, then offered her hand to Ayame. “Let’s go, then. The Town will be after us anytime. We gotta do what we can before they catch up. And don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything. I’ll protect you. Promise.”

Ruri’s assertion was comforting.

She always worries about me.

Ruri was like a blinding light.

Meanwhile, I'm always running.

Ruri's shine always stabbed her heart with guilt.

I'm sorry.

Ayame grabbed Ruri's hand and held it tight.

She was reminded of how she had to protect her sister—her sin.

After that, the Hazakura sisters took a taxi to the foot of Mount Ryugu.

The taxi driver told them that Mount Ryugu was closed, so they could only get so close to it.

Ruri wore an innocent smile as she replied, *"We're only taking a few pictures of the mountain before going back."*

He said National Security had been deployed to the mountain, but they didn't mind. The driver sighed and finally accepted the ride.

He figured National Security would scare the two young girls away anyway.

As they arrived at the foot of Mount Ryugu, they saw National Security guarding the place, just as the driver said. A tiny NO TRESPASSING sign and rope tied from tree to tree closed off the path. It was no intricate security net, but the public was forbidden from entering, with the hunters' association being the only exception.

A few apparent journalists were wandering around the trailhead, and a young man was questioning the National Security guards.

"Ruri, we can't get close," said Ayame.

"Yeah, let's go around them."

The girls realized it would be impossible to go up from there, so they asked the birds and insects around them to find another route.

As they followed the birds' guidance, they eventually found their way to the mountain trail.

They took a big detour, but thankfully, National Security's guards weren't on the mountain itself. They had no need to sneak around anymore, so they simply walked up the path.

On the way, they got a few animals to find information, and they relayed where the Archer of Twilight shot his arrow.

Apparently his "sacred zone" was by the ninth level.

"Ayame, over here!"

After a while, they saw the quiet Ryugu Shrine.

There was nobody around, the place apparently closed off as well.

"It's been a couple months," said Ruri. "Every year we would rest here after the manifestation... It feels weird not to have the priest and priestesses around."

Ayame nodded. Ryugu Shrine was a familiar place for the Agents of the Four Seasons.

It was tradition to bring about the season near this place.

"Ruri, should we do the Life Operation ritual? I didn't find many creatures on the way, so maybe we should summon some. There's too much we don't know."

"Yeah. I was just thinking about it."

"We also need more allies for when we face the Dark Wolf."

Ruri nodded and took her fan out of her bag—this was the focus for her divine powers.

It was not an essential tool, but holding it naturally approached one to the gods' state of mind, so many Agents throughout history had their own. Ruri had also brought Ayame's.

"Hey, I...I've been wanting to say this for a while, but... It's, um, pretty amazing getting to dance together as sisters, huh?" Ruri immediately realized what she'd just said.

Maybe I shouldn't have said that.

It was a sensitive topic for Ayame.

They hadn't had a proper talk about them being twin gods yet.

Summer had arrived right after the ordeal in spring. They'd talked with the Four Seasons Agency and the Town and decided they had to go on their journey across Yamato together.

Ruri's death had ruined Ayame's life.

That was shameless of me to say.

If they were normal sisters, then maybe it would have been great.

But we're not.

She could've just kept her mouth shut. Now she regretted it.

"U-um, I didn't mean anything by that... It's just that I like dancing with you, Ayame...," Ruri faltered. "I also like singing."

Her voice lowered in volume; she was afraid to offend Ayame further.

"It's just... I just really love it, that's all. But I shouldn't have said that... I'm sorry."

I'm sorry for loving you.

Ruri wanted to cry. Everyone always said it was good to love and be loved, but Ruri's love only hurt people.

If only she could've loved her sister more peacefully.

When she loved someone, she loved both light and dark. She wanted everything. She wanted to be together with them forever. That was how she was.

But the love of a goddess was too much for any normal human. Ayame only could handle it, because she was family.

"I'm sorry."

In the end, Ruri just smiled and hoped for the moment to pass. She was ashamed, and she wanted something, anything to hide her foolishness.

"I'm sorry, Sis."

She couldn't love correctly, like other people did.

She didn't know how much to give, so she ended up giving all of it.

And for that, she usually ended up being hated. Ruri was ashamed of that side of herself.

"...Ruri."

The wind blew between them.

They were identical outside, yet opposite inside. And so much of their worries began with the system of the gods. The role of an Agent was too heavy for a human.

Ahhh, I really shouldn't have said that, Ruri thought, but then Ayame whispered softly.

"I do, too..." Ayame nodded, partly to herself. "...I love dancing with you."

There was no shred of hatred or rejection as Ruri feared.

"Dancing with you feels wonderful, like it should've been this way all along."

Only quiet love. The summer wind brushed across Ayame's smile.

Ruri's lips trembled, like when she had been talking to Rindo on the phone.

"You're lying..." The words tumbled out of her mouth.

"Why? I'm even more dedicated to dance lessons than you are."

"I mean, yeah, but..." *Even when it's with me?*, she wanted to ask. "You really do...?"

