

王子様が あふれる

黄薔薇革命

今野緒雪



Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 2

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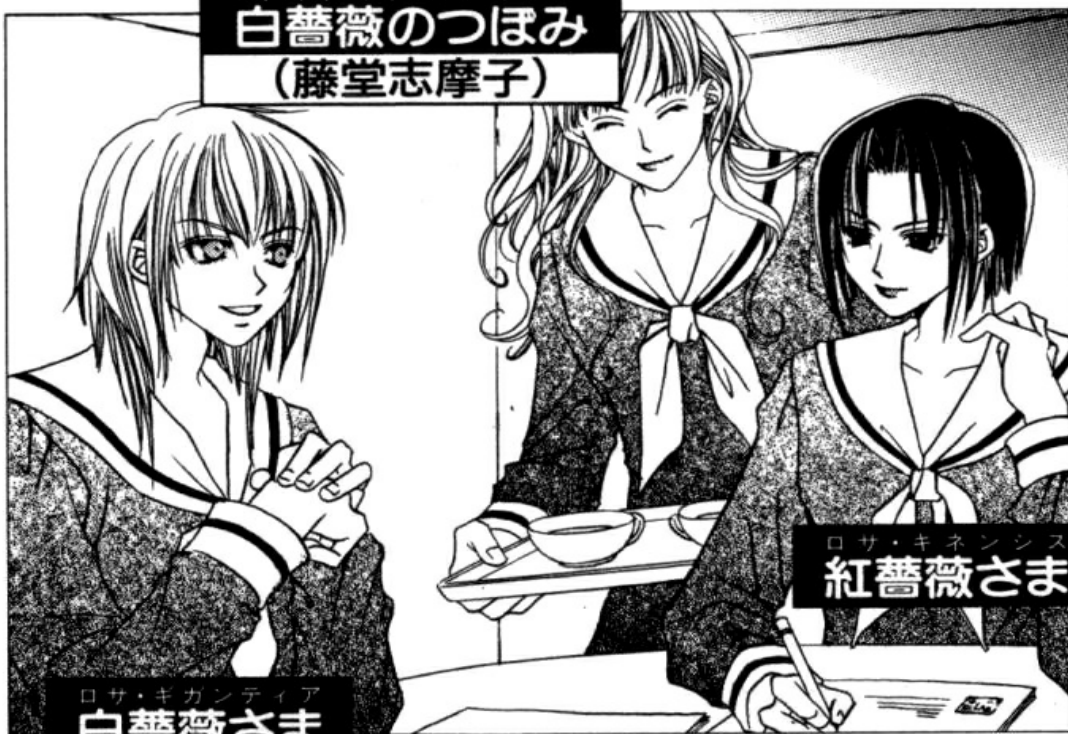
Prologue

ロサ・フェティタ・アン・フットン フェティ・スール
黄薔薇のつぼみの妹
(島津由乃)



ロサ・フェティタ・アン・フットン
黄薔薇のつぼみ
(支倉 令)

ロサ・キガンティア・アン・フットン
白薔薇のつぼみ
(藤堂志摩子)



ロサ・キネンシス
紅薔薇さま

ロサ・キガンティア
白薔薇さま

ロサ・キネンシス・アン・フットン

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(小笠原祥子)



ロサ・キネンシス・アン・フットン フティ・スール

紅薔薇のつぼみの妹

(福沢祐巳)



ロサ・フェディタ
黄薔薇さま

リリアン女学園写真部特別展示
「山百合会の幹部たち」

Photo by 武嶋薦子

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-coloured school uniform.

Walking slowly as to not disturb the plaits in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves here.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

Hasekura Rei (支倉令) and Shimazu Yoshino (島津由乃) both walked in a straight line down this maiden highway, -and arrived in the present.

Best Sœur

Part 1.

After the school festival.

Awaiting Fukuzawa Yumi, who had idled away her Monday holiday like a cat, were not the ordinary, peaceful days she had been looking forward to, but rather an extension of the busy, lively days that had begun prior to the school festival.

“Ugh, I’m late.”

She quickly walked down the gingko tree pathway after scurrying under the main gate, ignoring the other students milling about. ... No, maybe she was running a bit.

Even though the hems of her skirt was in disarray, even though her collar was a mess, she could only beg for forgiveness this morning. After all, it was a special day.

“Ahh, why did I forget to switch alarm clocks?”

She had thought, “I should switch clocks” while sitting on the toilet on Sunday, but she had forgotten about it entirely by the time she returned to her room.

Perhaps washing her hands had stimulated her mind enough to put a lid on that memory, or maybe the door not closing perfectly had irritated her. No, speaking to her brother at the landing of the stairs probably was the number one reason.

Plus, as she had decided to sleep in during the holiday, she switched off her alarm clock when going to sleep on Sunday night, so she had completely forgotten about the alarm clock until this morning.

What a blunder. What a disgrace. Late on such an important day.

The Maria-sama statue appeared at the fork. Even though she was in this much of a hurry, she still stopped and put her hands together. That's what habit is.

-Maria-sama, please watch over me today, too. Please help me lead a life without misguided conduct.

Then she opened her eyes and ran, ... no, walked, and that's when she heard the voice.

"Wait right there."

When she heard the voice, Yumi's back subconsciously straightened. For a moment, she thought she heard the voice of the person Yumi "feared" the most, but she then realized the voice sounded wrong.

"Yumi, why are you in such a hurry?"

She slowly turned around to confirm the identity of the voice, and found herself looking straight into a camera lens.

"Gokigenyou. How was I? Did you think I was Sachiko-sama?"

As she spoke, her camera made a clicking sound. The photography club's ace, Takeshima Tsutako-san.

In the case of Tsutako-san, she doesn't even let go of her camera for a shutter chance even when she's talking, so it almost felt like speaking to a cyborg.

"Gokigenyou. ... I'm sorry, I'm in a bit of a rush, so I don't have the time to fool around right now."

Yumi turned down a request for one more and turned her back to her classmate, then resumed walking silently.

"Oh, what do you mean by not having the time?"

Tsutako-san ran after her after pocketing her camera. Even though there must be better subjects elsewhere in the school.

“I see. Yumi-san, for some reason, is in an incredible hurry. May I take this as having to do with Sachiko-sama?”

Her borderless glasses glimmered. When she goes into this mode, Tsutako-san seems just like her newspaper club seniors. In the end, she’s just a curious cat.

“Sort of. Not entirely wrong.”

As she was not the type of person that could be warded off with half-hearted words, Yumi quickly walked to the school buildings as she answered. She didn’t have the time to be wasting time here.

“An earlier arrival to school than usual. Yet an expression screaming that you’re about to be late to something.”

Tsutako-san jumped out ahead by a half-step, turned around, and deftly walked backwards while staring at Yumi’s face. Her footwork was light. Maybe it was a result of her peeping photo style of photography.

Leaving that aside, just as Tsutako-san insinuated, Yumi was not about to be late for class. Still, she would have much preferred her report card to have “Tardy: 1” rather than be in the situation she was currently in.

“I get it. Yumi-san, is Sachiko-sama waiting for you? An early-morning rendezvous at the back of the Sanctuary?”

“Rendezvous?”

“French. If you were to translate it, it would be a ‘meeting,’ I guess? As the romanticist, Tsutako-san would very much prefer to translate it as a ‘clandestine meeting.’ Speaking of which, you only see the word rendezvous used in space stories nowadays.”

“Nowadays.” What generation did Tsutako-san come from? Sometimes you begin to wonder if Tsutako-san is actually the same sixteen-years old as you are.

Of course, there are many people around Yumi that you would be hard-

pressed to call an “ordinary high school student,” so it wasn’t that big of a deal.

“It’s not something as delicious as a secret meeting.”

When she answered truthfully, Tsutako-san adjusted her glasses, lowered her posture and looked up at Yumi.

“Oh, dear. Then, may I ask what that proudly glimmering rosary on your breast is?”

“Ugh.”

She’s sharp-sighted. That rosary was indeed the same rosary she received two days from Ogasawara Sachiko-sama. And because she accepted the rosary, that meant she became the sœur to one of the most prominent students in the school-.

She blushed just thinking about it. It was a spur of the moment, or Sachiko-sama had pressed her in earnest, or whatever, in any case, she accepted the rosary with the feeling of leaping off of a stage made of clear, spring water, but now that she thought about it this clear, morning daylight, she realized the enormous reality that was looming around the corner.

There was a steep cliff right under the stage of clear water, and there was no angel on stand-by at the bottom of the cliff with a fluffy, feathery mattress.

Reality was harsh. If she messed up her flight, she could end up with a broken leg, or worse, snap her neck and instantly die.

“And this is in full view. Yumi-san, usually you hide these things under your uniform.”

“I’m, not used to wearing it, so I didn’t think about what you do with it after wearing your uniform. ... But, I don’t have the time to be talking about this!”

Yumi realized and started running. At some point she’d gotten so engulfed in the conversation that she had stopped, like mothers around a well, speaking as they draw up water. She was already late as it was, but now she was

definitely tardy.

“Yumi-san I’ll be looking forward to hearing about this later.”

Tsutako-san stopped following. In exchange, she heard the repeated clicking of the camera’s shutter from behind. What could possibly be fun about taking photos of the backside of a student running at full speed-.

Anyways, Yumi felt that she was more and more becoming surrounded by strange people.

She arrived at the Rose Mansion, the student council’s headquarters standing at the corner of the school grounds, at seven fifty.

“I’m sorry I’m late.”

When she opened the door to the first-floor room that had, until the school festival, been used as a storage for the “Yamayurikai-version Cinderella” props, the gorgeous faces of the distinguished Yamayurikai members all turned around at once.

(Eek...)

Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida, Rosa Foetida en bouton Hasekura Rei-sama, Rosa Gigantea en bouton Toudou Shimako-san, and-.

“Were you caught in traffic?”

She was supposed to be weak against morning because of her low blood pressure, but Sachiko-sama glared at her and spoke with her usual, icy tone.

“N, no.”

“Then, what happened?”

Her trademark raven-black hair fell off her shoulders and stretched down her breasts. Her expression, with her angled eyebrows and her cold eyes, looked chillingly beautiful. –But it wasn’t the time to be caught awestruck. Although she used kind words in her questioning, it wasn’t something as nice as a “question,” and no matter how you tried to twist it, it was, at the very least, a cross-examination.

“Hey, Sachiko.”

Rei-sama tapped her shoulder, but Sachiko-sama quickly shut her out with a “please stay silent” and advanced to Yumi again.

“If you have a reason for being late, be clear about it.”

“...”

Even so, it was hard for her to say, “I overslept,” when being pressured by Sachiko-sama so much.

“Just, what time do you think it is?”

“Seven fifty-two...”

She bluntly looked at her wrist-watch and answered, and behind Sachiko-sama, Rosa Chinensis started laughing.

On the Tuesday after the school festival was to be a quick cleaning, followed by a brief reflection meeting, so they were meant to meet at the Rose Mansion by eight. Technically she’d arrived before eight, so she wasn’t actually late, but Sachiko-sama had sternly told Yumi that, since she was a first-year, she should arrive at worst fifteen-minutes before the meeting and welcome her seniors.

“Just what is your reason for being later than the third-year onee-sama?”

She had no idea. Sachiko-sama, when it came to these things, was as strict as an athletics club leader-. Just as she thought that.

“Sachiko’s become quite eminent, hasn’t she.”

She heard a voice from behind her. Before she could turn around, Yumi’s neck was pinioned, so all she could do was screech, “Ugeh.”

“Gokigenyou, everyone.”

“Rosa Gigantea!”

This was its own style of entrance that truly reflected the person’s personality. One of the three-colored Roses of the Lillian Girls’ Academy student council “Yamayurikai”’s leaders, Rosa Gigantea yawned without covering her mouth, one arm still wrapped around Yumi’s neck. It was a shame, as if she never opened her mouth, her looks were like that of a mannequin.

“My bad, my bad. I completely forgot, so I came as usual. Well, we were meeting at eight, so it’s all good, right, Sachiko?”

Rosa Gigantea looked like she was an armed burglar using a hostage, or perhaps a ventriloquist using a puppet, as she stepped forward, dragging Yumi with her.

“Y, yes... but Yumi-.”

“I think that’s enough.”

This time Rosa Foetida interjected.

“The meeting just has to start at eight.”

“But! I want Yumi to be a bit more self-conscious.”

“Says the person who made her seniors wait 25 minutes the other day. You don’t sound very persuasive, Sachiko.”

Rosa Chinensis laughed uproariously, but as Yumi was also late by 25 minutes to the play preparations, she could only shrivel even more. Blushing a deep red, having been struck where she hadn’t expected, Sachiko-sama

protested.

“Onee-sama, you are being far too soft on Yumi.”

But she was protesting to people that easily made her dance upon their palms. Rosa Chinensis folded her arms and proudly replied.

“Of course! For us third-years, second-years are like children and first-years are like grandchildren. Training is fundamentally up to the parents. Grandmothers simply irresponsibly find them cute, and treat them as such.”

Hearing Rosa Chinensis describe herself as a grandmother made Yumi exchange glances with Shimako-san, who was also a first-year, and then roll her eyes a bit. Ah, I see, the Roses are like grandmothers.

“Sachiko, when you were a first-year, you were treated quite kindly by my graduating onee-sama, were you not?”

“Th, that’s...”

Sachiko-sama could not find the words to retort. It seemed like she had been treated extremely well by her “grandmother” when she was a first-year.

“That’s how the world is. Give it up.”

“-.”

Sachiko-sama was utterly defeated. Not that anyone actually won.

She wondered if the Roses were fundamentally rather sadistic. Or maybe Sachiko-sama was masochistic. Every time, Sachiko-sama was verbally defeated in this fashion. Even though she was the object of the school’s affections, and she was a genuine, named household’s princess, the Roses themselves were not simple peasants overwhelmed by love, either.

But, she wondered why Sachiko-sama felt so different when surrounded by the Roses. The usual Sachiko-sama was like a perfect princess.

“Oh my, Yumi-chan. I wonder what this is-?” Rosa Gigantea had finally

stopped being a stalking ghost and had turned, instead, into a sexual harassing man, sticking her hand into Yumi's sailor uniform.

“Kyan!”

She yelped as the cold hand touched her collarbone. Rosa Gigantea quickly giggled, “Sorry,” and dragged out the rosary Yumi had hidden.

“Ah hah, so this is why Sachiko's all uptight.”

“Oh, dear.”

“So she pulls through when it matters.”

The Roses spoke among themselves, alternating glances between the rosary and Sachiko-sama. Yumi felt like a panda in a zoo.

“Onee-sama, it's time for the meeting.”

She didn't seem comfortable receiving attention in this way, so Sachiko-sama spoke, looking extremely displeased. It didn't look like she was hiding her embarrassment, but that was probably what it was, nonetheless.

“Oh come, do us a service. When, and where, did you exchange vows?”

“S, service?”

Sachiko-sama was finally beginning to look angry. As the Roses had deliberately used a wording to agitate Sachiko-sama, Yumi thought they seemed quite evil.

“And why must I perform a service task to the onee-sama?”

“Oh, if you say so. Then we'll just ask Yumi-chan. Yumi-chan'll tell us, because she's honest, right?”

“Umm-.”

What a conundrum. Sachiko-sama looked like she wanted to scream, “I'll

never forgive you if you tell them,” but the prospect of making enemies of the three strongest students in Lillian Girls’ Academy was not any better.

What should she do-, Yumi gulped. Just then, she felt a stimulus in her stomach.

(Th, this...)

The first stimulus was just the trigger, and she felt another wave. There was no stopping it, something horrible was about to happen.

(What should I do?)

But there were some things that people could avoid using sheer force of will, and there were other things that they were helpless with. Because Yumi was fighting the latter, she tried to come up with a way to lower her embarrassment.

(One, to warn them of what’s going to happen and simply accept the embarrassment. Two, raise my voice and try to confuse everyone. Three, run.) Yumi chose three. If she was going to confuse herself, she at least wanted to be spared “that.”

“Ah, wait!”

But when she started running, Rosa Gigantea snagged her right before she got to the door and dragged her back.

“What, do you not want to say? Was it so fabulous a memory you don’t want to tell us?”

Yumi shook her head. No. She hadn’t run because she wanted to hide the story behind the ceremony.

(Ahh, but... it’s too late.)

She should have eaten breakfast if it were going to come to this-. At the same time, a growling sound, like the croaking of a frog, arose from Yumi’s body. And, unbelievably, it ran for about ten seconds, her longest ever, and as the room was dead silent, it echoed off the walls.

(Ahh, it’s all over...)

Ah, to make these beautiful women hear the croaking of a frog. If there were a hole, ... no, she wanted to tear a hole ten-meters wide and then hide in it for ten years.

“... kuh.”

Rosa Gigantea broke the silence. Because it was her, it was not chuckling nor giggling, but rather an uproarious “hah hah hah.” Lead by that, -no, they probably weren’t actually lead, but rather their attempt to hold it in was in vain, as everyone other than Yumi and Sachiko-sama began laughing.

“Nice, Yumi-chan, you’re the best!”

“I was wondering how she was going to get out of this mess for Sachiko-onee-sama, but wow, what wonderful timing!”

“We shall pay our respects to Yumi-chan’s natural comedy and allow them to reprieve, then.”

She didn't know why it turned out that way, but in any case, the Roses smiled, apparently more than satisfied. The quick clean-up was indeed very quick, and Rei-sama and Shimako-san, who'd arrived first, had actually completed the job, so everyone left behind their laughter and climbed the stairs. In order to have their meeting, they were headed toward the second-floor room, which was supposedly the nominal conference room, despite actually feeling more like a salon.

There was one room on the second floor and one room on the first floor. Despite being called the Rose Mansion, it was extremely small. However, despite being small, it was splendid enough that calling it a cabin or shed would be disrespectful. It was constructed out of wood in the corner of the school grounds, and was rather clearly older than the other buildings. A triangular roof, stained-glass windows, ivy that crawled around the outer walls, bay windows made of wooden sills, it had the appearance of what you might expect to see in a sepia-colored photo. Once inside, you couldn't help but be constantly reminded of its old age by the warped floorboards and stairs that squeaked with every step, but even so, it had been used with utmost care by generations of student councils, so it was a mansion with a clean, soft atmosphere.

The beautiful seniors climbed the tight, steep staircase while making soft screeching sounds. Although it may have been Yumi's role to have gone ahead and prepared the room, the tightness of the staircase meant it would have been impossible to run past everyone, so she gave up and followed after. Yumi thought that she would have to take advantage of being classmates with Shimako-san and ask about how the Yamayurikai was run.

Starting today, well, more accurately it had begun two days ago the moment she accepted the rosary, she had become Sachiko-sama's sœur. As for Sachiko-sama, she was the sister to Rosa Chinensis, one of the three Roses that lead the Lillian Girls' Academy high school's student council, and thus was slated to become the next Rosa Chinensis. Of course, Yumi couldn't imagine that she would also be destined to become Rosa Chinensis, but as she was the sister to the Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Sachiko-sama, it was expected of her to help out around the Rose Mansion. In actuality, she was more interested in being even the slightest of help to Sachiko-sama, to prove

her worth as a little sister.

So, today was a special day. Her first day as Sachiko-sama's little sister.

Even so.

(I wonder if I disappointed her already.)

Yumi felt a bit blue as she watched the straight black hair sway coolly in front of her with every step. What was Sachiko-sama, the embodiment of pride who hated indecency, thinking of her little sister at this very moment? Because their meeting was filled with mistakes at every turn, Yumi was sure Sachiko-sama wasn't expecting a whole great deal of her, but she wondered if her error this time was too great.

(I hope she wouldn't be asking for her rosary to be returned.)

Screech, screech. As the heavy footsteps climbed, Yumi thought, "You never know." Sachiko-sama, with her unpredictable personality, was, well, unpredictable.

(I mean, everyone was in tears laughing at the frog's croak...)

There were only up to around twenty steps, but the stairs felt intolerably long. It would be so much of a relief if she said anything, but because she was silent, Yumi's thoughts kept turning to negative directions. If she was thinking about putting a blank slate to their sisterly relations, Yumi would have preferred a big bolt of lightning to just smash her that very instant. —As she thought that, Sachiko-sama turned around when she finished climbing.

She still had a sharp look in her eyes. But her relatively elevated position emphasized her splendid beauty.

Even though it wasn't the time for it, Yumi was mesmerized. She hadn't accepted being Sachiko-sama's sister because of her looks, but her looks were definitely the starting point for Yumi's adoration of her.

"Put out your hands, with your palms up."

As ordered, she put out her hands. Because it wasn't likely to be palm-reading, she assumed Sachiko-sama meant for her to put out both hands, and then noticed something about how she looked.

(... This.)

Looked eerily similar. Yes, exactly. The figure of a young boy being punished by a private tutor. She had seen, in an insert picture for a novel, the illustration of a boy sticking out both hands and being slapped on the palms with a pointing stick. Even though she completely forgot about what the book was for.

(Is Sachiko-sama going to...?)

She felt like flying away. She said she would prefer a bolt of lightning – but, when it came down to it, she couldn't help but think, “But I don't like pain.”

But, Yumi screwed her eyes shut. Rei-sama, who was walking in front of Sachiko-sama, had already walked through the biscuit-shaped door, so it was only the two of them left in the hallway.

Yet, despite waiting, no pain could be felt from her palms. Instead, she heard Sachiko-sama rustling through her pocket. “Huh?” she thought, and then she felt something light placed on her hands.

“This-”

When she opened her eyes, two cough drops were placed on her hands.

“Well, it's better than nothing, I hope.”

“Eh...?”

“I understand you hurried so much you didn't even get the chance to eat breakfast.”

Sachiko-sama turned on her heel and walked away.

“Just, don't embarrass me too much.”

“Sachiko-sama...”

Yumi ran up the last step and followed. Her own imagination was foolish. But, she couldn't imagine in her wildest dreams that Sachiko-sama would give her cough drops.

When she caught up at the door, Sachiko-sama turned around, as if remembering something, and let go of the doorknob.

“Also, please stop with the ‘Sachiko-sama.’”

“Eh?”

“You're my sœur, so settle down and begin calling me ‘onee-sama,’ please.”

As Sachiko-sama said that and fixed Yumi's tie, she asked, “And your answer?”

“... Yes.”

Still trying to grasp what was asked of her, Yumi simply nodded, but that was apparently enough, as Sachiko-sama smiled full of satisfaction and disappeared to the other side of the biscuit-shaped door.

“Onee-sama...”

She whispered, trying to get used to it. She felt like she was going to blush, so un-used to using the word she was.

Onee-sama.

It felt ticklish, and it was enough to speed up her palpitations.

It may seem foolish, but she touched her rosary from above her uniform, just to make sure everything was real. The rosary was still there. The rosary she received from Sachiko-sama two days ago.

So, Yumi was the only one allowed to call Sachiko-sama “onee-sama,” in the whole school. Yumi was so overcome with emotion she made a fist with her

hand.

“Come, stop dawdling.”

Sachiko-sama called from the room.

“Y, yes.”

Yumi quickly answered, then popped the cough drops into her mouth. Having been warmed in her hand, it had been difficult to remove the wrapping.

“Oh, where’s Yoshino-san...?”

