

COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

いとしき歳月(後編)

今野緒雪

集英社

Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 8

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will

Lost Items

Part 0

In this world, there are some things that no-one can do anything about it. One such example is time: no matter how much one might whine or plead, it was not possible to stop time from advancing. Even those born into rich families weren't exempt from this harsh reality.

Now that February was over, the third-years photographed in the yearbook were looking off into the distance, and that made her feel like crying. But it was different now to the earlier vague feeling of unease, with the realization that they were actually going to be gone causing the feeling of imminent loneliness to close in on her.

Even as she was dreading the thought of it, March eventually arrived. The events to send off the graduating seniors came one after the other, until at last the graduation countdown board in front of the office read "2 days to go."

"Are you alright?"

As they walked along the passage between the gymnasium and the school building, Shimako-san's hand gently touched Yumi's shoulder.

"Why do you ask?"

When Yumi raised her head to speak, right in front of her eyes was a neatly folded cloth being offered to her.

"... Umm."

It was unmistakably a handkerchief. Since she was being offered a handkerchief, did that mean –

“Do you think I’ve been crying?”

“Oh, was I wrong? Your shoulders were shivering the entire time during class, Yumi-san.”

“That was probably from the cold.”

Working in the unheated gymnasium, setting up row after row of folding chairs, was tough.

“But I thought I saw you sobbing.”

“I was just sniffing. You know how sounds echo in the gymnasium. I didn’t want to disturb anyone by blowing my nose.”

The first-years had worked in silence – even when they weren’t listening to instruction from their teachers, no-one talked. The cold made it annoying to talk, and the preparations for the ceremony two days later gave things a somber mood.

“Ahh, I see. Then have one of these, Yumi-san.”

Shimako-san put the handkerchief back in her pocket and instead pulled out a packet of tissues and offered them to Yumi.

“Ah ... thanks.”

Yumi expressed her gratitude then took a tissue and blew her nose as hard as she could.

Ah-pffft.

Her ears were ringing.

Yumi knew the reason her eyes were stinging in the cold air wasn’t because of allergies, or dry eye, or anything like that.

Her temporarily wet eyes had become susceptible to the slightest stimulus.

But for now she wanted to appear strong.

Beside her, Shimako-san's eyes were also red.

“Only two days now.”

“Don't say that. It's getting me down.”

Yumi dabbed at her eye with the corner of the used tissue. If she left it alone, then the production of tears wouldn't stop, and she really would end up with dry eye.

“You're right.”

Shimako-san agreed, and her sigh showed she was feeling it much more acutely than Yumi.

That was surely because her onee-sama was two years her senior. So the graduation ceremony meant her onee-sama was going away.

Part 1

“Yu-mi-chan.”

A voice called out to her, then before she had a chance to turn around she was embraced from behind, like wings closing around her body. She'd been right in the middle of cleaning, using a bamboo broom to sweep the tree-lined path, so was at her most vulnerable.

“Gya ... ”

Yumi instinctively started to cry out, but since she'd become quite accustomed to this sort of attack she toned it down and ended with a comparatively restrained, “Ahh.” This was her response to the almost-graduated Rosa Gigantea's request.

But something felt off, and as she tilted her head in puzzlement, the

disappointed voice of her sexual harasser reached her ears.

“Hmmpf.”

“... “Hmmpf.” ?”

She got a surprise when she looked over her shoulder. There was Rosa Chinensis.

“Is this a joke?”

Hastily she jumped away.

In a sense, it was a bigger shock than when she was embraced. Why was the honor-student Rosa Chinensis engaging in this sort of game? Look, over there, not ten metres away, Yumi’s classmates were looking at them, frozen to the spot.

“Tch.”

“Tch?”

Even the way she was talking was a bit strange. It was a strange, new sensation, like the vengeful spirit of Rosa Gigantea had switched bodies.

“I failed at hugging Yumi-chan’s soft body.”

Rosa Chinensis sulkily kicked a pebble.

“Sei said you roar like a baby dinosaur, so I was looking forward to hearing your voice.”

“...”

Yumi couldn’t think of anything that would be an appropriate comeback. So she silently watched the pebble that Rosa Chinensis kicked as it tumbled off the path and disappeared into the bushes.

She’d got stuck on the word “Sei.”

Recently, the Roses had been referring to each other by their names. Whether this was something arranged, or coincidence, she didn't know. But Yumi had witnessed that sort of scene numerous times.