She wanted it to be true, but what if Ayame was just playing along with her whims? Ruri couldn't help suspecting Ayame was only trying not to hurt her.

"Really. I mean, we're always in sync. Remember how the teacher applauded us? We get better every time we practice..." Ayame smiled shyly. No hint of a lie.

"You just like dancing..."

"I do like dancing, but I especially love dancing with you. Don't you?"

Ruri was shocked by how easily Ayame had asked it back. This was a very

deep question for her.

“Yeah... I-I’m good at singing, but not very good at dancing... But I’ve been messing up less since I began dancing with you... I didn’t like it before, but now I do...”

But what she really wanted to say was this:

Do you really still love me even though you sacrificed your life for me?

That question could never leave her lips. Everything would end if it did.

Ayame seemed to understand her thinking, or perhaps she simply wanted to state the facts—her expression remained calm.

“Of course. Just look at how great we are. I think it’s normal that you’d enjoy it,” she agreed with a soft smile. “I love you, Ruri.”

Ruri nearly gasped.

“I love dancing with you. I love doing anything with you, really.”

It was like they were children again.

Ayame had no idea how much solace her sincere love had brought Ruri.

Ruri never liked being alone. She always wanted to be with Ayame, no matter what she did.

Even for things she had to do on her own, most of the time, she had Ayame to motivate her—Ruri always wanted to make her happy or surprise her. It was a long time before she realized always being together could suffocate Ayame.

No matter how much she loved her, how close they were, she should never think of her as an extension of herself.

“...Okay, Sis.”

It wasn’t until after meeting the Agent of Spring that she was able to accept it.

The question of why her love could be suffocating shook her to her core.

She was learning how to act for other people, albeit in a hugely roundabout way.

“Let’s have fun. After all, the Agents’ power comes from the heart.” Ayame

took her fan from Ruri's hand and addressed the birds and the insects looking curiously at them. "Dear audience."

She wore a bewitching smile.

"You are very lucky to see the twin Agents of Summer dance."

Her words had power; the trees rustled, and the hidden inhabitants of the mountain appeared before the dance even begun. Ruri was a little taken aback by the curious audience.

Ayame giggled at her reaction.

"I never would've thought you'd call them the audience!" Ruri exclaimed.

"I mean, that's basically what they are. We must put on a show for them so we can get them to work. And we need the biggest audience we can to have the biggest reach."

"You're acting weird!"

"...I'm just feeling lighter after you dragged me all the way here." Ayame was smiling serenely, and Ruri's heart felt full.

"What can I say! I'm good at dragging people around!"

"Thank you. Really... Thank you. Hey, so since we're entering the God of Twilight's sacred zone, how about we sing a song about the moon for him?" Ayame pointed at the white shape high over the sea at midday.

"All right! Let's do it! It's a hard one though—you got this?"

"Don't worry. I like that song."

Ayame snapped her fan open and closed without doing a choreography check.

Was I chosen by mistake? Ruri wondered. The question came from pure curiosity, not from a place of envy or inferiority.

Ayame learned so quickly; she had better basics.

I would have been Ayame's Guard instead.

It wasn't hard to imagine how their lives would've been. Ruri thought about

dragging crying Ayame from Iyo all the way to Ryugu. It took a lot of effort. Surely Ayame would've been an easier goddess to take care of than herself, but supporting someone wasn't as easy as it sounded. The experience had shown her the weight of the responsibility, and she silently thanked her sister.

You always protected me. I know for sure how much you love me.

Her constant worry was calmer now, like still water. Ruri looked at Ayame.

Ayame nodded back at her, and Ruri knew they could dance with confidence.

With a one, two, three, they moved in tandem.

The two goddesses stepped and jumped and twirled at the same time. The bells on the fans joined them with elegant ringing.

“Cast off into the summer night and sail up and up to the sky canopy.”

Their song spread around them, and the birds, the insects, the air itself watched their dance with bated breath.

“The moon is cool in summer, the children say; dance, applaud.”

Everyone and everything was captivated by the goddesses.

“The stars are cool in summer, the moon rabbits laugh; sing, bellow.”

Life Operation was the power of the Agent of Summer. The power to subdue all creatures.

“Take the Flame Emperor’s oar and paddle starward to Antares.”

The song and dance made all who watched realize...

“Grab the Cloud Dragon’s tail and fly into the firmament.”

...that these two surpassed the logic of the world, with the power to master any and all.

“Blue sky of Spring, vast sky of Summer, sharp sky of Autumn, tall sky of Winter.”

A fleeting glance, and nature would submit.

“Lift thine eyes and rise, for we dance on this boat; let the melody echo, let the ovation resound.”

So disoriented they welcomed subjugation.

“The summer banquet waits for none.”

All life fell head over heels for them.



The angels descended upon the earth and shut their fans in synchrony.

The sound of the bell echoed. The scene at the end of the dance was one befitting the holders of Life Operation.

Birds of all colors, as is typical of a warm place like Ryugu, circled in adoration around them, and the animals applauded with their varying cries. The bears and other beasts knelt before the two goddesses.

