



Kana Akatsuki  
Illustration by Suoh



Agents  
of the Four  
Seasons

DANCE OF SUMMER

II

# Agents of Four Seasons

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## CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

### SPRING ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL **Zanetsu Kayo**

Hinagiku's half brother. Spring Administration functionary. His mother is a prosperous land-owner, and he is affluent himself. He knows Sakura and asks her to keep a secret from Hinagiku that he is offering financial support.



### ZANSETSU'S RETAINER **Tsubame Aboshi**

Brought up in the same orphanage as Sakura before being taken in by Zanetsu, whom he adores almost religiously. Despite his age, he acts as Zanetsu's right arm and does a better job than most adults.



### SPECIAL AGENT OF NATIONAL SECURITY **Tsukiji Aragami**

Special Agent deployed by National Security. Captain of Kaguya's security forces. She was only appointed temporarily to guard Kaguya, but she holds deep respect and affection for him. A strong believer in the gods incarnate after being raised in a faithful household.



### ARCHER OF TWILIGHT **Kaguya Fugeki**

The god incarnate who oversees night in Yamato. He fell into depression after his wife and Custodian ran away one day. His feelings toward Tsukiji, who came to guard him, are difficult to explain in a few words.



### CUSTODIAN OF THE ARCHER OF TWILIGHT **Eken Fugeki**

Young Custodian, of a standing similar to the Guards. He respects Kaguya and they used to live together like father and son, but one day, he disappeared.



### GUARD OF SUMMER CANDIDATE **Raicho Kimikage**

Ruri's fiancé. Guard candidate. Confident and sometimes arrogant, he's treated like a weirdo by most people, but he's kind and devoted to those he respects. Madly in love



### TOWN OF SUMMER DOCTOR **Renri Rouo**

Ayame's fiancé. Doctor affiliated with the Town of Summer's medical office. Despite his playboy looks, he's gentle and delicate. He longs to marry Ayame, but there is a big secret between them.

# Agents of the Four Seasons

DANCE OF SUMMER, PART II

4

Kana Akatsuki

Illustration by Suoh

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# Agents of the Four Seasons

4

Kana Akatsuki

TRANSLATION BY SERGIO AVILA ◆ COVER ART BY SUOH

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SHUNKASHUTO DAIKOSHA NATSU NO MAI GE

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

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First Yen On Edition: December 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Christopher Fox, Anna Powers Designed by Yen  
Press Design: Liz Parlett Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Akatsuki, Kana,  
author. | Suoh, 1989– illustrator. | Avila, Sergio, translator.

Title: Agents of the four seasons : dance of spring part 1 / Kana Akatsuki ;  
illustration by Suoh ; translation by Sergio Avila.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023– | Contents: v. 1.  
Spring dance: part one — Identifiers: LCCN 2023038212 | ISBN 9781975373177  
(v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975373191 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN  
9781975373214 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975373238 (v. 4 ; trade  
paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Seasons—Fiction. | Goddesses—Fiction.  
| Gods—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy comics. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.A377 Ag 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023038212>

ISBNs: 978-1-97537323-8 (paperback)

978-1-9753-7324-5 (ebook)

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*Afterword*

*Yen Newsletter*

They call them the Archers of Oracle.

They climb the hill, even plagued by the hazy spring clouds.

They pierce the sky, even burned by the scorching summer heat.

They walk without stopping, even distracted by the beautiful autumn foliage.

They do not wish for a normal life, even isolated by the freezing winter weather.

They shoot their arrows into the sky three hundred and sixty-five days a year, to bring a peaceful morn and night to the world.

In the island chain nation of Yamato, the Archers' dwellings are split into north and south.

The Archer of Dawn brings morning from the north and dyes the world in sunlight.

The Archer of Twilight brings night from the south and dyes the world in starlight.

The two Archers of Oracle are fated to remain there for their entire lives and devote themselves to their duty.

They are allowed no ambitions of their own, only quiet and peaceful lives.

The vicissitudes of life are not for bounded gods.

Yet one summer day, the God of Twilight met with two other gods incarnate.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Kaguya Fugeki, the Archer of Twilight.”

““Lord Archer of Twilight, we Agents of Summer have come to solve the Dark Wolf mystery.””

The sisters branded as bad omens, Ruri Hazakura and Ayame Hazakura, smiled at Kaguya Fugeki, while others were also on their way to gather at Ryugu, like petals on water coming together to form a sea of flowers.

Ruri Hazakura's fiancé, Raicho Kimikage.

Ayame Hazakura's fiancé, Renri Rouo.

Agent of Spring, Hinagiku Kayo.

Guard of Spring, Sakura Himekaka.

Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

Guard of Autumn, Rindo Azami.

Agent of Winter, Rosei Kantsubaki.

Guard of Winter, Itecho Kangetsu.

And at the center of the uproar was a lonely beast.

“Haah... Haa... Ha...”

His former lord, Kaguya Fugeki, had discovered his identity as his former Custodian.

He had soft, gentle eyes, and it was nearly impossible to think he would harm a soul, yet he hid a beast within. He ran across the mountains without connecting with anyone.

He blinded Kaguya's security forces with an illusion and managed to escape.

He thought to let himself be caught, but he couldn't stop halfway through. He had begun this, and yet now he didn't know why he ran. Regardless, he urged his legs to keep running.

The question rose within him: What was it he wanted to do?

*I don't know.*

The only thing he knew was that he'd been reduced to an uncontrollable beast. He had no claim for a reason as to why he would hurt his lord, yet regardless, he sought him, tested him.

He hurt him so his beloved master would acknowledge him.

*That's it.*

He simply wanted Kaguya's gaze.

*I wanted him to see me.*

He wanted him to listen to his cries.

*Lord Kaguya.*

He wanted him to ask why.

*Lord Kaguya.*

He wanted to connect.

*Lord Kaguya.*

He wanted him to show some sort of emotion, anything, even anger.

*Lord Kaguya.*

Please don't ignore me. As he blamed his lord, he remembered.

It was all his fault.

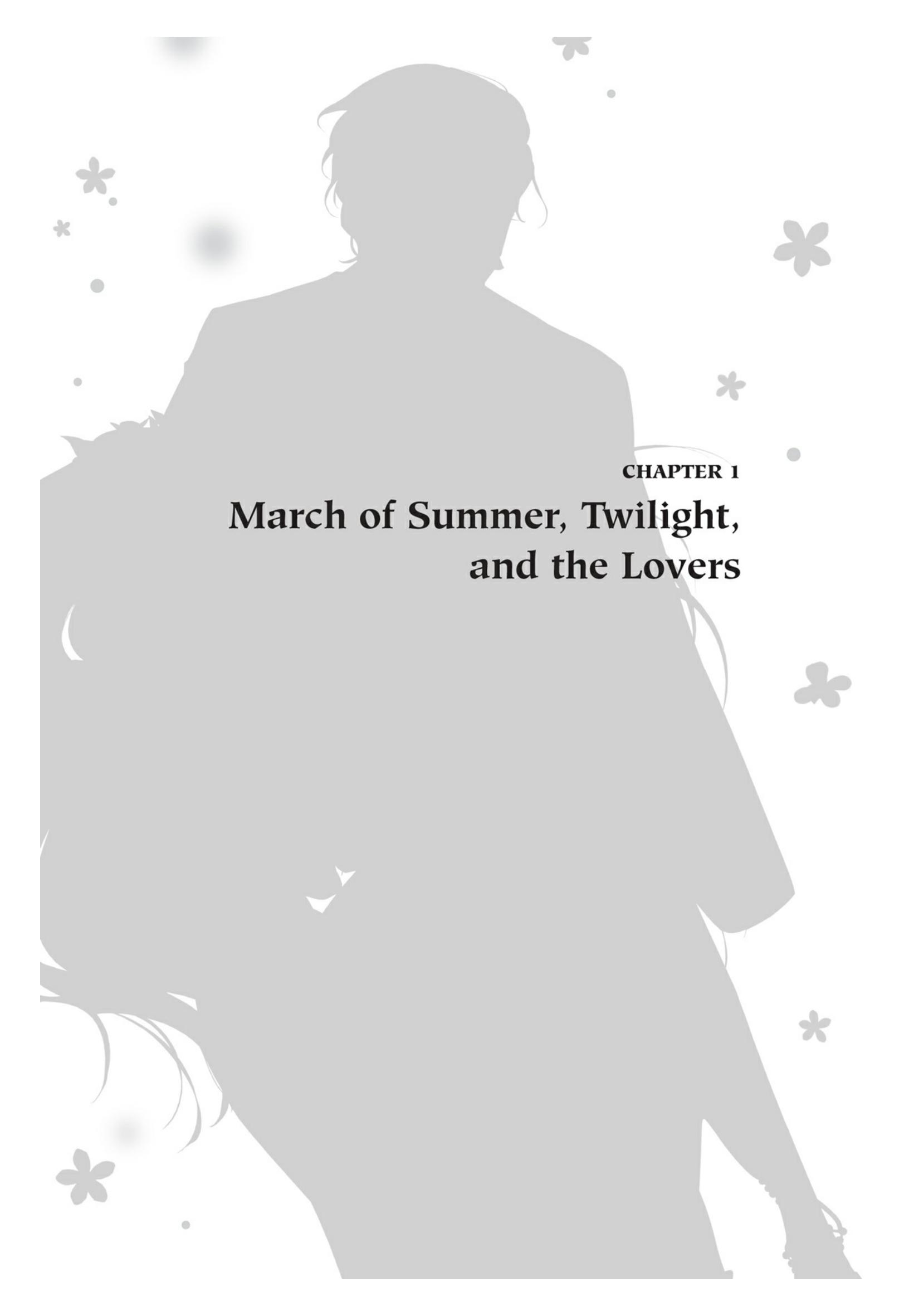
*Have you forgotten about me already, Lord Kaguya?*

His chest ached. He was lonely, hurt, and transformed beyond recovery. He was no longer the boy the Archer of Twilight loved. That boy had died.

Eken cried as he ran and ran, toward nothing in particular.

The same question went through his mind hundreds, thousands of times.

*Why did I become a wolf?*



CHAPTER 1

# March of Summer, Twilight, and the Lovers

July 23, Reimei 20. Kaguya Fugeki's residence on the southernmost island of Yamato.

It was eleven PM.

The situation developed rapidly upon the arrival of the Hazakura sisters.

Gods incarnate, who were never supposed to associate, met in a modern mansion hidden in the middle of the forest by Mount Ryugu.

"Please come in, Ladies Summer. Would you like me to carry your luggage?"

"D-don't mind us, Lord Archer! Thank you for having us... Wow, look, Ayame! He's got a fish tank!"

"Move in already, Ruri! I can't get through the door! Thank you for the invitation, Lord Archer."

The Agents of the Four Seasons and the Archers of Oracle dwelled in different domains, but their paths had finally crossed.

With the arrival of the Hazakura sisters, Eken Fugeki, the suspect behind the Dark Wolf mystery, dissipated his illusion and vanished. Capturing him was the objective of Kaguya and Tsukihi's security forces, but it was a more difficult task than first anticipated, and they were forced to come up with a way to resist his illusions. They couldn't take the twin goddesses with them to comb the mountains, either, so after some deliberation, they decided to retreat for the time being.

As they were meeting for the first time and Kaguya ardently hoped they would have much to talk about, he invited Ruri and Ayame to his residence. The twin goddesses seemed slightly nervous.

A mixture of hope and fear arose from this meeting between gods incarnate.

It was partly because of their host, Kaguya, who gave off a somewhat unapproachable aura.

There was something transcendental about the appearance of the man chosen as the God of Twilight. His stern visage tended to overwhelm those he met for the first time; however, his voice was kind.

“I hope I did not inconvenience you, asking you here so suddenly.”

His voice was like night itself—a great being protectively enveloping a smaller one.

The two young Goddesses of Summer shook their heads, allaying Kaguya’s concerns.

“It is an honor to be here, Lord Archer,” said Ayame.

“I—I feel the same way! It’s an honor,” added Ruri.

The fact that they had ended up making the same gesture instinctively emphasized their similarity as twins. They looked like children to Kaguya’s eyes; he was in his midthirties, while the summer goddesses had only recently turned nineteen.

*And Eken is even younger.*

They didn’t resemble him in the slightest, yet Kaguya still thought of his former Custodian with a pang of sadness.

*Where is he sleeping tonight?*

The sixteen-year-old’s whereabouts remained unknown.

“I’m going to make arrangements for dinner, but it shouldn’t take long. You’re more than welcome to eat with us. I’ll also get a room ready for you both, since I’d like for you to stay the night.”

Ruri’s eyes immediately lit up.

“Whoa, really?!”

At which point, Ayame hurriedly cut in.

“Ruri! Um, thank you... We appreciate the offer, but please don’t worry yourself about meals or lodgings... We came here without much thought other than to speak to you...so we’ll return to our hotel once we finish our discussion.”

“No waaay! Ayame, it’s already eleven!”

“I’m aware.”

“Are you really?! It’ll be past midnight by the time we’re done talking.”

“Yes, I know. We’ll be going back. His lordship is a god incarnate from a different domain. It would be rude to impose.”

“Aww...”

Ruri cried out as she held her stomach in hunger, but Ayame ignored her glare.

“This is bigger than just us. If we bother Lord Archer, it might cause trouble within Four Seasons society as a whole. Which means problems for the other Agents...”

Ruri hung her head. It stung to hear that; they’d already hurt Autumn’s reputation. Ayame had to be tired and hungry as well, yet she didn’t show it—after all, she was a former Guard. Kaguya watched their exchange before looking at Ayame and asking: “Erm... Lady Ayame, right? Mind if I ask a question?”

“Please, go ahead.”

“Did you leave any valuables back at the hotel?”

“N-no, not really. Though we did leave a change of clothes...”

“Then I’ll send someone to collect them tomorrow. Are there any foods you don’t eat or are allergic to?”

“...No.”

“Then is it only modesty preventing you from staying here?”

“...”

Ayame pursed her lips.

“That settles it. Lady Ayame, for the honor of the Fugeki name, I want you to accept my invitation. It would cause a far greater problem to send two young goddesses incarnate out into the night without any protection.”

“Don’t mind us, Lord Archer. We’re stronger than we appear. We can defend ourselves.”

“Perhaps, but that’s not the issue. You were worried about appearances, right?”

“Yes...”

“To be quite honest, I don’t like when people complain about appearances.”

He hadn’t said it with reproach, but Ayame shrank back regardless.

Kaguya was going out of his way to express himself kindly. “So I say this not as the Archer of Twilight, but as any other adult...okay?”

He pointed to the night sky, visible through a window set high in the wall near the entryway.

“Lady Ayame, it’s already dark outside. I brought the night.”

His tone wasn’t domineering, nor did it leave any room for argument.

“I worry about two young girls traveling alone. You should stay here overnight. What would you do if you were in my position? Would you send a child out into a land they barely know in the middle of the night?”

“I...”

“At my age, it’s hard not to feel some fatherly concern, you see. There’s National Security Special Agents here, too, so it’s safer than a hotel. Any father would want their children somewhere safe, right?”

Tsukihi and the other Special Agents nodded in apparent agreement.

“Moreover, we get to meet as fellow gods incarnate. I’d like at least until the morning for us to get to know each other.”

“Lord Archer...”

Seeing that he’d almost convinced Ayame, Kaguya gave her one last push.

"Lady Ayame, please just say yes for today. If you find it disagreeable, tomorrow you may do as you wish. Do this as a favor to me. I'm worried about you, so stay here tonight."

"..."

*It would be ruder to decline after all that, thought Ayame.*

She could tell that the god of night was simply making this offer out of concern.

His refusal to let the young women go outside in the middle of the night wasn't so different from Ayame's offer to let Spring stay in the Summer villa during their trip.

"A-are you sure?" Ayame asked. She still didn't wish to impose but decided to accept his kindness.

Kaguya's face lit up.

"Of course. Let's have dinner right away. We'll talk while we eat. And if there's too much to talk about, we can continue tomorrow... Let's just take it easy, okay?"

Ruri had been quiet this whole time, and she gave Ayame a look as though asking for permission before addressing Kaguya.

"Thank you so much, Lord Archer! Seriously, I'm so, so grateful!"

"Kaguya, please. And I'll call you Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame. I can't very well call you both Ms. Hazakura, now can I?"

"Thank you, Lord Kaguya! Isn't that great, Ayame?"

"Yeah... Sorry, Ruri. I know you're tired... I was being stubborn... We'll gladly accept your offer, Lord Kaguya. I hope we don't trouble you too much."

*They're nearly identical on the outside, but they couldn't be more different, Kaguya thought with a smile and a nod.*

At first, he'd been worried he wouldn't be able to tell them apart, but it didn't seem like that would be an issue now. Ruri was open and outspoken, and Ayame considerate and reserved. The difference was as clear as night and day.

"You won't. Please, make yourselves at home, as fellow gods incarnate. I'll get you something to drink. Would you mind taking a seat and waiting in the living room?"

The Hazakura sisters nodded and sat down on the living room sofa.

Everyone else split off into other rooms, leaving Ruri and Ayame alone for a little while.

"...He's really nice, isn't he?" Ruri said.

"...Yes. He's so nice I feel bad about it..."

The twins let themselves relax and gazed absentmindedly around the room. Unlike the old Hazakura residence, Kaguya's mansion was built in a modern style. The blue and white interior design was reminiscent of southern islands and gave the room a maritime feel. As well as the fish tank by the entrance, there was also a bigger one in the living room, and the fish inside stared curiously at the sisters.

"...National Security's...Secret Service is here, so I imagine they'll tell the Four Seasons Agency about us... I mean, obviously... And then the Town will find out, too..." Ruri said.

"Nothing we can do about that. Mom and Dad must be worried, so it should be fine. Even if they do pass along the news, we're lucky we met the people at the center of the Dark Wolf mystery. This could change the situation we're in now... And it's all thanks to you for saying we should go to the mountain today."

"...I—I didn't do anything... Did I?"

"We wouldn't have had such an opportunity if you hadn't dragged me along."

Ruri blushed at Ayame's praise. She was far more accustomed to being scolded by her sister, and she couldn't hide her joy.

"...It's thanks to you, Ayame," Ruri mumbled. "I can only do what I do because you're with me..."

Then she leaned her head on Ayame's shoulder. Ayame smiled.

"You're so clingy..."

“Not with everyone. Just you.”

Ayame gave in and leaned her head closer to Ruri’s.

Their journey had reached a stopping point.

“Sis... We did the best we could, right?”

“Yes... There was a point to us leaving home.”

They continued chatting, snuggled up together as a sense of relief gradually swept over them.

While the sisters relaxed, Kaguya was frantically making preparations in the kitchen to host the Agents of Summer.

He wasn’t the only one in a frenzy; Tsukihi Aragami and her squad deployed by National Security were also busily moving about, and she raised a hand, attracting Kaguya’s attention.

“Lord Kaguya, I have a report to make. The drinks in the fridge...are nothing but beer.”

Kaguya frowned as he looked at the shiny cans filling the refrigerator.

“This is an emergency. We can’t let them know we’re a bunch of drunkards.”

“I—I don’t drink that much!” Tsukihi argued.

“No way. You drink just as much as me.”

The gentlemanly facade he’d worn in front of the Hazakura sisters had completely vanished.

*The fridge has changed a lot compared to when the three of us were living here.*

Kaguya had always been a drinker, but ever since he’d started getting along with the Special Agent squad, it had become customary to have drinking parties after work. Now that he had someone to share an evening drink with, it had only been a matter of time before he started going in on the alcohol.

At first, he’d only treated the squad to some local sake, but now they had a full array of beer and all sorts of other liquors. Kaguya never let their supply run out, either, which had given birth to the fridge before their eyes.

“We can’t let them see this...”

“No... And Lord Kaguya, what should we give them to drink? We have some soda to use as mixers. How about that?”

“That’s not the worst idea... Still, I feel bad giving them something we got for alcohol. Oh, hey, we’ve got tea. Let’s make them tea.”

Kaguya chose a couple of relatively cute glasses for the Hazakura sisters and poured iced tea.

“...Let’s hide everything unsuitable for children to see,” Tsukihi suggested. “We’ll put the bags full of empty cans somewhere out of sight, and I’ll warn my subordinates to behave themselves.”

“Okay. I’ll take the tea out. Be right back.”

Thankfully, Kaguya and the Special Agents understood each other perfectly.

They all worked together for the sake of the Hazakura sisters. Kaguya handed them their glasses of iced tea with an innocent look on his face before going back to the kitchen. There he continued the dinner preparations, coordinating well with Tsukihi.

“Good thing we split up the cars to send one group shopping,” she commented. “You just bought a hot plate the other day as well, so we have everything ready. Dinner will be teppanyaki, as you suggested...and we can ask them what they want to eat for breakfast.”

“That sounds good. I can go to the market early tomorrow morning if needed. Also, is someone getting the corner room on the second floor ready? There are futons in the closet there, so take them out. Tsukihi, could you lend the girls whatever they need to stay over? You can bill me for everything later.”

“Not a problem. I talked with them on our way here, and they seem to be missing lotion and cleanser, among a few other things. I can also lend them pajamas.”

“I have a supply of unopened T-shirts. They might be too big...but the girls said they left their change of clothes at the hotel, so do you think I should lend them some?”

Ruri and Ayame had no idea that their hosts were running all over the place to provide proper hospitality.

Soon, all instructions had been issued and preparations in the kitchen were complete, and Tsukihi's squad gave the all clear.

"Captain Aragami, we're ready over here."

"Lord Kaguya, Captain, please feel free to join the Ladies Summer."

"Thank you. Let's go, Tsukihi."

Kaguya and Tsukihi let the security forces take care of the particulars and, smiling nonchalantly, went out into the living room. They sat down on the sofa across the table from the twins.

"Sorry to keep you waiting... Dinner will be ready soon. Let's talk as we eat... so why don't we start by properly introducing ourselves?"

Ruri and Ayame sat up straight.

"I'm Kaguya Fugeki, the Archer of Twilight. This is the captain of my security forces, Tsukihi Aragami."

Tsukihi bowed where she sat. "I am Special Agent Tsukihi Aragami, dispatched by National Security to guard Lord Kaguya. Erm, it is a pleasure and an honor to meet you, Ladies Summer..."

Tsukihi seemed a bit nervous. As a believer of the gods incarnate, she did everything she could to make sure she wouldn't disrespect them.

"Tsukihi's incredibly reliable," Kaguya added. "If there's ever anything you feel uncomfortable saying to me, please feel free to tell her. The security squad consists of eight people, including Tsukihi, and we all live here together. They'll take care of any trouble that may arise, so please let them know if you need anything."

The Hazakura sisters looked at the captain with curiosity before introducing themselves.

"I'm Ayame Hazakura. Ruri's elder twin sister."

"I'm Ruri Hazakura. Ayame's little sister."

With introductions over, Kaguya got down to the matter at hand.

“Now then, I only have superficial information...so forgive me if I get anything wrong. There are two Agents of Summer this generation, right? Is that because you’re twins? If I recall correctly, there should be a set number of Agents of the Four Seasons for each country...well, specifically for each region. Same as us.”

The twins had expected this question, and Ruri answered immediately.

“Erm... The reason we’re both Agents of Summer is because I died back in spring.”

““Wha?”” Kaguya and Tsukihi exclaimed in unison.

Ruri gestured wildly as she explained. “The way the system works is that a new Agent is born right after the last one dies. And back in spring, there was some trouble with the insurgents, and I died in battle.”

“As her Guard at the time, the fault lies with me...,” Ayame muttered weakly, but Ruri immediately denied that.

“It’s not your fault! So, um, as I was saying, Ayame was chosen as the next Agent of Summer. But then the Lady Autumn used her powers to resurrect me... and, surprise, surprise, I still had my Agent powers. So it’s a bit of an unusual case, but now we have two Agents of Summer.”

All eyes on Twilight’s side focused to points upon hearing Ruri’s rapid explanation.

“You... Erm... You died...?” Kaguya asked with an air of concern.

“I sure did!” Ruri replied energetically.

“...Do you have a power that lets you heal yourself?”

“No, nothing like that. It was Autumn’s power.”

Ruri and Ayame explained in further detail for Kaguya and Tsukihi.

Each Agent had their own power according to their season.

The Agent of Spring had Life Stimulation, the Agent of Summer had Life Operation, the Agent of Autumn had Life Putrefaction, and the Agent of Winter had Life Coagulation. This much was known by anybody in the society of the

gods incarnate, but the exact details of their powers weren't made public. Those who happened to see them from up close were always surprised.

The Agent of Spring, Hinagiku Kayo, had the power to use plants for offense and defense.

The Agents of Summer, the Hazakura twins, were able to control living beings other than humans, as they showed Kaguya.

The Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, could control the life and death of others under certain conditions.

The Agent of Winter, Rosei Kantsubaki, summoned ice and snow and shaped it to his will. He could use this to launch small-scale attacks, as well as larger ones, such as when he'd closed off the metropolitan expressway.

"Wow... Did you know about their powers?" Kaguya asked Tsukihi, somehow having managed to process everything he'd heard.

"No, not everything... I have seen the Lord Winter's Life Coagulation, since I used to belong to Porcupine, and he suffers most insurgent attacks. This generation's Agent uses his powers without restraint against them...so stories of his feats are well-known. However, I didn't know about the rest."

"I see. Yeah, I didn't know, either, since we're in different domains."

This explanation was becoming complicated.

"Excuse me, Lord Kaguya," Ayame said timidly. "The situation currently affecting the Four Seasons society is difficult to explain verbally, even for us. Although it is an antiquated way to do things, I believe you might understand it better if we write down each of the key points. And we would appreciate it if you could explain your situation to us in the same way..."

"Okay, sure. Tsukihi, could you grab me that? Right next to you, on the side table."

So began the exchange of information between Twilight and Summer.

As Ayame had said, explaining everything was no simple feat, and it took them nearly an hour to tell each other what they knew.

Dinner was ready by then, and they shared a table with the security forces while everyone chewed on what they'd just learned. Their brains were running at full speed, fueled by the harmony of rice, seafood, meat, and vegetables.

In the end, while both sides understood some of what they'd heard, they belonged to two different domains, and neither truly knew the other's situation.

“...Was it really experts holding that meeting?”

Kaguya couldn't hide his shock; the Agents of the Four Seasons' reputation had suffered as a result of the Dark Wolf mystery here?

“I never thought that an abnormality in the ecosystem brought the wolf. I've been climbing this mountain since before the Lady Spring went missing, so I would've seen a cub at some point during the ten-year blank. I also know the priest at the Ryugu Shrine by the mountain... We're friends, actually, and he said he's never seen a wolf. At most, we speculated it could've escaped from a smuggler...”

Ruri and Ayame nodded repeatedly, pleased by Kaguya's rational reaction.

“That's a normal thing to think, right?” Kaguya went on. “And besides, this isn't the first time an animal nonnative to Yamato has shown up in a city; they always turn out to have escaped from somewhere. There's plenty of eccentrics who would secretly keep an endangered species as a pet, and plenty of those pets run away. Where did that idea for divine punishment even come from? Is it because I said it was stranger and bigger than any wolf I'd seen in encyclopedias? Don't you think that's a bit of a stretch? Who was the one who suggested it? Do you know, Tsukihi?”

Tsukihi shook her head, panicked by the barrage of questions.

“I—I don't know. I would have told you already, otherwise. I might have heard

something were I at headquarters, but living here climbing the mountains with you, I only get to present my own reports...and get yelled at sometimes... I can try asking a friend at headquarters, but I suspect they're not telling us on purpose."

Ayame found that strange. "But National Security and the Fugeki clan don't gain anything by doing that, do they? I get that they'd fear Lord Kaguya would be disturbed or that he might object, but even then, the blame wouldn't fall on your organizations. It would only affect the Four Seasons Agency and Towns. So why hide it?"

A reasonable question. Ruri crossed her arms and added:

"Uhh... I don't mean to speak ill of your organization, but couldn't it be that ours bribed someone at the top of yours?"

"...I'm surprised you came to that conclusion at your age," Kaguya said, raising his eyebrows.

Ruri shrugged awkwardly. "...That was what happened with the Spring incident. New Year bought people from the Agency *and* from National Security. I have no idea why they would've done something like that, but there's a shocking number of people in the world who do bad things. Maybe they were in trouble and needed the money. At least now I sort of understand that people can do anything when they're under enough pressure... I heard it's mostly bigwigs supporting the divine punishment theory, so it's not unthinkable that they'd be using their power or money to shut people up..."

Tsukihi's face turned pale when she heard that, and she raised a trembling hand.

"Sorry, but as a member of National Security I want to apologize for the trouble last spring..."

Both Tsukihi and her subordinates bowed to the girls, and Ruri and Ayame looked flustered.

"No, it's not like everyone in the organization is to blame! You didn't do anything!"

"Yes, please raise your head!"

Tsukihi was still feeling down, though, and Kaguya placed a hand on her shoulder. She timidly raised her head.

“...I don’t want to believe they were bought...,” said Kaguya, “but as you say, I know many people have already been arrested after what went on in spring. Be they public, private, or independent organizations...wherever there’s a group of enough people, you’ll find some who scheme and become blinded by greed until their beliefs start to distort... I can’t deny it. Considering the facts, we should assume that there was some sort of backdoor negotiation or pressure behind it. Which means that this plot...this conspiracy involving the Agents of the Four Seasons, involves the interests of multiple organizations.”

In contrast to Tsukihi’s dejected reaction, Kaguya had calmly accepted the suspicion that his organization was corrupt.

“I never had any particular affection for them, so I don’t mind saying there’s probably something rotten there.”

“Lord Kaguya...”

“It’s embarrassing...but I’ve seen a lot in my life...”

Kaguya sighed.

All they could do was speculate, so they left the matter there for now.

Next, Kaguya explained their own situation to the Hazakura sisters.

“Your Guard...I mean, your Custodian has powers, too?!” Ruri exclaimed. “Wow... So that’s why the wolf vanished, and why we couldn’t control it... Then does that mean he didn’t stop because we bound him but because he was shocked and the illusion froze?”

Ruri and Ayame were shocked to hear the Dark Wolf wasn’t an animal but a mirage created by Kaguya’s former Custodian.

“So, it wasn’t that we were lacking in power... That’s good to hear,” added Ayame. “Anyway...it really is surprising that we’re so different from you, Lord

Kaguya, despite being gods incarnate. The systems might be similar in many ways, but they're also completely different. For one thing, your group of gods take care of different parts of the world, so I suppose it's only natural that there's such a difference in our powers..."

By the time dinner had ended and they'd shared what they knew, both sides had made their wishes known.

Twilight's main goal was to catch the source of the uproar: the Dark Wolf, Eken Fugeki.

If possible, they wanted to catch him themselves and speak to him without the Fugeki clan interfering. Kaguya still cared for his former Custodian. Tsukihi, while reluctant, respected his wishes and wanted to help Kaguya achieve his goal.

To get the Hazakura sisters to understand, they would have to tell them about the disappearance of Kaguya's wife and Custodian.

The girls were flabbergasted upon hearing how it had all started.

"A-are you for real?"

Ruri was the most disgusted.

"Huh?" said Ruri. "So, like...from our point of view...it'd be like Ayame running away with Raicho when she was my Guard...? Seriously? And then Ayame coming back and attacking me? What the heck? So obviously, you wanna catch him and get him to explain, right?"

"Hey, don't use me in your example," Ayame complained.

"But, like, that's basically how it would be if I was in Lord Kaguya's place, right?"

"Even so, don't involve me."

“But I gotta get in his shoes to understand Lord Kaguya’s pain. Try thinking about it with me. What if I ran off with Renri?”

“Enough! I don’t want to hear it! Renri would never do that!”

Ayame hated even imagining it, and she punched Ruri in the shoulder.

“Ow! I-I’m sorry... You didn’t have to hit me... Back on topic... Are you okay, Lord Kaguya? That sounds so awful... I’d be tearing Yamato apart if that happened to me. And you say you forgive him and want him to come back? Why?!”

“Ruri, don’t be rude!”

Kaguya couldn’t take it anymore and hunched over, covering his face with both hands. He seemed to exude sadness, and not even the Special Agents could keep quiet.

“You see, Lord Kaguya? You should be mad.”

“I told you it was strange. You tell him, Summer.”

“I feel bad for Lord Kaguya, but it’s true.”

The Guards all piled on, and Kaguya groaned behind his hands from the psychological damage. Tsukihi tried to help her master out and rein in her subordinates.

“Stop it, you all! This is a delicate issue! Lord Kaguya, I’m sorry...”

Ruri and Ayame hurriedly apologized, too.

“I-I’m sorry, Lord Kaguya! Really... I can’t believe you were bringing us night every day, even though you were going through all this... You’re amazing! I respect you so much!”

“I apologize, Lord Kaguya... Thank you for always bringing the night, despite your trying circumstances... Honestly, Ruri! You should’ve kept quiet!”

“Whaaa?! You were carrying on and shouting, too!”

“I was only shouting to try to stop you!”

“Tell me...am I really that pathetic?”

Of course hearing that people felt sorry for him made Kaguya start feeling sorry for himself, and his eyes clouded over for a time.

However, with that, Twilight's wishes were clear. Next, the Summer sisters outlined their own.

With her fists clenched, Ruri passionately explained that they also wanted to solve the Dark Wolf mystery.

"Lord Kaguya, would you mind if we help find your Custodian?"

For the Hazakura sisters, it was vital that Kaguya say yes.

"We let him get away tonight...but give us another chance! We can control the bugs, the birds, the fish—all animals. We did the ritual on the mountain today, so they'll do as we say tomorrow as well. We can support you in all sorts of useful ways. It's the perfect power to look for someone. We'll definitely be able to help!"

Kaguya could feel Ruri's passion, but he turned her down flatly.

"I'm grateful for the offer, but you don't need to help us. I'll put out a statement saying the Dark Wolf has nothing to do with the Agents of the Four Seasons. The Lady Spring is already being affected by this, so I'll have to do that as soon as possible... Still, it's unusual for an Archer of Oracle to release a statement on the Agents of the Four Seasons, and we can't go through the normal methods, considering our clan kept us in the dark about this. It'll take some time, unfortunately... I'll keep you informed of any progress, so you should return to your parents for the time being. Especially since you left without telling them."

Ruri shook her head. Next, it was Ayame's turn to try to convince him.

"We appreciate you releasing a statement. Lady Hinagiku Kayo is a friend of ours, so we cannot stand to see her suffer even more than she already has... however, that is a separate matter from us helping you solve the Dark Wolf mystery. As we explained, Ruri and I are both Agents of Summer at the same

time, and that means we're regarded as inauspicious. Our weddings were called off because of that. While we do want to repair the Agent of Spring's reputation, we also need to do something about ours."

The slander against the Agents of the Four Seasons would stop if the Archer of Twilight himself denied the divine punishment theory or that environmental destruction was the cause of the Dark Wolf mystery.

However, that wouldn't be enough to stop people from treating Ruri and Ayame as bad omens.

"We need an opportunity to prove ourselves. So please, allow us to help... We promise we will be of use if you let us accompany you."

They needed something that would show people they were a force of good in the world.

Tsukihi had been watching the exchange silently, but now she voiced a concern that was weighing on her mind.

"Um... This might be naive of me to ask, but should the Agents of the Four Seasons really be using their powers for personal reasons like that?"

"...We're allowed to use them under certain conditions, so it's more a question of whether those conditions are satisfied by the situation, or whether we have just cause. If you accept our cooperation, this will be an alliance between Twilight and Summer."

A murmur ran through Tsukihi's subordinates. As members of an organization in charge of the country's defense and guards of a god incarnate, it excited them to hear the words "an alliance between Twilight and Summer." After Tsukihi quieted them down, Ayame continued.

"We are bound by the Four Seasons Code; however, this was created with the objective of making the Agents of the Four Seasons act within reason and maintain their honor and authority as gods incarnate. Helping the Lord Archer of Twilight can't be judged as a violation of the Code. After all, we would be hunting in the mountains, and Mount Ryugu is currently closed. We wouldn't be showing ourselves to the people. Things would change if you were asking National Security...Porcupine, for cooperation, but they have a duty of

confidentiality.”

Ayame emphasized that the fight would take place far from the commonfolk.

“The most important thing, Ms. Captain...is that your master, this country’s lord of night, is in danger. Psychologically, as well as physically. Do you agree?”

That was for sure. To Tsukihi, the person who worried most about Kaguya, the situation was urgent. She nodded.

“Please keep in mind that Lord Kaguya is in danger,” Ayame continued. “Our opponent has the godly power of Divine Cloak. The battlefield is Mount Ryugu, where Lord Kaguya travels daily. The Dark Wolf is ransacking a holy mountain, threatening Lord Kaguya both physically and psychologically. That is why we’re here. Summer’s power is perfect for tracking, and we’ll do everything we can to save a fellow god incarnate and bring peace to Yamato. In a way...this is a fight to maintain the structure of the world. The battle against the insurgents was no different; we were permitted to use our powers to keep this framework in place. So there’s nothing strange about us helping out, is there?”

Tsukihi looked concerned.

“A force beyond human knowledge is at work in this case, and as you say, your powers are ideally suited for searching for Eken Fugeki, so, no, there is nothing strange about you helping... And keeping such threats from Lord Kaguya is related to maintaining the stability of Yamato’s nights. Objectively speaking, I have no reason to dissuade your generosity to help a fellow god incarnate solve this case. And yet...I worry you might suffer more condemnation. There’s no precedent for this, and you have personal reasons for getting involved.”

It was a sharp observation. Tsukihi wasn’t trying to be mean, but when Ayame spoke again, her voice came out in a whisper.

“Still, we’re here to maintain the systems of the world. And as you just admitted, it makes sense for us to help Lord Kaguya. Yes, we’re also trying to clear our names, but that’s only something that comes from doing a good job...”

“Oh!” Ruri interjected, and everyone turned to look at her.

“What is it, Ruri?”

“Ayame... What about that thing with Nadeshiko? The one you mentioned before.”

“That’s...an Agent problem. We can just guard her when she’s in Ryugu.”

“But that also depends on us solving this quickly.”

“True...”

“What’s the matter?” Kaguya asked. “Tell us if there’s something on your mind.”

Ruri and Ayame looked at each other.

“Erm, this is related to the Dark Wolf, but not particularly to the Fugeki clan...”

“Please just tell us, Lady Ayame. Now’s the time to lay everything on the table.”

“...Then permit me to speak openly. Summer will soon end, bringing about autumn. The Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, will come to Mount Ryugu to manifest the season. Agents need the use the leylines or we collapse from fatigue channeling our powers, so it’s essential that we do it here...”

Kaguya, Tsukihi, and the Special Agents all made a look that seemed to say, *So what about it?*

“She was kidnapped just a few months ago...”

“...The Spring incident, right?” Kaguya chimed in. “I heard the general gist of it. The Agent of Autumn was taken by insurgents, and the Four Seasons all teamed up to save her, didn’t they?”

Kaguya and Tsukihi both seemed to know about it, so she wouldn’t have to waste time explaining.

“Yes. We saved her, thanks to our combined effort...but that didn’t solve anything. The problem came next... Lady Nadeshiko suffered violence at the hands of the insurgents...and no matter how strong she acts, I believe she still harbors a great deal of anxiety and pain.”

“I see... That’s awful...”

“She is only seven, after all, so we’re worried...”

“She’s seven?!” Kaguya cried.

Clearly, this was new information. Everyone else in the room was shocked as well, and they finally grasped what the sisters were trying to say.

“She’s so young,” Ayame continued. “And as you must know, Lord Kaguya, using divine powers takes a psychological toll on you. It would be bad to let her do the ritual in a dangerous place. Her Guard would be worried, too.”

If the case remained unsolved for too long, its affects would also be felt by the Agents of the Four Seasons.

A grave look passed over Kaguya’s face as he imagined the Agent he’d never met.

No matter what kind of girl he was imagining, actually meeting her was bound to tug at his heartstrings. Especially after he’d spent ten years worrying about the Agent of Spring.

“There is still time, so don’t let yourself panic over it. We were just talking about coming to Ryugu to guard her if the case hasn’t been solved by then... I’m sure your Custodian isn’t a bad person, since you said you want to protect him, so I understand there must be more to the story of all this. However, from Autumn’s perspective, who are in no way at fault here, they would obviously worry about being attacked...”

“...You’re right...,” Kaguya agreed with a grimace. “That innocent young girl must be scared...”

Kaguya, Tsukihi, and the Special Agents all looked at one another, regretting their failure to see the bigger picture until now.

“Lord Kaguya... This really wasn’t just our problem...”

“No, the Agents of the Four Seasons use Mount Ryugu, too,” said Kaguya. “If we can’t solve this soon...it’ll also cause problems for them. And today...you two Agents of Summer show up. Eken must’ve run because he had an idea of who you are. It would be good if he was just surprised, but what if he holds a grudge against you for whatever reason? Eken... He’s not himself right now... I wouldn’t put it past him...”

The members of the security force who'd already tangled with Eken strongly agreed with Kaguya's fears.

Thankfully, nobody who'd been affected by his illusions had suffered any aftereffects, but that had merely been luck. Eken Fugeki was clearly aggressive. They couldn't deny the possibility of him attacking the Agents.

"I don't think this issue will take so long to solve that it'll continue into autumn... But we do need to solve it fast," Kaguya admitted. "This isn't just a problem for you Agents; to be honest, this affects us as well. I want to solve it as soon as possible and shut up the National Security bigwigs complaining about our captain. I also want to keep Eken safe. And I want people to be able to come to the mountain again. The best course of action would be for you to start helping us search the mountains for Eken starting tomorrow. However, you're completely right about what you said earlier..."

Ruri and Ayame felt hopeful about his response, but it wasn't the result they'd expected.

"I can't... As Tsukihi said, some people will take offense to you crossing domains to help. The Four Seasons Agency and the Fugeki clan are as different as National Security and the firefighters. In the end...I feel like it would just make more people treat you as bad omens."

Kaguya thought in silence, having a meeting with himself in his mind.

*I should be very careful about this.*

Honestly, he was in a bind. Should he really support the arguably reckless actions of these two girls who'd run away from home?

*Should I see them as young girls in need of protection or as gods incarnate?*

But the Hazakura sisters were not normal people.

They were Yamato's Agents of Summer, who lived in a world outside of common sense.

One of them, Ruri, was the second most experienced Agent of this generation, after Winter's Rosei Kantsubaki. They weren't newbies being stubborn but goddesses incarnate who had served Yamato for a long time,

found themselves in the middle of a conspiracy, and suffered silently in isolation.

They'd left the Town because the issue couldn't be resolved from within anymore. They had to put themselves at risk like this or the future would only grow even darker. That much was clear.

*This shouldn't be something weighing on the shoulders of someone so young.*

“...”

Kaguya thought and thought.

“.....”

Ruri and Ayame waited impatiently for Kaguya's response. Finally, he opened his mouth.

“.....Can I offer a solution?”

In the end, his desire to do something about it won out.

Whatever happened, he felt like he had to protect them.

“Why don't we say that *I*, the Archer of Twilight, begged *you*, the Agents of Summer, for your help? This incident all started with me. I should be the one taking the lead to solve it, and I think this would be the wisest way not to cause offense.”

Ruri's and Ayame's faces lit up, but almost immediately, they found themselves overcome with panic and worry.

“Yay...! Wait, no! Wouldn't that cause you trouble instead? And it'd be all our fault.”

“She's right; you'd get the blame. Neither Ruri nor I want that. We're the ones who forced this on you...and everyone's impressions of you will change...”

“That's it right there: people's *impressions*.”

Kaguya crossed his arms and, one by one, looked at each of the faces in the room.

“If you take the lead, then it'll seem like you're butting into a domain that's not yours. That won't help your current situation. But if we happened to meet

by chance, and we ended up talking, and I begged you for help, then that's a whole other thing, right?"

Everyone listened to Kaguya's voice, which was cold at times and kind at others.

"After all, this was our problem initially. Yet it's gotten to the point where it inconvenienced you Agents. Forced to deal with the issue, Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame bravely arrive to try to solve it, and I discover the truth. Naturally, I'm pained and even embarrassed by it. I was painted as the victim in all of this, but that's not true—and considering Eken is the source of it, the fault lies with my household. As the Archer of Twilight, who brings night from Mount Ryugu, I have a duty to solve this case as soon as possible. So I swallow my pride and ask the Agents of Summer for your help. Of course, I do this for the sake of the people. The Ryugu Shrine is closed because of my Custodian, and I feel bad for my friend, the priest. The shrine is an important source of tourism, while other people enjoy climbing the mountain. I had to do something; after all, this is my home."

Everyone pictured how Kaguya would control the public's impression.

He was trying to turn the tables on any possible criticism.

"If there's any criticism, it would come from the Fugeki clan and your Towns about us gods incarnate acting of our own accord, but do they really have the right to call us out? I only ended up in this shameful situation because they wouldn't tell me the reality, did I not? And forgive me for saying this, but I would also want to file a complaint against your Towns for picking on you youngsters with baseless accusations. I'd want to officially express my indignation toward them for using my problem for that nonsense. Manufacturing controversy at my expense, without even informing me? It's like they're mocking me. I've been diligent in my duties for so long, but this I won't stand for. Worst-case scenario, I tell them I'll stop shooting arrows into the sky if they complain about it. I won't actually do it...but it ought to work."

The escalating anger Kaguya felt for being kept in the dark was showing on his face.

"And if we manage to solve this case and you get my endorsement, then we

could turn around your situation and get people to see the new Agents of Summer as good omens instead, don't you think?"

Kaguya gave Ruri and Ayame a clumsy smile.

The twins' eyes lit up.

"“Thank you so much, Lord Kaguya!”” they said in unison.

If they could manage that, then the bigwigs in the Town of Summer would have no way to fight back. They'd be going up against the ruler of the night; who could argue against a statement from him when it was backed up by their actions? Neither the Agency nor the Town would want to raise a stink with the Fugeki clan.

The sisters clasped each other's hands in joy as Kaguya continued.

"That said! I want you to explain things to your parents and get permission from them before we do anything else! I'll have a chat with them first, but I'll put you on so you can explain things properly."

The twinkle in their eyes vanished. They knew they'd have to do this eventually, but the twins had no idea how they would explain their reckless journey to their parents.

Kaguya gave them a wry smile. "Of course I'd ask this of you; you're still kids. Also, I want to ask you something, if you don't mind. You mentioned your weddings were called off, but once we solve things here, I'd imagine talk of marriage might come up again. Is that okay with you both?"

Kaguya thought back to his own marriage. He couldn't say whether he'd wanted to get married or not—other people had decided that for him.

*But I said yes without thinking because I wanted a family.*

Unfortunately, married life hadn't been as he'd expected, and it had all come undone in the end.

It had been a joyless marriage for his wife, and he didn't want these youngsters to end up with a similar fate. But...

"I—I wanna get married! Like, so bad! And with Raicho! No one else!"

“...I... I don’t know if things will turn out that way, but I do wish to marry, if possible.”

Ruri’s and Ayame’s reactions were far from what he’d imagined.

He could tell how strongly they felt about it, and Kaguya blinked in surprise.

“Really?”

They were not unhappy engagements, as he’d feared, and the news brought a smile to his face.

“I see...”

It had no bearing on him, and yet it made him glad.

Knowing the girls would find joy in their marriages, his desire to help them out only increased.

It was a virtue of Kaguya’s that he didn’t get jealous in moments like this.

“Then our interests align. Ladies Summer, as the Archer of Twilight, I humbly ask for your help in this investigation.”

Smiles spread across the faces of the Hazakura sisters, and Kaguya’s chest lit up with a warm feeling that he was doing the right thing. Tsukihi looked at both sides with affection and respect.

And so their discussion ended, with Summer and Twilight teaming up.

Meanwhile, the Agents of Summer’s fiancés had arrived on Mount Ryugu.

“Everything good, Renri? You got the camera in place?”

Ruri Hazakura’s fiancé, Raicho Kimikage.

“...Yes.”

Ayame Hazakura's fiancé, Renri Rouo.

"Let me check."

Walking across the moonlit mountain pass, they carried so much baggage, it made you want to ask whether they were actually on a military campaign.

There were more people next to them.

"Young Master, we just received word that the other team is in position."

They were all dressed in black combat suits. If you looked closely enough, you would see a badge with the Kimikage family crest adorning their uniforms.

"Good. Take care of the check sheet and tell them to keep moving forward."

"Yes, sir!"

Renri stared at Raicho, who was checking the camera.

"Young Master,' eh?"

Renri didn't mean to poke fun of him, but Raicho took it that way anyway and gave him a cynical smile.

"I'm not even next in line. Still, I am from the main household, and they're from branch families."

"An overwhelming sight for someone of their standing, I'd imagine..."

"You sure know how to hurt a guy... But see, Renri, I didn't force them to come. They're here out of their own will. They came together as Maverick Rabbit Horn to stop Doyen Turtle's rampage. The latter faction's boss in our Town is Seiran Matsukaze, and they all know it implicitly. The views of the Townchief affect everyone in the Town. If we're going to carry out a coup, now's really the only time to do it. These guys also need to switch out the Administration for something decent, otherwise it'll cause them all sorts of problems. The lower your family's status, the worse you have it, after all...and seeing the Hazakura girls, who are from a prestigious family, *and* the Agents of Summer have their lives stolen from them because people got it into their heads that they're inauspicious omens, it's easy to imagine that anyone who gets on Doyen Turtle's bad side will end up being persecuted in the future. Am I wrong?"

“...”

“Renri?”

“Ah, sorry. It’s just...there are so many different factions and people plotting all these schemes that I have no idea about, my brain’s having a hard time catching up... I mean, until just yesterday, I had no idea you were so driven to take action and lead people like this...”

“Well, I am a lone wolf at heart. It’s no wonder I come off as eccentric.”

“I don’t see you that way.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Raicho, you’re...really pushy, but you take care of people. It’s no wonder you’re a leader.”

Raicho smiled bashfully.

“You’ve got more guts than I thought, too, Renri... Okay, everything looks good here.”

Raicho had been checking a trail camera set up by Renri in a tree. These cameras were designed to be placed outdoors and controlled remotely, and they were used mostly for security or to observe animals. The group was setting them up all over Mount Ryugu.

Once Raicho made sure the trail camera was working, he smiled at Renri.

“You’ve gotten the hang of this, now we’ve done it a few times. Only a couple dozen more to go and we’re all done, so let’s keep going.”

“Okay...” Renri still seemed unsure.

“Not the response I was expecting... Something wrong?”

“...I’m just wondering if we should really be doing this.”

Raicho frowned in puzzlement.

“I mean, setting up cameras on a sacred mountain...”

“I like to be prepared.”

“And everyone’s getting ready for violence.”

“My squad and I will be the ones doing all the violent work. Consider yourself our sidekick. Like the guy in the chair, you know? Giving out orders from the comfort of your tech room while we charge headfirst into danger. That’s you. You’ll be safe, don’t worry.”

“That’s fine by me, but I feel bad for all guys in the chair, from your description.”

“Sorry. But it’s the truth. Are you really that worried? Geez.”

“I’m not worried about myself,” Renri countered. Raicho wasn’t taking him seriously, and his frustration was clear in his voice. “I’m worried if this is the right thing to do. Should we really be here? And even if we should, aren’t there other ways to solve this? We can’t be sure everyone from your team will make it back safe...”

Raicho sighed.

“Renri... Don’t expect me to tell you whether something’s right or wrong. You’re a grown-up.”

Renri felt a stab of pain deep within his heart, and Raicho continued.

“Maybe it’s because you were brought up in a household that didn’t let you make decisions, but you tend to offload big decisions onto other people, don’t you? You gotta fix that. Be more confident in yourself. I know you can do it if you try.”

“...I’m well aware that I’m subservient, but that’s not the issue here, is it?”

“You’re so stubborn...”

“No, I’m not saying this out of stubbornness.”

“Okay, let me be straight with you. If you don’t wanna get hurt, then don’t do it.”

Renri flinched. Raicho stopped on the dark mountain path, a determined look on his face.

“But you’ll never get anything meaningful without hurting yourself.”

The carefree air about him had vanished, and a seriousness came over

Raicho's expression.

"I haven't given up on my marriage...but if worse comes to worst and it doesn't happen in the end, that's fine by me. We gotta put Doyen Turtle in their place, or those girls will keep suffering forever."

"Raicho..."

"Is there anyone else but us who would go so far to help Ruri and Ayame, even if it means making problems for others?"

"...No."

"I thought you were here because you agreed with me. Was I wrong? You said you wanted to help them."

Renri gulped.

"Weren't you ready to do anything for them?"

Renri nodded silently. He had made up his mind, but he couldn't seem to take that one final step. What they were going to do was big enough to shake his resolve.

Raicho, meanwhile, didn't have a shred of hesitation.

"Look, it's a very simple decision. Keep up appearances for society or become a villain for the girl you love. The answer seems pretty obvious to me. What do you say?"

It sounded like Raicho had been forcing the answer out of him, but when Renri replied, he did so of his own volition.

"Become a villain for the girl I love."

Raicho smiled and whacked Renri on the back.

"I knew you'd say that. Let's go, then. The battle begins when they come back to the mountain."

Renri stumbled forward a few steps from the blow, before following Raicho, whose troops moved out with him. He was one rambunctious guy, but Renri was jealous of his iron will.

He looked at Raicho's broad shoulders, then for no particular reason, glanced

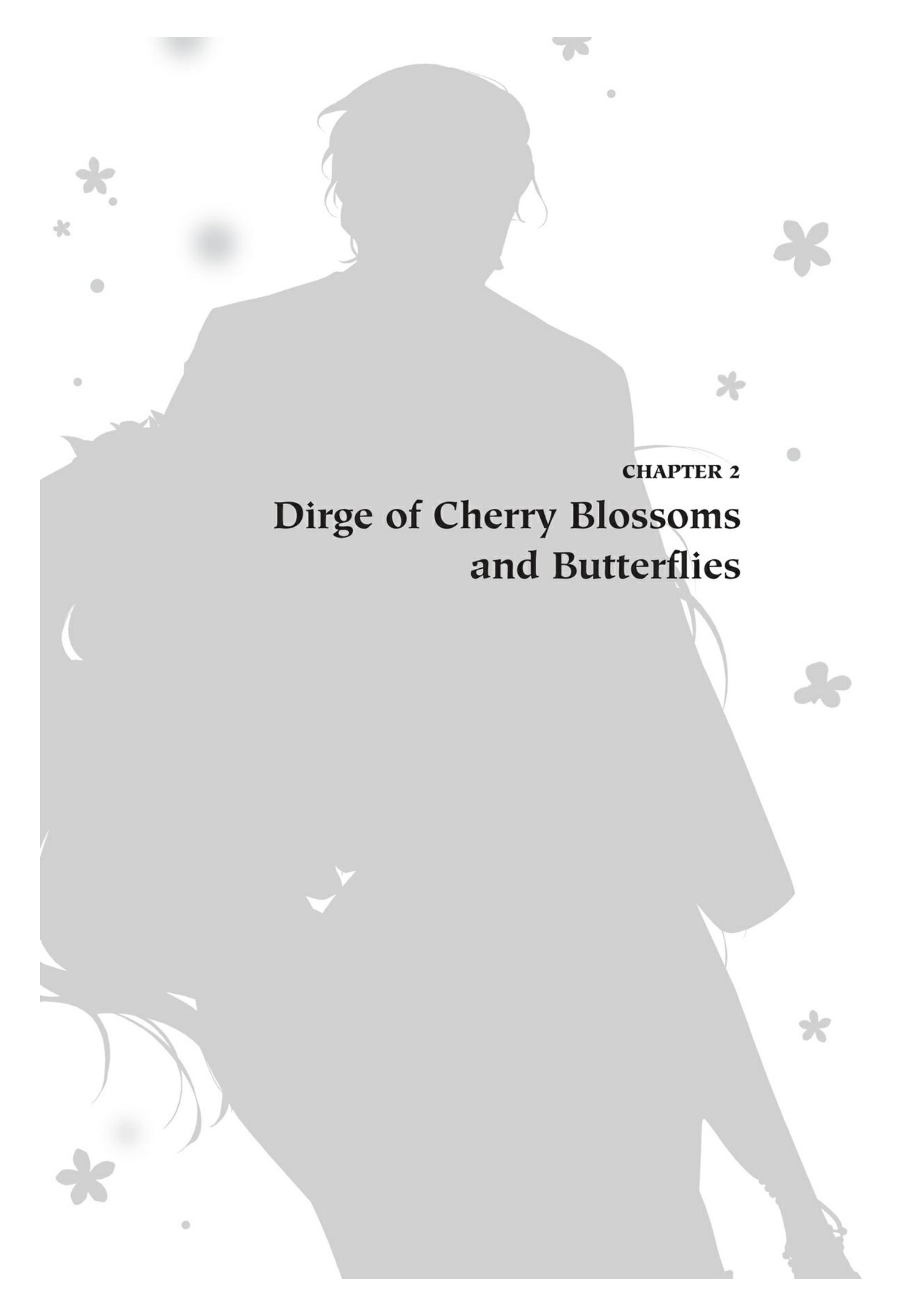
back over his shoulder. Ryugu's nocturnal panorama was reflected in his eyes. The town's light was faint, and everything was so far away. Ayame was on the same island as he was right now, but the thought didn't cheer him up. He felt the same way he had back in the Town, like no matter how far he went, he never got any closer.

He didn't think the outcome he was hoping for awaited him at the end of this journey.

He'd commit an unforgivable sin for the sake of the girl he loved. But then what?

*Ayame...*

*Worst-case scenario, I hang myself on this mountain, Renri thought as he followed Raicho.*



CHAPTER 2

## Dirge of Cherry Blossoms and Butterflies

July 23, Reimei 20. Just after ten PM.

At one of the top resorts in Ryugu, a taxi pulled up to the VIP entrance. Spring, Autumn, and Winter had arrived from Teishu.

“Just a little longer until you’ll be able to rest, Lady Hinagiku.”

“Yes... I’m fine... Sakura...let Hinagiku...carry...some bags.”

“I’ll take care of that, Hina. Itecho, you help Sakura with her luggage.”

“Okay. Here, Sakura, give me that. Let me carry the equipment.”

“Don’t mind me, Itecho, I can... Ah, wait.”

“What is it?”

“Please carry them, after all. I’ll help Lord Azami. He’s carrying Lady Nadeshiko, so someone else should get their bags... Oh no, they dropped her plushie!”

“Mmm... Are we there yet, Rindo...?”

“Yes, it won’t be long until you can sleep in bed. Ah, sorry Lady Himedaka! Thank you!”

“Oh, Lady Sakura... Thank you for picking that up for me.”

The Agents and Guards had taken a different plane from the Winter escorts and Agency staff. However, as the biggest airport in Yamato, the Teishu airport had plenty of flights to Ryugu, so they arrived at almost the same time. It had been after nine at night by the time they got in.

As the youngest Agent, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki had already been dozing off, so they went straight to the hotel. Their investigation would begin in earnest the

following day.

Zansetsu Kayo had been incredibly thorough with his arrangements, and his aide, Tsubame Aboshi, had been there to receive the Agency representatives when they arrived at the Teishu airport. Zansetsu had also reserved the hotel for them all, so once everyone finished checking in at the lobby, they split up and went their separate ways.

Without his help, each group would have had to stay in a different hotel, which would inconvenience security. As it was already late, they had dinner in their own rooms, eating what they'd bought at the airport.

Tsubame, who would be their guide for the duration of the trip, had been the one to suggest this. The young boy always had a nervous air about him, but he was incredibly capable. He spoke briskly to everyone as they received their key cards and got ready to go to their rooms.

“If I could please have your attention for a moment.”

His eyes were so blue that once you saw them, you just couldn’t help but listen.

“Breakfast begins at six thirty, and please don’t forget to bring your meal vouchers to the dining area. I will have cars ready to leave as soon as breakfast is over. Unfortunately, I can’t drive, so I’ll only be the navigator. If there’s anything you need, you can call my room. Now then, see you tomorrow.”

Tsubame gave everyone permission to go. It was odd to see a child giving orders to a group of adults, but no one could argue against it, considering his competence. However, once everyone had left, his only close acquaintance, the Guard of Spring Sakura Himedaka, called out to him in concern.

“Do you have a moment, Mr. Aboshi?”

“Of course, Lady Himedaka,” Tsubame replied happily, before balking at the sight of the woman beside her.

It was Hinagiku. The Agent of Spring was the half sister of his boss, Zansetsu, and the person they were protecting in secret.

“We’ll be eating what we already bought for dinner, right?” Sakura continued.

"We already had some food on the flight, but we still have our dinner. You've got a room all to yourself, if I remember right, so would you mind if we ate there with you? Lady Hinagiku already said she didn't mind, and I thought we could talk a bit before going to bed."

"Erm..."

Tsubame's joy at the invitation immediately showed across his face, but he couldn't say yes right away.

Zansetsu was hiding his presence from Hinagiku and had sworn all of their acquaintances to secrecy. As his subordinate, it would be best for Tsubame to involve himself with her as little as possible.

"Lady Himedaka, I..."

He faltered, but Sakura spoke without reserve.

"What is there to be worried about? You and I were raised in the same orphanage, and we both were picked up by persons of high rank."

It seemed she was still keeping the most important part a secret.

"I've already explained the situation to Lady Hinagiku. Your master may not show themself in public due to our poor relationship with the Town, but I've told her that they are the same person who's been supporting us since spring. She is quite grateful for it."