She wasn't coping particularly well with hearing the real names of the Roses flutter around. In the past she thought nothing of it when she heard their names, but recently it had been rubbing her the wrong way.

When Yumi entered high-school, the Roses were already the Roses. So hearing their real names felt out of place. Even though the three of them had only been called Roses for one year of their eighteen.

So for the Roses to return to using their real names was a way of saying that they were no longer everyone's onee-sama, and Yumi didn't like that.

It was unfair, although she had no right to make such a complaint. She thought that they shouldn't be acting like they've graduated already, since the ceremony hadn't taken place yet.

"I thought I'd give it a go just once."

"What are you talking about?"

"Being the Yumi-chan-hugging-monster. I won't be able to do it once I've graduated, right?"

Yumi heard this as her way of saying she didn't want to leave it undone. She felt a bit sad, since it meant Rosa Chinensis was already looking beyond Lillian's. It was a lonely feeling, like she was being left behind.

"Since I'm not going to Lillian's University and all."

This year's three Roses had all declined the option of priority placement at Lillian's University, instead choosing the path of entrance exams. Even though they were all brilliant students and would have been accepted into any course at Lillian's University. Such a waste. Well, they were actually more brilliant than Yumi imagined, because despite Lillian's Girls Academy not really preparing them all that well for entrance exams, they had passed their

exams and been accepted, so would all be university students from April.

” ... You’ll have to come and visit some time.”

“We’ll see.”

Rosa Chinensis smiled softly. But that was all.

Yumi knew that “We’ll see” wasn’t “Yes.” Rosa Chinensis probably knew it too. When April arrived and her new school life started, she may not look back at Lillian’s Girls Academy.

Rosa Chinensis wasn’t the type to get nostalgic and come back quickly. If she’d thought it hard to leave, she wouldn’t have applied to another university and would have stayed at Lillian’s. She was that kind of forthright person.

“Yumi-chan, you’ve almost finished cleaning, haven’t you? Are you doing anything after that?”

“No, not really. I was just going to go to the Rose Mansion like usual ... ”

While the “Third-Years’ Farewell Party” and the “Roses Going Away Party” were safely completed, the boutons were always busy with something, so Yumi was going to help out. The second-years had it tough because the third-years were all comfortably retired, and their petit soeurs weren’t yet reliable. It was even worse for Shimako-san, who wasn’t a second-year, so didn’t have a petit soeur to act as her personal assistant.

“Hoho, the Rose Mansion. Come with me then, just for a little while.”

“Come with you?”

Rosa Chinensis picked up the broom, handed it to one of Yumi’s classmates who was also cleaning, saying, “Can you take this?” then put her arm around Yumi’s shoulder and started walking away.

“Ah, umm, Rosa Chinensis.”

Taking someone away without their consent, that was kidnapping.

“It’s fine, don’t worry. You should spend some time with your grandmother every once in a while.”

So, the place that her “grandmother” dragged her to was Milk Hall.

“Come on, don’t be shy, drink up, drink up.”

“Okay ... ”

Hot milk wasn’t the sort of thing Yumi could gulp down, even if urged to. To make matters worse, she was supposed to drink it directly from the bottle. When Yumi grumbled about this, Rosa Chinensis lowered her voice and said:

“Silly Yumi-chan. What would happen if warm milk came in a carton?”

“What would happen?”

She timidly asked. The topic of the conversation was milk, but it looked like it was going in a hair-raising direction. However.

“A hot milk carton would be ominous, no?”

“Huh?”

Rosa Chinensis’ answer didn’t do anything to reassure her.

“The milk carton might erupt if it got too hot. Or there could be problems with the quality. That’s the sort of thing I’m talking about.”

“Ah, that sounds reasonable.”

Then Rosa Chinensis laughed and said, “Calling it ominous was just a joke though.” Oh, so that was a joke, huh.

“And that’s why you shouldn’t drink hot drinks through a straw.”

“Why’s that?”

The mention of a straw had been unexpected, so Yumi thought it was still a joke and prepared to laugh, but Rosa Chinensis answered without smiling.

“Because you’ll burn your mouth.”

Completely serious.

” ... Did you, perhaps, try it as an experiment?”

“Of course. During my seventh winter. Using miso soup.”

Straw, seventh winter, miso soup. Were those the key words she had to use in an improv sketch?

“But, why?”

“Who knows. The spirit of adventure, perhaps.”