It was as though every animal in the mountain had lined up to hear their orders.

There was no prey or predator here; there was no food chain in this army. They were all equally Summer's familiars. The sisters looked at each other with a smile.

"Wow! We're amazing!" Ruri threw her arms around Ayame, and Ayame giggled.

"Yeah, we could definitely overthrow a country with these powers."

"Good idea!"

"I'm joking. Anyway...I've seen you use Life Operation for a while now, but you've never summoned this many creatures... Too bad the Dark Wolf isn't among them. We've got quite a party here; maybe it's shy."

"Mmm...I think some guys are just easier to tame than others."

"Oh, right. Then maybe it just ignored us."

"Yup. But there's nothing to fear even if it shows up. I'm pretty confident we can tame that beast!"

"Good to hear. You're the veteran, so I'm counting on you."

"I gotcha!"

Ayame smiled at Ruri's pleasant confidence. Before this, Ayame would have told her little sister not to do anything reckless, but now she had genuine faith in her.

“Now, question! Raise a paw or a wing if you know the answer!”

“Don’t talk over each other, okay? We can’t listen to you otherwise.”

Ruri and Ayame cordially asked about the Archer of Twilight and learned all sorts of things.

According to the mountain critters, the Archer of Twilight was a man much older than them. The humans used to bring night in a pair, but now they went up the mountain in a big group.

There was an exclusive entrance to what they called the sacred zone, where they carried out the ritual.

The sisters received a lot of other data on the mountain, but what stood out more than the Archer was a mention of “something bad.”

The eerie descriptions left both Ruri and Ayame pale.

“There’s a bad thing among those going up the mountain.”

“Yes, it’s bad. Very bad.”

“It will die.”

“It will die, but it will do something before it does.”

“It’s been here for a while. The scary one is different.”

“Poor thing.”

“Poor thing. Doesn’t have friends.”

“No one wants to be friends with it.”

“There’s someone we’ve never seen before on the mountain. It’s waiting for something.”

“Give me water. Just a little bit.”

“There’s a lot of bad things. They’re looking at you now.”

“They look at you goddesses and the twilight.”

“Poor thing. But it will die. No big deal.”

Ruri was used to talking with the animals and ended up comparatively better than Ayame, who was feeling sick. The sisters decided to talk it out.

“So there’s a ‘baddie’ in the mountain. It might be too quick to assume it has something to do with all this... But do you think it does?” Ayame asked.

Ruri hummed in response. “I dunno. Conversations with animals tend to be more scattered than with humans, so we can’t trust them entirely.”

Ruri had been Agent of Summer for longer, so Ayame deferred to her.

“You mean they lie?” she asked

“No, I’m not sure how to put it... Imagine it’s like translating Yamatoan to a foreign language and then translating it back. We get a lot of mix-ups.”

“Oh... I get what you mean. The general idea is there, but you lose the finer nuances, right?”

“Yeah. But we know for sure that they’ve been seeing something.”

“And we’re not sure if it’s one or more... The data on the sacred zone sounds pretty reliable, though.”

“Let’s just head there first. We might bump into the Dark Wolf if we’re lucky.”

The two of them looked up at the top of the mountain. The sky was still blue. Night would come in a few hours. The Archer of Twilight might already be on the mountain.

“Yeah, let’s follow the path they told us.”

“Yup! Let’s go!” Ruri’s words echoed more strongly than usual in Ayame’s ears.

Meanwhile, on the same mountain.

Archer of Twilight Kaguya Fugeki and the Special Agent squad led by Tsukihi

Aragami went up the mountain on a different route than Ruri and Ayame.

Before the Dark Wolf incident, they would joke around on the way, but now the group was on constant high alert. A subordinate that had taken another path came back and murmured to Tsukihi's ear. She nodded and relayed the report to Kaguya.

"Lord Kaguya... Someone might have found this mountain trail," she said as they walked.

"How do you know?"

"There are rocks in unnatural places and scratches on the trees. Oh... Like that?"

Tsukihi pointed at a pile of rocks on the side of the trail.

They were difficult to spot, but landmarks were being left.

"You're right. I'm surprised you could tell... I come to this place every day and I didn't notice..."

"Only because you told me about your Custodian."

"..."

"You have no Custodian right now. Considering the effects his presence might have, it is easy to imagine something like this could happen in his absence."

"Who do you think put them here?"

"Well, the first thing that comes to mind would be the local hunters association."

"To keep track of the path?"

"Yes. It could also be a civilian. We have the mountain closed off, but it wouldn't be impossible to get around the checkpoint. There must be people who want to come on the mountain for a multitude of reasons—getting food, investigating, or even just for fun. We don't have the power and numbers to stop absolutely everyone who might get in, so someone reckless enough could find another route, like us. And these would mark their way. This isn't an official trail, and it is quite complicated, so it would be impossible to reach it again

without a landmark.”

“That sounds possible. A few years ago, we happened upon an old lady picking some herbs. Who knows how she got here...but Eken was able to conceal us. It was far away from the sacred zone, so she never saw the ritual.”