That was about 70 percent truth and 30 percent lie. Other than the facts that this person was Zansetsu Kayo and that he was doing so out of concern for his younger sister, everything else Sakura had said was true. Tsubame had nothing to complain about.

"Tsuba...me," Hinagiku said with a smile.

"Y-yes?"

"Hinagiku...gets help...to have...a place...to live. That much...Hinagiku knew... but not...who was...behind it. But...it was...your master?"

"Yes..."

"Thank...you. It's been...such...a great...help. People...in the Town...don't like..."

Hinagiku...very much. So it's...good...to have...at least...one ally."

A sad look had passed over Tsubame's face upon hearing Hinagiku admit she wasn't liked.

But the Agent of Spring paid it no mind and kept smiling.

"Really... Thank you...so much."

She bowed deeply, and Sakura followed suit.

Seeing this, Tsubame let out a voice that was almost a shriek.

"P-please, raise your heads!"

"Hinagiku...is also...grateful...to you...Tsubame. You...helped us...so much...on our way...here."

"That goes without saying! This is my job!"

"...Treating people...with kindness...isn't...as obvious...to everyone...as you...might think. Please give...Hinagiku's...gratitude...to your...master...as well."

"I will! I promise!"

"So...let's have...dinner together...okay?"

"Yes! Gladly!"

Caught up in Hinagiku's words, Tsubame hadn't been able to stop himself from saying yes.

As soon as he realized what had happened, Tsubame's face contorted into a look of shock. Sakura and Hinagiku grinned and half dragged him to his room.

"You've said yes now, so let's go have dinner together."

"Yes...let's. What...did you get...for dinner...Tsubame?"

"Uh, um, Salisbury steak... Are you sure about this? I'm not really worthy of your company..."

Tsubame kept trying to object, but the Spring pair pulled him along behind them.

To Hinagiku and Sakura, Tsubame was a person from the same hometown with whom they could chat openly; it was the first time they'd ever had

someone like that. The girls simply wanted to be friends with him.

“...”

From a distance away, someone silently watched the three of them. It was Rosei.

He reluctantly turned away and looked back at Itecho. Seeing him from behind, his reliable Guard looked lonelier than usual.

“You okay, Itecho?”

“Why do you ask?”

Even his voice sounded twice as tired as normal.

“You don’t look too well.”

Rosei had wanted to have dinner with Spring himself, but he’d chosen to go with Itecho instead for a reason.

*Seriously, what’s gotten into him?*

Itecho seemed distracted, something that Rosei had first taken notice of when they’d boarded the private jet. They’d had no time to talk alone until now, though, so he’d refrained from asking about it.

“...I’m fine. Here’s your room. I’ll be in the next one over. Call me if you need anything.”

Having finished setting up a security camera and showing Rosei to his room, Itecho quickly withdrew into his own. Rosei followed him without saying a word, and the door shut behind them.

“...”

“...”

Itecho let out a deep sigh when he realized his master was in his room. But instead of shooing him away, he put his bag down and turned to Rosei.

“What? Is this about Lady Hinagiku?” Itecho asked softly. “If you wanted to have dinner with her, you should’ve said so earlier... Okay, let’s go to her room. Sakura will get mad, but she won’t kick us out. You got your dinner with you?”

Rosei was irrationally enraged by his Guard's response. "When did I say any of that?! I'm worried about you!"

Itecho blinked in shock. "Me...? I told you, I'm okay."

"Don't lie to me! I can tell. There's definitely something off with you! I couldn't say anything in front of the rest of the Seasons, but tomorrow I want you to rest or go see a doctor. There's still time to do something like that. I'll tell you what we find out in our investigation. Don't try to just stick it out when you're sick!"

"Rosei..."

"You have to live a long life for my sake as well, got it? And don't you lie to me. I'm not buying it."

"It's not a lie. My body's perfectly fine... Sorry I worried you... Did I really look that bad? If I had to put it down to anything, it's probably just a bit of mental exhaustion..."

Itecho sat down on the bed and heaved another sigh.

It was obvious he was exhausted. The group was so big this time, and having more people to protect only added to the burden on the Guards. However, Itecho was the most experienced Guard of this generation, and their schedule today hadn't been particularly tiring for him. There were few things that could pain him enough to break his poker face.

"...Really? So you're not like that because of our itinerary?"

"..."

"Heat exhaustion, then? Or if there's something on your mind, it would have to be about either me, Hina...or Sakura."

Itecho's reaction as he said *Sakura* was plain to see.

"Sakura, eh? What about her? I do remember you talking with her and Mr. Azami..."

"..."

"She seemed to be acting weird, too. So what's the problem? Why haven't

you told me? I know you hide stuff from me as part of your job, but if it's affecting you this much, then tell me. Ask me for help. Yeah?"

"...So you *can* act like a proper lord when it suits you."

"Rude. When am I ever improper?"

Itecho remained silent and pointed at the chair, indicating for Rosei to sit, who obliged.

"Keep this a secret. Under no circumstances are you to tell Lady Hinagiku this, okay?"

Rosei could never have imagined what Itecho was about to reveal.

"Mr. Zansetsu proposed to Sakura? And she's thinking about saying yes?"

Rosei wasn't bewildered as such, but he was quite surprised.

"That makes no sense, she..."

*...she's in love with you.*

Even before they reunited, but more so afterward, to Rosei, it had always seemed like Sakura was after Itecho.

He sensed her feelings were not unlike what he felt for Hinagiku.

So why would she marry someone else?

"She seems to believe it's what's best for Lady Hinagiku..."

Now it made sense.

"You mean, like, to consolidate her position?"

"...How'd you figure that out so quick?"

As Itecho's eyes widened in surprise, Rosei's narrowed.

"I heard some stuff...at the theme park."

Rosei thought of Sakura's slightly sad-looking profile as he spoke.

"There's a lot on her mind right now. All of it related to Hina..."

Itecho sighed. "I'd imagine..."

"Seriously... They banished her from the Town of Spring twice, don't forget."

"Yeah."

"She can't trust the Himedakas, either, and the Townchief is the same person who called her back, then banished her. They're probably hoping to find some sort of excuse to get her away from Hina and replace her with a Guard who's easier to control. It seems that's what Sakura's afraid of. And her relationship with the Town got even worse after what happened in spring."

Itecho grimaced. He worried terribly about Sakura, but there was little he could do to help. Especially considering another Town's leadership was involved.

"I would guess Mr. Zansetsu also senses that atmosphere in the Town, which is why he proposed," reasoned Rosei.

"..."

"Sakura is an obstacle in the eyes of the Townchief, so naturally, Mr. Zansetsu—a member of Maverick Rabbit Horn and someone who has an ax to grind with the bigwigs—would want her. Even more so when it means keeping her by Hina's side. It's better to have a Guard that isn't under the Townchief's control. She's loyal to a fault."

"So you're saying Sakura should marry for profit?" Itecho asked, obviously displeased.

"...Look, I didn't say I agree." Rosei pointed at Itecho, emphasizing his point. "I was only laying out the facts and making an educated guess, okay?"

Itecho stood up from his seat, walked over to his lord, and pushed his finger down. Flames of fury burned in his eyes—though they weren't directed at Rosei but at the whole situation.

"What you say makes sense," Itecho said, a cold edge to his voice. "It would be easier for Sakura to cooperate with the Town if she was the wife of a son of the Kayo family. They would be able to keep the Townchief in check. But what

about after they're married?"

Rosei hadn't considered what might happen next.

"Her mother-in-law would be the Shirafuji woman who tried to kill Lady Hinagiku. She's currently married to Shungetsu Kayo. The rumors say she's been undergoing medical treatment all this time, but who knows when she'll return. And once she does, Sakura would have to live in that environment that's so awful even the Kayo kid himself complains about it. I can already see the trouble that would cause. The Townchief who banished her would become her family. You think she'd be happy like that?"

"Uh..."

"Sakura is keeping the Town at arm's length right now because they don't get along, but it's not all bad... If the two of them truly did love each other, then she'd probably be able to tough it out, but that's not the case, is it? She'd be sacrificing herself for Lady Hinagiku..."

The expression on Itecho's face seemed almost physically pained.

"Why do people only ever see what she can do for them...without a care for her life?"

He only ever thought about the Spring girl's happiness.

"You think she can just put up with anything?"

He noticed things about her that others didn't, and mere kindness didn't account for that attention.

"It's not like Sakura thinks she's special!"

Sakura Himedaka was a large part of Itecho's life.

They'd first met ten years earlier, forged a mentor-mentee relationship, and enjoyed their time together before Hinagiku had been kidnapped.

He'd found her knocking at the Town gate in tears and taken her in to keep her safe.

Day after day, Itecho had been bolstered by Sakura's presence.

And eventually, he'd lost her.

It was only once she was gone that he realized how much he loved her.

Then, this spring, she'd finally come back.

They weren't just colleagues or an estranged tutor and apprentice.

"She only pretends to be strong out of love for Lady Hinagiku."

Sakura's life was a part of Itecho's.

"...Itecho."

Rosei had listened silently to the outburst, but he couldn't stand what Itecho said next.

"She didn't get strong to put up a facade or for her own sake. She's sacrificing herself for loyalty's sake."

It pierced Rosei's heart. That was the one thing he hadn't wanted to hear.

"Itecho."

He wouldn't listen to any criticism. Itecho was self-restraint incarnate; the fact that he was so fired up just proved how heavily the issue was weighing on him.

"I... I can't stand to see Sakura continue to be beaten down like this... She's suffered so much already, and they want to put her through even more? That Kayo kid is only thinking about himself!"

He raised his voice as though Zansetsu was there in the room with them. But it was only Rosei.

"If he really cared about Sakura, there's no way he would've proposed to her!"

"...Itecho!" Rosei shouted suddenly, shocking Itecho into silence.

"Rosei...?"

"Don't talk bad about Hina!"

Rosei's scolding brought a remorseful look to Itecho's face.

“Hinagiku... Hina didn’t become an Agent because she wanted to! She’s not making Sakura sacrifice herself for her!!”

Itecho could hear a cry for help in Rosei’s passionate shout, and he finally realized his mistake.

He’d raised his voice against the one he was supposed to protect.

“...Rosei, I... I didn’t mean it like that...”

Rosei shot him a sad glare. Agents of the Four Seasons shared their lives with their Guards. It was inevitable for Hinagiku to come up while talking about Sakura. Itecho hadn’t meant what he’d said the way Rosei had taken it.

“...No. I shouldn’t have said that... I’m sorry...”

Itecho hung his head. Rosei didn’t feel good about it, either. He pursed his lips and chided himself internally.

*Idiot. This isn’t what I should be telling him right now.*

His emotions had gotten the better of him. This wasn’t how he’d wanted this to go.

He’d started this conversation out of concern for Itecho’s well-being. And at the root of Itecho’s worries were his feelings for Sakura, who was Rosei’s friend, too. Making Itecho feel bad now meant wasting the concern he’d first shown him by speaking out.

*And besides, nothing he said is wrong.*

Everyone knew that Guards sacrificed their own lives for the sake of the Agents.

They lived for the Agents. It was their duty.

*That’s why I felt so bad.*

Rosei knew he was alive because of Itecho’s sacrifice.

*I can never repay you for that.*

If Rosei wasn’t a god, he wouldn’t have had to force this on Itecho.

*If only I wasn’t a god.*

But he was Yamato's only Winter. That was why he suffered.

*"Why do you say that?"*

*"I see your suffering from closer than anyone else."*

*"You made me into a god."*

It was *because* he knew he was sacrificing his retainer that he thought like that.

"I'm sorry, Rosei..."

Itecho had apologized again before Rosei could find the words.

"...I understand, Itecho."

Rosei finally showed remorse, and Itecho raised his head to look at him.

"...Of course, I know you don't really think about Hina that way...but I still didn't want to hear that from you."

"...Rosei."

Rosei looked uncharacteristically meek. "I know you Guards sacrifice yourselves for us Agents. But I can't let go of you, and you can't leave me here, either, can you?"

The question sounded presumptuous, but Rosei was serious.

"Yeah..."

Itecho was delighted to hear Rosei say something like that with conviction.

Any Guard would feel the same way upon hearing that from their Agent.

"That's just how it is; we're stuck in this situation together...so I didn't want to talk about something we can't change. Or are you saying you could leave me?"

Their relationship was like a curse, in a way, so perhaps that love was just a prop—an artificial emotion created by someone. One couldn't deny the possibility entirely.

"Don't be stupid, Rosei. You'll use me up to the end and give me a proper burial once I'm dead."

But the relationship between gods and men was such that even that was acceptable.

Rosei could have taken Itecho's response as hurtful, but he did not.

"...All right."

Rosei nodded, and Itecho returned the gesture.

"Let me end this by apologizing," said Itecho. "I can't simply ignore what happens to Sakura... I know that's just an excuse, but I got too worried and lost my cool."

"I'm also worried about her..."

They remained silent for a while, until Rosei told his Guard to sit down. Itecho did so with a tired look on his face.

"...We got off topic," Itecho murmured. "I'm sorry about what I said, but I want to keep an eye on her so she won't get caught up in something terrible... Could you keep her in mind, too?"

*"Keeping her in mind is not enough,"* Rosei countered, collecting himself. "We have to come up with a plan."

Itecho was taken aback.

"What d'you mean? We've got nothing to do with this. What can we do?"

"Oh? So you're just going to stand back and watch?"

"No, I mean... We're from different Towns. It's not something we can butt into. I would've already taken care of it if it was going on in the Town of Winter."

"So you're just going to give up? Is that all it means to you?"

"...Rosei."

His words weighed on Itecho's heart.

"I don't want to see Sakura suffer, but as the Kangetsu heir, I have to

prioritize you, the scion of the Kantsubaki family. That is my duty.”

“...Sorry about that.”

Itecho wasn’t being timid; he’d simply made his decision based on common sense.

He didn’t have the right to interfere in someone else’s marriage, even less so when they were from a different Town. It could even end up affecting Rosei. That was why he’d kept his worries to himself.

“You’re right, though,” conceded Rosei. “We can’t just object to the marriage. And, from what I’ve seen, I don’t think Mr. Zansetsu dislikes Sakura. You didn’t get that feeling, either, did you?”

“I...”

Itecho struggled to find the words, not wanting to admit Rosei was right.

“So you thought so, too. I do think they formed some sort of emotional connection outside of our knowledge. Sakura also seems to find his personality appealing.”

“...”

Itecho was silent.

“Maybe they’ll be able to get along. In which case, it might be better for us to give them our support. What do you think?”

Although he was notorious for his poker face, Itecho looked devastated.

Seeing his reaction, Rosei silently apologized.

*I’m sorry, Itecho.*

He knew that he was being mean to his best friend.

He hadn’t truly meant what he’d said.

*I’m your biggest supporter, but I’m also Sakura’s ally.*

He’d lied to change the outcome of this for the better, even if it was just a little bit. No matter who or what got in his way, he would interfere with Zansetsu and Sakura’s marriage.

*She's in love with you, Itecho.*

Sakura liked Zansetsu as a person, but her feelings didn't go any further than that.

Rosei knew what Sakura's eyes looked like when she saw the person she loved.

They didn't look like that for Zansetsu.

*I won't let her become even unhappier than she already is.*

He only brought up the issue of supporting her decision to try to light a fire under Itecho. He'd wanted Itecho to realize why he himself was so furious.

*How do you really feel about Sakura?*

Did he care about her only as a protégé, or as something more?

*I want to think there's a deeper reason for you to get this mad.*

He wanted Itecho to realize he subconsciously loved her.

How did Itecho Kangetsu feel about Sakura Himedaka? That was a mystery even to his lord. It was obvious he cared for her, but Itecho acted like a guardian to anyone, so that didn't necessarily mean it was romantic love.

However, there were times when his feelings seemed too deep to be described as a simple mentor-protégé relationship—including what he'd just said today. If that wasn't how it was, then he should stop being so misleading. Rosei clearly knew and conveyed what he liked and what he didn't; Itecho's behavior was incomprehensible to him. He wanted to tell him, *If you don't love Sakura, then don't play around with her like that.*

*The problem was that Itecho never played around.*

After what had happened ten years earlier, Itecho had lived his life with Rosei as his number one priority.

That wasn't to say Rosei knew absolutely everything about the man's private life—but they did live together, so he got the feeling that Itecho was far detached from anything to do with romance. Perhaps he'd experienced something like that when he was younger, but by now, Itecho had probably

forgotten what it was like to love someone romantically.

Plus, since Itecho felt guilty about a lot of things regarding Sakura, it only made sense that he might have suppressed his feelings for her. At least, that was Rosei's theory.

In which case, if Rosei said the wrong thing, Itecho could end up closing off his feelings for her forever. He had to be careful.

*This might be a crossroads in Itecho's and Sakura's lives.*

Would their relationship turn romantic?

Rosei hadn't forgotten what he'd said to his friend about supporting that love.

"Itecho, hey! Say something."

He looked more and more frustrated.

"...Give me a second. I'm thinking."

"Oh. Well, you don't have to give me an answer right away, and it's not like Sakura's going to get married tomorrow, is it? I'm sure she'll mull it over for a while."

"..."

"So for the time being, let's just keep an eye on her and be prepared in case she says she doesn't want to do it after all. We need a plan for that, though, don't you think?"

"Yeah... You're right..." Itecho agreed. "So long as it doesn't mean picking a fight with the Town of Spring."

"Good. Then how about we adopt her?"

Just when he'd put Itecho's fears to rest, Rosei threw him a grenade.

"What?" Itecho asked, his voice cracking.

"She's a girl of Spring, but she's also of Winter. Neither Mr. Zansetsu nor the Town of Spring understand that part. We took her in when the Town banished her. Considering that, they shouldn't be able to argue against us so easily."

Rosei could be terribly clever in times like this. He kept on talking.

“Maybe we should make them realize that—tell them she’s ours, and that they don’t get to treat her however they want. The best way to do that would be to give her the Kangetsu or Kantsubaki name.”

“But... Rosei...”

“We’ve talked about this before, remember? Nothing ended up happening, since she left, but we can still do it. Then we’d be able to protect her for as long as you or I live. The Town of Spring can’t do anything about the Kantsubakis and the Kangetsus, especially since we had her living with us before. We’d be able to defend her as our kin if anything happened. And since you’re the most worried about Sakura, how about making her a Kangetsu?”

“...”

It was a good idea, but Itecho was bewildered. “I don’t think she’ll agree to something like that...”

“That’s why I’m telling you it’s a way out. We’ll just make the offer to her for when she feels like she needs somewhere to run.”

“But...”

“Considering her standing, she can’t reject Mr. Zansetsu so easily. He’s been supporting her, and he is Hina’s brother. But we protected them after what happened with Spring, so coming with us would be a good excuse to say no. That would take a weight off her shoulders. We can also do something to solidify her position as a Guard. At the very least, the Kayos would have to talk with us first, and they can’t meddle with a different Town, either. On top of that, we’re Winter—the Kayos don’t outrank us in social status. But more important than anything else...I’m sure she’d feel more at ease with us than with Mr. Zansetsu.”

Rosei internally apologized to Itecho as he delivered his next words.

“So...you don’t mind becoming her brother, do you?”

He drilled it into Itecho that this would be the result if he didn’t involve himself. The Guard was at a loss for words.

*Think about it, Itecho.*

“You were always like siblings.”

Why couldn’t Itecho just say, “Yeah, we were”?

“What? You don’t like that idea?”

Why did he only have to protect her from afar?

*Think, Itecho.*

Why was this man, who could set aside almost anything, so fixated on this one girl?

“It’s not that I don’t want to... I just don’t think she’d say yes...”

He wouldn’t look so pained if he only loved her as a guardian.

“She’ll do anything for Hina, so she might if we phrase it correctly. That’s why she’s thinking of saying yes to Mr. Zansetsu, right? She’d be thinking the same if we had offered it to her first.”

“...”

“I feel bad saying this, but we’re a safer bet for her than Zansetsu. Hina already thinks of you as her big brother... So instead of that other brother she barely even knows about, she’d rather be protected by you, as *your* sister, right? She’ll understand. If you don’t want to, we can always make her a Kantsubaki instead, depending on how we put it to her.”

“I mean, maybe...”

“But this is only a plan for now, so keep it secret. Save it for when it seems like they’re really going to get married.”

Itecho still seemed hesitant, but he nodded.

“...All right.”

*Think about it seriously, Itecho,* Rosei thought with a prayer.

“More than anything, Itecho... I want you to be her ally.”

Rosei’s eyes, as cold as winter and as beautiful as snow, pierced Itecho.

“She’s my friend. And I owe her my life,” Rosei continued. “She took a bullet for me during the attack on the Town of Winter. She helped me when I tried to

kill myself. She held my body up when I hung myself. Really, she's so... benevolent. And I...want to use all my power to protect her. I care for Sakura Himedaka, and I'm in her debt. You're my retainer. You should think the same."

His words were too heavy. Rosei, Itecho, and Sakura had lived together for five years. Sakura hadn't only been under their protection—she'd supported them back in kind.

"So this is an order. Itecho Kangetsu, go and speak with Sakura, as an individual, not as her mentor. Before Mr. Zangetsu takes her away from you."

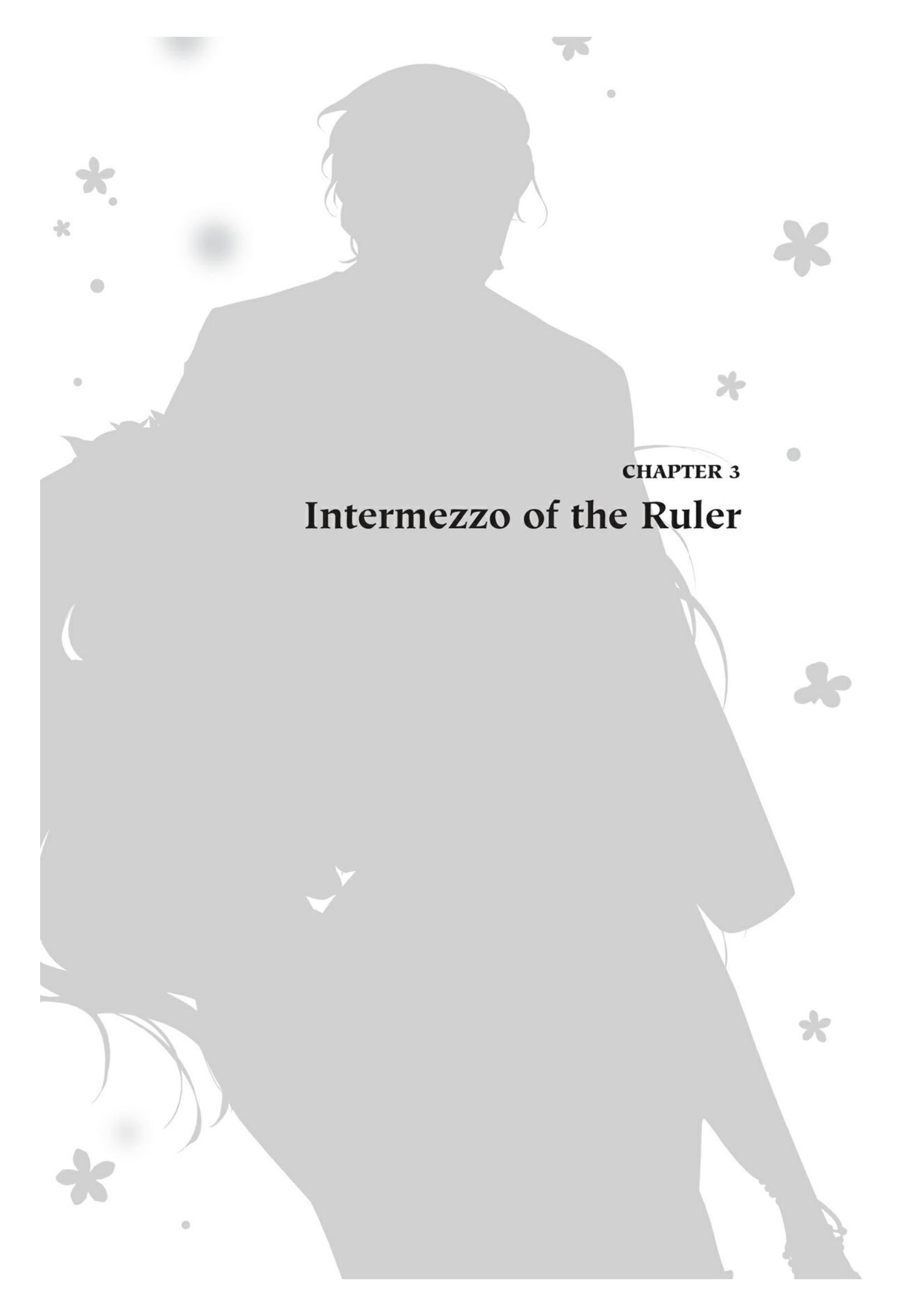
He used the word *order* to relieve Itecho of any guilt.

The best way to get him moving was for Rosei to command him to do so.

"...Yes, sir."

Itecho sealed away all his hesitation and answered as a loyal vassal.

The story of the cherry blossoms and the butterflies resumed at the same time as the strife between Twilight and the Dark Wolf.



CHAPTER 3

## Intermezzo of the Ruler

July 24, Reimei 20. Early morning in the Town of Summer.

As the gods incarnate slept, each one burdened by their own complicated situation, the Townchief of Summer, Seiran Matsukaze, was still awake, sipping coffee at home.

There seemed to be something weighing on his mind, as he still made no move to get ready for bed.

Dawn was about to break, and he remained sitting on the sofa. Once the cup of coffee was empty, he gazed at the indirect lighting in the room before opening the curtains and looking outside.

“...”

*It will be morning soon.*

The sun's glow would light up the night sky as the Archer of Dawn carried out her job.

As he thought of the duties of the gods incarnate, Seiran lacked the gratitude anyone would feel. They were but apparatuses of the world. It was only natural for a tool to work as it was designed.

Only fools felt thankful for what was natural.

*Will we be able to kill the Agents of Summer before the day is out?*

There wasn't a shred of remorse in that thought. Gods incarnate were beneath him.

They were replaceable dolls. Sacrifices. Cogs in the machine.

They were tools that deserved no pity—so thought a certain number of people. It was a cruel way of thinking, but so was the system of the gods incarnate.

People gathered around those with talent and power, whether they were gods incarnate or humans.

Religious offerings and businesses formed around such power, creating an economic sphere.

This economic sphere was passed down through the generations until it became an independent organism on the scale of national organizations.

The administrators of the gods incarnate—the Towns and Agency of the Four Seasons, and the Fugeki clan—held great power.

How had their administrators become stronger than the divine?

It came from the fact that the gods incarnate awoke in childhood.

Children were easily exploited. It was not difficult to impose pressure and responsibilities on an inexperienced child and take their family hostage to control them. And even if the child in question didn't accept it, those surrounding them would convince them.

So the standing of the living gods had fallen, and the power of the people around them had risen.

That was how Seiran, his parents, their parents, and their ancestors had created a kind of puppet state.

Their endless hard work had created this aristocracy, a group now dubbed Doyen Turtle, while those who opposed them and their rule were named Maverick Rabbit Horn.

To Seiran, Maverick Rabbit Horn was his enemy. They ought to be ashamed of themselves for living in this economic sphere and complaining about the powers that be.

*On whose society do you think your lives are built?*

He had pride in the fact that he descended from rulers.

*Why pity the sacrifices? It's like feeling bad for the fish on your plate. It's ridiculous.*

Thinking back, at no point in his life had Seiran felt respect for the gods incarnate.

Seiran had been born in the Town of Summer as the firstborn son of the main branch of the prominent Matsukaze family.

He was a long-awaited child, as his mother had had two miscarriages before.

This family was encouraged to propagate their bloodline, so a great burden had been placed on his mother's shoulders upon marrying into such a lineage.

Because of that, Seiran had been spoiled rotten as a child.

He lacked for nothing in childhood.

He'd had people waiting on him even before he became Townchief.

*"You don't have to do anything but stay healthy."*

He would get anything he wanted.

After fighting so hard to give birth to her precious child, his mother didn't want him to go through any hardships. She wanted him to be healthy and happy.

Thankfully, apart from the fact that he was a bit of a light eater, Seiran was completely healthy.

Such ignorance of hardship was a blessing, not a bad thing. Growing up surrounded by love had given Seiran confidence and a sense of self-esteem.

What wasn't so good was that his mother's doting love had made Seiran expect to be served by others as a matter of course.

Seiran was at the top, everyone else was at the bottom. He'd tell others to jump, and they would ask how high. Hard work was something everyone else did, not him.

This line of thinking affected his mother, too. Her support came from a place of love, but Seiran believed it was reverence.

It raised him into an entitled man.

It wasn't rare for people to be arrogant in their youth, but as they grew, they would experience failure. Their illusions would shatter, and any real problems would be averted. But Seiran's tendency to look down on others was only further solidified by those around him.

The person who influenced Seiran's life wasn't his loving mother, however, but his disinterested father.

Unlike her, he didn't care much about Seiran—or anyone in their family, really.

His focus was set on the power struggle for the administration of the Town of Summer—nothing else mattered to him.

Everyone has a story. Seiran's father was no different.

His father, Seiran's grandfather, was the Townchief of Summer; however, he had never been given the chance to take his father's seat. The protocol for appointing a Townchief differed from Town to Town, but in the case of Summer, the current seat would recommend a successor, and the Administration would make further recommendations to challenge them.

In the end, although Seiran's father received his grandfather's recommendation, he lost the game of musical chairs. From that point on, his lust for control burned as he pressed his own cause. In public, he said he wanted to make the Town a better place, but in reality, he just wanted the title of Townchief.

A Townchief's tenure varied from person to person and could end up lasting decades. As there were many responsibilities that complicated the succession, and as very few people could keep the other bigwigs in check while in the seat, the position tended to be valued and held for long periods of time.

Seiran's father lost the next race. And the one after that.

People naturally thought it would be impossible for him to become Townchief after so many losses.

He was painfully aware of that. So one day, Seiran's father changed his goal.

He might not be able to become Townchief himself—but if his son did, wouldn't that mean that all his hard work would pay off and his dream would come true, after all? It was like a revelation had dawned upon him.

Seiran had lived like a king, but that was the moment his childhood came to a close.

Just before he turned eight, his father, who had never even said “good morning” or “good night” to him, started talking to Seiran.

Their conversations were nothing like the ones normal fathers and sons have, though. It was but education, as his father observed how to best groom his undeveloped child into what he wanted.

For whatever reason, people tend to be more attentive to those who reject them rather than to those who accept them. One insult is more memorable than a hundred compliments.

As such, Seiran became obsessed with earning his father’s respect.

He also had the talent to answer his expectations.

*Study harder. Father is watching.*

*Watch your manners. Do as Father does.*

*Learn how to make use of others. One day, you will be Townchief.*

Seiran subconsciously knew that he was being used to become a copy of his father, but that didn’t bother him.

*“Seiran, you’ll become Townchief for me, won’t you?”*

He simply wanted to make his father’s wish come true.

But sadly, Seiran’s father passed away before that happened.

In his dying moments, he kept repeating:

*“I wanted to see you become Townchief.”*

*“Come to my grave to give me the news.”*

*“I can’t rest in peace if I don’t see you in your moment of glory.”*

His father had cursed Seiran. His mother had insisted time and time again that he not place such a heavy burden on their son, to let him live the way he wanted, but to no avail. The curse had taken hold.

*“Yes, Father.”*

He let himself be cursed.

His mother’s words couldn’t reach his heart—only those of the parent who’d rejected him.

His father had been the one imperfection in his perfect world. It filled Seiran with joy when his father looked at him. It didn’t matter that he treated his son as a tool.

*“I promise, I will become Townchief and visit your grave to tell you.”*

A few years later, that twisted familial bond bore fruit.

After a tough fight, Seiran fulfilled his lifelong wish. And as promised, he visited his father’s grave to bring the news.

*“I did it.”*

The grave gave no response, but regardless, Seiran was happy.

He had the leadership skills to become Townchief, but that wasn’t all he’d needed. Seiran had laid the groundwork and dedicated himself to gaining supporters so that his father would see his achievements. He had poured most of his life into this goal.

Standing before the grave, Seiran regretted that he hadn’t been able to do it sooner.

His father had poured all his passion into Seiran so they could savor this moment. And yet...

*I was too slow.*

Seiran could count the number of times he remembered crying in his life; this was one of them.

*“I’m sorry, Father.”*

He’d been too slow to realize the importance of caring for his parents. He could finally look after and cherish his mother. And so Seiran found his *raison d’être*.

But his war was only just beginning.

After all, his worth depended on him maintaining his status.

Time passes, and we find ourselves in Reimei 20.

The entire Four Seasons society has been shaken to its core.

The Agent of Spring has returned, and the Agent of Autumn has been kidnapped.

Agent of Summer Ruri Hazakura and her Guard Ayame Hazakura have gone to Teishu to solve the case despite the Town’s resistance.

*These cogs think they’ve become humans?*

Stay put, listen, follow orders—Seiran believed that was all Agents ought to do, so the events that had unfolded couldn’t be more upsetting to him.

Naturally, he didn’t allow any of his emotions to surface. Some were against that sort of thinking.

As Townchief, it was his job to keep people with differing opinions united.

Regardless, it was suffocating having to stand back and watch as this played

out.

A new Agent appeared as soon as the last one died—trying to rescue one was useless. It was a waste of resources, and the most infuriating thing of all was that Agent of Winter, Rosei Kantsubaki, had visited the Town of Summer to propose the Four Seasons Alliance in his efforts to save Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

He had explained things and bowed cordially to ask for permission, but it was clear that the Agent would've frozen Seiran had he said no.

He still considered that to have been a threat.

Later, he'd received a report that a New Year assassin had nearly killed the Agent of Winter, and oh, how he resented New Year's incompetence at being unable to finish the job.

There was nothing harder to control than a fully grown god incarnate, to say nothing of one so individualistic.

There were other things that upset him, but they didn't particularly affect him personally. At least not until they ended up stabbing him in the back.

There were traitors in the Four Seasons Agency of every Town.

This was a turning point. He could no longer just watch.

*"How is this wrong, Father?"*

There was a criminal in his own family.

One of those who had collaborated with New Year and allowed them to enter the Agency building was Seiran's own son, who'd worked at the Agency.

National Security had taken him away, of course, but Seiran still found himself confused.

Why would his own son help New Year?

Seiran held disdain for the human gods themselves, yet he was proud of his family for their duty in maintaining the cycle of the four seasons.

He had no reason to believe he'd raised a son who admired the insurgents. Seiran hadn't taught him anything like that.

Upon meeting him at the station, he'd asked his son why.

*"I mean, the Agents are just tools that get replaced as soon as they die, right?"*

His son seemed unsure why his father would even ask.

*"You said so yourself, Father. So I thought, the insurgents have a point. You're the Townchief...and you said all that...so..."*

The contempt Seiran had imparted to his son, along with the idea that the Agents were nothing but puppets and tools for the Towns, had led the young man to empathize with New Year. He'd said it plain and simple: He had learned it from his father.

*Have I created a monster?*

Seiran's father had been his entire world, and now he was the world to his son.

A child's personality was undeniably affected by the environment in which they were raised.

The words you heard were the ones you repeated.

If only those words had been *thank you* and *be well*. But they were not.

Seiran's father hadn't said them to him, either; he hadn't needed him to become Townchief.

*So I thought...my son...would also...grow up right.*

The path diverged between people who were fine with living as an imitation

of someone else, and those who weren't. Seiran lacked the imagination to think of anything else.

His criminal son was a failure in Seiran's eyes, so he'd sent him to the Agency instead of to the Summer Administration. Seiran had other children; he could put his hopes on them to take over as Townchief.

He hadn't thought a child who'd been banished would continue to want his father's attention. Seiran had once been the same, but he'd since forgotten his own childhood feelings.

But Seiran's son reacted to his desire for approval in a different way.

*"It's your fault, Father. Why didn't you tell me this wasn't right?"*

It was then that he realized.

A parent's words to their children could just as easily become a curse as much as a blessing.

He didn't care that he was still cursed himself; he had to soldier on as Townchief despite it. It was no longer a problem that just involved him. There were things to be done with this position. People to be protected.

His monster of a son had to be protected, too, and Seiran had used money and threats to get people on his side to reduce his son's punishment.

He'd been working in the shadows every day since spring.

Having people to protect also meant having attackers.

Criticism from the townsfolk came right away.

It made no sense that a man from a family who had produced a criminal could be Townchief. How was he going to take responsibility for his son's crimes?

If they succeeded in taking Seiran down, the chance that he could climb back up to his current position was nonexistent. The honor passed down from generation to generation was about to end with his. He could not allow it. Staining his family's name would be the greatest sin, and he had to retain his position to save his son from prison.

*I had to make a threat out of the Hazakura sisters.*

He needed a new evil to maintain his perfect world. He controlled the flow of information to point toward a bigger problem and to divert criticism away from him.

*Doyen Turtle was also on board, and everything was going well, up to a point.*

The Hazakura sisters were quite useful.

Ruri Hazakura's behavior had been seen as problematic before, so it was easy to turn the public against her. Ayame Hazakura becoming the next Agent had been a surprise, but she seemed easier to manage than her little sister. Seiran had thought that if he was able to break her spirit, there would be hope for the future of the Administration.

Seiran succeeded in deflecting criticism by making the twins out to be a bad omen.

He only had to bribe or use some other means to get the dissenters on his side, reduce the number of critical voices, and play off his son's crime as less serious than it had been. It would take a long time, but it would be relatively simple.

The stain on his family would not be erased, but so long as they behaved for a few years, the people would forget, and criticism would peter out—a clever way to avoid taking responsibility.

*“Shouldn’t another person take over as Townchief?”*

*“It’s ridiculous that someone from a criminal family represents the Town.”*

*“He condemns other families and stays quiet about his own?”*

Seiran couldn't forget the slander that kept beating at his eardrums.

The annoying verbal attacks likely came from Maverick Rabbit Horn.

*Shut up already.*

They probably didn't have strong ambition like he did. Likely only a few of them really stood on the Agents' side. They were simply making noise because they had mud to sling at someone in power. Or at least, so Seiran thought.

*Meddling brats, all of them. They don't know what it's like to bear the honor of generations on your shoulders.*

And now Seiran had begun to launch a counterattack against the humiliation he'd suffered.

Seiran burned in anger as he stared at his phone.

The screen read *Fukuryo Doji*.

Fukuryo Doji—or, as the name meant, “a child waiting to ascend to a dragon”—was a recognized information broker in the Four Seasons society. Seiran thought he must have an abundance of confidence to call himself something like that, implying that one day he would rule over everything.

Seiran hadn't met him in person, nor did he know what Town he belonged to. Years ago, when Seiran was running for Townchief, he had gotten a referral and asked the information broker to dig up dirt on one of his rival candidates. He had been a client of Fukuryo Doji's ever since.

“...”

The phone in his hand was ringing, and Seiran answered it right away.

After a moment of silence, a man spoke.

*“This is Fukuryo Doji. The pieces are set on the board.”*

His voice was cold.

*“Have you sent your men?”*

No emotion could be read from it.

“Everything is ready; they’re on standby in Ryugu. Fukuryo Doji, we received news through the Agency that the other Agents have headed to Ryugu as well. On top of that, apparently the Agents of Summer have joined up with the Archer of Twilight. There are too many unexpected factors... What’re you going to do about this?”

*“I only provide information. Don’t ask me to take responsibility for anything that happens on-site.”*

His words, too, were just as cold.

*“I told you from the very beginning, I can give you some tactical pointers based on the information I have, but it will be your responsibility to execute the plan. If you think it’s too risky, then withdraw. That’s my recommendation. I’ve never forced you to do anything.”*

“...You’re responsible for your words, though. Or can’t I hold you to them?”

Seiran’s reply was equally without warmth. He had the ability to keep others in check. The force in his voice was such that any family member or subordinate would wince in reaction were they present. People tended to obey those like him out of fear, even if what they said was wrong.

Yet Fukuryo Doji did not care.

*“I simply connect people in trouble and suggest that some things might or might not happen.”*

He spoke like he was used to people taking this sort of high-handed tone with him.

*“I do things that may resemble the job of an adviser, but I am not being paid to give advice. I’m just conveying what other people have said. I add in a bit of advice as a bonus, and this became part of my reputation somehow, but allow me to clear up any misunderstanding: I am not an adviser. I am simply giving my opinion because my client wants an outside point of view. It’s up to the client to*

*decide whether to act on it or not. That is to say, what happens is up to you. You wanted to get in touch with others from Doyen Turtle. You wanted intel. I simply gave you a wider breadth of choice—at no point did I take the power to make decisions away from you. You have made decisions for yourself so far, as a man of your standing should. If you’re going to vent your unjustified anger onto me because of that, then I’ll give you back your money, and you can be sure I’ll never bother you again.”*

Seiran ground his teeth in indignation.

“So you’re just another vile merchant.”

“*Are those your last words to me?*”

“Fukuryo Doji...!!”

*“...I’m kidding. Well, only half kidding. Listen, you have to pay me some respect. I’m paying you respect. I’m calling you at these ungodly hours of the night because I care about you. But I am not your underling. We’re on equal footing here. So stop acting like you’re my boss. It’s annoying.”*

Seiran was at a loss for words. Fukuryo Doji had a point; Seiran’s irritation with the Agents and his impatience had made him attack the man from the moment he picked up the phone.

“...Then you should also stop trying to rile me up.”

No words of apology, as expected of Seiran.

Fukuryo Doji sighed audibly.

*“I told you it was a risky plan, but you said you wanted to do it anyway. You refused any plans to restore your name in the long term and said you wanted something quick. I definitely remember giving you a safer option.”*

“I already told you why: My position is in danger if I don’t do this quick. There’s no time. Maverick Rabbit Horn is planning my downfall. I need to let those against me know before the next Town meeting what’ll happen to them. I have to protect my name for the sake of the Town and for my descendants... Look, I’m not being a sore loser. I’m saying it’s too late to go back.”

Seiran’s words brimmed with conviction. His father had entrusted him with

this life, and a lot of people had worked hard to give him this honor. How could he simply discard it like that?

He had used up most of his life to bring about this dream.

And his will to protect it was only stronger because it wasn't *his* dream.

*“...The Agents are making a move because they’re also desperate. It’s a sign that things are going well for us. What you bigwigs need after embarrassing yourselves with the traitors in your ranks is a rule of terror to drown out the criticism. And that is what you’re creating. You’re the oppressors, and the Agents are the oppressed. It’s only natural that the ones in danger would make a move. The Agents are tools, but before that, they’re humans. Maverick Rabbit Horn is also made up of people. The pushback is coming from the fact that your oppression is so strong, they have no voice to object.”*

“Even so, the Agents of Summer have gone too far! They shouldn’t have the right to speak with the Archer of Twilight! Who’s going to take responsibility for that? Those damn girls should’ve died in spring...!”

“*What you have to do now is decide how to act, not whine about your enemy.*”

Fukuryo Doji was mostly right, but the words of an outsider always stung the ears of those involved. They rubbed Seiran the wrong way.

“...Fukuryo Doji... Do you mean to ally with the Agents?”

“*If that’s what you got out of this conversation, it just proves you really have lost your composure.*”

“You think I don’t want to stay composed?! I came up with all that bullshit about the environment and divine punishment, I got people in the EPA and the Fugeki clan on my side! I got so far! And now...!”

Seiran was shaking with rage.

“Those stupid little girls ran away! How did they not get caught?! Maverick Rabbit Horn must’ve helped them...! Those idiots, who don’t know the first thing about government, are ruining my plans...!”

“*About that—I’m sure they had a collaborator. Some people just have*

*sympathy for the Agents. Your way of doing things is too aggressive, after all. It's obvious you'd have some pushback."*

"...This is all so infuriating. Why is everyone trying to wreck what I've built?!"

Seiran kicked over the table in front of him, and his coffee cup broke on the floor. Fukuryo Doji heard the noise and let out a long sigh.

*"Could you please calm down so we can move the conversation forward already? Why're you trying to treat me like your therapist? That's not my job; I'm an information broker. So for the last time, stop yelling in the phone."*

"..."

Seiran always tended to take out his frustration on the things around him, and today it was worse than ever. He scratched his chest with a pained expression on his face; it seemed the blood had rushed to his head in anger.

Fukuryo Doji continued.

*"...Relax. Let's go over the situation. So the Agents of Summer took us by surprise and went to Mount Ryugu, and they met the Archer of Twilight there."*

Seiran managed a nod. He'd lost it when he first heard about that.

*"The Hazakura sisters want to do something about their reputation as bad omens. The Archer of Twilight is known for his strong sense of justice. We can assume they'll want to work together to solve the Dark Wolf mystery. But everything's still pretty much going according to your plan."*

"But the plan was to come up with the story that there was something wrong with this year's summer manifestation, have them repeat it in the countryside, and kill the girls there."

*"All that's changed is the scene of the crime. The story isn't over yet."*

His soothing reply helped Seiran keep his anger from erupting again.

*"The rest is still perfectly doable in Ryugu—the inauspicious twins met their harbinger and died in its land. In fact, that only makes it sound more natural."*

Despite the dangerous topic of conversation, Fukuryo Doji's voice remained monotone.

*"The townsfolk would also find it easier to accept the deaths of those foolish twins if they happen in the middle of the Dark Wolf mystery. Obviously, they will look into who did it, and as long as they're not stupid, they'll realize it was someone from Doyen Turtle. You are its leader in the Town of Summer... The townsfolk will be afraid. If you take care of the aftermath promptly, they will understand your competence and that any dissenters will be killed. They will fear and respect you—things any ruler needs. Then, while their attention is away from criticizing you, you can keep bribing and threatening people to get your son's case taken care of. This doesn't affect the plan much at all."*

Seiran was still suspicious.

*"But your intel says the Four Seasons Alliance is going to Ryugu, remember? Won't they get in the way of killing the twins?"*

*"It will be hard... Maybe you could pull it off if you focus on one instead of both of them."*

*"Which one?"*

*"Whichever. Kill either of them and they'll be too afraid to do anything. They're smart enough to understand you'll go for their parents next, that they died because they didn't accept their sins, and that this is what happens if they don't listen or overstep their bounds. If you can do that, it'll put a lid on any rising respect for the Agents, and you'll be able to take back your authority. If there's no other uncertain factors, I'd say you'll be able to squeeze by with passing marks. Right now, you have quite a few squads supporting you. Colleagues sent you their personal troops, and they're all heading to Mount Ryugu. Be grateful to your Doyen Turtle comrades."*

*"How many? I sent twenty of my own soldiers."*

*"About sixty in total. That might grow still."*

Seiran finally gave a sigh of relief.

*"...Just don't forget your opponent here is too dangerous to try and overpower with numbers. The insurgents would be killing them left and right if that was enough. You only have this chance because they'll be looking for the Dark Wolf in the mountains. We already have control over the Agents of Summer's comms,*

*thanks to a pawn of ours. So long as they don't realize we've taken over their phones, they won't know the other Agents are heading to Ryugu. You've warned the concerned parties, too, right?"*

"Spring's, Autumn's, and Winter's movements are being treated as confidential in anticipation of a possible insurgent attack. I sent a unit to bring them in, but we found out too late. They're supposed to arrive tomorrow...no, today now, in the morning at the earliest. If we're on time, we can stall them at the hotel."

*"If they end up meeting Summer and Twilight, you should withdraw immediately."*

"Yeah. In that case, we'll withdraw temporarily. We can only pray things go our way. That's why I want the commander to meet up with the other troops there. Can you share the contact?"

*"Yes. Let's keep talking business, then."*

Seiran kept talking with the unseen information broker. Once everything was settled, he finally managed to find some peace. All he had to do was leave the soldiers to take care of the rest.

Those in power were far away from the actual battle.

Seiran trusted he would hear good news tomorrow—or more likely the day after, and went to sleep.

He ignored the fact that he owed that peaceful sleep to the god incarnate who brought night.

The Four Seasons, Dawn, and Twilight. They all came equally to the innocent and the guilty.

Nobody knew the efforts of the people behind the scenes.

As the Agents and their enemies slumbered, someone withdrew themselves from the blessing of the night to keep working.

The young leader returned to the Town of Spring in the mountains of Teishu.

The veil of night had fallen in the Town, including around Zansetsu Kayo's elegant Yamatoan-style abode.

Both his father's family, the Kayos, and his mother's, the Shirafujis, owned multiple houses in the Town of Spring, but he lived in none of them, choosing instead to buy an empty house and remodel it for himself. It was too big for him alone, yet it seemed too small for the scion of the Kayo family. His childhood home vastly eclipsed it.

Still, to Zansetsu, it was a castle he could call his own.

His grandmother was Townchief. His father was set to take over from her one day. His mother was responsible for bloodshed. He hated all of it, and this was the place he went to get away from it. His room was incredibly bare, with only the minimum amount of furniture needed.

All it was to Zansetsu was a place he could sleep after work. Nothing more.

Zansetsu had been suffering from insomnia. He rubbed his brow and sighed before grabbing his phone.

*“Tsubame Aboshi speaking.”*

A sleepy-sounding boy answered.

*“Were you awake?”*

*“I just woke up now.”*

*“...Sorry.”*

*“Don’t be. You know I’m a light sleeper. You should be resting, though. That worries me the most... You don’t eat well when you’re alone, either...”*

*“How did you know? I didn’t have dinner tonight.”*

*“...Honestly. I told you to eat three square meals a day even when I’m away.”*

Zansetsu could easily picture the pout on Tsubame’s face.

*“How about you, Tsubame? Have you been eating properly?”*

*“Yes. Er...I should’ve notified you first, but Lady Himedaka invited me to eat*

*with her... Lady Hinagiku was also there, so I had dinner with them... I'm sorry."*

"What're you apologizing for?"

*"...I shouldn't be getting this opportunity before you do."*

"I sent you there to support them in my stead. You can socialize no problem, so long as she doesn't find out you're with me. So what did you talk about? Were Sakura Himedaka...and my sister doing well? I'd appreciate any details, no matter how trivial. As part of your report."

Tsubame felt a sense of duty overtake him, and he told Zansetsu about Sakura and Hinagiku: what they ate, what they liked, how they smiled. He reported on work, too, but mostly talked about the Spring girls. Zansetsu listened with a warm smile on his face.

"Sounds like not much has changed over there. Thank goodness... Sending you was the right choice. Tsubame... You're forced to act more grown-up than regular people and other kids in the Town. I'm sure it must be a lot on you. I'll make sure to reward you for your dedication. I'll get you something once this is over, so start thinking about what you want."

Zansetsu had wanted to show his appreciation for his subordinate, but he didn't hear joy on the other side of the line. Instead, it sounded like Tsubame was pouting.

*"...I'm not with you so I can get 'rewards'!"*

"It does make you easier to manage, though."

*"Come on, Lord Zansetsu!"*

*"...You don't want anything? It's a boss's job to reward his retainers. Let me do my duty by you."*

Hearing Zansetsu's clumsy response, Tsubame silently thought for a moment, before finally murmuring: *".....How about we go to a theme park together one day?"*

Zansetsu had been ready to buy him a million toys—he hadn't expected that at all. He blinked in surprise.

*"...Are you asking this for my sake? It's true, I've never been to such a place..."*

*“...No! If this was for you, I’d suggest the hot springs... You’re always so stiff. It’s like you’re made out of metal, and giving you a shoulder massage doesn’t do anything.”*

“So you’re calling me an old geezer now?”

*“No... I just want to go to a theme park with you. It’s okay if we don’t get on any rides. I just had so...so much fun...so I wanted you to experience it for yourself...”*

He was such a kind boy. Zansetsu lowered his brows.

“...You’re forgetting how hard I work you.”

*“You forget how you rescued me from the orphanage. I would’ve wasted away and died in there without you. Or been taken in by someone in Doyen Turtle and died the same way.”*

“...”

“...”

Zansetsu yielded and broke the silence.

“Okay... I’ll go with you wherever you want once this is all over.”

“Really?!”

“Really. So go back to sleep now. You can get another few hours in.”

Tsubame sounded excited on the other end of the line.

“Good night,” Zansetsu said before hanging up.

Silence took over the room as he finished his call with his young retainer.

“...”

A pleasant summer night’s breeze came in from the window. The whistling air caressed Zansetsu’s cheek.

*A trip to a theme park with a kid, eh? I’ve grown pretty soft.*

He chuckled as he thought back on their conversation. He used to dislike being surrounded by kindness. The simple fact that he hadn’t avoided making a promise to Tsubame was abnormal.

He felt like he'd grown weak, doing something like that.

*How am I supposed to fight like this?*

His profile was filled with love for his small retainer, but the emotion on Zansetsu's face gradually receded, and his brow set hard into that of the cold commander. He focused and found his heartless self again.

After a breath, Zansetsu grabbed his tablet and opened the call and voice changer applications. The only people up at this time were insomniacs, people whose lives were on a different schedule, and those who had something big to achieve.

"...It's me. How is it going?"

The person on the other end answered the call.

Who, like Zansetsu, was awake at a time like this?

The chorus of insects on the other end of the call was incredibly loud. They must've been outdoors. Their voice was quiet, partially drowned out by the sounds of nature.

His call with this mysterious person went on monotonously and businesslike.

"Sounds like they're moving ahead with the plan. Their forces will arrive at Mount Ryugu tomorrow, and they'll pretend the insurgents killed them. You're already prepared, aren't you? Yeah... The current situation is better. The Agents of Summer are safe. And if we take care of things before the other Agents arrive, they'll also be safe. They did a good job as a distraction."

The other person objected, and Zansetsu's voice turned softer.

"I know. We won't make sacrifices out of them."

Zansetsu walked to the window, still on his call. The night sky was free of clouds, and the moon and stars shone brightly.

The view in this hidden village wasn't obstructed by the high-rise buildings or neon lights of the city. The sky's natural beauty was on full display.

*All of you, just keep as still and quiet as corpses.*

He liked the Town only at this time of night, when everyone was already

asleep.

*I don't want to hear a breath.*

Everyone in the Town was an annoyance to him.

To Zangetsu, the world had been covered in filth ever since he was a kid.

Over the course of his short life, there were only a few times he'd found something he thought was beautiful.

Nothing at all mattered. It was so hard to live, he'd once cursed everything around him.

"However this ends, it'll be decided tomorrow...or today, at this hour. Call me the moment any danger comes up. I can't be there, but I'll send a shadow. If there's anything I can help with, I'll take care of it immediately. Anything else you want?"

But now, he had an easier time breathing.

Anyone could forget their pain when they focused on something else.

What Zangetsu really needed was some rest, but he had a difficult goal in mind that he wanted even more.

*Just deserts for those who made me and my sister suffer.*

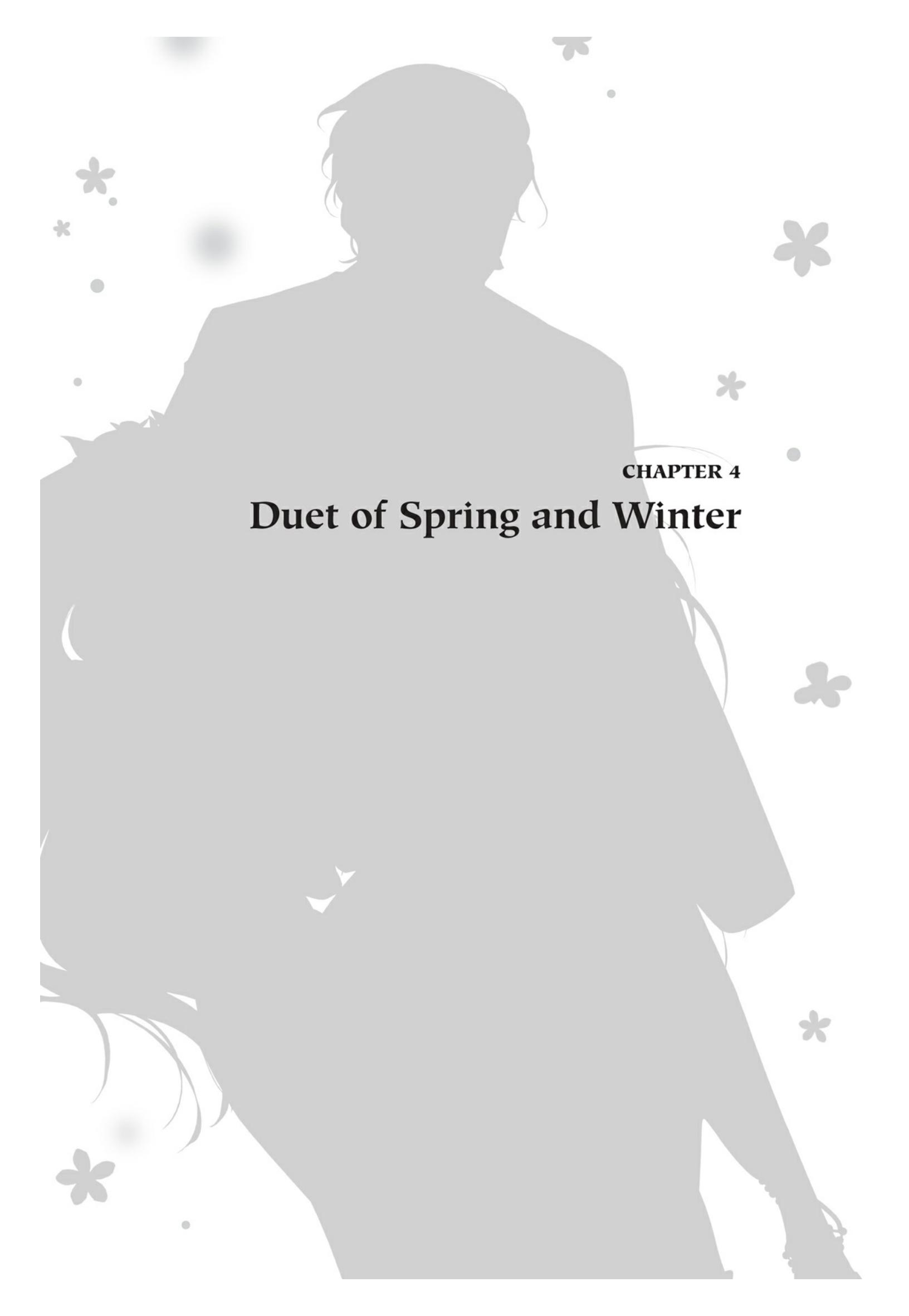
Zangetsu listened to the other person speak without interruption, then nodded.

"...No, thank you. Good luck... We've been in touch for a long time now, and I wouldn't want you to die... Oh, please. You misunderstand me. I may have sold the spark that will light this war, but it's not like I want people to suffer... Yes, that's right. I'm glad you understand. I am no merchant of death."

The other person must've said something funny, as an uncharacteristic smile flitted across Zangetsu's face.

"I am Fukuryo Doji. My task is to make sure the world takes its proper shape."

After uttering those words with the same lips he'd used to speak of love for his sister, Zangetsu hung up the call.



CHAPTER 4

## Duet of Spring and Winter

July 24, Reimei 20. Morning.

Spring, Autumn, and Winter had completed their long journey from Teishu to Ryugu, and the sky dawned on a new day.

“Itecho.”

A clear voice echoed across the hotel lounge.

Itecho turned around with his best attempt to hide a grimace. The voice belonged to the source of his distress: Sakura Himedaka.

“You weren’t in the dining hall for breakfast. Did you order room service?”

It wasn’t yet time for everyone to assemble, but his fellow travelers who’d already finished breakfast had begun to gather.

The people who were ready had naturally congregated in the lounge, where they relaxed on sofas scattered around the room. Itecho was uncharacteristically later than the others—the reason for which could be surmised from the bags under his eyes. He looked away from Sakura as he replied.

“No, I wasn’t hungry.”

“That’s a shame. The food here is amazing.”

Sakura had noticed Itecho’s absence and wondered about him during breakfast, probably because there was something she thought her mentor would’ve liked. It tugged at Itecho’s heartstrings. Despite her usual curt attitude, Sakura liked taking the initiative for the sake of others.

*I couldn’t sleep because I was thinking about you, and now I have no appetite.*

He could never say that out loud, though.

“I see... That’s unfortunate. Thank you for thinking about me.”

“I wasn’t... I just saw some things you’d probably like...”

“Really...?”

That sweet comment pulled Itecho’s eyes back to Sakura. His gaze landed on her big catlike eyes, and she noticed the change in his expression.

“Hey, are you feeling all right?” she asked.

A wry smile escaped him, hearing Sakura ask the same question Rosei had asked the day before.

“You’ve been like this since yesterday...,” she went on. “I thought it was just fatigue from the trip... But maybe it’s a migraine? Or is it your stomach?”

Sakura knew his weak spots and what usually ailed him from their five years of living together.

“...”

“There’s roasted green tea in the lounge. Let me get you some.”

“No...”

“There’s still time. The Winter Agency staff are checking to see whether there’s been any news on the Summer pair. We still can’t get ahold of them... and we can’t get the locations of their phones, either.”

“I see. If they’re making any big moves...they might be on Mount Ryugu...”

“Yeah. In any case, we gotta go there today. Spring and Autumn already agreed on this. No better way to look into the Dark Wolf mystery than to go directly to the scene of the crime.”

“Right. But we’re still close to the airport. It’s going to take us about an hour and a half to reach the foot of Mount Ryugu by car. I heard it even takes forty-five minutes to get there from the Town. We should head out as soon as possible.”