After the regular members had taken their seats, Yumi finally noticed that Rei-sama’s sœur, Shimazu Yoshino-san was missing. Shimako-san had already begun preparing the tea, a job normally reserved for first-years, so Yumi quickly went to help.

“Her fever hasn’t gotten down since yesterday.”

Rei-sama answered, almost like she was speaking to herself.

“I think it’s because she was over-excited because of the school festival.”

Apparently her body always broke down after events. Everyone other than Yumi seemed to be aware of that, so discussions simply resumed, with no one making any further comment.

As she distributed Shimako-san’s tea from a tray, Yumi thought, “I guess Yoshino-san’s body is frail.” When she thought about it, she’d never seen Yoshino-san participate in athletics activities.

Although Shimazu Yoshino-san had also attended Lillian Girls’ Academy

since kindergarten, they'd never been in the same class. Although they'd become acquainted with each other recently, because of the school festival, they'd never actually sat down and spoken.

In regard to Yoshino-san, she seemed to have a special personality on top of her frail body that created the image of a sweet young girl, with a relatively weak but perpetual smile. For example, one single lily of the valley in between roses and lilies.

When Yumi placed a teacup in front of Rosa Foetida, she heard a bit of idle chatter between her and Rei-sama.

“By the way, the newspaper club said they wanted to interview Rei and Yoshino-chan today.”

“The newspaper club? Yoshino and I?”

Rei-sama seemed to wonder, “Why?” and tilted her head to the side. Yumi also tilted her head. The tough, stern Rei-sama and the honest, diligent Yoshino-san didn't seem to be the type of people to stir up enough cause for the newspaper club to come calling.

“Oh, Yumi-chan, no looking elsewhere or you'll spill!”

Rosa Gigantea seemed to scold Yumi as she took her teacup from the tray.

“I'm sorry.”

Even though she apologized, she was still curious about the Rosa Foetida sisters.

“You know. Even the newspaper club doesn't just print scandalous stories. Well, not that I blame you for holding that prejudice, after the big fuss you raised in becoming sisters.”

Rosa Gigantea looked at Sachiko-sama and Yumi as she spoke.

“I see-.”

She vaguely remembered that there weren't a whole lot of scandals on the school newspaper that she could think of. Normally they're quite normal, printing stories of regular school events, or reporting athletics match results. The paper that was being circulated tomorrow was most likely based on the school festival, too.

"You and Yoshino-chan apparently were voted best sœur in the school-wide survey. It's a formal commission request, and I don't see why you would reject-"

Rosa Foetida spoke in a business-like manner, as if she were stating mathematical formulas, as she asked Rei-sama, "What do you want to do?"

"But, I don't know when Yoshino can come to school..."

"That's true."

Rosa Foetida warmed both of her hands on her teacup, saying, "I understand." Rosa Foetida always looked bored like this. But it wasn't a disinterested feeling you got from her, as she completed every job requested of her perfectly, and she was always present at classes. Because she did everything perfectly, she seemed like she never had a whole lot of fun with anything.

It was quite mysterious.

That Rosa Foetida and Rei-sama were sisters. It was, of course, not really a "thrilling" relationship like Yumi and Sachiko-sama, nor was it a match of like-minded people like Rosa Gigantea and Shimako-san. Rather, it was hard to place.

Why did Rosa Foetida make Rei-sama her sœur? And how did Rei-sama respond? Perhaps because she herself had found an onee-sama, Yumi became curious about others.

"Has everyone received a cup? If so, let's have a toast."

Rosa Chinensis stood up and spoke. She called it a reflective meeting, but it

seemed like she just wanted to have one last “good work everyone” party before returning to normalcy. Even after the Cinderella play was over, the Roses had to run around as the executive committee, and even after finishing that duty they were called upon for the night celebration, so they had not been able to gather everyone in one spot.

“First, a toast to a successful school festival.”

A toast to straight Darjeeling tea. Unlike Sachiko-sama’s tea, Shimako-san’s black tea was mellow and tasty. When she eagerly poured herself another cup, Rosa Chinensis once again stood up and spoke.

“Second, as commemoration of the moment Sachiko-sama made Yumi hers.”

“Pbbt.”

Partly because she had let down her guard, Yumi barely managed to stop herself from blowing tea out of her mouth.

“Oh my, she’s embarrassed.”

“-Ro, Rosa Chinensis!”

The third-years mumbled, “Oh how it is to be young,” like they were old women. They were totally mocking her, but there was no use in acting up about it. But the phrasing, “making Yumi hers” was rather extreme. But Yumi held back, simply opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish.

“Close your mouth, and wipe your face. How indecent.”

Sachiko-sama held out her gorgeous, laced, white handkerchief. Because she had come close to blowing out tea, the area around her lips were wet.

“Oh, you won’t wipe her face for her?”

Rosa Gigantea raised her eyebrows in feigned shock.

“Rosa Gigantea, you may wipe Shimako’s face any time you please.”

“I won’t do it for Shimako, but I’d be more than happy to wipe Yumi’s face.”

“I want to take this opportunity to make it clear. Please do not spoil my little sister.”

Perhaps it was because she wasn’t being attacked directly, but Sachiko-sama was quite level-headed this time. Yumi still didn’t know what was the cause for switching her from elegant mode to hysteria mode. Even though they had become sisters, Sachiko-sama was still an unfathomable being.

As the time for morning prayer was arriving, everyone finished drinking and stood up from their seats. Shimako-san said, as she cleaned the cups.

“There are many shapes of sisters, aren’t there.”

The fountain water felt colder than before.

Part 2.

“Yoshino, are you awake?”

Acting out of her own convenience, she opened the door without waiting for a reply and stepped in. Yoshino was lying face-up on her wooden bed, and shifted herself just a bit to confirm who had stepped into the room.

“- Why.”

She hadn’t been expecting to be greeted with, “Welcome!” by a sick person, but Rei brought a chair to the side of the bed while thinking “why” was a bit of a harsh greeting.

It was a chic room, she thought, just as she thought that every time she went into Yoshino’s room. Because it had originally been Yoshino’s uncle’s study room, there was no helping the flashy wallpaper, but everything other than

the ivory walls were dark brown. Floor, ceiling, window sills, shelves, everything. It was enough to make her think, at least use a flowery curtain!

“Has your fever gone down any?”

A chick-design handkerchief was placed on Yoshino’s head – the same handkerchief was used every time she came down with a fever. Yoshino couldn’t calm down without that handkerchief. Even now, despite the pattern fading away, the towel was still used, its outer edges sewn back over and over again.

Her aunt had just wrung the towel a little while ago, so when she felt the methodically folded towel, it still felt cold.

“Do you still feel ill?”

Perhaps she still felt terrible, as Yoshino didn’t open her mouth. But Rei, being used to it, continued.

“Rei-san’s a delivery-man today, so she’ll be retreating after delivering her mail.”

She took out a binder from her bag and placed a set of papers in a clear case on the table.

“The English reader prints are homework for next week. The archaic report came back, so I collected it. And-”

“How about your club?”

Yoshino suddenly interrupted. While at school, they used formal language to be polite, but otherwise they reverted to their regular, casual tones. She even deftly made sure to use “onee-sama” and “Rei-chan” correctly, to suit the situation.

“Club?”

Rei closed her bag and asked.

“Your inter-school match is coming, soon, so you said you needed to put in some extra practice.”

“I did, ... so?”

“Did you skip out, for me?”

Yoshino deliberately removed her handkerchief and asked, no, interrogated. She, loving her detective stories and hard-boiled stories, always look about with insightful eyes, so Rei always had to catch herself from automatically nodding in agreement. But their long time together made her know that if she were to nod, now, Yoshino might become so overcome with anger that she might cause undue stress on her heart.

So, Rei smiled and denied it.

“That’s not true. I asked father to help me practice, today, so I came home earlier for that.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

In Yoshino’s eyes was Rei, who had become extremely masterful at lying only to Yoshino. And in turn, Yoshino had become adept at seeing through Rei’s lies. Although she backed down, accepting the explanation, it wasn’t clear how much of it Yoshino believed.

But it’s not all a lie, Rei whispered to herself. She had, indeed, made a promise with her father to practice, today, it was just at a later time. Plus, she hadn’t come home early solely for Yoshino’s sake, but also for her own. If she stayed at school, she knew she would have been worried sick about Yoshino, anyways. And that lack of concentration would show up in her kendo practice. It wasn’t a good idea to show that sort of form to her juniors. So she said she had errands to run, and came home early.

Her father always said, her technique was great, but her weapon was always unsteady. The weapon of a girl still being swept along by emotions. Not that

gender mattered to her father. But that's why those words struck Rei so deeply. She knew it was true, herself.

"Let me see the prints."

Yoshino placed her damp towel on her pillow, sat up, and scrutinized her "mail." Maybe the reason why she looked so worn-out was because her trademark braids were let down. Or perhaps it was a result of her fever. Yoshino turned around and asked, "What?" when she noticed the stare.

"Nothing."

Rei smiled and shook her head.

Yoshino hadn't changed at all since she was small. Her cousin, who lived next door in the same building site, had basically been a true little sister even before the sœur ceremony. For Yoshino's sake, she was willing to go as far as lie, turning her back to Maria-sama's teachings. To not worry Yoshino. To protect Yoshino's peaceful days. Rei had lived as a knight all this time, like that.

"Rei-chan, what's this?"

Yoshino asked, pointing at a brown envelope mixed into the prints.

"Ah, that's right. I forgot. It's a questionnaire from the newspaper club."

"Questionnaire?"

"Yup."

Rei briefly explained how they had been voted best sœur, and that the newspaper club had asked for an interview but she had turned them down.

"Best Sœur Award..."

Yoshino had a complicated look as she mumbled.

"And, because an interview was impossible, they came crying, asking for us

to at least fill out a questionnaire. They said they would write an article based on that.”

“Ah. Then, Rei-chan, write my part for me.”

“Sure.”

After Rei picked up the questionnaire, she placed it side-by-side with her own and began filling in the answers. There were two sheets to the questionnaire, with the first one being personal data, such as her full name, her birth date, her constellation, her blood type, her class name and attendance number, her club activities, and other such things, so she was able to fill it all in without bothering Yoshino. The second sheet was about favorite quotes, favorite authors, favorite actors, and other such questions, so Rei asked Yoshino one question at a time and wrote down exactly what she heard.

“Rei-chan, what other awards were there?”

“Umm...”

She paper-clipped her sheets and Yoshino’s sheets individually, then put them back in the envelope, then remembered with a somewhat anguished expression. Apparently, Best Sœur wasn’t the only school-wide award that had been awarded to her. Because the survey had been slow in being collected, she’d just found out that day, but Rei had curiously ended up with the Mister Lillian award.

“M, Mister...?”

Due to the unexpected answer, Yoshino opened her eyes wide in surprise and then began laughing. “I bet it’s because those underclassmen sometimes mess up and call me ‘Onii-sama.’”

“Rei-chan, why don’t you grow your hair longer?”

Yoshino reached out and patted Rei’s very-short hair.

“It doesn’t suit me, and it’s bothersome when putting on the protector.”

“Ahh.”

Sachiko was Miss Queen and Shimako was Miss Princess, and Yumi had gotten Miss Cinderella this year, and upon hearing this, Yoshino mumbled emotionally, “Yumi-san.”

“What? Yumi-chan’s on your mind?”

“A bit.”

As Yoshino generally wasn’t interested in most people, that answer was a bit of a surprise. As she always missed a vast amount of class due to her illness, she never bothered to become intimate with any classmates. Although she looked well enough and would have been expected to have a wealth of friends, this attitude ended up having the opposite come true.

“Apparently she accepted Sachiko’s rosary, so you can become friends with her from now on.”

Yoshino flung off her blanket and jumped up, squealing, “Really?” at Rei’s report. Evening, during an autumn night, wasn’t cold enough to turn on the heating, so seeing Yoshino only wearing her pajama made Rei feel a bit cold. So, Rei took the cardigan that was slung over a chair and fit it on Yoshino.

“Sachiko-sama must be ecstatic.”

There was a rosary on Yoshino’s thin breasts, peeking out from the collar of the cardigan.

The dark green emerald Rei gave Yoshino during the spring looked outstanding on her white skin.

Part 3.

Tsukiyama Minako (築山三奈子), the captain of the Lillian Girls' Academy high school newspaper club, was in a great mood.

That was because the newspaper she was in charge of, the “Lillian Kwaraban[[1](#)]” was becoming popular.

“Wonderful.”

She looked down on the B4-sized paper she held in her right hand while standing elegantly, her left hand placed at her waist. While she was simply holding a preview print of the next issue for final check-ups, the all-color display was breathtaking.

“And it’s not just the appearance. The content, the writing, everything about this article is beautifully perfect.”

Stories are fights against time, as they must be told while ripe, was Minako’s creed. If the readers’ desires weren’t presented now, it couldn’t be called a newspaper. On that note, the “Lillian Kwaraban” could stand proud for holding true to that value.

Of course, when there was nothing to talk about, they would had to print articles about the interests of teachers, or the flowers that bloomed in the courtyard, which sullied the reputation of the paper, so to speak. But it was different now. She completely understood what the readers wanted.

It was the era of the Yamayurikai staff. Readers would follow as long as she chased after them. Everything was ripe for the occasion, of sorts.

Unlike her seniors, she was confident, more than willing to chase down anyone, including the student council members, and on top of her nerves, she had the ability to write, and well. And then the Yamayurikai staff, she wondered if there was a more interesting collection of characters in the entire history of the Yamayurikai.

Minako pulled out the previous issue from a shelf and narrowed her eyes at the headline.

"Exclusive Interview!

Rosa Chinensis en bouton, explains everything about her little sister"

See, she could do something this magnificent. The only way she could explain it was that God had chosen her to do the deed. This talent, this skill, it took even her own breath away.

(That's right-)

The story of Rosa Chinensis en bouton was thrilling.

The sœur-less Ogasawara Sachiko, who was absolutely adored by everyone in the school, is rejected by the current Rosa Gigantea en bouton Toudou Shimako, was then turned down by the completely unknown Fukuzawa Yumi, and the person who found the answer to everyone's question of "what's going on" was none other than Minako. Because of certain conditions, she wasn't allowed to publish the article earlier, primarily because the Cinderella play had to happen before she could publish an article about it, but the result of publishing it the day after was that the newspaper became extremely popular. And now-.

"Onee-sama, please stop being a narcissist."

She had become intoxicated to pleasing levels, but her sœur, Yamaguchi Mami (山口真美), had to drag her back to reality. For whatever reason, she had imagined herself in an exquisite place, but instead looked around to see a club room with a giant table in the place of a desk, one aging computer, and a brand-new color printer they had finally managed to purchase with club funds after a long, hard fight with the budgeting committee. There were two other club members in the room, but both of them silently continued their own work, shrugging Minako off. "It happens every day."

"Mami. ... You know."

"Unless you finish checking the article, we won't be able to print everything by tomorrow. And if that happens, onee-sama's motto of 'stories are fights

against time, as they must be told while ripe' will not be carried out this time."

"- Alright."

Minako reluctantly took a seat. Although she had chosen her little sister herself, she sighed, thinking, what a strict little sister I have. After all, that she speaks nothing but the truth makes her all the less cute. The third-years that retired from the club mentioned, "She's just like Minako when you were a first-year," but she couldn't help but imagining she wasn't this bad.

"Not even to the level of Shimazu Yoshino."

But maybe even half-way to her level of obedience and demeanor, a kind sister, is what she would have liked-. Minako flicked her finger at the two-shot photo on the test print.

The girl who stood next to Hasekura Rei, who looked like a young man, floated a soft smile, and they looked like a loving couple.

The two were chosen by vote to be Best Sœur, but it hardly needed a vote. The proud elder sister and the meek little sister was an old, traditional scheme. Cousins and childhood friends. The sickly girl and her protecting knight. The main subject of rumors among the school went from the White Rose to the Crimson Rose, and now was the time for the Yellow Rose. And it was up to them to publish the article.

"Onee-sama."

Warned once again, Minako quickly began looking over the article.

- When.

(Huh...?)

Something, was very odd. It wasn't a misprint or a missed word. Because it was a list, it wasn't a case of awkward phrasing or structure. But, something was odd. Like, the truth was warped, or something...

“Hey, who typed this?”

When Minako asked, a first-year member who sat next to Mami raised her hand, “Me.”

“Is there... something wrong with it?”

It, was the Best Sœur award interview article. Because Shimazu Yoshino was absent, she had gotten them to answer a questionnaire. It seemed Hasekura Rei had answered them both, using the same blue fountain pen, and they had been answered with the same, methodical handwriting. Including the amanuensis episode as part of the two girls’ beautiful relationship, they had written an article and printed it.

“... The questionnaires, did you mix them up?”

“Eh!?”

At once, the three club members scrambled toward the test print.

“Hasekura Rei-sama’s favorite book is shoujo novels, in general, while Shimazu Yoshino-san loves Ikenami Shoutarou’s fencing novels.”

“Rei-sama’s hobby is knitting, Yoshino-san loves TV and sports competitions.”

“Rei-sama’s favorite phrase is ‘sincerity,’ while Yoshino-san’s is ‘first strike, certain victory.’ That’s-”

What it said, everyone thought. But there had to be a mistake. Maybe the two questionnaires were mixed up while typing.

“But, I left them like this.”

The first-year who entered the questionnaire pulled the questionnaires out from their brown envelopes. They were neatly separated into two pairs of sheets, with their ears folded in to keep them together.

“Ahah. Then, I can’t blame you.”

The sheet with the name Hasekura Rei and the sheet with ‘knitting’ were clipped together.

“Then Rei-sama messed up?”

“Probably.”

But, because they were going to print it, they had the obligation to confirm the error before revising it.

“Yoshino-san was absent again, today.”

Mami reported.

“Rei-san should still be at club. Or maybe she’s at the Rose Mansion?”

She could simply send someone else, but Minako stood up. In a case like this, she wasn’t comfortable simply waiting for a report. She placed her cardigan on her chair and left the room.

Along the way, she ran into the photography club member, Takeshima Tsutako.

“Oh. Well, might that be the newspaper club’s Minako-sama? Thanks for working hard this late into the day.”

The photography club and the newspaper club were a relatively intimate pair of clubs, but she still felt uncomfortable around this person. Her actions were relatively simple, but you could never figure out just what she was thinking.

“Rei-sama? She wasn’t present at the Rose Mansion. You know, because the match is soon, she’s been busy every day at practice.”

She was blessed with good timing, as Tsutako had apparently just come from the Rose Mansion. The rumors that she had been going in and out of the Rose Mansion because of her connection to Fukuzawa Yumi seemed to be true. – What an enviable position.

“If you’re headed toward the martial arts building, I shall accompany you.”

Takeshima Tsutako smiled like a lady and suggested that. In actuality, she was aiming for the time just before club activities ended, particularly for the kendo club and the fencing club, and she intended to climb a ladder and snap photos, she mentioned, as they walked toward the building.

“Kendo is a beautiful sport, but the mask is bothersome.”

When she suggested taking photos before practice, she was told that wouldn't work, either.

“The instant they take off their masks after practice is the best.”

The sweaty faces, the strands of black hair stuck to their faces-, her eyes glittered as she spoke. As Minako unfortunately did not share such tastes, she could only listen, nod, and answer, “I see.”

The Japanese-style building called the martial arts building was at the back of the school site, behind the secondary gymnasium. Kendo, archery, judo, karate, and other such martial arts clubs all used this building, and today, half of the wooden-floor was covered with tatami mats and used by the judo club, while the other half was used by the kendo club.

“B, ... beautiful.”

Lady Takeshima Tsutako was clicking her shutter at the judo club members, whose clothing clung to their bodies from the sweat. There was no mistaking it, she was completely thankful for being born a girl.

“Dear, dear.”

Minako left her alone and walked toward the kendo club. As they were still in the midst of practice, she sat down in a corner and watched.

She couldn't confirm Hasekura Rei's location just by looking. She guessed, maybe one of the people wearing the protectors was her, but the name written on her protector was different.

“A point!”

The consultant teacher, who was acting as a referee, shouted, and taking advantage of the break, she decided to ask one of the first-years who was also watching.

“The second-year, Hasekura Rei-san...”

“A, Rei-senpai went home early.”

“... Eh, when?”

“About thirty minutes ago, I think.”

Thirty minutes was enough time to finish preparing to leave and then go out the main gate. She realized she should have checked the shoe boxes, but it was too late for that.

“I apologize for not being of any further help.”

The first-year club member apologized formally and then turned back to watch. Just as she thought, oh, how cute, Takeshima Tsutako had silently appeared by her side and had begun snapping photos again.

(.....)

Minako wordlessly stood up.

“Minako-sama, are you already done here?”

“Hasekura Rei-san left early, apparently.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

As Tsutako didn’t let go of her camera when she turned toward her, it felt like she was going to take photos, so she instinctively put both hands in between her and the lens.

“You have a tough guard, Minako-sama.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Of course not, they’re words of praise.”

Takeshima Tsutako lowered her camera, then narrowed her eyes that were beyond the frame-less glasses and laughed. This is what I don’t like about her, Minako thought.

How unlucky-. She thought, as she left the martial arts building alone.

First she ends up possibly needing to revise printing, then she barely misses Hasekura Rei, then she gets caught by the camera brat. Her happy feelings from just a while ago vanished to the beyond.

She decided to try phoning Hasekura Rei’s home before returning to the club house. She’s relatively close to the school, so she may have arrived home already.

The green phone placed in front of the office was luckily unoccupied. She put in her card and deftly dialed the number. Roughly 70 peoples’ phone numbers were input into Minako’s head. Incidentally, this wasn’t something expected of newspaper club members. This was simply a hobby. One of Minako’s secret pleasures was to pour over the annual student directory. Essentially, she was fundamentally interested in people.

In her hurry, she accidentally pushed the wrong area code, but the receiver seemed to have figured it out nonetheless. Still, no one was picking up.

“I wonder if she’s out...”

She placed with the phone cord with her index finger as her stress level rose.

For the caller, ten rings feels like an eternity.

At the thirteenth ring, finally a young man answered the phone. According to the input personal data, though, Hasekura Rei was an only child, so this couldn't have been a sibling. "I'm sorry. It looks like no one is at home-"

It seemed to be a young man that attended Hasekura Rei's father's dojo. That would mean Hasekura Rei hasn't returned home yet, and it was unlikely a mere student would know much about Hasekura Rei. As she thought about what to do, Minako noticed a certain student walking by.

"Okay. I'll call back later."

She quickly put down the phone and ran out in her indoor shoes.

"Rosa Foetida!"

That person turned around very slowly in front of the library. Her hairstyle was such that she had a hair-band that neatly collected her semi-long hair. Her sailor-collar was the most beautifully tied in the entire school, was how she was described, yes, this was definitely Rosa Foetida.

"Is, ... there something you want?"

Minako instantly took a step back. Rosa Foetida felt even harder to approach than usual.

"Ah, umm."

She was never really a sociable person, but it was especially so, today. But it didn't seem like she was in bad spirits, but rather more like she felt extremely dazed. Though it might be inappropriate to say she looked like she was in love.

"I apologize for calling you over."