“If it’s a civilian, even in the worst case, we can take care of it through governmental channels.”

“Problem is if it’s not. We have to be wary of insurgents, of course. We don’t have to deal with anything like the Seasons, but there are some cults who are against night or day...”

“Yes, we will take out any insurgent who tries to hurt you. That is our biggest concern usually, but this time...”

Kaguya scowled. “It’s the Fugeki.”

Tsukihi nodded with a dour expression as well. “Yes... If you were right about the Dark Wolf, and they realized before us... It’s only natural they would be on the move to take control. They would likely try to get rid of him in secret. Depending on how things develop, Lord Kaguya...even if we must hand over Eken Fugeki to the authorities, you want to talk with him first, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“And I want to respect your wishes. However, as National Security is protecting you at the request of the Fugeki clan, we can’t attack them if a fight does break out.”

“So we’ve got no choice but to get a head start and check the truth, huh... Let’s wait on the report.”

“I agree. It would be better if you could lead the search.”

Kaguya instinctively let out a deep sigh. “...I wish I could go back to the peaceful times when I was just shooting the arrow...”

He meant it, and Tsukihi’s heart ached. She wished to do it for him.

There were a lot of parts moving where she couldn’t see, and it was becoming clearer by the day that the routine she’d recovered for him was crumbling away.

“Lord Kaguya...”

She tried to find the words to cheer him up, but before she could, he punched his own cheek.

“L-Lord Kaguya!”

The strike echoed in the silent mountain.

“Sorry,” she said. “I was losing it.”

“No, it’s... You’re bright red!”

“It’s okay. I needed it. I’ve been causing trouble to so many people, running away from my problems... I realize that. I can’t keep running forever. I want to protect your place to be. I will. I’m gonna do it... I’m doing this!”

Kaguya started walking faster.

Tsukihi felt a heat behind her eyes as she saw that tall, slightly curved back move forward.

A few months ago, she was the one fighting to stay at the god’s side.

He’s come so far.

Now he was doing the fighting. He was showing all the trust they had built across the seasons.

Even if they couldn’t stay together once this ended, she wanted to know she wouldn’t regret her actions one day.

“Lord Kaguya, wait. Don’t leave me behind.”

The words just came out of her mouth. Kaguya looked back and waved her on.

As they arrived at the sacred zone, a pleasant wind blew their sweat away.

There was no guarantee the Dark Wolf would attack today. But if it did, it was always after Kaguya brought night to Yamato.

It took advantage of the darkness to conceal itself, play its games with them, and then leave.

“It’s almost time.” Once he saw everyone ready, Kaguya took action.

It was about time for the sun to set.

Kaguya inhaled deeply, and motes of light danced around his body like a snow flurry.

Soon, an arrow of light took form, waiting for the archer to release it.

The sight was as mystic as always, elevating him to the level of a god.

Kaguya’s expression changed. “Tsukihi, it’s here.”

He didn’t know what took over his body, but he always informed Tsukihi when the time arrived.

Normally, he could shoot the arrow without the command, but he had accepted Tsukihi in the role of his Custodian.

“Take care of my body.”

He recognized her as someone he could trust with his unconscious self.

So Tsukihi gave the command with a great sense of pride and responsibility.

“Release!”

And the Archer of Twilight’s arrow flew into the blue sky.

The Archer of Dawn would have to tear apart the sky canopy next.

Tsukihi caught Kaguya as he lost consciousness from the burst of divine power.

She looked at the sky. She and her subordinates felt the same at this moment, as observers of the mystic.

Go.

Slash it.

Break it down.

They wanted this man's efforts as he sacrificed himself for everyone in Yamato to pay off.

The summer sky adorned with white clouds gradually donned the blue dress of twilight.

Every slice of the scenery seen from Mount Ryugu's sacred zone was beautiful.

The town at the foot of the mountain dyed in dusk. The cars driving down the roads. The people walking. The night's blessings were so natural that the masses received it without gratitude.

"...How'd it go?" Kaguya muttered as he finally opened his eyes.

Tsukihi turned to him. "Yes, it's a beautiful sunset, Lord Kaguya."

Kaguya rose to see the orange sky. "The moment of truth is coming... No changes to our strategy?"

"No. Everyone will equip night vision goggles before it comes. As planned, we will not be striking it down but pursuing and catching it. The guarding team and the pursuing team will split and act as soon as the Dark Wolf appears. Is that all right?"

"...Yeah."

"Don't worry," said Tsukihi. "I will protect you. I'm your shield now."

Kaguya smiled at the brave statement.

The group remained in the sacred zone, observing as the night darkened as always.

Tsukihi gave the order silently, and everyone but Kaguya put on the night vision goggles.

The sticky sensation of the wind under the strong sunlight was gone now as the breeze rustled the mountain trees. The world was about to be taken over by

twilight.

It's here.

Kaguya thought, although he wasn't fully certain. Still, he felt eyes on him. The sensation didn't strike him the first time the Dark Wolf appeared, but now he could more or less predict its emergence.

"Tsukihi, I think it's here," said Kaguya.