“Even so, there’s still time for you to get some tea. You should get a drink even if you don’t feel hungry.”

“...”

"What? We're gonna climb a mountain, you realize? You need to look after your body from the moment you wake up... I'm saying this out of concern for you."

Sakura was put out by Itecho's lack of reaction, and Itecho deflected his attention to the others. Behind Sakura were Rosei, Hinagiku, and the Autumn representatives seated amiably around a table.

Rosei noticed him watching and turned to look at his Guard. Itecho could feel the pressure of his silent gaze.

*I know.*

He was telling him to do what he'd promised yesterday. Itecho followed his lord's command.

"Sakura, do you have time to talk right now, just the two of us?"

"That's kinda sudden..."

Sakura looked over her shoulder. The Agents were all together, and there were enough bodyguards to look after them, meaning the two Guards could leave without issue. Sakura told Hinagiku where she was going, then left the lounge with Itecho.

The end of the long corridor had an open space for the elevators, and it was there where Sakura and Itecho stopped to talk. The windows had been designed to let in as much light as possible and looked out on the scenery of Ryugu. Looking down, Itecho could see trees lining the roads, which gave the city a southern feel. It was exotic compared to Teishu and Enishi—Sakura's and Itecho's respective homelands—and the sight similarly caught Sakura's attention.

"If the Summer Agents are okay...I want to take them and Lady Hinagiku to the beach..." Sakura said with a sigh. Itecho nodded in reply.

If only he was in the right headspace, then he would've been able to enjoy this view with Sakura.

"So what'd you wanna talk about?"

Sakura was the one to break the ice, causing Itecho to hesitate slightly. He

had to be careful about how to phrase this so she didn't get mad.

"I know this isn't the best time...but I want to ask something about you and Mr. Zansetsu."

"...It really isn't."

Sakura didn't leave immediately. Was it because she had her back to the windows and Itecho was blocking her path to the lounge? Or was it because lately she'd softened up on her attitude toward Winter?

"I figured you'd worry about it. You...always poke your nose into other people's business... That's why I didn't want you to know about it..."

"I'm glad I found out. That way I can offer you other options before you make such a big decision."

Sakura blinked, surprise and expectation both visible in her eyes.

Her voice cracked. "What other options...?"

Itecho took the wrong assumption from her reaction.

*So you really don't want to marry after all...*

He had no idea that Sakura had been in love with him ever since she was nine. He couldn't understand the complicated matters of her heart.

"What? Itecho..."

He couldn't comprehend that she simply wanted him to stop her, not because it had anything to do with duty.

"Rosei suggested that you could come and join the Town of Winter."

"...Excuse me?"

"You could become a Kangetsu or Kantsubaki, whichever you prefer... We can protect you if we adopt you. That way, the Town of Spring wouldn't be able to just strip you of your Guard position."

"..."

Sakura's jaw was on the floor.

She'd never imagined he would say that. Sakura had told him not to tell Rosei

yet, but of course he had. Itecho had told his lord to try to come up with a way to convince her not to marry Zansetsu.

*I gotta take care of this quick.*

He'd panicked and ended up saying something he hadn't planned to.

*For her sake.*

He'd hidden the fact that he wanted to do something about it for his own sake. It was a shameful, sad excuse.

He wanted to do whatever he could to keep her here, but the words hadn't come to him.

"...A-adopt me...?" Sakura asked, confused, and Itecho explained gently.

"You're considering the marriage proposal out of concern for Lady Hinagiku, right? But it won't be all positive. I don't want you to suffer down the line."

Anger overtook Sakura's expression. "You told Rosei?"

She was listening to him for once, and everything had come crumbling down.

"...Yes. I told him not to tell anyone, obviously. Sakura... Just keep this conversation in mind. Even if you choose not to, you can tell Mr. Zansetsu that you got the offer from Winter. Maybe then he'll abandon such a rash proposal..."

"Why did you tell him?! We're keeping this a secret from Lady Hinagiku! What if that idiot lets it slip?!"

Sakura berated him, her words overflowing with indignation, but Itecho couldn't back down now.

"Rosei cares about you. He won't do anything to annoy you."

"He already did! What the hell? Adopt me? You want me to be his sister? Or yours?"

"No, you don't need to actually do it... I'm just saying...this could make it easier to say no to Zansetsu's proposal..."

"Don't make decisions about my life for me! You've got nothing to do with this!"

“Yes, we do...”

“No, you don’t!”

“I do...! I’m your mentor! I don’t want my protégé to be unhappy!”

For the first time during their conversation, Itecho had raised his voice.

“...!” Sakura flinched.

Itecho had scolded her before in the past, but there were few times when he’d shown such strong emotions. “...Sakura, I don’t want you to suffer...”

He’d always cared about her.

Now, because of her marriage, Itecho’s emotions were surfacing.

“I’m sorry I told Rosei, that we came up with this idea without talking to you, and that I upset you. I didn’t mean to. I just want to protect you...”

He was a gentleman, always calm and composed, with a perpetual poker face no matter who he was talking to—but that facade fell quickly before his dear protégé.

“Sakura... Please.”

Sakura could tell even through his sunglasses that Itecho was holding back his pain as he looked at her.

“But...!”

“I want you to reconsider. Remember what Azami said, too. You’re still young. You’ll have other opportunities. You don’t have to choose your future spouse now.”

“...”

“Do you really like Mr. Zansetsu that much...?”

“Itecho, what ‘other opportunities’?”

Sakura’s lips trembled. “...There’s no one else who sees me that way. Who would propose to me, even out of self-interest...? What other opportunities are you talking about...?”

“...What do you mean? There’s lots of people.”

“Like who...?”

“Well, I can’t think of anyone on the spot... But you’re such a gentle, good-natured woman...”

“See! You admit there’s no one!”

She hadn’t heard Itecho’s last sentence, and Sakura made to push her way past him to leave. He quickly reached out to grab her arm.

“Let me go! I’ve had enough of this stupid conversation! I’m going back with Lady Hinagiku!”

“It’s not stupid! This is your life!”

“Who cares about my life?!”

Itecho was at a loss for words.

“...Who cares! It doesn’t matter if the Kayos pick on me; that’s nothing compared to what they did to Lady Hinagiku. I’m sure that’s what you’re worried about. I’m not stupid.”

“...How can you say that about yourself...?”

Itecho’s voice was laced with sorrow.

“...I mean, it’s the truth. The only one who really cares is Lady Hinagiku.”

Sakura’s words were like a knife in Itecho’s heart.

“...What about me?” he asked.

“You’re my mentor; you have a responsibility to care. That’s all.”

“...Sakura, why do you say that?”

“Lord Zansetsu... He’s trying to use me, but he also wants to protect me at the same time. Of that, I’m sure. We both care for Lady Hinagiku. We want the same thing. It’s really not a bad deal getting married to him. He’s already considered what you’re worried about, and I’m sure he’ll do what he can to stop it.”

“That’s not enough. Can you be absolutely certain that he will protect you no matter what?”

“...Like I told you, I don’t care what happens to me. What matters is Lady Hinagiku.”

Hinagiku was the compass pointing the way in Sakura’s life. That much was fact. She was the first person who’d openly loved Sakura and wanted her simply because of that love. That was just who Hinagiku Kayo was.

She’d sacrificed her life to protect Sakura. She was her goddess.

Throughout Sakura’s entire life, no adult had ever taken care of her. Only Hinagiku.

That was why Sakura loved Hinagiku back, and even clung to her. She dedicated herself to her lady. She would stop at nothing for her sake.

“Lady Hinagiku is everything to me.”

For she loved her young goddess.

“I’m her Guard. What’s wrong with me living for her sake?”

Itecho couldn’t argue against that.

“...”

Still, he kept his grip on her arm.

“...I understand the resolve behind that question, and I agree with you on many levels, as someone in the same position.” He held on tightly and wouldn’t let go. “But who’s going to be there for you when you’re the one suffering?”

Sakura was confused.

“I have Lady Hinagiku.”

“When you’re suffering *for* her?”

“I...”

“What’re you going to do when you can’t tell her you’re in pain?”

“...I just won’t tell her.”

“That’ll be suffocating.” Itecho’s words were heavy. “There’s nothing harder than having no allies.”

It was a sharp remark. Sakura had been in a place like that not so long ago.

It made her happy to live for Hinagiku, but with Winter's help, she had come to realize how exhausted and strained she was.

"...I'm the same way. It makes me happy to serve Rosei. But you can't live on that alone."

Sakura felt flustered. It felt too real when Itecho said it. "That's not true!"

"I almost lost my mind blaming myself after they kidnapped Lady Hinagiku."

"...!"

"Even with all my love for Rosei, there are days when it's hard to be a Guard."

Itecho looked Sakura straight in the eye, hoping she'd understand his feelings.

"But I endured it, thanks to you."

She could see the sincerity in his eyes beneath the sunglasses.

Sakura relaxed her arm in Itecho's grip.

"You fought so hard every day so Rosei wouldn't die. You kept me alive."

Only the three of them would understand the pain of those days they'd spent together.

"Sakura... Do you remember when I found you in the closet, crying for Lady Hinagiku, and then *you* ended up comforting *me*?"

"..."

"Maybe not...?"

"No, I—I remember..."

It was clear in Sakura's memory.

There were peaceful days during her time in the Town of Winter, but they'd also had their fair share of ups and downs.

Rosei would frequently self-harm, blaming himself for Hinagiku's kidnapping, and Itecho would feel defeated every time it happened. Seeing the two of them in pain would remind Sakura that Hinagiku was no longer there and often make her cry.

She'd wanted Hinagiku back.

She'd been so sad, she'd wanted to never stop crying.

But if Sakura had let herself be consumed by sadness, then it would've been over for the three of them, so she'd kept her tears a secret. Sometimes, Rosei would find her like that, but most of the time it was Itecho.

Light would shine into the dark closet, and he'd say, "*C'mere.*"

She would shake her head, and Itecho would reach out a big hand and grab her arm, just like he was now.

As she sat there in a daze, he would pull her out and hug her protectively.

Then he would whisper, "*You're okay.*" He'd stroke her hair and convey through his touch and warmth that he was there for her.

One time, Sakura hadn't been able to bear it anymore.

"*You can cry, too,*" she'd murmured.

Sakura was the only one being supported. So who could Itecho cry to, then?

Itecho was her trustworthy protector, but he was still young, hurt, and confused. He was a Guard. She knew he'd been raised to behave this way.

She'd called him Lord Itecho back then.

"*I know you're in pain, too, Lord Itecho.*"

She'd hugged his head and whispered in the same way he had.

"*You're allowed to cry, too.*"

Sakura remembered Itecho's quiet tears.

She caressed the head of the boy, much closer to an adult than she was, and cried with him.

Those had been sad days, but she'd been happy to feel like Itecho needed her.

How could she ever forget?

“I don’t want you to just bear with it your whole life. I want you to be cherished, like you cherish Lady Hinagiku. Like you made me feel.”

Sakura realized Itecho had let her go, and that the heat she’d felt was gone.

“Even if you tell me it’s none of my business and to stay out of it, I just wanted to say that to you... Sakura, think carefully about whether it’s really a good idea to marry Mr. Zansetsu. Isn’t the reason why you haven’t spoken to Lady Hinagiku about it because you’re still unsure yourself...?”

“...”

“At the very least, I want you to talk with her before making a big decision like this. If you say that she’s the only one who truly cares about you...then ask for her opinion.”

Sakura stared at her hand, now that Itecho had let her go.

Her head had cooled off, and she whispered internally that he was right.

*It happened again.*

She wouldn’t have had that thought before, but Sakura had changed.

This time, Sakura realized she’d made Itecho sad again with her venting.

“...If there’s anything I can do, tell me. I’ll do anything for you,” he told her.

She’d done the same the day she left the Town of Winter, when she told him to get lost, shut up, and not come after her. She looked at Itecho hurting and thought to herself: *I’m always forcing my feelings on him.*

He was simply worried about her. Yet Sakura had lashed out because he’d struck a nerve. None of what Itecho had warned her about was wrong.

Even though Sakura had said she was doing it all for her lady, she hadn’t told Hinagiku anything.

She could simply ask Hinagiku for advice without mentioning Zansetsu by name, but she hadn’t even done that.

She should've just made a decision and told her lady about it, but she couldn't, because she was still unsure.

Zansetsu would surely be a kind husband, but marrying into the Kayo family would be like throwing herself into the flames of hell.

Everyone in the Town knew how much tragedy had been born out of that family's marriages.

She couldn't trust the Townchief, either.

There were few people she could really trust and feel safe with.

"...Itecho."

Like the man right before her.

She loved him, and yet she'd hurt him. She didn't know what she wanted to do.

*I'm such an idiot.*

She scolded herself to grow up already.

She was no longer the child who'd been shaking with loneliness, so blinded by anger and sadness that she'd fled the Town.

Now she could see more. She knew more.

*And the reason why is...*

Because the two meddlesome young men from Winter had supported her all the way.

"...I'm...sorry." The childish apology surprised even Sakura as it left her mouth. "You were only worried about me. I went too far... I'm just confused...and I overreacted to what you said..."

Perhaps it was because she'd been remembering the past.

"Sakura..." Itecho let out a sigh tinged with relief.

Sakura continued, saying whatever came to mind, no matter how embarrassing she found it.

"No one's ever asked me to marry them..."

“...Yeah, it’s only natural you’d be confused. I’m pretty sure I’d be shocked, too.”

“I’ve never even dated a man...so suddenly jumping straight to marriage? I was scared.”

“...Oh.”

“But I’m not a child anymore; I have to think for myself. If this is what’s best for Lady Hinagiku, then I should probably do it even if I’m scared... I’ve thought about it a lot...so it just...made me mad that you made it sound as if...I hadn’t...”

Sakura hadn’t noticed Itecho’s reaction to one piece of important information.

“But you don’t benefit at all from getting involved in this. You took the time out of your day and worried about me because I asked you for some guidance... And then, when I finally got it, I yelled at you. That’s not okay... I’m...sorry...”

After all that, she waited for a response from Itecho.

“Sakura, that’s not true.”

He looked a little confused, but he smiled again right away.

“I should’ve been more careful. I’m the one who overstepped. I’m sorry.”

Sakura thought it was times like this that Itecho showed just how much more mature he was than she.

*Even though I’m sure he’s angry.*

He’d forgiven her immediately—or that was how it seemed, at least.

There was no way Sakura could smile like that if someone had done the same thing to her.

It reminded her how far he was out of her reach.

Itecho, unaware of the feelings bubbling inside Sakura, spoke kindly to her for understanding.

“You were simply speaking as a Guard. I realize I don’t have the right to butt into your personal life, much less your marriage. I was just worried about you...”

“...I know how much of a worrywart you are...”

“It’s not like I worry like this about everyone...”

“...I know that, too.”

It reminded her she was still a child.

It wasn’t a matter of her being a good match for him or not; Sakura was just saddened by her own immaturity.

“...Don’t make that face, Sakura. I wasn’t trying to upset you...”

“...What face?”

“I’m getting sad just looking at you.”

“...Then don’t.”

She hung her head.

“...How are we supposed to talk if I don’t look at you?”

“...”

“Sakura...?”

The kinder his words, the more pathetic she felt.

The man pitying her would never come to love her.

He would always be her kind mentor. So Sakura decided to give up, too, and be a good pupil.

*But...*

The more he showed he cared for her, the greater her love for him would grow.

*Every time, I end up falling in love with him.*

It was an illness. A stupid love.

She knew it wouldn’t be requited and that it was her fault.

“...Itecho.”

Sakura kept her head down as she spoke. “I’ll think seriously about what you said. I still don’t know whether I’ll say yes or no...”

Itecho was frustrated—she still wasn't turning down the proposal?

Still, it was an improvement.

"Okay... And talk about it with Lady Hinagiku, you hear?"

"Yeah. But no one's adopting me."

"I see..."

"I don't want to be Rosei's sister or yours."

"Yeah... I thought you'd say that."

The conversation was over. It hadn't gone on for too long, but they needed to return to the lounge.

"...You ready to go back?" Itecho asked, but Sakura shook her head.

"You go on ahead."

Sakura didn't think she'd be able to act normally in front of everyone else with this sad look on her face—but she couldn't bring herself to admit it to Itecho. It was too embarrassing. Too pathetic.

Holding back the tears was all she could do. Itecho noticed her voice trembling and tried to get a glimpse of her face, but Sakura covered it with her arm.

"...Sakura, are you crying?"

"...No."

"I'm sorry... It's all because of what I said..."

"...Shut up."

"Sakura."

"Shut up, Itecho. Say one more thing and I'll cry for real."

"..."

Itecho stopped cold.

"It's not your fault," Sakura told him. "It's my feelings. Like I told you...I'm confused because this is all new to me... I've been trying to act like everything's

okay, but it's not. I want to go back to Lady Hinagiku with a smile on my face... so I'm desperately trying to hold it in. You go ahead, Itecho."

"..."

"Now. Please."

Itecho was left with no choice. Sakura could tell he was hesitant, but in the end, he left. His footsteps faded, and it was only once the smell of his cologne drifted away—she didn't know what the scent was called—that Sakura sighed in relief. A few tears rolled down her cheeks.

"..."

She took out her handkerchief and wiped them away before taking a deep breath. Sakura wasn't one to wear heavy makeup, but she still had to be careful not to mess it up, or it'd be obvious she'd been crying.

*And that would worry Lady Hinagiku.*

"I'm Lady Hinagiku's perfect Guard. I'm Lady Hinagiku's perfect Guard..."

*My priority right now shouldn't be romance.*

"I have to find Summer and put Lady Hinagiku's worries to rest."

*Don't let yourself be confused by men.*

Sakura exhaled deeply and recovered her normal sharp expression.

"All right."

Sakura walked down the corridor and started working her way around the few corners that separated her from the lounge.

Past the second corner, an attractive man was leaning against the wall.

"..."

"...Sakura."

She'd expected it, but a deep sigh still left Sakura's lips.

"Itecho, I told you to go on ahead..."

She was angry, but he did not step back.

“...I didn’t want to leave you alone. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No...”

Itecho looked troubled, so Sakura forced herself to smile. “You’re overreacting. You’ve seen me cry before.”

“...”

“You know I’m a crybaby... It doesn’t take much to bring me to tears. Don’t worry.”

“...That’s not true. There’s nothing worse for my heart than seeing you cry.”

“...What about Rosei?”

“He could afford to cry *more*. It relieves stress, so it’d be good for him. But when *you* cry, it’s because you’re putting up with something you can’t do anything about, so it hurts to see.”

He knew her so well. She knew him, too. Itecho did what he did out of concern for her, but he’d ended up criticizing and forcing his thoughts onto a confused girl. It wouldn’t be long before he started feeling guilty, no matter how hard Sakura insisted it wasn’t his fault.

“...Anything I can do for you?”

Sakura had to give him an opportunity to make up for it so he could go back to wearing the face of a Guard. This man made himself feel better by being useful.

So Sakura thought it over for a short while, before saying:

“Once this is over...”

“Yes?”

“...I want to try the ice cream they were selling at the airport. Th-the expensive one...”

“...”

“No? Then...”

“Don’t be silly. Leave it to me.”

“But you hesitated.”

“...I was just surprised by how little you asked for. This won’t make up for making you cry... I’ll buy you as many ice creams as you want, be it ten or a hundred. We can eat them on the trip home...”

“I don’t want that many... Just enough for Lady Hinagiku and me. And Rosei, and you...”

Sakura sounded exhausted as she walked away, and Itecho followed by her side.

By the time they got back, the situation had developed further.

“Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame are under the Lord Archer of Twilight’s protection?”

Sakura’s quiet voice was filled with shock.

The Winter Agency staff checking on the situation had just come back when Itecho and Sakura returned to the lounge. They had appeared reluctant at first to go along with the Agents, who were acting of their own accord, but now they’d resigned themselves to cooperating. The Agency staff were probably hoping to win back the trust they’d lost with Ishihara’s betrayal. All organizations had their problems, but not everyone belonging to them were bad people. Some tried to be helpful within the constraints of their own position.

One man from the Winter branch of the Four Seasons Agency nodded and continued.

“...The circumstances surrounding the issue are quite complicated, but the Lord Archer of Twilight is currently missing his Custodian—the equivalent of a Guard of the Agents of the Four Seasons. National Security’s Secret Service is protecting him, and they notified their headquarters about the Ladies Summer being under their care, which in turn notified the Four Seasons Agency.”

A stir went through the people gathered in the lounge.

“So, the two of them are all right?” Rindo asked urgently.

“We haven’t heard anything about them being taken to the hospital.”

Rindo and Nadeshiko looked at each other with relief, and everyone else seemed to feel the same.

“Excuse me.” Nadeshiko politely raised her hand. “I want to speak with Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame...to tell them to stay safe...and that we’re all gathering together so they won’t replace us...”

“My lady is right,” Rindo said in support. “Can’t you somehow get us in touch with Summer? National Security’s Secret Service should be able to use their confidential line. We still can’t get through to their phones... Please...”

“I will try, but I expect them to put me on standby waiting for approval...,” the Agency staff member replied evasively. “We were told to stay in the hotel and protect the Agents. Only a very select few know that you’ve come together to protect yourselves from the threat of replacement. The bosses say that you should remain under supervision and wait for them to take care of the issue once this trouble is over... They want to contain the problem...”

“Telling us to shut up and stand aside, huh?” Rosei replied harshly.

“Lord Winter... You may not believe us, but National Security and the Four Seasons Agency are split internally. There are those who truly wish to protect the gods incarnate and those who don’t... That is where this response comes from... And there’s little we can do about it... I apologize that we are unable to help...” The regret was clear in his voice.

When heavily supervised people acted of their own accord, of course it was seen as problematic. However, the Agency staff accompanying them weren’t trying to stop them; they only supervised and reported in. That was probably the most those who favored the gods incarnate could do. In normal circumstances, there would be more conflict.

Rosei frowned, and Itecho spoke up to defend the Agency staff.

“They all have their own lives and their own families. Don’t be too harsh on

them, Rosei. The fact they're being honest tells us they're on our side."

"I didn't mean to attack you personally... Sorry. I was just showing my mistrust for the organization itself."

"No, it's only natural you would feel like that, Lord Winter..."

Rindo took over to speak with the Agency staff member. "Since we can't get through to Lady Ruri's or Lady Ayame's phones, there's little we can do now... Does anyone have a line to the Archers of Oracle? If National Security won't put us in contact with the Lord Archer's Secret Service, then we'll need a different approach."

The Agents of the Four Seasons wanted to secure the Hazakura sisters as quickly as possible to prevent them from being replaced. They couldn't trust anyone else to take care of them.

Looking for a different route was the appropriate alternative.

The problem was that the Archers and the Agents had no common ground even though they were both gods incarnate.

"Itecho."

Rosei called to his Guard, implicitly asking if it was possible.

Itecho frowned. "...We need to get in touch with the Lord Archer of Twilight. If it was the Lady Archer of Dawn... She brings morning from a sacred mountain on our home of Enishi, so we could ask a nearby shrine... They have a link with the Lady Archer, and it's the same one we stop by to manifest the season."

"Do it, quickly," said Rosei. "Reach out to that shrine on Enishi. They'll put us in touch with the Fugeki clan, who we can go through to connect with the Lord Archer... If they can help us get in contact with our fellow Agents, we would owe them."

But Itecho seemed hesitant. "That would be a terribly roundabout way to do it... And we'd end up owing them a lot. Who knows what they might ask of us."

"Lives are in question here. If it's in our power to do, then accept whatever they ask. I'll leave it up to your judgment."

"Got it. I'll go call them."

Itecho left, and at the same time, Tsubame finally showed himself in the lounge.

“Mr. Aboshi, we—,” Sakura began, but Tsubame quickly cut her off.

“Oh, I know. Most likely, we received the same information: that the Archer faction has the Ladies Summer under their protection. Early this morning, I confirmed the movements of various organizations.”

“Orders from your master?”

“Yes, though I only looked into what he asked me to investigate...”

“Then we can cut to the chase. We’re looking for a way to get in contact with the Agents of Summer. Does your lord have a line we can use?”

“No... I’m sorry. Not to contact them directly. The Archers’ existence has always been kept well under wraps. But I think we’ll have the full picture soon enough. And once we do, I have a plan.”

“Really?!”

“Yes. National Security’s special forces have a base in Ryugu, and it seems the Archer is asking Porcupine for help in solving the Dark Wolf mystery. We’ve asked an insider in National Security to notify us of any movement.”

Sakura’s shoulders slumped. “...So we’re on standby?”

“J-just for a bit! Wait for a little while. Your presence in Ryugu should already be working as a deterrent! Agency staff and National Security made a move yesterday and are already in Ryugu. Most likely, those wanting to replace you are also watching our movements. We’re trying to stay one step ahead of them, so the time we spend staring each other down definitely won’t be wasted...”

“...But they’re basically like the insurgents’ radicals. You can’t be sure they’ll think the way you do.”

“Uh...”

“Some of the people who show up won’t be able to stop themselves, and they’ll try to establish their dominance through violence. We have to find Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame before those lunatics...”

Tsubame was struggling for an answer when Itecho returned with his phone in hand.

“Itecho,” Sakura said, “I know you’re in the middle of negotiations right now, but...”

“Something huge just happened,” Itecho said, cutting her off. He ran to them with a nervous look on his face.

“What’s going on...?”

Just then, the phones of the Agency staff members all went off at the same time.

“That must be the Lord Archer’s notice, the thing I was talking about. I got an emergency notice while I was on the phone with the Townchief of Winter. Look at the message.”

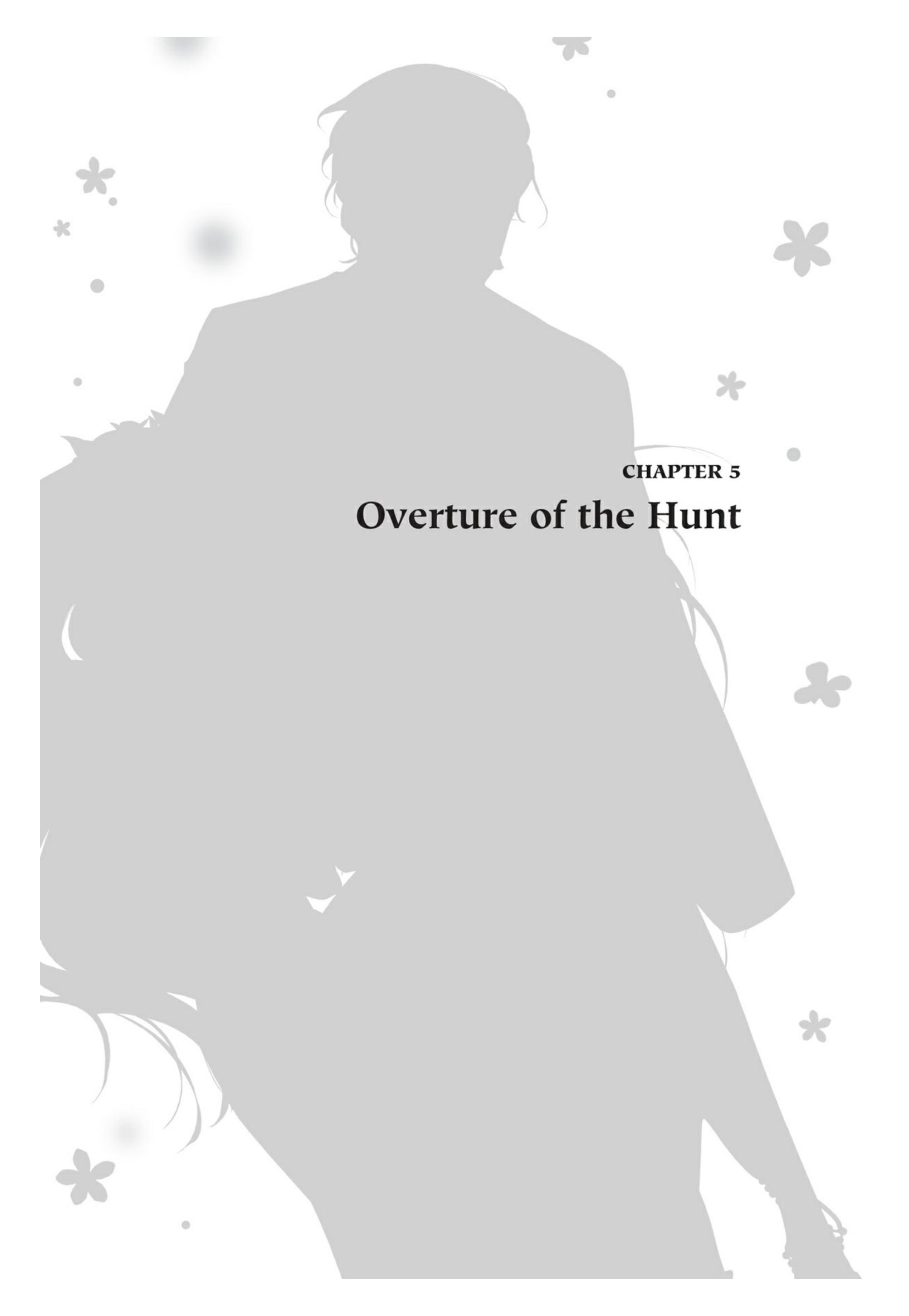
The staff members took out their phones and showed everyone the message.

They were all aghast.

Itecho, the only one who knew what it said, read it out loud.

“This is a notice to the Four Seasons Agency, National Security, and the Fugeki clan. The Archer of Twilight has forged an alliance with the Agents of Summer to solve the Dark Wolf mystery. This alliance is a show of protest against those who deride the gods incarnate—toward the accusations of environmental destruction, the divine punishment theory, and the concealment of such information from the Archers. Anyone who dares oppose this alliance will not again see the dark of night.”

It was a declaration of war from the Archer of Twilight, Kaguya Fugeki.



CHAPTER 5

## Overture of the Hunt

He'd hated me.

Thinking back on it makes me sad, but it was true: He hadn't liked me one bit.

The Archer of Twilight hadn't been anything like I'd expected, and I think that showed on my face when I met him. I admit, I'd idealized the gods incarnate too much.

And that wasn't what he needed at the time.

*"Tsukihi Aragami, was it? Go home."*

He was blunt.

*"Go. I don't need you."*

His glare was threatening.

*"You're not needed here. Go home."*

I was shocked.

I was shocked because he was no god.

He was the most normal, most hurt man.

*I messed it up.*

I'd heard some of the details as to why National Security had sent me to guard him.

His wife and Custodian had developed an immoral relationship, and the God of Twilight had stopped trusting anyone after such a betrayal.

The Fugeki clan, responsible for managing and raising the Archers of Oracle, offered to find a replacement wife and Custodian, but he refused.

He'd run away from the mansion filled with memories of the two traitors and cooped himself up in the mountains.

So they'd sent me and my subordinates to act as his temporary guards and supervisors.

I'd read the brief, but I hadn't thought seriously about it before meeting him in Ryugu.

*Why was I surprised to find a hurt man?*

They'd explained I was going there because of his emotional distress.

Was it because he was a god?

That didn't mean he would be all right. If I'd changed my perspective just a little bit, I would've realized that.

Maybe I'd had some preconceptions about the gods incarnate, having been raised to worship them since I was a young boy. I was blind, just like a child who thought adults never cried.

The living gods deserved reverence, but they weren't flawless.

*He's clearly just a man who was made into a god.*

Thinking of it that way, I understood why he'd hidden away in the mountains.

The Archers of Oracle were bound to one location.

Unlike the Agents of the Four Seasons, they couldn't just go anywhere.

Anything that would prevent them from shooting their arrows every day in their designated place was strictly forbidden.

A closed environment was the only place he could live.

He had so few people in his life, and the two most important ones had left him.

He must've wanted to run away. To go and look for them.

But he wasn't allowed to take a break.

Yamato needed the Archer of Twilight to bring night.

He must've wanted some time to process how he felt.

Saying, *Don't worry, we'll get you another Custodian. We'll get you another wife*, was about the cruellest thing you could do to him.

Like they thought he would go back to functioning if they just filled the empty spot in the puzzle with another piece.

They didn't think at all about those they would be sending.

The Fugeki clan had made a bad move.

*If I were to put myself in his shoes...I would be so scared, and more than anything, sad.*

*What he truly needed was time alone to heal.*

*Us coming up to the mountain was the worst thing that could've happened.*

Just when he thought he was free of the schemes of the Fugeki clan, people from National Security had come, saying they'd protect him in his Custodian's stead, oversee his daily life, and that this was necessary because he was a god. Obviously he would reject us.

*But they'll try something even more aggressive if we leave.*

I pondered on the reason why I had been sent.

I knew the other people who'd been considered for the job. Some were stronger than I was, some smarter.

But I was probably the best at giving orders.

They must've wanted a coordinator. Someone to protect, observe, and report in on his status.

At the same time, they also expected me to investigate and advise them on what kind of person would be the best to succeed me as his official Custodian—someone who could stay close to protect him in the truest sense of the word and watch over him.

That was what they'd expected of me.

I remembered my boss telling me to look for what I could do.

I had to explore the issue on-site and find a way to solve it.

*“Go home.”*

Unfortunately, my trial bore no quick results.

I decided to set up a camp in the mountains so my subordinates and I could watch over the god and get him to trust us.

We would remain by his side despite what he said, and help him in any way we could.

He didn't seem to be very self-sufficient, so we indirectly taught him the survival skills we'd learned in National Security, thus increasing our opportunities to converse with him.

I was astounded when I first saw him shoot his arrow. My brain just couldn't keep up.

He was human, yes, but he was also, undeniably, a god.

The way he shook off my hand holding his when he regained consciousness was human, though.

Little by little, I began to understand him.

I wanted him to understand me, too. That I was not his enemy.

That I was a fellow human who wanted to be his ally.

The months went by, and our relationship changed gradually.

Autumn came to a close, and we shared a meal for the first time in the middle of Mount Ryugu.

I was nervous, but the hot pot was so delicious, my bowl was empty before I realized.

*“You eat more than I expected,”* he told me, and I’d turned bright red.

He wasn’t wrong—I eat a lot.

He saw my reaction and added, *“I didn’t mean it in a bad way,”* before giving me a second helping.

I was only more embarrassed by how closely he stared at me eating.

*“Is it good?”* he asked, and I nodded repeatedly. He smiled. He said he liked cooking for and feeding people. That took me by surprise; I’d only ever seen him angry.

*He’s so kind in reality.*

The look on his face when he smiled was so soothing. I’d discovered a new side to him, and my heart sped up.

*Did his sadness change him?*

After a few months of hard work, his opinion of us as “National Security staff who won’t leave already” changed to “annoying people who I let stay with me.” He was beginning to trust us, and I also had my subordinates to thank for that. I was glad I’d chosen such good-natured people.

This wouldn’t have happened if I’d been alone.

We worked hard to keep the God of Twilight closer to the side of men.

He would very easily lean too far into godhood if left alone.

He no longer told us to stay away when he was doing the ritual.

He began coming in the car with us to shop for groceries.

He joined us when we went to the bathhouse by the coast.

No one mentioned it out loud, but as time went by, we’d begun to share our lives.

So when he invited us to have dinner one night after bringing in twilight, it wasn’t a miracle. It was the natural outcome of the time we’d spent together.

The dark veil covered the sky.

The Lord Archer of Twilight seated with us around the bonfire had brought us night.

He hadn't said anything about me holding his hand when he'd fainted that day, either.

"...*Tsukiji*."

He'd already begun using my first name by then.

"*Yes, Lord Kaguya?*"

I finished my bowl of rice soup and wiped my mouth.

"...*Aren't you tired of camping outside?*" he asked, an awkward look on his face.

I was taken aback. What was this about?

It had been a long time since we'd begun staying outdoors to watch over him, cooped up here in the mountains.

We'd gotten too used to it to be tired of it, and everyone was enjoying the natural outdoors lifestyle by that point.

"*We work for National Security—we're more used to camping and cooking outdoors than the average citizen. It's necessary for us to carry out disaster relief operations.*"

"...*I see.*"

"*Are you going to tell us to leave again...? We won't.*"

"*You're pretty rebellious for a believer, y'know..."*

"*S-sorry..."*

"*It's fine... You have integrity, which is why you're their leader.*"

I was surprised. Was that praise?

I blinked, and he continued awkwardly.

"...*You've got guts. You won't leave no matter how cold I am, and honestly, I'm running out of patience.*"

*"Is this a scolding...?"*

He shook his head.

*"No. It's a suggestion, out of respect for you..."*

I shivered at the thought of what he might say next, but they were incredibly kind words.

*"You and your subordinates...can use my mansion. It might be dirty after being abandoned for so long, but it's gotta be better than this. You should sleep there if you're just going to keep coming to check on me..."*

Forgive me for my shock upon hearing that, but I'd received nothing but rejection up until that point.

*"Why?"*

*"Well... Because it's my fault you're here..."*

*"We are only doing our job protecting you."*

*"I know... I know it's your job, but still."*

*"You don't need to worry about us."*

He looked sad.

*"No, I've already made my decision. I've calmed down considerably, thanks to you and everyone."*

But he was prepared to do away with his sadness.

*"I've been permitted too much...just because I'm a god. I have a lot of restrictions, as well, but I can't let that be a reason to drag people down with me. That's why my wife and Eken left. And I acted selfishly with you, too, even though I knew I had to be under supervision."*

*"Lord Kaguya..."*

*You don't understand.*

I'd never thought of you as selfish.

I hadn't been stupid enough not to realize that you were the one suffering the most.

Too many inconsiderate people like me had hurt you. Your anger was warranted.

If I said you were selfish to feel that way, then when would you rage against your fate?

You'd grown too used to the pain, until you couldn't properly express your anger.

Even now, you had the right to get mad.

When you gave us the cold shoulder, I hadn't wanted to accept that was who you really were.

*"Girls, y'know, they, uh, go through a lot, right? And winter is coming soon. You need shelter. You and your subordinates can use the mansion. Archers throughout history have used it, and it's huge, so there are plenty of rooms to spare."*

The unapproachable, constantly glum god had become friends with us and started to feel guilty about making everyone live like this. He wasn't wrong that life in the mountains was tough.

I'm sure he must've thought long and hard about it before coming to this conclusion. If he couldn't get us to leave, then at the very least he could let us stay somewhere decent.

*"You...won't return home with us...?"*

I'd asked him the same before indirectly, but it had always ended with a glare.

*"..."*

But not that day.

*"...I want to go home, but being there brings up things I don't want to remember, which in turn affects my job. Divine power is affected by one's mental state... After Tohko and Eken left, I had a lot of trouble making the arrows, and the night was unstable for a while. I can't let the people of Yamato go through that again. There is some logic to what I'm doing,"* he said with a wry smile.

I finally lost my temper at what his wife and Custodian had done to him.

*It's just too cruel.*

Even if they'd wanted to leave, couldn't they have chosen a way that would hurt him less?

*Or did he love them so much that he'd end up like this no matter what?*

The god wanted to close his eyes and run from the pain, but he wasn't allowed.

Unable to stay at home anymore, he chose to escape to the sacred area where he served the people.

They didn't know he slept in the mountains to bring the long autumnal nights without fail.

Until a few months ago, I had been one of those people passively receiving his blessing.

I hadn't known the pain he went through shooting those arrows.

I'd believed without a doubt that night would come, but it was all built on top of his sacrifice.

*"Then how about we go out and buy some curtains together?"*

I wanted to do something, anything for him.

And this feeling was not born out of faith.

*"Curtains? Why?"*

It was out of affection for the man before my eyes.

*"Curtains are like a house's face. Changing them will give it a different feel. We can also change the carpet and the furniture little by little... Then, maybe you won't feel bad being there... Of course, we could also consider getting a new house... I can help with that!"*

How would he react to my suggestion?

I waited for his reply, but when it came, it sounded like he was testing me.

*"...In that case, I'll change all the furniture... I'd rather get rid of all of those memories."*

I clenched my fists.

*“That’s a great idea! I couldn’t agree more. Let’s change everything!”*

*“...That’s impossible. It’s too much.”*

*“Let us take care of the manual labor. Our bodies are in top shape, down to the last muscle.”*

All my subordinates showed their biceps with pride and assured the god they would help.

He laughed out loud. I was so happy; I wanted to see him smile more.

*“...You’re really gonna help?”*

*“Of course.”*

*“But your job is guarding me... You... You don’t gain anything from this.”*

Now I giggled.

*“They didn’t tell us not to do anything other than guard you... And it’ll be necessary if we’re going to move our base of operations to the mansion. Besides, I love looking at interior design. I’m also good at putting furniture together. We’ll take care of this, Lord Kaguya... Don’t try to do everything on your own.”*

Not everything in the world followed duty and tradition.

*“...Let’s build a home we can go back to together.”*

You live by the rules of gods.

*“The hot pot will taste even better at home.”*

I find that a bit sad.

Even if, when I met you, you were just a hurt man.

*“...You can’t stay here forever.”*

I want to be closer to you.

Please forgive me for feeling this way.

July 24, Reimei 20. Afternoon. The residence of Kaguya Fugeki.

Tsukihi Aragami had sent National Security the exact words Kaguya had used.

Soon after that, her phone started ringing nonstop. She moved to the end of a long hallway in the mansion and responded to inquiries from her bosses and other organizations.

“We have a lead on the Dark Wolf case. The creature was identified as the Lord Archer’s disappeared Custodian. This is confidential information, so please handle it with care.”

“The support request for Porcupine is only to aid us in our hunt, and we will not be handing over the Ladies Summer. They have agreed to help us with the hunt, and of course, we have received permission from their parents... The Townchief of Summer? Do they need his permission to help a fellow god incarnate? They met him coming to Mount Ryugu during their time off, and that’s it. Perhaps if they were in the middle of the job, but the Townchief is merely the leader of the Summer Administration. He is only there to enact the decisions of the majority—he does not have the power to restrict the actions of the Ladies Summer. We would be open to hearing him out if he has any objections, in which case the Lord Archer will also be present. This matter was undertaken at the behest of the Lord Archer himself, so it is only for him to attend. Please let him know.”

“That’s right, the Lord Archer is outraged. Why wasn’t he notified about this dispute involving the Agents of the Four Seasons? Had he known beforehand, we would have taken care to avoid any friction. Forgive me, but if you say my

job is only to guard and supervise the Lord Archer, then you are sorely mistaken. How could I quell his anger without being informed of the situation? If you wish to criticize him after his message, then you're more than welcome to come to Ryugu and tell him to his face that he should just keep quiet and shoot his arrows. Can you do that? I'm sure night would stop coming if you did... An abdication of duty? As you just informed me yourself, my job is to guard and supervise him. We will do our best to make sure night comes today, but there's nothing we can say if he refuses. We've worked hard so far. We finally got him to go back to living in the mansion. If he runs to the mountains again... Yes, if you say so, then please send someone who can take responsibility here. The Lord Archer is waiting for a response on why you did not share this information. Yes, I understand. We will do everything in our power. Good-bye."

As soon as one call ended, another one came.

Tsukihi sighed as the phone rang again—she'd already lost count of the number of calls she'd taken—when Kaguya came into the hallway and yanked her phone out of her hand.

"This is the Archer of Twilight, Kaguya Fugeki."

Tsukihi tried to take it back, but Kaguya turned around and continued talking.

"Oh, you're Tsukihi's direct supervisor? Good, I've been meaning to have a word with you. Could you stop making meaningless calls until you send someone here who can explain this case? You've been making Tsukihi stand in a corner of the hallway for over an hour now... A threat? Don't misunderstand me. If we're finding fault with each other, what about your nasty cover-up? Or are you telling me you didn't know the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons were being affected by rumors from the Dark Wolf mystery? Listen, this is an error on the part of the Fugeki clan. And now I have to apologize to the venerated Agents. This all happened because every organization involved with us gods incarnate has been dishonest. If you had stopped this nonsense, it wouldn't have come to this... Oh, that's a different department? You think I

care? Your organization messed up, so figure it out.”

And with that, Kaguya hung up.

“...Lord Kaguya.”

He glanced at the exhausted look on Tsukihi’s face and frowned.

“I’m sorry. It took me this long to come help you because I was on the phone with the Fugeki clan for an hour, too...”

“N-no... It should be me apologizing for having you help me like this...”

“Not at all. You’re stuck between me and all these other organizations... You’re in the worst possible position. It should be me taking all the heat... Thank you, for everything...”

Tsukihi hadn’t been looking for any appreciation, but hearing him say that made all the stress she’d been feeling disappear.

“No, no...”

A word of gratitude from one’s lord was the best medicine for a guard.

“Please, I’m only doing my job. By the way, Lord Kaguya...how’d things go on your end? What did they say about the cover-up regarding the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons?”

Wrinkles carved themselves into Kaguya’s brow.

“...They said they hadn’t wanted to tell me about the damage suffered to the Agents’ reputations because I’d been having a hard enough time psychologically as it was, that they’d had no other option but to keep me in the dark in case it affected me and endangered the night.”

“...It sounds like they just came up with that excuse...”

“I’m sure they must’ve thought that at some point, but I think the biggest deciding factor was that they wanted to keep on the good side of the higher-ups in the Four Seasons. Remember everything the Ladies Summer said yesterday?”

“About Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn, right?”

“This ridiculous situation starts to make sense when you hear rumors of a

faction that wanted to deflect criticism from itself buying out these so-called experts to disparage the Agents. I think Lady Ruri was absolutely right.”

The council of experts who'd gathered to discuss the Dark Wolf mystery were as follows: The Fugeki clan, in charge of the Archers.

National Security, who ensured the safety of the citizens of Yamato as the police.

The Environmental Protection Agency, run by the Yamato government.

The Towns of the Four Seasons, who raised the Agents of the Four Seasons.

The Four Seasons Agency, who assisted with the activities of the Agents of the Four Seasons.

The Four Seasons Agency and Towns had been added at the request of the Environmental Protection Agency. It made the most sense to think that someone who'd heard about the chaos on Mount Ryugu had come up with the conspiracy and incited the EPA and other big fish to get the Towns and Agency to spread their lies.

“National Security didn’t tell you about it because the Fugeki clan asked them not to let anyone around me know,” explained Kaguya. “They confessed to that. And well, it’s true that even when the Dark Wolf was attacking, we weren’t this on edge until we met the Ladies Summer. I guess they were right.”

“...Still...it’s self-righteous of them to say you’re better off not knowing when others are hurting and you’re involved...”

“Well, I am basically like a trained pet,” Kaguya replied nonchalantly. “They think I’m happier just living in ignorance inside my own little box. Tsukihi, it’s not that they consider you incompetent, or your subordinates; you were just dragged into my problems. I’m sure about that. That seems to happen to the people around me... It’s not a good place to be, by my side...”

Kaguya’s tone was so resigned and lonely.

“I was born into this, so there was nothing I could do about it. Or so I thought until today...” Kaguya gave a wry grin. “...But today, I want to fight for my dignity and those young living goddesses. I don’t always want to be the one

getting hurt.”

“Lord Kaguya...”

“Remember that I was the one who dragged you into this, so you don’t have to think any more about it. That’s how I feel...so I just wanted to let you know...”

Tsukihi vigorously shook her head. “No, I accept it. I always wanted you to get mad...”

Kaguya blinked in surprise. He didn’t understand what Tsukihi meant.

“I get mad fairly often, though.”

“At the small things, maybe, but not at your fate... I wanted you to get angry over the circumstances you’re in.”

“...”

“Lord Kaguya, I believe in the gods incarnate, and my job is to watch over you, but...” Tsukihi looked down for a moment, then lifted her eyes and stared straight into Kaguya’s.

She was slightly taller than he was, so their gaze wasn’t quite level.

As they stared into each other’s eyes with only a little distance between them, it felt as if they were the only two people in the world.

“Personally, as Tsukihi Aragami, I want to support you, Kaguya Fugeki.”

No matter how awful the state of the world was right now, the two of them had met each other and found a kindred spirit.

They had simply become Tsukihi and Kaguya. A sweet pain tugged at their hearts.

“Don’t let something so irrational defeat you...,” Tsukihi pleaded.

Before Kaguya even had time to register his shock, a question popped into his mind.

No one, not a single person, had told him that before.

“Why...?”

No one had ever seen him as anything but a god.

“Why are you so kind to me?”

No one had seen him as human, so he’d strived to be divine.

And as he lived that life, two people he’d cared for had already betrayed him.

“How am I supposed to answer that...?” said Tsukihi. “I mean, this isn’t really kindness...”

“It makes no sense, though... You’re a devout believer, right? Are you just being considerate of me? If so...I don’t want you to sacrifice yourself like this...”

“No! I already said, I’m talking about you, personally, Kaguya Fugeki...!”

“...I know, but still.”

He lacked the confidence to smile sincerely at Tsukihi’s words. Kaguya had decided for himself that he didn’t have the ability to be loved as a person.

“I’m just getting mad for you... It’s a very personal anger, so I don’t think it counts as kindness... But there’s nothing weird about it. You’ve gotten mad for me, too... And that’s because we’ve gotten closer than before, right?”

Kaguya had no idea what to do now that he had someone who adored him so.

What if he ended up making her hate him?

His heart wanted to ask for her love there and then, but a part of him also wanted to run. If she broke his heart, he would never recover.

Tsukihi was a light that had appeared in Kaguya’s life from out of nowhere.

He hadn’t seen it that way at first, but now he was sure of it. He’d lived until now for the purpose of meeting her. Still, she was human, and he was a god. He couldn’t drag her over to his side.

*Don’t give yourself dumb ideas. Don’t get too involved.*

“Is it really that weird...to think that I want to help you...because I l-love you...?”

*Don’t ask for love. You’ll be betrayed.*

“You can be a little mean at times, but you’re incredibly kind, and you make

food for everyone...and you're so strong bringing night every day even without anyone's support. I, Tsukihi Aragami, respect...and love...all of that about you, Kaguya Fugeki."

*Don't ask for love. You'll only cause her trouble.*

"We're of a different standing, but you joke around with me. I'm so tall, but you never make fun of my height. You treat me like a woman... There's too much to say."

*Don't ask for love. Love wasn't meant for you.*

"I love everything about you."

*Don't ask for love.*

*I can't take this.*

Kaguya didn't know what to do.

He cared for Tsukihi, and that was why he'd tried not to see her romantically. He thought her feelings came from a place of faith, so he'd created a reason to push her away.

But now that she'd come right out and said it, he couldn't hesitate. He couldn't keep quiet.

He'd finally met someone who loved him, and he didn't want to let her pass him by.

So he reached out to her.

"...!"

This time, he wasn't scared to touch her.

Tsukihi's breathing stopped as he grabbed her hand.

The fact that he didn't reach out and embrace her was proof that he hadn't lost all sense of reason.

His wife had run away from home, but that still didn't make it right to cheat on her.

This was all he could do to show his feelings. Not as a god, but as Kaguya Fugeki, the man.

“...Thank you. I love you, too.”

Sadly, when Kaguya had reached out for Tsukihi's hand, he'd grabbed her fingertips in a weak, uncertain grip. Clearly, he wasn't used to touching people.

“L-Lord Kaguya...”

Kaguya didn't let her continue before he repeated himself.

“I love you, too.”



He looked her square in the face as he said it. He could tell from her expression that she didn't reject his words.

His chest welled with affection and pain.

"And...thank you for seeing me as a person..."

Once he'd done that, Kaguya immediately let go.

It was something he'd only felt the first time he met her. A feeling that should have remained hidden from everyone forever, but here he was saying it aloud.

"...Thank you."

A feeling he wasn't allowed to convey.

"I love you, Tsukihi."

The more he said it, the more he wanted to.

"I love you."

Like he was saying he wanted her.

"Lord Kaguya..."

Tsukihi's face had turned bright red, and Kaguya's eyes were welling up with tears.

"I don't expect anything," he said. "Even if I'm alone, your words are enough... for me to keep doing this job for the rest of my life."

After saying it all out loud, Kaguya had given Tsukihi a way out.

"Really, thank you... I'll give it my all today. I also...want to protect you, Tsukihi Aragami. I'll do what I can...to stop them from treating you unfairly."

"...Lord Kaguya, I..."

Just as Tsukihi opened her mouth, her phone rang.

They looked at each other in silence, until finally Kaguya turned his back to her.

"I'll take your phone for now, so could you make sure everything's ready for

us to leave?" asked Kaguya. "Let's go to the mountain as soon as possible."

As he answered the call, Kaguya gently asked Tsukihi to go.

"...Okay."

The issue of their love for each other still remained up in the air, but now wasn't the time to deal with it. The battle was taking place today. Tsukihi dashed down the hallway while holding a hand to her chest.

"...!"

She grabbed the doorknob to the living room, where everyone else was, then stopped for a moment.

Her cheeks were still flushed, so she wanted to cool off, but it was midsummer and the AC didn't reach there.

At the very least, she needed to calm her racing heart.

Tsukihi took a deep breath in, then slowly breathed out.

"..."

She could hear Kaguya's voice in the distance. She closed her eyes.

His voice was quiet yet listless. She could easily picture him speaking into the phone in his hunched posture.

The heat in the summer. Kaguya's voice. His words meant for a special someone.

It all constricted her chest. She hadn't come here to fall in love.

But that love had begun quite a while ago.

"..."

She took one more deep breath.

Then she whispered to herself, so quiet only she could hear: "I'll do my best, too..."

Tsukihi threw open the door to the living room.

“Everyone ready to go hunting?”

The battle was almost upon them.

Plenty of factions were shocked by the Archer’s declaration of war.

The Agents of Summer and the Archer of Twilight had joined forces to put an end to the Dark Wolf mystery.

The Archer had threatened not to do his ritual to bring about night if anyone interfered with them.

The message was promptly relayed to National Security, the Four Seasons Agency, the Towns of the Four Seasons, and the Fugeki clan. A select few had also been informed of the Dark Wolf’s identity, so Tsukihime Aragami could ask for help from Porcupine, the National Security’s special forces.

Townchief of Summer Seiran Matsukaze had been driven into a corner by this declaration.

“Damn them all...!”

Seiran trembled with anger.

Their unauthorized actions up until yesterday had been child’s play compared to this.

The Hazakura sisters had not only recklessly gone off to try to solve the Dark Wolf mystery, they’d also joined up with the Archer. That was how the situation had stood yesterday. Now, the god incarnate from a different domain was criticizing the Four Seasons society.

The Archer had said he was furious about the country’s treatment of Twilight and the Seasons.

Seiran knew little about the Archer of Twilight, but the declaration alone was enough to let him know he wouldn’t be an easy foe to handle.

This had wrecked the high morale of Doyen Turtle. People were beginning to pull out, and the forces Seiran had fought so hard to gather had been cut in half. He had about forty men remaining. Numbers meant strength, and losing even a few was a huge loss for him.

*“Damn them all is right. Where are you now?”*

Still fuming, Seiran was on the phone with Fukuryo Doji.

He endured this agony in the same room where he'd once humiliated the twins.

*“...In my office in the Town of Summer’s *honden*. The Archer of Twilight’s notice woke me up early.”*

*“No one can hear you there, can they?”*

*“Don’t worry about that. I’m calling you in the gaps between my work.”*

*“Good to hear you’ve been keeping up a calm front.”*

*“...Officially, we’ve sent orders to take custody of the Agents of Summer. The Administration is in chaos. Calling them bad omens is biting me in the ass. Even people who accused them of grave sins are sneering at me now...”*

*“I see. Take that as a lesson on how everyone will react once you lose your power.”*

*“...”*

Seiran wanted to yell curses at the phone, but he suffered in silence.

People were turning on him as they spoke.

He didn’t want to end up losing his information broker-turned-adviser as well.

*“There are two paths before you now. Withdraw or charge ahead. Which do you choose?”*

Seiran realized it would be over if he withdrew.

“Charge ahead, of course. The rest of Doyen Turtle will fall, too, if I yield here. The idiots who called their soldiers back don’t understand that. We’re at a crossroads; if we let the Archer intimidate us and allow the livestock to do as

they please, the Towns will lose their power. They withdrew their troops, but they won't escape the criticism. We're only holding on to power because we united to let the Agents take the blame for the appearance of the Dark Wolf."

*"...Allow me to ask a simple question... Why do you continue to cling to that seat? It's forcing you to walk such a dangerous path."*

"Are you making fun of me...? Is that pity?"

*"No, it was just a question. I care about myself, so if I were in your situation, I would either immediately run away or accept the gods incarnate for the time being while waiting for another opportunity to turn the tables. I simply wanted to know what's driving you to do this."*

There was no contempt in the man's voice, but Seiran didn't want to expose how he felt inside.

When he stayed quiet, Fukuryo Doji continued to speak.

*"There was someone close to me who once was obsessed with power in the same way, and I never understood why."*

"What happened to them?"

*"They couldn't dedicate themselves to good or to evil... Too many things hit them all at once, and they fell into ruin."*

"...So you say I remind you of that fool...? Hah!"

Seiran's fury was starting to give him a headache, but he felt like answering the information broker's question. There was one thing he knew: This man was most likely both younger and freer than he was.

"Fukuryo Doji. You don't have a family, do you?"

"..."

"I don't know your identity, but your words sound quite immature from time to time. You don't have a family. You don't know what it's like to support a household. Being alone is convenient. Nothing ties you down. You can go anywhere, do anything. See things no one's seen. That's why you don't understand."

“...”

“Do you have children? A wife?”

“...”

“I’m sure you don’t even get along that well with your parents. That’s the case for everyone in the Four Seasons society who doesn’t value the importance of their home. They don’t dream or have the burden of supporting others.”

*“...You sound like a loving father. Are you, really?”*

“The mere fact you can ask that tells me you’re young. Listen to me. In the end, a family is just a group of strangers. You think love just comes naturally because you’re family. Hatred also comes, too. But even so...”

Seiran thought about his son’s broken life, which he’d been responsible for.

“Even so, you end up caring for them until the end. It’s an attachment so strong, it’s almost a curse—that’s what family is.”

Seiran’s son was still detained by National Security.

“My son is in a cell. My wife is in the hospital, her mind in shambles after what our son did. My other children, they either attack me or beg me to protect him. I bear the responsibility of the head of the Matsukaze family’s main branch. No matter what happens to me, I have a duty to keep my family in power. It takes more than pretty words to support a household. You’re too far up there on your high horse to understand, but I can’t run away now. If I do, my family will be humiliated and lose its place.”

*“...So you don’t care about other people’s families so long as yours is safe?”*

“Weren’t you listening? You can’t live on empty platitudes. I’m sure you don’t have the right to say that, either... How many people have you made suffer because of your job? You think you’re on the side of justice? Don’t make me laugh!”

*“...You got me there.”*

“Other families don’t matter. Ever since I was a child, I’ve only lived to make my family’s wish come true. I don’t care about anyone else...about anything else!”

*“...I see. Well, setting aside whatever you’ve actually done, I think your willpower is more impressive than that of the person I knew.”*

Fukuryo Doji sounded satisfied.

Perhaps he had someone toward whom he held similarly twisted feelings. Seiran felt like he’d gotten a clearer picture of what the information broker was like, but he didn’t have the time to ponder on it.

“Let’s get back to business.”

Seiran would have to decide later whether to threaten him or make him an ally.

There was only one thing he had to do now: Kill the Hazakura sisters. Then his family and his life would be safe.

*“...Yes, let’s. Now, if you can kill the Agents of Summer, you can make their deaths out to be the Archer’s fault for dragging them along to solve the Dark Wolf mystery. As for him, I expect his threat not to shoot his arrows is a bluff. The Agents of Summer wouldn’t want that, either.”*

“How can you be so sure?”

*“The same way you move according to someone else’s hopes and dreams, the Agents create their miracles because the people wish them to.”*

Seiran’s breath caught in his throat.

*“Have you ever thought about the standards for being chosen? I have. The gods incarnate are people who can sacrifice themselves for others, who wish for the peace and calm that comes as a result. The gods choose people like that. It’s in the legends, too. Our ancestors said, ‘Allow us to become the Agents of the Four Seasons. In exchange, please bring a good harvest and peace to the land.’”*

“That’s...”

*“They’re good people by nature. Of course, some turn to evil as they grow up, but in essence, it’s people who can sacrifice themselves that become gods. Since the dawn of time, all over the world, those who are praised as saints by the commonfolk are people who lay down their lives to achieve great feats for the sake of a cause or for the weak. You think someone like that...someone who,*

*unlike the Four Seasons, works three hundred and sixty-five days a year, would throw away their job so easily?"*

"...Heh. By that logic, you could claim the Agent of Spring was the closest to being evil for refusing to manifest her season."

"..."

For some reason, Fukuryo Doji replied to that in a near growl.

*"Don't be a fool. The Agent of Spring is special. Any normal person would've killed themselves after what the Town did to her."*

It sounded like he was standing up for her. Seiran wanted to comment on that, but Fukuryo Doji continued before he could.

*"The Archer won't abandon his duty. It's an empty threat. Now, I'm sorry, but my phone's been ringing all morning, so I'm hanging up for now."*

"Fine..."

*"Fortunately, those who are passionate about moving forward with replacing the Agents seem to be even more motivated. They'll send more soldiers and funds, so make sure you work hard. The rest of you can't pull out now, either. Your prospects for battle aren't looking all that bad. Good luck."*

"...Thanks."

He hung up. Seiran's eyes were fixed to a spot.

"..."

He remained quiet as he dialed the next number—a private soldier directly under his command, currently on Mount Ryugu.

"Unami? It's me. Have you met up with the others yet?"

There was a slight delay before the man replied.