Minako stopped, collected herself with a polite greeting, then drove straight to the point. After all, it would be prudent to ask someone who knows Hasekura Rei and Shimazu Yoshino well. And after receiving confirmation,

she would run back and re-print. As long as she turned off the room lights and the computer's monitor, she should be able to stay hiding in the club room for a bit. Everything should be printed out before the first room check.

“Rei and Yoshino's interests...?”

Rosa Foetida asked back, her forehead wrinkling a bit.

“Yes. There's some doubt that cropped up regarding their interview article, so I wanted to confirm it...”

“Rei is kendo, Yoshino-chan is reading. I don't know what exactly they read.”

“_”

That solves nothing.

“Then, knitting-”

She tried asking.

“Knitting?”

Rosa Foetida repeated the word knitting to herself, then went, “Ah,” as if she finally remembered what it meant. Of course, Minako hoped Rosa Foetida had an idea, but that was a complete whiff.

“Knitting, as in like, sweaters with yarn?”

“Y, yes.”

“I've never seen them knitting. Yoshino-chan's classmates might know.”

It seemed like Rosa Foetida obviously left Hasekura Rei out of her assumption, at the very least.

“Then, their favorite phrases...”

She was grasping, but she asked one last question.

“Do you tell each other your favorite phrases?”

“- True.”

Minako could only nod. She would prefer not to have that intimate a sister.

“Is that all?”

Rosa Foetida fiddled with her hair, looking extremely agitated.

“Ah, I’m sorry for taking your time.”

After stepping to the side and bowing deeply, she thought, that was weird. Even while looking extremely bored, Rosa Foetida was the type to quickly deal with things in a timely manner, but for some reason, she was in a slow tempo today.

“Oh, speaking of which.”

Rosa Foetida, who she thought was simply going to go home, suddenly turned around and asked.

“Say, you’re being swept along a river on a boat, and there’s a big waterfall in front of you? But you can’t go home unless you go past that waterfall.”

“Uh...”

What is she supposing? But Minako couldn’t figure it out, so she simply cocked her head to the side and listened.

“But you have an oar. Which way would you paddle?”

“Eh?”

She was wondering when the question would be asked directly, but apparently it was to end with the boat.

“Which way to paddle? Would that mean, upstream or downstream?”

“Ahh, nevermind. I wonder why I’m even asking someone else.”

Without waiting for an answer, Rosa Foetida resumed walking to the rear gate.

“Gokigenyou.”

Rosa Foetida never turned around, even after Minako spoke to her. But rather than ignoring, it seemed like Rosa Foetida simply didn’t hear.

(What happened to Rosa Foetida...)

Forgetting her present state, Minako’s reporter blood began stirring. Even though she could simply just be ill, it felt like something newsworthy.

With that determined, she was unable to see anything else. Such was the type of person Minako was.

Part 4.

After school on a day where the lingering memories of the school festival were just about fading.

“Oh?”

Having finished cleaning duties, Yumi was just walking down the hallway thinking, “Time to go to the Rose Mansion” when she noticed a familiar face in the 1st-year Chrysanthemum class and came to a stop.

“Yoshino-san?”

“Ah, Yumi-san.”

Yoshino-san raised her head from her desk and smiled, as usual.

The Chrysanthemum class had also seemed to finish cleaning duties, as the desks and chairs were lined up neatly. There were a few bags hanging from desks, presumably belonging to students with club activities, but otherwise there was no hint of any other person.

“I didn’t know you were back in attendance.”

Yumi entered the classroom after striking a “pardon my intrusion” pose.

“Yes, beginning today. I ended up missing a week.”

She giggled, fufufu. It was a smile filled with composure, saying that she was used to it.

“Yoshino-san, are you alone?”

“Yes. I’m copying notes, from the classes I missed.”

There were several notebooks stacked on her desk that she had probably borrowed from other students.

“What a lot of work.”

“I’m almost done, will you wait?”

Yoshino-san then resumed copying. That means I’m allowed to be here, decided Yumi, so she pulled up a chair and sat down in front of Yoshino-san.

Yumi looked on, wondering about the kind of person Yoshino-san was. She had a rather petite stature. She was a bit skinny, but not overly so – it would be adequate to call her small, in general. The lap blanket she placed above her skirt was probably hand-made. Maybe it was so it wouldn’t stand out, but it was made of the same, dark-green colored cotton as the skirt.

Yumi looked elsewhere.

Her front hair was cut straight across right above her eyebrows, and she split

her hair evenly, tying them in a braid. It wasn't to the level of Rei-sama, but her hair was tinted brown, and the tight braiding sort of de-emphasized the lighter-colored hair.

Her eyebrows were more thick than long. Their downward angle had the seeming effect of disguising lament, and thus made her look more fascinating. It wasn't difficult accepting that this would be the school's number one little sister. When Yumi turned into a second year, she would like a little sister just like Yoshino-san.

(... Ah, and just what am I thinking?)

She was embarrassed of her own fantasies. Yumi covered her blushed cheeks.

“What?”

Yoshino-san suddenly looked up. She probably felt the stare.

“Ah, no, nothing. ... Sorry.”

She tried to cover it up, but it was too late. Plus, she couldn't come up with any sort of excuse, so that made it all the more suspicious.

“As Rosa Gigantea mentioned, Yumi-san is interesting.”

Even though she had been stared at, Yoshino-san didn't seem to be in discomfort. Having finished copying, she laughed and put her mechanical pencil and eraser into her pen case.

“Was I going through life phases again?”

“Yes.”

“Uwa...”

Her face was in flames. Why did she always embarrass herself in front of beautiful girls?

No, that's not it. The problem was that there were more and more beautiful

girls surrounding her nowadays.

“How do people perceive me?”

Yoshino-san asked, resting a hand on her bag.

“Perceive Yoshino-san?”

“Yes. Yumi-san’s image of me.”

“Yoshino-san’s image...”

Having been asked this so directly, Yumi found it difficult to place things into words. Of course, Yoshino-san wasn’t asking about thick eyebrows or brown hair. Not the outward appearance, but more of the internal image-

“A bit sickly, the type you want to protect?”

“That’s it!”

Yoshino-san had offered help, and Yumi quickly raised a finger and agreed, but then she realized that might have been a bit insulting.

“Umm... but not necessarily that sickly...”

Even though she tried to follow-up, she knew it was futile.

“Don’t worry, it’s the truth, after all, that I’m sickly. Anything else?”

Being urged on, Yumi decided to prudently pick her words and answer.

“That’s what a girl is like, I guess? Great with dealing with other people, gentle, cute. The type my little brother might like... huh?”

She was trying to explain things with kind words, but she noticed she was going in an increasingly weird direction. No one was asking about the tastes of her family. But Yoshino-san giggled, “What an honor.”

“Yoshino-san seems like the type to wear a frilled apron at home and bake

cookies, and knit laced table-cloth.”

“Her favorite drink is milk tea?”

“Right, and she has a white cat.”

“Yes, that’s the image.”

Laces, ribbons, flowery designs.

In the case of skirts, flared, rather than tight.

A-line coats.

Her favorite fruit is a strawberry.

Pink over blue, in colors.

Likes ice cream. Likes cookies. Likes candy.

Good at English and social studies, but not so fond of math and science.

Maybe this image isn’t too different from what a girl might imagine of “a girl.” At any rate, Yoshino-san had become excited, agreeing with those points.

“But, wrong. I’m not like that at all.”

Yoshino-san said.

“Really?”

“But everyone thinks that way.”

She laughed along with a sigh, then began folding up her lap blanket. The lap blanket, made to fit the color motif, looked a bit bland, but also seemed very maiden-like. ... At any rate, her declaration meant she wasn’t the one that knitted it.

“There aren’t really girls that fit that image, after all.”

It was a bit of a disappointment. But at the same time, Yumi was curious about how Yoshino-san really was.

“I don’t think they don’t exist, though.”

Yoshino-san emphatically said, then stood up. Then, she walked to the back of the room, opened her locker, and placed her lap blanket inside.

“Shall we, to the Rose Mansion?”

When Yumi asked, Yoshino-san shook her head.

“Onee-sama is coming to pick me up, so I have to go home with her.”

“Rei-sama...?”

But Rei-sama’s kendo competition was soon, so she was supposed to be training hard every day, was she not? That’s why she had been absent from the “Tea-parties named Meetings” that had been going on every day at the Rose Mansion as of late.

“It’s my first time going to school in a while, so onee-sama is being overly worried.”

“I see.”

The knight had to see the princess off. However, the princess was scornful of the knight.

“Plus, she’s timid.”

“She doesn’t seem that way.”

“She looks strong because she does kendo.”

“... Yoshino-san pulls no punches.”

Indeed, reality seemed to be different from Yumi's original image. After all, Yoshino-san didn't seem to be the type to speak ill of anyone.

"We've been together since we were born, so we know almost everything about each other."

"Eh?"

Yumi cocked her head, not understanding the meaning behind those words. Then, like a mirror, Yoshino-san did the same.

"Huh? Yumi-san didn't know? Rei-chan and I are cousins."

"Eh!?"

She was surprised at the truth between Yoshino-san and Rei-sama's relationship, but she was also shocked by Yoshino-san called Rei-sama "Rei-chan."

"Yumi-san, you must have been in a hole somewhere."

Apparently it was a famous story in the school. Particularly this spring, when the Rosa Foetida en bouton Rei-sama chose Yoshino-san as her little sister, the Lillian Kwaraban ran an article, so even the students that had entered starting from high school knew about it. Yet, embarrassingly enough, Yumi had attended since kindergarten and still didn't know.

Yet, it couldn't be helped. It wasn't something to be proud of, but Yumi only read the Lillian Kwaraban when it interested her enough, and when it came to the Yamayurikai staff, she was purely Sachiko-sama.

"Yumi-san, you accepted Sachiko-sama's rosary, right? How did it feel?"

"Feel...?"

"Was it exciting?"

Of course.

“... Yes.”

It had happened just a week ago, so she still had fresh memories. Sachiko-sama, whom she'd adored for so long, had offered her rosary in complete seriousness. The happiness she felt was incomparable over her sixteen years of life. It was like fireworks had gone off in her soul.

“In our case, it wasn't like that.”

“Wasn't?”

“Onee-sama and I were always in Lillian, right? So at some point we knew that when we became high schoolers we would be sisters.”

Yoshino-san called Rei-sama “onee-sama” this time.

“During the school entrance ceremony for high school, I was sick, too, so I was at home. So onee-sama came home, found me sleeping, and tucked the rosary into my hand. That was it.”

“I think it's beautiful in its own right.”

“Perhaps. But it wasn't exciting. It was like reading the end of a mystery novel.”

“Hmmm.”

In other words, Yoshino-san wanted to be excited. On the other hand, Yumi wanted to live as peacefully as possible.

“But, Yoshino-san, there's no way to turn back time, and there's no changing that you're cousins, right?”

“Exactly. That's why it's just a foolish complaint. For some reason, I just felt like having Yumi-san listen.”

“So listening was enough?”

“Plenty. I'd never had a friend like that before.”

Even though they were intimate cousins, she couldn't have complained about Rei-sama to Rei-sama.

"I see."

But then she realized something.

(Wait a second. ... That means, even though Yoshino-san is good at dealing with people, she never opened herself up to classmates?)

People aren't necessarily what they seem. She was supposed to have learnt that with Sachiko-sama.

"That's why Yumi-san is valuable."

Yoshino-san rested her chin on her hands and smiled softly. But beyond that angelic smile, she might have been thinking things unimaginable to Yumi.

"Yoshino, sorry to keep you waiting."

Rei-sama energetically arrived at the classroom, filling the silence between Yoshino and Yumi. "Oh, you were with Yumi?"

"Ah, I was just passing by. I'll be going then."

She felt a bit out of place, and quickly stood up. Maybe it was because they were talking about Rei-sama without Rei-sama, or maybe it was because it felt like she was interfering between lovers, Yumi didn't know herself which it was.

"Yumi-san. What're you fussing over?"

"That's right. We didn't become sœur yesterday after all, we don't have to flirt all the time."

Yoshino-san and Rei-sama both spoke drily.

"F, flirt..."

The way Rei-sama spoke, it was as if Sachiko-sama and Yumi, having become sœurs just the other day, were always flirting.

“Flirting?”

Yoshino-san’s eyes glimmered as she asked.

“Scolding over trivial matters, fixing perfectly fine ties, secretly giving cough drops, Sachiko seems so happy having found a little sister.”

“Uh, umm, Rei-sama?”

She wanted to shake Rei-sama out of her run.

Cough drop incident aside, the scolding and appearance checking didn’t seem to fit into what you would usually call “flirting”-.

Rei-sama and Yoshino-san, despite seeming very different, definitely looked similar when it came to this. They placed the same amount of value on rather strange things.

“Well, let’s go home then.”

Rei-sama picked up Yoshino-san's bag.

"Yumi-chan, if you're going to the Rose Mansion, could you tell the onee-sama, sorry for being a bit selfish until the competition?"

"Ah, yes."

"Gokigenyou, Yumi-san. Having you listen let me clear my mind."

Yoshino-san bowed her head, spoke, and then followed after Rei-sama to the hallway. But Yumi didn't know what she cleared her mind of.

"Yoshino-san, are you scheming?"

When she spontaneously asked, Yoshino-san quietly turned around, paused, then asked, "Why?"

"Why-."

Rei-sama was about to vanish out the door. Yoshino-san didn't wait for an answer to her question, instead vanishing out with Rei-sama, leaving the words, "Who knows?"

"What do you mean, 'Who knows'?"

When she thought about the question, she realized it was an answer to Yumi's first question.

"Then... Yoshino-san, you ARE up to something-!?"

Yumi sat back down in the chair, alone in someone else's classroom, and held her head with her hands.

Yoshino-san's eyes looked like they were quickly planning something out. What was she planning? Should she stop her? Should she tell someone?

She felt responsible, as Yoshino had "cleared her mind" after speaking to her. But she wasn't very experienced with these things, and her high school

freshman mind, still not knowing much about Yoshino-san to begin with, couldn't think of anything, despite serious thought.

“I feel like I'm going to have a developmental fever.”

Yumi's desired “peaceful days” seemed far, far away.

The Returned Rosary

Part 1.

Her prediction came true faster than she expected.

“The Rosa Foetida en bouton sisters broke up.”

Yumi heard this for the first time during cleaning, which, being after classes, was like the conclusion to a day.

Katsura-san, who was in charge of cleaning elsewhere, rushed back into the room and began whispering to other students. Yumi, who was washing the blackboard with a wet rag, heard it then.

“Is that true!?”

Jumping down from the platform in an outrageous, unladylike, and certainly not very flattering pose, Yumi leapt at Katsura-san.

“W, wait, Yumi-san. Calm down.”

But how could she? Yumi grabbed Katsura-san’s arm with both hands, dragged her to the side of the classroom, and repeated her question.

“W, well, to start with, could you at least spare my uniform the rag?”

Katsura-san appealed with a near-shrieking tone. Yumi finally noticed that the dark green cloth of her uniform was stained even darker around her arm.

“Ah, sorry.”

Yumi quickly pulled her hand away. She was so surprised that she never let go of the rag.

“Well it’s alright, it’ll dry on its own, anyways.”

But more important, she seemed to want to say, Katsura-san began speaking about what she had just found out. As always, she heard news quickly.

“It happened just after the sixth period class, so it just happened.”

According to her.

Yoshino-san, on her second day of returning to class, skipped out on home room to go home, so that she could go to the hospital. She had a note from her doctor, and her home room teacher was more than willing to let her return home quickly, so as to not push a person who’d just recovered from an illness.

“For the Chrysanthemum class students, it probably was like touching a swollen area, you know? They probably felt more comfortable if she just went home, rather than force herself to clean duty.”

“Why?”

“Because Yoshino-san-. Wait, Yumi-san, you’ve never been in the same class as Yoshino-san?”

“No.”

When Yumi nodded, Katsura-san was surprised, “You’ve both attended this school since Kindergarten, and there’s a class change every two years, so that’s incredible,” but carried on, knowing there was no choice but to explain in more detail.

“Because you’ve never been in the same class, you might not know what’s wrong with her, then?”

“She has a weak body, I thought?”

“Well, that’s true, too, but here.”

Katsura-san pointed at Yumi’s breast with her index finger.

“Scarf?”

“Idiot. Her heart.”

She wasn't actually joking, but nonetheless, Katsura-san quickly smacked Yumi's head.

“Anyone who's been in the same class as her would have seen it at least once.”

“What?”

“Her, fit, I guess you would call it. I think it's even worse for the people who watch it, because the heart's so directly linked to living.”

“Well, yes.”

Apparently, every now and then, Yoshino-san runs out of breath and has to sit down and hold her breast down. The earlier reference to touching a swollen area was a reference to that kind of body.

“That's why she sits out of marathons, doesn't go to camping trips, and sits out during physical education. Plus, she misses a lot of school, so she's kind of an enigma.”

“I see.”

That's why she had trouble making friends. Possibly because of that, her cousin, Rei-sama, ends up needing to take care of her even more than you might expect. And then because of that, it becomes even harder for classmates to get close to her, so she never ends up making friends.

“So?”

Yumi spurred her on.

“Oh, where did I get to? I went on a digression, so I forget where I was.”

Katsura-san was pondering deeply with the facial expression of a grandmother, so Yumi lent a hand, without any hesitation.

“Yoshino-san left early, for a doctor’s appointment.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Katsura-san clapped the bottom of her fist with her palm.

“Apparently Rei-sama came along when Yoshino-san left early. Obviously that means Rei-sama also skipped out on homeroom, right? So Yoshino-san refused to let her escort her. A taxi was coming to the main gate, and she was feeling fine, so she said she could go alone.”

“Yes.”

“At that point it was just a light conversation. So it was just a trading of ‘I’ll go with you,’ ‘Don’t come.’ Anyways, the taxi was coming, so they walked to the main gate together.”

“... But Yoshino-san finally snapped?”

“Exactly.”

“What was the direct reason?”

“Rei-sama received permission from her homeroom teacher to leave early. That angered Yoshino-san enough to give her rosary back. With the audacity of doing it in front of Maria-sama!”

“_”

Wow, Yoshino-san, you really are something. She was wondering what Yoshino-san would do, but to give the rosary back-.

“So, what happens when you give the rosary back?”

“It’s a catastrophe. What have you been listening to?”

Katsura-san sighed with an exasperated look.

“Rosa Foetida en bouton having her rosary returned by her little sister, this is

an unprecedented major incident!”

“Catastrophe... like, a break-up?”

When Yumi asked, Katsura-san lifted her index finger and waved it side to side; tsk tsk tsk.

“More like a divorce.”

“... Eeek.”

The second wave of astonishment was coming. For the elder sister to have her rosary returned by a little sister she took entirely for granted was like having your obedient wife suddenly bring out divorce papers. No, maybe it’s even worse. Because it’s unprecedented.

“But why does Katsura-san know so much?”

“I heard from Rei-sama.”

“Eh?”

“She’s been wandering around the school like a ghost, so when I asked her what was wrong, she mumbled all of this to me.”

Katsura-san had concluded all of this by piecing things together.

“Then, Rei-sama?”

“I thought about helping her back to her classroom, but it was like she was sleepwalking. I’ve never seen Rei-sama like that before.”

“Say that sooner!”

Yumi pushed the rag she still held into Katsura-san’s hands and flew out the classroom with an unheard of travelling posture. Katsura-san said she saw Rei-sama on campus, so she hurried down the stairs and jumped out through the nearest door.

“Which way?”

Although she got outside, the Lillian facility was huge. She should have asked Katsura-san for more details, she thought, but it was too late for that.

“Whatever, I’ll just guess.”

She spoke those lines, which she’d heard before in a drama, and ran northward. Piecing the story together, she decided Rei-sama had to have been in a deep shock. When people are stunned, they either want to be alone, or they want to talk to someone. For whatever reason, she felt it was the former. In that case, she might be in an isolated place.

When she peeked inside the greenhouse, where she and Sachiko-sama had escaped the day before the school festival, she did indeed see Rei-sama. Rei-sama was so lifeless that for a moment she almost thought she was looking at the wrong person.

One boy, or rather, one girl, was standing immobile in the middle of the greenhouse, not even bothering to sit down on one of the benches. It was plausible that she didn’t even realize where she was.

“Rei-sama.”

She called out to that handsome face, but she could offer no more words. She’d just realized she didn’t know why she tracked down Rei-sama.

Hearing about Rei-sama wandering about the school, she jumped out, not able to restrain herself. But what could, or should she do, now that she found her? There wasn’t much she could do for Rei-sama.

Maybe she was just a nuisance? Rei-sama might have chosen this place to be alone.

“Ahh, Yumi-chan.”

When Rei-sama looked at Yumi, she laughed weakly. That smile was painful to see. Her left hand gripped the rosary with the dark green jewel. That was probably the rosary Yoshino-san returned.

“Why.”

Why, did Yoshino-san return the rosary. Like she wanted someone to explain to her. But, as expected, it was more like she was mumbling to herself, and she sighed.

“Yumi-chan, do you ever want to return Sachiko’s rosary?”

“Eh? Ah? ... No, not yet.”

To be honest, that hadn’t even remotely crossed her mind. But that was probably true for Rei-sama too. For sisters who’d exchanged vows, it was a mind-boggling proposition.

“Sorry. You’ve only been together for a week, it’s impossible.”

“Ah.”

Even if it were to be possible, it was difficult to imagine herself in Rei-sama’s place. Plus, in the case of Yumi, even if Sachiko-sama were to propose a divorce at some point, Yumi herself would never even think about returning the rosary.

“Ahh, I feel like I’m dying.”

With that sudden exclamation, Rei-sama sank to the floor, covering her head with her hands. Saying “I feel like I’m dying” rather than “I want to die” seemed oddly fitting for Rei-sama. –Just as Yumi thought that.

“Hey, please do not go spontaneously dying.”

An icy voice sounded from behind her.

“Sachiko-sama!”

When she turned around, she saw Ogasawara Sachiko herself, standing in the doorway.

“Stand up, Rei.”

Sachiko-sama walked past Yumi, stood over Rei-sama, and, first, roared.

(Wow...)

She nailed her line with such masterful precision it was vexing. This commanding tone probably could be imitated by no one else.

“Rosa Foetida en bouton easily dying like this is unacceptable. Now, stand up!”

As Yumi thought, “Ah, how wonderful onee-sama is,” and stared transfixed, Sachiko-sama grabbed the lifeless Rei-sama’s wrist and began walking.

“Ah, where to?”

When she asked, Sachiko-sama responded, to the Rose Mansion.

“Her milling around like this is a bother to us, too.”

(Kuuuh.)

This was it. There was no replacing it. She yelled at Rei-sama, then forcefully pulled her away to her group of friends. Sachiko-sama quickly executed the answer Yumi was looking for. And to think that she had come out here worried about Rei-sama, but rather than showing it, she would fire venom, saying it was a “bother.”

Truth be told, leading Rei-sama to the Rose Mansion was a good answer. At this time, Rei-sama’s older sister, Rosa Foetida, might be there, too. And even if Rosa Foetida were not present, one of the third-years might do something about it.

Maybe the Roses would intercede and force reconciliation. At the very least, they’d have to breathe some semblance of life into Rei-sama.

As she thought that and left the greenhouse with Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama, she noticed a familiar figure wobbling to the back gate.