A seven year old child with the spirit of adventure. That was incredible.

“Your parents didn’t stop you?”

“Why would they? It was something their child was interested in.”

It’s not as though she was going to die from burning her tongue. Rosa Chinensis’ household seemed to be quite enthusiastic about learning. Because of that, they’d produced such a strong lady.

“What?”

“Ah, nothing. I just thought you’d be able to study hard and give the men a run for their money.”

As soon as she said it, Yumi thought, “Oh no.” She’d brought up the topic of graduation on her own. Would her tear ducts be getting another workout?

Since Yumi had been at Lillian’s since preschool, until now she’d never

really thought about going to another university. Much less a co-ed one. She didn't have Sachiko-sama's fear of men, but she had a hunch she wouldn't be able to study peacefully if there was a guy at the desk beside hers.

"Yep. That's right."

"And the law department. You could be a lawyer or a prosecutor."

"I wonder."

As she said this, Rosa Chinensis stood up, then walked over to the vending machine by the wall, came back and sat down again facing Yumi.

"I set my sights on the law department because I'm interested in law. Lillian's university doesn't have a law department, so I had to go somewhere else. And when you're studying, it doesn't really matter if there's boys there or not, right?"

"I suppose."

"Well, Eriko's interested in the unusual, so whether it was a girls school or a co-ed school was important to her. Hey, did you hear?"

"About what?"

"To keep herself entertained, Eriko took the entrance exams for a bunch of different faculties. She didn't care whether it was humanities, or science, or anything else. Then she passed them all, so as a last resort she decided by picking one out of a hat."

So that's why she was in the Fine Arts department. Up until now, Rosa Foetida had never said a single word about liking art.

"A true masterpiece."

Still, even though she made fun of her close friend, Rosa Chinensis had made her choice not because it was her number one hope, but because she thought that taking the entrance exam on the best day of her life (Valentine's Day) had been a good omen.

“But best of all was Sei.”

Tears fell as Rosa Chinensis laughed.

“Umm, tell me Rosa Chinensis, why did you choose to study law?”

Seeing the tears accompanying the laughter, Yumi quickly changed the topic. She’d had quite enough of talking about the people she loved going far, far away.

“Well, in my case.”

Rosa Chinensis took a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at the overflowing tears.

“I realized I wanted to become an artist, and that’s the ideal situation.”

“Huh!?”

Had Yumi misheard? What she heard Rosa Chinensis say just now was that she was going to the law department, but she wanted to be an artist. But wasn’t Rosa Foetida supposed to be the one going to the Fine Arts college?

“Figuratively speaking.”

Rosa Chinensis laughed. As she laughed, she poked the attached straw into the carton of strawberry milk she’d bought from the vending machine earlier.

“With art, you don’t study it because you’re looking for a job, you just enjoy painting, then when you realize that, you want to become an artist. Isn’t that how it is?”

“So you’re studying law because you want to become a lawyer?”

Even as she asked, Yumi couldn’t keep herself from watching what Rosa Chinensis was doing with her hands. After finally putting the straw in, she immediately took it out – what was she planning on doing?

“Right. Although saying I wanted to do something to help people sounds

more persuasive.”

But the other way was fine too. It might even be more persuasive coming from a teenaged girl.

“Well, I’m glad you’re not studying to be a surgeon, Rosa Chinensis.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it would mean you just enjoyed cutting up people’s bodies, then you realized that, and decided to become a surgeon.”

“... I wouldn’t want that sort of surgeon operating on me even if I was dead.”

“Well, you wouldn’t be dead when they started.”

Yumi answered with a straight face.

“That’s for sure!”

Rosa Chinensis voice rose as she laughed without restraint.

“You really are funny, Yumi-chan!”

“Hey, what exactly are you doing with your hand while laughing so hard!?”

As soon as she saw what was happening, Yumi grabbed Rosa Chinensis’ wrist, but it was too late.

“What am I doing? Surely you can tell just by looking.”

After blowing on the milk to cool it, Yumi had managed to drink about a third of her bottle, and it was into this empty space that Rosa Chinensis poured the strawberry milk. Squeezing it out the hole previously occupied by the straw.

“Wh-wh-wh”

While watching Yumi sputter in confusion, Rosa Chinensis asked:

“Why? Is that what you wanted to ask?”

Coolly throwing a lifeboat. Right, that. That’s what Yumi had been searching for.