*"We've joined forces and are currently lying low on Mount Ryugu. We encountered National Security agents by the entrance, so we tied them up in a mountain hut, alive, and made it look like the work of radical insurgents after the Agents of Summer. If everything goes to plan, we shouldn't be under suspicion for it."*

Seiran held the phone tighter and nodded.

“Yes, that’s fine. Soon enough, the Archer will bring those ill-omened twins. Use a smoke screen to separate one of the girls from the guards, then kill her while she’s blinded.”

*“You don’t mind which one we kill, correct?”*

“Yes, either one is fine. You’ll get a hefty reward if you manage to pull this off. I’m not just talking about money, either; I’ll give you whatever you want. But make sure she’s dead.”

*“Roger that.”*

The emotionless exchange ended, and Seiran turned to look at the picture on his desk. He’d originally placed the portrait of his family there to flaunt what an upstanding man he was, but it had since become very dear to him.

Seiran was already exhausted, but he didn’t let go of his phone.

He called his wife. “...It’s me. How did your visit to the doctor go? No, don’t worry about that, just rest at home... It’s okay, don’t concern yourself with work.”

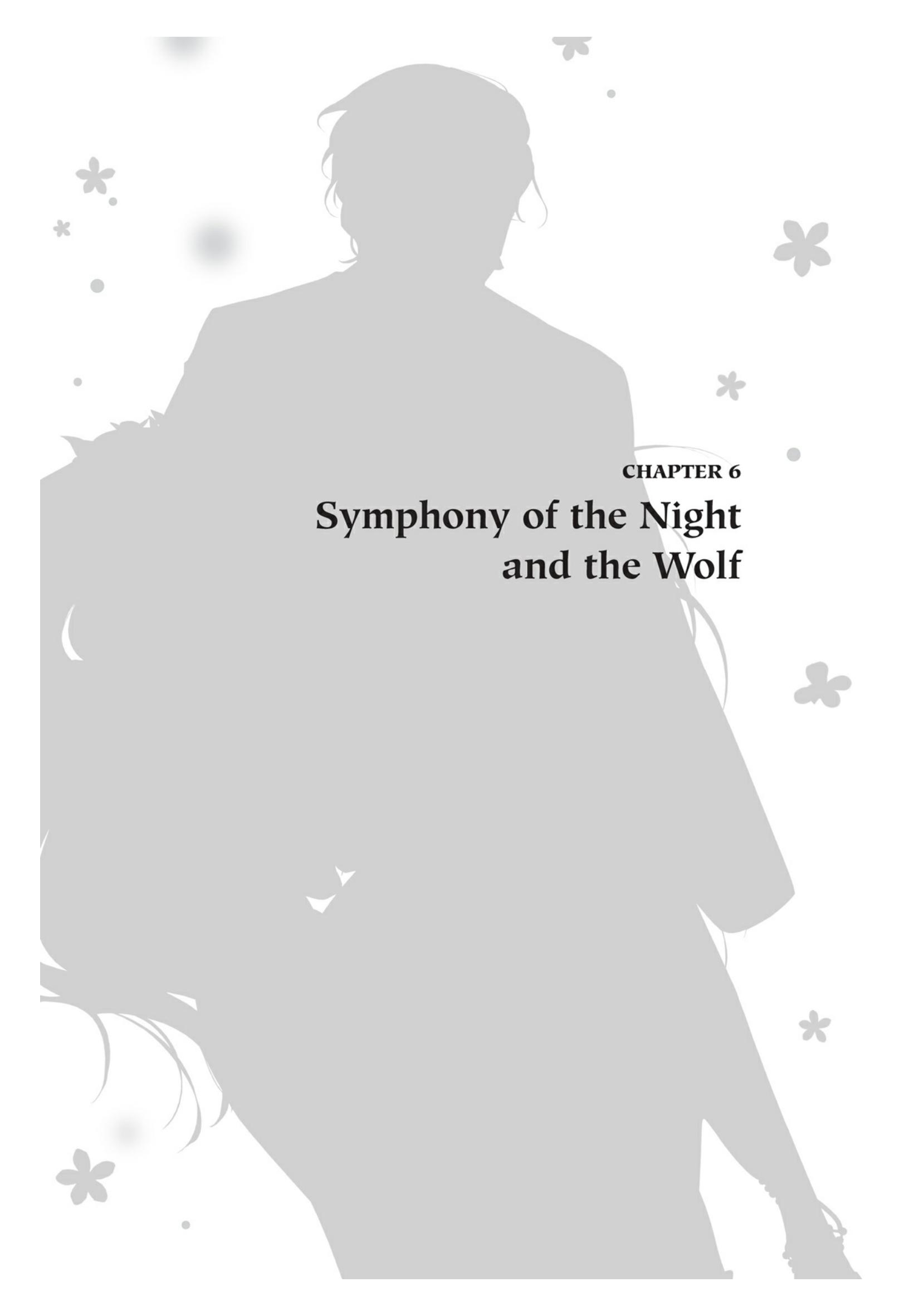
His wife’s happy voice brought peace to Seiran’s frayed heart.

“I’ll be home late, so don’t wait up for me. I’ll work something out for our child...so you just focus on resting. Okay?”

He could be an angel to some and a devil to others.

“Everything will be all right.”

Seiran prayed so that one of those innocent girls, either one, would die.



CHAPTER 6

## Symphony of the Night and the Wolf

July 24, Reimei 20. Afternoon.

Spring, Autumn, and Winter. Summer and Twilight. Renri and Raicho, the Hazakura twins' fiancés.

They were up against the Townchief of Summer Seiran Matsukaze's private soldiers and the ruffians from each Town aiming to replace the Agents with support from Doyen Turtle.

The pieces assembled on the board while the Dark Wolf, Eken Fugeki, hid on Mount Ryugu.

In a few hours, the Archer of Twilight, Kaguya Fugeki, would climb the mountain to bring in the night.

Eken had sneaked into Ryugu Shrine, which was closed because of his presence on the mountain, and stood bewildered before the folding screen that was only open to the public once in a decade.

It depicted in detail the gods of the Four Seasons, the God of Twilight, the God of Dawn, and innumerable other gods.

It was said that a famous artist had spent half their lifetime completing this piece.

Eken's lord had told him it was stored inside the shrine.

Being acquainted with the head priest, they could request a viewing, but once before, when Kaguya had asked him whether he wanted to see it, Eken had shaken his head. He'd said he wanted to see it with Kaguya when it was officially open to the public.

As if hoping he'd let Eken stay by his side until then.

*What was it Lord Kaguya said?*

He remembered Kaguya smiling and saying it would be a long time until then. He remembered being relieved that his lord hadn't disregarded his request.

*Lord Kaguya.*

That god had been such a familiar presence to him, but the gods in the picture seemed so far away.

*I want to go back to you.*

The vague thought crossed Eken's mind.

*I want to go home.*

But he couldn't. The sixteen-year-old boy was running from the adults.

He should ask for protection as soon as possible, but he couldn't.

Not after he'd turned on the only person who would protect him.

*Lord Kaguya.*

It was envy at first. Eken had trembled with rage, thinking of the heavy burden he had carried for his lord and how easily he had been forgotten.

Then it was fear.

He'd cried out, wondering where he'd go if he lost the place where he belonged.

*I want to go home.*

So he'd attacked his lord. He'd wanted his lord to remember him.

He didn't know why he'd used the beast illusion. For a while now, Eken had been unable to go back to how things were, unable to return to the man he was.

*I want to go home. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.*

At first, he'd simply wanted the attention of his lord.

Eken closed his eyes, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

*I want to go home!*

The boy was no wolf—he was a child in need of support.

“You can’t go home anymore. You’re not needed.”

He heard a voice.

Someone was here in the empty hall. Eken looked at the person, not showing any real surprise.

The woman, in her mid to late twenties, smiled at him.

She was so thin, the wind could carry her away. There was a shadow cast over her expression.

Despite her gloomy aura, her voice was clear and strong.

“Lord Kaguya doesn’t have any further use for such a stupid Custodian. I’m sure of it.”

She seemed like a ghost, but she was there in the flesh.

“Poor thing. He abandoned you...”

But even standing there, she didn’t feel real.

As each word stabbed him in the heart, tears fell from Eken’s eyes.

“Just run away... Even the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons are here now. They’re going to catch you.”

Before Eken realized it, she’d walked right up to his face.

“...Where? There’s nowhere I can go.”

“This wasn’t the place to run to,” she lectured him. “The bigwigs never had any intention of letting you go back to Lord Kaguya. From the moment you reported that problem, they branded you useless. You’re in a worse state than you think.”

“I can still do my job!”

“Reaaaally? From what I can tell, you can’t do anything anymore.”

“...I can!”

“You’re suuure? You reaaaally think so?”

“Tohko, please, stop. You’re scaring me...,” Eken begged through tears.

Tohko reached out a hand and stroked his hair.

“Stop that. Don’t touch me.”

“Please. I’m the only one you can count on now.”

“All of it...This is all your fault.”

“Yeah...”

“This is because of what you did...and you dragged me down with you...”

“The cracks were already there beforehand. There was something wrong with that clan.”

Eken shook his head, ridding himself of Tohko’s hand.

“That’s not true. Everything might not have gone perfectly, but still, we were a family.”

Tohko grabbed his hand with a sad look. “A *fake* family.”

Her words echoed with cruelty. Eken took a step back, not knowing what to say, then asked: “...Why did you do it, Tohko?”

“You already know, don’t you? I thought you understood better than anyone else.”

Eken lashed out, but there was a sad edge to his voice. “No, I don’t! You told me you were okay...!”

Tohko didn’t react right away to Eken’s anger. His eyes pressed her for an answer, and finally she smiled at him and replied.

“That’s just a lie you say out of consideration for others.”

“Then you should’ve said something to me and Lord Kaguya! You should’ve told us you were suffering!”

“I did...”

“But you never agreed to any of our suggestions!” Eken cried indignantly. “If I was saying the wrong thing, why couldn’t you ask me for what you wanted?! What should I have done?! I’m sure Lord Kaguya would’ve been able to do something...”

Tohko cackled. “You’re such a child... I was sold off into marriage, but I was still his wife. I had pride in my position as a god’s wife. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t. My ego wouldn’t let me. I did my best until I couldn’t anymore.”

“You should’ve thrown away that pride!”

“...I tried... You know that better than anyone else.”

Her cold glare pierced Eken, and he took another step back.

“In reality, he did anything I wished. That’s the kind of man—of god—he is. Kindhearted. But I didn’t want to trouble him. If that was the alternative, then I was better off disappearing.”

“But...”

“What ended up being funny was...that for the longest time...I thought things would turn out terrible if I did... How embarrassing. If I could go back in time, I’d tell myself...*just run already...* Then, maybe, Lord Kaguya could’ve found someone he really liked. I could’ve started to live my own life. I didn’t have to be driven to do something so stupid. Nor you, Eken.”

“.....What should I have done?”

“You didn’t have to do anything.”

“...!”

“But you couldn’t. You’re the same as me. So you have no right to blame me. People sometimes do stupid things. How many people do you think would be able to do the right thing in our situation?”

“...Tohko...”

“You can think something is the right thing to do, but there are times when you can’t do it. It could be pride, fear, sadness; those defense mechanisms restrict your choices, and you end up defeated, like you are right now. I was also in a bad way back then. So don’t ask me why.”

Tohko smiled.

"This isn't about who's right or wrong. There's nothing we can do about it. That's just life."

Her tone was kind, but her words cut deep.

"...I wanted to do something to help..."

"Well, sorry... And thanks. I'm not criticizing your kindness."

"I'm sure Lord Kaguya wanted to do something, too..."

"...Sorry."

"If you're going to apologize...then don't do it to begin with..."

Eken fell to his knees and sobbed. Tohko kept quiet and watched him cry in the dark room. There was no one there to reproach the boy or the woman for their sins—only the gods in the folding screen watched over the two runaways.

*Help, Lord Kaguya.*

Eken kept repeating his name in his mind.

That was one god that wouldn't help him, yet it was the only one Eken clung to as he cried. If this mountain was the only place he could run to, he was truly alone.

And Eken Fugeki was alone. That was why he drowned himself in his affection for Kaguya.

"Eken, you might be happier not seeing him again."

Eken rejected Tohko's words of pity.

*No. I was happy to see Lord Kaguya.*

As he cried, he thought back on the best days of his life.

Back then, he'd run across Mount Ryugu, undaunted by its steep slope.

He'd wanted Kaguya to see him brimming with energy. To make him see that Eken wouldn't lose heart so easily.

But the man whose attention he sought was constantly annoyed by that.

*“Stop running before you hurt yourself.”*

Rather than god and retainer, they were more like father and son. Eken was so happy to see the man who meant so much to him look at him and speak to him that he couldn't stop himself from frolicking around like a child.

*“Lord Kaguya, look at this huge stick! I’ll grab it for you!”*

*“Lord Kaguya, look at that boar! Wow! I’ve never seen one before!”*

*“The ground here’s softer because of the rain yesterday, so be care— Oh, man... I got the shoes you bought me all dirty...”*

Kaguya was everything to Eken.

*“...You get tired of the scenery going up the mountain every day? Will that happen to me, too, one day? Still, even if you say it’s bound to happen, I really love the views here.”*

Eken didn't need to find things he had in common with Kaguya to love him.

*“It’s not like just anyone can come to this sacred area. But I get to see it because I’m your Custodian.”*

He felt indebted to Kaguya. He respected him. He was proud of him.

*"Lord Kaguya, please don't fire me even after I grow up. Keep me by your side even when I'm twenty or thirty. Promise? Don't break it, okay? It's a promise! Remember!"*

One could say he needed to do so in order to live.

Eken Fugeki had begun serving this god at the age of fourteen.

He'd been a normal young boy. The only things of note about him were that he was taller than other kids his age, and that his family wasn't so wealthy.

Eken had four bigger brothers and one elder sister, with another sibling on the way.

The Fugeki clan provided financial aid to incentivize increasing the number of members of the bloodline. But even then, the family was in dire straits, as his parents were bad at managing their finances. Once they got old enough, the children were sent off to train in the Fugeki clan's institutions.

Just when his parents were looking forward to having one less mouth to feed, a notice came.

The Archer of Twilight Kaguya Fugeki's Custodian was considering retirement.

Custodian appointment methods varied from generation to generation.

Sometimes, the Archer would choose someone they knew already; other times, such as this, the Fugeki clan would release a notice to gather candidates. It was a prestigious job, but the Custodian had to be tied down to a single place, climb the mountain with the Archer, and watch over his shooting of the arrow every day. It was a hard, labor-intensive job. At first, Eken hadn't wanted to become Custodian. He'd only volunteered because his parents were struggling to make ends meet.

He'd always been healthy, and before he realized, he'd passed the practical and theoretic tests and ended up in Ryugu, a southern land far away from his

home. Everything there was new to him.

*“...Eken. Eken, eh...?”*

The god looked exhausted upon their first meeting.

He had a certain aura about him. The two of them sat down in patio chairs in the pretty, well-maintained garden and started talking. Winter had passed, and summer had arrived without spring, giving them a beautiful, warm afternoon.

*“You see, I’ve been looking into all of the candidates myself as well.”*

At first, Kaguya had been furious.

Not at Eken, but at those who’d sent him.

*“...You’re talented, but I don’t have any intentions of making you my Custodian.”*

He’d failed the moment the final interview had begun.

*“Wha...?”*

*“So don’t worry, okay? You don’t have to do this job.”*

Sadly, Eken didn’t feel relieved but disheartened.

*My parents will be disappointed.*

He imagined the looks on their faces and felt his chest tighten.

But then Kaguya said something that blew his pain away.

*“...Based on your reaction...you don’t realize you’re being sold off, do you?”*

*“Huh...?”*

*“We’re looking for someone over eighteen. You’re fourteen. Your parents did the paperwork, didn’t they? They told you to fake your age?”*

*“...”*

It was true. Eken had volunteered, but he’d realized he didn’t qualify the moment he read the requirements.

Then his parents smiled and said, *“It’ll be fine. You’re big and tall.”*

*“I know people say being Custodian is an honorable job... But they’re just like*

*me...sacrifices for the world. It might be different for the Guards of the Agents of the Four Seasons, but here, you live your entire life climbing this mountain. Kids these days don't want that. I found it strange that you'd come here..."*

Eken hurriedly corrected him. He hadn't wanted Kaguya to think badly of his parents.

*"I—I volunteered!"*

*"You did?"*

*"Yes... My parents just...supported my idea..."*

Kaguya sighed.

*"No. You came here because you thought you had to for your family, didn't you? Because they don't have enough money."*

*"..."*

Eken couldn't reply—Kaguya had hit the nail on the head.

*Don't say that.*

*"Plenty of people who serve the Archers are sent by their parents or relatives looking for money... The same thing happened to my wife."*

*Please don't say that.*

*"I'm not being sold off..."*

Eken had never thought his parents didn't love him.

However, he realized there was a difference between how much he loved them and how much they loved him back.

*"You're still fourteen. They're faking your age and sending you away when you're still so young—how could you call it anything else?"*

*Don't say it. Don't say it.*

*"You're doing what your parents want so they'll love you. And they're taking advantage of that."*

Kaguya's words pierced Eken's heart. The god looked at him with an incredible sadness and worry in his eyes. That expression made everything

clear.

Eken's parents had given him away to get rid of one burden.

*“...You mean they don’t want me...?”*

Kaguya didn't know how to reply to Eken's question. He gently shifted the focus away from the young boy.

*“...I’m sure they must’ve been in a tight spot financially...”*

It was poverty to blame, not anyone in particular. Putting it like that would give Eken some solace, but it didn't solve anything.

*“...”*

His head was filled with a single question that kept swirling around in his mind: “What do I do now?”

Go back home, disappoint his parents...and then what?

He'd finally begun to understand his situation after having it clearly explained to him by this outsider.

He finally realized his life was heading down a terrible path.

*“A Custodian’s job continues until they’re replaced. Your parents doing it would be one thing...but you’d be throwing your life away. You don’t have to do it. So don’t worry. Okay?”*

He hadn't heard a word Kaguya had said. His body burned with a sense of unease.

*“I always did what everyone told me to do when I was a kid, too. It was after I grew up that I realized how wrong that was.”*

*Where will they send me next? What if they don’t hire me there, either?*

*“...It was a bit late, but I decided to object to these things. I don’t think people should be offered as sacrifices without being asked what they want to do themselves.”*

*Will my parents let me stay at home until I can support myself?*

*“So, Eken, you...”*

*Ahhh, but more importantly, will I be able to love my parents unconditionally now that I know the truth?*

So many feelings circled around in his head all at once.

The fact of the matter hadn't changed: Even if he couldn't become a Custodian, he had to get a job. They'd tell him to contribute money to the household, so he had to think of a job where he could make enough to do that. The weight of his anxiety suddenly came crashing down on Eken.

*"Hey, are you listening? Are you okay, Eken?"*

*"Ah, y-yes..."*

*"Really?"* Kaguya asked again, seeing the pale look on the boy's face.

Eken asked himself the same question. *Was he okay?*

*No, I'm not.*

He felt like he wasn't a person but a tool born to be used up by someone else. He'd tried hard to tell himself that wasn't the case, but now...

*That's all I was, really.*

The pain spread throughout his chest, and he tried hard not to cry.

*"...Eken, are you listening? Are you okay?"*

*"...I...don't know."*

Kaguya faltered for a moment, then stroked the boy's head with a large hand.

*"It's okay. I'll make it okay."*

Eken didn't know what he meant, but Kaguya continued, cutting right to the chase.

*"...For now, stay here with me."*

*"Huh...?"*

That only made Eken even more confused.

*"But that'll be hard on Mom and Dad."*

*"...And what they did was hard on you... Their actions could be considered as*

*ridiculing a sacred position. They falsified their kid's age; they owe more than an apology..."*

It was only then that Eken finally realized his sins. The man before him was a god incarnate. The person responsible for this country's night.

To a busy god, an attempt to trick them was unforgivable.

*"I-I'm sure they didn't mean it! I shouldn't be saying this of my parents, but they don't think a lot of things through...!"*

*"I'd imagine. That's why they threw their child away."*

Kaguya was furious, and he showed no compassion for Eken's parents.

*"They won't get away with this. They have to understand what they did... If your parents were also under pressure from someone else, just as you were, then I'd also like to help them...but first of all, I need to help you."*

*"Me...? Why?"*

*"...Isn't it obvious? Because you're a kid! That's why I'm explaining things to you... In any case, you'll have to stay away from your parents until all this gets resolved. I can't imagine they'd take the news calmly. I can't let you go home until I'm sure you won't get hurt."*

Eken wanted to believe there was no chance of what Kaguya feared happening, but he suddenly felt afraid of going back home.

*"You understand? Your parents did something bad. But not you. So I'll protect you here. Stay in Ryugu for a while. That's why I called you all the way here to give you the rejection."*

Eken only became more and more confused.

*"Lord Kaguya, but I... I didn't bring anything..."*

Kaguya took that in a different way than he'd intended.

*"Right, we'll have to get you what you need... You need clothes and other things."*

*"No, that's not what I mean..."*

*"Did you leave anything important back home? I can have someone go get*

*it..."*

*"No, that's not it... I mean I didn't bring anything to offer you in return. I don't have any money, either."*

Kaguya's exasperation showed clearly on his face.

*"...You think I would ask you for money...?"*

*"I don't want to be a nuisance..."*

Eken hung his head, unable to accept Kaguya's feelings.

He didn't know what to do.

Kaguya was reaching out a hand to him, but Eken wasn't sure whether it was okay to take it.

*"...I can't burden you like that, Lord Kaguya..."*

He was at a complete loss.

He felt like his childhood had come to a sudden end.

*"It's just like you said: Not even my parents want me..."*

He wanted to keep being protected. To keep up the illusion that he was loved.

Eken kept his head down, and Kaguya said in an even gentler voice:

*"...Then think of it like this. I'm keeping you by my side because I don't want to worry."*

*"What do you mean...?"*

*"You are a citizen of Yamato, and I'm supposed to protect you. However, I don't want to think about 'protecting people' purely in terms of profit and loss. If I lived like that, I wouldn't give night to the people. After all, I also want to live my own life..."*

Kaguya was speaking his true feelings.

His words cut deep into the wound that had just opened in Eken's heart, but they also softened his hardheadedness. The king of night's kindness enveloped people whole.

Ironically enough, it was the bond that Eken had formed as a result of all his

hardships that changed his life for the better.

*“...Are you sure...?”*

Kaguya was the Archer of Twilight, but to Eken...

*“Even if I have nothing to give back to you?”*

...he was a savior.

*“...I was wondering why you weren’t crying... So you were holding back your tears, huh?”*

From that very moment, Eken loved him immensely.

To Eken, Kaguya was his destiny, even if the god didn’t see him the same way.

After that, Eken lived in the mansion alongside the current Custodian and Tohko, Kaguya’s wife, who had also been sent to Ryugu as a sacrifice.

It was the Custodian who first noticed how compatible Eken and Kaguya were.

He had been old, and he’d convinced Kaguya to show Eken the job of the Archer. Eken climbed the mountain with the adults, entered the sacred area, and saw the god incarnate use an otherworldly power to bring about night.

Eken was sincerely moved by the sight—showing he had the quality to serve the Archer of Twilight.

Archers all around the world tore open the Canopy to bring morning and night, and he found it beautiful. He found beauty in Kaguya’s poise as he shot the arrow for Yamato, excited by the magical scene. He secretly wished he could perform such a feat. Eken showered Kaguya with praise and respect, which the god didn’t seem to mind. Perhaps it was inevitable that they would

begin to form a new relationship.

In the end, Eken asked Kaguya directly to let him take on the role of Custodian, this time undeniably by his own will.

*“Lord Kaguya, please allow me to stay by your side forever. I want to be your Custodian.”*

He wasn't someone who would find it suffocating to support someone else from behind the scenes.

He was charmed by Kaguya's personality as well. And he was young; his presence would be necessary as Kaguya grew old.

He was perfectly suited for the job, but Kaguya refused.

*“No. It'll close off your future. I'm in the middle of negotiating for you to get an assistant job in a Fugeki institution... If you want to work, wait until then.”*

*“Then let me stay here by your side! You're a part of the clan, right?”*

*“You don't get it... You won't get to leave Ryugu if you become my Custodian! Even those who work at the Fugeki clan's observatory get to go on vacation and marry whomever they choose. You'll be extremely limited if you stay with me!”*

*“It doesn't matter if I can't travel. I'll just look for a partner in Ryugu.”*

*“You don't understand!”*

Eken did not back down, however.

He asked time and time again, until Kaguya eventually gave in.

Part of the reason was that he couldn't find anywhere else to take Eken in.

If Kaguya was going to have to raise Eken either way, then he could at least let

the boy be his Custodian, temporarily, until the time came for him to leave the nest. So in the end, he let himself be guided by emotion.

Kaguya lamented the fact that Eken was wasting his life, but on that point, the two of them would never see eye to eye.

Kaguya couldn't go anywhere, but he had a duty and a family.

Eken could go anywhere, but he had no place or person waiting for him.

The boy had been searching for a purpose.

*"I want to be with you and be useful to you, Lord Kaguya."*

Eken chose to be with that somewhat grouchy man simply because he liked him.

*"...You won't be able to just up and quit if you regret it somewhere down the line..."*

They made a good pair as lord and retainer. Grumbling all the while, Kaguya performed the ritual to make Eken his Custodian.

Once it was done, the old Custodian retired, and Eken became Kaguya's retainer.

Eken had had the opportunity to meet his parents later on. They scolded him for saying that they had been the ones to suggest faking his age, and they'd naturally drifted apart.

*That doesn't matter.*

They wouldn't really see each other anymore, anyway. He was going to live with the god, here on this island, forever.

Eken wouldn't have been able to endure his sadness if he were alone, but

Kaguya's need of him gave him great support. He found pride in being responsible for the safekeeping of the god incarnate who brought night every day.

*I'm working hard. I got taken in by a good lord. It's all going to be okay.*

He had no one to talk to about it, but he didn't feel lonely.

After all, he knew his lord was making sure he wouldn't.

Eken's biggest fear was being sent off somewhere without knowing about it.

But he had faith that Kaguya would never do such a thing.

He was sure he would grow old by Kaguya's side, and they would continue to dedicate their lives to Yamato as Archer and Custodian.

As he went out on walks and shopping, Eken became acquainted with the locals.

Kaguya had said that they lived in a small bubble, but Eken's circle of acquaintances grew as he got to know more people who knew about Kaguya's identity.

It wasn't anything flashy, but his life was peaceful and purposeful.

He enjoyed every day in his own way. He honestly didn't wish for much.

He savored his little bit of happiness.

Yet where there was the moon, there were clouds to block it, and wind to scatter the flowers.

All good things come to an end.

That eventuality came two years after Eken first began his job as Custodian.

*"Is that true...? Custodians can do that?"*

It happened during a morning chat.

Tohko exclaimed in surprise upon hearing Eken's story over breakfast.

He had used his power of Divine Cloak for the first time, guiding an old woman who'd wandered into the sacred zone back to the mountain trail by showing her illusions.

That was it, but Eken was excited that he'd finally had a chance to use his power; the former Custodian had spent months training him with it. He hadn't really needed to use it at all, but the young boy had been too excited to resist.

Tohko had been with Kaguya for ten years, yet she hadn't known about the Custodian's powers.

Kaguya looked slightly troubled, but he didn't reprimand Eken for bringing it up—he only asked his wife to keep it a secret.

*"That's confidential, okay? So keep it between us."*

Tohko felt left out.

*"But Lord Kaguya, I had no idea. It never came up with the last Custodian..."*

*"It's something that's best not shared around. But you're family...so it's fine."*

*"You should've told me earlier, then... I'm shocked."*

*"I thought you were better off not knowing. I don't mean that in a bad way—just that it was better to keep you protected."*

There seemed to be some sort of friction between the couple. They respected each other and didn't argue, but it felt as though they purposely avoided getting too close to each other.

*"I can keep a secret... You didn't have to exclude me."*

Tohko had been sold off by her family, just like Eken.

Kaguya married her without knowing or even suspecting what the Fugeki clan had done.

He saw himself as the culprit, and Tohko, the victim.

*"It's not like that! I didn't mean to exclude you... Divine Cloak must only be*

*used to protect the Archer. We can't flaunt it like it's a magic trick, so it's just better that you didn't know..."*

Kaguya had once tried to annul their marriage after finding out Tohko had been sent as a sacrifice.

He'd been furious with the higher-ups. It was one thing if she'd made up her mind to marry him, but what had happened was little more than human trafficking. Yet the marriage was already done.

Were they to divorce, a number of issues would arise.

Tohko's reputation would suffer from accusations of abandoning her duty.

It would be hard for a woman who'd given up in her role as a god's wife to find another partner, or even to get a job somewhere within the Fugeki clan. Even if Kaguya forgave her, the clan would not.

*"...Would I also get that power if I became your Custodian?"*

*"Impossible. Eken is my only Custodian."*

On top of everything else, Tohko had a sick older brother whose medical bills were paid through her service. If she'd told Kaguya that she wanted to continue receiving that support at least until her brother passed away, Kaguya would have chosen to keep her close to him in the same way he did Eken.

Neither Kaguya nor Tohko were at fault, yet they felt bad for each other.

Kaguya felt guilty for wasting a woman's life by accepting the marriage to her without much thought.

Tohko felt guilty for taking advantage of Kaguya's kindness to protect herself.

*"How do they get that power? Eken was just a normal boy, right?"*

They lived together as a family, but an unbridgeable gulf separated them.

*"The Archer breaks off a branch from one of the plants from the land and gives it to their chosen vassal. The rest happens naturally. It's been that way forever. They say the Archer gives away a piece of their power, but I don't know myself... I gave Eken a branch of crape myrtle that was blooming that day."*

Tohko was shocked to hear that.

*“The one in the garden?”*

*“Yes, the crape myrtle there.”*

*“...”*

*“Tohko?”*

*“.....”*

It took a while for Kaguya to realize his mistake.

*“I’m sorry... I forgot... That’s one of the plants you always take care of...”*

A heavy silence settled over them. The garden was the only place Tohko could use freely.

She must’ve been sad to hear that one of her precious flowers had been damaged.

*“No, Lord Kaguya, the garden is your property...!”*

*“That’s not true. It belongs to you, Tohko. I’m sorry, really... Let me get you something as an apology. What would you like? I’ll get you anything.”*

*“...You’ve...already done more than enough for me.”*

*“...Don’t say that. I haven’t done anything for you. I’m so sorry...”*

It was a mismatched marriage.

The problem was that other people had decided it for them.

If only Kaguya had had enough imagination to think of what tragedies could arise from agreeing to marry who the higher-ups told him to...

If only Tohko had had the courage to oppose the marriage and told Kaguya she wanted him to refuse...

If only they had talked it over, even if they still decided to live together...

There were plenty of other ways things might have turned out. But they were all only hypotheticals, and the family was tearing apart at the seams.

It had torn too far to patch up again, and little by little, that madness spread and led them all down the wrong path.

*“Eken, what kind of illusions can you make?”*

It was the summer Eken turned sixteen.

Tohko had asked him that question, but it gave him a bad feeling.

*“Can you do it?”*

She was still fixated on the powers he'd told her about.

*“...Tohko, like Lord Kaguya said, I can’t just show it off like it’s a magic trick.”*

*“I just asked whether you can do it or not...”*

*“...I can...”*

*“.....Just once...? Please...?”*

It started with a flicker of compassion.

Tohko brought a photo album from her room and asked Eken to show her illusions of the people in the pictures. She was sad that she couldn't go to her hometown and see her family.

She begged Eken to use his power to give her some solace.

*I’m not using it for anything bad.*

He was just a child.

*Lord Kaguya will get sad if Tohko’s upset.*

And a loyal vassal.

*It’s my duty to take care of the Archer in body and mind.*

He decided to grant her wish, not so much for Tohko's sake, but for the sake of keeping his lord's complicated marriage on good terms.

So he showed Tohko her friends, her only brother, all the people she couldn't see. She was brought to tears even though she knew it was all a mirage. At first,

everything had gone well.

*“You shouldn’t just be satisfied with these fakes... Why not give them a call?”*

*“Easier said than done. My brother’s in the hospital...”*

*“Tohko... You got married for your brother’s sake, but he doesn’t even call?”*

*“He was against it right up until the very end... Ahhh, this is amazing... It’s like I’m really talking to him.”*

Next, Eken tried to re-create places from her memories.

Tohko was enchanted. It felt as if she was really there.

Eken ended up breaking his promise to only do it the one time and showed Tohko the illusions again and again.

*“This is so amazing, Eken.”*

*“Thank you. I feel like I can keep going now.”*

*“What a wonderful power.”*

Kaguya was happy to see Tohko happy. Eken felt he was doing the right thing.

Their world was a small one, composed of only three people—their happiness was the only thing that mattered.

Eken was the type of person who wanted to be of use to others.

Yet no one thought that would end up leading him down a dark path.

*“...You’re going back to your family?”*

One day, while Eken was preparing breakfast with Tohko, she gave him the news.

Thinking back on it from Kaguya's point of view, it must have seemed like the two of them had become very close very quickly.

*"Yes... I haven't seen my brother in years, and I'll also see my parents. I'll use that opportunity to tell them and the people who set up this marriage that I want to leave Lord Kaguya."*

*"...Tohko... You don't like him?!"*

*"Lower your voice!"*

Eken and Tohko glanced toward the living room where Kaguya sat on the sofa, still drowsy from waking up. It didn't seem like he'd heard.

*"Speak quieter, okay?"*

*"Okay. So why are you doing this...?"*

*"...Back to your previous question, I owe Lord Kaguya so much. I was married off at eighteen, and just did whatever the adults told me to do. I was frightened and couldn't stop crying, but he tried to protect me. I could never dislike him..."*

*"Then why...?"*

*"...Because I'm bleeding his life dry."*

Her expression was cold and stern but deliberate.

*"I'm wasting him. If he hadn't married me, or if we could divorce, then he could be with someone he truly loves. Back when this all started, they said my brother didn't have long left to live, so I asked Lord Kaguya to let me stay for just a few years, and he said yes... But thanks to the Fugeki clan's support, my brother's been able to prolong his life...and this ended up dragging on... This isn't right. I'm sure you've noticed it, too... We don't really feel like a married couple."*

*"..."*

Eken figured she meant the fact that they didn't have a child, among other things.

It was an old-fashioned way of thinking, but that was the kind of world they lived in.

*“...After Lord Kaguya found out I was sold off because of my brother...he stopped looking at me as a wife, and I became one of the commoners he had to protect... It’ll probably always be like that. Things might have been different if I came here of my own free will, but no...”*

He had an idea of what Tohko meant.

Even more so than the other gods incarnate, Kaguya had a keen awareness of his role as a god, and that his duty was to protect the commonfolk. That was why he’d used this system to keep Tohko by his side and protect her from her family. In the end, no romance had blossomed between them, but they still supported each other in their daily lives, and now ten years had gone by.

Such was the relationship between Kaguya and Tohko. They were family, in a way.

*“Lord Kaguya made me part of his family. He took me as his wife. But...he thinks he stole my life away from me... That’s not it. I’m stealing his. He’s been a god ever since he was little and has had his life controlled for the good of the people. He doesn’t even realize he’s being oppressed.”*

*“If you put it like that, then I’m just doing the same...”*

*“You’re doing your duty. You’re not like me. And you’re integrating well into life in Ryugu. I... I can’t get used to this place, even after all this time... I had a lot to think about when you showed me my hometown with your powers. About my past, and my future. And Lord Kaguya, of course. I’ve always been on the receiving end... He’s protected me for ten years. It’s time I left. That’s the only thing I can do for him...”*

*“Tohko...”*

Eken imagined what Tohko had looked like when she’d come here at eighteen years old—a woman married off to a god in an unfamiliar land. He’d come to Ryugu at fourteen...

*I also came here without knowing what I was doing. I was so scared and sad, I clung to Lord Kaguya.*

Kaguya had accepted him. That was just the kind of god he was.

*"I don't want to be a parasite leeching off Lord Kaguya anymore... I want to be independent..."*

Eken reassessed how he saw Tohko. As Kaguya's Custodian, he didn't have a good impression of anyone who could aggravate his lord, so he hadn't been too fond of her. Now, though, he knew he'd had the wrong idea.

*I'm also troubling him by being here.*

He couldn't miss the connection between Tohko's situation and his.

Eken thought about what he could do and said what came to mind.

*"I-if you're worried about money, I can help you with that. I get a wage, too."*

*"Hee-hee... I can't take money from a child. I told Lord Kaguya I'm visiting my hometown and asked for some time off. I just told you because...well, now that I've told you, I can't back down...I have to stand up to the people in charge. It'll just be the two of you for a little while, but look after Lord Kaguya for me, okay?"*

Eken didn't know what to say to Tohko's sad smile, so he just nodded.

After that, Tohko left on her trip. Their normal breakfast table was reduced to just the two of them, and the house felt so large all of a sudden, but a few days later, Tohko returned. Kaguya welcomed her back warmly, having only thought she'd been visiting her hometown.

*How was it seeing your family after so long? Did you get to hang out with your old friends? It must've been a long trip. Better to just rest up for today.*

Tohko answered all of Kaguya's questions with a smile. Eken, on the other hand, was restless. What had the people in charge said? Was Tohko going to disappear from their lives? The loneliness suddenly hit him all at once, but...

*"It was no use. They told me to stay in Ryugu forever. To never come back... and to do my job..."*

Once they were alone that night, Tohko finally gave Eken the news.

*“...Also, it turns out my brother...died last year.”*

She must've been holding back her tears the whole time with Kaguya. But she hadn't been able to endure it any longer and broke down sobbing, talking to Eken.

*“Th-they didn't tell me. They already had his funeral and buried him.”*

Eken's chest hurt at hearing her story.

*“I feel so bad for Lord Kaguya. How am I going to tell him? He won't forgive me...”*

Eken urged Tohko to tell Kaguya everything, sure his lord would do something about it.

He wouldn't just suddenly push her away. He would definitely support her.

Tohko didn't listen; she only cried. Kaguya was asleep, having completed his duty as the Archer, so Eken convinced her to tell him when they were all together the next morning.

In the end, he almost had to force her to go to bed. And he would regret this moment over and over and over again.

Why hadn't he stayed with her until morning?

Eken woke up early the next morning to find Tohko collapsed downstairs.

“No...”

*She's...dead?*

She looked dead to Eken. There was a small puddle of blood, as if she'd hit her head.

The mansion had an open-air design, with wooden floating stairs leading up to the second floor.

If you were going upstairs, you could look down and see the first floor. Leaning over the edge was dangerous.

*No way.*

Kaguya always warned Eken not to run up and down the stairs.

It was pretty high up, and the fall could be catastrophic.

You had to hold on to the railing when going up and down. That was why Eken had been asked to help Tohko whenever she was carrying anything on the stairs. It was a place anyone living here had to be careful of.

*No, no, no, this can't be.*

Was it an accident?

*How? Why?*

Suicide?

*But she never looked like she'd do something like that.*

Had she hit her head and not been able to move late last night when everyone was asleep?

*Why, why, why, why, why?*

No, she was clothed like she was going outside. Did she try to run away by herself?

Or did she feel so guilty and hopeless about the future that she threw herself off the stairs?

*But we said we'd talk in the morning.*

Eken had no intention of brushing aside Tohko's problems. He'd just postponed the conversation to the next day out of consideration for his lord because it was late at night. He'd been prepared to get on his knees and beg Kaguya to do something for Tohko. This problem concerned him, too—they were family.

*Why couldn't you wait?*

Eken had known Tohko was on the brink of an emotional collapse, and he'd put it off.

*What do I do?*

There was no going back. But most importantly...

*"Oh no. This will make Lord Kaguya cry."*

That was what worried Eken the most.

Just then, light surged from Eken's body and burst inside the room.

*"Eken?"*

Eken's heart stopped as he heard his name.

Kaguya had woken up.

His voice was coming from the top of the stairs.

*"What are you doing down there?"*

It was in that moment that all the seams that had been holding their family together became visible.

*“You’re still half asleep? Anyway, I’m going to the market, so we’ll have breakfast later. You don’t have to come. I’ll get milk and eggs. Anything else you want?”*

It was broken beyond repair.

Everyone should have taken a good, hard look at it.

*“Anything you want, Tohko?”*

But the veil of illusion appeared.

*“Huh...?”*

Eken followed Kaguya’s gaze and found a person there.

*“Nothing, then? Okay.”*

It was a woman he knew well.

*Lord Kaguya.*

*“Since you just came back, Tohko, I’ll make those pancakes you liked the other day.”*

*No, Lord Kaguya.*

*“There’s strawberries and whipped cream, but we ran out of eggs and milk yesterday.”*

*Lord Kaguya, no, she’s not...*

*“It’s nothing... I can at least do that much for my family...”*

She hadn’t been there a moment ago.

But now Kaguya talked to an illusion without a shred of suspicion.

*“Consider it a welcome-home gift.”*

An illusion of Tohko Fugeki stood beside her corpse.

The space around her was warped. It was obvious this wasn't natural.

*"I'm going, then. See you later, Eken, Tohko."*

But Kaguya didn't suspect a thing as he left the mansion.

Eken looked at the illusion as it turned its head to him with a smile. He felt a shiver run down his spine.

It was a manifestation of his sin.

The Custodian's Divine Cloak was meant to protect the Archer.

Upon seeing Tohko's broken body, Eken had thought:

*Lord Kaguya will be sad.*

*If he's too sad, he won't shoot his arrows anymore.*

*Then night wouldn't come to Yamato.*

That couldn't happen. So many people waited for night to come today as well.

*I have to hide it.*

That flawed thought had flickered across his mind for a moment, and he'd unconsciously used his power.

The Custodian didn't need to take any special action to use Divine Cloak. From the outside, it looked like the light of a firefly illuminating the night, just as it did when Kaguya shot his arrow, that enveloped Eken's body and burst out of him within a set range to form the illusion he'd created in his mind.

Eken had chosen for himself and immediately concealed it.

“...”

He'd changed the scene to hide Tohko, then created a fake Tohko to talk to Kaguya.

“Tohko... I'm so sorry.”

Eken tried to touch the Tohko on the floor, when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

The shade of Tohko opened its mouth.

“Let's call security. We have to move the body.”

The fake Tohko suggested something awful without batting an eyelid.

Eken felt like he was going to lose his mind.

Why was he talking to the illusion that he had created?

“Or is she still alive? Either way, we have to move her. Call security, Eken. The higher-ups will give you further instructions.”

“What...are you...?”

“You immediately thought of what was best for Lord Kaguya. You already made a choice.”

“What are you...? You're not Tohko...!”

“You have to act fast, for Tohko's sake, too!”

Whose idea was this? Was she giving voice to his logical side?

Or was he imagining what Tohko would say if she were here right now?

“...Ngh.”

He had no idea about anything. Except for one thing.

“Eken, do you not care if Lord Kaguya doesn't bring night anymore?!”

Eken had to do what was best as a Custodian.

It all went perfectly wrong.

Everything was taken care of while the poor god was out shopping for his family.

The security team removed Tohko Fugeki's body from Kaguya's house.

The situation was quickly relayed to the higher-ups of the Fugeki clan.

Eken was told to continue deceiving Kaguya for a few days.

And so the curtains rose on the most comic tragedy in the world.

Tohko wasn't there. Yet he had to act as if she was.

What frightened Eken the most was that Tohko's illusion was acting her part independently.

Ironically, he had an aptitude for imagining, constructing, and deploying this power.

It usually required a great amount of concentration and caused fatigue after only a few hours, but Eken was able to keep it up for days on end out of consideration for his lord. Perhaps it could be said that a spoonful of insanity aided in the flourishing of his talent. Eken protected Kaguya's heart.

The woman he'd protected dearly was gone, but Eken kept the truth from him so he could keep going.

What happened afterward was just as Kaguya remembered.

One day, Tohko and Eken disappeared, leaving behind a note.

But in reality, Tohko had gone earlier, and what Kaguya had thought was a family of three was only two and a mirage. His Custodian had hidden his wife's death from him.

Eken had removed himself from Kaguya's house that day under the orders of the higher-ups.

By that time, even he'd realized how much psychological damage he had.

He couldn't sleep, he was constantly anxious, he had suicidal thoughts. It was inevitable after betraying his beloved lord and talking for so long with an illusion.

Eken would eventually slip up. The higher-ups hadn't had to tell him that.

The loyal boy had finally reached his limit. He'd suggested telling Kaguya the truth, but the people in charge had been reluctant to do so. He told them he couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't lie to Kaguya. And after much pleading, they finally accepted on the condition that he take a break.

The reason for this was because his illusion was acting independently, which was unheard-of.

What if it attacked Kaguya?

The illusory Tohko was more carefree, yet stranger and eerier than the real one. They told Eken that he had to recover mentally, rein in his illusion, then come back in good health—for Kaguya. Eken couldn't argue against that. He asked to be there when they explained to Kaguya where Tohko had gone, but they refused.

It would be difficult for them to explain if Eken created the illusion again unconsciously, and even if they could get Kaguya to understand, he might lash out against Eken.

Eken wouldn't be able to endure that in his current state, and they couldn't be sure he wouldn't create an illusion that could harm them in order to protect himself.

The adults would take care of explaining it all while he rested in the hospital. What he needed was professional counseling, and all Eken could do was accept.

First, they suggested he leave the mansion without telling Kaguya anything.

Kaguya would likely simply assume the two of them had run away together. Then, later, someone from the Fugeki clan would come and offer an explanation. Tohko didn't want to live there anymore and had forced Eken to go with her, the two would be caught sooner or later, and Tohko would be taken to live somewhere else.

They would ask him to give Eken a few months' rest so he could collect himself before returning to Ryugu.

That way, Eken would be able to come back without much issue.

Kaguya would grieve and rage if he knew the truth. They wanted to avoid that. Eken just had to rest and recover while Kaguya waited, then go back to him.

The sixteen-year-old boy accepted their tale full of holes.

His judgment was not trustworthy then. He realized his psyche was falling apart. He loved Kaguya, and that was why it hurt to be by his side. He couldn't leave him, but he wanted to.

In reality, the Fugeki clan left that fake note the day Eken departed, with no explanation about his or Tohko's disappearance. They decided it would be best to simply replace the broken wife and Custodian. Kaguya had refused, but Eken had no way of knowing that.

Eken was sent to a hospital far away from Ryugu in Teishu, where his days consisted of waking up and going to sleep. Night came even with the Custodian away, so Eken knew that the world kept going no problem without him. One month, then a second went by like that.

Oddly, no one came to visit him. A sense of anxiety began to overtake Eken.

*"You're so dumb, Eken. They're not sending you back."*

Tohko's phantom laughed at him as he stayed obediently in the hospital.

*"It's all a bunch of lies. He must have a new Custodian and wife by now."*

*Lord Kaguya isn't like that.*

*"I'm sure he's relieved to have gotten rid of us two nuisances."*

*Lord Kaguya...isn't like that.*

*"Want to go see, then? It's about time you left this place already anyway. Do you think they planned on keeping you in here until you died?"*

Eken fled the hospital. As he regained his senses, he thought that even if Kaguya hated him now, he wanted to ask for forgiveness. So the lonely wolf ran and ran and ran.

Then he saw it. A perfect form that existed without them.

*“Tsukihi.”*

*“Lord Kaguya.”*

Seeing Kaguya and Tsukihi talking together after Eken had run all that way to Mount Ryugu was what finally pushed his mind to snap.

He saw love there in the mutual respect and affection between the two of them. It wasn't an imperfect family like the three of them had been; the security forces were in harmony with Kaguya. It was the first time he'd seen his lord like that, and it made Eken realize just how much he had been holding his lord back.

It pained him to know that this was the life Kaguya had always wanted.

*I'm sorry, Lord Kaguya.*

At the same time, envy burned within him.

*Why, Lord Kaguya?*

Yes, Eken had betrayed his lord. He'd concealed the truth from him.

But it had all been for him.

It was then that Eken's heart truly became that of a beast.

*Lord Kaguya.*

He wanted to ask why.

*Lord Kaguya.*

He wanted his pity. His gaze.

*Have you forgotten about me already, Lord Kaguya?*

There was a reason why the boy had a wolf in his heart.

“Eken, someone’s here.”

The cruel words of his fake Tohko brought Eken back to reality.

Eken had been living in this desolate shrine ever since the Dark Wolf mystery first began, but sometimes, the head priest came back.

“No, out there. Outside.”

Eken wiped his tears away with a sleeve before going outside. Apprehensively looking around, he saw someone in the trees surrounding the shrine. It was already almost noon. The glare from the sun didn’t let him see clearly, but a few people were heading toward him.

“Look, they’re kind of suspicious-looking...,” said Tohko. “There’s five of them? What are we going to do? Let them go past? There’s no food in the shrine, but they might have something good. What if we attack them?”

Eken shook his head. “No, let’s go back inside.”

Having made his decision, Eken turned back around. It didn’t seem like they had seen him.

They were probably just some locals fooling around going into the closed-off mountain, or the hunters’ association looking for the Dark Wolf.

It was better just to let them pass by.

But the moment he turned his back on them, he heard someone running at him and turned around.

“Eken!” Tohko’s phantom shouted.

Eken wanted to yell, too. The people had been so far away only seconds ago,

but they'd run up close to him with the speed of racing horses. They must have noticed him. He gasped at their response speed.

*No way.*

Eken immediately built the illusionary world in his mind to create the Dark Wolf, but his opponents were faster. A hand reached out and hit his thigh faster than he could see it. A jolt of electricity coursed through him, bringing Eken to his knees. They bent his arms like a doll's and stepped on his back. He saw something that looked like a nightstick fall to the ground and realized that the object was what had hit him. From the electric shock, it was some sort of stun baton. Soon, men's shoes filled his field of view.

"Did you hear a woman's voice just now?"

"I don't see anyone else. Look around."

"Allow me, Young Master."

They spoke one after the other. The job of restraining Eken was left to someone else. Eken cautiously looked up and saw an imposing man glaring down at him.

"...There's something off about you. What were you doing?"

His voice was glacial.

"What are *you* doing?!" Eken cried out sharply.

A high-pitched scream followed. Apparently, there was a kindhearted person among them, and Eken heard someone speak out against his treatment.

"Renri... What do you mean? We're detaining someone suspicious. He could be an assassin sent by Doyen Turtle."

"Raicho, please, look at him! He's just a boy! Look!"

Eken found himself caught in the middle of a discussion between the fiancés of the Agents of Summer, Raicho Kimikage and Renri Rouo.

"The Towns' bigwigs use orphans as private soldiers. They get children from the Mercy Refuges and train them. What if he's one of them? Hey, kid, what Town are you from? Answer our questions and we won't hurt you—too much."

“He’s probably just a commoner!”

“C’mon... The mountain’s closed off, the shrine is sealed, and he’s here now? Hey, are you really just an ordinary civilian? If so, I’ll give you some money to forget we ever attacked you. If you don’t, though...”

“Raicho!”

“...I—I...”

“See, he’s not talking. I knew he was an enemy.”

“He was just trying to say something! You’re scaring him!!”

Eken was so afraid, all he could do was tremble. That was the Divine Cloak’s weak point.

So long as he remained at a distance or his opponents didn’t surprise him with sudden movements and he kept calm, he could keep the spell up. But the moment his mental strength collapsed, it crumbled.

In the same way the Agents of the Four Seasons and the Archers of Oracle controlled their divine powers, if Eken found himself mentally unstable, he would lose his weapon. It also didn’t help that he’d already put the Dark Wolf away after seeing the Agents of Summer the previous night. Tohko’s phantom was gone now, too. Eken showed extraordinary concentration when it came to Kaguya, but that wasn’t the case this time.

*Lord Kaguya, help me.*

He was a scared child again.

Not to mention his foes were incredibly tough. If they’d been easier to handle, Eken might’ve been able to take a deep breath and create another illusion, but the man stepping on him was someone even veteran Guard Ayame Hazakura recognized as stronger than herself. He was far more intimidating than your average man.

“We should silence him before he causes any trouble...”

Eken could tell from his fist and his words that this wasn’t a man you could talk around. He trampled on others with sheer strength.

“Raicho, we have to hear him out first!”

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that his life was in Renri’s hands. Eken looked at him begging for salvation, and Renri got even angrier seeing the tears in his eyes.

“Raicho! Tell your men to let him go!”

“Renri, do you really think all mass murderers walk around in clothes drenched in blood?”

“No, but it’s obvious he’s just a kid! A normal kid like those back in the Town!”

Eken pricked up his ears at that. “...Town...?” The words escaped through trembling lips. “You’re...with the Towns...of the Four Seasons...?”

The two men wearing black looked at each other.

“You mean, you are, too...?” Renri replied.

“Yes, I’m...from the Fugeki clan.”

“You mean the venerated Archers of Oracle’s...? We’re from the Town of Summer. We’re here for a reason.”

“Summer...? So you know the Ladies Summer...? Um...excuse me... I—I... I don’t mean to harm them... Please, I... I’m sorry, I’m not...”

Eken’s fear was clearly abnormal. Renri showed him pity, but it only made Raicho more suspicious.

“See? Let the kid go, Raicho.”

“...Something feels off.”

“Raicho! I’m warning you!”

Hearing Renri yell, Raicho ordered his subordinate to release Eken but to stay on guard. He glared daggers at the kid, and Eken knew what would happen if he tried anything funny.

“You’re already angry...,” Raicho retorted. “Kid, for the record, I don’t trust you. I’m just taking a less violent route because Renri won’t shut up. So what’s a boy from the Fugeki clan doing here? You’re a servant to the Lord Archer of Twilight? You must be aware of the situation, right? He sent a notice. This

place's gonna become a hunting ground..."

Eken welled up the moment he heard the words *Archer of Twilight*.

"...Lord Kaguya..."

He'd been holding back so much up until now, but he couldn't keep it inside anymore.

"...I promise I'll make up for it... Please... I'm sorry... Please... Forgive me..."

Renri and Raicho looked at each other as the frightened boy begged for his life.

"...He's crying! You made him cry, Raicho! You made a kid cry!"

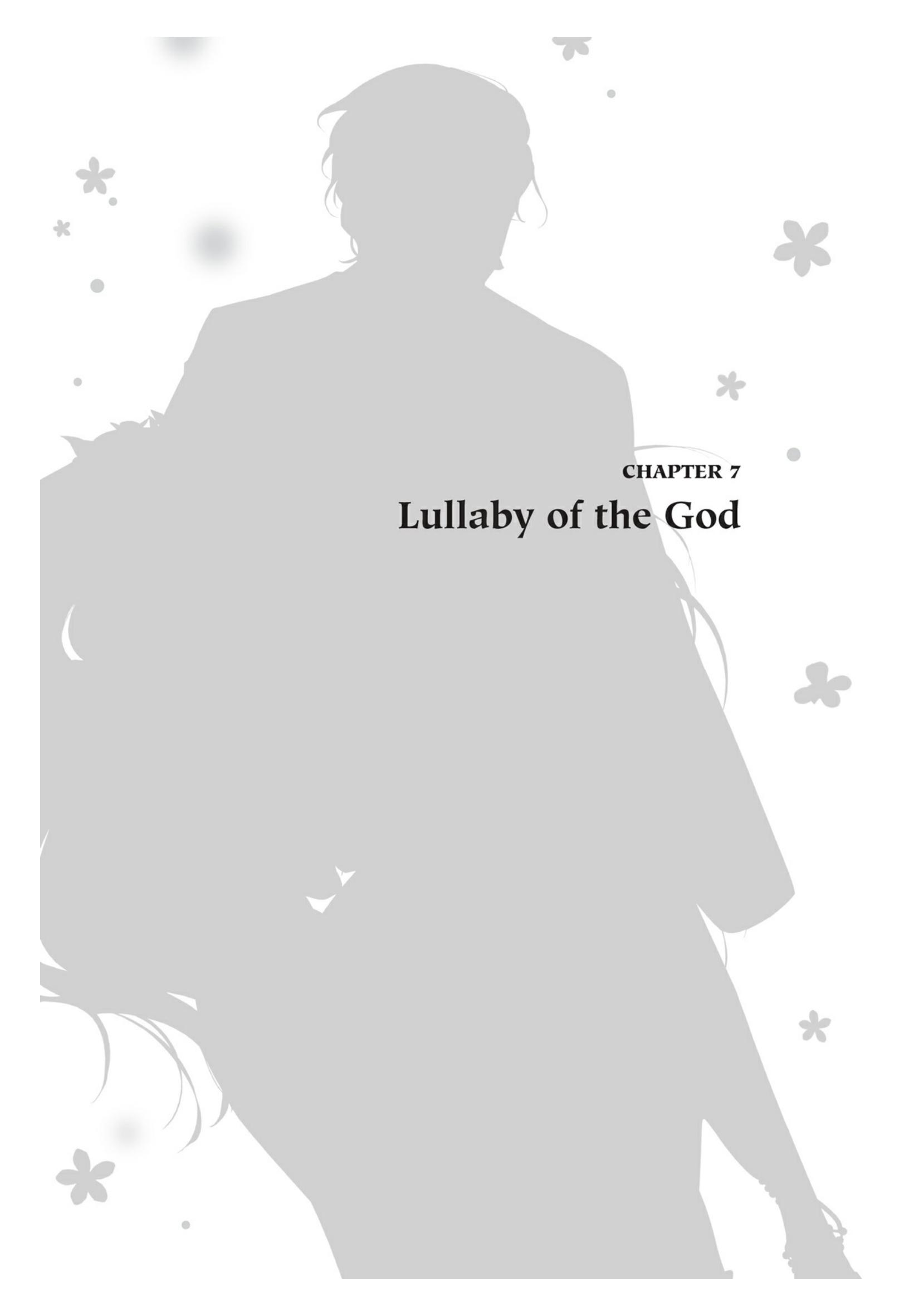
"No way. He just started crying on his own!"

The argument kept going. No one thought of this encounter as a miracle.

Without realizing it, Renri and Raicho had obtained the key to solving this turmoil.

And so the wolf finally joined in Summer and Twilight's fight.





CHAPTER 7

## Lullaby of the God

A few hours before the lost wolf met Raicho and Renri.

Spring, Autumn, and Winter immediately switched from standby to action after hearing about the declaration of war.

Tsubame found out that Porcupine's destination was Mount Ryugu.

Considering the Archer of Twilight had said that he would also be trying to solve the Dark Wolf mystery, the best course of action to get close to them would be to go to Mount Ryugu.

There was one other reason why it was better to be on the move, regardless of whether the Seasons could meet them or not. Ryugu was not a big island, compared to the rest of Yamato, but it was still blessed with vast tracts of land and mountains. As was the case in Teishu, Iyo, Tsukushi, and Enishi, there were plenty of towns and roads within its borders. All this meant that it wasn't just a matter of walking in a straight line to get where you wanted to go.

As Sakura and Itecho had discussed, it would take them between two and two and a half hours to reach Mount Ryugu by car. Plus, the group was fairly large. The cars would need to stay nearby to make sure no one got lost, and seeing as it was almost midday, they would have to stop on the way to get food and rehydrate or they'd be too tired to climb the mountain. And although Nadeshiko was used to traveling, and quieter and more understanding than normal kids her age, she couldn't move at the same pace as the adults. Even factoring all of that in, it would still take longer than they calculated.

Everyone scrambled to get ready for departure.

But as they were rushing around, a group appeared at the hotel to stop them.

"We are with the Security Department of the Maintenance Division for the Four Seasons Agency's Summer Branch. We have come to ask the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons to stay inside the hotel, for your own safety..."

The Agency had sent their staff.

The Agents were surrounded the moment they stepped out into the parking lot. All the other guests around them scattered away under the overwhelming pressure of their presence.

Tsubame Aboshi, who was waiting by the cars after getting everything ready, watched the confrontation between the Agents and the men in suits with apprehension.

“We understand you are worried about your colleagues, but we have a duty to keep you safe. National Security’s Porcupine squad is on the move. Please let them safeguard the Ladies Summer. We must watch out for insurgent attacks. We will keep you informed of everything as it—”

“Then could you please get us in contact with the Secret Service squad appointed by National Security?”

In the midst of that turbulent atmosphere, Rindo Azami had taken a step forward and cut off the Summer staff member who seemed to be their leader. He was speaking more forcefully than usual.

“Apologies. I am the Guard of Autumn.”

Rindo seemed more emotional today than he had in the past few days.

Out of everyone here, he had been the first to worry about being unable to get in touch with Ruri and Ayame. The situation had taken a turn for the worse, and Rindo realized they were in danger, too, and he’d kept moving while protecting a young child.

“We have no time to waste, so I’ll be honest with you. The venerated Agents are terribly worried. We heard rumors that people plotting to replace the Agents were arrested in the Town of Spring. Is the Agency aware of this?”

Rindo couldn’t hide his annoyance at the Agency staff coming at this moment. He glared at them, as if telling them to get out of his way.

“...We belong to the Summer Branch, so—”

"I'm asking whether you know about it or not. Surely someone in a managerial position at the Maintenance Division would know about violent happenings in other Towns."

"...We are aware."

Rindo's lips formed a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. He was furious.

"Good. Then you must know that this is the result of that nonsensical divine punishment theory they were putting forward. And that there are fools who harbor hatred for the Agents and forget their duties, all in the name of their phony justice, just like what happened in Spring."

"I have heard something similar, yes..."

The man's eyes shifted to Hinagiku and Sakura.