“That’s...”

The reason why she wasn’t able to believe it completely was because that person seemed to be projecting someone else’s aura. Or rather, she didn’t seem like her usual self.

(Maybe it’s someone else?)

Because they were all girls wearing the same uniform, it wasn’t very difficult to mistake people.

“What are you doing, Yumi, hurry up.”

Sachiko-sama called out to Yumi, having noticed her lagging.

“Ah, yes.”

“Please don’t be trouble, I’m fine dealing with one person, but two is beyond me.”

Given no choice by those words, but at the same time ecstatic that Sachiko-sama was fretting over her, Yumi ran to Sachiko-sama’s side. She would know if the person she saw was indeed who she thought it was when she got to the Rose Mansion.

“You don’t need to run.”

But, she wanted to be with onee-sama as much as possible. Onee-sama was such a presence that Yumi felt satisfaction just being in the same space.

In that sense, how could Yoshino-san return her rosary?

Rei-sama was always so sharp and kind, but now she was an absolute mess from the shock. Their relationship was supposed to be that close, so why-

Understanding the actions of other people was extremely difficult. Yumi, finally, at the age of sixteen, found that out.

Part 2.

“Don’t expect too much.”

Rosa Chinensis cautioned, before saying anything else.

“Eh?”

“Yumi-chan looks like she wants to say, ‘I entrust everything to you,’ so I thought it would be prudent to remind you.”

“Ah.”

“Right, right. Even if we’re third-years, we’re still high school girls, so you’re completely mistaken if you think we’re like Superman.”

Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis both spoke, and then took a seat, saying, “If that’s enough, we’ll listen.”

The second floor of the Rose Mansion. Fortunately, Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea had both been drinking tea when the three of them strolled in. Yumi probably had that “fortunately” emotion written all over her face. So the Roses warned her.

“Onee-sama, is that not cold? It’s almost as if you’re saying you don’t care what happens to Rei.”

Sachiko-sama complained, while seating Rei-sama.

“We’re not saying anything about not caring, right?”

“Right. ... So, if we don’t do anything, Rei and Yoshino-chan are going to be in corporal danger?”

The two Roses glanced at each other, then resumed sipping their tea elegantly.

“The onee-sama are going to leave this distraught Rei alone?”

“Sachiko’s on fire today.”

Rosa Gigantea spoke coolly, then laughed.

“You and Yumi-chan are free to become agitated over this, but the most important thing is how Rei feels, right?”

“Rei?”

Everyone looked at Rei-sama. And she, in turn, looked away twice or thrice, uncomfortable in the spotlight.

“Do think about it. What if you and I..., no, Yumi-chan’s better. If Sachiko and Yumi-chan were to have an argument?”

Rosa Chinensis walked to Sachiko-sama’s side, then softly stroked her black hair. In this situation, it was fascinating how Sachiko-sama suddenly looked very young. Ah, everyone becomes a “little sister” in front of their “onee-sama.”

“If? What are you saying, onee-sama.”

“Would you want someone to intercede? Even if you did want someone to help, wouldn’t you dislike it if Rei were to be proactive and move before you asked?”

“- Well.”

“That’s my point. Of course, if that were the case, I’d come knocking on your door anyways, before you even asked.”

“And why is that?”

Sachiko-sama asked, dubious. Of course. She wanted to know why it was different for Rei-sama and Sachiko-sama.

But, Rosa Chinensis.

“Because I’m your onee-sama.”

She gave a simple, clear answer that was almost embarrassing to hear. When said with such confidence, no one could complain about partiality.

“Then we should discuss Rei with Rosa Foetida?”

Sachiko-sama’s forehead quivered.

“Well, that would be the norm, I’d say. In turn, I would prefer not to have Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Foetida say anything about Sachiko.”

“Oh, really? I actually don’t mind if Shimako relies on someone else.”

Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Giganta were rather laid back. Even Yumi, who was relatively new to the group, felt that she couldn’t leave Rei like this.

“But we’re here because that Rosa Foetida isn’t around...!” Finally, Sachiko-sama shouted and banged the table with her hand. But the third years, being like sly, old foxes, weren’t to be moved by such a show.

“It’s not something that’s life-or-death, is it?”

Um. But that’s a whole different level, Rosa Chinensis.

“It’s common courtesy to not interfere with strife in other peoples’ households.”

Even Rosa Gigantea. Sheesh, the Roses were merciless. However, they weren’t cruel enough to not reach out.

“But. If Rei wishes, we’ll listen.”

“Right. We won’t push anything upon people. So how is it, Rei? Is there anything we can do?”

Like that. If they had said that in the beginning, Rei-sama probably wouldn’t

have answered.

But while they were bickering over outsiders being this or that, Rei-sama seemed to have gathered her wits, so she shook her head and answered, no.

“If the time comes, I will bring the matter up. At the moment, even I’m still in confusion.”

If she could be that clear, it was looking better, Yumi thought. She didn’t look that confused.

I'll think about it, Rei-sama said. Why it turned out this way, why Yoshino-san wanted to break things up, if there was fault in herself, what that was, all of those, little by little.

Indeed, without understanding those fundamental matters, even the Roses being intermediates wouldn't solve anything. And even if things were brushed under the carpet now, there was no guarantee it wouldn't happen again.

"Then we were just a bother."

Sachiko-sama said, miffed. Running around finding Rei-sama, then shouting at her, then dragging her to the Rose Mansion was simply a lot of effort for no gain.

"Friends are there to perform these thankless jobs."

Rosa Chinensis' follow-up could be taken as either nice, or teasing. Nonetheless, the message was clear. Sachiko-sama wasn't wanting anything out of it, anyways, so even if it would have been clear nothing would have come of her actions, she probably would have still done the same. Simply propelled by the inability to just sit and watch, she would act, oblivious to any advantages or disadvantages from actions. And that's what friends are about.

"Well, bringing Rei here was probably the right decision by Sachiko and Yumi-chan. From what I heard, Rei was bumbling about, talking to anyone and everyone about it."

"But I didn't-"

Do that, she seemed to want to say, but Rei-sama's voice faded out. At the very edges of her memory, she seemed to remember what she did.

"Right. You were doing that."

Rosa Gigantea lowered her eyebrows.

“If you were talking without knowing it, this is pretty serious.”

Yumi agreed with Sachiko-sama’s opinion. Because at the very least, Rei-sama had spoken to Katsura-san. Thinking about when Sachiko-sama appeared at the greenhouse, it was easy to assume that rumors had spread using a route different from Katsura-san. That means it was more than possible that Rei-sama had wandered around darkly, and spoken about Yoshino-san returning the rosary to every person who asked if she was alright. And if that was subconsciously done, it was scary.

“I’ve just returned.”

Shimako-san arrived. Well, as she’d apparently been to the Rose Mansion before Yumi, returned was probably more accurate.

“I’m afraid to say, Rosa Foetida had already returned home.”

(Then, that meant...) The Roses had already grasped the nuances of what had transpired, and thus had sent Shimako-san to find Rosa Foetida. But Rosa Foetida was already gone.

And then Yumi thought, “Ah.” Then the person she saw near the greenhouse was Rosa Foetida, after all.

“That’s a shame. She’s been a bit off as of late, so I had a suspicion she wouldn’t show up at the Rose Mansion.”

“So we tried to call her, but we were just a bit late.”

So they had turned every stone anyways. This is why the Roses are treated like Superman.

“What good fortune, Rosa Foetida has no idea how serious this is. ... So, Shimako, how are things outside?”

“It might be because it’s after-school, the rumors have not spread too much, yet.”

After listening to Shimako-san’s report, Yumi stood up and peeked out the

curtain. There were a number of students outside the Rose Mansion who'd probably heard the rumors and come to see if anything would happen. Yumi thought there might have been more people than there were when she'd come.

They didn't have the courage to open the door and ask directly. Rather, like wild horses, they'd gathered, to satisfy their curiosity, that was all.

"Ooh. I recognize some of them. How lively, how lively!"

Rosa Gigantea slid over and giggled, peeking out over Yumi's head.

The familiar face was probably the newspaper club leader. Yumi'd been chased before, so she recognized the face, too. The newspaper club members had fast ears, and along with their fast ears, they wrote articles quickly.

"Rei. Where's Yoshino-chan?"

Yumi heard Rosa Chinensis ask Rei-sama behind her.

"She was taken to the hospital by taxi."

"Oh, well that's good."

Until the masses settled down, they seemed to feel it would be a good idea to keep Yoshino-san out of view. In these cases, the proactive person usually became vilified.

"Even if the masses today settles down, won't the masses tomorrow be excited?"

When Yumi asked outloud, Sachiko-sama nodded, "True." Yoshino-san's heart was weak, as it was, so everyone felt it would be best to shield her from this uproar.

It was a bit hypocritical, because Yoshino-san was the one that caused all of this. But everyone still felt Yoshino-san was an associate. No one knew what the future beheld, but everyone seemed to agree that this should be settled as amicably as possible. Of course, that meant Yoshino-san becoming Rei-

sama's sœur again.

“Well, there's no mistaking this is going to become a bit of a scandal. Maybe even more troublesome than Sachiko's scandal.”

Rosa Gigantea said, as nonchalantly as if speaking of the weather.

Tomorrow might have a pinch of rain. The temperature will be a bit lower than yesterday. Something like that.

But, in retrospect, it wouldn't be something as soft as rain. Even if it were to be rain, it would be accompanied with a large-scale hurricane. And at that moment, it was northbound toward Lillian at an unimaginable speed.

Part 3.

“Good evening.”

Returning home, Rei walked through her garden and opened the door, connected to her neighbor's house.

“Oh, Rei-chan, welcome home.”

Rei's aunt, or Yoshino's mother, wiped her hands on her apron and appeared at the foyer. The scent of well-boiled potatoes traveled with her. It was probably Yoshino's favorite tonight, meat and potato stew.

“Has Yoshino returned from the hospital?”

“Yes, about thirty minutes ago. She's sleeping upstairs right now, they took a lot of blood samples from her.”

Her aunt spoke as she glanced upstairs. Her expression implied that even though Yoshino was sleeping, there was nothing worth worrying about.

Yoshino always went to sleep after an examination.

“Shall I take a message?”

“No, it’s okay. I couldn’t go to the hospital with her, so I wanted to make sure she got home safely.”

“Oh?”

She confirmed her entering the taxi, but she didn’t know about anything that happened afterward. After giving the rosary back, Yoshino took off for the main gate, in an attempt to leave Rei behind, so Rei was worried that she might have had a seizure.

“Rei-chan.”

When she turned around to leave, her aunt stopped her.

“Did something happen between you and Yoshino?”

Her heart beat.

“Why? Did Yoshino say something?”

Rei turned back around and asked.

“She never says anything. Just my instincts, you know.”

Her aunt was Yoshino’s mother, after all. Yoshino never says anything, even if something happened. So, her mother seemed to take it upon herself to keep a watchful eye.

“We just had a little fight. Don’t worry, we’ll make up soon enough, there’s nothing to worry about.”

She hadn’t sorted out her feelings yet, either, so discussing it with her aunt was a bit tough. In honesty, she should steel herself and ask Yoshino about it directly.

“Then...”

“Ah, Rei-chan.”

When she turned around again, her aunt stopped her, again.

“Rei-chan, um-”

But she couldn't seem to formulate her thoughts into words.

“Auntie?”

She was scared for a moment, thinking there was something wrong with Yoshino, but apparently she was simply thinking too deep. Rei was exhausted by her aunt's words.

“Meat and potato stew, I made too much, so could you tell your mother that I'll bring some over later?”

Her aunt's meat and potato stew was a bit sweeter than the Hasekura household's usual seasoning.

Unexpected Consequences

Part 1.

It seemed one of the biggest reasons why the rumors spread so fast was the speed of the newspaper club. By noon the next day, every high school student knew about the catastrophe that had befallen the two whom were voted Best Sœur. It was an awe-inspiring display of speed.

“Tsukiyama Minako got us, this time.”

“I didn’t think she’d publish it the next day.”

Lunch break.

When Yumi arrived at the Rose Mansion with her lunch box in hand, she found Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea groaning to one another while sitting across from each other.

“Sorry, could you pour us some tea?”

Rosa Gigantea mimicked the speech mannerisms of section chiefs, like in dramas. Her back was a bit stooped, and she didn’t lift her eyes from the table in front of her. She was like an “old man.”

“Rosa Chinensis, would you like Japanese tea, as well?”

“Yes... no, actually, I’d prefer orange pekoe, if you don’t mind.”

Usually she’d accept the same thing, or she would pour herself her preferred tea, but it seemed she had other things on her mind today.

“Orange pekoe.”

I wonder if Darjeeling isn’t sufficient? Yumi thought, as she peeked inside the cupboard, and then she found orange pekoe teabags in a glass bottle. It seemed like she knew exactly how much remained.

She poured thick blend of Japanese tea for Rosa Gigantea in a chawan, and orange pekoe in a teacup for Rosa Chinensis, then placed the tea in front of the respective requesters. After pondering over which to choose, she then filled a chawan a third of the way with the same blend of Japanese tea as Rosa Gigantea and then distilled it with boiling water.

The groaning of the two was based on the newspaper extra spread out in front of them. It was a simple, one-sided monochrome print on a B5 sheet, but it was extremely attractive nonetheless.

The headline in big letters read, “Yellow Rose Revolution.” And to its side, “What is going on with the yellow roses?” was neatly printed, further engrossing the reader.

“It’s like a sports paper.”

Rosa Gigantea grumbled, while holding a mustard-tarama-salad sandwich to her cheek, the sort that only the most die-hard of fans actually order.

“It’s rather vulgar for an authenticated high school newspaper.”

Rosa Chinensis sighed, rolling her round rice ball around her lunch box. As for Yumi, sitting between them, she stuck a fork into her crab-shaped sausage and thought,

(Is that so,)

Being satisfied by the implications.

The Lillian Kwaraban used to be a more orthodox high school newspaper. She had only started reading the newspaper in depth the past two or three issues, so she had assumed it was always a gossipy tabloid.

She wondered what sort of person Tsukiyama Minako-san was, so fervently tracking down rumors about other people.

Character aside, she took the two-shot photo of Rei-sama and Yoshino-san that was used for the Lillian Kwaraban that was published ten days ago, and this time had the artistic sense to lay out the new article on a torn version of

the photo. Even Yumi had to admit that was brilliant.

Speaking of senses, the two Roses in front of her. Sandwich and Japanese tea, orange pekoe and rice balls, those were mismatches, too. –Just as she was thinking about that, Rosa Gigantea started laughing, staring at Yumi’s face. She was probably going through life’s phases again.

“I heard Yoshino-chan’s absent again?”

Rosa Gigantea returned to the topic, deciding to ignore Yumi’s face, this time.

“Ah, yes. I went to the Chrysanthemum class during the class break, but Yoshino-san was absent.”

“But Rei was here.”

Rosa Gigantea mumbled, “she’s so honest,” then wiped tarama salad off of her lip with her ring finger and licked it off.

Apparently Rei-sama had appeared on time, as always, though without Yoshino-san, and had been properly attending classes since first period. Perhaps she had settled down after a night’s rest, although she hadn’t recovered to the point where she could outwardly look fine, which itself was quite painful to watch, opined Rosa Chinensis. Rei-sama was probably forcing herself to take everything in stride to alleviate everyone’s concerns. But a newspaper with her photo plastered on its cover was unexpected, so she had been stunned, and had read the article in detail, anyways.

“Rei-sama was the one who was dumped, so her classmates’ll be sensible and not inquire, but-”

Rosa Gigantea stopped there, but even Yumi knew what she wanted to say. “We’re going to be bothered all day as substitutes for the questions.”

Because they wouldn’t say it, but Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea both looked extremely tired, even though they had only attended the morning classes so far. Even if they had been at physical education, they looked like

they had run an hour-long marathon, or had swum in a pool for that long. But it was out of season for pools, and you could tell just by entering the room that their exhaustion was not sports-related.

Right. Their exhaustion was mental fatigue. They might be stressed out, too.

Perhaps they'd heard the rumors, or they'd read the extra and wondered about the future of the yellow rose sisters, or perhaps the students were simply curious, but they had attempted to hear the story from the people closest to the sisters. And when it came to people close to the sisters, the first people that sprung to mind were the Yamayurikai staff: the Roses, and enboutons and their sisters who went in and out of the Rose Mansion were targets as well. Even Yumi, who you normally would think hasn't yet understood everything that happens in the Yamayurikai, was bombarded with questions to the point where she had escaped to the Rose Mansion, so she couldn't imagine how troublesome it must be for the Roses.

"Was it like this in my case, too...?"

Yumi remembered what had happened two weeks before the school festival. The students were in an uproar over whether Yumi would become Sachiko-sama's sœur or not, and this situation felt just like that.

"It's not really an annoyance."

Rosa Gigantea tied up one of the vinyl wrappings for her sandwiches and tossed it in the waste bin. –Which, of course, meant that out of Yumi's sight, they had all dealt with all of this.

"It's a bother, of course, but it's not Rei or Yoshino-chan's fault, right? I mean, this is all simply compounded by the fact that they're popular, anyways. So don't worry about it."

The Roses were mature, she thought. They were only two years older, but they were able to coolly analyze their actions and their emotions. As for Yumi, she simply thought, "I hope it works out."

"By the way, how about Shimako? You two are in the same class, right? She

didn't escape with you?"

"Everyone backs off when she smiles and answers, 'I have no clue.'"

Actually, she was probably joyfully picking up ginkgo nuts at the secret grove. She was almost bursting with impatience since the morning.

"I see. Beauty is a weapon. In the case of Sachiko, she's so scary no one probably wants to bother her about this."

For Yumi, Rosa Chinensis was also a beauty, in her own right. Rosa Gigantea was more of an exotic beauty, but her looks were on par with the stone statues in the fine arts room. Rosa Foetida-

"Huh?"

Speaking of which, where was Rosa Foetida? Rosa Foetida was the most likely to be irritated by all of this bother, too. She was the person Yumi expected would run here first, faster than even Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea. And Rei-sama was Rosa Foetida's sister, so the questioning would be even more severe.

"Is Rosa Foetida absent, too?" When Yumi asked, the two Roses looked at each other and answered bitingly, "Well she's here."

"But?"

"She's in an even more otherworldly state than yesterday's Rei. She looks so disturbed I don't think anyone is willing to talk to her."

"It looks like things will keep deteriorating at this rate. I wonder what happened to her?"

Rosa Chinensis rested her head on her palm, musing, "I wonder what happened." Yumi wondered why Rosa Chinensis didn't worry more about Rosa Foetida. Anyways, it seemed like it was at least okay that they knew why Rei-sama was so stunned. Well, it wasn't good or anything, but at least knowing the cause meant there was a way to deal with it.

“Well, if they need to borrow our strength, Rosa Foetida would come and ask.”

Rosa Gigantea also spoke in a relaxed tone.

“You don’t have to look at us like that, Yumi-chan. If push comes to shove, we’ll step in, so don’t you worry. But more importantly...”

It was more of a priority to deal with Rei-sama, Rosa Gigantea declared, and Rosa Chinensis nodded.

“But you said you wouldn’t interfere with household strife...”

“We said that yesterday, but the situation has changed, what with this thing being published.”

Rosa Chinensis flicked the extra spread on the table with her index finger.

“This article...?”

Yumi looked down at the article. Actually, Yumi had received the article by the ginkgo trees and had read through it.

“It’s a big problem. It’s not an article, it’s a novel.”

The extra was slammed by all five fingers, this time.

“A novel.”

“‘Perhaps-.’ ‘Possibly-.’ They’re all presumptions. But it’s so well-written that when you read it all, you end up assuming it’s all true.”

Rosa Gigantea’s statement that Tsukiyama Minako should be a novelist rather than a reporter was, of course, not praise but sarcasm.

Come to think of it, the piece was indeed more like a novel than a newspaper article. On top of the blurring of truth and fiction, the writer had assumed the feelings of Yoshino-san and Rei-sama, whom were both not even interviewed. But it was so skillfully written that you would miss that fact

unless someone pointed it out. Plus, people assume newspapers are written truthfully, so readers end up taking it for granted.

“You want to protect Rei-sama because a false article was written?”

“Ah...”

Yumi absent-mindedly nodded.

(I can’t.)

She’d been trying to follow the conversation, but it was speeding too far ahead.

(Umm, Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis both said they were just going to watch, but because of this novel-like article, they’ve started wanting Rei-sama’s problem solved. –I think.)

“The problem is that this has been beautified.”

Rosa Chinensis stood up and, this time, poured herself a second cup of orange pekoe.

“There’ll be repercussions.”

Rosa Gigantea leaned back in her chair and sighed, “Sheesh.”

As for Yumi.

Even when she was washing the three chawan at the sink, she couldn’t decipher the Roses’ words, and even when she was walking down the hallway after exiting the Rose Mansion, her tilted neck didn’t straighten.

“Beautify...? Repercussions...?”

But that was solved sooner than she expected.

Part 2.

The early bell rang, so Yumi hurried back to class.

Shimonoseki-sensei, her fifth period math teacher, was a very punctual old man who would always enter the classroom when the true bell rang, so he expected his students to have their textbooks, notebooks and pencils on their desk and sit quietly when he entered.

But for whatever reason they had forgotten this, as a number of students were gathered near Yumi's desk, speaking to each other.

“What's the matter?”

When she went closer, she noticed Oyamada Miyuki-san (小山田みゆき) sobbing at her desk diagonally behind Yumi's. The group of students whom were friends with her simply replied, “Nothing,” as if to protect her.

(Infectious crying...?)

When she looked more carefully, she noticed everyone in that clump had watery eyes. One girl was seriously crying, the others were crying infectiously, they had all missed the early bell, and so when they replied, “Nothing,” it was very unpersuasive.

“Ah, I'm sorry, we'll get out of the way.”

They realized that standing where they were prevented Yumi from being able to take a seat, so one person moved aside a bit. Well, okay then, she thought, and took a seat at her desk, but the girls behind her still stayed in her mind.

Then, Shimako-san came back.

“Good harvest?”

When she asked as Shimako-san passed by her desk, she simply laughed

happily, fufufu. She looked so ecstatic that asking that question was unnecessary.

Yumi noticed the vinyl bag and chopsticks Shimako-san had taken with her were missing, but apparently she had hidden her harvest somewhere in the garden. Even if you were to tie the end of the bag over and over again, the smell would inevitably leak, so she probably didn't bring it into the classroom out of etiquette. And of course, none of the classmates could probably even come remotely close to guessing that the reason for this beauty's wonderful smile was the ginkgo. Other than Yumi and Tsutako-san, anyways.

“But, that aside.”

Shimako-san lowered her voice and spoke in Yumi's ear.

“Rei-sama's problem has caused quite an uproar.”

“Uproar?”

“There're students dissolving their sisterly bonds. And not just one or two pairs.”

(Ehh-!?)

She was about to say that out loud, so she covered her own mouth, and Shimako-san also felt this coming, and also covered Yumi's mouth, so the double shutter prevented the yell from leaking out.

“W, why?”

Immediately, she thought, “So that's it,” about Miyuki-san's reason for crying. But Yumi was not so unrefined as to turn around and confirm that. Suppressing her burning desire to find out about that, she urged Shimako-san on for more details.