Tsukihi nodded. "I can sense something, too..."

She had a sharp, animal-like intuition, and she had sensed the same thing.

"We're being observed. And I sense hatred."

"Hatred?"

"Yes. Animosity, perhaps... No real intent to kill... But the hatred is clear."

"It should be directed at me."

Where's it looking from?

Kaguya had to unveil the face behind that glare tonight. He looked around.

Tsukihi's form blended into the darkness, but Kaguya's eyes were sharp at night.

Perhaps it was part of being the Archer of Twilight. For that same reason, he declined to use the night vision goggles.

I'd rather use my eyes.

Darkness didn't bring fear to him, but calm—it was his home.

So he was the first to spot it.

"Over there!"

He saw eyes gleam in the darkness.

"Let's move!" Tsukihi called, and her command was quickly followed.

There were eight people in the troop, including Tsukihi. Four of them moved to escort Kaguya, while the other four prepared to pursue.

The Dark Wolf had chased them around, but it had never tried inflicting lethal

wounds on them. It always vanished into the trees after toying with them.

That in mind, they moved in a formation that made it easy to hit and retreat, as well as to help anyone who needed it. The best one in a fight, Tsukihi, remained by Kaguya's side to protect him.

"Move! Move! Move!" Tsukihi took the lead as she rushed around the sacred zone surrounded by trees.

The escort team's role was to keep moving to make it easier for the pursuit team to catch it.

"Eken!" Kaguya yelled. "...Eken! Is that you?!"

The Dark Wolf showed clear reaction to the name, pausing in its attempt to bite a member of the pursuit team and looking at him.

It was a very human movement. This moment, as it stopped in its tracks, was the chance.

The pursuit team aimed a special-made net launcher at the Dark Wolf.

"Fire!" Tsukihi commanded.

The net shot into the air and spread.

It looked as though it had caught the Dark Wolf, but in a split second, it escaped capture and broke through the encirclement to escape.

It moved like a speeding bullet, and only a moment after it disappeared, it reappeared in an entirely different place.

The Dark Wolf leaped around—right, left, right, left—and it looked to be getting bigger and bigger. The ground began to shake every time it landed, knocking everyone off balance.

Kaguya was beginning to feel dizzy.

The sound of the wind blowing through the mountain got louder, too.

The rustle of the leaves was earsplitting. The Dark Wolf's world-defying roar was deafening. The fear dominated their every sense. The earthquake shook their hearts. Everything they saw, everything taking place was too unreal.

Ahhh.

Kaguya was certain.

It is you, Eken.

This was no wolf.

“Lord Kaguya, the Dark Wolf is growing! Are you seeing this?! And the ground...!”

Tsukihi and the rest shouted at Kaguya to make sure they weren't the only ones seeing this.

Kaguya shouted over the wind and earthquake. “Yes! We're all seeing the same illusion! It's not reality!”

“But it's so clear! It feels so real!”

It was impossible to believe right away. The Dark Wolf's childish, tantrum-like rampage was overwhelming. Anyone arguing it was only a dream would have their sanity questioned.

“I can even feel its breath on my skin!”

Kaguya nodded as he glared at the Dark Wolf roaring. “Eken's Divine Cloak can build fiction on reality! He could deceive the whole world!”

The face of the perpetrator came to Kaguya's mind.

“The Custodians get their power from the Gods of Dawn and Twilight! The power should be used only to hide my presence!”

Eken.

He never doubted Eken's respect. The man was like a son; Kaguya had thought he would climb the mountain with him forever.

But he had already thrown Kaguya away. They were not to see each other again in his life.

“His power is only meant to hide me and the sacred zone from the people...”

Eken had betrayed him. Eken had wounded him.

“But it comes from our bond as lord and retainer!”

But Kaguya never forgot him. He never stopped waiting.

“We’re not supposed to be linked anymore! And yet...!”

Eken, what happened?

“I never saw him use a power like this before! At most, he would conceal the path to the sacred zone and make people look away from me! Making up a wolf and doing all this is so far beyond—! If the Fugeki clan finds him, they’ll...!”

They’ll kill him!

“...Damn it!”

Eken, why? You’re no longer my Custodian. You ran away.

So why come back to hurt him again?

“Understood! We will change strategies! Pursuit team, look for any suspicious persons around!”

As Tsukihi commanded, the four people meant to catch the Dark Wolf changed directions and disappeared into the trees around the sacred zone. They moved swiftly thanks to the talk beforehand; if they had to react on the spot, they wouldn’t have been nearly as synchronized.

It was too fantastical to believe that the Dark Wolf was an illusion and that there was a caster somewhere else.

Fortunately, it helped that they were protecting Kaguya.

The troop observed the god incarnate’s miracles every day. If there was a god that brought night to the world, then it was not unthinkable that the warrior meant to protect him had a special power.

The remaining four kept protecting Kaguya and buying time.

“Lord Kaguya! Is there any way to stop the illusion other than capturing the caster?!” Tsukihi was beginning to look desperate.