"However, we are from Summer... That would be the Town of Spring's problem..."

Rindo immediately stepped to the side to block the man's accusatory gaze. He'd been glaring at the lady and retainer of Spring, as if it was their fault.

Suddenly, a column of cold air rose behind Rindo—though it was the middle of summer in Ryugu. Rosei was glaring daggers at the staff members in silence.

Rindo looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with him before he could say anything. Rosei understood that Rindo was asking to let him take care of things, and he reluctantly stepped back. Rindo turned to look at the Summer staff again.

*Do they want to die?*

The king of winter was saying nothing, because Rindo had stepped forward first.

He had volunteered to negotiate on behalf of everyone, and Rosei had respected his decision and let him take the lead.

He had only done it to let Rindo save face—it had nothing to do with respect for the Agency's Summer staff. Rindo had wanted to solve this through discussion, to avoid having the people in front of them turn into ice statues, but they didn't seem to care about his efforts.

“As they say: Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. And the fact is that your behavior has been problematic. That is why we have come here now.”

“How rude. The Agency should take a good hard look at their own actions before criticizing the Agents. The situation has escalated into hate crimes because you couldn’t keep your ridiculous theories in check.”

“...”

“Those extremist ideas made people go out of control. How are these people you’re letting off the hook any different from the insurgents? There has been no official warning denouncing the divine punishment theory; not from the Towns or the Agency. Do you mean to clean that up behind closed doors or not at all? How can you ask the Agents to not worry like that? Your actions aren’t in line with your words. You have a duty to protect the Agents? Don’t make me laugh.”

“That is a decision from the higher-ups...”

“Then bring someone higher than you here and get them to explain what they plan to do. Otherwise, there’s no point in us talking. We asked National Security for a direct phone line to the Archer of Twilight and have received no response. If only the Agency tried to help us, we could resolve this issue without a hitch. If you want to say anything to the Agents, then show some good faith first.”

“I’m sorry, but that is not a decision for us to—”

“Then you have no reason to stop us.”

Rindo turned around and gestured for the Agents to go to their cars.

Tsubame quickly looked up, but then the Agency man grabbed Rindo’s arm.

“Please reconsider. We don’t want to have to use force.”

The rest of the staff members unholstered their guns. They aimed them at the Guard instead of at the Agents to keep them in check. They couldn’t possibly defeat them all, so their best option was to take Rindo hostage.

“Are you serious...?”

Rindo frowned. After everything, this is what it had come to? The Agency man sneered, taking Rindo’s reaction as confusion or fear, misbelieving he had the

upper hand.

“Please don’t move. The bullets might hit someone else.”

He wasn’t wrong; with how close they were, the bullets could ricochet anywhere. It was safer not to move. But the threat didn’t work on Rindo.

“You realize...I’m the Guard of Autumn...?”

“Yes, we are aware. If you could please convince the others, Lord Azami...”

“I could easily defeat five or six of you.”

The air turned colder as Rindo and the man kept talking.

“I’m warning you. Stop right now.”

He heard a quiet voice calling his name.

“We can still talk things out.”

Again, that small, sad voice calling his name.

“Put away your guns...”

It was the voice of his beloved Goddess of Autumn.

“Rindo!!”

As if reacting to Nadeshiko’s scream, Rindo twisted the wrist of the hand holding him, causing the man to pull away. He grabbed his opponent’s arm and kicked his feet out from under him before immediately pulling out his gun.

The next second, he had the gun pressed up against the man’s head and was glaring at the rest of the Agency staff.

“If any of you move a muscle...!”

He didn’t even finish his sentence before all the staff members, including the one in front of him, fell to their knees and their eyes rolled back into their heads.

“...Huh?”

Rindo was at a loss for words.

One by one, the men fell to the ground, their guns bouncing away.

It was quite a shocking scene—all of them collapsing at the same time, like puppets with their strings cut. Without a moment's delay, the Winter Agency staff shouted that they would apprehend the men and got to it.

Rindo turned around in shock.

“Nadeshiko...?”

His princess was hidden protectively behind Sakura and Hinagiku. She popped her head out to the side slightly and looked at Rindo, teary-eyed and trembling.

The faces around him all seemed to say the same thing: *Uh-oh*.

“...Nadeshiko, did you do that?”

“...”

“You sucked their life force?”

Rindo was referring to the Agent of Autumn’s power of Life Putrefaction.

Tears started falling down her cheeks. “B-but... You... You were...”

The Agent of Autumn could draw the life out of living things.

From healing wounds to absorbing life force, her power had a wide array of applications depending on how it was used.

Nadeshiko had felt that Rindo was in danger and, whether consciously or not, sucked the life of the Agency staff. Rindo hurriedly checked the pulses of the Summer staff, and it didn’t seem any of their lives were in danger. They had collapsed as if they hadn’t eaten or slept for three days—weakened but not dead.

“Nadeshiko, you can’t do that. You shouldn’t use your powers recklessly... I could have taken care of things by myself...”

Nadeshiko went back to hiding behind Sakura. “But... But...”

Sadness had crept into Nadeshiko’s voice as she’d tried to explain herself, and Sakura gently stroked the young girl’s shoulder. Then she turned to Rindo.

“Lord Azami, please don’t scold Lady Nadeshiko. She was only trying to protect you.”

“But... Lady Himekawa...”

“Mr. Azami, if she hadn’t done it, I would’ve,” Rosei interjected.

Hinagiku, standing next to him, raised her hand slightly. “...Um, sorry... But Hinagiku...was also...going to...create some...roses...” She was holding a pouch with flower seeds. “I...wanted to...help you...Lord Azami.”

“Even you, Lady Kayo...”

Rindo was taken aback. He was happy that everyone had wanted to protect him, but the reality was that he could have saved himself. Looking at the bodies collapsed all over the ground, he couldn’t help but think that this had been overkill. Not to mention he was a Guard; he wasn’t supposed to let Agents act on his behalf. Itecho spoke up, noticing the pain on Rindo’s face.

“Azami, I know how you’re feeling, but I don’t think it could be helped in this situation.”

“Lord Kangetsu...”

“You tried to talk things out, and they pulled guns on you. They even threatened that the bullets might ricochet and hit the Agents. According to the Four Seasons Code, the Agents are allowed to protect themselves, meaning Lady Nadeshiko’s actions were justified. She incapacitated them without any serious injuries, so really, they should be thanking her. Things could’ve turned out far worse if a full-on fight had broken out.”

“...That is true, but even so...”

“In any case, you should give Lady Nadeshiko some emotional support, along with the warning.”

That he could agree with immediately. Rindo walked up to Sakura, but Nadeshiko wouldn’t come out from behind her. The young girl shook her head in refusal. Rindo reached out to her and picked her up against her will to look into her eyes.

“Nadeshiko...”

She looked away.

“Nadeshiko, look at me.”

“...”

“Nadeshiko. Please, look at me.”

She wouldn’t. Instead, she asked in a fearful voice:

“...You hate me now, don’t you...?”

*She thinks I was angry because I hate her?*

A bittersweet pain ran through his chest.

“Of course not... I love you.”

“You’re lying...”

“I want to be by your side forever. But that will be difficult if something happens and they find me negligent in my duty.”

Nadeshiko shivered.

“If the Town thinks I’m not guiding you properly...that I’m not properly teaching you right and wrong, they might take me away from you.”

Hearing that, Nadeshiko finally looked at Rindo.

The moment their eyes met, the young girl started crying again.

“N-no... Don’t!”

She broke down in tears far too easily. Nadeshiko finally understood why Rindo had gotten mad at her—it was for both of their sakes.

“Sorry. I’m sorry.”

Rindo gently patted her back. “I know. I don’t want that, either. I’m happy you tried to protect me...but I didn’t want you to use your powers without thinking it through. You have to be extra careful because you’re the Agent of Autumn. Do you remember what I told you back in spring?”

“...To be careful...because it controls life...?”

“That’s right. I know what a kind girl you are, but some people might not think the same way if they saw what just happened.”

Rindo looked at the unconscious Summer staff being taken away.

"And you don't want your powers to activate every time you get emotional, do you?"

"No..."

Nadeshiko shook her head. She was always quick to recognize her mistakes; it was one of her best qualities.

"No... I don't... I'm sorry..."

Rindo was relieved to hear her recognize her mistake. He hadn't scolded her just because he was angry.

"No, I should've thanked you first. I'm sorry for that. Thank you for saving me, Nadeshiko."

When Rindo thanked her, another wave of tears poured from the young girl's eyes. She buried her head in his neck and sniffled. The young goddess had a power that could be as much doom as it could be salvation, and she needed the guidance of an adult.

"Lords and Ladies, we wish to apologize for the courtesy shown you by our colleagues."

The Winter Agency staff bowed over and over again.

"We will keep them in custody here. However, that does mean that there will be fewer people to accompany you... Is that all right?"

Rosei nodded, then replied.

"Sure. So you think they were acting strangely, too?"

"Pointing a gun at a Guard and taking him hostage is something an insurgent would do. That is definitely not normal. I fear...someone doesn't want you to get close to Mount Ryugu... Perhaps something bad for them will happen if you do."

"...I agree. That means we have to hurry. Keep your guards up, everyone."

The group headed toward the cars again. Tsubame came running toward them.

"Ahhh, that scared me. So are we ready to leave? Sorry I couldn't get a

helicopter."

The idea to go by helicopter had come up at one time, but the companies that had them to rent near the airport didn't have many, and it would've been impossible to transport this many people all at once.

"So instead, I got us some fast sports cars."

The Winter security forces and Four Seasons Agency members got excited at the sight of the luxury cars, and the people in charge of driving proudly climbed in. As everyone decided how to split themselves and which car they wanted to go in, Tsubame smiled and made a phone call.

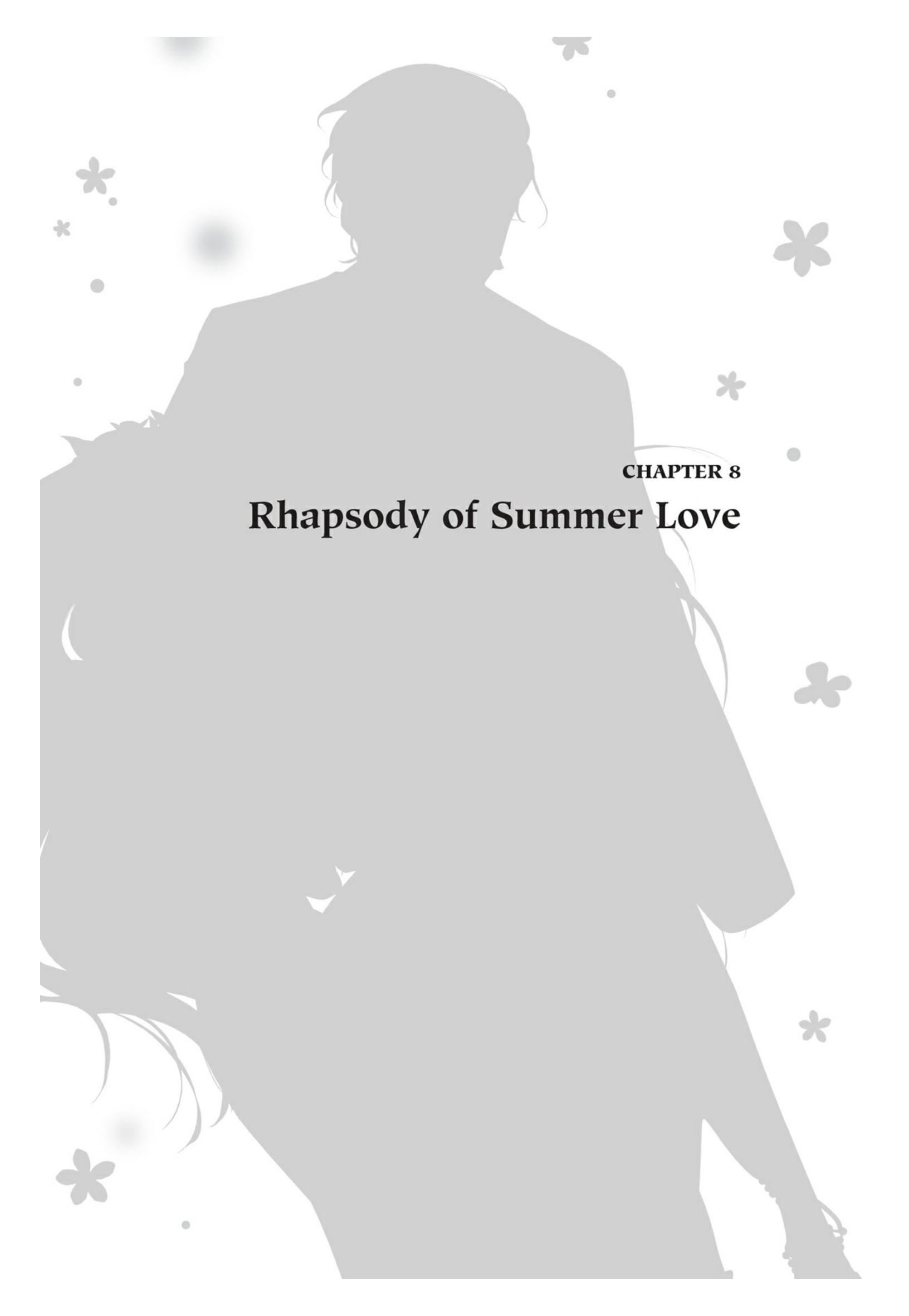
*"Lord Zansetsu, the blockade failed. We will arrive earlier than planned."*

The schemes that each party formulated in their minds had slowly begun to change shape.

By the time Spring, Autumn, and Winter would arrive, yells and gunshots would be echoing across the mountain.

“Now then, everyone, let’s be off. You can rely on me, Tsubame Aboshi, to continue attending to your every need.”

But no one had any way of knowing that at this point in time.



CHAPTER 8

## Rhapsody of Summer Love

There was once a man famous for his inability to fall in love.

Love took many forms.

For some, rather than being a sincere connection with another person, it was nothing more than a form of stimulation in their life.

How heavy it weighed on them depended on the person.

For Raicho Kimikage, love had been as light as a balloon before he met Ruri Hazakura.

That was why he hadn't hesitated.

He could break up with someone without worrying about it.

He never grew attached.

His shortest relationship was three hours; his longest, three months.

Although, one had to question whether he'd ever really been part of a couple at all.

The honeymoon period always ended with the person slapping Raicho in the face and vanishing. Her time with him was a dark spot on her life with her non-boyfriend, before being erased from her mind. He wasn't suited for serious relationships.

As far as casual flings went, though, he'd had plenty, and a reputation for them.

That was love for Raicho Kimikage.

It wasn't love so much as a diversion.

Like binging on a snack.

Fun while eating it, but eventually you got tired of the same thing.

Once that happened, you didn't want it anymore and avoided it for a while.

And even without it, life kept on going.

It was nice to have, but there were other, more fun things to do.

So he had no attachments.

In a way, you could almost describe it as "honorable." But, as mentioned before, love came in different shapes.

While it was light for Raicho, for the person in a relationship with him, it could be something they poured their life into.

That mismatch ended up in tragedy.

Since Raicho was reasonably good-looking, there were many victims to his tragedy.

There were those who found him charming at first, only to end up thinking of him as the pinnacle of selfishness. They would send him signals to try to get him to listen to them more.

Unfortunately, Raicho was more of a speaker than a listener.

On top of that, it wasn't in his nature to pursue the ones who left.

So it was always Raicho asking to break up.

*"I get it now. It was a mistake we ever got together in the first place,"* he'd say as he cut and run, only to be chased after and slapped. Or the other person would say, *"I get it now. My time with you is just a stain on my life,"* before slapping him. Always one or the other.

After repeating that same pattern so many times, Raicho finally realized something: *He was the problem.*

He'd never felt so strongly about a person that he'd chased after them, and

he only let other people chase him because it made things easy, but there was never any passion. His coldness ended up making his lovers cry. He was smart enough to realize all that.

Once he did, he stopped being so lax about his relationships.

He warned people who tried to chat him up.

That he'd never be serious about it. That eventually they'd break up. And if they were fine with that, then they were welcome to go out with him.

But even with those rules, it never went right.

It hurt Raicho as well to be asked, "*Why don't you understand my feelings?*"

In the end, he got tired of being in relationships.

Put negatively, he was egotistical; put positively, he was a lone wolf.

Love was hard for a man who never tried to forge a deep relationship with anyone to begin with.

*Well, isn't life more fun without it?*

With that thought, he told himself he was done.

Raicho gradually moved away from love.

He didn't want a partner for life. If he needed one for his job, for his position, then at least it should be someone fun who wouldn't bore him, or someone like a plant, who wouldn't get in his way.

He started grumbling about it to his peers.

Those who knew him largely agreed that Raicho would never marry for love.

In fact, they expected him to be able to care more about his partner in an arranged marriage.

His strength allowed him to do a variety of jobs, including that of a bodyguard.

He could care for someone if he simply thought of it as a job.

If the marriage was decided for him, then he would take care of his partner as a matter of duty.

It was better for him to have some sort of shackle. He wasn't meant to be let loose.

Raicho himself even agreed with the opinions of those around him. So he accepted the offer when his parents presented it to him.

*“Would you like to be a goddess’s husband?” they asked.*

Raicho was lucky. All the mistakes in his life led him to Ruri.

It was a beautiful, clear autumn day.

The first time they met, the young goddess of Summer was wearing a kimono as dazzling as the autumnal leaves and—so long as she kept quiet—was the personification of Yamatoan beauty.

A regular person would be overwhelmed by the aura of a goddess incarnate, but not Raicho. He only thought she looked younger than the age he'd been told she was.

*Young ladies are trouble.*

He was a bit annoyed. His conditions for a wife did not include beauty; what mattered was whether she was easy to manage. He found himself more attracted to the job as her Guard than to the woman herself. He wanted a job where he could make use of his skills, and the marriage was but a bonus.

In Raicho Kimikage's eyes, Ruri Hazakura was worthless.

He really had felt that way in the beginning.

*"I'm Raicho Kimikage."*

*"...I'm Ruri Hazakura."*

They were introduced to each other at a restaurant in the Town. Their parents talked about the personality and interests of their child as though they were trying to sell a product. The Hazakura family was old, prestigious, and wealthy. On top of that, they had been honored by the head of the family's daughter being chosen as the Agent of Summer. Even with Ruri Hazakura's reputation in mind, producing an Agent was of great prestige.

On the other side, the Kimikage family, while old, had only recently made a

name for itself. They had managed to raise a succession of martial artists and had recently been appointed on the Town's security. They had a wide range of responsibilities, from overseeing security systems to managing dojos.

Both families would have something to gain from this marriage: The Hazakuras would get a skilled Guard and husband, while the Kimikages would tie themselves to a prestigious family, further propelling their name forward.

With their parents' plotting going on in the background, the children focused on eating their food. Unsure of what to do about them, their parents suggested they go for a walk in the Yamatoan garden on the grounds of the restaurant.

Raicho, experienced with women, casually offered his hand to Ruri, inviting her to come with him. But she didn't take it.

She revealed her feelings for the first time then—feelings of disgust.

*“No, thank you. Why would I need to hold your hand?”*

The moment they were away from their parents, Ruri became talkative, which took Raicho by surprise.

*“...I just thought it would be hard for you to walk in a kimono.”*

*“Who do you take me for? I can walk just fine. Try any funny business and you’re dead.”*

She had the looks of an ideal Yamatoan beauty. Her mouth, on the other hand...

Raicho was more shocked than angry.

*She talks a lot more than I thought.*

It was probably because she'd seemed too much like a doll at first, but Raicho was surprised by how much spirit she had.

*“Let’s get one thing straight right now: I am not marrying anyone. My sister’s gonna stay as my Guard.”*

*“...Your sister. Ayame, was it?”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“I hear she’s pretty strong.”*

*“She is. Super strong. So I don’t need someone like—”*

*“I’m stronger.”*

An electric shock ran through the air.

*“Huh...?”*

Raicho finally felt the pressure of the goddess.

It wouldn’t have been strange for him to be afraid in that moment, but it wasn’t as if he was lying, so he continued.

*“I’m stronger. That’s why they chose me.”*

The air surrounding them started to make a disturbing rustling sound. Raicho didn’t notice, but birds began to fly in circles overhead. Dogs howled from afar.

It didn’t take long before stray dogs were running into the solemn, beautiful Yamatoan garden.

The diners screamed, but the two of them just continued arguing.

*“No way! Ayame’s stronger!”*

*“No, I am.”*

*“How?”*

*“I’ve never lost in a martial arts tournament in the Town. I was too strong for my family and teachers to keep me in check. When I was at the dojo, the weaker kids lost their confidence, and I couldn’t spar with other people without hurting them... I went through the Agency to join National Security’s training program, and no one was stronger than I was. After that... Well, I did some stuff around the Agency until I came back for you.”*

*“Ayame fights insurgents every year. Say what you want about sparring, but you’ve never been in a life-or-death battle.”*

*“That’s not true. Like I said, I did some stuff. I can’t say what exactly, but I was at a secret department in the Agency. I did fight to kill, with my life on the line. I’d rather not talk about it, though...”*

*“...”*

*“Also, I don’t mean to say she’s weak because she’s a girl, but you can’t deny the physical differences.”*

Raicho raised a hand to compare his height to Ruri’s, and flames lit up in her eyes.

*“I mean, if you want to prove it, I’m open for a match, but unless you want to humiliate your sister, it’d be better for you not to say I’m weaker.”*

*“...You are weak.”*

Ruri’s voice was a whisper, and she glared at him, brimming with disgust.

*“You’re saying all this nonsense to my face.”*

The pressure surrounding her grew even stronger.

*“You never thought you might be killed by a god?”*

Raicho blinked, at a loss for words.

*“Sway, sway, sway, sway the petals, over the gleaming pastures, in the booming summer.”*

Before Raicho’s eyes, Ruri began singing Summer’s song of the four seasons.

*“Love, love, love, love breaks, under Tora’s rain, under the summer fireworks, among the firefly traders.”*

*“Um, Lady Summer. Erm...”*

*“Slash, slash, slash, slash through, hatching dragonfly, waiting for autumn.”*

*“Are you listening? Isn’t that for using your godly powers...?”*

*“Sit tight! Waiting for autumn!”*

Animals gathered in the blink of an eye. One of them, a big deer, charged at Raicho to send him flying. Raicho hurriedly tried to put some distance between himself and the deer, but he tripped.

The animals surrounded Ruri, and she rolled up her kimono to hop astride a giant white deer, rare even in Yamato.

When he saw Ruri’s godly poise on the deer, Raicho finally gulped in fear.

*“Surprised now? You fool!”*

She was beautiful, dignified, and strong.

*“You’re just a human... Don’t try mocking me!”*

That day was supposed to be just another of the many boring days of Raicho’s life.

*“I hate anyone who bad-mouths Ayame! I never want to see you again!”*

But in an instant, Ruri had transformed it into something special.

She rode the deer without a care about exposing her skin, and made it kick dirt and leaves at Raicho before leaving.

“...”

What a terrible partner for an arranged wedding.

This was back during Ruri’s adolescence, when she was twice as prickly as she was now.

Raicho was left behind in shame, his suit ruined by the dirt and leaves. Both sets of parents, watching over them from afar, screamed.

“.....”

But Raicho felt something pull at his heartstrings.

*“...She covered me in dirt and left on a deer,”* he muttered.

Was it because no woman had ever been this rude to him?

Or because he was interested in protecting that young goddess after seeing her supernatural powers?

Or because he’d found her unexpectedly cute, seeing Ruri trying to hold back her tears as she left? No, it could have been because she’d showed she had the power to kill him.

Whatever it was, his head was full of Ruri now.

Ruri and Ayame’s parents ran into the chaotic garden.

*“Are you all right, Mr. Kimikage?!”*

They called out to him, but Raicho continued muttering to himself.

*“Maybe if we were in the city, I’d have a chance... No, what about the pet shops? And all the birds. Obviously, the mountain is out of the question. The only way to do it is to attack her directly, but there would be too many obstacles, and animals’ movements are hard to read. Even with training... Wait, she must be able to use insects, too...”*

Raicho had been punched, shot, cut—but this was the first time a deer had attacked him. And it was a goddess’s familiar, no less. The shock was huge.

*“Err... Please...forgive our daughter.”*

*“.....”*

*“Umm...”*

Ruri’s parents tilted their heads, confused by the reaction of her potential groom, who didn’t seem to be listening and was mumbling to himself.

Raicho couldn’t look away from the direction in which Ruri had run off.

*“Umm, it might be better if we forget this whole thing...”*

*“No, it’s okay, Father, Mother.”*

It was at this moment that Raicho and Ruri’s game of tag began.

He felt as if, finally, someone he wanted to pursue had come into his life.

His first impression couldn’t have gone worse, but he only needed to make up for it.

*“I like her a lot. Please, let us move forward with the engagement.”*

On that day, Raicho gained his identity.

He had a revelation. Now he knew who he was and what he should live for.

Some people in the world possess great talent, and Raicho was one of them.

He wasn't dumb, martial arts and armed combat came naturally to him, he had superhuman strength, and he thought outside of the box—mix all that with a sarcastic personality and you had Raicho.

He was also blessed with his surroundings, brought up as he was in a family that valued strength over everything else. But no matter how accomplished they are, humans are happiest when they aren't alone. Geniuses and prodigies could be split into two groups: Those who recognized their talent and kept a distance from the people who envied and resented them for it, while still remaining social.

And those who recognized their talent, looked down on others, and lived in solitude.

If forced to pick a side, Raicho was the latter.

Not to say that he was antisocial, but he would only show care or sincerity to those he deemed worthy. He would do everything to avoid speaking to people he didn't like, even those inside the Kimikage family.

He was thought of as difficult, but he wasn't unreasonable. When he set a goal for himself, he would be cooperative, competitive, and show leadership skills. He wasn't really close with anyone, but because he was good at everything, he was valued by the people around him. Raicho was a bit hard to manage and kept at arm's length.

The Hazakura family had approached him looking for a strong soldier who could protect Ruri from being replaced as an Agent, but his parents knew he was a hard man to deal with.

The Kimikage family was honest in telling the Hazakuras as much, but their response was that their daughter, too, showed no interest in anything but her sister. So they decided to give it a try and get the two of them to meet. After all, they could simply look for someone else if things didn't work out.

That was how the families brought together two special yet problematic people.

*“So they’re just treating it like a trading card game?”*

A few days after their meeting, Raicho was at the entrance of the Hazakura residence.

Ruri had staunchly refused to let him come in, despite her parents being all for it, so they talked separated by the iron gate. She’d come out to meet him, despite what she’d said before leaving the other day.

Raicho had wanted to properly introduce himself, explain why he had been chosen as Ruri’s prospective partner, and ask to start a relationship.

*“Our parents are playing with us, setting a couple of weirdos against each other, hoping it goes right?”*

*“That’s a funny way to put it. I like the way you think, Ruri. So that means we’re ultrarare cards, eh?”*

*“Hold up. Don’t call me by my first name.”*

*“What should I call you, then? Ms. Hazakura? Lady Summer? I like Ruri, though. I like the sound of your name.”*

Raicho was acting friendly, unlike at their first meeting, while Ruri remained the same. He wouldn’t listen, and she was running out of ideas for how to handle him.

*“I hate you. Go away.”*

*“You can’t intimidate me. I like strong women.”*

*“...And I hate pushy guys.”*

*Help me, Ayame.*

Ruri turned to look back at the mansion, but Ayame had shut her curtains. It was obvious she was peeking through the gap, but she wasn’t going to come and help her sister.

If confrontation wasn’t working, she had to change her methods. So instead,

Ruri put on a calm front and said: "...Hey, erm... Raicho? If your parents are just telling you to come here, how about we work together to break this off? You're mad after what I did the other day, right? We're not compatible..."

"That's not true. I think we're very compatible. We can be equals."

Raicho replied with a clear look on his face.

"No way. What makes you think that?"

"The deer attack."

"Excuse me...?"

"You got angry and set a deer on me, and that brought me to a realization: I'm strong, but only against humans. Not against animals."

"..."

Ruri pursed her lips. He really was a weirdo.

"You were right. Maybe if I had enough prep time or numbers I could make up for that, but as far as pure strength goes, your Life Operation powers surpass me. You can control anything, right? If we were to fight one-on-one, I'd use a weapon. And if I did, you'd need to have one, too, so you'd use the animals. Then you'd block my first attack. I mean, I love dogs and wouldn't want to shoot one, but let's say I could. You could still block a ton of my bullets with a ton of birds. I'd have to find an opening, but by that time, I can imagine I'd be surrounded... Ah, and if we were at sea, I'd be totally dead already. You can control sharks, too, can't you?"

"Stop, stop, stoppp!"

Ruri grabbed the iron bars and shook them. Raicho came back to his senses.

"Sorry. I just like making up imaginary battle scenarios."

"Do people often call you a weirdo?"

"All the time. Anyway, I don't know if I could ever defeat you—and meeting a girl like that had me buzzing with excitement."

That only made Ruri more scared.

"B-buzzing? Like in your fingers and toes?"

*“All over my body.”*

*“Did you hit your head back then or...?”*

*“Huh? I don’t think so. I think this is love.”*

*“No way!”*

*“But, I mean, I think your voice and your hair and your eyes and everything about you is so adorable...”*

*“No, no, no! No one sees me like that! You’re confused! You got a concussion or something! Sorry, I went overboard, didn’t I? Let’s go to the hospital, yeah? Let’s get you checked out... Maybe my divine powers had some sort of strange effect on you.”*

*What a funny girl.*

Raicho only fell more in love with Ruri the more she worried about him. He’d gotten tired of talking through the gates, so he went along with her suggestion.

*It’s going to take five or six hours to get a checkup with how busy the medical office is at this time of day.*

Which meant they would get to be together the whole time.

*“Will you come with me, Ruri?”*

Raicho was the kind of man to do anything to get what he wanted. He didn’t care about being taken to a hospital to check if he had brain damage. If anything, it was a fantastic outcome—he got to be alone with the girl he’d been trying to make advances on since they first met.

*“I’ll go if you come with me.”*

*“Fine, I’ll go with you. I’m getting seriously worried now. I’ll pay the bill, too.”*

*“Then could you go get permission from your parents? Just tell them we’re going out for a walk. I don’t want to cause a fuss by telling them something might be wrong with me.”*

*“Okay... Yeah. Thanks! Gimme a minute, Raicho!”*

Hours later, Ruri and Raicho came out of the hospital, where he'd been given a clean bill of health.

*"I had fun on our little hospital date, Ruri."*

*"..."*

*"So now it's been medically proven that I'm in love."*

*"Ayame, help me..."*

Ruri's face was full of despair. Raicho's was full of bliss.

*"Let's go somewhere else for our next date."*

*"No... I... I feel like you tricked me..."*

*"Oh, don't be like that. Don't you think this was worthwhile? We got to talk a lot; don't you think we're not so bad together after all?"*

*"I was so worried about you, I didn't process anything we were talking about..."*

*"Ruri... You're not just funny, you're kind, too..."*

*"Stop that!"*

*"Let's talk some more later. I can take you anywhere in my car. I'm sure your parents would allow you to go outside the Town with your fiancé."*

*"I would like to go outside...b-but no..."*

*"You took me to the hospital, saying there was something wrong with my head, and now you're throwing me away here?"*

*"...You're making me sound like the bad guy."*

*"The doctor had to hold himself back from laughing, and I saw one of my neighbors among the nurses. I wonder what they thought of me. You humiliated me, and now you don't want anything to do with me? What will I do if nobody wants to marry me anymore?"*

Ruri felt like a criminal in court.

“...”

“Let’s go on a date, Ruri.”

“...Just one, then.”

“You told your parents we were just going out for a walk, right? I promise not to tell them what actually happened...”

“...Three and that’s it.”

“Ten.”

“Eight.”

“Five.”

“Let’s shake on five. I’m sure I’ll get more once you fall for me anyway.”

Ruri heaved a heavy sigh.

“Raicho...”

She gave him a serious glare and said:

“Look, you just find me interesting right now.”

It was the first time Ruri had truly looked Raicho in the face.

“You’ll realize one day that you can’t stand marrying me. I’m not a rare card; I’m one of the weakest. I’m just doing my best to make myself seem like that. I’m not the special girl of your dreams you think I am.”

Raicho blinked in surprise.

His instincts were telling him that the woman before his eyes was being sincere.

“So my fiancée is lacking in self-confidence.”

Ruri hung her head, taking his comment as a reproach.

Raicho noticed that his sense of values was beginning to change.

*I wouldn’t have liked a person with no confidence before.*

He’d believed that insecure people tended to be inconsiderate with their words and actions.

It annoyed him to see people cower and sob.

*But not now. Why?*

Now Raicho found this girl, who lacked confidence despite being a goddess, adorable.

He was sure she was special.

*"But it doesn't change the fact that I like you. You'll understand soon enough, Ruri."*

*"What...?"*

*"I'm a man of my word. Once I fall in love, it's forever. People think I'm capricious, but that's not true. It's just that there are so few things in the world that I'm serious about..."*

Ruri raised her head and stared at Raicho.

*"So what is it you've been serious about up till now?"*

*"Combat, collecting snow globes, and you."*

Ruri spaced out for a second at his concise answer, then smiled for the first time.

*"That's not much."*

Raicho's heart raced at the sight of her smile, then he, too, smiled like a child.

*"Don't you think it's better to have a man who likes fewer things than one who likes everything and everyone? That way you know I'll never cheat on you."*

*"...Hmmm."*

*"I want you to see my snow globe collection. I have a lot, since I've been overseas for work."*

*"I've never seen one, actually. They're those things where you shake up the snow inside, right? I don't like snow."*

*"It's not real snow. Maybe I could give you one."*

*"...Aren't they super important to you?"*

*"But I'd be giving it to you. I don't mind, if you'll take care of it."*

*"I don't really need one, but I'm interested in seeing them. You have any pictures?"*

*"Yeah, you wanna see?"*

*"I don't mind..."*

And so, little by little, the two of them became closer.

The truth was that they actually had good chemistry together.

Ruri had been crying out for love, and Raicho had a dump truck load of it to give. To someone like her, it wasn't overbearing but reassuring.

*He seems to like me a lot, and it doesn't seem like he'd abandon me.*

Ruri needed that kind of reassurance in her life. She went from wary to affectionate, like a wounded animal receiving care. Raicho got glimpses into her mind and gradually got to understand how sensitive she was; he'd play pranks on her, she'd get mad and say she hated him, and he'd beg for forgiveness. He learned how to care for her.

Their meeting had a positive influence on both of them. They were a lucky couple.

If things kept going like this, then they shouldn't have any problems in their marriage.

So they thought—but in life, wind and rain often came after the flowers bloomed.

After the Hazakura sisters manifested summer, they were branded as bad omens.

The connection was severed between the Kimikage and Rouo families and the

Hazakuras.

The grooms' houses cruelly turned their backs on them.

The other fiancé, Renri, was overcome with sorrow and, for the first time in his life, had started arguing with his father every day.

As for Raicho, he accepted it so easily, his family was shocked.

"The wedding's off? Well, we can't argue against the circumstances. Just don't try to get me another fiancée right away, or you'll make me look bad. And I'll be mad."

That was the only thing he said before retiring to his room.

Raicho shut himself in, and his family hadn't known how to handle him.

*It happened quicker than I'd expected.*

No one knew he was planning to revolt.

He wasn't cooping himself up in his room to hide his pain.

While Ruri and Ayame had sunk into the depths of sadness, Raicho was getting in touch with a certain someone, preparing to make a move.

He spoke on the phone in his dimly lit room, the darkness illuminated by rows of glowing snow globes on the shelves.

Above his desk were pictures of Ruri.

His fixations had not changed.

Combat, snow globes, and Ruri.

"Fukuryo Doji? They finally called the engagement off."

Raicho had been in touch with a certain information broker famed among

those in the know.

“Yeah, it seems the Townchief took the lead like you said he would. The members of Maverick Rabbit Horn inside the Summer Administration have been opposing it, but he won’t listen. It’s a shame I can’t go break his puny body in two right now. I’m fuming, but I can put up with it because I knew this fight was coming.”

*“Have you taken control of Ruri and Ayame Hazakura’s phones?”*

“I did it when I last visited their home for dinner. They’re not very tech-savvy, so they won’t notice the remote-control app. It’s something we use back in the Agency, so as long as nobody goes through their phones with a fine-tooth comb, it should be fine. I’ve already confirmed it works by deleting some texts and hanging up on some calls. I’ll keep them in the dark for the moment.”

*“...I know it’s part of the plan, but don’t you feel bad about it?”*

“Of course I do, but the alternative is letting them die.”

He heard Fukuryo Doji chuckle.

“It pained me to do it at first, but the urgency to protect them is even greater now. We can patch things up later, so long as they stay alive. Hopefully they’ll move according to our plans... I’m worried because Ruri is so unpredictable...”

*“Even to you? You predicted this would happen back in spring.”*

Raicho groaned at Fukuryo Doji’s teasing remark.

“She... Her actions are unpredictable, but not her feelings. You’d think she doesn’t think things through, but she really does; she only pretends to be naive. Ayame is easier to read. She’s the type to overthink... I’ve been keeping an eye on her to make sure she won’t kill herself.”

*“...I’ll help in any way I can to make sure your fiancée and her family stay safe. However, the situation is dire. The Dark Wolf mystery in Mount Ryugu is still under investigation. The moment the EPA got the Towns and the Agency involved, Doyen Turtle moved quickly to buy or threaten the members of the council. They struck back after what the Agents did in spring. Plans to replace*

*the Agent there are already underway in the Town of Spring. Seiran Matsukaze's private forces are leaving a trail of animal corpses that died from unnatural deaths to force the Agents of Summer to reevaluate their manifestation. It's about time we made a move. How is that one thing we talked about going?"*

"I practiced with the conversation records you gave me. Adjusting the pitch and resonance is hard for me, though, since another person did this sort of job in the forces... Now I realize how good at their job they were. It'll sound a bit odd, but I'm sure we can trick Ruri, with the state of mind she's in. I'm in the middle of running checks to make sure it works in real time. Want to hear it?"

Raicho booted up a mysterious application on his phone, then put it up to his mouth and said: "Hello, Fukuryo Doji."

Two voices overlapped. One was Raicho's, while the other was that of someone he had no connection to whatsoever—the Guard of Autumn Rindo Azami.

*"That's quite good."*

"There's just one more step to get through and my voice will be gone. The thing is, though, right now, it causes some lag in the conversation. I'm not a pro on this, after all. It still needs some adjustments."

*"It looks like it'll work... Out of curiosity, do you need a special device for that?"*

"No, not at all. It's probably more complicated than the one you're using, though."

Raicho knew that Fukuryo Doji was using a voice changer app.

"If you give me priority, I can give you a list of the necessary parts."

*"Priority?"*

"This is a war of intelligence, and I want to win. You're selling your intel to Seiran Matsukaze, too, aren't you?"

*"..."*

He had a feeling the person on the other end of the line was smiling.

"There's something you're not telling me but you are telling him... and vice versa. I thought you were just playing with me at first...but now I think you might be on my side. That's why I asked."

*"...It makes things easier for me that you're so clever."*

"I knew it. I couldn't help but get the impression you were filtering the information you gave me."

This time, Fukuryo Doji couldn't contain his laughter. It was a dry laugh.

*"Oh, I underestimated you. But don't worry; I was giving you priority from the very beginning. Otherwise, I wouldn't have sent you Rindo Azami's conversation logs. Or suggest you send your lover into danger to expose and corner the enemy..."*

"..."

*"I am not your enemy. The Four Seasons society is rotten; I want to get rid of the crooks at the top. The people in power have forgotten their mission, gotten too worked up about their own interests, and stopped thinking and raising issues. Things are not working as they should. The duty of the descendants of the Agents of the Four Seasons is to protect them, nurture them, and make sure the cycle of the seasons continues without issue. I want to return things to their proper state."*

Fukuryo Doji appeared to be enjoying the fact that Raicho had seen through him.

He sounded unusually excited.

*"And for that, we need a revolution. If we don't quell the voices calling out to replace the Agents and capture their ringleader—"*

*"...But revolution could also lead to losses on the Agents' side..."*

*"All things require sacrifice. And simply saving the Agents of Summer won't restore honor to the group as a whole. Unless we increase our scope and save everyone, we won't be able to scare off the members of Doyen Turtle. You said the same thing, so I'm sure you know this already. That's why I like you."*

Raicho couldn't think of who this person reminded him of, but he could tell

Fukuryo Doji had it rough, too. He was reminded of how reckless what he was trying to do was.

*It's a huge gamble.*

He'd foreseen Doyen Turtle making a move after what had happened in spring. Those who indolently wasted away their days sitting on their thrones would not let themselves be removed without a fight.

But their counterblow had been heavier than he'd expected.

Getting rid of a negative brand was not an easy thing to do in such a closed society.

This went beyond the issue of their marriages. The girls' lives would continue to be trampled on in the future; it was inevitable. They would end up being ostracized for the rest of their lives if they didn't do something.

*Pretty words won't save them from that hell.*

Raicho wanted to save the Hazakura sisters.

In order to do that, he had to restore their honor—not just the girls' but the Agents' as a whole. And helping solve the Dark Wolf mystery could provide a foundation for that. Ruri and Ayame had to show that they were omens for good, rather than for evil.

To set that in motion, Raicho would pretend to be Rindo Azami—a man who Ruri had insisted for months was trustworthy.

*It doesn't feel good using another man to give her a push, but what can you do?*

Raicho had a different role to play in this.

"...So your endgame is to clean the rot in every Town's administration."

*"I have other goals...but that's the one for now. This generation's gods incarnate shocked the Four Seasons society by forming an alliance. I want them to continue their efforts to cut out the rot running rampant across the world. I want them to realize who their enemies are and fight them. It means exposing them to danger...but I don't mean to turn them into martyrs. That is why I have people like you to back me up and keep monitoring the moves on the enemy's*

side."

The information broker he'd never met spoke with such fervor.

*"I feel bad pushing this onto you, but I want you to face the rot that was uncovered this spring. Now's the time we need a hero to fight the villains who spread this divine punishment drivel."*

Raicho didn't let himself get carried away by the other man's passion but responded calmly.

"I have a question: How do you know I won't report everything you just said to Seiran Matsukaze? I could make a hefty buck."

He tried testing the other man, but Fukuro Doji responded without so much as a pause.

*"You care more about love than money."*

"..."

*"People like you get madly obsessed with love because you had nobody else to cling to before."*

"..."

*"If you wanted money, you would've done something from the very beginning of our conversations. I'm not worried about that. What I am worried about, though, is that you might give up your life for Ruri Hazakura. I don't want a promising young man to die. Be careful."*

".....I appreciate the concern."

Fukuro Doji played his cards close to his chest, but there was a certain charm that made it hard to be cruel with him.

*"Our calls will be less frequent, but keep notifying me of your progress. Take care."*

And so Raicho rolled the dice.

He called his fiancée after cutting off communications without a good-bye or

a sorry.

Pretending to be another man.

*“Lady Ruri, I apologize for calling so early in the morning... How are you doing?”*

*“It’s me, Rindo. Please answer me.”*

*“I’ve heard things have gotten rough for you. Is there anything I could help with?”*

Ruri Hazakura was the one shining jewel in his life.

*“That’s why that theory affecting us is spreading—to take the attention away from themselves. Didn’t you find it strange why your weddings were called off?”*

*“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 cannot go on.”*

*“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.”*

She was irreplaceable. Nobody else could be Raicho’s Ruri.

*“...Lady Ruri.”*

*“Please, don’t say...you should’ve died...”*

*“That’s not true. I know how you try to be cheery for the sake of other*

people."

*"You're a gentle girl. You don't let anyone see you sad, even when you are."*

*"I know how truly kind you are..."*

*"You're a wonderful person that should stay alive. I'm not the only one who thinks so; plenty of people do."*

Ruri wouldn't show Raicho the same level of passion. But that was okay.

*"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 of that talk about environmental destruction, would you? Think about it."*

*"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."*

*"You are not strong because of your noble standing—you try to be strong for others. I forgot that. I should have known this 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."*

Raicho didn't mind if he only loved her, and she loved her sister.

She had died once without him, but the next time, he wanted to die alongside her.

If possible, once they were much, much older.

Raicho felt like he could do anything to protect Ruri's future.

Time had passed since then, and he was now inside Ryugu Shrine on Mount Ryugu.

“You see? I’m one of the people who created this situation so I could protect my fiancée.”

Renri, Raicho, and Raicho’s squad had come across Eken. They disclosed their identities to each other and exchanged information.

Eken had told his story in tears, and Renri and Raicho were now telling their side. It was time for Raicho’s monologue.

“Fortunately, I was brought up in the family in charge of the Town’s security, so I could get Ruri and Ayame out of there. I made sure no one found out too quickly. I told Renri about everything and came to Ryugu with him. We got here faster than they did, since we drove. I reconvened with my troops at the airport, and I’ve been guarding the girls ever since. Right, Renri?”

Renri nodded in response, but he was looking off into the distance.

“...You can imagine how mad Renri was when I told him about how I’d pretended to be the Guard of Autumn to lure them here as bait for the bad guys... It was seriously scary. It looked like he wanted to kill me. I didn’t do it because I wanted to, mind you. It was a difficult choice I had to make, not only for the sake of our marriages, but for their future. Who knows how this bad omen rumor will affect them? Even their parents will be affected. I don’t care how much they yell at me later...my judgment said it was better to become the villain to protect them. And in the end, Renri came to see things my way. Right?”

Raicho glanced at him expectantly, but Renri just sighed.

“That said...we didn’t anticipate them meeting up with the Lord Archer. The

chances of them doing that were low, so it even surprised me. Guarding them will be harder now that they're with him and his Secret Service. It happened so quickly, and it wasn't like we could coordinate with them, so we were worried they'd take care of the enemies we'd lured here... But after thinking it through, that doesn't change what we have to do. We lured Ruri and Ayame here so they'd solve the Dark Wolf mystery, and we knew the enemy wouldn't get to them on the first day but the second—today. Also, according to my informant, they'll come pretending to be insurgents, so we're still going to be fighting on the mountain; there are only a certain number of opportunities for them to kill the girls. So we left the Lord Archer to take care of them, keeping a couple of people behind to keep watch, and brought back our main forces to the mountain. Now we're just waiting for those idiots to arrive to start the war."

"..."

"This is a physical fight between Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn, as well as an information battle between those disgracing the Agents and those wanting to restore their honor. So now that long explanation's over... Eken Fugeki, do you understand what you've gotten yourself into here?"

"..."

Eken sat on his knees, pale in the face and covered in cold sweat, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Eken?"

It wouldn't be crazy for him to be speechless right now.

"Are you listening, Eken?"

Raicho had a gun aimed at him. Eken was scared the man would kill him if he said the wrong thing, and Raicho cocked his head.

"Renri, the kid won't talk," Raicho complained.

Renri couldn't stand the sight of this anymore and put his hand over the barrel.

"You expect him to talk with a gun to his head?! Are you insane?!"

That was why he had been so cold to Raicho.

“Renri, that’s dangerous! You shouldn’t put your hand in front of a gun.”

“You’re the one doing something dangerous here!”

“...You realize he’s the Dark Wolf? You saw it back there. He started glowing, and a huge wolf came out of nowhere.”

“True, but...”

“We almost started firing blindly. We could’ve killed each other.”

During his story, Eken had shown them the Dark Wolf so they would believe him. He hadn’t attacked, and he’d dispelled it soon after.

Renri had understood that the boy had no intention of attacking them, but Raicho had kept his gun trained on Eken ever since.

“I commend him for telling the truth, but he said he didn’t have his powers under control. If it works the same way as the Agents’, his powers probably strengthen and weaken depending on his state of mind. We have to stay on our guards or the phantom wolf could eat us. And you don’t want me to defend myself?”

Raicho’s logic made sense, but it wasn’t a good look at all.

He was threatening a kid who had valiantly told them about his situation.

Renri wanted him to think about how the sixteen-year-old might feel.

“Raicho... Please just put the gun down for a while.”

Raicho shook his head.

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“I know. Please.”

Renri gestured for him to calm down.

“You don’t understand.”

“I do. I know you’re trying to take care of me, not just Ruri and Ayame. Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“...”

“But some people can’t talk when they’re scared. I know exactly how he feels.”

The moment I'm under threat of violence, I can't do anything, even when I want to. My brain freezes from the panic. That's just how some of us are."

"....."

In the past, Raicho would have brushed that off as naive.

However, after meeting Ruri, his world had expanded. He'd stopped saying such things without thinking about them first. He'd fallen in love with a girl who would smile and say everything was perfect in front of others, but on the inside, she thought that she was better off dead. He couldn't repudiate the words and actions of a person in trouble so easily anymore.

"We need to calm him down so he won't panic... Making him think we need to be on alert against him isn't good, either. Don't you think?"

In the end, he had to give in to Renri's plea. Raicho reluctantly lowered the gun.

"Thank you, Raicho."

Renri sighed in relief, and Eken exhaled deeply. He must have been holding his breath.

"Eken, you haven't had a proper meal, have you? Let's get you something to eat so you can calm down first, yeah?"

Renri took out water and a rice ball he'd bought at a convenience store from his bag and handed them to Eken.

"...M-Mr. Rouo..."

"Just call me Renri. I'm calling you Eken, right?"

Eken wolfed down the rice ball, and Renri handed him the rest of his own food without hesitation.

"...You could've said you were hungry earlier..."

Raicho had been silent up until now, but he must've felt bad for Eken, because he handed him his own food, too.

"I-I'm sorry...for taking your food..."

"Just eat. People get aggressive when their stomachs are empty, so you

should eat up and put yourself in a better mental state. If you don't attack us, we won't attack you."

"...I'm sorry... I-I'm really sorry..."

Tears ran down Eken's cheeks as he chewed. He swallowed, wiped the tears away, and took another bite. That started the cycle all over again.

It was such a sad sight that even Raicho's soldiers looked at him with pity.

What Eken had done wasn't right, but at the time it had happened—and even now—he was a kid who needed protection.

Someone had to guide this lost child if the Dark Wolf mystery was ever going to be solved. Eken also realized, painfully so, that he could no longer let himself be ruled by his emotions.

"I... Wh-what should I do...?"

Renri responded gently to the boy's tearful question.

"Don't worry... From what you told us, people will sympathize with several parts of your story. And besides, you wouldn't be able to use your powers if you weren't loyal to the Lord Archer and didn't want to protect him, right?"

"That's right... And mutual trust... I thought Lord Kaguya...was waiting for me... because I was still able to use them...but..." Eken nearly broke down crying again.

"Yeah, there's still hope... We don't know for sure that what you're concerned about is really happening. I mean, the replacement wasn't a Custodian, just a group of people that look like they belong to National Security."

"...Yeah."

"That means the Lord Archer might still be waiting for you to come back."

"...Really?"

"You don't find it strange? The Agents of the Four Seasons don't go so long without a Guard, nor do they ask National Security for protection when they're waiting for a new one. They do these things internally, so it would be staff from the Four Seasons Agency looking after them. They're an independent

organization. The Fugeki clan is, too, right? The fact that they're coming from a different place...makes me feel like he's making a stand of some sort. You don't take the people who protect you lightly. This might be a bad way to put it, but... it's like a fixation. He realized you were the Dark Wolf when you attacked him, right? What did he say? Just to go away?"

Eken suddenly remembered what his god had shouted to him.

*"Eken! Come out here! Let's talk!"*

Kaguya had wanted to have a conversation.

They'd gone past the discussion stage, so it wouldn't have mattered if he'd cut Eken loose, but Kaguya had still tried to talk things through and solve it without violence.

"If... If I ask him to...would he hear me out...?"

It was Eken who had pushed Kaguya away. The anger and sadness had taken over his mind, and he hadn't been able to make good judgments.

"...Renri, there's something wrong with me... I'm not like this... Not really..."

Renri shook his head, then spoke in that same kind, warm voice.

"Look... You don't call that sort of thing *wrong*. You were just overwhelmed. Even if there are things you could have done better, you need protection, first of all. You need an adult who can hear you out and guide you."

"...There's no adult willing to hear me out..."

"Mmm... At the very least, I'm listening to you now..."

"...Ah... Mm... I'm...sorry..."

"You want to go back to the Lord Archer and apologize for what you did... Is that right?"

Eken nodded repeatedly. He regretted his actions; he'd had his fill of envy and anger.

“...Raicho, could we take him down the mountain before the fighting begins? I’d like to find an adult who will listen to him and mediate.”

Eken reflexively looked at Renri, who pulled a strained smile.

“I’ve already decided to fight for my fiancée here. I can’t go with you; I’m sorry.”

“Renri has the job of watching the trail cameras, looking up the faces of the attackers to link them to their families and, if I die, to secure the video and retreat to prosecute the Townchief. Basically, he’s our witness. I need someone trustworthy to do it, who will do anything for Ruri and Ayame. So you can’t have him.”

He hadn’t meant to sound coldhearted, but it felt like that to Eken. Raicho noticed and made his voice softer as he continued.

“But...in order to solve the Dark Wolf mystery, we need to capture you and hand you over to the Lord Archer or Ruri and Ayame, so we have to keep you under our watch... They’re supposed to recover their honor by capturing you, but you’ve already learned not to annoy the Lord Archer, so what should we do now...? Even if they don’t pull off the feat we were hoping for, we might be able to clear their names by exposing the Townchief...”

Eken got an idea from hearing Raicho talk and enthusiastically interjected.

“Um... Yesterday, I saw the Ladies Summer and got scared and ran away... So if I gave myself up after that...wouldn’t it count as their achievement? That is, I’d be surrendering to the Ladies Summer...”

His face was hopeful, as if he’d found something that he could do.

“...Well, that’d really help us out... But are you sure that’s okay with you?”

Raicho’s voice was laced with doubt, but Eken had a serious expression on his face. It didn’t seem like he was lying.

“Yes. I don’t want to add to my mistakes. And...if it’s all right, I’d like to stay with you and help you capture Do, um...Doyen Turtle, was it? If I do that and give myself up...I might be able to make up a bit for all the trouble I’ve caused the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons...”

Raicho and Renri had been surprised to find out that Eken was the Dark Wolf, but Eken had been just as shocked to hear that what he'd done when he'd lost his self-control had had such an effect on Four Seasons society. His regrets didn't stop just with Kaguya.

"I see... You have a point. And more firepower is always welcome..."

"No way, we can't do that."

Raicho and Renri had expressed their differing opinions at the exact same time. They looked at each other in disbelief and started arguing again.

"Renri... Why can't we? We could defeat Doyen Turtle easily with his powers. Everything would work out safely."

"But that would mean having him fight armed soldiers."

"Not directly. His illusions work remotely. We'll keep him at a safe distance. Then it wouldn't be a problem, right? He already basically fought the Lord Archer's Secret Service, remember? It wouldn't be his first fight."

"...Even if he's fighting remotely, it's still dangerous. And back then, he was confused and desperate. Now he understands his situation and regrets it. We shouldn't drag a kid like that into our fight. We'd be liable for him. Who's going to take responsibility if someone dies?"

"I will."

"You mean you'll look after his mental state, too?"

"His mental state...?" Raicho was taken aback.

"He's already cracking, and you want him to fight a war?"

The people present took Renri's words a number of different ways.

Half of Raicho's soldiers thought he was being ridiculous; it was a naive remark from someone who was on the side of the "protected." Sometimes, force needed to be answered with force. They shot Renri critical looks for saying that, when they were the ones defending him.

The other half thought he had a point. Fighting could create psychological scars, and sometimes, hurting someone took a bigger toll on a person than

being hurt.

Eken himself stared at Renri in bewilderment.

“He’s not a soldier, but he has power. *Divine* power.”

“Okay, then you’d make Ruri fight if she was here?”

Raicho felt the words get lodged in his throat. “...Of course not.”

“I thought as much. You may be using them as bait, but you’re keeping them away from the danger. You decided you would do the fighting for them... because you’re kind. The sisters have powers, too, but you don’t want them to fight—and that’s because you don’t want them to get hurt physically *or* mentally, right? Self-defense is one thing, but having another person use their powers is wrong. Besides, even if this began with the Dark Wolf mystery, the fight is entirely on the side of the Four Seasons. It’s not fair to drag a boy from the Fugeki clan into it. How would you explain that to the Lord Archer afterward?”

Raicho showed no expression, and Renri continued.

“Think of Eken as if he was Ruri...or at the very least, as if he was your kid. A kid that was finally taken into care.”

“...My relationship with Ruri is still pure... And I can’t imagine having a child this old,” Raicho said with a pout.

“It’s just an example!” Renri yelled.

“But he offered to fight.”

“And an adult is supposed to say no!”

“...”

“He’s been sacrificing himself to protect his lord’s mental state and night in Yamato after getting dragged into the suicide of someone he used to live with. Then the adults tricked him into going away and staying in a hospital. He ran away, and now he has no place to go!”

Eken began crying again.

Renri had just said everything he’d wanted someone, anyone, to understand.

He knew he was at fault, too. Still, a pang went through his heart at hearing someone defend him.

“He’s confused and hurt. That’s why his powers are running amok! It’s only going to get worse if we make him fight!”

“Okay. I get it.”

Renri had suffered psychological abuse at home every day, and just recently, his father and brother had ganged up on him and locked him in the storage shed. He’d carried psychological injuries with him ever since he was a kid. That was why he was so sensitive to another child who was about to get hurt.

Raicho was sharp enough to realize that.

On the other hand, Raicho had focused on fighting since he was born. They had been raised as very different people.

“...Renri... I’m...okay... I’m okay...”

The sight of Eken sobbing made it clear what the right choice here was.

“...I get what you mean.”

Raicho admitted defeat for once.

“Okay. Thinking more about it, it’s obvious I can win even without him. And the fight might end more quickly without a weak kid dragging us down. We’ll protect him.”

Even though he’d given in, he laughed. Raicho understood his own usefulness and purpose in life. He had the capacity to protect whoever asked.

“Raich—” Renri started to say, but he was interrupted.

“Young Master! A camera was destroyed!”

A sudden report came in.

“A group thought to be members of Doyen Turtle have broken through the National Security forces at the mountain’s main entrance and are coming up! They must be intending to ambush the Lord Archer and the Ladies Summer!”

The whole room burst into commotion.

“Fortunately, we have video of people near the parking lot talking explicitly about the plan to replace the Agents. That alone won’t be enough to provide definitive proof, but we could use it to unsettle them...”

“Excellent. Continue to monitor the situation,” said Raicho.

He was the only one there who didn’t look nervous in the slightest.

“Everyone, calm down and follow the plan. Squad one stays here with Renri. Squad two comes with me on the hunt. Your orders: Don’t die, don’t kill. We’ll lose legitimacy if we do. You can beat them *half* to death, though. Abduct a few people if you get the chance, and withdraw if things go south. Look for an opening to make contact with the Lord Archer’s security forces to tell them to stay away. We cannot put them at risk. Don’t lose sight of how we’re going to win this. Ultimately, we have to come out of this as the ones that came to protect the Agents of the Four Seasons after they heard about a group wanting to replace them... The opponent is here claiming to have just cause, and we’re going to hit them back with a fistful of *our* justice. Win and we’re the good guys, lose and we’re the bad guys, so make sure you behave. Renri!”

Raicho handed him his gun, and Renri’s hand sank under the weight.

“Keep in mind that you have to take the safety off to shoot. Remember what I taught you yesterday?”

“H-huh?”

“Renri, you take care of the kid. It’d be more dangerous trying to get him off the mountain right now.”

“I understand, Raicho...”

“You talked a big game; now he’s in your hands. We’re gonna keep that kid alive so he can turn himself in.”

Renri was taken aback by how much Raicho’s aura had changed all of a sudden, but he nodded.

“Okay...”

Before his eyes was a man who’d been selected as a Guard of Summer—the strongest man in the Town.

Once Raicho put on the face of a warrior, all Renri could do was be his adjutant. He wasn't strong enough to do anything except follow his orders.

"Er, Dark Wolf... I mean, Eken. The Lord Archer's secret entrance to the mountain is on the western side instead of the east, right?"

Eken jolted upright as he heard his name, but he quickly found a reply. "Y-yes... How did you know?"

"I've got connections. I've been up and down the mountain multiple times since the Dark Wolf first appeared, too, so I've got the place memorized. We know the enemy doesn't know it because they went through the main entrance. It wouldn't make sense to go there for an ambush. They can't assassinate anyone from there."

*He really did prioritize me.*

A grin escaped him. Raicho had no feelings for Fukuro Doji, but right now, he couldn't help but feel grateful. Their interests had just happened to align, but it still made him happy.

"The Lord Archer's side isn't coming yet. This is our chance. I'll lead the main squad and attack. We have to make sure they don't approach the Lord Archer's route. I'd always planned for you to provide support from here, Renri, so everything worked out. Here's the tablet and earphones. You're supposed to be able to get a signal up at the top of the mountain, but it's better we communicate via radio."

"Roger!"

"Remember to stay calm and don't try to be a hero. You'll be okay. You're smart. Just don't panic and you've got this."

Raicho slapped Renri on the shoulder. It hurt a fair bit, but it pained Renri more on the inside to think that it might be the last contact he ever had with Raicho.

"Take care, Raicho..."

Renri held out his hand. Raicho's eyes darted back and forth from his face to his hand.

“Thank you for everything up to now. And...sorry I asked so much of you.”