“I wonder if it's a repercussion of Rei-sama and Yoshino-san's matter...”

Just then, the true bell rang, and Shimonoseki-sensei walked in, so she was

unable to hear the rest of Shimako-san's information. Diagonally behind her, Miyuki-san cried in stifled tones all through math class. Because there was no oral practice like English or reading from the textbook for social studies, it might have been a blessing that this was math class, Yumi thought. Plus, Shimonoseki-sensei, perhaps due to his old age, wasn't the type of teacher who really observed his students that much.

Only the sound of the teacher's chalk constantly echoed through the silent classroom.

Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea were probably worried about this sort of repercussion.

How cynical.

Had Rei-sama and Yoshino-san not been the sisterly ideal for the entire school. Had the newspaper club not beautified their feud with flowery words-. Then it might not have been a spark for other people.

Yumi pulled the B5 leaflet that was tucked into her textbook, folded it into the size of her notebook, and re-read it. The extra, headlined "Yellow Rose Revolution," simply wrote the fact that Yoshino-san had given back her rosary to Rei-sama in front of the Maria-sama statue.

While there had been examples of students dissolving sisterly bonds for various reasons in the past, it read that this was different. It had always been dissolved by the elder sister. Just as it was customary for the upperclassmen to propose to the underclassmen, the pattern was assumed to be the elder sister bringing up the topic of a break-up.

(That's true, it's unthinkable for a devoted little sister to reject her elder sister.)

On top of that, the partner was the Rosa Foetida en bouton. There were easily more than twenty students who would have loved to be Rei-sama's little sister.

(... which means Yoshino-san broke almost every mold possible.)

Yumi sighed once more while reading the article.

“Okay, attendance number five, please solve the problem.”

She wasn’t paying careful attention, so she froze in terror, wondering if she, number 35, had been called upon. But after a pause, a desk behind her clattered, and she heard a soft, “Yes.”

Miyuki-san stood up. After wiping her nose with a handkerchief, she teetered and wobbled toward the platform at the front of the class with weak strides. Like Yumi, she was the type that didn’t stand out no matter what she did, but this time there was an undeniable emphasis on her overly fleeting state of mind.

“Poor Miyuki-san...”

The classmates that knew what had happened murmured. However, the old teacher, with his failing ears, had no way of picking out the stifled crying, so when he saw Miyuki-san’s puffy eyes and red nose, he simply guessed, “Hay fever?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know the answer.”

Miyuki-san lifelessly lowered her arm, as if lifting the chalk was an immense task. If she had been listening to class, it probably was a simple question, but it was too much to ask of her right now. Because she was crying the whole time.

“You may return to your seat. Attendance number 15.”

Tsutako-san walked past Miyuki-san and went up on the platform with a clear “why me?” look. It seemed like she was paying attention to class, as she quickly wrote the answer in white letters.

As she returned to her seat, Tsutako-san pointed at Yumi and mouthed, “Be careful.” At that, Yumi snapped to attention. Five, then fifteen, so today he was going through fives. Which meant next was 25, then Yumi’s 35. She put away the leaflet and focused on the textbook.

The twenty minutes until the end of class felt extremely long, after that. It actually might have been easier to take if she had been called upon earlier on.

By the time the fifth-period class ended, Miyuki-san's tears had dried up. But her melancholic state remained. It was an odd feeling, like someone else was sitting diagonally behind her.

During the break, Miyuki-san's friends all gathered around her desk again, and although she wasn't actively trying to listen, Yumi found out that Miyuki-san had broken up with her older sister.

"Poor girl."

The girls surrounding Miyuki-san murmured. But, why. To Yumi, it simply felt like they were saying lines from a drama series, and so the situation felt extremely surreal.

"It was the only way."

Miyuki-san cried again, after being comforted. Eventually the sixth-period chime rang, and everyone dispersed to their seats again.

Yumi thought to herself, "To be continued."

Part 3.

"They're pretending to be Yoshino-san."

Tsutako-san said with distaste, as they walked down the hallway after school.

"Pretending to be Yoshino-san-"

It was such a blunt but fitting explanation that Yumi momentarily lost her words. Miyuki-san during the afternoon was very much like Yoshino-san, or at least like the Yoshino-san image carried by the girls surrounding her. Weak, loveable, cute... Right, just like the image Yumi herself carried until recently.

“Just you watch. There’ll be more.”

“No way.”

“I’m willing to bet on it.”

Yumi didn’t know what Tsutako-san intended to bet, but it couldn’t have been much of a deal, so she ignored that statement and kept moving the discussion along.

“So how do you pretend to be Yoshino-san?”

“They call out their onee-sama in front of Maria-sama with a tragic face, then return the rosaries.”

Yumi screamed inside when she heard that.

“Th, then, Miyuki-san wasn’t the rejected, she’s the one that started everything? And even though she’s the one that rejected, she was crying like that?”

“Right.”

Tsutako-san replied simply. On top of that, she was raising her camera and clicking the shutter every so often, so she was clearly disinterested. The topic was so disinteresting to her that even she took a “how stupid” stance.

“Yumi-san, okay? In life, even if two people like each other a great deal, sometimes it becomes necessary to split up for a bit. Can you imagine Yoshino-san returning the rosary with a smile?”

“I don’t...”

“If anything, you’d imagine her silently crying, right?”

That was true. She could easily imagine Yoshino-san returning the rosary while suppressing her tears. But she couldn’t imagine her laughing or even being angry while doing it. But Tsutako-san said Yoshino-san had brought up the topic of the split in a fit of anger.

“The repercussion of printing is strong. Because when you read the article, you feel like you were there.”

That’s right. That extra.

It was written to imply that Yoshino-san was a tragic heroine. Unable to stand her own dependence on Rei-sama. That she thought Rei-sama, the future Rosa Foetida, needed a stronger, more dependable little sister. Her fit of anger was a cover for her own insecurity.

“A tragic borne out of her elder sister being Rosa Foetida en bouton. An artistic piece.”

Boutons basically are converted to being a Rose as soon as the upperclassmen graduate. That’s why Roses and Bouton are often directed to choose little sisters both for their affinity as well as their character.

“...”

She suddenly felt ill. She’d never given it much thought yet, but Yumi realized that meant next year she would be Rosa Chinensis en bouton. She worried if she was capable of living up to that title, having seen Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama.

“Yumi-san, you’re over thinking things. Shimako-san is Rosa Gigantea en bouton this year, so she’ll be Rosa Gigantea next year.”

Even though it was someone else’s problem, Yumi couldn’t help but feel horrified by the prospect of being in that position. It could be quite stressful for Shimako-san.

“Well, even if you’re the sister of an en bouton, it doesn’t mean there’s no

way for you to not be a Rose in the future.”

Tsutako-san patted Yumi’s shoulder, but she didn’t know if those words were praise or extra pressure.

But. Even though the prospect of becoming a Rose in the future was enough to shiver her, the idea of not living up to Sachiko-sama was even worse. That being said, there would be pressure following her all the way until graduation for being Sachiko-sama’s sœur, so she suddenly felt worried about her heart.

“Tsutako-san, you said they were pretending to be Yoshino-san, so would they have been acting?”

She asked her sudden curiosity out loud. Then, Tsutako-san looked at the tall window at the stair’s landing and groaned, “Hmmm.” It was well into autumn, so the afternoon sky was heavy and cold. Even so, the leaves that stubbornly stuck to the trees looked like warmth to the eyes, with their dark-colored, round forms.

“Hard to say. They’re probably doing it out of seriousness, but...”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re obviously just being influenced, but they probably feel like they come up with everything on their own. I mean, the matter of Rei-sama and Yoshino-san must be clearly etched into their minds. But they probably look at it is just an impetus. Even though they probably only really bothered to think about it in the past two days, they imagine that they always felt anxious about not being a fit for their onee-sama. And so this is the right time to distance themselves.”

Maybe because the people in question weren’t in hearing range, Tsutako-san relentlessly plowed on, criticizing the following break-up girls.

But, what if the girls had actually been anxious about it all along? Right. Just like Yumi, they always wondered, “Am I worthy of her?” and then with lack of confidence, while they mulled around in melancholy, Yoshino-san popped up, and they felt she had beaten them to the punch?

When she said that, Tsutako-san cackled and said, “If it’s just chance like that, would there be three pairs in just lunch-break alone?” In that case, it did seem like things were going too neatly. Tsutako-san’s insightfulness was admirable.

“You sound like you actually watched it.”

“Truth be told, I did. Miyuki-san, who could line up alongside Yumi-san in a competition for ‘Most Stereotypical Girl,’ returning her rosary with watery eyes.”

Tsutako-san lifted her camera, appealing that she, of course, captured that moment on film. When Yumi looked a bit angry, Tsutako-san justified herself, saying she had simply been passing by, emphasizing that she’d happened upon the scene while taking a walk during lunch break. But along the way, she’d also snapped photos of the other two pairs. –What a troublesome friend.

“But, why are they pretending to be Yoshino-san? Is there anything to be gained?”

As they went down the last step, Yumi asked. They were to split up here, with Tsutako-san going to her club house, and Yumi going to the Rose Mansion, but she didn’t want to leave in the middle of the conversation.

“It must feel pleasant? Being a tragic heroine.”

“A tragic heroine...”

Yoshino-san did have the image of a tragic heroine, and Yumi was a girl, too, so she’d imagined herself being the main character of a sad story once or twice, but-.

“I guess they’re that bored of life? They wanted excitement.”

Of course, that wasn’t part of their calculations, Tsutako-san pointed out.

“Lillian students are fundamentally quite blessed, after all.”

Students that attend from kindergarten can study all the way through university as long as they have a bit of academic skill and as long as their household assets remain in place. Of course, there're some that transfer into the academy in the middle, or some that leave to take exams for other schools, but it's the type of school atmosphere where the term "Examination War" is wholly out of place. Without examinations, the school has a rather laid-back atmosphere. Being laid-back is a lovely thing borne from surplus, but sometimes it can bring boredom.

"If days were more thrilling, this kind of disease wouldn't be so contagious."

"Disease."

"Yes, it's a disease. They're so bored and desperate that they can't find anything to do, and just when their souls are so paralyzed that they don't even know what they're looking for--"

Yoshino-san did something completely unexpected.

"It had such an impact that they had a spell cast on them without them realizing it."

"I get it, that makes sense."

Yumi finally felt like she got on the same page as Tsutako-san. If every day were dynamic, there would be no time to be bored, but not everyone lives like that. Had she not become Sachiko-sama's sœur, Yumi might have been rather bored, too. She didn't have a club she was devoted to, like Tsutako-san.

"Then would that mean the reason for the rise in popularity for the 'Lillian Kawaraban' is because it caters to the desires of the bored girls? Like they're peeking in on the daily lives of the Yamayurikai staff – something they can't do on their own?"

"That's probably a part of it. That's why as long as they report properly, they're allowed to do those things. But suddenly interviewing people without immunity, like before with Yumi-san, or printing an article without checking

with the people in question is detestable.”

This indignation came from Tsutako-san, who made it a habit to secretly take photos of girls in their gymnastics uniforms. Although Tsutako-san always checked with the people before using any of them, so she wasn’t as bad.

“It’s not right to place all the blame on the newspaper club, but Yoshino-san’s actions should have been condemned, but instead it became justified, and then fashionable, and that’s where the problem is.”

Tsutako-san predicted, “It won’t end with three pairs,” and left for the clubhouse in a different courtyard.

Things were going out of hand. And she was already overwhelmed with thoughts of how to rectify Rei-sama and Yoshino-san’s situation. If things were to continue to spread to other students, it was feasible that everyone would stop being sisters, and that would lead to the Lillian tradition crumbling.

(What can I do...)

Although she was heading straight to the Rose Mansion, she stopped and turned around. She thought, the number one medicine would be to settle things between Yoshino-san and Rei-sama, then report it to everyone. Impersonation crimes tend to stop when the original is solved, after all. ... Even if this wasn’t quite the same.

She thought the best course of action was to convince Yoshino-san to re-accept the rosary. But she was absent today, too. Rei-sama was probably at her club, but discussing it with the one who was rejected would be futile.

So her next thought was the line that connected everyone. Rosa Foetida. She didn’t know why Rosa Foetida was in an ill mood, but her cute sisters were in a crisis. She thought Rosa Foetida should be willing to help. Everyone said it was hard talking to her because she wasn’t herself, but in all sincerity, if Yumi explained things, she might come up with a way to solve things. And if Rosa Foetida came up with a plan, Yumi was willing to make it happen.

She was conveniently at the first floor, so she went to peek at the shoe boxes. Rosa Foetida was in third-year chrysanthemum class. Come to think of it, even though they were all in different grades, Rei-sama and Yoshino-san were both chrysanthemum, Yumi mused, as she looked through the small lockers.

(... Rosa Foetida's real name.)

She'd heard it before, but she couldn't remember. Not only Rosa Foetida, but Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea were almost never called by their real names, so she couldn't recall any of their full names, either.

She had no choice but to go through attendance numbers, confirm their names, and then guess which locker belonged to Rosa Foetida.

(I'm really a fool.)

After feeling down for a moment, she pumped herself back up and began working. Just then, she noticed the figure of a student in front of her. When she stepped aside to allow her to retrieve her shoes, she noticed it was Rosa Foetida herself.

“Rosa Foetida!”

Yumi ran over, overjoyed. But she listlessly turned around, and on top of her teary eyes, one of her cheeks was quite red.

“Wh, what-”

What happened, she wanted to ask, but couldn't.

Rosa Foetida turned her face to the side again and covered her red cheek with her left hand, as if she wanted to hide it from Yumi's sight.

(- No.)

It was because the sight of Rosa Foetida covering her cheek doubled up with the Hanadera student council president. When he was slapped by Sachiko-sama, he, too, held a hand to his cheek. So Yumi immediately understood. Rosa Foetida had been hit by someone.

She only saw it for a moment, but Rosa Foetida's face looked extremely painful. She thought that such a powerful slap wasn't justifiable, no matter who the person was.

“What?”

Rosa Foetida calmed herself and asked. But asking for help from someone looking to the side was difficult. Plus, at that moment, she felt Rosa Foetida was in a bigger bind than Rei-sama and Yoshino-san.

“I’m sorry, I’m actually in a bit of a hurry. So if you want something, make it quick.”

Rosa Foetida seemed to sigh.

“No, in that case it’s alright. I’m sorry for stopping you.”

There was no way she could make it quick, and Rosa Foetida seemed to be in a terrible situation, too, so she decided not to consult with her today.

“Yumi-chan.”

Rosa Foetida turned around, remembering something, after she’d started walking away. She was still covering her left cheek.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, but could you-”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

Yumi quickly shook her head. Rosa Foetida might have chosen to leave at this time, when there were fewer students walking about, because she didn’t want people to see her face.

“It’s not like I’m hiding it, but it is a bit uncool.”

“No, it’s not...”

Yumi didn’t really know what she wanted to say with “no, it’s not,” but she saw Rosa Foetida walk off to the main entrance.

“Gokigenyou.”

Yumi watched her form grow smaller in the distance.

Where, when and who slapped her? There aren’t very many people in the school who can hit Rosa Foetida.

(I wonder if she's alright...)

She wasn't the newspaper club, but she was definitely curious.

When Rosa Foetida vanished into the campus woods, Yumi went back into the school facilities and sighed. With Rosa Foetida looking like that, the future looked grim. She remembered what Katsura-san had said, earlier. "Rosa Foetida is peaceful and secured with a 3rd-year, 2nd-year and 1st-year." There were no definite in the world, she felt.

Yumi realized Rosa Foetida had gone home without changing her shoes when she was just about to reach the Rose Mansion. She thought about going back, but enough time had passed that it would have been futile to chase Rosa Foetida, and Yumi was already quite tired as it was.

But perhaps it was a blessing amidst all the misfortune.

The way she looked, Rosa Foetida wouldn't notice she was still wearing her indoor shoes until she made it home. After all, she seemed to be completely oblivious to her sisters' crisis.

Part 4.

"Oh, that's impossible, Yumi-chan."

Rosa Gigantea laughed. Either she'd gotten used to everything or she'd decided to forget about it, but either way, she was so full of it energy that it almost seemed like her exhaustion during the noon was a lie.

"Ah... impossible..."

"Yup. When Rosa Foetida's like that, it's over. All we can do is wait for her to be revived."

“‘That’?”

“‘That’ is ‘that.’ You can’t tell whether she’s dead or alive, and you can’t tell if she’s thinking about something or not. ... Well, obviously she’s pondering.”

Yumi had arrived when no one else was at the Rose Mansion, so Rosa Gigantea seemed to welcome her with open arms and even made instant coffee for her. If her classmates found out that she’d been serviced by one of the Roses, they’d surely be envious.

“I don’t remember when, but she ended up like ‘that’ before, and it was the first time, so we were all up in arms panicking. Then she returned to normal after a week, so it’ll be fine if we leave her alone, I think? Well, just consider it to be bad luck that she ended up like this when Rei’s situation came up.”

“But-”

Leaving Rosa Foetida, whose cheek was struck, like this? But she’d been told to keep quiet, so she couldn’t tell Rosa Gigantea about Rosa Foetida’s swollen cheek. Yumi swallowed her words with her hot coffee.

“Ah, it’s good.”

“Right? I’ve figured out Yumi-chan’s tastes.”

The coffee wasn’t just handily made, but the sugar and powdered milk were dissolved in a miraculous ratio.

“Everyone has one or two things they’re good at, after all.”

“So one of Rosa Gigantea’s talents is to figure out other peoples’ tastes?”

She spontaneously asked, and Rosa Gigantea laughed out loud, like there was nothing that could make her happier.

“Well, we’ll leave it at that. By the way.”

After drinking black coffee from her own cup, Rosa Gigantea asked Yumi.

“Do you know what Rosa Foetida’s special skill is?”

“... No.”

She didn’t know why she was asked that, but Yumi honestly shook her head.

“How about what she’s weak at?”

“Unfortunately, no idea.”

If she was asked about Sachiko-sama, she’d immediately answer, “Men.” But she didn’t know anything about Rosa Foetida.

“Right answer.”

Rosa Gigantea reached out and patted Yumi’s head. –Gosh, she’s not a child, so she could do without this sort of treatment.

“Huh, but why right?”

“Rosa Foetida has no strengths and weakness.”

“Eh?”

No strengths and weaknesses? What did that mean? Yumi tilted her head, wondering what Rosa Gigantea meant.

“It’s like powering up Yumi-chan’s average-ness at everything. Without even trying, she’s capable of doing everything above average. Got it?”

“Ah... that’s kind of enviable.”

“Not really.”

Rosa Gigantea placed her hand on Yumi’s head: You don’t get it. However. Yumi wondered why Rosa Gigantea’s skinship was never very heart-throbbing. It was so different with Sachiko-sama.

“People are more at peace with themselves when they’re good at something.”

“Why?”

“Because they don’t have to choose what they want to do. Think about it. If she wanted, she could become anything. But she has nothing she really wants to do. Because every field is lined up exactly the same, to her.”

That causes unhappiness, Rosa Gigantea said. People who could do anything carried with them their own specific sorrows.

” Rosa Foetida always looks bored and unwilling to do things, right?”

“Yes.”

But she realized that was a bit of a rude statement. Still, Rosa Gigantea also wasn’t malicious, so it was alright.

“In truth, she is bored. She always knows what the result will be. She even knows how much she can do.”

“She knows her limits?”

“Yup. She can do anything, but she’ll never be able to take on someone who’s specialized.”

Even so, she was on a different dimension. If Yumi were in that situation, she’d be willing to just roll the dice for it. But she knew she’d be laughed at if she said it, so she stayed silent.

“The reason why she accepted becoming a part of the Yamayurikai staff, with its painstaking jobs and all, was because she hoped it would put some excitement in her life, I guess. I mean, she’s probably happiest of us all about an eccentricity like Yumi joining, and I think the unexpectedness of making Rei her sister was a key point.”

“_”

She felt sweat dripping somewhere on her body. Then, what? Rosa Foetida was so bored with life that she was happy with simplifying the criteria for her actions?

“Why’re you thinking about this in such a difficult way, Yumi? People choose sisters for different reasons. I know plenty of people who chose people based on their looks.”

“Rosa Gigantea... Is that why you chose Shimako-san to be your sœur?”

“Who knows?”

Rosa Gigantea deflected the question with a meaningful laugh.

“What I’m saying is, don’t rely on Rosa Foetida. I mean, they’re sœur, so she cares heavily about Rei, but she’s not nearly as close as Rei and Yoshino-chan. Plus, she almost never becomes engrossed in anything, but right now she’s been captivated. So I don’t know what that is, but it’s a good thing, I think.”

Rosa Gigantea can laugh because she doesn’t know about Rosa Foetida’s swollen cheek.

“Of course, if things weren’t so heavy on her side, she’d probably be the one enjoying Rei and Yoshino-chan’s strife the most.”

Then Rosa Foetida wasn’t going to be much use either way. After thinking a bit, Rosa Gigantea reached over to Yumi’s cup, said “let me try a sip,” and drank.

“Ah, shall I pour you a second?”

“Really? Okay, can you pour three peoples’ worth of black tea in new cups?”

“Three people?”

“Yup. Me and Yumi and one more are here.”

What is she talking about?

“One more?”

“Oh, Yumi-chan didn’t notice?”

“...”

Maybe she was trying to be spooky, but there were no ghost traditions in Lillian. There were none, ... so she didn't have to try to scare her.

Anyways, Yumi didn't feel like probing further, so she wordlessly walked to the sink and began pouring three cups of black tea, as requested. There were no brand requests, so she used the Darjeeling tea bags, as usual. When she placed the three cups on a tray and turned around, there stood Rosa Gigantea, who'd crept up without a word.

“Gyah!”

“What. I just came to help, you don't have to sound like I'm attacking you.”

Rosa Gigantea took the tray from Yumi and placed the cups on the table.

“But if you keep looking like that, I will.”

After giggling at Yumi, who was still frozen in place, Rosa Gigantea hugged her tightly.

(... Like I said, it doesn't make me feel anything.)

But she kept snatching away her freedom, so Yumi struggled against it a bit with her arms and legs. But. Of course, Rosa Gigantea wasn't seriously attacking, so she didn't seriously try to get out, either.

“Ro, Rosa Gigantea, do you do this to everyone?”

Then Shimako-san wouldn't be able to hold herself. Her own onee-sama was flirting with other girls. But Rosa Gigantea separated herself and spoke.

“You question my chastity?”

And then she said, “Nope, just Yumi-chan!” then hugged her again, and kissed her lightly on her cheek.

“R, Rosa Gigantea!”

That's going too far! When she seriously tried to get out, she found herself freed with ease. But, Sachiko-sama was standing where she landed.

"-Yumi."

"Sa, Sachiko-sama."

No, this wasn't how it seemed, there's an explanation- But Sachiko-sama ignored Yumi, stalked up to Rosa Gigantea and said, coldly.

"You're going too far with your frolicking. You did it because you knew I was here!"

(The three teacups!)

For the first time, Yumi thought, "She got me!" Rosa Gigantea noticed Sachiko-sama coming into the Rose Mansion. And so she wanted Sachiko-sama to see her making fun of Yumi-. She's sadistic, Rosa Gigantea.