“It won’t disappear until the caster dissolves it or loses consciousness! He must be within viewing distance! This takes concentration, so he can’t defend himself! Our only way is getting the pursuit team to find and smack him!”

“Understood! We’ll keep this up until the illusion stops! Will you be all right, Lord Kaguya?!”

“Yeah, I can run!”

“That’s not what I meant!”

What, then? Kaguya thought, before seeing her face and understanding. She was worried for his mind.

“...I’ll be okay!”

Tsukihi would take him away in the blink of an eye if he said anything else. He would lose the right to fight alongside her.

“Don’t worry about me!” Kaguya responded forcefully. He didn’t want to lose that right.

He couldn’t keep being tied to the people who hurt him in the past.

He already had others he wanted to cherish.

“Eken!”

His current guardian, Tsukihi, and the youngsters in her troop—he had to protect them.

They were his driving force now.

“Eken!!” he yelled as loud as he could. “What are you doing?! Stop it! Come out here!! You’re not getting away with this!”

He couldn’t tell whether the emotion boiling within him was anger or sadness. He only wanted to talk with the boy he couldn’t see. He wanted to tell him that he wasn’t going to just stand here and take this.

“I’ll let you talk! Just show your face if you’ve got something to say!”

One of the few people in Kaguya’s life, someone he once loved and cherished, was fighting him, and he decided he was furious.

“You want to kill me?!”

He wanted to scream it was *he* who smashed their peace.

“Then come and get me! You know better than anyone that you can’t!”

He couldn't escape in despair as he did in the past. No matter what, Kaguya had to stand tall as the Archer of Twilight.

"Stab me in the chest! Shoot me in the head! Whatever you want!"

Morning would come tomorrow. And he would bring the night.

"But if you put a finger on anyone else, you're dead!"

He lived solemnly to bring the night to the people of Yamato.

"Don't get normal people involved! Have some pride as a Custodian!"

Eken couldn't get away with this. He had maliciously disturbed the god incarnate and made them close the beloved mountain off to everyone else.

On top of that, he was now frightening the people Kaguya swore to protect.

"Didn't I teach you the strong should protect the weak?!"

The Dark Wolf roared as loud as it could, and everyone stepped back.

Along with the roar, a small voice echoed:

"Lord Kaguya."

A voice so sad, so swollen in anger as if it were about to burst.

"Eken..." Kaguya said. "Eken! Eken!"

Nobody else could tell, but Kaguya knew for sure it was the voice of the boy who had once guarded him.

"Eken! Come out here! Let's talk!" Kaguya spoke on instinct, but his plea was erased by the Dark Wolf's cries.

They had to catch him now that they were sure it was his Custodian, but first, they had to do something about the illusion.

A sacrifice was needed for the pursuit team to move around freely.

"Take aim!"

Tsukihi's subordinates swiftly held up their guns as Tsukihi commanded.

"Fire!!"

Everyone shot at the sky. Warning shots. This much was within the plans.

They hoped the noise would shock him enough to dissolve the illusion, but the Dark Wolf's rampaging was on another level today. It was as if he was sending his emotions out in a great wave.

He did not respond to Kaguya's pleas, either. He attacked the moment they fired, splitting the team, and the wolf's claws scratched one of them. The soldier let out a muffled scream and ran immediately. Kaguya pulled Tsukihi away while keeping an eye on the wounded. He saw blood.

Is that an illusion? Or is it real?

Had Eken launched a long-distance attack at the same time his illusion moved?

"What happens if the illusion does something worse than that, Lord Kaguya?!" Tsukihi asked as they ran.

"It would be deadly painful, for sure! The pain and wound would go away once the illusion vanishes, but the body still recognizes it! It could leave after-effects... Divine Cloak is no simple illusion; it affects all the senses! Your heart could stop if it bites you!" Kaguya yelled. This was a deadly serious matter. "So everyone run!"

The others gave up on attacking and retreated while shooting warning shots.

Tsukihi tried shooting the Dark Wolf, but it didn't seem to hit. The troop had tried attacking with no regard to harming the wolf before, but it always got away. There was no point anyway, as it was only an illusion. They had to find the caster. Defeating Eken Fugeki was the only way.

"But we have to buy time for the pursuit team!" she said. "How about we dart in, attack, and then dart out?! Making the illusion evade should put a burden on him!"

"It might work, but we shouldn't! Don't do anything that could put you at risk! I don't want to see you die from shock!"

Tsukihi shot him a combative glare, but Kaguya only yelled even louder.

“It’s your job to protect me, but it’s also my duty to protect the people, and that includes you! Don’t underestimate the gods’ powers!”

“But...!”

“You’ve only made it this long because he had some semblance of reason! He’s lost it now! Look! It’s getting even bigger!”

Indeed, the Dark Wolf was now far bigger than it once was.

Although they couldn’t be sure, as they only got quick glances of it while running, it looked double or even triple its original size. A regular wolf was about three feet long, but this one was already bigger than that—it was overwhelming.