Raicho finally realized this was a handshake.

Neither of them was the type to intrude on another person’s personal space.

Raicho’s smile widened as it dawned on him that this was Renri’s way of showing his affection.

“...It’s no trouble. Thank you, too.”

Raicho grasped Renri’s hand and gripped it tight.

“I... I wanted to be sure I was leaving someone in charge who cares about the girls as much as I do...in case something happens to me. I know...you’ll tell Ruri how hard I worked. So I can go out there and fight without worrying.”

“Raicho...”

“I asked so much of you, really, bringing you all the way here. I’m sorry.”

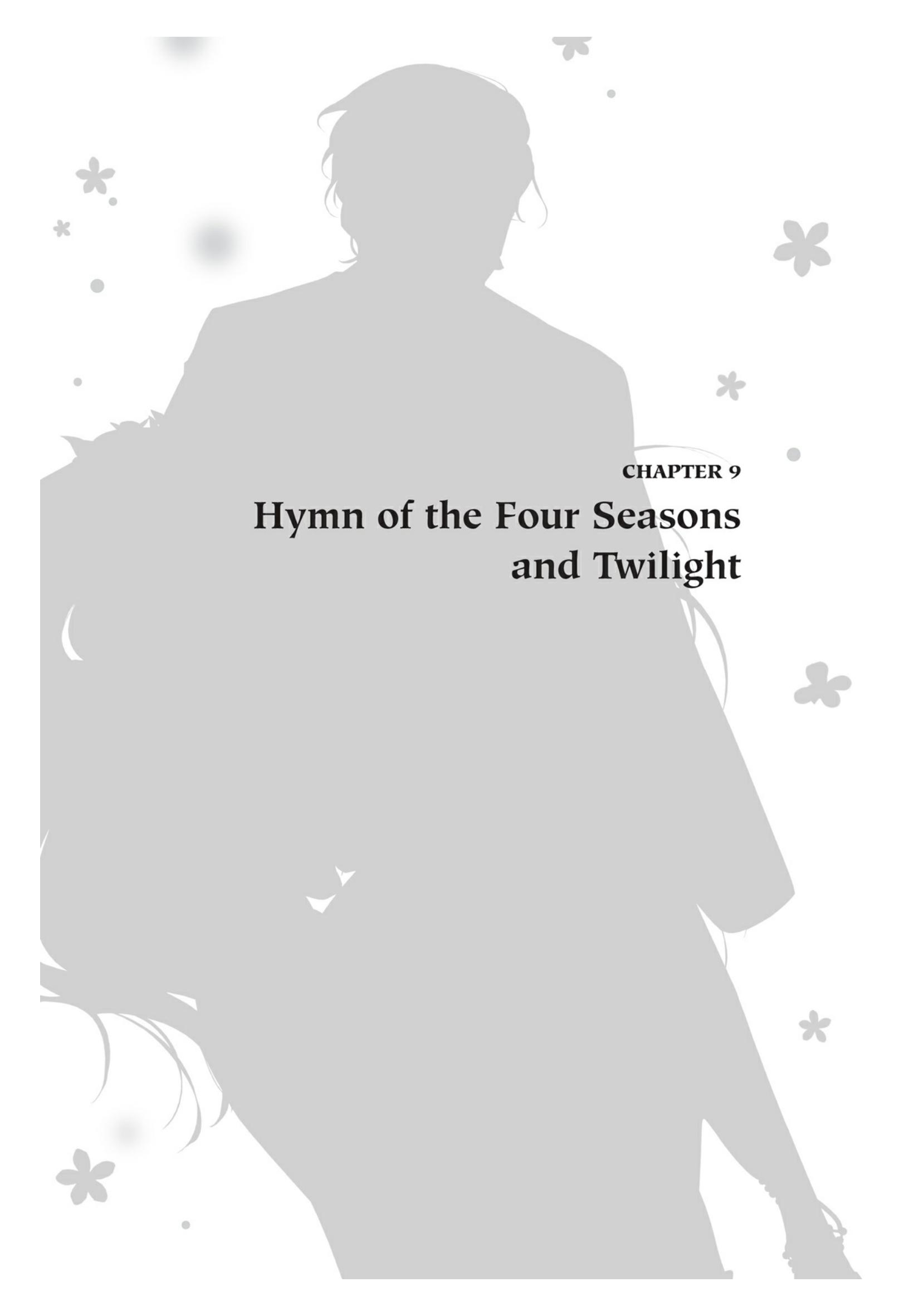
Renri shook his head sadly.

“...We’re getting a bit emotional, but remember, I’m not going out there to die.”

Raicho gave him a mischievous wink.

“I’m not dying until I drag the Townchief and everyone who made Ruri suffer down with me.”

And with those parting words, Raicho left Ryugu Shrine.



CHAPTER 9

## **Hymn of the Four Seasons and Twilight**

At the same time, near Mount Ryugu.

Summer and Twilight finished all their preparations to solve the Dark Wolf mystery and got on the move a little earlier than when they'd scheduled to go up the mountain. They traveled the road in multiple cars.

Tsukihi Aragami had finally managed to calm her racing heart, but that all went out the window as she sat next to Kaguya in the car. Suddenly, a phone rang, and everyone rummaged through their pockets to see if it was theirs.

"Ah, it's mine."

Kaguya looked at his phone. The screen read *Kaya Fugeki*.

"Oh, it's Kaya. I wonder why she's calling..."

"The Lady Archer of Dawn?!" Tsukihi screamed in shock.

"Yeah. She should be at school after bringing in the morning, though... Wait, is today a weekday?"

"How about you answer the phone first...?"

Kaguya did as Tsukihi suggested, and a voice reached Kaguya's ear.

"Hey, *Big Bro*. Are you good to talk right now?"

Her voice was charming enough without seeing her face, and her manner of speech sounded somewhat boyish. Even though she called him *Big Bro*, they had no blood relation.

"Yeah. What's up? Did something happen?"

"*More like something's happening on your end, right?*"

"...You're not wrong, but how do you know about that?"

"*I'm calling you as a request from the shrine at the foot of our mountain. Is it true that venerated Agents of the Four Seasons are over there? What was their season again...? Summer?*"

The sudden call was surprising enough, but now this? Kaguya was becoming more and more confused.

“How’d you know that?”

Kaguya and Kaya were the Archers of Twilight and Dawn—colleagues, essentially. Although they lived in different regions, they had formed an amicable relationship as veteran and newcomer ever since Kaya had become an Archer. They had never met in person, but they knew each other’s faces, thanks to the advances of communications technology in the modern era. Still, they weren’t close enough to get in touch frequently. They talked about their jobs and woes once every few months and not much more.

They hadn’t been in touch since Kaguya’s family had left him bereft.

*“The Lord Winter is in Enishi, and he asked the head priest there to get in touch with me and tell me the gist of what happened. You never thought to call me and talk about this whole thing?”*

“Kaya...”

“*Do you not trust me as your colleague...?*”

“Ah, no... It’s just... I would rather not bother you... I was upset enough for myself...”

“*...Sounds messy. I’ll get the whole story out of you later.*”

“I’m getting interrogated?”

“*Yes. Just not now. I’ll relay the message I was given.*”

After a pause, the Archer of Dawn Kaya Fugeki whispered through the phone.

*“This is from Spring, Autumn, and Winter. All Agents of the Four Seasons are at risk of replacement. Stay on high alert. Get a new phone and call Winter as soon as possible... Are things really okay, Big Bro?”*

“Huh...?”

The word *replacement* wasn’t a familiar one to the Archers of Oracle.

For as long as he’d been serving as a god incarnate, not once had Kaguya been worried that his life was in danger.

*Does that mean someone's trying to kill Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame?*

Fear began to overtake him. Kaguya, sitting in the back seat of the car, looked through the rear window. Ruri and Ayame were in the car behind them. There didn't seem to be any problem, but a cold sweat ran down his back.

*"I heard you're guarding them, but you should be extra careful. The Lord Winter says he's been calling the Ladies Summer, but he hasn't been able to get through."*

"But they could call their parents no problem."

*"Hey, I'm just telling you what they said. Whatever it is, they had to take this roundabout way of getting their message across...not to mention going through a god from a different domain. Whatever happens within the Four Seasons...I'll be praying that you don't get dragged into their problems and that you're okay."*

"..."

"Big Bro Kaguya?"

"Yeah, thanks. They're sure about this information?"

*"Yep. They said they had to play phone tag because they couldn't get in touch with you directly. Well, it makes sense they can't get ahold of your number so easily..."*

"...Okay, I got it. Can I call you back if I need to ask anything else? You're not at school?"

"Summer break just began!"

"Oh, right!"

*"I'll go to bed in the evening to get ready for the ritual, but I'll tell my Custodian to keep an eye on the phone. Go ahead and call whenever you want, and he'll pick up. Anything else I can do?"*

"No... Thank you. I'll take care of things on my end. Tell Yuzuru I said hi. Be good."

Kaguya hung up, then hurriedly told Tsukihi:

“Get all cars to stop.”

Mount Ryugu was already before their eyes, yet Kaguya told them to move the cars to the side of the road. Fortunately, there were no other vehicles on the mountain, as it was closed.

Kaguya ran up to Ruri and Ayame’s car.

“Girls, can you get in touch with the Lord Winter from your phones?”

The Hazakura sisters were confused by the sudden question.

He explained the situation and got them to make the call, but it said that the number was either occupied or the phone was out of battery. They couldn’t get in touch with the other Agents, either, even by text.

“...Sorry, can I see your phone?” Tsukihi asked.

She looked through their devices.

“...Is there anything you don’t recognize on your apps lists?”

Neither of the girls could give a definite answer, as they rarely checked them.

Then Tsukihi gave them her phone and asked the twins to get in touch with Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki. Ruri was confused, but Ayame typed in the number.

The phone rang once, twice, three times. After the fourth ring, he answered.

*“Who is this? Identify yourself.”*

It was Rosei’s voice, cold like the snow and as haughty as a king’s.

At the end of a long journey, unaware that they had been isolated, Summer finally reunited with the other seasons.

“I-it’s Ayame Hazakura... I’m borrowing the phone from someone else. Is that you, Lord Kantsubaki?”

She heard a gasp on the other end of the line.

“Big Hazakura?!”

“Ah, yes. That’s me...”

A bizarre cheer followed.

“Lord Kantsubaki, where are you right now? Are you in the middle of something?”

But Rosei wasn’t listening.

“Guys! It’s Big Hazakura! She’s okay!”

Ayame heard Nadeshiko, Hinagiku, and Sakura all cheer in the background, too. The Agents really were together. Why?

“L-Lord Kantsubaki, er...”

“Where are you right now? Is Little Hazakura okay, too? Is the Lord Archer nearby?”

Ayame was overwhelmed by the barrage of questions.

“G-give me a second. I’ll put you on speaker.”

She hurriedly switched the call to speaker mode.

Kaguya, Tsukihi, and the other guards came closer to listen.

“Ruri and I are okay. We’re with the Lord Archer of Twilight on our way to Mount Ryugu. Is it true you asked the Lady Archer of Dawn to get in touch with us?”

“Yes. Listen, they want to replace you. We’ve been calling you this whole time! Has anything weird happened to you?”

“You were? Huh? But...we texted your Guards, and no one replied back... And Ruri spoke with Lord Azami. He told her—or, well, advised her—to come here to solve the Dark Wolf mystery. He said that could help soothe the negative opinion of the Agents...”

“...”

“Lord Kantsubaki?”

“That’s a very scary thing to hear.”

“Huh?”

“*Mr. Azami, she’s saying something weird about you telling them to come here.*”

Ayame looked at Ruri.

“He did, didn’t he, Ruri?”

“Yes...?”

Ruri frowned. Their hearts started beating faster, and then a new voice came over the line.

“*...Sorry, mind if I take the call? Lady Ruri! Lady Ayame! Are you okay?!*”

“Lord Rindo!”

“Lord Azami!”

The Hazakura sisters’ voices overlapped.

“*You’re okay...! Thank goodness...! I was worried sick because I couldn’t get in touch with you!*”

Ruri was puzzled.

“Huh? Wait, b-but you called me! After we got on the plane, we were so busy, we couldn’t call you back...”

“*...I didn’t call you, Lady Ruri.*”

“...N-no way! You cheered me up...”

“*I’m telling you the truth! I mean it. Nadeshiko and I were so worried about you both, so we called you and texted about going to the beach...but you never replied. The other Agents called you, too! But no one could get through!*”

Ruri gulped.

“*Who did you talk to, Lady Ruri?*”

A chill ran down her spine.

*Who did I talk to?*

She clearly remembered speaking to a man who she’d thought was Rindo

Azami.

*He cheered me up. He listened to me when I was crying.*

And she'd followed his advice to drop everything and go to Mount Ryugu.

It was thanks to him that she'd made up with Ayame, come on this trip, and met Kaguya. And now they were heading over to solve the Dark Wolf mystery, exactly as he'd suggested.

But now Rindo said that it hadn't been him.

*Then who was it?*

Fear and a feeling of loss came over Ruri. Her courage had come from his kindness.

Her vision turned dark. Had everything she'd done up till now been wrong? The color began to drain from her face.

"A-Ayame, I, what do I...? I don't know what to do... Who was I talking to...?"

It was clear Ruri was terrified; even insurgents didn't distress her this much.

She'd been duped by the same person who'd swayed her heart. And it crushed her.

"...Ruri, calm down. Give me your phone. Captain, please hand me a gun."

Ayame quickly took action. She threw their phones on the ground and shot them. One, two, three shots was enough to destroy them. The Archer side was aghast, but that was one way to find out about Ayame's past as a Guard.

"It's okay, Ruri. I'm here with you. I'll protect you."

"...Sis."

Ayame caressed Ruri's back before taking the phone.

"Lord Azami, this is Ayame. I just destroyed our phones in case we were being tailed by a dangerous individual. It seems...that we were deceived."

A regular person would have thought it was a prank, but Ruri was this country's Summer. An Agent of the Four Seasons. Ayame felt the same fear as Ruri that they might have been involved in something terrible, but she did not

lose her cool.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry, Sis... I...”

Ayame shook her head. “Stay strong, Ruri. We’ve made it all the way here together, and we’ve survived battles before. If you were tricked, it means they were just that good. Lord Azami, I can only hypothesize, but it might be that someone who sounds similar got us to come to Ryugu.”

Rindo swallowed his anger, but it came out through his words.

*“You think I would tell you girls to run away from home?! Even you believed that, Lady Ayame?”*

“...I’m sorry!”

*“Why...?! You may be the Agents of Summer, but I would never! And that you should go without telling anybody? I’m a Guard! I would never say that!”*

Rindo’s concern was real, and he couldn’t keep the anger and sadness out of his words. He would never do something like that, and it hurt him that they’d thought he had. Ayame recognized their mistake.

“Yes... You’re right.”

*This is what makes Rindo Azami the man he is,* thought Ayame.

He had once lost his lady, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki, and with that experience in mind, he worried about Ruri’s and Ayame’s safety as well. Not to mention, Summer and Autumn had become friends after what had happened in spring.

Rindo would never incite his friends to do something dangerous while he just stood back and watched.

*That’s right. And yet...*

They had been too heartbroken to think things through.

In the end, they’d been right to be suspicious.

*And I call myself a Guard? Get it together, Ayame!*

She clenched her fists.

“...I can see it clearly now. I found it strange back then, but after our

engagements were broken off...I don't think either of us were thinking straight... We were so angry with everyone around us that we chose to run away from home... But that doesn't excuse it. I am truly sorry."

*"Huh? They called off your marriages? Both of them?"*

"Yes... Oh, you didn't know that? They said twin goddesses are a bad omen... and they called them off..."

*"I had no idea... Ahhh, you poor girls... I see... No, in that case, I'm sorry for yelling at you. It must've been so hard on you..."*

Ayame, and Ruri listening from the side, felt tears welling up in their eyes as the real Rindo comforted them. Ayame blinked them back as she continued.

"The fake Azami told us that if we came to Mount Ryugu and solved the Dark Wolf mystery, it could ease the criticism surrounding all the Agents, and maybe get our weddings back on track..."

Rindo fumed silently for a few seconds.

*"...I'll never forgive this faker. In any case, I understand the situation. Lady Ayame, please stay where you are."*

"Could we go to meet you instead? We're already right in front of Mount Ryugu."

*"No, it's dangerous over here. We've been hearing gunshots all over the mountain..."*

"Gunshots?"

At that point, Kaguya interjected. "Sorry to interrupt. I'm Kaguya Fugeki, the Archer of Twilight. Could it be you came across the Dark Wolf? I'd prefer if you didn't fight him, if possible... He is my Custodian, so if you could remain on standby—"

*"Huh?! Lord Archer?!"*

Rindo raised his voice in surprise, and Kaguya rushed to finish explaining.

"Sorry if I startled you. The situation here is also quite complicated, so I would like us to share what we know as quickly as possible. To summarize, the Dark

Wolf appeared because of mismanagement within my house."

"H-hold on! Give me one second, please!"

Rindo seemed to be panicking himself. Rustling sounds came from the phone, and a voice that sounded like Hinagiku's murmured, "*The Lord Archer?*" They knew he existed, but they'd never met him, so naturally, the Agents would be curious about their colleague.

After a while, Rindo spoke again.

*"I made it so everyone on this side can hear you now, too, so if you could please speak slowly, we would appreciate it. Concerning the gunshots, we believe there is currently a fight going on in the mountains."*

"A fight?"

*"Yes. At first, we thought it could be insurgents...but when we arrived on Mount Ryugu, members of Maverick Rabbit Horn from the Town of Summer appeared and tried to stop us from approaching the mountain. We confirmed their identities. Maverick Rabbit Horn and Doyen Turtle are fighting. Maverick Rabbit Horn's leader is...Lady Ruri's...I guess now former...fiancé, Raicho Kimikage."*

Kaguya looked at Ruri. She was too stunned to speak.

*"Is that the right name, Lady Ruri? He is the son of the main branch of the Kimikage family, correct?"*

She wanted to ask how, or why, but her lips wouldn't move.

All Ruri could do was let her teardrops fall in silence and bob her head up and down in an approximation of a nod.

Raicho Kimikage had taken action without her knowing. She would have to ask him if she wanted to know for sure, but there was one simple reason, considering their relationship: He'd done it for the woman he loved.

Ruri wasn't stoic; of course that made her cry.

*Raicho.*

He hadn't given up on her.

Kaguya responded in her stead. "She says that's right. Which means...this is infighting among the Town of Summer?"

*"No... We can't really say that. Broadly speaking, this is a fight concerning all of the Agents of the Four Seasons. Maverick Rabbit Horn says that they are doing it to stop Doyen Turtle's tyranny."*

Things were serious. Their goal at the start of the day, solving the Dark Wolf mystery, had gone right out the window.

They couldn't easily approach their destination now that it was a battlefield.

*"We already know that Doyen Turtle are thugs. They attacked and tied up the members of National Security guarding the closed-off entrance to the mountain. Maverick Rabbit Horn have set up cameras all over Mount Ryugu and are currently sharing the feed with us. We'll know whether the ones attacking are insurgents as soon as we get ahold of their identities. Moving on to the issue before us, the fight appears to have intensified while we have remained outside the mountain talking. We can hear frequent gunshots and yelling coming from farther up the mountain. We would like to go and check on the situation, but they might have people waiting near the entrance plotting to replace the Agents. So we aren't sure what to do next... Ah...!"*

Rindo spoke to another person before coming back to the phone.

*"Maverick Rabbit Horn just told us you are also under surveillance from afar to make sure you're safe. But they seemed to have anticipated your arrival and are sending a vehicle back... Do you see a car approaching?"*

Just as Rindo said it, a car came into view from down the empty road.

It stopped a short distance away, and people got out. Tsukihi and her soldiers immediately moved to guard Kaguya and the Hazakura sisters, but the new arrivals stood still and raised their hands to show they were unarmed.

*"Apparently, they left their weapons behind, so you can send a member of the Secret Service to verify their identities. Feel free to call the Four Seasons Agency to run their names against the residents list."*

As suggested, Tsukihi's troops headed over to the car with their guns drawn.

Kaguya continued the call. "Lord Azami, was it? Could you please tell me why such a fight would break out in Mount Ryugu? I heard the Four Seasons society is split down the middle by the divine punishment theory. If that is the cause, then this is my responsibility."

*"You're referring to your Custodian?"*

"Yes—let me briefly explain. The Dark Wolf is not something created by environmental destruction or divine punishment. The Archer's Custodian has the power of illusion to protect their master. A few days ago, we found out that the Dark Wolf is my Custodian, Eken Fugeki. He vanished months ago, but something happened that made him attack me with mirages. I believe he's been hiding on the mountain, so I was trying to get Lady Ruri's and Lady Ayame's help to secure him. And let me just say...I had no idea the Dark Wolf was causing so much trouble for the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons until yesterday... The Ladies Summer told me about the environmental destruction and divine punishment theories, which got me so riled up that I sent that declaration out to every organization this morning. I'll take care of the Dark Wolf, which should get us on our way to clearing up the issues surrounding the Agents... I am truly sorry about this. I would like to apologize in person."

Multiple confused voices came from the other end of the line.

Most shocking of all was the fact that the Dark Wolf was a human, followed by the news that the Custodian had such powers and that their fellow god incarnate had no idea of the Agents' situation. They had no time to waste on shock, though.

Rindo seemed taken aback, but he replied.

*"...I—I believe I understand. You did nothing wrong, as the information was hidden from you. If anything, the Four Seasons have caused you a great deal of trouble. Allow me to explain our side. The Four Seasons Agency and the Towns are currently divided into two groups: those whose wrongdoings have come to light, and those who were under the boot of the former and are trying to correct their maladministration. We call them Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn, respectively. Doyen Turtle is acting behind the scenes to replace the current generation of the Agents of the Four Seasons, while Maverick Rabbit Horn is*

*working against them... The current conflict on Mount Ryugu comes from their attempt to replace the Ladies Summer. It is dangerous on the mountain, so we ask all of you to stay put. Could you please continue to guard our Summer for the time being...?"*

Kaguya and the girls chattered in confusion, but Tsukihi replied first.

"My name is Tsukihi Aragami, captain of the National Security forces in service of Lord Kaguya! Please rest assured. We will protect the Lord Archer as well as the Ladies Summer."

*"A captain in the Secret Service? That's good to hear!"*

"Yes. Lord Guard of Autumn, I would like to ask further about the situation. Is National Security's special forces squad Porcupine with you there? We requested their deployment to help in the hunt for the Dark Wolf. If they are, I believe it would be best to reassign them to protect the venerated Agents instead. We can take care of things on our side."

*"Yes, we're doing just that. We have some members of Porcupine sharing information with Maverick Rabbit Horn and ourselves, while the rest are on the lookout to capture anyone scheming to replace the Agents. After all...this is practically terrorism."*

Porcupine was an anti-terrorist force. Although this was technically infighting, it wasn't too dissimilar to the Agents' battles against the insurgents. Their job was to protect these key national figures from believers in conspiracy theories. They couldn't leave the Agents' sides when people plotting to replace them could be close. Nor could they abandon their original request, however. So they had split up to accomplish both, while prioritizing what was most urgent.

*"I apologize... This means taking manpower away from you. They said they will send reinforcements, so please wait before going on the search for the Dark Wolf. Porcupine's opinion, as well as that of everyone else here, is that it would be best to stay away for the time being."*

"I understand. You're the ones who need immediate protection right now, so don't worry about us. I simply ask that you send us someone to act as a liaison."

*"Thank you... That said...there is...one problem..."*

“What is it?”

“*Although we Guards are against it...the Agents insist on helping put an end to this fight...*”

“Th-th-the venerated Agents want to fight?!” Tsukihi’s voice cracked. The believer in her had taken over. “Th-th-th-they can’t! Please, stop them!”

“*I would love to, believe me, and all of the other Guards are equally against it...*”

“*I’m telling you, I’d only be giving backup support and catching them from afar.*”

This time, it was Rosei who chimed in, and Rindo sighed.

“*...That’s the decision of Lord Rosei Kantsubaki, Agent of Winter.*”

That interaction showed just how far up in the hierarchy the Agent of Winter was.

“Lord Winter! You mustn’t! You must understand how important you are...!”

“*So you’re telling me I should ignore the commonfolk?*”

“...!”

The words got caught in Tsukihi’s throat.

“*Ms. Captain, I’m not some idiot trying to be a hero. Whatever Maverick Rabbit Horn’s motives are behind this battle, their primary objective is to prevent the replacement of the Agents. So we’re just supposed to watch in silence as other people fight to protect us? We already have more than enough reason to intervene. And most of all...innocent people will die if we ignore it. In reality, I doubt those who wish for our deaths and are planning our replacements are currently in Mount Ryugu. They must be observing from a safe place all the way in Town. Most of Doyen Turtle here must be expendable tools. Some of them might have even been coerced into fighting. And you’re telling me to let them die?*”

“...Lord Winter.”

His words were like a punch in the chest for Tsukihi.

Rosei wanted to end this battle without bloodshed. He'd suffered a betrayal back in spring, but he'd even been sympathetic about it. Ishihara, New Year's spy, had felt conflicted by her own actions and eventually joined the side of the Agents.

He didn't want to forsake people who were, in a way, victims themselves. Rosei was kind that way.

*"And I also have reason to fight. It sounds like the Archer's side is responsible for this strife, but we're causing him trouble even as we speak. It will be hard for him to shoot his arrow among this chaos. We'll take care of this in a few hours, so you, Captain, Lord Archer, please protect our Summer."*

"That goes without saying, but...gods incarnate shouldn't involve themselves in fights..."

Kaguya and Tsukihi exchanged a confused look, but the other side had no more time to hear them out.

*"...Sorry, but the fight is starting. Lord Archer, please take the Hazakura sisters somewhere safe. Even if you solve the Dark Wolf mystery, it won't do anything to put a stop to this battle, will it?! We'll give you a call once we've made sure everything's safe! We'll send Autumn your way, along with some members of Porcupine. Let them give you the rundown!"*

*"Lady Ruri, Lady Ayame, we'll get in contact with Maverick Rabbit Horn and head over there. Please don't move! Okay?! Stay put!"*

The situation sounded intense, because they hung up as soon as they'd said their piece.

The members of Maverick Rabbit Horn whose identities had already been confirmed by the Archer's security team explained things in further detail. Once the conversation was done, they stood still under the scorching sun, uneasy looks across their faces.

Soon, a Porcupine vehicle arrived.

Mount Ryugu was already right in front of them, a couple of minutes away by car, so they'd arrived almost immediately.

As soon as the car stopped on the side of the road, Nadeshiko jumped out.

“Nadeshiko!”

“Lady Nadeshiko!”

Ruri and Ayame ran up to her without thinking.

“Nadeshiko, don’t run! Thank goodness you’re all right, girls!”

Nadeshiko ran toward them with small pattering steps, and Rindo’s face creased with concern. The sisters felt their chests tighten at the sight of the familiar faces.

“Lady Ruri, Lady Ayame!”

Nadeshiko grinned in joy at seeing them, and the sisters took turns hugging her.

“I’m sorry, Nadeshiko. Thanks for coming to look for us...”

“Thank you, Lady Nadeshiko...”

The small goddess had come all the way here for them. Just thinking that made them happy.

“Thanks, Lord Rindo...,” said Ruri.

“Lord Azami...I am so sorry...,” said Ayame. “Allow me to apologize formally at a later date... Are you sure you should be here? What is the situation over there?”

Rindo glanced at Mount Ryugu before replying.

“The other Agents asked me to come here to guard you. Spring and Winter must be giving remote support to Porcupine by now. Nadeshiko...is still in training, after all.”

There was also the question of her trauma from spring. They must have planned to distance her from the battle.

The young girl smiled happily as Ruri and Ayame embraced her.

“Rindo, let’s say hi to the Lord Archer,” she chirped.

Once the round of hugs was done, Nadeshiko looked at the man behind Ruri

and Ayame.

“Oh, right. Lady Ruri, Lady Ayame, would you mind if we greet the Lord Archer first? Could you introduce us?”

Ruri and Ayame hurried to bring forth Kaguya and Tsukihi.

“Nice to meet you. I’m the Archer of Twilight, Kaguya Fugeki. Please, call me Kaguya.”

“It is a great honor to meet you. My name is Rindo Azami, Guard of Autumn. This here is our country’s Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.”

Nadeshiko timidly took a step forward and bowed.

“I am the Agent of Autumn, Nadeshiko Iwaizuki. Thank you for always giving us night, Lord Archer of Twilight.”

A handsome young retainer and a cute little goddess.

It was a picture-perfect sight, but Kaguya’s thoughts were elsewhere.

*She really is so young.*

He was shocked. The insurgents had abducted this child?

He came to his senses after a moment and crouched to meet Nadeshiko’s gaze.

“And thank you for always giving us autumn... I heard about what happened in spring. I’m so happy to see you’re doing well.”

He was so glad she’d come back alive.

Kaguya had the type of face that might seem a bit scary to kids, but Nadeshiko wasn’t afraid at all. She looked happy to see a god from another domain kneel and look her in the eyes.

She had never met this man, but her heart was open from the very beginning, just from the fact that they were colleagues.

“I’m still new, so I haven’t brought in many autumns...but you bring night to Yamato every day...”

That got a chuckle out of Kaguya.

"It's silly to try and compare the Archers of Oracle with the Agents of the Four Seasons. We are very different. I've heard the stories, but still...you really are young... Children your age deserve praise for simply sleeping and eating well. To be able to take on such a noble duty on top of that—you should be very proud of yourself."

Nadeshiko's smile grew even wider. "...Lord Archer...Lord Kaguya, you think...I work hard?"

"Yes, you seem like a very hard worker. I'm very impressed."

Nadeshiko's already red cheeks took on an even rosier hue. "How was autumn last year...?"

"Very beautiful. Ryugu's autumn is not as pronounced as in other regions, but even so, you can see the change of colors in the trees. I always look forward to it. Your autumns are very lovely. You have my deepest respect."

"...Hee-hee. I really respect you, too, Lord Kaguya...!"

Nadeshiko blushed at the conversation and the Archer's shower of praise, clinging to Rindo's legs as she hid her face. Kaguya's smile deepened.

"Our Autumn... She's so noble...and adorable..." Tsukihi exclaimed in awe, covering her mouth with both hands.

Kaguya stood and nodded. He couldn't agree more. "So...we're supposed to be on standby to protect the Ladies Summer, but...I don't have many hours left before I need to begin climbing the mountain. Am I not going to be able to do that?"

"Oh, today's night ritual," Rindo responded. "It depends on how the battle plays out... Is it possible for you to shoot the arrow from somewhere else?"

"It is, but I need to borrow the sacred area's power. Even if everything goes fine today, I might not be able to do it tomorrow."

A confused look crossed Rindo's face, and Kaguya clarified.

"The Archers use so much divine power when shooting the arrow that we black out. Without the sacred area's power, I could deplete my power reserves and not wake up before it's time to shoot tomorrow's arrow. It's not like I'd die,

so you don't have to worry about that, but it would cause trouble for Yamato."

Rindo understood now.

He let his hand fall onto Nadeshiko's head as he replied.

"Ah, I see. A similar thing happens with the Agents. As they go along on their journey to manifest the seasons, depending on the person, if they use too much divine power, they might get a fever... I imagine it's not as serious as it is for you, though..."

"Fevers don't feel good... I'm worried about Lord Kaguya."

Nadeshiko's words got a smile out of Kaguya.

"If I can get even a little closer to the sacred area and follow the leylines, that will help with the side effects. Worst case scenario, I shoot from the foot of the mountain, someone carries me up there tomorrow, and I do the ritual as soon as I wake up. I should still be able to bring night...but there's no guarantee. When all's said and done, it's best to go to the sacred area. So even if you tell me not to go, I have to. One more thing: It was always around the time I shot the arrow that the Dark Wolf appeared... I want to go and see if he's there. He might be alone and scared on the mountain... I realize it's only a personal issue, but I can't choose to stay away... Protecting my Custodian is important to me."

The Custodian was like the Agents' Guards. Rindo couldn't easily dismiss Kaguya's desire to protect his retainer despite the betrayal, and he frowned.

"...This is a difficult situation..."

"Lord Azami, we can lead Lord Kaguya up the mountain. We've already tamed a lot of animals on Mount Ryugu, so if we get them to show us a path that avoids the battle..."

"You're right! We don't know anything about this place, but we found the sacred area thanks to their help. We can do this!"

Their plan sounded convincing, but Rindo couldn't agree to it right away. He had to protect the Hazakura sisters.

Yet with their help, they could see Kaguya safely to the sacred area.

*What if this is the wrong decision?*

As a Guard, he would rather take everyone to the airport and away to safety.

*But the Lord Archer has to do his job. And there's no safe place for Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame at the moment.*

Either way, there would be no peace until the battle on the mountain ended.

*Can we really circumvent the fighting?*

Rindo looked at the people present. There weren't enough. As he hesitated, *she* gave the final word.

"...Rindo, I'll protect everyone. We need the night... The people of Yamato need it..."

"Nadeshiko..."

She spoke with no consideration of the pros and cons. "Don't try to do everything yourself... Let's all do this together. We'll protect Yamato's night. I feel like this is what we should do..."

The young goddess's consideration for the commonfolk was the decisive blow. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

"..."

After much thought, Rindo said:

"...Very well."

He looked at Tsukihi, her cohort, and the members of Maverick Rabbit Horn and Porcupine accompanying them.

"I would rather have at least Lady Ruri and Lady Ayame withdraw, but I feel like it might be more dangerous to split up... So how about...we unite?"

Everyone present agreed.

Tsukihi, Kaguya, Ruri, and Ayame all nodded.

"I'll find out the current state of the battle—even if they don't answer. Let's go fight for the night."

Rindo's fist tightened around his phone.

Now we go back to when Spring, Autumn, and Winter first arrived at Mount Ryugu.

Before they got there, the Doyen Turtle troops, led by the Townchief of Summer Seiran Matsukaze, had already gathered on the mountain to assassinate the Agents of Summer.

The night before that, Raicho, his squad, and Renri had placed trail cameras all over Mount Ryugu. They were well hidden, but the members of Doyen Turtle who'd checked the public path up the mountain just happened to find them.

These sorts of cameras were normally used to observe animals, so the people who found them didn't know they had been set up by Maverick Rabbit Horn to stop their plans to replace the Agents.

Still, even if they had been placed there by ordinary folk, Doyen Turtle couldn't leave behind evidence of their assassination. They promptly shared this information with the other teams, who were instructed to look around their posts to check if there were any more cameras.

As they were doing this, Raicho's second team arrived on the scene.

*"We can see the enemy at point ten—the entrance near the parking lot. Your current location is closest to point three, Raicho."*

Renri's voice came through Raicho's mic-equipped earphone.

"So diagonally upward. Sounds like we should launch a surprise attack from above to avoid them reaching you at point two. Renri, keep an eye on the cameras and, if things get hairy, take everyone to point four and head down. It'll look like there's nothing, since it's the Archer's trail, but you'll find a path there if you look closely. It'll take you to a different place from the parking lot where they're stationed."

*"You shouldn't be worrying about me more than yourself!"*

Raicho could sense Renri's distress, and he chuckled.

He cut off communication and ordered his soldiers to split up. They wouldn't be very far apart, however, as they were forming up for a pincer attack. The two teams kept each other in their sights as they moved.

Raicho's troops totaled thirty-six people. He'd left three in Ryugu Shrine with Renri and sent five to protect Ruri and Ayame. Ten were waiting in cars a short distance away, securing their escape route. Two had been appointed as lookout and emergency assistance in the parking lot and by the entrance to the mountain. The remaining sixteen followed Raicho across the mountain. They all wore black combat uniforms.

Meanwhile, Doyen Turtle's forces totaled forty, including those left behind in the parking lot, and they wore camouflage uniforms. Black against camo, with Raicho's side at a numerical disadvantage.

Even so, they were fewer than originally planned. Presumably, it was the work of Fukuryo Doji, who'd been carefully manipulating both sides behind the scenes, but this wasn't known by anyone.

"They're here," Raicho murmured to his men.

He pointed in the direction of a group of people walking through the trees, as tiny as ants from their vantage point. There were five of them—most likely the advance team.

"I'll go. You secure the fallen and back me up."

Raicho crouched down and silently approached the five enemies.

Doyen Turtle's squad looked around as they talked to each other.

"Let's ask Unami how far we're going. We can't keep looking for cameras forever. We need to make time to reach our posts."

"I mean, it's the Archer, the Agents of Summer, and the Secret Service, right? I'm sure they're all moving together, so they should be easy to find..."

Raicho was glad to hear they were looking for the cameras.

He waited until they were as close as possible before giving the half of the group that had split off a signal. One of them ran up to the enemy from behind, intentionally making noise.

Only the quiet sounds of nature—the calls of birds and chirping of insects—surrounded them, so of course they would turn around upon hearing the rustling of the grass.

Raicho sprang into action, waiting for this opportunity.

He held his custom-made tonfa baton at the ready in both hands and hit the first enemy from behind. Raicho kicked him in the back to send him to the ground, then quickly threw his baton to his other hand.

Without a moment's hesitation, he stabbed the tip of it into the man's back.

"Aaaaaahh!"

The man shrieked as he felt the shock of electricity.

His special stun baton was a different variety from the standard police-equipped model. Raicho just preferred to have it hidden in a tonfa, typically meant for defense and dull blows.

"Ohh, that feels good."

Raicho ran toward his next target.

The rest finally snapped out of their surprise at the sudden attack and reacted.

"You're...! The Kimikages...!"

They seemed to know him. The four of them immediately closed in around Raicho.

Without a shred of fear, Raicho switched hands again. The enemy troops seemed to specialize in knife combat, as they all unsheathed their weapons and attacked in sync. Raicho blocked each incoming attack with his tonfa, repelling a knife before kicking out with a long leg to give himself some space. He quickly created an opening and escaped their encirclement.

By then, his troops were already inching toward the enemy. Once Raicho got away from the concentrated fighting, he ran back in to resume his attack.

Hit, evade. Hit, evade.

One of them pulled out a gun, but the moment his shot went wide, Raicho

closed the distance and dropped him.

A ripple of fear ran through the enemy as they immediately realized that even the smallest opening would mean the end for them.

The quick moves of a knife fighter could be intimidating, but Raicho got up close without hesitation and overwhelmed his enemy. They lost the moment they showed fear for his tonfa.

He deflected hands and sent knives flying, and even if they tried to drag him into a martial arts fight, Raicho was always one step ahead. He moved like he could see the future. It had nothing to do with his weapon.

One could say it was simply Raicho's talent for combat shining or the difference in their experience. He only moved in the way he thought would give him the best chance of winning. His biggest concern would be running out of stamina, but as his smile mid-combat showed, that wouldn't be happening for a while.

The five members of Doyen Turtle fell groaning to the ground in the blink of an eye.

Raicho's team moved in and prevented them from escaping by threatening them with their long stun batons. The entire fight was just a warm-up for Raicho—he hadn't even broken a sweat.

"We're off to a good start," he said to himself.

Just then, a call came in to his earphone.

*"Raicho, I can see a large group climbing from point nine."*

"Are they all coming up, then?" he asked Renri.

*"No, there's...eight still in the parking lot. But about thirty on the mountain. Let's see... One, two...fifteen stopped right at the start of the climb. So half of them are heading your way."*

"That's a lot. Still within expectations, though."

*"Um... But... There's this huge guy with the group..."*

Raicho rotated his arm and replied nonchalantly.

"He's 'huge'...? I'm a pretty big guy myself. You mean he's even bigger?"

*"Yeah, he looks scary. Also, I think...I've seen him a few times at the medical office. He was injured in training or something... As for the rest, I'm scanning for members of the Kimikage family, but there's a lot I have no idea who they are. We got them on camera, though, so we can look them up later and find out what Town they're from. Whatever happens in the end...I'll track their movements. That's my role, right...?"*

"Yeah, that's right."

*"...Shouldn't I be there with you?"*

"Renri... Your role there is important, that's why I asked you to do it. You can't come here; I need you as insurance in case something happens to me. Don't worry. I'll run away if things take a turn for the worse. And I'll get my men to do the same. Also, you'd just be getting in the way, so please just stay there."

"..."

"I appreciate the sentiment. You just can't help worrying for me. I feel the friendship, the love."

Renri sighed before saying, *"I'll keep you up to date"* and hanging up.

Raicho smiled, then gave instructions to his men, who were tying up the unconscious enemies and laying them down alongside the path.

"Ten of you stay here with me. We'll intercept them. The other six, carry two of these guys over to the escape team, then remain on standby with the cars. If things get dicey, withdraw immediately. Move out."

After seeing the smaller group disappear into the woods, Raicho looked at the faces of the ten men before him, elite members even among those of his troop. None of them looked worried.

"I hear they've got someone scary with them. I'll take him on. They outnumber us, but not one person in our squad is weak—you all are especially strong. We're gonna win this."

Everyone nodded and grinned in response to their commander's encouragement.

The trust of Raicho Kimikage was enough to raise morale. He was the kind of man who could elicit such a reaction.

They hid in the bushes as they waited for the enemy squad to arrive.

The mountains of Ryugu were humid in summer. The trees shielded some of the sunlight, but even then, the afternoon was intolerably bright.

*But this is Ruri's season.*

Summer hadn't bothered Raicho ever since he'd fallen in love with its Agent.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead over and over again, until Doyen Turtle finally showed itself, just as Renri had reported.

Raicho held a gun to the head of one of their tied-up enemies and called out a cheerful greeting.

"Hey there, everyone! Are you the guys here to kill Ruri and Ayame?"

The replacement squad grimaced at the sight of the hostage.

"We know you're with Doyen Turtle, and that you're here to replace the Agents of the Four Seasons! We took care of your advance team, no big deal. Honestly, it was so easy, I was a bit disappointed... So—are you just a bunch of thugs hired by the big houses, without any real combat training? We have self-defense and baton-fighting classes over at the Kimikage house, so feel free to drop by for a lesson!"

Raicho's arrogant attitude was to deliberately provoke them.

His goal was not to defeat all the members of Doyen Turtle on the mountain.

"You listening?"

It was to expose the wrongdoings of Doyen Turtle itself and to stop the criticism of the Hazakura sisters. For that, he wanted to get the enemies to give up all hope and leave.

*So will they take the bait?*

Some drew their guns, but one man among them stood out, who stepped forward and stopped the others.

"You're the Kimikages' son, aren't you?"

The man looked to be in his thirties. He really was huge—easily taller than the bigger-than-average Raicho.

“Oh, you know me?”

“All martial artists in the Town of Summer know about you.”

“I’m flattered to hear that. We’ve met somewhere before, haven’t we? Who are you, again? We’re fellow Townfolk here, so would you mind introducing yourself, please?”

“...Unami.”

“The Unami family, eh? We’ve fought in the finals at the Town’s martial arts tournament, haven’t we? I remember you; you were strong. So you’re working as a bodyguard for the Matsukazes now? That’s such a shame.”

Raicho sounded like he was putting on some sort of performance, but he wasn’t lying.

*Who would’ve thought it’d be this guy?*

It had been a few years ago, but unusually for him, Raicho remembered it clearly. This guy had put up a good fight. Dealing with this would take a lot longer than Raicho had anticipated, now that he was here.

*It’s not like I’m gonna lose, though.*

But the longer the fight dragged on, the more they’d be overwhelmed by the enemy’s numbers. Raicho would be fine, but he didn’t want to risk the lives of the branch family members. He had to be careful here.

“How about we make a deal, Mr. Unami?”

“Hostages won’t make a difference. Sorry, but I’ve got no feelings toward these guys. I just met ‘em today.”

“...Tough break,” Raicho whispered to the man he was using as a shield before letting him go. Realizing that nobody was his ally here, the man ran away.

“Still, would you like to make a deal? We know that Seiran Matsukaze is one of the ringleaders. If you testify that you were ordered to do this against your will, then there’d be no reason for us to fight.”

Unami tilted his head dramatically.

"What do you mean? We're only here to protect the Ladies Summer under orders from the Townchief."

"National Security's special forces are here, so you don't need to. And if you were officially requested, why wouldn't you work together with Porcupine? Why skulk around the mountain like you're trying to ambush somebody?"

"Same goes for you, right? And you already harmed some of the members of our squad."

"Uh-uh, that's not gonna fly. Those cameras you found and broke were ones we'd set up. We already know you're here to kill the goddesses. We got you on video talking about replacing them."

"Even if that's true, we'll get rid of those recordings before they see the light of day."

"...That's not all, though; we already caught a couple of your colleagues. Everything will come to light after we take our time interrogating them."

"Nobody in the Town would believe a false report like that."

"Mmm, sounds like none of this is getting through to you, and it's starting to tick me off. Are you ready to die on that hill? You think you'll be set for life if you get past us? I wonder... I paid an information broker friend of mine a small fortune to look into the Townchief's personal assets. There's no way you're here for free, right? Are you getting paid in cash? Or will we find transfer and withdrawal records? Some of you got paid in advance, I'm sure. Or are you just all so infatuated with the Townchief that you came here like it was a divine calling? Now *that* would be funny."

"What are you trying to say...?" Unami's brow finally moved an inch.

"There's no way the Townchief's handling of his information is flawless. We'll find a hole. I'm just giving you some advice: You're on a sinking ship, so you should probably jump off as fast as possible."

*It's just a hunch, though.*

That last bit had all been a bluff. Raicho suspected these guys were getting

something in return for their cooperation, even if it wasn't material. He was hoping to solve things peacefully by threatening that they would be investigated once this was over.

"Stop these strange accusations. As I said, no one back home will believe such falsehoods. You're a threat to the Town. Talking is pointless; all we have to do is take you out fair and square and hand you over to the authorities."

"That's an iron will you got there."

"...We have justice on our side. That's all there is to it."

There was no chance they'd be able to talk things out. Raicho gripped his tonfa in silence, and as he did, his squad came out of hiding. They had moved to surround Unami's troops while Raicho had been chatting with him. Unami took out his knife, and even in his huge hands, it didn't look small. It was easy to imagine just how big it actually was.

Unami's men glared daggers at Raicho's.

"Kimikage. Let me ask you one question before we fight. You're strong. You don't need to marry the Agent of Summer to ensure you'll be the next Guard. Let's just say that the *unfortunate accident* you mentioned earlier ends up happening. I can talk to the Townchief to set things up for you. Wouldn't you prefer to serve a new normal god, rather than protect an ominous one for decades?"

Raicho was momentarily taken aback.

"Normal?"

Unami's casual remark stabbed strangely at his heart.

Then he realized.

"Yes, the current situation is abnormal," Unami answered. "Do you really want to marry a zombie?"

Raicho realized this man truly thought that what he was doing was for the best.

"That's an awful way to put it... What'd Ruri ever do to you?"

“Nothing. I just find it creepy.”

Unami thought it was okay to kill someone based on his own biases.

*Ahhh. So this is the kind of guy trying to kill Ruri?*

Raicho felt a murky darkness well up inside of him from the pit of his stomach.

Immediately, all peaceful thoughts in his mind evaporated.

It wasn’t hatred but a strong resolve to kill this man as fast as possible.

“That’s just what the Agents are like.”

*Fast.*

“Even with the Hazakura name, they can’t escape being treated as tools. Isn’t that the normal reaction?”

*Fast.*

“How can anyone accept twin goddesses in the first place? What if we get awful summers because of them? The people will suffer. Those twins are better off dead.”

*I have to kill him fast.*

For the sake of the girl he loved.

Raicho was also trying to kill someone based on his biases, though he didn’t realize it.

But in the end, what is a fight except a clash of opinions?

Unami wanted to kill the Hazakura sisters because he found them creepy and abnormal.

Raicho wanted to kill Unami because he didn’t need someone who’d hurt his beloved in their world.

“Just...stop,” Raicho snarled. “I don’t want to listen to an idiot who just gave in to peer pressure. Bring it on.”

“...It seems you’re unable to think ahead to the future.”

“You’re the one who’s not thinking ahead. The Townchief you’re fighting for now could get rid of your loved ones, too, someday.”

Unami didn't listen. His expression remained unchanged.

"Kimikage. You need to die, for the sake of a better Town."

"Mr. Unami, please die, for the sake of Ruri."

Then they rushed at each other, and knife and tonfa clashed.

So began the war between justice and love—Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn.

The sounds of battle echoed all the way to the public entrance of the mountain, where members of Doyen Turtle hid in the forests and the group began to argue noisily.

"Recon is back. There's a fight up there. They think it's the Kimikages!"

"An ambush...? So they knew what we were doing?"

"Let's split up and send reinforcements."

"No, we don't know when the target might show up."

"Mr. Unami ordered us to stay here, so let's just wait and see how this plays out."

"Don't be ridiculous; we should join them. Is everyone in the Town of Summer a coward?"

Raicho's forces, consisting of only people from the Kimikage family, were a far cry from the ragtag team of people from all Towns that made up Seiran Matsukaze's private soldiers.

It wasn't necessarily a disadvantage when they were simply killing a couple of young girls in a surprise attack, but having to fight an organized group made some people apprehensive. Infighting in a situation like this was the worst thing they could do.

And the worst-case scenario for them was still to come.

*“Attention, scoundrels in Mount Ryugu plotting to replace the Agents of the Four Seasons!! Hand yourselves over peacefully!”*

The voice coming through the loudspeaker belonged to a member of the National Security's special forces.

The Agents of the Four Seasons had covertly managed to team up with Porcupine, and at last, they had come face-to-face with Doyen Turtle, who found themselves paralyzed.

Up the mountain, a battle raged on. Down here, Porcupine closed in on them.

They had to either face the special forces head-on or flee blindly across the mountain.

Far behind Porcupine, Spring and Winter also waited.

“Um... Hinagiku...has good...eyesight.”

“Yes, you do.”

“So...Hinagiku will...make flowers...bloom...around...Doyen Turtle.”

“All right.”

“Then...could you...attack them...Lord Rosei?”

“Got it. I'll follow your lead, Hina.”

“Then...let's look...for...the right...moment!”

“Let's do this!”

The adorable and brave conversation belonged to Hinagiku and Rosei.

Sakura and Itecho stood right beside the Agents, watching over them.

The four of them were a long way from the entrance where the conflict was going on. Rosei and Hinagiku were planning to restrain the enemy. They could quickly immobilize their enemy by using Spring's and Winter's powers in sync.

Targeting and capturing only the enemy forces in the middle of a heated

battle was a demanding task even for one with excellent control of their powers. Yet Hinagiku, the young goddess of Spring who'd returned to Yamato after ten years, assured them she could do it.

Her good eyesight allowed her to provide support from quite far away. Hinagiku had felt guilty about troubling the commonfolk after what had happened in spring, so this time, she'd volunteered to help Rosei take care of things quickly. The Guards had reluctantly accepted her desperate plea.

"You decided on a plan? Rosei, here's your fan."

"Lady Hinagiku, please take care... Here."

The Guards handed the Agents their fans. They suited them well in their usual kimono attire, but today the Agents were wearing Western-style clothing from their trip to the theme park, creating a bit of a mismatch. The moment they unfolded their fans, a gunshot rang out. Hinagiku was startled, and Sakura gently reassured her.

"They're shooting, but don't worry; those are still warning shots. If we let Doyen Turtle and Porcupine get into a shoot-out...people will die."

"Sakura..."

"Don't worry. I'll guard you from the front. If anyone's going to get shot, it will be me."

"..."

Hinagiku shook her head in silence. She had asked Sakura and Itecho to hide.

"No... Please, hide..."

"I borrowed a bulletproof vest from Porcupine. I won't die."

"No... Hinagiku...will fight...to protect...you."

"...I know you will."

"And also...Itecho... Hinagiku...is going...to protect...you both."

Sakura couldn't look her in the eye, but Hinagiku put her face so close to Sakura's that they could kiss. Hinagiku was always the one being protected, but in times like this, her eyes shone with such strong determination.

“Sakura...look here.”

“...”

“Sakura. Look...at Hinagiku.”

It wasn’t a command but a plea, yet Sakura still obeyed. She looked at Hinagiku.

Sakura’s tearful face was reflected in her citrine eyes.

Meanwhile, Hinagiku’s soft smile was reflected in hers.

“Hinagiku...will protect...everyone.”

Hinagiku Kayo was a goddess who could smile in times like this.

“So many...gods...incarnate...are...on this...mountain...today.”

“Yes...”

Hinagiku bumped her forehead against her Guard’s, and Sakura squeezed her free hand in return. She wanted to soothe her.

“Hinagiku thinks...that we...were guided here...today...so that...no one...dies.”

“You mean like fate? I don’t care about that, so long as you’re okay...”

“Sakura... This time...you can...rely on...Hinagiku. You’re...Hinagiku’s protector...but...without you...Hinagiku has...no reason...to live.”

“Lady Hinagiku...”

“No...reason...at all. Let Hinagiku...protect...you...”

It sounded like a declaration of love, but to the two girls, it was simply a fact.

Were Hinagiku to lose Sakura today, she would quickly give up on life.

Sakura couldn’t stand it and hugged her.

“If there’s any danger, then just run... We’ll run away...”

Sakura wasn’t afraid for her own life; she was frightened that she might lose her beloved lady, who had finally come back after ten years. Sakura trembled slightly.

“Sakura, it’s okay...,” Itecho reassured her. “Even if the enemy turns their

attention this way after Spring and Winter begin the manifestation, Rosei will create a barrier. We'll only get in the way if we stand in front of them. Once their spells are done, it'll be our turn. We have to go stop the chaos farther up while we keep the two of them safe."

Hinagiku nodded in agreement, but Sakura was still unconvinced.

This time, Rosei chimed in. "Sakura, look at this." He skillfully waved his fan, and four ice bunnies appeared on the ground.

"What is this, Rosei...?"

Sakura stared at the rabbits. She thought they were statues, but then she was shocked to see them leap adorably.

Hinagiku's eyes lit up. "They're...so...cute."

"Wh-wh-what are they?"

"Ice bunnies."

"I can see that!"

"I've been training a ton since the last time I saw you, and I have all sorts of new tricks now," Rosei said with pride.

"They won't last long, since it's hot out here, but I can make ice that moves on its own. They'll also take attacks for people I tell them to protect. Let them block the bullets. And I'll also create a barrier around us once we start our spells."

Rosei pointed his fan at Sakura and Itecho.

"Don't worry. I won't let anyone shoot Hina or either of you."

"...Rosei."

Had that gotten Sakura to rethink how she felt?

Rosei waited for her reply.

"Th-that's amazing, but...I wouldn't want these cute little things to break like that."

Now she was worried about the rabbits.

“...” Rosei gave her an exasperated look. “You idiot, they mean nothing compared to your life...”

“But they’re so cute... Why’d you have to make them so cute...?”

Sakura adored all things cute, as seen when she’d been charmed by all the critters in the Summer villa. It hurt her to think about the ice bunnies being destroyed for her sake.

“What, so it’d be fine if they’re not cute? I’ll make them cubes, then... You’re so high-maintenance.”

“No, wait, these are good.”

“Make up your mind already!”

“Sakura, come and wait over here with me,” Itecho called.

“...Itecho...,” Sakura murmured. “Okay, then. Rosei, take care of Lady Hinagiku... If you ever need to, undo my barrier and use all of that power on her. Got it?”

At Itecho’s insistence, Sakura finally left Hinagiku. The ice bunnies bounced after them.

Sakura didn’t complain after that; perhaps the bunnies had calmed her down a bit.

Rosei felt a wave of relief as the gloomy mood dissipated. “Hina, when you’re ready...”

He looked at Hinagiku but stopped midsentence. She wasn’t smiling.

“Lord Rosei... You’re...amazing.”

Where had her earlier bravery gone? The Agent of Spring was back to being her usual timid self.

“Hinagiku...needs...to train...more... Hinagiku needs...more power...to protect...everyone...”

Rosei gave a wry smile at that. So she was bummed out at the difference in their skills.

The girl who’d destroyed New Year’s hideout to escape had nothing to be

envious about. Rosei was simply good at doing delicate tasks; as fellow Agents, they should have about the same amount of power.

“Hina, look...,” Rosei said to her kindly. “I’m not as amazing as I made Sakura believe. They may come in handy for protection now, but that’s not why I practiced making them at first.”

“Hmm...?”

“I tried making things other than flowers to show you when you came back. I did it because I remembered how much you liked the snow bunny I made you... It was for you.”

“...”

“The shape didn’t take long to get right. Still...I wanted to really impress you. I didn’t want you to think I’d been slacking off while you were gone... It was sort of childish...but I thought it’d be really cool if they moved...so I worked really hard at it, and that’s how it ended up.”

“Lord Rosei...”

“It’s not amazing. To me, they’re symbol of my loneliness.” Rosei sounded embarrassed as he criticized himself. “You seem to think there was some awe-inspiring training or lofty belief, but there isn’t.”

But Hinagiku responded immediately.

“It is...awe-inspiring.”

Rosei raised his gaze to look at Hinagiku.

“It’s...the result...of your...hard work. And now...you’re...using it...to...protect us.”

Hinagiku’s eyes shone brightly, like stars.

“It’s super...super...cool...”

She looked like she truly believed that.

Rosei silently hid his face behind his fan.

“Lord Rosei?”

“Umm, thank you... I’m glad to hear that.”

“Why...are you...hiding...your face?”

“...I don’t want you to see it right now.”

*The girl I like said I was cool.*

How could he not be happy about that?

*Now I feel like I could do anything.*

Rosei had to force himself to stop smiling and put on a serious face.

Sakura and Itecho looked on with suspicion.

“All right, let’s do this!”

“Okay...!”

Hinagiku and Rosei took a few steps away from each other and held up their fans.

The song and dance they were about to perform was shared by Spring and Winter. Among the ancestral songs of the four seasons, there were many about the love between Spring and Winter.

With it, they could fight together, even with the long empty period in their relationship.

Hinagiku began the song.

“Cherry blossoms, plum blossoms, peach blossoms, open; bloom even in dreams and may you reach him.”

Hinagiku’s sweet voice resonated. Rosei sang in reply.

“I shan’t lament the wait, even in an eternity of the same dream.”

The first verse done, they looked each other in the face and began to dance in step.

From there, they chanted in unison.

““A touch will break you, a touch will melt you, for I love you.””

Grass and flowers bloomed on the ground they danced on, responding to their song. Ice pillars emerged in the air, as if to guard their retainers.

The sun was high in the sky, but snowflakes started to fall—a beautiful harmony of Winter and Spring.

““Wherefore art thou Spring? Wherefore art thou Winter?””

Hinagiku glanced at her enemies, and wherever her citrine eyes rested, the ground bloomed with lilies that wrapped around their faces and robbed them of their vision.

““Still we have one meeting place—in dreams.””

Strong hollyhocks reached out from the ground, grabbing the Doyen Turtle combatants and lifting them up into the air.

They tried to fire their guns blindly, but Rosei had anticipated that.

““Cherry blossoms, plum blossoms, peach blossoms, open; freeze clouds, sky, and moon for the two of us.””

He felt Hinagiku's divine power through the leylines and followed them to freeze the area.

Flowers bloomed out of season, snow fell, and breaths froze.

““Bloom even in dreams and may it reach you—the dream of Spring and Winter.””

Prisons of flowers in ice formed one after the other.



Spring and Winter avoided their allies and confined their enemies, giving birth to the most beautiful hell on earth here on Mount Ryugu.

Doyen Turtle's squad let out muffled screams. They wouldn't escape from this unscathed, but at least none of them would die. Spring and Winter had only used the absolute minimum amount of force necessary in casting such a precise spell.

Even though they had been expecting it, the members of Porcupine exclaimed in astonishment as the magical attack swept in from behind the shoot-out.

Some of them screamed at seeing bullets frozen in the air heading toward them.

"The gods are terrifying..." one of them whispered, paralyzed by fear.

These two were heavily guarded, but this was what they could do to their foes.

Neither Hinagiku nor Rosei heard the whispered remark.

Meanwhile, in Ryugu Shrine, Renri Rouo was in disarray, faced by an endless barrage of incoming reports.

"The Agents of the Four Seasons are here *and* they're helping Porcupine fight Doyen Turtle?"

The first message had come from one of their comrades who'd come across the Agents of the Four Seasons while waiting in the parking lot.

"W-wait. Ruri and Ayame are? ...They're supposed to stay back with the Lord Archer. They're going up the mountain for the ritual? Why?! And they're looking for the Dark Wolf? S-stop them! Tell them we have Eken Fugeki with us!"

Then it was their scout watching over the Archer and Summer.

Both groups had acted against their expectations.

It wasn't that Renri and Raicho lacked foresight—they just couldn't know the whims of the gods incarnate.

Up until the spring of Reimei 20, unless something happened that they were strongly against, all Agents of the Four Seasons had followed instructions, accepted their limitations, and remained under protection.

Had this incident happened in spring, the Agents would most likely have followed the Agency's and Towns' orders to remain somewhere safe and wait for the storm to pass. Such was the life of the Agents of the Four Seasons.

However, that battle had changed them.

It was better to take the lead than to remain passive. They couldn't escape violence simply by enduring it.

They had switched to an active defense approach and learned to come together to protect themselves and their brethren. Unity bred courage.

And everyone on the mountain had been strung along as a result of that courage.

Eken noticed the confusion of Renri and the Kimikage guards and asked:  
“A-are things looking bad...?”

Renri grumbled an answer.

“It's not good, that's for sure. Raicho did everything he could to keep the gods incarnate away from danger. We wanted to solve things ourselves. And why are Spring, Autumn, and Winter here, too? When did they get here? Have they been here since the Lord Archer joined forces with Summer? That's too fast, though...”