"Yumi-chan's soft and huggable, it might become a habit."

"If you love touching people that much, please, do hug your own sister?"

Oh Sachiko-sama, your words can be taken the other way so easily it makes me blush, too.

"Shimako? I've never even thought of that."

"Oh. Then think about it. And please stop reaching out to my sister."

"I'll think about that, instead."

Rosa Gigantea doesn't seem like she'll change. Of course, if she were the type to back down from Sachiko-sama's glare, she wouldn't have been mischievous to begin with.

"Yumi. You too."

Sachiko-sama turned around and scolded.

“Don’t flail about so wildly. It just makes Rosa Gigantea happy.”

“... Yes.”

I don’t think I did anything wrong though, Yumi thought, but she answered obediently. Because Sachiko-sama wouldn’t have been pleased if she just stayed calm, either.

“Now, hurry up and wipe yourself.”

Sachiko-sama took out a white, laced handkerchief from her pocket and rubbed Yumi’s cheek.

She didn’t react at all when Rosa Gigantea kissed her, but she blushed when Sachiko-sama stroked her with her handkerchief. The scent of Sachiko-sama’s hair floated over, causing her heart to race.

Sachiko-sama was like a temple guardian demon. But her own body was quite honest, Yumi thought.

Part 5.

She was troubled. She was running out of time to make her decision. Ideally, she would have made a decision earlier and fixed things, but she’d kept telling herself she would deal with it tomorrow, and now time had run out. If she kept leaving it alone now, it’d probably cause irreparable damage. It was her own body, after all, she knew when it was at its limits.

Thus, it wasn’t that she had to decide what to do, as it had become a necessity, that’s all. There’s no time to keep putting things off. Everyone’s beginning to notice. Ahh, but still. Could she fight off her dread? It wouldn’t hurt because of anesthesia, but once that ran out, it would hurt, wouldn’t it?

Plus, there was a bigger problem. That building, she couldn’t bring herself to

enter it.

She'd stood in front of the foggy window panes before. But she couldn't bring herself to take the last step, to open the door and enter. After pondering things over quite a bit there, she ended up walking away. A Lillian student had walked in front of it, so she was forced to flee. She couldn't let someone see her fretting over her inability to enter the building.

If it were to come to this, she should have discussed it with someone earlier, then have them forcibly tie her down to the examination table. But it was too late for that, now.

"I have to go."

She muttered, but she couldn't force herself to stand. Her cash card and insurance card were propped up on the table, ready to be taken at any moment. And really, she had no idea if her insurance would work, nor how much it would cost, to begin with. –After all, this was her first time.

"Maybe it'd be easier going to a big, general-purpose hospital."

The threshold wouldn't be so high there, and if someone were to see her, she'd be able to smooth things over.

That said, she'd never been in such a tight spot in her ten-plus years of life. Her tympanitis from a few years ago was hardly comparable.

Were human bodies this brittle, that they'd become absolutely useless from one defective part?

Human bodies are no better than a machine that stops working after losing a single screw. Contrary to her normally calculating and cool self, she heaved a desperate sigh.

Just what is going on?

Part 1.

Yumi suddenly had a phone call from Yoshino-san, who'd been absent from school for almost a week. Well, phone calls are almost always quite sudden, but as Yoshino-san had never called her before she was a bit, no, she was quite surprised.

It was a bit after eight in the evening.

“Yumi-. Phone call.”

Her brother yelled – a rare occurrence – from downstairs.

“Hurry up. I think it's a public telephone.”

“Public telephone?”

She tilted her head to the side in confusion, and when she picked up the telephone, she heard Yoshino-san's voice.

“Your brother?”

“Oh, yes, he's being cheeky again.”

“He seemed like a reliable person.”

“If you say so.”

As her brother mentioned, it did seem like she was calling from an outside telephone. She could faintly hear the bustling of people underneath Yoshino-san's voice, an indication that she probably wasn't at home.

“You're so blessed. I'm an only-child, so I admire siblings so much.”

But Rei-sama was around, like a sibling, so she probably couldn't have been

that lonely. Is what Yumi thought, but Yoshino-san didn't mention Rei-sama, at all.

Incidentally, Yoshino-san seemed bright and energetic. She'd been resting since the "Yellow Rose Revolution," so Yumi was worried about her, but she didn't seem to be that ill, at least at the moment. Rosa Foetida and Rei-sama seemed more like the ill people in question.

On that note, did Yoshino-san know how disastrous things have become at school? And how people perceive what she did?

"What have you been doing, while you've been away?"

Of course she was probably resting at home, but she seemed so healthy Yumi bluntly asked. Plus, it seemed difficult to ask directly about Rei-sama.

"Mm. I've been having exams taken at the hospital, and such."

"Exams?"

"Yes. Like blood sampling and electro-cardiograms."

"You're sick...?"

"No, I'm not. They're not performing exams because I'm sick-"

Yoshino-san froze.

"It's a bit hard, to talk about it by telephone. Actually, I called because I wanted to see Yumi-san."

"Me?"

Which meant Yoshino-san had no intention of returning to school just yet. "I'm sorry to call you over like this," Yoshino-san said, and then she designated the time and place for Yumi.

"Eh?"

Yumi asked again, while writing everything down on a memo book. She'd said she wanted Yumi to see her, so Yumi assumed she was going to Yoshino-san's house, but...

"Yoshino-san you weren't receiving treatment at your home...?"

And right as she asked, she heard the unique announcement from the receiver.

— Doctor OO, please come to the nurse station immediately.

Yoshino-san was actually in a hospital.

Part 2.

"Excuse me."

When she double-checked the name-plate on the door, then opened the door, she found Yoshino-san reading a paperback on her bed.

"Ah, Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san immediately raised her head and smiled, like a blossoming flower.

It was an independent room, and there was no one in the room attending to her. Probably to kill time, there was a stack of paperbacks on the small table by her bed.

"Here..."

Yumi showed Yoshino-san the flowers she had brought as an expression of concern. At first she thought about bringing cake or fruits, but her mother had told her she should refrain from that if she hadn't asked Yoshino-san if she

could eat, so she decided on flowers instead.

“Thank you! They’re pretty.”

They were a variety of types, but the three species of yellow roses were all cute. For some reason, Yumi felt they suited Yoshino-san.

“I’d never paid someone a bed-side visit before, so I had the florist pick the flowers for me. I didn’t know there were so many things to keep in mind, like avoiding Lillies because their scent is too strong.”

The florist had also recommended taking an arranged bouquet so there wouldn’t be a need for a flower vase. So the flowers were placed in a basket, like a flipped straw-hat, and it was conveniently designed so you could simply pour water into it, so all you needed to do was set it down on a table.

“I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to bring potted plants.”

“Oh, yes, because it implies ‘netsuku,’ I don’t mind, though.”

Apparently that’s because of “根つく” (to become rooted) and “寝つく” (to enter a deep slumber). According to Yoshino-san, hospitals paid deep care to omens. Accordingly, many hospitals refused to use 4 (shi) and 9 (ku) (死, shi, death, 苦, ku, agony). Of course it’s mostly because patients might be bothered, rather than the hospital itself.

“I’m sorry for taking up your Sunday.”

Yoshino-san placed the book she was reading on her stack of books and turned herself around to face Yumi.

“Oh no, don’t worry about it.”

Yumi shook her head as she sat herself down on the chair Yoshino-san offered. Her happiness at being told by Yoshino-san, “I want to see you,” trumped any feelings she might have had about losing her Sunday.

“It feels a bit off-kilter, doesn’t it.”

Because they'd never met each other outside of school. Yoshino-san had a gown draped over her cardigan, and Yumi was wearing a jumper skirt and a mohair cardigan, so they both giggled.

"How do things look?"

Yoshino-san didn't specify who, or what, she was asking about in her question, but even with her average language skills, Yumi knew who Yoshino-san was asking about.

"She was dazed for a while. But I think she's recovering."

"I see."

The question was about Rei-sama.

"Then, she's not dazed anymore?"

"Mm, well... I guess. I think she has a bit more to go, though."

As she spoke, Yumi wondered. Was Yoshino-san happy that Rei-sama was dazed, or the opposite?

“Next Saturday, Rei-chan, she has an inter-school match. For kendo.”

“Yes.”

“I really want her to win.”

So I wanted to make sure she’d gotten a grip on herself again, Yoshino-san said while smiling, relieved. Then why did she do such a gut-wrenching action in the first place? But Yumi could ask that after Yoshino-san finished speaking, so Yumi concentrated on listening. –Because Yoshino-san didn’t seem to dislike Rei-sama, or anything.

“Yumi-san, did you read the special edition ‘Lillian Kwaraban’ about Rei-chan and I?”

The subject abruptly changed.

“Y, ... yes, I read it, why?”

Actually, Yumi brought that, and the following edition, with her in her handbag. She wasn’t trying to be proactive, but if Yoshino-san wanted to read it, she wanted to make sure she had it on hand.

“Did you feel anything was odd, while reading it?”

“What?”

“Would it be a mistake? Or would it be better called a misprint? Anyways, that article has a huge mistake.”

“Eh!?”

Yumi quickly opened her bag and pulled out the “Lillian Kwaraban.” She was in a hurry, so the second and third leaflets were pulled out of the bag at the same time and floated onto the bed, where Yoshino-san quickly snapped them up.

“- Oh. Things have become quite dreadful, it seems.”

Yoshino-san laughed while skimming over the article.

(I don't think it's something to laugh about-)

One sheet was the break-up announcement. And the new issue this week was a special about the others that had jumped on Rosa Foetida en bouton's bandwagon and began breaking up their own relationships. On the front page alone was a list of ten pairs, for a total of twenty names. Aside from Oyamada Miyuki-san, Katsura-san was also one of Yumi's classmates on the list, so Yumi was in complete shock when the issue was printed. Just how far was the newspaper club going to take this?

But this was just a list of pairs the newspaper club had actually found out about, so there was a possibility that the true list was at least double the size. What was going to happen?

“- Oh. In any case, where's the misprint?”

Yumi held out the “Lillian Kawaraban” and approached Yoshino-san. She'd glanced over it again, but she didn't find anything wrong.

“Of course. Anyone else would find that article more believable.”

“So, it's not a kanji conversion mistake, or something like that?”

“It's the content.”

Yumi looked through the article again with that pointer, but she still didn't know what was wrong. “I give up,” she said, and handed the “Lillian Kawaraban” to Yoshino-san, and she then said, “All of this,” and pointed to almost half the page.

“All?”

“The questionnaire for Rei-chan and I. There were two sheets, but the second sheet got swapped.”

“Eh...? Ehh-!?”

It wasn't the data you could pull from a physical examination record, like birth date and blood type. Rather, it was the part introducing their personal tastes.

"You're kidding."

Rei-sama read shoujo novels, and Yoshino-san read novels about samurai killing people. That totally didn't fit their image.

Then Yoshino-san picked up one of her books and showed the cover to Yumi, as proof.

"... Ikenami Shoutarou."

She felt herself being sapped of power.

"These are all by him."

Like a finishing blow, Yoshino-san pointed to her tower of books. She probably would be better off reading textbooks to keep up with the classes she missed, but then she'd end up longing for school, so she was re-reading her favorite fencer books, instead.

"Then, then, Yoshino-san's hobby--"

"Maybe it's because I can't do it. I love watching sports shows."

Sumo, baseball, soccer, Olympics, she loved them all to death, she said. Ahh, Yumi's image of Yoshino-san was being shattered.

But, that meant Rei-sama was the one who loved knitting.

"Do you remember the lap blanket I used in the classroom? Rei-chan made that."

"__"

Being stunned speechless, would best describe Yumi.

The cool Rei-sama, who swung a shinai around at school, gripped a knitting needle and balls of wool at home – who would believe such a thing?

It didn't suit her. She was willing to bet that without actually pointing it out, no one would notice the misprint. She didn't want to defend the newspaper club, but she could understand why the misprint happened.

"I think Rei-chan's overdoing things."

"Overdoing?"

"She's always tried to be my knight. Plus her looks? Everyone ends up thinking of her as a boy."

But she was such a girl, inside. A girl's girl, as Yumi had spoken to Yoshino-san about some time ago.

"Yoshino-san, umm, I understand you want to say she's actually quite girlish, and that she's pushing herself, but..."

Yumi was beginning to lose sight of where the conversation was going.

"Rei-chan falls apart when I'm around."

Yoshino-san said seriously.

"So you returned the rosary?"

But that would be just like the newspaper club imagined. To pull herself away for Rei-sama's future was like a story out of modern Japanese drama.

But Yoshino-san glanced at the article and said it was completely different.

"I'm not that sort of gallant person. Plus I can't just turn my back on her."

"Eh?"

"I just thought this relationship couldn't continue the way it was. So I wanted to return things to a blank sheet."

“What do you mean?”

“Becoming strong for Yoshino. Then what happens when I’m gone? In truth, Rei-chan’s a strong, dependable person, but she’s just using my existence as a shield, acting strong rather than being strong. And she has to realize that.”

Rather than Rei-sama supporting Yoshino-san, Rei-sama was using Yoshino-san as a crutch.

Yoshino-san had realized that earlier, and had thought deeply about what to do about it. And she decided that they needed to be apart for a while. But they go to the same school, and they were neighbors. Then the only way to do this was to break their sisterly bonds. And just as she was wondering about when to put things into motion, that day came.

Yoshino-san, incensed by Rei-sama’s excessive care, returned the rosary out of momentum.

“I want Rei-chan to become stronger.”

With a firm expression befitting of the phrase “First strike, certain victory,” Yoshino-san laughed.

“In turn, I’m not going to just make Rei-chan suffer. I’m going to become stronger, too.”

“Become stronger-?”

Yumi could tell Yoshino-san was plenty strong, just from the conversation. Why would she want to become even stronger?

But Yoshino-san wasn’t talking about that aspect of strength. Yumi hadn’t completely understood Yoshino-san’s thought-processes yet.

“I’ve decided to undergo surgery.”

She was a girl with more than enough strength.

Part 3.

“- And so Yoshino-san’s message is, ‘I can’t come to cheer for you, but I’ll pray for your success at your match.’ That’s all.”

Rei-sama was completely floored when she finished hearing the message.

“Yoshino is hospitalized? And she’s having surgery-”

“This Saturday. The day of Rei-sama’s match.”

It was lunch-break on Friday.

Rei-sama was probably going to be busy after school, so Yumi called her to the courtyard and relayed the message.

“Aunt and uncle did seem a bit fretful lately...”

Rei-sama put her fist to the hemp palm in the courtyard and agonized. It must have hurt, because she was leaning against a hemp palm...

(If this were Rosa Gigantea, she’d probably cling to someone without any hesitation.)

Then. Rei-sama raised her head and suddenly leaned in to Yumi.

“Which hospital? The usual place?”

Rei-sama's close-up. She'd been Yumi's dance partner at the school festival, so she was a bit used to it, but it was still intimidating. Maybe it was because of her hairstyle. Even when she wore the school uniform, she seemed like a young man.

"Yumi-chan!"

"... Apparently it was the same hospital she'd been going to."

She spun around as soon as she heard the answer, so Yumi hurriedly grabbed Rei-sama's arm. Hey, what time do you think it is? It's still noon, Yumi thought in her mind. And this was why Yoshino-san ended up having to take drastic measures.

"What do you hope to accomplish by going?"

"What, uhh-"

"Rei-sama, you don't understand at all why Yoshino-san deliberately chose to have surgery during your match."

The arm Yumi grabbed suddenly became powerless.

"I don't know. There's no way I'd know."

They'd walked together all the time. Then, their relationship was torn apart without any explanation, so Rei-sama had no way of knowing Yoshino-san's feelings, and why she decided to have surgery during the match.

Yumi became a bit envious while watching Rei-sama struggle.

Yoshino-san occupied this much of Rei-sama's heart. She knew it wasn't right to compare, because they'd been together for so long, because they shared blood. But if Yumi had decided to break their relationship, would Sachiko-sama agonize as much as Rei-sama? Would she contort her face in distress like it was the end of the world?

"And even if it's surgery, she said it wasn't anything big. The success rate

was close to 100 percent...”

“Close!? It’s her heart! Can you be absolute about it!?”

Rei-sama grabbed Yumi by her shoulders and shook her wildly.

“Re, Rei-sama.”

She wasn’t a doctor, so she couldn’t answer that. Yumi was just a messenger, so she was completely clueless about that sort of medical stuff. And maybe Rei-sama realized that fundamental point, because a bit after she shook Yumi, she let go and apologized.

“Yoshino always refused surgery.”

“Yes.”

Yoshino-san’s heart was always a bit off from normal people. She didn’t know the specifics, but she had a hole in a wall inside her heart. So sometimes blood that was supposed to go elsewhere would go to the wrong place, making her have palpitations or run out of breath.

Yoshino-san’s illness was a bit subtle, in that if you were careful, you could live normally. Ideally, you’d just have surgery when you’re an infant, but the illness was diagnosed after elementary school, so she’d come to this point, having steadfastly refused it. Yoshino-san had told Yumi all of this yesterday.

Even if it were alright now, it was the type of illness that could have repercussions later in life, so it was better to have surgery. Medical practices were always improving, so the surgery could be completed without leaving much of a mark, and so she decided now was the time, said Yoshino-san.

But she must have been a bit scared. Yoshino-san never said it, but because of her incident with Rei-sama, she’d finally decided to give surgery serious thought for the first time.

Basically, a return. She would become stronger for Rei-sama.

When you think about it, the accepted principle for living is to live for your

own sake, but Yumi thought that, beyond that, people were greatly influenced by the need to live for someone else, or to not depart before another, or other such like powers.

“Please, do well during your match. That’s Yoshino-san’s wish.”

Yumi held Rei-sama’s palm and gently reminded her. This was something they’d have to deal with on their own, so Yumi couldn’t do much more to help them.

But, she honestly hoped, from the bottom of her heart, that things would work out well for both of them.

Rei-sama’s match.

Yoshino-san’s surgery.

“-Yoshino’s wish.”

Rei-sama mumbled, still agonized.

Rei-sama’s hand was big, strong, and a bit firm. It was meant as a compliment, but she was so manly it was hard to imagine her knitting.

Part 4.

“What’s wrong, Hasekura-san?”

Yamamura-sensei, the club supervisor, asked as she took off her mask.

“Mind out of body. Waving around a shinai like that is asking for an injury. That’s not good.”

“Yes.”

“Captain, could you watch the underclassmen practice for a bit? ... Hasekura-san, come with me.”

Rei left the martial arts building with the teacher, at her urging. She wasn't surprised she got warned. During a scrimmage, a first-year who was clearly inferior managed to take a point from her. She'd never even lost to a classmate before.

“Asking what's the matter would be a waste.”

Yamamura-sensei laughed, leaning against the martial arts building. The fuss. The faculty had to have caught wind of it by now. After all, the teachers had found out about Sachiko and Yumi-chan extremely quickly.

The sound of enthusiastic arranged scrimmages passed through the walls, and for some reason, it felt extremely distant.

The first two days after Yoshino returned the rosary, she was so absent-minded that she couldn't remember what she was doing, but she was becoming accustomed to the hole in her heart. A dry wind was blowing inside of her. The pain of losing Yoshino would never heal under that wind, and all she could do was adjust her life, that was how resigned she felt.

She didn't know what she did wrong.

She just knew she messed something up. And because she didn't know what was wrong, she could only imagine her inability to understand simply made her even more wrong. So it was inevitable Yoshino would leave her. Because she was a person with a giant defect in her character.

But hearing Yumi-chan talk about Yoshino made her waver. The resolve she'd made with her dried heart was actually thirsting desperately for the water that was Yoshino.

She wanted to hug Yoshino again. And melt under Yoshino's soft smile.

“Hasekura-san, are you that crippled without Shimazu-san?”

Yamamura-sensei's words struck home like a clean shot to the mask. As

expected of a Lillian alum. She never misses the mark.

“Without Yoshino...?”

She’d never thought about that. Because Yoshino was always by her side, so she’d never given any thought to a world without her.

“There’s nothing wrong with Shimazu-san’s existence making you a stronger, kinder person, but isn’t it wrong if you fall apart when she’s gone?”

“If I, fall apart?”

“At the very least, you’re not the Hasekura Rei I’ve always known.”

Then, what kind of person was she? She was good at kendo, and she was kind enough to cover for Yoshino, and-.

“I’m not the kind of person sensei thinks I am.”

But she was actually timid, hated being left alone, and was a crybaby. She was such a weak person. So, this was her true self. Without Yoshino, she couldn’t do anything. Simply put, with Yoshino, she felt she could do anything.

She began crying. Even though she’d never cried, since Yoshino had left her. Rei was so shocked by Yoshino’s departure that she’d forgotten how to cry. Yamamura-sensei was surprised Rei suddenly cried, but she wrapped her arms around Rei like a big sister and held her.

“Sensei.”

How long had she been crying? When the tears finally dried, Rei felt the need to ask someone.

“Was I a burden for Yoshino? Because I was subconsciously always hovering over her?”

“I don’t know.”

Yamamura-sensei said.

“But if you know you were hovering over her, and you think that was a mistake, then you can work hard to rectify it, can’t you? It’s not like Shimazu-san died when she returned the rosary. She’s alive, and living next door, isn’t she?”

“... Yes.”

“Then it’s all okay.”

Sensei patted her shoulders and beckoned for her to go back into the martial arts building. But at the entrance, she turned around. “Oh, yeah.”

“So I can keep discipline, do 50 swings there and then come back.”

“Yes.”

“Let’s win the match, general.”

Sensei gave her a thumbs-up.

Rei nodded, then set her shinai in front of her. For some reason, she felt oddly invigorated. She’ll do her best.

She could still keep going, Rei thought.

Part 5.

“So, what was it? You’re being the carrier pigeon for Rei and Yoshino-chan?”

Sighing, resigned, Sachiko-sama fixed the ribbons that tied Yumi’s hair.

“A carrier pigeon... but I’m not doing it every day. And it’s more like

Yoshino-san sending Rei-sama messages. Oh, but, would you like to visit Yoshino-san with me?”

It was Thursday.

Tomorrow is the Friday before the surgery, so the nurse urged me to refrain from visiting, so they could do their final check-ups and other such preparations in peace. So today was to be the last day Yumi could see Yoshino-san before surgery.

“How foolish. Yoshino-chan would end up having to pay attention to our needs, instead. And she only called Yumi because she wanted to keep everything low-key, did she not?”

“Ah...”

Then did that mean Yoshino-san didn’t have to mind anything if it were just Yumi? She couldn’t figure out whether to feel happy or not.

“Also.”

Sachiko-sama looked serious.

“Rei’s tolerating this, so I can’t go, it wouldn’t be fair. You go ahead yourself.”

Grabbing her bag back from Yumi, who was holding it for her, Sachiko-sama began walking down the ginkgo pathway again. Yumi scurried after her and walked by her side.

It had been a while since they’d gone home together. Because so many things were happening.

Even though they became sisters, it didn’t feel like they’d actually become any closer. Maybe they were paralyzed because of all the fuss around Yoshino-san. Yumi hadn’t paid attention to other sisters before, so she didn’t know how other sisters behaved.

“I wonder what Rosa Foetida is doing.”