The sacred zone was a flat, open space with nowhere to hide. The only place where they could flee was the trees—but the paths there were difficult to run through, and they would have to avoid both fallen trees and the wolf’s claws at a full run. If the Dark Wolf caught up to them, it could kill them with a bite. Could a human mind remain unscathed after seeing such an illusion?

Even if it wasn’t real, it could cause a heart attack. So Kaguya urged them to *run*.

The pursuit team showed no sign of returning. He had no idea where they were hiding, but probably not somewhere easy to find. This was a war of attrition, which was hugely unfavorable for Kaguya and his team.

The troop members were weary from running around and taking care with their shots, and they turned to look at Tsukihi asking for further orders.

There were still unknowns in this situation, but at least they knew what they were fighting now.

If Kaguya was right about the illusionary attacks having effect on their bodies, then it was for the best that they retreat and reconsider their strategy, for the safety of the man they were meant to protect. All the more reason to shore up their numbers and look all over the mountain. Tsukihi held back from clicking her tongue. The plan today was to contact the Dark Wolf in order to check

whether Kaguya's suspicions were right. They got their result. In the grand scheme of things, this was not a bad situation. And yet.

Why doesn't he show himself?

She only knew bits and pieces about the Custodian, and the little data she had popped into her head. He was a terrible Custodian from her point of view, but Kaguya wanted to save him. She'd thought they would be able to converse with him, then, but no.

Stupid wolf!

Apparently, the Custodian had no intention of talking. It was like he hated even the idea of it. He was far more aggressive now than before.

Tsukihi cursed the stupid wolf again. She may not be his Custodian, but she couldn't let anyone harm Kaguya— "Tsukihi! We already know who he is! No need to attack aimlessly and get ourselves in danger! Let's retreat and try again! He's attacking indiscriminately!"

The wolf charged at them the moment Kaguya said that. Tsukihi took another shot, knowing it was in vain. She led Kaguya and dodged right before it tackled them.

"But we're finally face-to-face! Are you sure?!"

"We're not running away! We've done enough! We now know the problem is with the Fugeki clan! I can advocate for you!"

"If we don't catch the Custodian, you'll still be in danger!"

Kaguya yelled back. "Don't be stupid! The same goes for you! My order is to get everyone to safety!" He was furious.

Kaguya Fugeki did not mince his words at times like this.

"Loud and clear!" Tsukihi reloaded her gun and shot overhead while watching out for the wolf in the darkness.

A flare—that was the signal to retreat. The pursuit team immediately went down the mountain. The escort team withdrew as well.

"Get out of there!"

Tsukihi's subordinates obeyed right away, but they weren't the only ones who reacted to the flare. The Dark Wolf blocked their one path down the mountain. It growled and glared as if to say it would not let them pass. Kaguya and the escort team were left speechless.

Everyone silently wondered what to do now.

They didn't have to take the path forged by the Archers and Custodians across history; they could just forge their way through the trees. But that wasn't a good choice for remaining together. Or for running. Kaguya wanted to suggest splitting up, but Tsukihi grabbed his arm before he could. She would not allow him to become a decoy.

"Tsukihi."

"No, Lord Kaguya."

"...All right. I'll go with you. Just the two of us."

I'm sure the Dark Wolf will go after me.

"Order them to run, Tsukihi. I'll follow you."

He looked at the other three.

"Got it? You all go in different directions."

They had stern looks on their faces.

"Lord Kaguya, the pursuit team must be waiting at the meeting point. They will give us support the moment we leave the sacred zone. We'll see you down the mountain, no matter who goes."

"I am not letting anyone go."

The attacks had been close up to now, but the wolf had never attempted to directly harm Kaguya. As though it was simply telling the escort team to get out of the way.

Kaguya took a step forward and raised an arm, as if to protect his subordinates.

"Eken, do not hurt these people."

He was sweating.

Eken Fugeki's illusory wolf howled sadly.

"If you need to take someone down, take me down. Not the people, Eken."

As Kaguya glared at him, the soldiers he was trying to protect stepped forward. Tsukihi already had her gun raised. The troop was closely united, much to the chagrin of the Dark Wolf. It let out another great roar to intimidate them, shaking the air and warming it with its breath. Tensions rose in the gradually closing space.

"Eken, please..."

Don't hurt anyone. The moment Kaguya prayed for that, the moon faintly illuminating the ground vanished. The twilight was plunged into absolute darkness.

He thought a cloud had covered the moonlight, but...

"Circle! Circle! Circle and protect them!"

...he heard the high-pitched voice of a girl, like a lance through the violence of that summer night.

Kaguya and the troop looked around at the sky. They had no idea where the voice was coming from, but the thing covering the moon moved at her command.

Eee! Eee! Eee!

An ear-shattering noise.

That's no cloud.

It moved too quickly to be a cloud, and it seemed to be moving.

Eee! Eee! Eee!

The strange, disturbing noise became like music falling from the skies.

Eee! Eee! Eee!

The cacophony tormented the Dark Wolf, too.

“Lord Kaguya! Look!”

Tsukihi pointed her flashlight at the sky, revealing the source of the noise.

At first, Kaguya thought it was a dragon.