“In any case, Master Rouo, we should withdraw for now.”

Renri was confused by the guard's suggestion. “But Raicho and the others are...”

“The young master is in battle, and we are unable to get in contact with him. I

imagine that Porcupine and the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons would be coming up the main entrance. They will most likely run straight into the middle of the young master's battle. That would be welcome support. A squad member has told us that the Lord Winter is leading the group, and he is famous for hunting insurgents. They shouldn't find themselves too much at risk... And leaving makes the most sense if we're going to hand over the boy."

Eken looked down awkwardly as everyone's eyes turned to him.

"The plan was to stay here longer, but the situation has changed. The Lord Archer will hurry to us once he hears about the boy. We have a duty to withdraw with the intel."

"...You're right. This is an easy spot for people to run to if they're trying to escape the battle, and everything should work out if we pack up here and head to the path the Lord Archer's following... The way things are now, there's also a good chance we'd meet someone who can help Eken, seeing as there's so many adults on the mountain. That's not a bad idea... What do you think, Eken? Would you come with us...?"

Eken raised his head apologetically. "I... I'll surrender."

"No, that's not what I'm saying..."

"I'll go to prison..."

"D-don't think so negatively. You're just going back to your guardian, Lord Kaguya. We haven't gotten a response yet, but I'll back you up... Ah, wait. That should be it now. It's from the Kimikage family guys with the Lord Archer."

Renri was getting a call on his phone, not on the radio.

"This is Rouo..."

The next moment, Kaguya let out a voice close to a scream. "*Eken?!*"

Renri squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, pulling the phone away from his ear. It was so loud, he thought his eardrum might've taken some damage.

*"Eken! Are you there? Let me hear your voice! Eken!"*

Renri collected himself to reply. "I-is this the Lord Archer?"

*“Yes! You’ve got Eken under your protection? Put him on the phone! Eken!”*

Renri immediately passed the phone to the boy.

But the boy went white as a sheet.

“R-Renri... Is Lord Kaguya...s-super mad...?”

“I think he’s just worried. Answer him, Eken.”

“But I...”

He was scared. Renri saw the faint images of a ghostly woman and a huge wolf appear behind Eken, so he quickly decided to mediate and held the phone back up to his ear.

“Lord Archer! Eken is quite unstable right now. I’m sure you have much to talk about, but could you please promise not to get mad at him? His powers... If they get out of control... Well, they almost are already...”

Kaguya realized what Renri was trying to say and apologized.

*“...Sorry! I just wanted to make sure he was all right... Is it that bad? Is he hurt? Could you ask him if he’s been eating properly?”*

“Oh, you have nothing to worry about on that front. He has no significant injuries, and we just gave him a meal.”

“Thank you... I really appreciate it...”

He sounded relieved. Renri silently switched to speaker phone.

Kaguya’s worried voice finally reached the young boy afraid of rejection.

*“In any case, I want to see him... I’m sure I’m at least partly to blame for all this. I want us to sit down and have a conversation. Could you please tell him...?”*

Renri was sure Eken would understand, even as confused as he was, if he could just hear it himself.

*“Tell him to come back home...”*

That his lord was truly worried sick for him.

Eken couldn't stand it anymore and leaned toward the phone.

"Lord...Kagu...yaaa...!" His voice was full of tears.

Renri could hear Kaguya swallow a lump in his throat.

*"Eken? Eken, is that you?"*

"Lord Kaguya... I'm...I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

*"Eken...!"*

"I'm really sorry... I thought... I thought you hated me...!"

*"Are you okay? Does anything hurt?"*

"I'm okay... But, Tohko... Lord Kaguya, I..." Eken couldn't speak properly through his tears.

*"You know where she is, too? No, that doesn't matter. For now, I'm just glad you're okay... Listen, I'm coming to you. Please come back... Come back home, Eken."*

"...Lord Kaguya... Lord Kaguya..."

Renri couldn't just sit there and watch in silence, so he spoke up.

"Lord Archer, Eken has given us the broad strokes of what happened, and there is good reason as to why he became the Dark Wolf and attacked you. You might not be able to accept it simply as a child's mistake...but he *is* just a kid. And someone's been manipulating him..."

*"...!"*

"It's likely that problems will arise between you and the Fugeki clan once you hear him out. In any case...if possible...I hope you can welcome him with open arms. Otherwise, his powers... Well, he's been rather unstable, and that's what caused him to attack you..."

*"I understand... I don't have to worry about Eken and his powers for now, knowing he willingly talked to the people protecting him. If you could please do*

*me one favor—he cries very easily, so can you keep him calm and bring him to me?”*

“Of course. We’re currently in Ryugu Shrine and plan to move to the Archer’s trail to meet up with you. Could you please inform your security team?”

“Will do. You know the way?”

“I know it’s confidential, but yes.”

*“It’s fine. I’ve got to do the ritual, so I’ll keep going up the mountain. We’ll either get there at pretty much the same time, or you’ll have to wait a bit for me. Sorry for the trouble... Take care of Eken...!”*

“Yes, sir!”

And with that, Kaguya hung up. Renri caressed the crying boy’s head, then realized he’d forgotten something of vital importance.

“...Should I have...asked him to tell Ayame I’m here...?”

Renri looked at the Kimikage guards, but they all shrugged. Clearly, they didn’t want to get dragged into the couple’s problems.

*I don’t think we’ll be able to reconcile like this.*

He couldn’t imagine what Ayame would think if she saw this. It was highly likely that she would get mad at him for going off and doing things behind her back. Even if they could clear the girls’ names, if Ayame ended up hating him, then he’d have lost everything.

“...”

“Renri, are you okay...?”

Eken had stopped crying when he saw the man who’d been consoling him turn pale.

Renri forced a smile.

*This is no time to be thinking about yourself. Focus on Eken.*

The Archer of Twilight himself had asked Renri to protect the boy. He had to see him safely back home.

“...Let’s go.”

And with that, Renri, Eken, and the rest left Ryugu Shrine.

Meanwhile, back with Raicho’s team, the battle was still going. There were also a few veterans on Doyen Turtle’s side, as expected, and his allies were pushed back and knocked down while Raicho fought Unami.

*I gotta take him out quick.*

Raicho’s thoughts had been overtaken by panic and rage. A foe he normally would have slammed to the ground by now was still standing.

“Kimikage!”

His concentration snapped back to the battle as he heard Unami call his name.

“Your men are dropping like flies!”

The man’s tone rubbed him the wrong way, and Raicho yelled back at him.

“You’re just forcing them back with sheer numbers!”

It was a summer afternoon, and they were fighting on the side of a mountain. Although they were both from the Town of Summer, that didn’t give them any sort of special tolerance to the heat. Sweat flew with every swing.

*Damn monster!*

Raicho wasn’t losing. Victory wasn’t out of sight.

*Is he on drugs or something?!*

The man was just too tough. Every blow bounced right off him.

Electric shocks didn’t affect him. He was absurdly stubborn, as if his body just wouldn’t listen to reason. His huge frame gave him a simple, effective advantage.

But Raicho wasn’t going to lose. The accumulated damage of his tonfa strikes seemed to be weighing on Unami. His movements were losing their edge.

*I’ll kill you.*

Raicho couldn't hold his emotions in. He swung his tonfa faster, and Unami was forced to defend, blocking with his knife.

*You're not gonna be getting back up after this.*

It was time, now that Unami's reflexes had slowed.

While striking with the tonfa, Raicho repeatedly kicked out his long legs to break Unami's stance.

He swung his weapon one more time to knock Unami out.

The blow had enough force to crack a skull, but the other man swiftly dodged to the side. At the same time, he kicked out his leg to try and trap Raicho.

Raicho quickly held his tonfa back up and hit Unami with an electric shock.

*I'll kill you!*

He aimed for the moment Unami was unable to move and smashed him in the face with his tonfa.

Raicho heard the sound of bones breaking—it wasn't Unami's face, though, but his arm.

“Tch!”

Unami had guarded himself the second before it hit. Raicho clicked his tongue and swung the tonfa downward again. His foe tried to protect his head with his broken arm, but he cried out in pain. He was under Raicho's control now. No further violence was needed, and yet Raicho didn't stop.

“Move! Your! Arm!” He swung his tonfa down over and over again. “Move it!”

Soon, Unami couldn't use his arm anymore. It fell limp—exposing both his face and his mortal terror.

“Now die, for Ruri's sake...!”

The words came from the bottom of his soul, but the voice didn't sound like his.

Raicho knew it was him talking, but he felt like his real self was somewhere else far away, somewhere justice didn't exist, and that he was only watching on from the sidelines.

*Am I going crazy?*

Still, he didn't care. He could kill this man.

"It's okay to kill people who are abnormal, right?" Raicho taunted.

This man in front of him was evil.

"Well, from my point of view, *you're* abnormal."

So it didn't matter.

"If you don't care what kind of girl she is, or how much her family loves her, or that she's my fiancée, then I won't care, either."

*Ahhh, what am I saying?*

"You make me sick. You bad guys are all the same. You never care about others, only yourselves. I was trying to talk things through with you. But *you* were the one who refused!"

"Wait! Wait, Kimikage!" Unami showed his intent to surrender. "You'll dishonor your name if you kill me!"

"Huh...?" Raicho's voice was filled with anger.

"What's your job here right now? You're not a Guard of the Four Seasons. You won't get away with it if you kill me! Are you really fine with that?!"

"What about your crime of trying to replace the Agents?"

Unami shook his head. "I was only following orders. You were right, the Townchief is behind this! We haven't done anything to the Agents of Summer yet! You can still justify this fight as self-defense, but if you kill me, it's murder!"

Raicho had forgotten that he'd been trying not to kill anyone. The only thing on his mind had been getting rid of this man in front of him.

"...But if I let you live, you'll follow someone else's orders to kill Ruri, won't you...?"

"I won't! I swear!"

"Don't change your beliefs that easily..." Raicho gripped his tonfa tightly to strengthen his conviction. "You're making this harder..."

Then he moved his arm up behind him, building momentum to end this all in one strike.

“Kimikage, stop...”

*My head's all fuzzy.*

He wanted to rid himself of this disgusting sensation right now. He wanted peace of mind.

Raicho didn't know it, but it was his mind, not his body, that he'd pushed too far.

He'd been running and running this whole time, to protect his Summer.

*I want it to end.*

“Just shut your mouth.”

He wanted this to be over so he could regain his peace of mind for the first time in months.

*Ruri.*

“Die already!”

*Ruri.*

Back to a time when nobody was being harmed, killed, or humiliated.

*I don't care about anything so long as I can protect Ruri.*

He'd worked hard for a future like that.

That was how Raicho justified his violence. Because he wanted to be at peace.

Raicho would take one man's life for the sake of the woman he loved.

“Both sides, put down your weapons!!”

But then he heard a woman's graceful voice.

“...!”

It wasn't just Raicho—everyone around him froze.

The air turned cold, and the smell of flowers wafted over them. By the time they noticed, they were already caught in the attack. Their feet were frozen, and their arms held in place by ivy. The spell had hit them like a flash; it had all happened in the blink of an eye.

"...Damn it!"

The surprise made Raicho lose his balance for a moment, but he stood firm. He gripped his tonfa tightly so he wouldn't lose it.

"Put down your weapons! Spring and Winter will take it from here!"

The clear warning came from the Guard of Spring, Sakura Himedaka.

"You are in the presence of the venerated Agents of the Four Seasons! Come along quietly and surrender, members of Doyen Turtle!"

Both Doyen Turtle and Maverick Rabbit Horn looked around, searching for the gods incarnate.

National Security's special forces had covered their line of sight, and beside them were the members of Maverick Rabbit Horn assigned to the Agents. They frowned at seeing their wounded colleagues.

In the middle of that oppressive aura, protectively surrounded by the guards, were two figures: A graceful young woman like the living embodiment of spring, and a handsome young man with the icy glare of winter.

Some followed Sakura's order to throw away their weapons, but not all.

Guard of Winter Itecho Kangetsu stood by her side, surveying the scene.

"The Four Seasons Alliance has gathered to stop the replacement of Summer! We've arrested a dozen of you already! Do not resist in vain!"

Itecho's loud roar pushed them over the edge of surrender.

Already restrained, almost all of the people dropped their guns and knives.

The presence of the famous insurgent hunter, the king of winter, must have also aided in pressuring them. Who knew what he could do if they showed signs of resistance?

“...Let...me...GOOOOO!”

Only Raicho ignored the order. All the muscles in his body tensed in an attempt to tear away the ivy and bring his weapon down. His arm would break before the ivy did, however.

*I'll kill him! I'll kill him! I'll kill him!*

Raicho's eyes turned bloodshot as he went for one final attack on Unami.

“Stop...it!!”

The scream had come from Goddess of Spring Hinagiku Kayo. Surprisingly, Raicho reacted to it.

It could have been because it was the voice of a weak girl around Ruri's age, but he raised his head.

“No...violence!”

The flower seeds that left her hand grew at an imperceptible speed.

Vivid-blue bellflowers stretched like snakes to wrap around Raicho.

The blue filled Raicho's eyes, which had been blinded by his desire to kill this man.

*Ruri.*

The bellflowers constricted his hand holding the tonfa, robbing him of his ability to wield his weapon, then coiled around his legs, forcing him to his knees. Raicho toppled onto the bed of bellflowers that had grown almost immediately.

He hit his face as he fell, and the taste of blood spread through his mouth. Fortunately, the flowers dampened the hit, but a dull pain raced throughout his body.

“...Hah... Hrgh...”

It took him a moment to understand what had happened.

“...Haah, haah.”

His breathing was heavy, and his vision was shaky. He'd gotten too worked

up.

“...Haah... Haah...”

Blue flickered in his wavering vision.

“Haah... Haah... Haah...”

Raicho liked the color blue. Ruri’s color. It reminded him of her and of how much she loved blue flowers.

“...Haah, haah...”

Just seeing the color of the flowers caused a tightness in his chest that brought him near tears.

There was only one cause for him losing all reason.

He had plenty of experience hurting others and being hurt...

*Ruri.*

...but not of fighting for his beloved with his life on the line.

“Lady Hinagiku! Keep a safe distance away! I’ll go on ahead!”

“Rosei! Stay with Lady Hinagiku! Don’t get too close!”

Sakura and Itecho left the Agents inside the security web and set foot into the battlefield strewn with bodies. They walked carefully so as to not step on the people collapsed on the ground.

“I am Guard of Spring Sakura Himedaka! Is there a Mr. Raicho Kimikage here?”

“I’m Guard of Winter Itecho Kangetsu. We’ve come here in the name of the Four Seasons Alliance! We hear that Lady Ruri Hazakura’s fiancé is the captain of the Maverick Rabbit Horn squad! If you’re all right, please answer!”

*Ruri.*

Raicho was able to breathe again. "...That's me," he said.

He surprised himself at how quietly the words came out.

Raicho scolded himself and raised his voice as loudly as he could. "I am Raicho Kimikage!"

Two sets of footsteps approached. The Guards must have signaled Hinagiku and Rosei, because the vines' hold on him grew weaker and turned him around, allowing him to see the faces of the approaching pair.

"You? This was reckless..."

The man who helped him up was so handsome that just seeing him this close-up would make anyone's heart race.

"...Itecho, look at his eyes... Is he okay? Can he even talk...?"

Staring down at him was a beautiful girl who looked like a princess.

This was Raicho's first meeting with the people who were supposed to become his colleagues.

"As I said before, I am the Guard of Spring, and he is Winter's."

"Guard of Winter Itecho Kanetsu. Nice to meet you."

"Ah... Ruri has...told me...about you..."

"...So your memory seems to be working... Look here. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"Two. I think the rush from the fight made you a little crazy..."

Sakura had casually criticized him.

Raicho wanted to protest, but his head was oddly fuzzy, and the words wouldn't come out. In the end, only a simple question got through.

"Is that how I look...? Crazy...?"

"Your eyes are out of focus. Is this your first fight?"

“No... Not at all. I’m strong, really... I have a lot...of experience...”

“Maybe you’re strong, but you’re not calm. You could’ve gone for his legs, but instead you were punching him in the face, like a bloodthirsty killer. And you’re a Guard candidate?”

“...Legs.”

Raicho was baffled; he hadn’t thought of that. He’d only been thinking of breaking the other guy’s skull.

Itecho took over.

“Can I call you Raicho? There were other people fighting here as well, so you should’ve knocked out as many people as possible to provide support to your teammates rather than fixating on a single person. Keep in mind, you’ll often be fighting even larger groups when going up against insurgents.”

“He’s right. If you don’t have a gun in a fight against multiple foes, then aim for their legs. With strikes to the torso, people tend to get back up no matter how hard you hit them.”

“The way you use your tonfa is novel, and those were some impressive moves. You have the combat talent; you just need to keep your cool. Don’t be discouraged.”

Hearing the two of them critique his fighting style when they’d only just met, Raicho was even more confused about how to react.

“...Sir, Ma’am... I really appreciate the incredibly calm...and accurate advice... but I have to kill him... Unami... He’s going to kill Ruri...”

“What...? Who said that about Lady Ruri?” Sakura asked.

Raicho answered with a gesture of his head. “The big guy over there...”

Unami was still conscious, flailing his legs in resistance against Porcupine tying him up.

“He called Ruri...my Ruri...a zombie... That bastard. Could you set me free? I need to kill him... I can’t let him escape... He said Ruri’s abnormal...”

Sakura and Itecho looked at each other and frowned.

“Calling our country’s Summer a zombie is beyond vulgar...,” said Itecho.

“You got that right. That would get anyone riled up,” Sakura replied.

She walked briskly over to the raging Unami, then swung her sword, still in its sheath, down at him.

“...Hngh!!”

Unami let out a muffled yelp as Sakura attacked a man’s most vital spot with enough force to crush it. She hit his shin, too, for good measure.

“Aaaaaahh!”

It was an excellent demonstration of the advice she’d give Raicho: Go for the legs.

“Rosei!” Sakura called out. “This guy’s too heavy to carry around, so freeze the path all the way to the parking lot! That should make things easier for Porcupine!”

When the man was already helpless to resist, that order was inhumane.

Only Hinagiku seemed upset; Rosei just smiled cruelly and gave a thumbs-up. After he gave her his confirmation, Sakura turned to look at the Porcupine members trying to tie Unami up.

“Apologies. Seeing as we’re already on a slope and carrying this guy’s huge body will be a pain, the Agent of Winter will freeze the path, and you can drag him down the mountain like a sled. Do the same for anyone else who won’t cooperate. We’ll leave the rest to you all.”

After giving the troops their instructions, Sakura returned to Raicho and Itecho.

“There. That should shut him up,” she told them.

Raicho looked shocked, and Itecho gave her a wry smile.

Sakura pouted at his reaction. “...What, Itecho? Weren’t you the one who once told me that’s what you do against men...? Th-that’s their weak point...”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You looked like you wanted to!”

"Targeting the vitals is one of the fundamentals of combat. It was fair punishment."

"...You don't find it improper?"

"No. But I do believe I said you should only do that *in the worst-case scenario...*"

Sakura pouted harder, and Itecho chuckled.

"I'm not criticizing you; I would've done it if you hadn't. Who knows? I might've even done something worse."

"Yeah, true. You're more savage than me, Itecho. Guess we're all good."

It was hard to call that *good*, but Sakura changed the topic.

"Hey, newbie. My lady and the Agent of Winter ordered that no one should die here. That guy's already been humiliated by letting him live, so suck it up and let the law take care of the rest."

Raicho was taken aback for a moment, but he soon made a face that looked much more like his usual self.

A ferocious yet friendly smile.

"Sir, Ma'am...you're incredible..."

Itecho helped him up. It was only then that Raicho could see clearly what he had done. The young men of the branch family were laid out on the ground, some of them bleeding.

*I failed?*

He finally realized. He'd used the people who shared his will as expendable pawns.

Raicho felt his gaze inexplicably drawn toward the alluring couple standing far away.

*Lady Spring and Lord Winter.*

Rosei was already freezing the way with Life Coagulation.

Hinagiku looked at the dreadful battlefield, pale in the face yet standing

strong.

*That's the girl Ruri said was her first friend close to her age.*

She was here, and for one reason only: concern for the Hazakura sisters.

And she had yelled at him. Told him violence was wrong.

Most of her life had been controlled by violence.

He'd forced her to stop him from recklessly attacking.

*I'm the worst.*

Raicho couldn't look at Hinagiku anymore. He turned away.

"...You shouldn't have been able to get in touch with Ruri or Ayame...yet you came."

"How did you know? We came here *because* we couldn't get in touch with them."

"...Ruri wasn't all by herself, huh...?"

"Of course not," Sakura said. "We formed an alliance all the way back in spring. Raicho Kimikage, there's a lot I want to ask you. I consider you to be on our side, but you've also caused a lot of trouble. Mind following us peacefully?"

"...Maybe I should've asked for help from the beginning..." Raicho said, pursing his lips.

Sakura furrowed her brow, and Itecho took over, his voice a whisper.

"We'll let you meet Lady Ruri later on if you come quietly. You probably did all of this for her, didn't you?"

"...Do you think it's stupid?"

Itecho remembered the time he'd gone back and forth all across the capital of Yamato on a bike.

"Who can say? I do stupid things myself sometimes, too."

Raicho looked at him in disbelief.

"What's important is what you do after."

Itecho's words sank deeply into Raicho's chest.

He could feel that the Guard wasn't being dismissive of what Raicho had done; he understood it.

He fell in love. He chased after it.

He lost it. He obsessed over it.

He plotted so he would never lose it again.

He dragged so many people with him.

He went on a rampage. And then...

“...”

He simply wanted to see his goddess, his sweetheart, as soon as possible.

*Ruri.*

She would probably—no, *definitely* get mad at him.

But if she was the woman he knew her to be, she would still love him afterward.

Maybe he was delusional. But in his eyes, there was nobody more loving than Ruri Hazakura.

She was the only one who could love him; he wasn't good at being loved head-on.

*I want to see you.*

After a moment, Raicho agreed to obey the Guards, then asked them to do something for him.

“In the mountain...there's a friend I dragged here with me, hiding. Could you make sure he's safe? He's Ruri's sister...Ayame's loved one.”

So ended Raicho Kimikage's long journey.

The scene shifts there to Renri's side.

Renri ran alongside Eken and the Kimikage bodyguards toward the Archer's trail.

Their pace wasn't terribly swift, however, as they had to carry all sorts of equipment.

"Ah, more to the right. That path over there is dangerous!"

"Thank goodness you're with us, Eken..."

"These animal trails must be hard to travel for city folk."

"The Town isn't really a city... But I do think...I need...to do a bit more exercise..."

Renri was running out of breath.

A young sixteen-year-old boy. Hand-picked, elite warriors of the Kimikage clan who'd honed their bodies. And a doctor who worked behind a desk.

Renri was sure he had the least stamina of all of them.

*This is embarrassing.*

He was going to meet Ayame, but he was completely exhausted. Renri had had abuse heaped on him by family, gone on a sudden trip to Ryugu, spent the whole night setting up trail cameras, camped out, and now this. His body was at its limit.

"Renri, you're the Lady Summer's fiancé, right? Will you be her Guard?"

"...I think she'd be in trouble if someone like me was her Guard... You see, I was originally going to be the Guard's husband..."

"Oh, right... I see. Sorry..."

"No, don't be. The situation's just that complicated."

"If everything works out all right, would you go back to being engaged...?"

“...A physician can’t be a Guard, so I wonder. Ahhh...I can’t feel my legs.”

Eken stopped talking after that. It seemed like Renri didn’t really want to talk much on the topic. They kept running and running through the mountain.

Renri stubbornly kept up with everyone’s pace.

He wanted to have no regrets, to know that he’d done what he could to the very end.

*I guess someone like me really can’t be Ayame’s husband.*

He could tell after spending time with Raicho and the Kimikage men—he was powerless.

It had also shown him how violent Ayame’s world was.

*What she needs is a warrior like Raicho.*

It hurt to admit, but it was true. He wanted to think there was something he could do for her, but Renri couldn’t find any reason to justify staying by Ayame’s side.

*Are Raicho and the rest okay?*

Renri was following orders, but he still couldn’t help but think about those he’d left behind.

And naturally, his mind raced with thoughts that things might’ve turned out differently if he was strong.

“Umm... You see the bird following us?” Eken murmured, and Renri’s thoughts snapped back from the gloomy depths of his mind.

He saw a bird flying toward them.

It circled above his head, then perched on his shoulder. If this was a simple hike, it would’ve been a heartwarming sight. However, Renri was from the Town of Summer.

“It must be under the control of Life Operation.”

Even when he went to touch it, the bird stayed put, but it was a reaction that couldn’t be explained as a simple familiarity with people. Renri, Eken, and the Kimikage men stopped all at once.

“The power of the Lady Summer?”

“Yes, I think they’re trying to find us. Look, there’s more birds overhead. They’ll probably fly back to tell the girls.”

Just as Renri had suggested, the birds circled around overhead as though signaling someone before leaving.

“Looks like we’ll be meeting them soon, then.”

“Yeah, and they’ll find out about me... Huh...?”

Suddenly, the birds returned with incredible haste and began crying out an alert.

*Shouldn’t they only be able to use those birds for surveying and reporting back?*

The Agents of Summer could use Life Operation to automatically attack those they set as enemies, but the variety of instructions they could give was limited when they weren’t there. Renri felt something was wrong, seeing the birds screech like that.

Animals alerted their group when they sensed danger.

Renri guessed this was such a situation.

And if that was the case, then their message was:

“Run. A predator is coming.”

He felt shivers run down his spine.

“Enemy incoming!!”

A gunshot echoed around them before he could finish talking.

Renri pushed Eken to the ground, then threw himself down as well.

The Kimikage men acted quickly. They noticed remnants of Doyen Turtle behind them and fired back swiftly. They couldn’t see their enemies behind the trees, but the terrain didn’t allow for a large group to pursue them.

There probably weren’t that many of them.

“Eken, I’ll get their attention. You run.”

Renri heard the voice of a woman among the chaos. He and Eken both raised their heads from their positions on the ground to see the phantom of Tohko Fugeki. Eken's power had activated automatically under the pressure.

"N-no, Tohko, don't...!"

Eken was out of sorts. A chill ran through Renri. The mirage was so lifelike.

Just the idea that she was moving on her own was terrifying.

"I won't die even if they shoot me."

"I don't want to see you get hurt ever again!" Eken cried out.

But Tohko just sighed and shrugged. "Then you should bring out something stronger. All I can do is let them shoot me."

Then Tohko disappeared like a heat haze.

Eken held his head in his hands, his face pale.

"Don't push yourself, Eken! Let's wait for backup!"

Without his rage, all Eken had left to handle this situation was fear.

"Mr. Rouo! Take him and go!" said one of the Kimikage guards, but the question of where they could run to remained. Were they supposed to crawl away? There was no time to ask.

"No! Let's get Eken out of here first! He knows the way! He can get us backup! Eken, you know which way to run?!"

"I..."

Renri slapped Eken's back in encouragement. Then he grabbed the gun Raicho had given him.

"Take off the safety... Damn... My hands are shaking..."

He couldn't stop himself from trembling as he adjusted his posture to hold the gun.

"Eken, please! Get to the Lord Archer and tell them not to come near us! If possible, get Porcupine and his Secret Service to come back us up! I'm sure the birds already told them about it, so you should find them soon! Just run! Don't

let Ayame and Ruri get close!"

With shaking hands, Renri moved the bird that had curled up on his shoulder to his finger and handed it to Eken.

"Go!"

It was a simple order, but the force behind it made it impossible not to follow.

Eken stared at the man before his eyes and thought:

*No.*

He sincerely wished that this kind man wouldn't die.

*I don't want you to die.*

Something terrible could happen while he was gone.

Why hadn't he done something back then? If he had, then maybe...

The regret tormented him.

*I don't want anyone to suffer again.*

Eken had always run.

He'd spent his whole life running.

Running from scary adults, from those who harmed him, from his circumstances.

He'd run and run and run.

At the end of all that, he'd found Renri, who was telling him to do it again:

"Run, Eken!!"

He reminded Eken of his beloved God of Twilight; the man tried to protect him simply because he was older.

Renri turned away from Eken and fired the gun. Eken had to follow his instructions and run.

But he couldn't run anymore. He didn't want to.

“No.”

As Eken whispered that, a gentle light like the moon’s flooded out of his body.

The next moment, the world went dark.

Day turned to night. A writhing noise emanated from the darkness.

Eken’s Divine Cloak had encroached upon their surroundings.

“Renri, you Kimikage men, Ladies Summer, Lord Kaguya—I will protect all of you.”

Night was Eken’s greatest ally.

The shooters paused, unable to tell friend from foe.

Eken’s eyes glowed like a beast’s in the dark.

Then a bigger eyeball appeared floating in the darkness behind him.

It quickly took the shape of a beast, transforming into a giant wolf baring its ferocious fangs.

The Dark Wolf that had plunged the gods incarnate society into chaos in summer had revealed itself.

*It’s huge!*

Renri gulped. He’d seen it before, but it was even bigger now than it had been back then.

Perhaps the size and ferocity of the wolf reflected the strength of Eken’s emotions.

“*Chase them away!!*” Eken roared. He spoke in human words, but his voice was layered as if there were multiple speakers, and it was far more intimidating than usual.

His power was granted by the gods, but Eken himself was not divine.

His power clearly differed from Ruri’s and Ayame’s Life Operation due to its instability.

*“Make them surrender! Force them to their knees!! Don’t let them get near!!”*

He needed extraordinary concentration to maintain the illusion.

Eken’s expression was strained, and controlling the Dark Wolf appeared to be painful for him.

It was too much for one person to handle, after all.

“Eken! Don’t kill them!”

Eken kept quiet but nodded in response.

The wolf ran freely through the woods.

Their enemies resumed shooting, but all the bullets went right through the Dark Wolf. Renri could only watch with bated breath from behind a tree.

The Dark Wolf mowed down everything in its path until it found an enemy, stomping on the man’s neck before unleashing a brutal kick.

*Is he gonna be all right?*

The scariest part of this power was the psychological burden after the illusion was undone.

The man probably *wouldn’t* be all right, but at least the wolf wasn’t chomping bits off and devouring him. The Dark Wolf kicked him away and sank its fangs into the edge of his clothes.

It spun around with the nimbleness of a grown man and took off again. It was unbelievable that none of this was actually happening; it wouldn’t be strange for some of those witnessing it to have a heart attack.

The Dark Wolf took down one person, then a second, and cornered the last one.

The man fell on his behind and crawled backward as the Dark Wolf bared its fangs at him and let out a howl. Frightened by the wolf’s cry, the one remaining enemy slowly put his gun down on the ground.

Eken’s bravery and determination had subjugated their three pursuers almost immediately.

“...Haah... Haah...”

The young boy was close to hyperventilating. Renri noticed immediately and stroked his back.

“Breathe slowly, Eken. You’ll only feel worse otherwise. Easy does it.”

It didn’t seem to be Eken’s first experience having trouble breathing like this. He covered his mouth and nodded painfully.

“It’s okay. You did great. That was amazing. You saved us...”

Renri surmised that Eken’s condition was a result of the adrenaline rush and emotional shock, so he spoke softly and kindly to try to calm the boy down. The Dark Wolf slowly began to dissipate as Eken’s emotions settled.

Soon, a sound rang out, and the illusion of night reverted to broad daylight.

The stunned Kimikage soldiers ran up to the last foe, and Renri looked over to see if they’d finished tying him up; the first two were already restrained. Renri and Eken stood up in a daze.

However, he noticed the last enemy soldier slowly moving his hand.

The Kimikage men had already picked up the gun he’d dropped.

He was trying to take another one out of his pocket.

*Ah!*

Renri’s reaction was instantaneous.

“Watch out!!”

He yelled as loudly as he could, then thrust out a hand to protect Eken’s back.

*Reach him.*

Everything moved in slow motion.

Why could he feel all his actions tick by from one instant to the next?

Renri was trying to save Eken, yet for some reason, Ayame’s face popped into his mind.

*Reach him.*

Renri prayed.

His outstretched hand made contact with Eken's back, and he tackled him.

He covered the boy with his own body.

A gunshot rang out.

The bullet tore his arm open.

Renri hurtled forward from the force of trying to cover Eken.

He had no idea how to break his fall, and he fell headfirst and hit his temple on the ground.

Renri felt Eken shifting beneath him.

He pushed the boy's head down, telling him not to move yet, as he swallowed back cries of pain.

*It hurts.*

His vision went dark in an instant.

He didn't cry out.

He couldn't.

*It hurts.*

Who would he tell it to?

Who did he want to scream to?

*It hurts. It hurts so bad.*

Renri shut his eyes from the pain. Everything was swallowed up by darkness.

In the darkness, Renri thought back on his life.

He was crying in his house. He'd been about seven at the time.

He was crying because his brother had torn his drawing apart.

He'd asked his mom to buy him the drawing paper.

He'd wanted to be free to draw whatever he wanted on that big canvas.

But his brother had told him not to waste time on that and to study instead.

Now he understood. The eldest son also had a hard time, being brought up to take over the family.

He'd bullied his carefree little brother in order to vent his frustrations. He had to become a doctor—he was a Rouo. Studying was best for Renri's sake, too. But he'd been too young to understand.

*Why do you say that?*

All he'd done was cry.

The memories flashed before his eyes.

Renri crouching in the entryway to the house, not allowed inside after getting bad grades.

Renri having his toy taken away, being told that idiots don't have time for toys.

Eventually, his little tears had dried out, and he'd started wearing a smile.

Getting upset only made them madder. They asked him to at least be affable, so that was what he did.

When he smiled, they looked down on him.

*Why do you say that?*

Because you're stupid. Because you're a failure. Because you've never known hardship.

They'd said all that to him. So Renri had decided to plaster the mask of a smile on his face while he sent his heart somewhere else. It was better to keep his heart locked away, since it only brought him pain. He couldn't let them know he played the part of the jester so he could survive the brunt of their attacks.

The bait kept them satisfied. These people had to affirm themselves by harming others. Renri had been born into such a family, so he had no other choice.

His family was glad to have him as their jester. Everyone wanted that.

If he could keep it up, then maybe they could love him.

*"You do that consciously, don't you? Putting yourself down..."*

*Why do you say that?*

*"I'm...not against it..."*

*Why do you say that?*

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

*Why do you say that?*

*“You don’t need to try so hard. I won’t hate you. I’ll be with you...forever.”*

*Why do you say that?*

*“You really don’t have to try. Because I... I would never hate you.”*

*Why do you say that?*

*“Not now, not ever.”*

*Why do you say that?*

*“Please believe me...”*

*Why do you say all that for me?*

Ayame, already you hate me, don’t you?

But I still love you.

I don't think you know why I love you this much.

It's okay if you never do. Just don't look at my misery.

“Renri!”

The young boy's voice brought Renri back.

Time began flowing again, and he coughed.

“...Gack...! Hah...!”

Eken had also fallen to the ground when Renri had tackled him, but now he'd gotten up and was looking down at Renri.

All emotion disappeared from his face.

In an instant, the Dark Wolf reappeared behind him.

The wolf jumped over Renri's head and made its way toward the man who'd fired the gun.

“*Eat him.*”

The Dark Wolf did as it had been told.

It chomped down on the head of the member of Doyen Turtle, and the noise of it chewing was loud and graphic.

Renri didn't see any of this, though. He was still facing the ground, so he could only hear the strange sound.

It must have been an indescribably horrific illusion. The Kimikage men silently watched the tragedy, and after a pause, one of them shouted in panic.

“What are you doing?! Seize him!”

The Dark Wolf disappeared again, surrounded by silence.

“...Eat him, eat him, eat him.”

The illusion was already gone, but Eken kept muttering the command over and over again, like a curse. Renri, still in pain on the ground, called out his name.

“E...ken.”

Hearing Renri’s voice, Eken finally came back to his senses.

The boy sat Renri up with trembling hands. His head and face were bruised all over. After the beating from his family and his face-first fall, he was a mess.

“Eken... What did you...do...?”

“I made the shooter pay... Renri, I’m sorry...”

“Are you okay...?”

“I’m fine. But you... I... What should I do...?”

“Is the enemy still there...? I can’t see from here... Well, my vision’s all fuzzy...”

“R-Renri... You’re dying... Renri...!”

“...I’m dying?”

He chuckled at Eken’s mistake.

“Ha... Ha-ha... I’m not dying...”

The laughter made his wound ache.

Eken was in disbelief. How could he laugh?

“Look, it just grazed my arm... I’m not gonna die from this...”

“You’re not? Really?”

“I’m...a doctor... Ergh, don’t make me laugh... It hurts...”

Renri was snickering.

The boy's words made him so happy. He felt bad for laughing when Eken was so serious, but he couldn't help himself.

He wouldn't have been able to do this if he hadn't laughed.

"I'm...a joke," Renri whispered, after laughing for a little while.

Between the two of them, Eken was the one who looked the saddest. "No, you're really, really cool... Why do you say that...?!" he said between sobs.

Those words shook Renri to his core.

"Don't say that... You're my hero, Renri..."

"Please... You're exaggerating..."

"It's true. You're my hero. I'll tell Lord Kaguya that you saved me...!"

Renri laughed again, this time out of pure happiness.

*A hero, huh?*

To think the jester would be called that!

It had paid off to show some courage. He felt like he'd been vindicated.

"Mr. Rouo! Are you okay?! Please, forgive our negligence!"

The Kimikage men had finished restraining their enemies and run up to Renri. They quickly took off his shirt and stopped his bleeding with a makeshift tourniquet.

"I'm okay... Did you tie up all our pursuers?"

"Yes. We just finished that now, so let's move on."

"Can you stand, Mr. Rouo?"

"I'll manage..."

Truthfully, it hurt so bad, Renri felt like his arm was getting torn off. Anything he did was painful. He'd never been shot before, so his body was in shock, and his arms and legs wouldn't stop trembling.

Still, he was determined to stand up.

He had to deliver this lost child, who'd called him his hero, back to his family.

Renri followed the birds flying overhead to go down the mountain.

They guided the group left and right, leading them onward.

They crossed the labyrinthine woods until they finally reached a well-worn path: the Archer's trail.

As they did, someone appeared.

The birds that had guided them all flew over to that person.

Notifying their masters, the users of Life Operation, of their return.

Telling her that they had brought the people she was looking for.

"No way... He's really here... Renri!"

Her voice reached Renri's ears.

It was the voice of the person he'd set out on this journey to protect.

"...Ayame?"

Renri had been looking down at the ground in pain, but he suddenly raised his eyes.

She must've come running after hearing the gunshot.

Ayame Hazakura.

And not only her.

A large group of people followed behind her.

Ayame must have taken the lead by herself out of concern after hearing the birds' report.

She was out of breath.

Renri thought she looked as beautiful as ever, but she also looked much more bedraggled than normal.

"...Ayame."

She ran up to him.

*Gah, I'm filthy.*

He hadn't bathed. Blood was dripping from his arm. His face was covered in tear tracks from the pain.

He'd finally reunited with his beloved. He didn't want her to see him like this.

"Renri! Why are you here...?! Are you okay?! The birds kept telling me you were here, but really, what were you doing...?!"

"...Ayame..."

"The same thing as Raicho...? Fighting on the mountain?"

"..."

"Renri, answer me...!"

"...Yeah. I did something stupid because I wanted to help you..."

Ayame gasped.

"But I really couldn't do anything..."

Eken overheard the conversation, and a barrage of emotions poured out of him.

"That's not true...," he said tearfully. "Lady Summer... I-I'm sorry... It's my fault Renri was shot... He shielded me..."

"They...shot him?"

"It's fine. I can walk... Eken, stop apologizing. You did nothing wrong. It was my choice."

He looked at Ayame as he spoke and could see an ocean of tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ayame... I know we're not engaged anymore... It's so stupid... I must be such a bother to you..."

"..."

"...Are you mad...?"

Ayame shook her head. "How could I be mad...?"

At that moment, Ayame's tears spilled over. She reached out to him.

"Ayame...?"

Her hand was shaking.

"Please...let me..." Ayame's voice was hoarse, and it escaped from in between sobs. "I... I'll...hold Renri up..."

Her hand hovered in the air before pulling Eken's arm, gesturing for them to swap places.

"No, I've got him. It's my fault he's like this..."

Eken declined with a grimace, insisting even as Ayame's torrent of tears continued.

But this was one thing she couldn't give up on.

"He's my fiancé. I'll help him..."

She didn't want Eken to get in her way. Renri was hers.

So she tearfully insisted.

"...Ayame..."

Those words made Renri happier than anything else could.

"I-I'll do it... I just wanna..."

Her voice had been full of determination at first, but now she sounded more like a stubborn kid.

Ayame must have been having a hard time sorting out her feelings as well.

Sadness, anger, and happiness were all blended together.

"Ayame... M-my arm's...bleeding... I'm filthy. I'll get stains all over your clothes..."

"You're not filthy... I'd never think of you that way..."

“But Eken’s already helping me...”

“I-it has to be me... I have to hold you up...or you’ll die... Unh... Hrnnn...”

“No, I mean, it hurts a lot...but I won’t die from this, so don’t worry.”

“B-but... No, I’ll do it... I have to do it...”

“No, I’m heavy. And look, I can move my fingers... My nerves are all right. See?”

Renri tried to explain that, while his injury was serious, it wouldn’t kill him. But Ayame wouldn’t listen and forced Eken to let her take Renri from him.

She was practically hugging him, but he carefully let her take his weight.

Under the hot summer sun, Renri’s body temperature rose even higher.

While that was going on, the Archer’s group, Summer, and Autumn arrived.

“Eken! Are you theeere?!”

Though somewhat belatedly, Kaguya also hurried toward them.

“L-Lord Kaguyaaa!” Eken replied, his voice hoarse.

Kaguya ran straight for the young boy and, without slowing, swept up Eken in a hug.

“You idiot!”

It was a yell, but the words were full of love.

Eken had never expected his master to hug him, and he cried even harder than earlier. Renri watched them with a deep sense of relief.

*Thank goodness. I’m so glad I could protect this kid.*

“...Lord Kaguya, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

“...Seriously, what were you doing...?! At least you’re okay!”

“I’m sorry... But, umm, Renri got sh-shot shielding me... I... I’m sorry... Really... It’s my fault... It’s all my fault... I’m sorry...!”

“He was shot?”

Kaguya let go of Eken and looked at Renri and Ayame.

“You’re the man who answered the phone?”

“Ah, yes... Erm, it’s an honor meeting you, Lord Archer... I...”

“Hang on. We better stop your bleeding first. Tsukihi! We have a wounded person! Get the first aid kit over here!”

Renri had a bit of a bad feeling.

*Isn’t this getting blown out of proportion?*

His hunch had been right; everyone else gathered around him and started fussing over his injury.

“Sis, step back for a sec.”

“But, Ruri... Renri’s...!”

“It’s okay! Lady Nadeshiko’s on the way! Lady Nadeshiko! Over here!”

“Lady Ayame! Is the wounded person here?!”

“Nadeshiko, check if you can use the leylines. There should be a lot on Mount Ryugu...”

Renri’s eyes darted left and right.

He was shocked to see the faces surrounding him.

*What in the world?*

He could guess who was who from what they were saying.

It went without saying that the girl who looked identical to Ayame was Agent of Summer Ruri Hazakura.

The youngest of them all, who kept a straight face even as she looked over him, was Agent of Autumn Nadeshiko Iwaizuki.

The handsome young man supporting her was Guard of Autumn Rindo Azami.

They were the elite of the elite, people who even descendants of the Four Seasons wouldn’t usually get to meet.

*Please don’t all gather for someone like me.*

His injury did hurt, but it wasn’t anything they needed to worry about *this*

much.

“Um... I’m okay.”

Renri smiled like it was nothing, but no one listened to him.

“Rindo, I got the leylines...”

“Can you also suck some from the Doyen Turtle men on the ground there, Nadeshiko?”

“Lady Nadeshiko, if you need life force, then you should use mine instead. I... You might find this a bit creepy...but the Archer can heal from wounds and illnesses almost immediately. I think that would be faster than using the leylines. And he ended up like this shielding my Custodian, so it should be me...”

Everyone ignored Renri, as if to say that the wounded should just shut up and let himself be attended to.

*No, really, I’m okay.*

“Are you sure? We can’t let you take all the burden, though, Lord Archer... Nadeshiko, are the leylines not enough?”

*I’m really okay.*

“No, they are. Lord Kaguya, you must stay healthy. Lady Ayame, would you allow me to take your lord fiancé’s hands?”

*I’m okay, really!*

Renri couldn’t stand it anymore, and a yell escaped his lips.

“St-stop!”

He spoke firmly, thinking that something outrageous might happen if he didn’t.

“You shouldn’t use a goddess’s power for this!!”

*For this, for this, for this...,* Renri’s voice echoed across the mountain.

“I can get this patched up at the hospital!”

Everyone looked at him with mouths agape.

“It’s against the law to use a god incarnate’s power so casually! The leylines’

power isn't unlimited! If you use it for healing me, you might affect the next season's manifestation in Ryugu! And the Lord Archer uses it every day! Are you trying to dry up the leylines?! Stop!"

Everyone surrounding Renri looked at one another. He was completely right.

But they all also looked worried about the blood he was losing.

"B-but I got treated..." Ruri remarked meekly.

"The situations and our standings are completely different! You're not healing every single wounded person here today, are you? I appreciate the sentiment, but no! I'm okay, really!"

"...Renri..." Ayame pleaded, but Renri still shook his head.

"I can walk down the mountain. Don't worry."

Nadeshiko looked at Rindo with a frown. Her Guard also furrowed his brow, giving her his advice.

"He is correct..." Rindo shifted his gaze to Renri.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm fine... I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused you... And, uh...I believe you'll want to interrogate us on what we did..."

"No, you need to go to the hospital first. Let's split up. We just got notice from Lord Kantsubaki saying they finished subduing the enemy over there, so they'll meet us here. The Lord Archer should also be safer that way. We'll send some of the members of Porcupine to help you down the mountain."

Tsukihi had been surveying their surroundings, but she suddenly chimed in.

"I'll send some of my forces, too. Lady Summer...I assume you'll wish to go down with him?"

Ayame's face was damp with tears.

"He is your fiancé, so please go with him if you want to. Will you be accompanying them?"

Tsukihi was only showing the normal amount of consideration given the circumstances, but Ayame hadn't expected it.

She was momentarily taken aback.

The word had come out naturally when she'd said it earlier, but in reality, they weren't engaged anymore.

Renri was her ex-fiancé.

"...Yes."

Ayame responded while Renri was still lost in thought.

"Yes, yes... I want to stay with him..."

They weren't in a relationship anymore, yet Ayame nodded over and over again.

"Ayame..."

Tsukihi smiled softly at the sight of the couple.

"In that case, before you go, we should treat him with first aid. Lord Kaguya, my troops are watching our surroundings for enemies, so could you please wait with the Agents?"

"Sure. I... I'll have a talk with Eken... He's crying so much, I'm worried about him hyperventilating. I'll try to get him to calm down..."

Kaguya pulled Eken away.

Soon, Spring and Winter joined the group.

Rosei said that Porcupine was interrogating Raicho, so Ruri joined in going down the mountain.

In the end, Spring and Winter took over guarding the Archer.

Summer's protection also looked after Autumn, and they went down the mountain together.

Ruri and Ayame apologized to Kaguya for not staying with him up until the end, but he'd already completed his objective anyway. Not to mention, he'd found Eken again, thanks to their fiancés, so he had nothing but gratitude for the twins.

Kaguya was dumbfounded by Eken's confession, but even so, he didn't think

to stop climbing Mount Ryugu. As he parted with the group heading back down the mountain, he called out after them.

*“Watch your step after I bring the night.”*

He worried about the Hazakura sisters and Renri right up until the very end.

And with that, Summer and Autumn headed down the mountain.

On the way, Renri explained why he and Raicho were on Mount Ryugu.

His steps were shaky, and he didn't have much energy to speak, from the blood loss, but even so, Renri felt he had a responsibility to explain. He told them everything that had happened since Raicho had broken into the warehouse.

He was prepared to have them yell at him or punch him, but Ruri and Ayame only cried out in surprise. In the end, they never blamed him, but just said in unison, “*“Thank goodness.”*” Renri wasn't sure how to react to that.

Ruri and Renri hadn't particularly had a good relationship up to now, but she must have been thinking of something, because she worried about his well-being.

She even offered him a boar to ride, to make the descent easier.

Renri couldn't bring himself to do that in front of Ayame, though, so he declined and walked on his own.

An ambulance was waiting for him once they got to the foot of the mountain.

There were already plenty of others, too, to take everyone hurt in the brawl by the entrance.

Ruri walked over to see Raicho, still under confinement by Porcupine near the

mountain trail.

Autumn accompanied Ruri, while Porcupine's guards escorted the ambulances.

When asked about riding in the ambulance with Renri, Ayame replied clearly:  
"He's my fiancé."

They were quickly taken to a nearby hospital.

Fortunately, thanks to the first aid, Renri's injury wasn't serious, but he was made to stay overnight out of precaution. Ayame waited alone while Renri was treated, and by the time they were reunited, the sky was already red.

"Renri. Lord Kaguya could do his job again today..."

He nodded in response.

It felt funny, since they had been with the god incarnate of night only a few hours earlier.

Renri would have to be interrogated by National Security.

Ayame had to rejoin the other Agents.

Porcupine, aware of the circumstances, let them have ten minutes alone to talk. They sat next to each other on a bench and conversed.

"Ayame, I have to stay in the hospital tonight..."

"Yes..."

"What're you gonna do...?"

"I... I have a lot to explain, so I have to go back with the Agents. But I'll come back here tomorrow. My phone...is broken...so I'll get a new one tomorrow. You'll save my new number, right...?"

"..."

"You won't?"

"Ah, no, yes, please..."

"I'm supposed to stay in Ryugu for a while, but if you're going somewhere, I'll go with you."

Renri was confused by how naturally she said that.

“You can’t do that...”

“Why not?”

“I... I think I’ll be interrogated and yelled at by National Security and the Four Seasons Agency for a while, so you don’t have to come with me for that. Your parents must be worried...”

Ayame gave him a reassuring smile. It looked weak; she must have been tired.

“My parents will be coming here tomorrow. They’re under National Security’s protection.”

“Huh, why?”

“We don’t know how the Townchief might retaliate, so we decided it would be best for them to get away for the time being...”

“Ah...”

The face of the tyrant flickered across Renri’s mind.

“The Doyen Turtle members we caught on Mount Ryugu confessed, and now they’re after Seiran Matsukaze, but he vanished. Others from Doyen Turtle might’ve helped him. So until he’s caught...”

“...I see...”

“My parents were grateful to you and Raicho.”

“...No way, really? Why?”

“Why...? Not everyone can fight Doyen Turtle. They’re happy that you...cared about their daughters enough to...”

Renri blushed. “Oh... No, Raicho basically dragged me here...”

“I was happy, too...”

A moment of silence enveloped them. Then Renri asked what he most wanted to know.

“Um... Ayame... You’ve been treating me like your fiancé this whole time, but...does that mean...we can still be...engaged...?”

“You’re asking me that now...?”

“I mean... Isn’t it over...?”

“...”

“We’re not engaged anymore...”

Ayame had finally calmed down, but tears once again formed in her eyes.

“How...?”

*How could you say something so mean?* her eyes asked.

“The connection between our families is broken. You’re a goddess now. You would be better off marrying someone strong who can protect you... At the very least, I’m sure that’s what everyone will say. And I... No matter how it hurts me to say, I wouldn’t be able to argue back...”

Ayame was hurt by Renri’s words.

“...Why do you say that...?”

Ayame had cried a lot today. She was distraught.

But these tears were the most bitter of them all.

“You’re the only one who can be my fiancé...” Ayame reached out and grabbed Renri’s fingers. “...There’s no one for me but you...”

Everything in her expression was telling him not to leave her alone.

Renri gulped. He wanted to bask in Ayame’s kindness and go back to how their relationship had been.

But his heart told him that he couldn’t anymore.

“...I...did something stupid...”

“But you did it for me... You did it to protect me and Ruri, right...? Renri, did you only do it because you wanted to oppose the Town’s administration...? The Rouo family is in charge of the medical office. They’re hard to sway politically. Why else would you come all the way here to the south to fight these people?”

“I mean, that’s true... But...”

“Do you not like me...?”

“No! But that’s the problem right there... Ayame... There’s this discrepancy...”

“What?”

“You’re different from me.”

Renri asked with all the resolve of a man putting his head on the chopping block.

“I love you. But you don’t feel the same, do you...?”

Time froze for Ayame. She was actually paralyzed for a moment.

“Ayame, when you got stranded in that mountain pass...you had forgotten all about me. But a part of my heart knew you even before you remembered me.”

“...”

“...That’s also why I asked you to marry me—not for freedom. I felt like, if we did, you might love me back someday...”

Ayame let go of Renri’s hand.

“...”

He smiled wryly.

*I knew it.*

“I tricked you.”

*I knew it wouldn’t work.*

“You just wanted to be free... I wanted to marry you for real because I love you.”

*The only reason anyone would choose me is to use me.*

“...I betrayed you...”

*My existence is meaningless to people if they can’t use me.*

Still, he wanted her to know.

Renri forced a smile. “I’m sorry that I love you...but I don’t think our engagement will be useful to you anymore...”

Renri shut his mouth and stared at the hand that Ayame had let go of.

He wished he had the right to ask her to hold it again, but he’d just sacrificed it.

*I could’ve been with her forever if I’d just stayed quiet.*

He couldn’t trick her anymore, though, because he liked her even more now.

*Idiot. You’re already regretting it.*

As he sank deep into his thoughts, Ayame’s slender hand reached out to him again.

And not just her hand; she moved her whole body closer.

“Huh...? A-Ayame...?”

He braced himself for a punch to the face, but instead, she hugged him hard enough to crush him.

Renri struggled to hold her thin body.

“...Hnnh... Unh.”

Ayame clung to Renri and buried her face in his chest, sobbing.

“...Hnnh... Unh...”

*Why?*

Ayame Hazakura didn’t do things like this.

She was a smart girl. She was always so careful about how she carried herself.

Yet here she was, hugging him in public, crowded with other patients, security, and medical staff.

He didn’t know how to react to this.

In any case, he couldn’t stop blushing. Nor could he string together a sentence.

“...Ayame, umm...”

He mustered up his courage and put a hand on her shoulder, but he didn't know what to do next.

"...Unh... Hnnh..."

Ayame's whimpers grabbed the crowd's attention, and the Porcupine staff looked at them with concern. Renri panicked and patted her on the back.

"Ayame... What's wrong?"

"...I will."

"Huh...?"

"I... I will marry you..." Ayame whispered, in tears. "I love you. I'm your fiancée. I will, I'll definitely marry you. Even if the Town says I shouldn't, even if my parents say I shouldn't, I'll be your wife."

After such a long journey, Ayame finally told Renri her true feelings.

"I am going to become your wife no matter what it takes.

*"I love you."*

"..."

Renri's soul quivered.

He couldn't believe it. He'd summoned up all his courage to tell Ayame how he felt, but still, his confusion had won out.

"B-but there's better people than me..."

"There aren't."

"There are more handsome men... Stronger men... Others..."

"I don't care."

"But you should... I mean, your position..."

"I don't need any of them."

“Yes, you do... You’re a goddess now.”

“I don’t need anyone that’s not you. I don’t want them.”

“...But...”

Renri’s secret love was about to come true.

But it couldn’t be. His head told him that was impossible.

Ayame argued him down. “I love you, Renri.”

Her eyes were the same as his: in love.

“I love you...”

It was the first time in his life that anyone had loved him like this.

*This...is real?*

Tears sprang to his eyes, and they fell onto Ayame’s cheek.

Ayame welcomed them. She stared at Renri and tried her best to convince him she was telling the truth.

“Please believe me. I love you.”

Renri was finally sure of it. She wasn’t teasing or testing him. Once he understood that, he felt a tightness around his chest as he cried with joy.

“...Really?”

“Really... Why did you think I didn’t like you...?”

“...Because I have no self-confidence.”

“That’s your family’s fault. Renri...you’re so kind, you accept me no matter how big a nuisance I am. You didn’t run. You protected me.”

“But I’m weak...”

“You have the strength to care for people.”

“I basically fled from my home. I won’t have a job once I’m back...”

“We can figure that out later. We could cultivate some of our land.”

“Ha-ha...”

“As long as we don’t starve, we’ll make do.”

“That means...I’d depend on you... I don’t want that...”

“What’s the problem if we’re together?”

“...”

“I don’t care, so long as you’re with me.”

“...”

“In my eyes, you’re the best fiancé I could ever have.”

“...”

“I love you.”

Renri had prayed for this his whole life. *“Can’t someone love me?”*

“...Yeah.”

It was a long and arduous journey, an opportunity he thought would never come, but Ayame had answered his prayers. He put his arms around her, this time without hesitation.

He didn’t care what others thought anymore.

If he didn’t hug her now, then when?

“...Thank you.”

His response was weak, and his hug, awkward.

But even so, Ayame understood how he felt.

She watched Renri cry.

He told her not to look at him, but she wanted to see.

She wanted to watch forever at how his heart was moved by her love.

“Thank you for loving me...”

*I want to keep looking at you forever.*



Night came no matter the hardships suffered during the day.

That night, as always, the Archer of Twilight's arrow slashed through the Guardian Canopy and brought dusk.

Many watched the sky gradually turn dark from Mount Ryugu.

It came to those who wished night would never come.

It came to those who prayed for night to come.

Darkness came to everyone.

A peaceful slumber even for the wicked.

A moment of tranquility for the good.

They forget that this miracle is woven by someone's efforts.

They all take it as a given.

They know not of the god shooting the sky with tears in his face.

That their blessings are built on someone's sacrifice.

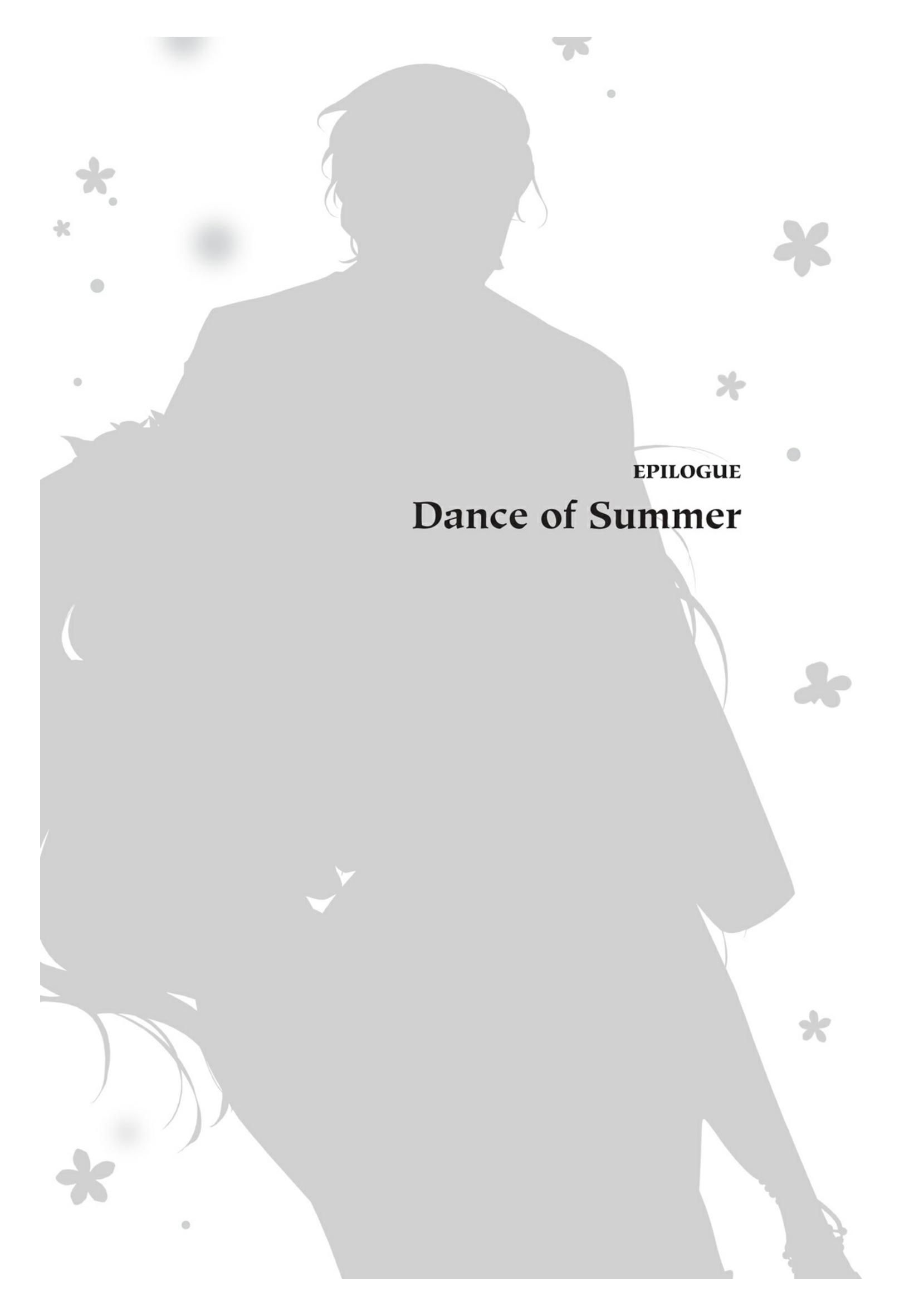
And no one questions it.