See. Even when they were together, they'd always talk about other people. But actually, Yumi was wondering the same thing.

"She's been home, sick with a fever, but it's almost been a week, has it not?"

"It is worrisome."

But as she said that, Yumi wondered, "Does she really have a fever?" Not that she was skipping out on school, but perhaps she was staying home for other reasons.

She did have the swollen cheek, so Yumi couldn't help but think there was more to it. But she made a promise with Rosa Foetida, so she couldn't discuss it even with her onee-sama.

But, should she speak about it? Without realizing it, she'd begun straggling behind in thought, so Sachiko-sama had come back, grabbed her arm, and begun dragging her.

"What are you doing? Hurry up."

And then they walked to the main entrance like they were linking arms. Even if it was through clothing, Yumi felt comforted by being physically connected with Sachiko-sama. Even though so many things were happening, she could feel, "Oh well, it'll all work out." Because Sachiko-sama was here with her. Being in touching distance with her was like a miraculously good fortune.

There were many students milling about at the bus stop, whom probably had their club activities end, so she quickly pulled her hand away from Sachiko-sama. But that ended up looking even more like they were secret lovers, so she became embarrassed. What did Sachiko-sama think? She glanced up, but Sachiko-sama looked calm and collected, as always, so on one hand she was a bit disappointed, but she also wouldn't like a Sachiko-sama who'd blush at such a paltry thing as much, either, so she felt torn.

"As Rosa Gigantea says, your face goes all over the place."

In the bus, they stood, holding onto the straps, when Sachiko-sama spoke, sighing.

“My face... goes all over the place.”

Wham! It felt like the bus’ ceiling came crashing down.

Going through life’s many phases. Rosa Gigantea’s unrivaled naming sense. But how was she supposed to comment on that? Sachiko-sama doesn’t seem to understand that every one of her little actions could give Yumi extreme highs and extreme lows.

With a blameless face, she could make Yumi feel ecstatic, and then depressed. Yumi wouldn’t be able to find any other person who could make her feel this way. –Is what Yumi thought, as she was rocked about in the bus heading to the train station.

After stepping out of the bus at the north gate for M Station at JR, she split up with Sachiko-sama at the wicket.

“Take care of yourself.”

Sachiko-sama fixed Yumi’s tie, as normal, smiled like Maria-sama, glided through the wickets and vanished on the other side. Her straight, black hair waved behind her, and she gave off an aura of beauty, even when looking at her from behind.

Yoshino-san’s hospital was about fifteen minutes by bus at the south gate bus terminal. When she walked down the steps at the train station, she saw the bus she normally takes for going to school, and she almost went on it out of habit.

(No, no.)

She’d end up going straight home if she stepped on that bus.

After confirming the bus stop and the destination projected at the forehead of

the bus, she stepped on the bus for Yoshino-san's hospital. It was packed by the time it departed. The hospital was in the middle of a quiet residential area, but it seemed like it was becoming rush hour.

By the time the bus stopped in front of the hospital, though, it had become largely empty, so she stepped off easily.

There is no night-time treatment on Thursday, read a sign, as she walked through the front entry hall.

Outpatient clinics were done for the day, so the treasury and the pharmacy were both closed, and the waiting room was empty. Maybe that was why the smell of antiseptic seemed stronger. She felt a chill run up her spine, realizing that night-time hospitals had a cold atmosphere like this.

Two days ago she'd arrived at an earlier time, and on Sunday she'd come at noon, so it was nothing like this. Interview times were until seven, and when she checked her watch, it was six fifty. It was a perfectly fine.

(But...)

After one unusual thought, things begin snowballing. Just to be clear, the hospital was very modern, clean, and even the waiting room had a more than abundant amount of lighting. It wasn't the type of old, wooden, spider webbed building that ghost stories come from. Really, it was just Yumi feeling uncomfortable with her surroundings.

(I should go up, quickly.)

There should be plenty of nurses at the in-patient ward, and Yoshino-san was in her hospital room. Other visitors like Yumi would be in the conversational rooms, too. –It seemed like she just felt uncomfortable because there was no one around.

Yumi ran to the elevator – had Sachiko-sama been there, she would have been warned – and hit the button to go up.

The elevator seemed to have been in wait, as the door immediately opened.

She didn't want to have been stuck waiting, but having the door immediately open felt a bit intimidating, too.

But, there was no one in it, so she walked in, relieved. She'd been taught at school to never be alone with a man she didn't know.

She stepped out to the fifth floor and went to the nurse station. It was like a checking station. Without going through it, she couldn't see a patient.

She felt even more relieved when she saw the glass window for the nurse station. Just then, she felt a chill at the back of her neck, and she quickly spun around.

There.

(☆×■◎※△————!?)

Yumi silently screamed. Down the corridor to hospital rooms stood one person, staring absent-mindedly.

That person, after one glance at Yumi, turned around and walked away.

(... Stop.)

It was nothing, just an in-patient. It was just a white gown.

“Don't scare me like that, please.”

She felt her strength being sapped.

She was scared with no people around, and then she was scared when there was someone, so it was endless. There wasn't supposed to be any otherworldly phenomenon in this world. Either way, she was protected by Maria-sama, so it would be alright.

(... Even so.)

Hadn't she seen that person somewhere? Yumi thought.

Of course, she was surprised at first, so she didn't even have the chance to think about that. But when that figure had walked away, and she'd settled down, she couldn't help but think that face was familiar. But it wasn't Yoshino-san.

(But, who else other than Yoshino-san would be an in-patient at this hospital?)

Then, her shoulder was tapped, so she almost jumped.

“Wh, what's wrong?”

The person who'd tapped Yumi's shoulder was even more surprised, because of Yumi's look upon turning around.

“Yoshino-san...”

“Yes, pull yourself together.”

She'd probably just finished calling home, as Yoshino-san waved her telephone card in front of Yumi's face.

“Did something happen, Yumi-san?”

“... I, just now, I think I just saw Rosa Foetida.”

“Eh?”

“Yes. It was Rosa Foetida, that ghost!”

Yumi spoke, excited. Of course, Yoshino-san wouldn't understand her with that.

“Calm down, Yumi-san. Rosa Foetida? Rosa Foetida's alive, so she wouldn't be a ghost.”

“Then... a living ghost?”

“Please, stop. You're scaring someone who's about to have surgery.”

“... I’m sorry.”

Yoshino-san didn’t care about omens, but she seemed to be surprisingly weak to ghost stories, too. As they walked to Yoshino-san’s room, Yumi explained what she’d seen. Then, Yoshino-san abruptly spoke, remembering.

“That reminds me, I saw her, too.”

“Eh!?”

“Saw, or rather, I think I saw, more like. I didn’t expect Rosa Foetida to be at a hospital in my wildest dreams, so I just forgot about it-”

Then it must have been Rosa Foetida. Without her uniform, she wasn’t outstanding enough to immediately recognize her. So it wouldn’t be too surprising if they’d both been in the same ward.

“But, it must be someone else? Because Rosa Foetida’s at school-”

“Actually, she’d been absent since last week.”

“Eh?”

Yoshino-san blinked, hearing this for the first time.

“When did Yoshino-san see her?”

“Last week..., no, maybe it was the beginning of this week. I’m sorry, I don’t really remember.”

“At school Rosa Foetida’s said to be absent because of a fever.”

“To the point of being hospitalized?”

The two of them sat down on the hospital bed and groaned, thinking. Because you wouldn’t be hospitalized with a normal fever.

“... Shall we ask a nurse?”

“I’ll pass.”

“Same.”

To be honest, Yumi didn’t really feel like investigating any further, so she was relieved when Yoshino-san said “I’ll pass.” She seemed to be having her own set of problems, so she didn’t feel comfortable intruding, because she had no idea what would come out.

Ahh, but, still.

Both of them had quickly decided that it was Rosa Foetida. It was a dangerous leap of faith, she thought, especially as they’d seen her, once, and not simultaneously, so they were simply trusting each other’s judgment. But if she were to sell this story to the newspaper club they’d be so happy.

(Rosa Foetida’s mysterious hospitalization.)

-Of course, she wouldn’t even come close to doing such a thing.

“So, Yumi-san.”

Yoshino-san spoke, quietly.

“What?”

“I appreciate you doing so many things for me.”

Such a formal statement felt a bit like a farewell, so Yumi couldn’t help but feel a bit down.

But, the surgery wasn’t supposed to be difficult. Of course, it was nothing like removing a wart from your buttocks, but it was supposed to be a relatively easy surgery, for a heart operation.

“Oh, no, don’t look that way. Don’t worry, I don’t plan on dying. This will absolutely not be my parting message.”

Even in a situation like this, her thoughts were written on her face. Yumi

resolved to, when becoming an adult, never play poker or mahjong.

“I just wanted to say thanks. And along with it, I have a request.”

“A request?”

Yoshino-san’s been doing astounding things lately, so Yumi couldn’t help but feel a bit afraid of “a request.” But the request was simple.

“The day after tomorrow, if you’re free, could you watch Rei-chan’s match?”

“-Eh?”

“I want you to see Rei-chan fight.”

“Rei-sama’s match.”

“Right.”

She simply nodded, but Yumi thought Yoshino-san wanted to add, “for me.”

“Okay, no problem.”

In truth, she wanted to run here immediately after class, but she’d be leaving the surgery up to the doctors, anyways, and since she was just a high school girl with the wrong blood type, she wouldn’t be of any help, so she decided against that.

“I’ll watch Rei-sama win.”

Yoshino-san said thank you, and smiled like an angel.

Her dinner was brought up, so Yumi gave Yoshino-san a last cheer, then left the hospital. Maybe it was because she felt like she’d accepted an important mission, because her mind was more focused, and so the quiet hospital didn’t seem as ominous as it did when she’d arrived. Humans are such simple creatures, she thought.

Close to the main entrance of the hospital, she could see the red light of an

ambulance switching on and off. In the waiting room were people that she assumed were the family of the patient, and they were receiving an explanation from a nurse, and they didn't seem to look positive.

She didn't know if it was an illness or an accident, but she felt sorry either way. She walked out the entrance door as quietly as possible, to not disturb them, and thought about Rei-sama.

How hard was this on Rei-sama?

Even if she couldn't do anything, she must be wishing she could just be by Yoshino-san's side. But because of Yoshino-san's wish, she's gritting her teeth and toughing it out. She was concentrating on winning her match, like it was to be proof of her love.

Rei-sama was strong, being the onee-sama of Yoshino-san. She was honest, direct, and charming.

The bus to M Station had just arrived, so Yumi ran to the bus stop and stepped on. She collected her breath, sitting down at the seat closest to the door of the empty bus.

Because she'd run, and because she was thinking about everything that was to happen in two days, her heart was beating fast.

Fighting Maidens

Part 1.

The weather that day was so beautiful it felt a shame to simply pass it off as “clear Autumnal weather.”

Indoor kendo match, as well as a surgical operation, it wasn't like either of them were affected by weather, but Yumi felt it was much better than if it were gloomy. It felt like Maria-sama was definitely watching over them, so even as a bystander, she couldn't help but rejoice in the weather.

After fourth period ended, she finished cleaning as quickly as possible (and as a result worked harder at cleaning than ever before), and sped off to the main entrance, where everyone had agreed to meet.

Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis, as well as Sachiko-sama had already arrived. Rosa Foetida was still absent, so unfortunately she wasn't able to watch her little sister's gala occasion. After waiting for Shimako-san, who arrived five minutes after Yumi, they all headed to the town gymnasium.

The park that surrounded the gymnasium was occupied primarily by girls wearing three different uniforms. Because the weather was great, it seemed like many decided to just kill time outside until the matches began.

A very orthodox dark-red tie above a navy blazer. And a more modern design, with a blue pleated skirt and a thick, beige-colored blazer with a coat-of-arms at the breast. And then casual clothing.

Amidst this, the ivory sailor collar and black, low-waist one-piece Lillian uniform couldn't help but stand out. Although some people backbit that our uniform found itself in the wrong era, Yumi thought the comparatively older design actually felt fresh.

Today's matches were an organized tournament between schools in the area, and the four girls' kendo clubs considered the best in the region were

participating. It wasn't an official tournament, but it did have tradition, so students from many schools had come to cheer.

The hall was quite filled by the time of the two o'clock start. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't possible to find a whole five seats open together, so they split themselves up into three and two.

"Sachiko and Yumi-chan, there're two seats over there."

Was she accommodating them? Rosa Chinensis directed the two of them to sit together.

"Here, Yumi-chan."

Rosa Gigantea presented one paper box of mixed sandwiches and two paper boxes of milk coffee. Yumi didn't know when she'd gone out to buy them.

"You can't fight on an empty stomach, they say."

Except the only one actually fighting was Rei-sama, they were just cheering-. But, she was hungry, and she didn't want to turn into a frog again.

"How much was it?"

When Yumi went to take out her purse, Rosa Gigantea said, "Don't worry about it." Even though she was an upperclassman, they were both high school students receiving an allowance, so Yumi tried to insist on paying, except Sachiko-sama went ahead and placed bills on Rosa Gigantea's hand.

"Because there's no reason for Rosa Gigantea to treat me, or my little sister."

"You're so strict. But, well, you're trying to be a big sis, so I'll retreat."

Rosa Gigantea complied with Sachiko-sama, returned the exact amount of change, and left to return to sit with Rosa Chinensis.

"Um-."

Now, Yumi had to face Sachiko-sama. How much was it for one person?

“Oh, put away your purse, it’s embarrassing.”

Sachiko-sama said, and hurried to sit down. Yumi followed in a hurry.

“All you have to do, is say, gochisousama.”

“But-”

When Yumi still dawdled, Sachiko-sama looked a bit cross, saying, “Don’t you get it?”

“Let me be a big sister sometimes.”

“... Ah.”

So, Yumi pulled out a sandwich without hesitation and said “gochisousama.” It was made of lettuce and tomato and eggs, and actually tasted pretty good.

Part 2.

Yumi had never even watched a kendo match on TV.

So she had no idea how Rei-sama was supposed to win, but Sachiko-sama filled her in while they were watching.

First, that it was a team match, rather than an individual one.

While there were matches to decide individual winners, in this case, the four schools chose five people to represent them. In order of strength, the five were titled Taishou, Fukushou, Chuuken, Jihou and Senpou^[2], and the Senpou fought the Senpou, the Taishou fought the Taishou. And Rei-sama was Lillian’s Taishou.

Even though these schools were considered the top four, their students changed year to year, so there was rarely an occasion where you could

definitively say one school was the absolute best. Takurazawa school, which won last year, had their Taishou, Fukushou and Chuuken all graduate, so most people didn't expect them to be repeat champions.

The favorites this year were Oonaka girls' high, and Lillian girls' academy. Unfortunately, we'd lost last year at the semi-finals, but this year Hasekura Rei returned as a Taishou, after being the Fukushou as a first-year student.

Because there were only four schools, each match was a semi-final and a final. They drew for matchups and, luckily, Oonaka and Lillian weren't paired.

The fencers from the four schools entered the floor and sat, encircling the fighting area.

Yumi glanced at her wristwatch.

Two in the afternoon. The surgery was hopefully going well.

Yoshino-san's surgery was supposed to have begun at nine. Yoshino-san had apparently painstakingly insisted that the surgery be held today. At first, Yumi thought she didn't absolutely need to have it be today, but Yoshino-san probably had her own reasons for fixating on this date. It might be something you'd never know until you end up in that situation yourself.

She expected an athletes' pledge, or that someone important would make an announcement, but the match actually simply started. The first two combatants stood up, and the referee blew a whistle.

"It's exciting."

After emptying the pack of milk coffee, she put the box under her seat to keep it out of the way. The sandwiches had already been settled into their stomachs at a ratio of Yumi: 4, Sachiko-sama: 2.

But, Sachiko-sama, like, for one of her sandwiches, the olive oil was soaked into the bread, or she had another sandwich with white and brown bread, but she didn't like the brown bread because it had caraway in it. She was full of

complaints, so Yumi ended up having to finish everything. Maybe she was picky because she was a rich princess, but Yumi thought Sachiko-sama's mother must have a hard time packing lunch like that. Ah, because it was Sachiko-sama, it was probably a maid or something.

“Don't wander about, watch the match.”

Sachiko-sama suddenly grabbed Yumi's jaw and turned her back to the matches, like a shower lever.

(Gosh- when Sachiko-sama does something like that, it just makes it even harder to concentrate!)

That said, she found herself sucked into the matches anyways. The matches continued, and the Oonaka and Takurasawa Taishou stood, facing each other.

As expected of the Taishou, even for a newbie like Yumi, their superior skills to the previous four was evident. And for whatever it was worth, they seemed to have more vigor, too.

Along with a clean PANG! sound, the Oonaka Taishou stepped back. Simultaneously, the three referees lifted a white flag.

“That meant it was a clean blow, right?”

After watching four matches, Yumi was getting the hang of things. Even if it looked like a good hit, unless a flag went up, it didn't matter.

“It was a brilliant strike to the mask.”

Sachiko-sama gasped in admiration, and praised the Oonaka Taishou.

“You're pretty knowledgeable about kendo?”

“Suguru-san used to do kendo.”

“_”

Suguru-san, meant full-name Kashiwagi Suguru. He was Sachiko-sama's

cousin, a third-year student at Lillian's neighboring Hanadera Institute, student council president, and a handsome, intelligent young man. Plus, he was Sachiko-sama's fiancé, as decided by their parents and preferred males... Anyways, he's a rather awe-inspiring person.

Speaking of which, what happened to Kashiwagi-san? Did they extinguish their engagement?

The first semi was a 4-1 rout by the Oonaka girls. Next, the Lillian students stood up.

Rei-sama.

Was radiating willpower, even though it was just the Senpou match. I'll definitely win! You could feel her determination.

Maybe it was because she was preparing herself for the kendo matches, but Rei-sama looked different than normal, sporting a scarier face than usual.

The Tsukimigaoka high school we were against was a private coeducation school, so you could hear throaty voices whether they won or lost. It was in stark contrast to the pure-yellow cheers of Lillian.

The Senpou and Jihou were both defeated by Tsukimigaoka, but the Chuuken and Fukushou both won. Next was the Taishou, Rei-sama.

If they lose, they fall to the consolation round. If they win, they go to the finals against Oonaka. It was all down to the Taishou.

“What pressure...”

“Don’t worry, she’ll win. If she loses here, she wouldn’t be able to face Yoshino-chan.”

Yumi thought Sachiko-sama’s words were on the mark.

Rei-sama stepped into the fighting circle with her mask, bowed to the Tsukimigaoka Taishou, and the match began.

Rei-sama was beautiful, standing tall with her shinai in front of her. She wanted to show Yoshino-san this scene.

(Oh shoot, I should have brought a camera.)

How clumsy, to realize it now. Just as she was humbled by her guilt, she noticed a flash from the audience.

“Tsutako-san...!”

“Oh, Yumi-san. Gokigenyou.”

She turned around for an instant, hearing her name, but then immediately returned to concentrate on the match. As expected of the photography ace. She’d never let a chance for a good photo go by. On second look, the newspaper club captain was by her side. She, too, looked immersed in reporting.

(I'll ask for a copy of the photo later.)

She was glad she was friends with Tsutako-san. Actually, when she asked about it later, she found out the Roses didn't even bother thinking about cameras, simply relying on Tsutako-san. Rather than a newbie using a disposable camera, a semi-pro using an advanced camera was certain to produce better photos. Plus, if they left it to Tsutako-san, they'd be better able to focus on the matches.

The Taishou match was, as Sachiko-sama predicted, dominated by Rei-sama. She pounded away with mask and torso shots, to the point where Yumi would have readily raised a flag. The Tsukimigaoka Taishou was forced into a more defensive game, but because she was the Taishou, she might have been driven by pride to swing back every so often.

“Brilliant.”

Sachiko-sama yelled at her side. Simultaneously, three red flags went up. It was too fast for Yumi to have noticed, but Rei-sama's forearm blow had been clean.

“Sachiko-sama is really athletic.”

Sachiko-sama smiled bitterly at that.

Anyways, Lillian got past the semis, and Rei-sama had a win under her belt.

“Huh...?”

It was rather late, but a question suddenly formulated in her head.

“At what point would Rei-sama count as having won?”

Did that mean Lillian winning? Or Rei-sama winning all of her matches? Or-

“Yoshino-san didn't mean that sort of victory, I think.”

Then, what did she mean? As Yumi tilted her head to the side, the finals match began. There's almost no time for rest.

During the finals, the Senpou went to Oonaka, the Jihou went to Lillian. Chuuken draw, Fukushou Lillian, and so Lillian was ahead.

“If Rei-sama wins, we win!”

Excitedly, Yumi grabbed Sachiko-sama’s arm, but Sachiko-sama didn’t look very pleased, so Yumi quickly pulled her arm away.

“That’s not it. I don’t mind the arm.”

“Eh?”

“That’s not good.”

She had no idea what was wrong. Lillian was ahead with two wins, one loss and one tie, and Rei-sama was next, so it was like presenting a club to an ogre.

“Oonaka’s Taishou is really strong.”

“Strong?”

“They had to have three wins by Fukushou.”

“They had...!?”

She was talking as if Rei-sama was going to lose. But, they were two and two against Tsukimigaoka, so Tsukimigaoka was a stronger team than Oonaka. So Rei-sama, who beat the Tsukimigaoka Taishou, was certainly going to beat the Oonaka Taishou...

“That’s not how it works.”

If it were Tsukimigaoka versus Lillian, everything was primed for Lillian to win. But it was simply that the Lillian first-years were nervous at beginning the match, so they didn’t show their full potential.

“The Oonaka Taishou is a rank holder.”

“Rank holder?”

“Yes, around san-dan.”

“Rei-sama?”

“Ni-dan.”

“What does that mean?”

“... You really don’t know anything, do you.”

Sachiko-sama sighed, exasperated. Apparently it starts from shodan, and goes ni-dan, san-dan, etc. But in the case of Sumo, the lower numbers are stronger. –Well, she didn’t say that outloud though.

“What happens if Rei-sama loses?”

Because then they would both have two wins and two losses and a draw.

“The team with the most points wins.”

Currently, Lillian was winning by one point. So, if Rei-sama were to lose by one point, they’d be tied. And if that happens.

“They both send out a representative for a one-point match.”

“But. If that happens, they’d both send their Taishou.”

“Of course.”

“Then, we’ll lose...!!”

If she lost once, Rei-sama wouldn’t be able to win the second one.

“That doesn’t mean Rei-sama is going to lose.”

“Well, true.”

But, Sachiko-sama said it first. That it was bad. That the Oonaka Taishou was a san-dan and strong. Ahh, but what happens then?

Yoshino-san, eagerly awaiting Rei-sama's victory?

Their relationship?

Actually Yumi had gone off on her own and believed that if Rei-sama showed good results here, Yoshino-san would accept the rosary again.

Rei-sama with a match victory, and Yoshino-san with successful surgery, they'd both be able to walk down a fresh, new road as sisters. And everything would end happily. Is what she thought.

"It's beginning."

Sachiko-sama quietly announced.

That's right. Yumi had to watch Rei-sama for Yoshino-san.

(If that were to happen, maybe she'd be okay with just that win before...)

When she glanced at the watch, it was four. How was Yoshino-san's surgery?

Rei-sama did her best.