The name of this land, Ryugu, meant *dragon palace*. It came from legend saying it was the home of a dragon god. He feared a new perilous illusion had arrived, inspired by the old stories.

“B-birds?!”

But as he focused more clearly, he noticed the giant shadow was in fact a conglomeration of smaller creatures.

Wild birds native to Mount Ryugu—a strange flock of many different feathers.

“Sway, sway, sway, sway the petals, over the gleaming pastures, in the booming summer.”

A murder of crows at dusk would look tiny in comparison to what they witnessed.

“Love, love, love, love breaks, under Tora’s rain, under the summer fireworks, among the firefly traders.”

The flying rally resembled a dragon.

“Slash, slash, slash, slash through, hatching dragonfly, waiting for autumn.”

The bird army circled around them, creating a barrier between Kaguya’s team and the Dark Wolf.

“Sit tight, waiting for autumn!”

Among the birds’ cries, Kaguya heard the divine song of two girls.

Ahhh.

Kaguya knew immediately.

Allies.

He knew their ability put them on his level.

“You, wolf over there! Stay put!”

It was the second girl, calling to the Dark Wolf, but its only answer was a roar.

“No way!” one of the girls shouted.

“Why?! There’s no way Life Operation can’t tame it!”

“It didn’t react at all! Ruri, what are you doing?”

“I called more boars! It’s down to numbers now!”

“I guess they’ll at least serve as distraction. Meanwhile, let’s show them the way!”

The bushes rustled, and the first thing to jump into the sacred zone was a giant boar.

Then another. And another. They circled the sacred zone from the trees. Meanwhile, the birds kept flying around the Dark Wolf, keeping it immobilized.

“Lord Kaguya...,” Tsukihi muttered in concern.

Meanwhile, Kaguya’s spirits were lifting. This duo was not an enemy.

“Don’t worry,” Kaguya responded gently as she watched the bird army in shock. “It’s okay, Tsukihi. I think... They’re just like me...”

After the boars appeared two girls, so beautiful they shone even in the dark night.

They were young, apparently still in their teens, and most notably, identical to each other.

“Good evening! How are you? We stopped the wolf for you!”

“Sorry to intrude in this sacred place. If you wish, we would like to offer some help... Ah, we have to introduce ourselves first, Ruri.”

“Right, Ayame.”

They both had black hair, one with exceedingly high spirits and another with calm maturity. While Tsukihi and her soldiers were still reeling, Kaguya grinned.

“I’m the Agent of Summer, Ruri Hazakura,” said one girl.

“I am also the Agent of Summer, Ayame Hazakura,” said the other.

Kaguya responded after a short pause. "It's my pleasure. I'm the Archer of Twilight, Kaguya Fugeki."

The Hazakura sisters looked at each other as he said his name.

The Summer twins smiled under the protective watch of eyes glittering all through the forest.

Their familiars quietly stated they would not allow anyone to hurt their goddesses.

"It's really you...! Oh, thank goodness. We came here to meet you."

"We have so much to ask you!"

The divine beings met as if by fate, under extraordinary circumstances.

““Lord Archer of Twilight, we are here to solve the Dark Wolf mystery.””

As the Agents of Summer stated their purpose, the Dark Wolf dissipated into the night.

AFTERWORD

I hope this message finds you well. It has been a while.

I've come across the seasons to meet you once again.

The stage is now summer, the season for joy and love in all life.

I've been able to deliver all of this to you thanks to your great support. I give you my deepest thanks.

I received the honor of an award before the publishing of this book. Thank you so much.

However, the honor is not only mine.

It is always the readers who make an author an author, as well as everyone involved in letting this story take flight around the world, and the bookstore staff who put it on their shelves.

It is thanks to your support that this lowly writer gets to fight with a wooden stick and kettle shield. It's the most I can hold.

My life continues today thanks to others, as it always has. I am thankful every day.

So I weave these stories for the outside. I hold my needle to sew each and every word with heart and soul in the hopes it will make you happy. And I do hope that you're happy. I want this story to be your solace in the longest nights.

There are times when you don't want morning to come, or cry out of fear for the night.

The four seasons, the morning, and the night may have moments that you hate. Moments that will make you feel life is terrible, when the idea of living

one second more seems suffocating.

I want the world of books to take you to love and fun.

I hope that, even for a moment, I can help you become a little fonder of the world.

You may find this nosy or presumptuous of me, and I apologize if you do.

I simply end up thinking this way because, since childhood, I've been saved by so many stories from people I've never met. When times were hard, it was always these adventures in other worlds that lifted a weight from my heart.

Do you find it too close-minded? Too sad and lonely?

Even if you do, I want the lonely people out there to have their allies in this world.

The Summer story will continue, and I want to thank the bookshops, the publisher, the designers, the editors, everyone involved, friends, and family, for seeing this journey through.

Suoh, thank you for giving beautiful color to this world, as always. I can run thanks to your illustrations.

And you, standing by my side now thanks to this book—thank you.

I hope you stay here with me for a little longer. Let's watch the story of the arrow flying toward the summer sky together.

I will see you in the next volume.

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