No matter how cruel the night, sooner or later, morning will come.

That way, they can wish.

For today, for tomorrow, to be a good day.

How fortunate are those who can still pray.



EPILOGUE

## Dance of Summer

October 23, Reimei 20. Autumn solar term: Soukou. Ryugu Shrine.

Ryugu, the southernmost point of Yamato, welcomed a slightly cold morning with the advent of autumn.

That said, it was still warm compared to other regions.

The journeys of the Agents of the Four Seasons normally began on the first day of the first term of each season: Risshun in spring; Rikka in summer; Risshuu in autumn; and Rittou in winter.

The Agents traveled from island to island over the course of two months. Spring and Summer went from Ryugu to Enishi; Autumn and Winter went from Enishi to Ryugu.

The differing routes meant that Ryugu could fully enjoy autumn now until the Agent of Winter arrived, while for Enishi in the northernmost point, Rittou was close, and it would soon be buffeted by intense cold.

Archer of Twilight Kaguya Fugeki opened the curtains as he did every morning. He looked out at the efforts of his colleague, the Archer of Dawn, and thanked her from afar before getting ready for the day.

Kaguya was at Ryugu Shrine on Mount Ryugu.

After everything that had happened in his former home, including Tohko Fugeki's fate, they had decided to demolish it and build a new mansion.

In the meantime, Kaguya's friend, the head priest, had offered the shrine for him to live in for the time being. The man knew he was a god incarnate, so Kaguya could live his life as he always did, without constraints.

*And it's close to the sacred area.*

The God of Twilight had been secluding himself in the mountains far too much of late.

He walked out of his room and into the hallway, where people already at work greeted him.

Kaguya had known everyone in the shrine from a young age, so it felt like staying at a relative's home. He headed to the kitchen and dining room. Other people could take care of the cooking, and they had told him he didn't have to do anything, but he felt less like a freeloader helping out where he could.

As he entered the kitchen, he saw a woman's back.

“...”

For a moment, Kaguya mistook her for someone else.

The sight of her smiling face calling his name came to mind.

*No.*

He closed his eyes, opened them again, and the illusion was gone. It was the head priest's elderly mother preparing breakfast.

“Oh, good morning, Lord Kaguya.”

Her manner of speech was relaxed, and it made Kaguya soften his tone in return.

“Good morning. Didn't Eken come to help?”

“There's so much left over from yesterday I only have to make miso soup. I sent him to sweep the leaves outside. He said he wanted to do it.”

“Oh...”

Kaguya chuckled.

“Maybe he's trying to impress the *miko*...”

Eken Fugeki was living with Kaguya in Ryugu Shrine. It had only been a few days since he'd come back.

Up until then, Kaguya had been under the supervision of National Security's

Special Agents. None of them were here anymore.

“Ahh, yes, they do get along well, don’t they?”

“Indeed. Does she come all the way here from Town just for the weekends?”

“She’s the daughter of a relative. She also does office work, so she’s a great help. But is that okay, Lord Kaguya? You’re not annoyed it may impact your Custodian’s job?”

Kaguya was taken aback.

“I would never. He’s young; he should fall in love once or twice...”

“Oh-ho.”

“He has few opportunities because of me, so really, I welcome it. Although maybe they are just friends. We shouldn’t be tying them up romantically. I feel like he’d get mad at me if he found out.”

“Oh-hohhh.”

“I... I just want him to be happy with someone, anyone...no matter their gender, age, or profession.”

“A lot of happiness awaits the young. That includes you, Lord Kaguya. There’s more waiting for you.”

“...”

Kaguya gave a polite smile, unsure of what to say to that.

The failed replacement had taken place in Ryugu a few months prior.

Ever since he’d first been told the truth about everything, Kaguya had started to feel much older than he actually was.

Was there really more waiting for him?

He hadn’t changed physically, but he felt mentally exhausted.

Eken had been suffering to protect Kaguya’s psyche. He had been living with Tohko’s phantom.

It had all been a wicked ploy by the Fugeki clan to keep the night coming.

The burden had been too heavy for Kaguya to bear.

He wouldn't have been able to endure it without Tsukihi.

And now she was gone from his side, too.

"I'm sure Tohko is also doing her best for the sake of her future as well, far away wherever she might be."

"...Yes."

The one upside was that Tohko Fugeki was still alive.

Considering the circumstances she'd been found in, it was still unclear whether she had tried to kill herself or had tripped going down the stairs.

"I want her to do her best..."

Tohko didn't remember either Kaguya or Eken.

When she hit her head after that disconcerting day, everything painful she was holding in had vanished.

*I'm sure she wanted to forget everything.*

The day she was found, she'd been taken to a nearby hospital.

Once she recovered consciousness, the doctors and members of the Fugeki clan explained what had happened to her, but she couldn't believe it.

She had forgotten all about the fact that she'd gone back to her hometown, been driven away, told to stay the god's husband forever, and that her brother had passed away. A third party explaining things calmly had a good effect on her, and she began to recover her mental stability. She had remained hospitalized off the island, but it was decided that she wouldn't go back to Ryugu once she was discharged.

Kaguya had requested to let her live a second life. Tohko had already been removed from her position as his wife.

The Fugeki clan had cut financial support to her family, but Kaguya was sending her money personally so she wouldn't have trouble in her new life. They were an odd couple, but they were still husband and wife, so Kaguya convinced Tohko that it was only right for him to support her. Sadly, though, as Kaguya couldn't leave Ryugu, all of this only happened over the phone.

He was sure they'd have had a hard time talking about it if they'd met, though.

And so the Archer of Twilight lost his partner. He hadn't taken a new wife but remained single, and the Custodian he loved like a son returned home safely.

The misdeeds of the broken boy desperate to protect his family were pardoned by calling out the Fugeki clan's betrayal. He was still mentally unstable in some ways, but Eken seemed to be so glad that Kaguya had been waiting for him this whole time that Tohko's phantom hadn't emerged since.

Kaguya had heard that, after the Dark Wolf mystery came to a close, the environmental destruction and divine punishment theories riling up the Towns of the Four Seasons had died down.

*There are petty, sly people everywhere, huh?*

The armed forces of the masterminds behind the ordeal, Doyen Turtle, had been caught, thanks to the evidence of Renri and Maverick Rabbit Horn. The soldiers had then confessed in turn, leading to the arrest of numerous ringleaders and collaborators.

This time, every Town would have to have a political upheaval.

Seiran Matsukaze still remained at large, however, and while some people thought he might have died already, the search was still underway.

*Maybe he was rubbed out.*

From Doyen Turtle's perspective, what the former Townchief had done would either have been a monumental feat if he'd succeeded, or a capital crime if he hadn't. His collaborators had all been big names with personal armies ready to send at his request.

It was fairly possible that, along with the soldiers, they could send an assassin

to silence him.

And many people had evaded exposure thanks to Seiran's timely disappearance.

Because of this, the Town of Summer remained without a chief.

Apparently, the members of the Summer Administration were fighting for the seat of power behind the scenes.

*I just hope it becomes a Town where the Ladies Summer can live in peace.*

That would probably take time.

“Lord Kaguya, how much food would you like?”

Kaguya was about to ask for his usual small bowlful, before he suddenly remembered.

“Ah... I’ll be going out soon, so I’ll just have some miso soup and rice. I’ll be wearing my formal *hakama* for the first time in a while, and I don’t want my belly to show...”

“Ohh, right. When and where are you going again?”

“The old Ryugu Garden at eleven. Thankfully, it’s nearby, but I have to go somewhere else at two, so I can’t really take my time...”

“And you’re going out again afterward, right?”

“Yes, we’re going out drinking. I’ll head back out after bringing in night, and I’ll stay over there. Eken wants to come, too, but there’ll be alcohol...”

“They did it on the island for you, didn’t they?”

“It seems so...”

“Isn’t that nice?”

Kaguya smiled sincerely at that. “Very nice,” he whispered, his voice full of emotion.

“It truly is an honor...to be invited to Summer’s wedding.”

The Agents of Summer were marrying today in Ryugu.

The old Ryugu Garden was a huge area that had once belonged to a prosperous landowner.

A large bridal company had since bought it and turned it into a wedding venue.

It was a similar place to the garden Ayame and Renri had visited in the mountains before.

That had been a place to enjoy the mountain landscape, while this was one where you could gaze down at the beautiful ocean scenery.

It was a popular venue that normally had to be reserved a year in advance, but the Agents had received help from an unknown source to secure it.

The hosts and the guests at the wedding today were all figures of national importance.

National Security had sent escorts to guard the entrance, and they strictly monitored everyone coming and going with a menacing air.

Kaguya and Eken had left the shrine late after taking a long time putting on their formal *hakama* and getting ready. Familiar faces were already walking down the aisle in front of the waiting room when they arrived.

“Hello, long time no see.”

Kaguya turned around at the sound of the voice.

“Lord Kaguya!”

Dressed in a bright yellow kimono, Agent of Autumn Nadeshiko Iwaizuki reacted immediately, waving a hand at Kaguya.

Behind the girl just back from her journey manifesting autumn was a man in a stylish suit: Guard of Autumn Rindo Azami.

"It has been quite some time, Lord Kaguya. Glad to see you here... And glad to see Lord Eken is also looking well."

"...I'm so sorry for all the trouble back in Mount Ryugu!"

Eken bowed vigorously, and Rindo raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, no, I... I'm sure most would agree that you alone are not to blame for what happened. Please raise your head. Besides, today is a day for celebration..."

"Today's going to be so much fun," Nadeshiko added.

Eken timidly straightened his back. Kaguya also gave an appreciative bow.

"I'm surprised they got permission to marry in just a few months, though," Kaguya said, looking at a sign that said *Hazakura* in front of the waiting room.

"A-ha-ha... I don't know if you'd call it *permission*, exactly. The Townchief was the one behind all of this in the first place. They haven't caught him, and no one knows who should be apologizing to the Ladies Summer; no one's taking responsibility. They're all showing a lack of honesty, even after everything is already over... No one has the right to complain, so they just went ahead and did it."

"...Well, that certainly is...strong-willed."

Rindo nodded at Kaguya's remark.

"I, for one...am glad they didn't back down. The truth of the matter is that no one can say a word of complaint. They don't have the right."

Vitriol filled Rindo's quiet voice, and Nadeshiko clung to his leg.

Rindo smiled. He patted her head, careful not to mess up her adorable hairdo.

"I wish they had caught the Townchief... That way, I would have some sort of lead on the information broker who provided the son of the Kimikages with records of my conversations... The Ladies Summer did get to throw this wedding, thanks to their Town being in disarray, however, so I have some conflicting feelings about it..."

"Ahhh," exclaimed Kaguya. "You couldn't get anything from Mr. Kimikage?"

"No. Naturally, he was investigated by National Security, too...but all records of any conversations, money transfers, and phone numbers were already gone..."

"Wow."

"Scary stuff, indeed. So I'm trying not to dwell on it for now. Just keep in mind, Lord Kaguya, if you ever hear me say something strange, please, do not believe me."

In the end, maybe Rindo had been the one most affected by what happened.

"Shall we head into the waiting room?"

Kaguya nodded in response and followed behind Rindo, but he was soon stopped by a tug on his *haori* coat.

"Lord Kaguya!"

"What is it, Eken? If you want to go to the bathroom, make sure to go now."

"No! Look over there. The black suits."

Eken pointed at a group of guards from National Security.

They were talking over the venue's floor plan. They looked familiar.

"Go, Lord Kaguya."

Eken grabbed his arm to turn him around and pushed his master forward.

"I'm not jealous anymore. You need her. Go."

Kaguya walked forward, boosted by the momentum from Eken's push.

He looked back at the young boy. Rindo and Nadeshiko had noticed Kaguya wasn't following and had gone over to talk to Eken. He seemed to be explaining the situation.

Rindo patted Eken's shoulder with a smile and nodded at Kaguya, telling him to not worry about the boy.

"..."

Kaguya felt apologetic as he continued walking toward the gathering of black suits.

“Hey, guys... It’s been a while.”

Tsukihi Aragami and her Special Agents welcomed him with a smile. Kaguya couldn’t look her in the eye, so Tsukihi took the initiative to talk to him.

“Lord Kaguya, have you been well?”

“Yeah... And you, Tsukihi?”

“Very well, thank you. I know you’re getting enough sleep, at least. I know that all too well.”

Unfortunately, though, she’d started the conversation with a hint of resentment.

“...”

“After all, you’ve even been sleeping in the middle of our phone calls.”

Tsukihi’s subordinates grinned at them.

“No, it’s just, your voice makes me feel so relaxed...”

“You do it almost every single time I call you.”

“...Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine... I’m always so nervous, but when I hear you sleep so soundly...I think about how you used to stay up all night while we were living together, and now you’re so well-rested, you even snore...”

“I’m sorry!”

Kaguya Fugeki and Tsukihi Aragami were in a long-distance friendship.

They were in that weird spot between being friends and being a couple.

“I’m glad to see you, Tsukihi...”

“...Really?”

“Really. Look, I only fall asleep because I feel safe.”

“...”

“After I finish my task, I go home, and I look forward to calling you. That’s why I can give it my all.”

“...”

“I feel like all my fatigue goes away when I talk to you... I feel at peace... Ah, hang on. Forget I just said that. I’m being really embarrassing right now...”

“Hee-hee... Yes, you are.”

We will have to wait to see if their romance develops further.

Eken and Autumn entered the waiting room just as Guard of Spring Sakura Himedaka was coming out. Surprisingly, she wasn’t with her lady at the moment.

Even more surprising was the long-sleeved kimono she was wearing. It was likely matching with her lady Hinagiku’s.

Sakura was so beautiful that she drew everyone’s attention (if she was quiet) as she half ran across the venue.

She didn’t seem to care about the gazes of the people she passed by as she rushed up to a black car at the edge of the parking lot.

Sakura knocked on the door, and the automatic window lowered to show the man’s face.

“Sakura Himedaka.”

“Lord Zansetsu...”

It was a secret meeting with Zansetsu Kayo.

Back in the venue’s waiting room, someone stared at the door Sakura had just come out of.

Guard of Winter Itecho Kanetsu. He, too, wore a formal *hakama* matching his lord’s.

“...”

Someone else stared at Itecho staring at the door.

“...”

Agent of Winter Rosei Kantsubaki.

And another someone else stared at Rosei staring at Itecho staring at the door.

“...”

Agent of Spring Hinagiku Kayo.

None of their eyelines were going in the same direction. And it had already been over ten minutes since Sakura left. The guests on the Hazakura side had been given rooms split between gods incarnate and the rest, so the Winter escorts, while still few, were more numerous than usual.

There shouldn't be a problem with Sakura not being there—but the three of them had created one.

“...Lord...Rosei.”

Hinagiku tugged shyly at the sleeve of Rosei's *haori* coat. She tilted her head and asked a question with her eyes.

“*What's...wrong with...Lord Itecho?*”

Rosei responded in kind with some added gesturing.

“*He's worried about Sakura. She just left him to guard us and ran off. I mean, it's not like we don't have enough security, but that's weird...*”

Hinagiku replied back with gestures of her own.

“*Sakura...went out...to have a call...with...our backer.*”

They even avoided whispering, since Itecho was so close.

“*Itecho's worried about her. He fears this backer of yours is someone Sakura should stay away from.*”

“*Hinagiku...doesn't...understand. But if...Lord Itecho...is worried...then Hinagiku...is worried...too. But...he seems...like...a nice...person...*”

From the outside, it looked like they were playing some sort of game with their hands, but the two Agents eventually concluded their silent conversation.

"Hey, Itecho," Rosei called out.

The Guard had been standing the whole time instead of taking one of the seats in the waiting room.

"...What's up, Rosei?"

He finally looked at his Agent.

"If you're that worried, then go check on her," said Rosei.

Itecho was taken aback by his suggestion.

"I think Hina wants you to as well."

Hinagiku's head bobbed up and down. "It's been...a long...call."

That was a good excuse. And if Hinagiku was worried, that would also make it easier for Itecho to move around.

"Lord Itecho... Could you...please go...and check...on her?"

"Lady Hinagiku..."

"Hinagiku...will stay here...and have...a drink...with Rosei."

Hinagiku held up her glass of orange juice. The waiting room had a bar, so there was plenty to keep guests occupied as they chatted. If he left now, Itecho would most likely be back by the time Hinagiku finished her orange juice.

"..."

Itecho hesitated, but so long as Rosei and Hinagiku stayed here with Autumn, they would be safe. So he ended up doing as they suggested.

"Thanks, I'll go take a look. Rosei, take care of Lady Hinagiku."

Itecho hurried out of the room, and Rosei and Hinagiku nodded to each other, as if to say *mission complete*.

Itecho walked past all the people trying to greet him or stop him.

As he made his way through the crowd, he ran into Kaguya, who was still talking with Tsukihi.

“Oh, Lord Guard of Winter.”

“Lord Archer of Twilight. It’s good to see you.”

Spring and Winter had introduced themselves to Kaguya back in summer, when they’d escorted him to the sacred area and watched him carry out his ritual, shooting the sky.

“Are you looking for someone?”

“I am. Have you seen the Guard of Spring?”

“Ah, Lady Himekawa? I saw her making her way to the parking lot.”

“Thank you. I have to go and bring her back, so I’ll see you later... And thank you all for your protection today.”

Itecho bowed before leaving the venue.

*She’s on the phone outside?*

It would be problematic if Hinagiku heard, sure, but that seemed too far away. Just then, Itecho saw a black car go past.

“...”

He couldn’t see in through the windows, so he radioed in a warning.

“Kanetsu to everyone. There is a suspicious car in the parking—”

He was cut off by another voice coming from his earphone.

*“Himekawa to everyone. It’s an acquaintance of mine, don’t worry. They’re heading to the Ryugu airport.”*

It was the girl he was looking for.

Itecho felt a stab of pain in his heart as he saw her returning from the parking lot.

“...Sakura...”

He called out the Spring girl’s name in a hoarse voice.

He thought she wouldn't hear him, but she did.

She raised her head.

"Itecho."

Sakura was wearing a long-sleeved kimono that matched Hinagiku's. She looked elegant, dignified, and slightly entrancing, and the combined effect was almost blinding.

"What's the matter? Is something wrong?" She looked worried. "Did you forget something in the car?"

Her voice was so different from how it had been when she was little.

"Itecho?"

Nothing about her looked like the Sakura he knew.

He'd always found her adorable, but it was clear his feelings were transforming into something else entirely.

When she was nine, she'd been cute.

When she was fourteen, she'd been hurt.

When she was nineteen, she'd turned into a beautiful woman.

Now she was twenty and so dazzling, another man had proposed to her.

"Sakura... I was looking for you."

It was about time Itecho put a name to his feelings for her.

He'd had to look for her when she was gone and was delighted when he found her again.

Simply seeing her standing there gave him a feeling of bliss. What was this?

People normally didn't need to think so hard to answer a question like that. And Itecho knew it, too.

"I was worried about you..."

He already knew.

"Sorry, what's wrong?"

“Nothing, it’s just that you were taking so long... Lady Hinagiku was also worried...”

“Oh... Uh...”

Sakura seemed to have trouble finding words.

“I got a call from Lord Zansetsu, and when I picked up, he said he was in the parking lot.”

“Wha...?”

“He was in that car just now.”

Itecho’s hunch had been right. Somewhere inside of him, he’d sensed the appearance of a threat.

“He said he’s on a trip with Mr. Aboshi, so he dropped by...”

“We’re all the way down in Ryugu.”

There was no way it could’ve been a coincidence. Sakura chuckled.

“Well, it’s just... He said he wanted to talk to me in person...”

“...”

“But he’s gone already. Sorry I made you take over security. I’ll head back now.”

“Was it about marrying him?”

“Huh?”

“Isn’t that what he wanted to talk about in person?”

Itecho had asked so in such a straightforward way that Sakura stopped mid-stride.

An awkward tension surrounded them. Sakura would normally have yelled at him by now. She would have told Itecho it had nothing to do with him.

But she didn’t.

“...Yeah...”

She looked Itecho in the eye and nodded bashfully.

Were this any other woman, he would've given her his support without a moment's doubt.

"And you gave him an answer?"

It felt impossible to do that with her.

*This is possessiveness.*

Itecho had sealed away his feelings for her out of a sense of guilt. He felt shame at the thought of wanting Sakura back in his arms after causing her so much sadness that she'd run away.

"Sakura..."

You don't know what you've got until it's gone. It's something you hear people say all the time, but Itecho had never expected to live it himself.

"I know it's wrong for me to say this..."

The moment Rosei had handed him the phone and he'd heard Sakura's tear-filled voice for the first time in five years, when she'd said she was waiting for him, Itecho's chest had filled with a heat that said he would do anything for her.

"...But I still want to say it."

He was surprised at how much she had grown.

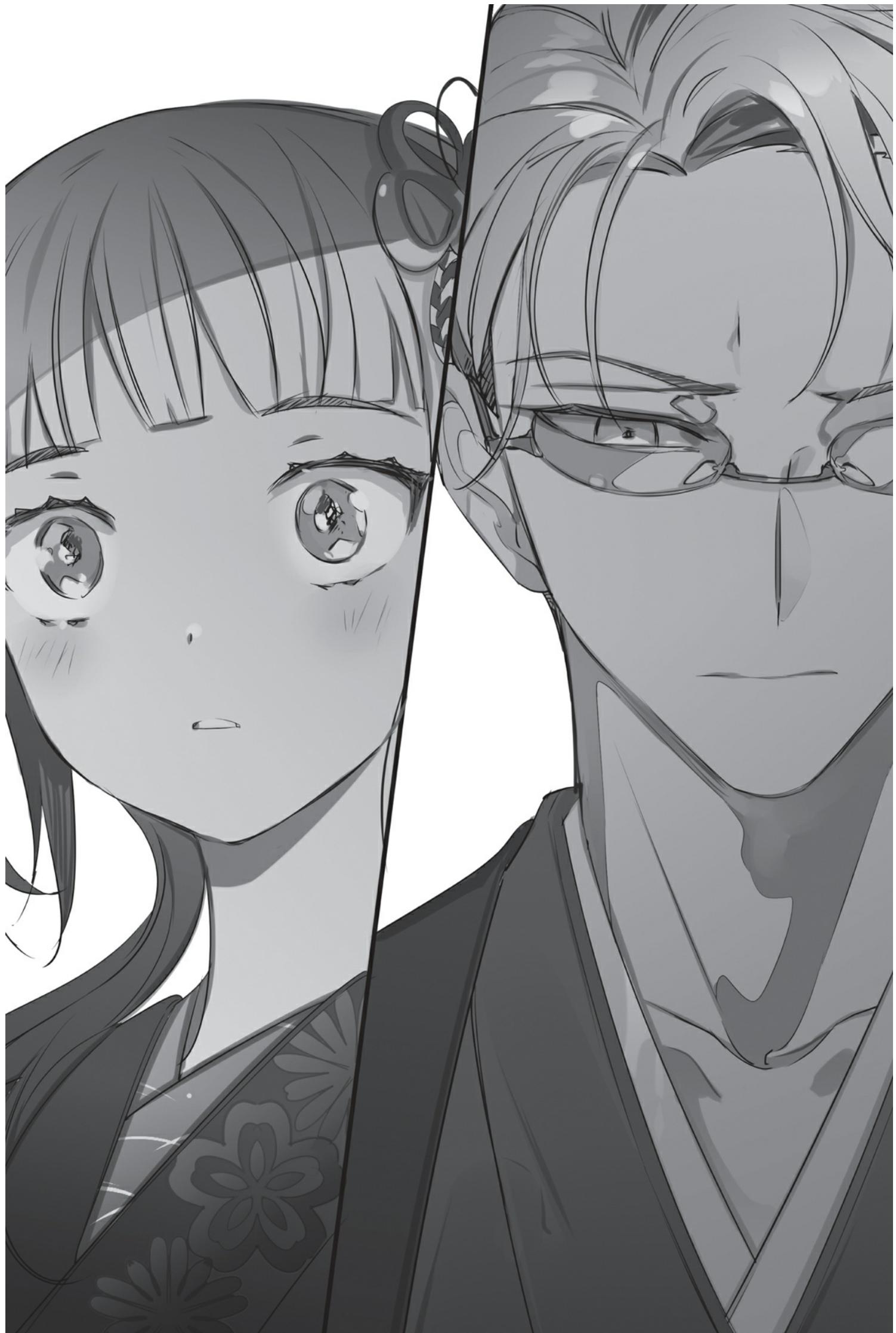
She was cold, unlike before. But he didn't care.

*She* was what mattered to him.

"Sakura, don't marry him."

The important thing was that Sakura Himedaka had returned to Itecho Kangetsu's life.

He wanted to be connected to her even when they were far apart.



“Don’t leave with him, Sakura.”

He didn’t want her to go.

“...I won’t try to make up excuses talking you out of it.”

*I’m a fool.*

Not just a fool—he believed he was shameless, arrogant, and selfish.

“I simply don’t want you to.”

He hadn’t been able to tell her the most important part, but he’d still made the attempt to stop the most important woman in his life.

“Don’t go.”

Still, he couldn’t feign indifference. No matter how much she might yell at him, Itecho didn’t want to have any more regrets.

He already had one lifelong regret from when he’d lost her before.

“Don’t go with him...Sakura.”

He didn’t ever want to feel that way again.

“...”

Sakura said nothing.

Itecho thought that was only natural.

He had no right to tell her how to live. He’d lost any right he might’ve had five years ago.

This was rooted in Itecho’s mind, no matter how much anyone else tried to console him.

This was why his chest had hurt so much when Sakura’s beloved lady, Hinagiku, had counted him among the people to help fill the void in her memories with new ones back at the theme park.

He’d found it strange that they could forgive him just like that.

He deserved to be hated for the way he’d hurt them.

Itecho had felt relieved when Sakura asked him to stay as her mentor. He'd resolved to become a man she could trust more than anyone else. But she hadn't known what Itecho hid in his heart.

She had once cut ties with him. Having such a man tell her not to marry wouldn't make her change her mind. It was more likely that she would be confused by hearing that.

Itecho waited patiently for her response.

“...”

After a little while, Sakura's cheeks turned a rosy red.

She looked down for a moment, before raising her head back up, as if trying to overcome her embarrassment.

“...You dummy... I'm not marrying him.”

Much to his surprise, she smiled.

It had been a long time since Itecho last saw her smile.

The autumnal wind blew, making Sakura's kimono flutter. The sight of her in the middle of nature, illuminated by the sunlight and being swayed by the wind, was breathtaking.

“...You really are such an idiot.”

Itecho was captivated by the look on her face.

“You had this huge frown on your face, and *that's* what you wanted to say? Were you really that worried?”

“Y-yeah...”

“You're so dumb, Itecho.”

Sakura kept calling him names, but her tone wasn't the least bit mocking.

Far from it; he felt affection in her words.

“...So you’re not...marrying the son of the Kayo family?”

“No...”

“But you were considering it...”

Her perfect older man was taken aback for once.

Sakura looked happy to see that it was because of her. She drew closer to him and looked up into his eyes. “What? Were you worried as my guardian again? You only ever think of other people, don’t you? You’re going to give yourself an ulcer doing that.”

Itecho faltered at the sight of her large, catlike eyes so close to his, and at the beauty of her long eyelashes.

“...I’m not saying this as your guardian. And I already told you: I don’t worry about everybody.”

“...Mm-hmm.”

“I only worry because it’s you, Sakura. I care about you.”

“...”

“Of course I would worry about you marrying someone you don’t want to. And also...I’m not saying this as your elder. I just didn’t want you to.”

There was passion in Itecho’s words. Now Sakura was overwhelmed.

“Did you really turn him down? Tell me what happened. What did he say? Was he mad?”

“...Lord Zansetsu wouldn’t get mad. He just said it was a shame, and to tell him if I changed my mind.”

“What?”

*He hasn’t given up?*

Itecho scowled.

“...I turned him down. I told him I can’t marry him...but he didn’t say he’d stop supporting us financially. He really was just concerned about me.”

“He wouldn’t have asked you to marry him if he was only concerned about

you..."

"...You really hate him, don't you?"

"Not personally. I just hate inconsiderate, influential men who propose to you."

Sakura wondered if that could apply to anyone but Zansetsu to begin with.

"...Are you really that against me getting married?"

"Yes," Itecho said resolutely.

"Wh-why...?"

Sakura had other questions she'd wanted to ask him, but she'd been so caught up in Itecho's passion as he revealed his feelings that she'd forgotten to ask them.

But he didn't give her the answer she was looking for.

"Because I am. No reason. I just don't like it. And I don't like Mr. Zansetsu for proposing to you when it could make you miserable in the future."

It had made sense in Itecho's head, but Sakura, unaware of her feelings, was confused.

"...You sound like you're talking about food."

"That's exactly what it is."

"...So if Lord Zansetsu is the problem, would you be okay with me marrying someone else?"

"No. Who knows if they'll really make you happy?"

"Then who am I supposed to marry...?"

"..."

The answer was up in the air.

Itecho wasn't able to come out and say, "Me."

He hadn't even told her he loved her. The order of things was all wrong.

"...Idiot."

From Sakura's point of view, it had sounded like he was just trying to tell her how to live her life.

"Stupid..."

But she wasn't angry. In fact, she looked happy somehow.

"You... You really don't get it."

Her cheeks reddened until they were the color of apples.

"...What, Sakura?"

"Think. You should've told me earlier if you were so against it..."

She scolded him in a whisper, and Itecho apologized on reflex.

"I'm sorry..."

But it was only after he said that, that another thought crossed Itecho's mind.

"I did tell you not to, though, didn't I?"

Sakura shook her head. "I thought you only said that because Rosei told you to, and you were doing it out of a sense of duty..."

"I didn't intend it like that..."

"But this time...I could tell you said it because you really were against it."

"I only used Rosei as an excuse back then... I..."

"You should've said that from the beginning."

"...Sorry."

"I... I would've said no right away if you'd insisted..."

"Really?"

"Yes..."

"But...I wasn't sure I should butt in like that..."

"..."

"I ended up holding back."

"...Yeah."

“But I... I never liked the idea.”

A silence stretched between the pair.

Awkward yet somehow sweet.

Sadly, neither side knew why.

*Why would she have said no if I'd insisted?*

Itecho was confused.

*There's no way she'd want to be with someone older like me.*

Sakura would have been shocked if she had read Itecho's mind right then.

*Does she want me to give her more guidance as her mentor?*

If she knew that Itecho thought she would never choose him.

From his point of view, Sakura had only allowed him back in her life because she still had use for him and his teachings.

Sakura, at twenty years old, was a flower on a high peak way out of his reach.

“...Itecho, you big idiot.”

Sakura was confused, too.

*Is he just treating me like a child? Or is he actually seeing me as a woman?*

This meddlesome, annoyingly helpful man was so kind, it was easy to misunderstand him.

It gave her hope that he might love her back.

*Maybe there's a chance?*

But she didn't need to pressure him for an answer now.

She'd finally dealt with something that had been weighing heavily on her mind.

Sakura just wanted to enjoy the happiness she felt for now. Even if she didn't know how exactly Itecho loved her, she could be sure that he cared about her.

*He said he didn't want me to get married.*

She was so happy.

*He said it.*

It made her ecstatic to hear it from his own mouth.

“Sakura... Let’s go back to the others.”

“Yeah...”

Itecho held out a hand, as if to escort her. There were stairs leading into the venue, and she was wearing a kimono.

“...”

Sakura hesitated, but she took Itecho’s hand. Partly because she wanted to be pampered, and partly because she wasn’t used to the long sleeves of her kimono.

“Watch your step.”

“I feel like I’m going to trip... I should’ve worn a normal dress.”

“But you wanted to match Lady Hinagiku, didn’t you? And you look so good in it.”

“...A Guard shouldn’t be wearing a kimono, though, right?”

“What’re you saying? I’m sure you have a gun under there anyway.”

“Yep.”

“We have enough people to fight off an army here today. Don’t worry.”

Sakura was relieved to hear his kind remark.

Cute or pretty outfits weren’t something a Guard could indulge in.

“...Thanks.”

Sakura squeezed his hand tightly, just as Hinagiku did with her.

Itecho’s arm twitched.

“...”

He hesitated at first, but then he squeezed her hand back.

“Oh, Itecho... I did talk with Lady Hinagiku before deciding, just as you suggested.”

“...You did?”

“She said no, same as you.”

“I knew she would. Did she yell at you?”

“...How’d you know that? Yeah... She really chewed me out yesterday.”

Sakura thought back to their conversation and gave him a quick rundown of what had happened.

The day before, Sakura and Hinagiku had stayed at a hotel in Ryugu.

They’d taken a bath and changed into their pajamas, then brushed their hair and done their skin care in preparation for the Hazakuras’ wedding the following day. The two girls were so excited to attend their first wedding, they hadn’t been able to sleep, and they’d stayed up late chatting in bed.

It was then that Sakura had finally told Hinagiku about the proposal.

She explained the circumstances around it without mentioning it was Zansetsu.

She’d told her that a promising young man from the Town of Spring had asked her to marry him.

That they could expect him to protect both of them.

That if the marriage worked out, they wouldn’t have to live in a place hidden away from the Town but could return there with their heads held high. That even if people bad-mouthing them, her husband would protect them.

It was a good opportunity, logically speaking. Sakura thought she should do it but hadn’t completely made up her mind yet. So she wanted to know what Hinagiku thought about it.

Sakura knew Hinagiku would be concerned.

And she had been, but not in the way Sakura had expected.

*“...Sakura...what about...Lord...Itecho?”*

Hinagiku’s voice was filled with anger and despair.

*“You’re...in love...with...someone else...and you’d...do that...for...Hinagiku?”*

Sakura didn’t know what to say when Hinagiku immediately brought up her still ongoing first love.

*“I don’t love him... That’s over now...”*

*“You’re...lying.”*

*“...I’m not lying. You’re the only one I love now.”*

*“You...liar.”*

It hurt her to hear her lady, whom she loved and respected more than anyone, call her a liar.

But Hinagiku’s expression was even more pained.

*“You...liar...Sakura! Hinagiku...doesn’t...like...lies!”*

*“Lady Hinagiku...”*

*Should I have waited to tell you until after it was over?*

Sakura’s life belonged to Hinagiku—or at least, that’s what she thought.

That was why she’d asked her lady about it. She’d felt it was the right thing to do.

*“No...!”*

She hadn’t wanted to upset her like this.

*“I’m sorry... It’s my decision to make, and I shouldn’t have asked you to decide for me. Please, forget I ever said anything.”*

*“No... I won’t...forget.”*

*“...We have Summer’s wedding tomorrow. Let’s wrap this up and go to sleep,*

*okay?"*

*"No."*

Hinagiku staunchly refused.

Her voice was firm and her intent clear.

*"...I'm sorry."*

*"Why...are you... apologizing?"*

*"I didn't mean to cause you distress with my stupid problems, Lady Hinagiku..."*

*"...Hinagiku...loves you...more than...anyone else...in the whole...world. Don't say...your problems...are stupid."*

Hinagiku spoke with a harshness she rarely showed.

Then her voice suddenly became quiet.

*"Hinagiku...always...tells you...she loves you...but...do you...not...understand?"*

Sakura could tell she was struggling to contain her emotions.

She felt like the worst criminal in the world for causing this kind goddess so much pain.

At the same time, she was ridiculously happy. Her lady cared for her so, so much.

*"I understand very well that you appreciate me, which is why—"*

*"No...you don't. You...would marry...a man...you don't...love... for Hinagiku's... sake. You...don't...understand. What...about...your...happiness?"*

*"It would make me happy. It would firm up my position, plus I'd be able to stay by your side all my life..."*

Tears formed in Hinagiku's eyes.

*"Even though...you love...Lord Itecho?"*

Sakura's eyes darted down. She looked at her clenched fist.

*"..."*

*"If you...were to...choose...based on...your own...happiness...who...would it...be?"*

*"....."*

*"You can't...tell...Hinagiku?"*

Hinagiku covered Sakura's fist with her hand.

*"Hinagiku...really...loves you. So...so...so much."*

She squeezed Sakura's hand, as if to tell her they wouldn't be apart again.

*"If you...are doing...that...for Hinagiku...then Hinagiku...doesn't want...to be in...the Town."*

Hinagiku hadn't changed.

She was in love with Rosei, too, but she remained that same goddess who'd created a path of spring just for Sakura's sake on that snowy day.

*"Hinagiku...doesn't need...to go back...to...the Town. She doesn't...need...to see...Mother's...grave."*

This broken girl, kinder than anyone else, only told her retainer without hesitation that she loved her.

*"She doesn't...need to...as long...as Hinagiku...has you...Sakura."*

She was irreplaceable to Sakura. Which was why her words stung the most.

*"Don't...worry. Hinagiku...is strong...now."*

It wasn't only because of the special feelings that existed between the goddess and the human.

*"Hinagiku...won't lose...again. If anyone...tries...to take you...away...Hinagiku...will fight."*

There was no other word for it but *mutual love*.

Hinagiku said Sakura was the person she loved the most. Sakura appreciated Hinagiku more than anyone else in the world.

*"And if...it's an enemy...we can't...beat..."*

Their love was almost invincible.

And that love made Hinagiku dissolve into tears as she said:

*“Then let’s...run away...anywhere...in the...world...together.”*

Her lady told her she wouldn’t let go of her.

Hinagiku had looked breathtakingly beautiful in Sakura’s eyes as she said that.

And so Zansetsu’s proposal vanished from her mind. Sakura immediately apologized to her lady and said she would turn him down, but it was quite some time before Hinagiku stopped crying.

Their eyes had turned red, and both girls had to cool them before going to sleep.

That was how they’d spent the night before the wedding.

Sakura happily recounted the story—mainly the parts about how much her lady loved her—but as Itecho seemed to listen attentively, his mind was elsewhere.

*It sounds like I’ll have to tell Lady Hinagiku about my feelings first.*

About his love for Sakura Himedaka.

Itecho felt like he needed Hinagiku’s permission to feel that way about Sakura. That it was better, as a Guard, to consult with her lady before trying anything.

*Like, ask her for her retainer’s hand?*

Itecho felt embarrassed just thinking about it.

*“...And then Lady Hinagiku...”*

*In any case, I should try to keep away the competition for now.*

Ever the hard worker, Itecho thought it would be best to take care of what he could right away.

“Sakura.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Lady Hinagiku looks especially beautiful today, doesn’t she?”

A hint of confusion crossed Sakura’s face at the sudden change in topic, but she nodded right away.

“...Oh, you can tell?”

Sakura liked talking about anything that had to do with Hinagiku.

“I got the best outfit for her today. She looks like a real, live angel.”

Her eyes shone as she let out a sigh.

“She’s like the personification of grace itself...,” Itecho continued. “It makes me happy to see her look so beautiful, but...”

“But?” Sakura interjected.

“There are too many people here today. We better watch out for any suspicious characters trying to approach her, right?”

“...Yeah!”

In the blink of an eye, Sakura put on her Guard face.

“You’re right. Let’s keep an eye out!”

Sakura unleashed a practice kick, despite her kimono. Itecho was content to see that.

*All good.*

That was enough for today.

It made Itecho happy to protect both Hinagiku and Sakura at the same time.

He’d tell Rosei later on what they’d talked about, and he was sure his lord would be all for their plan to keep away the competition.

Meanwhile, the car that had left the wedding venue headed for the Ryugu airport.

It was quiet inside the vehicle.

“...”

The small retainer lived only for Zansetsu, and he spoke to his master, who was sitting there with his eyes closed.

“...You didn’t want to at least catch a glimpse of her?” Tsubame asked.

Zansetsu opened one eye. “You think I came here to see my sister?”

A dry chuckle escaped him.

“...No. I believe your primary objective was to get Lady Himekawa to join your camp...”

“Too bad she turned me down.”

Tsubame frowned with great sadness. “...She simply doesn’t know you well enough yet. Once she realizes your charm...”

Zansetsu burst out in laughter at Tsubame’s attempt at comfort.

It was a real laugh this time.

“That’s funny. What is my charm, then?”

“Well, you’re really cool.”

“...”

“And diligent and talented.”

“...Oh?”

“But if left to your own devices, you’d only ever eat nutrient supplements, which is charming...”

Zansetsu’s face turned serious.

“...You’re just attacking me now.”

Tsubame clenched his fists and argued emphatically.

“Not at all! As your retainer, I find it incredibly touching.”

“...”

“It makes me realize you wouldn’t be able to function without me!”

“.....”

Zangetsu seemed utterly lost by this thread of logic. Then, nonchalantly, he said: “It was too late for me to intrude. That’s how I lost.”

His tone was a bit sad, but he didn’t seem to have any regrets.

“She would have said yes if I’d asked her before spring.”

Zangetsu’s assumption wasn’t entirely wrong.

Sakura had been lonely, with no one to help her, struggling to figure out her job as a Guard as she protected Hinagiku from enemies on all fronts. Back then, she would have accepted his proposal, but now, she had reunited with Itecho Kangetsu.

It was just as he’d said: There was no space left for him to work his way in.

Things would have turned out differently had Sakura Himekawa and Itecho Kangetsu been lost to each other, but that was no longer an option.

“...It’s a shame. I...wouldn’t have minded calling Lady Himekawa my wife.”

“...”

“Lord Zangetsu... You haven’t given up yet, have you?”

“...”

Tsubame looked so upset, you’d almost think he was the one who’d been rejected.

“...Don’t be so sad. Sakura Himekawa will stay with Hinagiku, as always. Who knows if she’ll come around to my side, but so long as she protects her, that’s what matters.”

*Despite what he says, in the end, everything he does, he does for his sister.*

Tsubame sighed, then looked at Zangetsu’s graceful profile.

His master insisted on avoiding making that clear, which Tsubame found frustrating.

*Lord Zansetsu can be so contrary at times.*

Would the day come when the siblings could enjoy spending time together?

Tsubame wasn't sure whether it was worth getting his hopes up.

"By the way, what will you do about Seiran Matsukaze?"

"...What do you mean?"

Tsubame pouted. "He should be imprisoned. You should take care of that smug creep soon." Terrible words for such a cute young boy.

"If we had, we wouldn't be going on this pleasant trip today."

"...That is true. You always think of everything, Lord Zansetsu..."

"I'm not sure what to do about him, though, to be honest. I had to leave him and the problems he's caused up in the air so I could reward Raicho Kimikage and Renri Rouo for their efforts. Now that they've got their wedding, I could always kill him...but I could also keep him alive and find a use for him. He'll obey like a good dog if we tell him we'll take care of his son in prison and his remaining family."

"Then I can't do anything too awful to him? He spat at me the other day..."

"...So long as he can recover in a few days, you can take it out on him."

"Really? Yay!"

Tsubame's mood immediately improved. Zansetsu knew his young retainer was a little monster.

His madness could be adorable at times and horrific at others.

*What a nasty child.*

Despite his thought, Zansetsu reached out to the boy and caressed his soft hair. Tsubame rubbed his cheek on his master's hand like a dog would. These gestures between him and his young retainer scratched an itch inside of Zansetsu. After all, he hadn't ever done it with his sister, and probably would never get to.

In reality, Zansetsu was hollow and a bit insane, just like Tsubame. He couldn't become wholly evil, yet he couldn't be called good—he was somewhere in

between.

The two monsters—one little, one big—could breathe easy when they were together.

“Fukuryo Doji will be taking a little vacation. How about we head to the theme park right now, Tsubame?”

“Huh...?! Really? Yay!”

Tsubame smiled as warmly as when he was allowed to do violence.

And Zansetsu watched him with a satisfied smile.

Now we return to the old Ryugu Garden.

The descendants of the Agents of the Four Seasons prayed to the Gods of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter.

Naturally, marriage vows also took place before the Four Seasons.

As such, the venue was fantastically decorated with all sorts of motifs and flowers representing each season. The sea could also be seen outside the windows.

The guests enjoyed the seasonal theme before the event began.

The stars of today’s show were waiting in a place away from the comings and goings of the venue.

On this gorgeous day, the Agents of Summer were to be married.

As could be surmised from the two men standing in front of the brides’ room, they were holding a double wedding.

“Are you ready yet?” Raicho Kimikage knocked on the door.

“Not yet!” a voice that sounded like Ruri’s called out, and Raicho sighed.

"I know you're going to look pretty anyway, so let me see already!"

He grumbled as he loosened the tie of his tuxedo.

Another of the stars, Renri Rouo, hastily grabbed Raicho's hand, and they met each other's eyes.

Renri would have been scared to face Raicho before, but that man was gone.

"Don't untie it, Raicho."

In fact, he seemed to have the tough guy under his control.

"...But I can't breathe."

"It's just for a few hours!"

"...A few *hours*?"

"The girls have it worse, okay? It's just a tie."

"...I don't think it's the right size... Doesn't it look weird?"

"No, you look good. Besides, you don't have much of a choice, with your physique, so it would be better to just give up."

"Your tuxedo looks fine."

"Because I'm normal."

Renri tightened Raicho's tie again as Raicho looked down at him and said: "No way. You're not normal at all."

He put on his usual, brutal smile and continued chatting happily.

"You call a guy who plots a wedding while the Town's in shambles so they don't complain about it *normal*?"

Renri looked away. "You're making me sound like the bad guy here..."

"The good thing about you is that you're a logical guy, but you're also open to accepting the illogical."

"...Well, you sure didn't object. It wasn't just my idea."

"Well, I love causing mischief. More so when I get to marry Ruri."

Raicho knocked again, but this time, Ruri yelled, "Go away!"

“...How’s your family?” Renri asked, and Raicho smiled wryly.

“Not here; they’re against it. But it’s fine. Time will smooth things over. They’ll have to accept it after I become Ruri’s and Ayame’s Guard. They’re just boycotting because I caused all that chaos. What about you?”

“...Well, my family’s always been like that, so...”

“Looks like both our families have their fair share of problems.”

“Yeah...”

“Thankfully not the Hazakura family, though.”

“You said it... I feel at ease knowing there are some families out there who don’t hate each other. Despite all the complaints, they supported us in the end.”

Today, Renri Rouo would be marrying Ayame Hazakura, and Raicho Kimikage would marry Ruri Hazakura.

It was basically a miracle that they’d gotten to this point.

Much thought had been given to Renri’s and Raicho’s punishment after the incident on Mount Ryugu.

They had acted without permission from the Town, armed themselves, and committed violence on a sacred mountain.

That would normally be enough to warrant an arrest by National Security, but they had also defeated Doyen Turtle with the help of the Agents of the Four Seasons. And so they’d been left in an incredibly unusual situation.

Punishing the two of them, as well as the young members of the Kimikage family, would also mean casting blame on the Agents of the Four Seasons. And that would bring objections.

People, of course, formed some very natural opinions on the matter.

This had all happened in the first place because no one had put a stop to the slander, they thought.

Why had the Agency and the Towns remained silent? they asked.

Fire those responsible before criticizing the actions of Maverick Rabbit Horn, they demanded.

A similar argument broke out within the Fugeki clan, too, as the Archer of Dawn joined the Archer of Twilight in criticizing the treatment of the gods incarnate.

Needless to say, Kaguya fulfilled his promise by releasing an official statement saying that the Dark Wolf mystery had been solved, thanks to the alliance between Twilight and Summer: *The Hazakura sisters are a good omen to us.*

Staff from the Agency and leaders from the Towns visited to apologize and explain about concealing the matter.

Kaguya offered a logical rebuttal. “If you claim that what the Hazakura sisters and their fiancés did went beyond their respective authorities, then where was *your* response to the situation?” Dawn, Twilight, and the Seasons were all caught up in the storm.

In the end, two things were decided:

Harsh punishments would be handed down to those who plotted to replace the Agents.

Pardons would be given to all members of Maverick Rabbit Horn for working to stop them.

As a result, everyone from Maverick Rabbit Horn was released free of charge, including Renri and Raicho. Some were still suspicious of the twins, but it had calmed down.

The Townchief of Summer, who had been the most vocal supporter in labeling the Hazakura sisters as bad omens, was found to be the mastermind behind the replacement plan, after all. And when he was identified as the source, his criticisms were naturally disavowed.

However, Doyen Turtle was not gone, and a bad reputation was not so easily fixed.

The issue that came up after this was of how to structure security for the activities of the twin goddesses. It had already been proved that they weren't safe even inside the Town.

Agency staff would be deployed to their home at all times, naturally, and National Security would set patrols. The Towns normally refused entry to outsiders, but they had to accept it, as Seiran Matsukaze was still missing.

Only the matter of their Guards remained, yet no one volunteered for the position after all that had happened.

Raicho had been assigned the job provisionally on paper, but it was practically set in stone.

Renri, on the other hand, had quit his job at the medical office and started working at the Four Seasons Agency.

He was sent to the Maintenance Division of the Summer Branch's Security Department.

Although he had no knowledge of martial arts, Renri would train to serve alongside the Agents of the Four Seasons.

Just as Winter had looked for someone with qualifications as a counselor, a security member with a medical background was highly valued by the Agents of the Four Seasons.

Everything fell into place.

And so these two young men would become happy grooms today.

“Renri, could you come with me to see the Guard of Autumn later?”

“Huh? Why?”

“You remember I used his voice? He chewed me out back on Mount Ryugu, and I’m afraid to go see him alone... Ruri won’t take my side on that, either.”

“He’s a good person, though.”

“It’s just awkward... Please... The others are going to be mad at me, too...”

“Fine... Anyway, how long are they going to take there?”

Renri and Raicho knocked on the brides’ door, and Ruri and Ayame yelled in unison, “Not yet!”

Unlike the carefree grooms outside, the twins were racked by nerves and anxiety.

“Did I put too much color on my cheeks? No, you need a little more for the pictures, right?”

Ruri checked her makeup in the mirror over and over again.

She wore a princess line dress that fully accentuated her cuteness and looked stunning with the rest of her ensemble. It was Ruri’s ideal wedding dress. She’d wanted a light skirt that spread out around her, and the highlight of the bodice was the sewing on the off-the-shoulder section. It had beautifully decorated translucent silk organdy sleeves that revealed some skin while keeping it elegant. A bridal headdress sat atop her loosely done-up hair, and a gorgeous ribbon decorated the back of the dress. It was the wedding dress of any young girl’s dreams.

“Is this really the right shade of lipstick...? Maybe I should ask the makeup artist again...”

Ruri’s ribbon-shaped earrings bounced with her every fidget.

Raicho would be thunderstruck and shower her with praise when he saw her. Ruri looked dazzling, with no reason to worry whatsoever, yet she still wasn’t satisfied.

Ayame tried persuading her. "Ruri, let's give up already. We've done what we could..."

In contrast to her sister, Ayame looked calmly at the schedule. The time they had to check their dresses was already up.

"Ayame! You only do this once! You should be trying to look your best!"

"I already have."

She was right; her wedding dress was missing nothing.

Ayame wore a more form-fitting dress with the skirt coming to just above her knees. The bodice had silk organdy with classic lacing sewn in a mermaid line. At first sight, it looked like a see-through minidress, but it wasn't at all risqué.

There was a mystical aura about her, thanks to Ayame Hazakura's natural elegance. Her earrings were graceful flowers, and her hair was braided and decorated with smaller blossoms. It was a very bold, avant-garde dress for the serious and calm Ayame, but she was gorgeous in it. Like a beautiful flower embellished by rings of pretty blossoms.

Ayame sighed at Ruri's insistence and stood next to her before the mirror.

"Look. We... We look the prettiest we've ever looked. The dress fitters and makeup artists gave it their all. It would be rude to them to worry any further."

Despite the difference in style between them, the twins still had a sense of harmony. It would be tough to find a better example of the affinity between them. One could tell that they had extensively discussed their outfits ever since they had decided to hold their double wedding.

Still, Ruri felt like she wasn't ready. Ayame looked nervous, too, but she was more concerned about the placement of the guests' seats and the general flow of the event.

All she could think about was showing the gods incarnate they'd invited hospitality deserving of their status.

"Let's stop looking in the mirror. You remember the schedule?"

"...Raicho does; it's okay."

Ayame pouted. "Look, today you'll have to be with me a lot of the time. We have to change dresses later on, so make sure you memorize it, too. And we're going to have to redo our lipstick when we put on the kimonos. You're going to be upset about that later on, I'm sure. Just look at the schedule."

"...I wanted a colorful dress."

"No, we made this deal with Mom. No complaining."

"Meanie..."

Ruri grumbled about everything, as if she was getting pre-wedding jitters at the last moment.

"..."

But Ayame was used to her complaining.

"Enough. Let's let Renri and Raicho in."

If Ruri wasn't going to listen, then neither would she.

"Waaah! Wait!" Ruri clung to Ayame's arm.

"Ruri... You're going to undo my dress."

"..."

"Let me go."

"Just a little longer..."

Ruri's voice was quiet; she must really be agitated. Her arms were shaking.

"..." Ayame furrowed her brow, but she didn't give any more scolding.

"What's scaring you?" she asked gently.

"..."

"Tell me, Ruri. What are you afraid of?"

"...That after this...it won't be just the two of us anymore."

It was an abstract fear.

"We were always together..."

But Ayame understood what she meant. That their world as sisters would

come to an end. The wedding would begin the moment they opened the door and welcomed their grooms. The era of Ruri and Ayame, the duo, would become a thing of the past. The present would change.

“We’ll still be living nearby. And Raicho will be my Guard, too...”

“There are houses in between... We’ll be so far apart.”

“There were no other empty houses.”

“I wanted to live together!”

Ayame shook her head, a hopeless expression on her face.

“No way...” Ruri hung her head, hurt by her sister’s reaction. “You’re so mean...”

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“I just want to enjoy my honeymoon,” said Ayame. “Ruri, you’re ruining your makeup. Don’t rub your eyes.”

“...”

“Honestly... I’ll come see you every three days.”

“...”

“That’s not enough? I can’t believe Raicho still wants to marry you...”

Ruri couldn’t avoid shedding a tear. “...He said it’s okay if you’re the most important person to me.”

The realization that she wasn’t the most important person in Ayame’s life made Ruri cry.

“...He said I can still love you over anyone else...”

“Ruri...”

“Raicho is so nice... Which is why I’m happy...but...” Ruri let out a sob. “But I want you to love me the most, just for a little bit longer...”

Ayame hugged Ruri almost completely on reflex. “...Ruri.”

It was the former Guard of Summer’s job to tell her goddess sister the magic words.

The girl who shared a face with her.

The girl who had given up her happiness for the sake of the many.

It was her job to encourage her goddess.

For the little sister, her big sister's love was her one salvation.

"You dummy... You're going to deliver summer to Yamato together with me for the rest of our lives."

Ayame's mentality was a bit different now than it was when she'd been a Guard, but fundamentally it remained the same.

"You won't be alone... And even if we live apart, it's not like we're going to stop seeing each other."

The little sister had followed her big sister ever since she was a kid.

All to tell her "*I love you.*"

They were equals, in reality. But they'd had to twist things a bit to make it work.

Ayame had been worried before. Not anymore.

"We're closer than ever now. Why are you crying?"

It was okay if they were different, more tangled than other sisters.

Ayame thought that they had reached this, their best shape, after the many twists and turns they'd faced.

"I'm glad I became Agent of Summer."

The sisters who hadn't wanted to become goddesses might not be able to go back to being human, but the two of them had become one.

"There's nothing to be afraid of anymore."

Tears formed in Ayame's eyes as she spoke.

Their curse would last forever, but it was nothing to fear.

“We don’t need any vow to stay together until our deaths.”

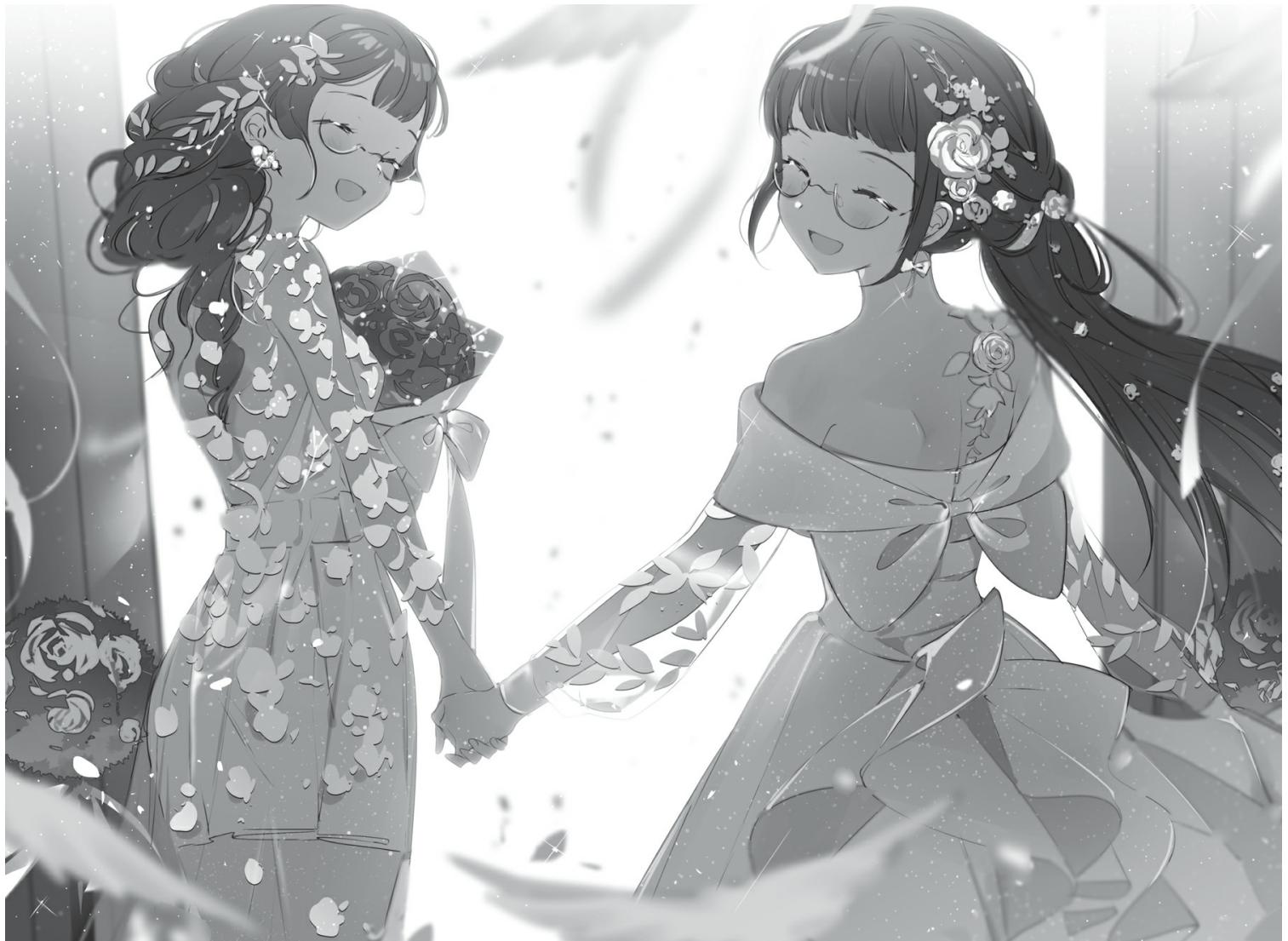
Nothing to fear.

“I love you, Ruri.”

Together, they could fight the world.

“I love you, too, Sis.”

Nobody knew their summer was granted by sisters like these.



## AFTERWORD

I hope this message finds you well. Has summer come to you? What did you think of the story of the Wolf, Twilight, and Summer?

There was a lot of love and sadness in Spring, so I put a lot of romance in Summer.

The relationships are still developing, but I'm sure many things are happening in the margins of the story.

I hope you will continue to support the love of the gods incarnate of Yamato.

Now then, I wove this story eager to deliver you the season of summer, but to be honest, it wasn't all smooth sailing. For the Dance of Spring, I thought so hard about whether I was putting all the right things into the story that I was giving to you that I ended up crying, and I cried again with Summer.

It hurt so, so much. There was so much pain and sadness as I wrote this story.

I thought a lot about why it was so painful, and came to the conclusion that it was because summers are shorter over here in the north, so all my life, I'd never really thought that much about summer. It's not that I dislike it; it just doesn't feel very close to me.

For me, it's like a friend who disappears before you really know they're there. It comes every year to smile at me, but then I get lonely when I realize it's gone. That's summer.

It's an unrequited love. One I can't speak about so casually.

I thought that would continue to be the case, but after wrapping up this story, I felt like my relationship with summer had also changed a bit. I wanted to know more about it.

I wanted to enjoy the season of the Hazakura sisters.

Nothing would make me happier than to think that you, wherever you are in the world, might be thinking the same.

Time to close out with some special thanks. There are more people now helping me with this story moving forward. Publishers, binders, editors, bookshops—thank you to everyone involved, from the printing to the delivery of this story.

I also want to thank my family and friends for always bringing me back from my dreams and into reality.

To Suoh, for creating this world with such beautiful illustrations. The skill, talent, and effort put into this volume is outstanding, as always. Thank you so much.

And finally, thank you for standing next to me watching the arrow as it flies into the sky.

You may not think that's something worth being thanked for, coming with me all the way to the end, but that's not the case.

I'm glad to be able to spend summer with you. I'm glad to have met you. Please stay well. I'm always sad to have to say good-bye.

May you have another wonderful season.

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