Newbies couldn't tell the difference between skill. But Rei-sama seemed more intimidating. You could feel her determination to win. Her voice was louder, too.

But.

Maybe it was the difference in skill. "What happens then" happened.

When they were locked, with their shinai against each other, and Rei-sama tried to pull off, her opponent was a split-second faster and landed a torso hit.

The gathering of black one-piece girls all lowered their shoulders, "Darn." Of course, Yumi was among them.

The match continued to a decisive Taishou fight. Both Taishou took off their masks, wiped away sweat, and set up to fight again.

Right before she put her mask back on, even though she lost, Rei-sama looked mysteriously serene. Yumi had no idea why that was the case.

Her eyes were calm, like a pool of water with not a single wave. It was completely different from eyes that have simply given up and wandered elsewhere. No, she was just not quiet, it was like she had found her wick. Like a polished, cleaned katana was gripped by her soul. Anyways, she looked completely focused.

(I wonder what happened?)

They were leading the match, but her loss put them all back at the start, so there must have been a tremendous amount of pressure. The word victory was draped over her shoulders, and she had to win in order to vindicate the efforts of the other four, and she had to beat an opponent she'd just lost to. Yumi thought that must be taking a heavy toll on her psyche.

This was it.

Even so, Rei-sama looked like she'd already won.

Part 3.

The surgery had apparently been complete by the time the matches ended.

When Yoshino-san's father showed up at the gymnasium with red eyes, everyone was terrified. But after saying the surgery was a success and Yoshino-san was resting, her father flagged down a taxi and rushed off again.

Unable to sit still, Yumi visited the hospital the next day, and was called by Yoshino-san's mother by the nurse station.

“I’m sorry. She’s sleeping right now. Fukuzawa-san, would you like to see her anyways?”

“Eh, but it’s after surgery, shouldn’t she been in an ICU...”

“She’s already back in her room. It’s a bit hard to look at, because she has a few tubes still stuck to her...”

“...”

Well, without a doubt, Yoshino-san’s surgery was simple, even if it was heart-related. She thought everyone was just saying it was easy, for the patient’s sake.

Maybe she was affected by “see her anyways?” or maybe she thought of Rei-sama, but she decided against it. If she could see her this easily, it wasn’t right to be ahead of Rei-sama.

Right after surgery, Yoshino-san had awakened from anesthesia and asked, “How was the match?” but had gone right back to sleep.

“So, how was the match?”

Yoshino-san’s mother asked, but after a quick thought, she smiled, “No, I shouldn’t ask.”

“If I found out the results before Yoshino, it wouldn’t be right.”

What a knowing mother, Yumi thought.

Part 4.

Rei saw Yoshino on an evening, three days after the match.

She actually wanted to run over as soon as possible, but she restrained herself

until Yoshino said she wanted to meet. And that morning, her aunt told her Yoshino wanted to see her, so she stopped by the hospital after her club finished. Apparently, Yoshino didn't want to see people with tubes still stuck in her.

"Long time no see."

Are people allowed to be this energetic just three days after heart surgery? she wanted to ask, because Yoshino was propped up on her bed and smiling as always.

"You look fine."

"But I'm not. The incision hurt so much when the anesthesia wore off, I'm better now because they just gave me some painkillers."

"... So it hurts?"

"Well I mean they cut the skin, messed around with the heart, and then closed it again."

Yoshino said, like she was reciting a simple cooking recipe. With her acting like that, she couldn't help but wonder, again, if it actually hurt, if she actually had surgery.

"Yoshino-"

When they split up, she had a lot of things she wanted to say. But now, with Yoshino in front of her, she couldn't find any words to say.

Yoshino was alive, and right there. That was enough to satisfy her.

"How many days?"

"About two weeks."

"It's the first time. That we've spent so long apart."

"Yeah."

Even during the class trips during middle school, they hadn't been apart this long. Plus, when they were on trips, they still phoned each other, so they never felt lonely. The days where they could count down how many days were left on their fingers felt nostalgic.

“Rei-chan.”

Yoshino said, with a meek face.

“I'm sorry. I wanted to hold hands and walk with Rei-chan.”

“Eh?”

“Not lending a shoulder, or carrying, or anything like that. I wanted to walk with my own legs. I wanted a relationship like that. Like Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama. That's why I wanted surgery. I wanted a sturdy body, so I could walk with Rei-chan. And I wanted Rei-chan to be used to that.”

Yoshino blurted everything out at once, like her words were going to vanish if she didn't.

“Will you believe me? I didn't return the rosary because I began hating Rei-chan.”

“Yeah, I know.”

When the Oonaka Girls' High Taishou took a point from her, she didn't find distress or pressure in her heart, but rather a pure, white, empty world. That's when she understood what it meant to “win.” What she needed to strike down wasn't the opponent in front of her, but none other than herself.

Opponents, club members, audience, and the Yoshino she loved so much-. When all of those weren't there with her, Rei found herself alone in that white world. That's when she realized what Yoshino had thrown at her, she thought. What Yoshino meant by “winning,” what she really meant.

“I love Rei-chan the most, in the whole world.”

Yoshino murmured.

“Me, too.”

Rei felt Yoshino’s hair. More than father, more than mother. She loved Yoshino most, in the whole world.

That’s why she could believe Yoshino’s words, and she could tell Yoshino her feelings.

When they were stuck together, they were so close that she’d never been able to look straight at Yoshino’s face like this. But now, even though they were a bit further apart, their souls felt closer. She felt closer to Yoshino than ever before.

“Oh. The match. How’d it go?”

Yoshino asked, suddenly remembering.

“We won.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief at Rei’s reply.

“Really? But the Oonaka Taishou is that Tanaka-san, right?”

“We got pulled into a closing match, and I ended up with a decision win. Plus she got a point off me in the actual match, too.”

“But your opponent was a third year san-dan! Wow!”

Which meant, of course, that Yoshino wasn't really ever expecting her to beat Oonaka's Taishou.

Yoshino was excited, suddenly rambling, that she'd definitely go to cheer next year, that she would spend the next year practicing so she'd be able to make a handmade lunch.

"But, wow, you're energetic. Did you really have surgery?"

"I did. Do you want to see the scar?"

"... Really?"

"I want Rei-chan to see."

Yoshino unbuttoned her pajama and opened the front. She wasn't wearing an undershirt, but a big gauze was wrapped over her breast in its stead. She didn't have any bandages.

"When a bunch of things were stuck in my body I wouldn't have wanted to show you, though."

As she said that, she peeled off the paper tapes. When she lifted the heavily piled gauze a bit, there was a roughly 10 centimeter scar under her right breast.

One horizontal slice. It was stitched together with a wiry thing, rather than thread. The single line that ran through Yoshino's white body was beautiful, looking like a decoration.

"When it heals, it'll hardly be noticeable."

"Ah."

Because it's a girl's body, it's a good thing the scar wouldn't remain, but Rei felt a bit disappointed the decoration were to vanish. Yoshino laughed, too, "I'd look like a girl pirate if it stayed."

After carefully returning the gauze to its place and buttoning her shirt, Yoshino spoke.

“I think I want to start kendo.”

“Eh!?”

“I’m Rei-chan’s cousin, so I might have some talent. I said I’d cheer for you, but it seems more fun if I were to do it, myself, too. Then, next year I’ll take a point from Oonaka’s Tanaka-san as vengeance for Rei-chan.”

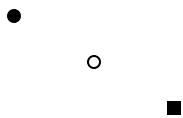
Yoshino’s ego had bloated after surgery. Rei smiled bitterly.

“Then I guess I should make sure I don’t lose my Taishou throne.”

She seemed so ecstatic Rei didn’t want to correct her.

Third-years graduate, so next year Oonaka wouldn’t have Tanaka-san.

Maybe it’s because they’d been together a lot lately. Yoshino seemed a bit like Yumi-chan.



Speaking of which.

The professional nurse immediately noticed that the patient had opened the gauze.

Do I even need to mention that Yoshino-san and Rei-sama were scolded afterward?

As long as it ends well

Part 1.

“-is what happened.”

That Monday.

The usual peaceful days returned. ... or so Yumi wished, as she found herself in the Rose Mansion after school.

(Why am I stuck being interrogated by Rosa Foetida?)

The warm Darjeeling has become iced tea. For the past hour, she'd been caught by Rosa Foetida.

“Everyone's late today.”

“They've escaped. From me.”

“Huh?”

“Yumi-chan knows all the details, they said. So, you have an obligation to explain.”

“What the.”

She was wondering why no one was showing up even though there was supposed to be a committee meeting, but apparently they'd simply pushed everything to Yumi and escaped.

“So, keep going.”

“But I've already told you everything.”

But Rosa Foetida kept saying it wasn't enough of an adequate explanation, and kept insisting on more commentary. Even though she was gone for a

while, Rosa Foetida was back to full power.

It was a bit awkward talking to Rosa Foetida when she's down, but this sort of obsessive Rosa Foetida is something you want to avoid, too. No wonder everyone ran away, leaving the newcomer, Yumi.

Rosa Foetida didn't really care for most things, but when she became interested in something, she would be relentless.

"Okay, Yumi-chan? I've been left behind these past two weeks, a pitiful being. And my own cute sisters were amidst a crisis, but I never noticed. Don't you think it's obvious I'd want to make up those two weeks?"

"Uh."

But it wasn't like she had amnesia. She'd been attending school for the first week, when everything was the most chaotic, and she still hadn't noticed, so Yumi thought it was a bit odd that she would drag someone into her own uproar.

"Oh, well. But everything's back to normal, right?"

"Yes."

"Yoshino-chan's being released from the hospital next week?"

"Yes."

"That's good."

Rosa Foetida looked at her cold tea, made a face, then took it to the sink.

"Ah, I'll wash it."

"Oh? Sorry."

Yumi caught up with her and rolled up her uniform sleeves.

Sheesh. She was finally being acquitted.

It was like guidance counseling (not that she'd actually experienced that), being interrogated one-to-one, and it wasn't particularly pleasant. Compared to that, putting her hand to an icy sink was nothing.

"By the way, Rosa Foetida?"

"What?"

"Rosa Foetida... um-"

Seeing Rosa Foetida humming happily made her want desperately to ask. Her swollen cheek, why she was absent for a week, and why she was at the hospital. But there was the matter of privacy, so she didn't feel comfortable asking. Then Rosa Foetida looked like she understood, and opened her mouth.

"Oh my, Yumi-chan, did you think I was pregnant, too?"

"Eh? Rosa Foetida was pregnant!?"

Yumi was so surprised she splashed water on herself. Rosa Foetida looked completely exasperated.

"I said 'did you think.' Of course I wasn't. I don't have a boyfriend."

"You don't?"

"I don't. I've been attending a girls' school since kindergarten, how am I supposed to meet one? Even the teachers are all grandpas and grandmas."

"All, but..."

Well, that's true, she thought.

"Some of my classmates were worried about that, though, I wonder why?"

I wonder why? That was probably because of Rosa Foetida's behavior. Even as she dried off the sink with a rag, her heart beat rapidly. Talking about pregnancy was exciting for a high school freshman.

“Do I need to carry around my dentist’s medical certificate?”

The second wave of surprise. It was a good thing she’d finished washing.

“What, you didn’t know? I had my wisdom teeth pulled.”

Rosa Foetida opened her mouth wide and showed her the holes at the back of the left side of her jaw.

“Gosh, a bit of rice got stuck in it, it was horrible.”

“Ehhhhhhhh!?”

Well, it went like this.

She didn’t like the drill sound at a dentist’s practice, so she’d always meticulously brushed her teeth and all. Rosa Foetida was proud she had never had to see a dentist. So the wisdom teeth popping out, being completely unrelated to brushing teeth, was like an unfortunate accident. It probably would have been better if she’d immediately gone to a dentist, but she just couldn’t take the sound of drills, and so she’d been unable to step through those doors. She was like a phantom.

“I know you might laugh, ‘it’s just a dentist!’ But I’m frightened to death by them. I wondered whether it’d be alright to just die from wisdom teeth if I’d never have to see them.”

“...”

Yumi could understand how she felt, though. But either way, you usually don’t die from wisdom teeth.

“Plus, having people finding out that I’m scared of dentists at my age would be humiliating as Rosa Foetida.”

“Um... then you holding your swollen cheek and having teary eyes...”

“It probably hurt so much I was at my limits. ... Oh, I ran into Yumi-chan?”

“You even said ‘Yumi-chan’ to me. And-”

Then Yumi stopped herself. She’d feel humiliated if she found out Yumi knew she’d gone home with her indoor shoes.

But, that might mean she had no idea she ran into Yumi and Yoshino-san at the hospital? When she brought it up, she mentioned she didn’t see anyone in a Lillian uniform.

“Oh, so it was Yumi-chan? And Yoshino-chan was in that hospital, too?”

She was like Urashima Tarou[\[3\]](#), Yumi thought. Those two weeks are simply vacant, for her.

In the end, Rosa Foetida was so embarrassed by her inability to see a dentist she’d kept it a secret from her family. So her father panicked at the sight of Rosa Foetida groaning with a fever and called an ambulance. Luckily she was brought to a general practice, so there was a resident dentist, and they were able to pull the wisdom teeth out at the hospital. And her father found out, of course.

“But he did call an ambulance, right? So he said, don’t come back immediately. He is the mayor, so he’s a bit proud. So I stayed in the hospital until my fever went down, for his sake.”

“He sounds like a great father.”

“How?”

She asked dubiously. If you say something off-handedly I’ll kill you, was written all over Rosa Foetida’s face.

“Right-”

He was willing to look bad for someone he loved. Yumi thought that was lovely.

Part 2.

By the way.

I should report a bit on what happened afterward to Yoshino-san, who'd created a sensation by liquidating a relationship by returning the rosary to her sister.

By the time Yoshino-san made her return from the hospital, the Lillian girls' academy garden was dressed in winter, and students had largely forgotten about the Yellow Rose Revolution. Even the news of Yoshino-san's return to school was simply printed on the "Lillian Kwaraban" as a small, token "we're sorry" sort of thing. They're so mercenary.

But, Yoshino-san did it again.

This time, Yoshino-san called Rei-sama out to the Maria-sama statue (!), bowed her head, and requested, "Please make me your sister."

For an underclassman to break up a relationship was obviously a rarity, but an underclassman requesting to be a sister was also unheard of. And everyone was in an uproar again.

That said, Yoshino-san and Rei-sama came to school every day together again, ignoring all of the uproar surrounding them. Yumi couldn't have been the only one thinking they were closer than they were before the Revolution. Yoshino-san seems to be serious about starting kendo next year.

Currently, the underclassmen that were influenced by Yoshino-san's catastrophe and returned their rosaries have begun requesting to be sisters again. A hush-hush boom. A lot of them split up as a spontaneous decision, so they probably ended up regretting it as time went on. It might have been the perfect time for Yoshino-san to come back.

"Gosh, what are they thinking, anyways."

They don't have any self identity, Sachiko-sama grumbled. But Yumi could kind of understand where they were coming from.

The Roses and the boutons were the idols of the school. So people were willing to do anything to become a bit more like them. Yumi was like that just a while ago, so she could understand.

Sachiko-sama would probably never understand, for all eternity. But the Sachiko-sama that would never understand that was the Sachiko-sama Yumi loved.

"By the way, Yumi."

After school, as they walked over the fallen ginkgo leaves, Sachiko-sama spoke with mischievous eyes.

"From now on, if you call me 'Sachiko-sama,' I won't reply."

"What?"

"Because. You're not trying to change what you call me."

And with that, Sachiko-sama turned her back to Yumi and kept walking. She'd said what she wanted to say, after all.

"Sachiko-saaaa"

Even though she chased after her, she held steadfastly to her resolution.

"If you don't want to be ignored, address me properly."

You get it, don't you, she seemed to say, and she kept walking without even glancing behind her. Yumi played with her hair. It felt somewhat awkward.

"...e-sama."

"I didn't hear yooooou."

She was going to force Yumi to say it. Yumi looked around. Luckily, Maria-

sama wasn't looking. "Onee-sama!"

Yumi's voice was awful clear in the middle of the gingko pathway. And then her onee-sama, as pretty as Maria-sama, turned around, answered with her own, clear "Yes?" and smiled, satisfied.

Postscript

My second stomach is filled with whipped cream and chocolate and strawberries, it seems.....

Hello, it's Konno.

As promised, here's the second coming of cake smorgasbord. This time I decided to shine the spotlight on the Yellow Rose family (?). What did you think?

Of the three colored roses, for whatever reason, the yellow roses seemed to be the forgotten ones. –Or rather, red and white were simply too strong. I won't point any fingers, but Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis en bouton (you said it, anyways).

Well, lately I've been on a trend of short postscripts, so like karma, this time I ended up with a ton of pages, and I'm kind of flabbergasted.

My supervisor.

“Well, we're hoping for at least seven pages, for starters. But if you have a lot to write, we're good, feel free to write nine pages or eleven pages, if you want.”

Was the message he left in my answering machine.

“If you have that many pages you could write a short story!”

Said my big sister (laugh). I was actually thinking, “Maybe I should,” but the table of contents does say postscript, and adding a novel there instead would be a bit strange, and there are a few “postscript maniacs,” so I opted to write about things I normally wouldn't, instead.

Ah (あ), how about an A I U E O Essay (is that what you call it?). That might be better.

I don't know if I'll be able to fill everything, but I'll try.

I (い Internet) I began using the internet. But when you write it like that, it looks a bit like "I've started making cold Chinese noodles."

Ro (ろ Roan [鸞]) The symbol Roan (a mythical bird) can be made by typing Shinran (親鸞)

Ha (は Hana [花 Flower]) A lot of people tell me flowers often come up in my stories.

Ni (に Nikujaga [肉じゃが Meat potatoes]) One dish that popped up in this story.

Ho (ほ Bakou [母校 Alma mater]) Last autumn, I went to the culture festival for my alma mater. The new school buildings were so pretty, I thought, "I wanna attend again!" Students these days are lucky.

He (へ Heian Jidai [平安時代 Heian Era]) If I were born in the Heian Era, I might have been called a beauty (*limited to exterior appearance). But I don't like being able to take a bath only once a year, so even if I had a time machine I'd never settle there.

To (と Touko [瞳子]) A girl that showed up in the “Maria-sama ga Miteru” magazine story. She was a strong character.

Chi (ち Chocolate) I think it’s a wonderful candy.

Ri (り Lillian Girls’ Academy) Is on top of a hill.

Nu (ぬ Nurunuru [ぬるぬる Wet]) My supervisor doesn’t like food that’s wet and slippery.

Ru (る Ruri [瑠璃 Beryl]) Is the name of a bird, the name of a stone (Lapis Lazuli), and is the name of a color. It’s beautiful.

Wo (を) When you were small, wasn’t it hard writing “wo” straight?

Wa (わ Wanchan [ワンちゃん Dog]) I like dogs that aren’t that small, have short hair, and are black.

Ka (か Katakori [肩こり Shoulder-cramp]) For some reason it happens mainly on my right arm.

Yo (よ Youchien no sensei [幼稚園の先生 kindergarten teacher]) I wanted to become one, when I was a kid.

Ta (た Tabemono [食べ物 Food]) I can't help but notice I constantly drift to this topic.

Re (れ Letter) Thanks for all the fan letters. I look forward to them all the time.

So (そ Soba [蕎麦]) You can eat them in the winter, too.

Tsu (つ Tsumami [つまみ Snacks]) I keep eating snacks. But I don't drink sake.

Ne (ね Neko [猫 Cat]) Maybe it's because there aren't many dogs in my neighborhood – I keep seeing cats.

Na (な Natsu no otogi [夏のおとぎ Summer tales]) There're some people that still remember “Natsu no Otogi” (one of her first works), even though it was so short.

Ra (ら Radio) I record late-night broadcasts and listen to them. I'm a heavy listener of certain shows.

Mu (む Musashino [武蔵野 Musashi Park]) I feel like I'm pointing at a huge area.

U (う Undou [運動 Exercise]) I'm so bad at it. But I can swim and run.

Wi (ゐ) When I was working part-time, I had a colleague named Rumiko-chan. She had this cute, curly handwriting, and the letter “wi” reminded me of her.

No (の Nori [海苔 Seaweed]) Love it. I can eat it the way it's packed.

O (お Oyuki [緒雪]) When I introduce myself, I pronounce it the same way you normally say “Osushi.” Right, like Ochiyo (お千代) or Okiku (お菊). [As you might be aware, the actual word is “sushi” just like the basic name is Chiyo or Kiku. But for formality and respect, sometimes you had O- as a prefix. This is what she's talking about.]

Ku (く Kushami [くしゃみ Sneeze]) When I use a menthol-based cough drop, I always sneeze.

Ya (や Yamagata [山形]) My parents came from here.

Ma (ま Maria-sama ga Miteru [マリア様がみてる]) On the internet dictionary page for “Maria-sama ga Miteru,” I read a lot of comments describing it as “soft but definitely yuri.” I laughed. Thanks, everyone, it's the best compliment.

Ke (け Kekkan [血管 Blood Vessel]) Mine are thin, so the nurses always have a fit. Whenever they get it on the first try, I feel like praising them.

Fu (ふ Futagoza [双子座 Gemini]) Are double personalities, apparently. Maybe.

Ko (こ Konno [今野]) 今 from 今野 looks like it's laughing.

E (え E [絵 Picture]) Is totally preference, I think.

Te (て Tennis [テニス]) When I was in junior college, a classmate seriously once asked me, "Why aren't you in the tennis club?"

A (あ Amimono [編み物 Knitting]) I was totally into it, a long time ago. Haven't touched it lately, though.

Sa (さ Sachiko [祥子]) Not Shouko, Sachiko.

Ki (き Kirai na mono [嫌いな物 Things I hate]) Sachiko has a lot of things she hates, but you don't hear about what she likes.

Yu (ゆ Yume no Miya [夢の宮 Palace of Dreams]) That's what I think of when you bring up "Yu."

Me (め Megane [眼鏡 Glasses]) I only wear them at home when I watch TV.

Mi (み Mi [巳]) 乙 and 己 and 巳 and 巳 are all different letters. And Yumi's Mi is the Mi from the year of the snake.

Shi (し Shinchou [身長 Height]) I'm shorter than expected, is what I hear a lot. Yes, I'm small.

We (ゑ We) Looks like a kettle being boiled.

Hi (ひ Hinemosu [ひねもす All day]) But Hinemosu kind of sounds like a round animal lying around on the balcony.

Mo (も Mossburger [モスバーガー]) Is tasty, but waiting is painful.

Se (せ Senkou [線香 Incense Stick]) You burn them in your room. Quite an aroma.

Su (す Slippish!) I'm sorry, just a bit more.

N (ん) ん and n look and sound similar, it's amazing.

... Phew. Somehow I made it to nine pages, so I'll finish things off with a little preview.

I'll still be on cake smorgasbord next volume. I've gone crimson, then yellow, so now it's time for white.

Speaking of which, Rosa Gigantea seems to be really popular... I mean, it's fun writing her and all.

“Rosa Gigantea's past, revealed now!!” (Oh look, they're gathering they're gathering)

If Minako were to write it, it might be headlined like that (laugh).

Please look forward to how it ends up.

Let's meet again in the spring!

Konno Oyuki