“Didn’t you say you couldn’t drink it when it was hot?”

“I did, but.”

That didn’t mean she wanted it diluted with strawberry milk. At least if it had been coffee flavored milk, Yumi could have thought of it as a cafe au lait that was heavy on the milk.

“But it had already cooled.”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, Yumi-chan. You won’t be the only one with this bad memory.”

Rosa Chinensis poured it into her own milk too. Because there was air in the pack, it drained quickly. Then she took a single mouthful, and her impression was:

“It’s not that good, is it?”

“...”

So, why do it? That was the obvious retort, but Yumi didn’t say it. Because she could guess the answer. This was obviously something Rosa Chinensis had wanted to try once too.

“Exactly.”

“Huh?”

Yumi looked up as she struggled to drink her lukewarm strawberry milk, and Rosa Chinensis was smiling.

“You’re sharp, Yumi-chan.”

“Wha?”

“But funny despite that.”

“Umm.”

Not knowing how to react, Yumi reached out for her milk again. Rosa Chinensis continued on, unconcerned.

“That’s why I think you’re worthy.”

“To be chosen to experience the hot strawberry milk au lait ... ?”

Then Rosa Chinensis shook her head, “No.” Her silky black hair gently touched her left and right cheeks once before settling down.

“To be Sachiko’s guardian.”

“Huh?”

“Yumi-chan.”

Rosa Chinensis smiled at her and spoke softly.

“Take care of Sachiko for me.”

” ... O ... kay.”

“She’s not charmingly innocent, but she’s my irreplaceable petit soeur.”

It was at that point that Yumi realized that Rosa Chinensis had invited her there to hear her final request.

Part 2

“Where have you been?”

When she opened the door to the meeting room, or salon, on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, Sachiko-sama was waiting there, looking imposing.

“I’m sorry I’m late.”

Yumi quickly lowered her head, assuming a respectful bowing pose.

“What were you doing to make you arrive thirty minutes later than your classmate Shimako-san?”

“Umm.”

“I’m sure I told you to arrive early because we’d be discussing what happens after the graduation ceremony.”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

Yumi had realized that her onee-sama was worked up about this, so she earnestly apologized without offering an excuse. Talking back would only be adding fuel to the fire. The explanation of why she was late could wait until after her onee-sama had calmed down.

“Ah, Sachiko-sama. While Yumi-san and I are in the same class, we’re responsible for cleaning different areas.”

Now that Shimako-san had been dragged into it, she was unable to contain herself and rose from her seat to protect Yumi. While Yumi was grateful for Shimako-san’s consideration, in this case it was probably just going to make things even more complicated.

“In that case.”

Like a teacher scolding students that had forgotten their homework, Sachiko-sama stood facing Yumi and Shimako-san, arms folded.

“At your next class meeting, raise the matter of the number of students allocated to each cleaning area. That level of variation is unacceptable.”

Whoa, so incredibly combative. Like the stereotypical mother-in-law from a TV drama.

“A class meeting? I don’t think that’s ... ”

” ... Yeah.”

The two first-year peach group students looked at each other. Shimako-san

wasn't really under the impression that Yumi was late because she'd been cleaning the entire time, she simply meant that they wouldn't necessarily arrive at the same time just because they were in the same class. And even if there was such a discrepancy between cleaning areas for the pine group, it was a bit late bringing it up midway through the third term.

"Umm, onee-sama. I'm not late because of cleaning."

Out of options, Yumi opened her mouth. She couldn't carry out her plan of remaining steadfastly apologetic until Sachiko-sama's anger had run its course. Shimako-san whispered, "I'm sorry I made it worse," to Yumi.

"Then why?"

Yumi's mind wasn't working fast enough to come up with a good excuse on the spot. No, even if she had thought of one, she wasn't so desperate to get out of the situation that she'd lie to her onee-sama.

"I'm late because I stopped off somewhere on the way."

"You stopped off?"

Sachiko-sama asked, with a quizzical look on her face.

"Alone?"

"No."

"Then who were you with and where did you go?"

Yumi sensed that the way Sachiko-sama's eyebrows shot up meant she already knew that Yumi hadn't been alone, but surely that was just her imagination.

"Rosa Chinensis invited me to Milk Hall."

"My onee-sama did?"

Yumi had expected thunder to come crashing down, something along the

lines of, “No matter who invites you, if it’s going to make you late for something then you should refuse.” However.

“I see. Alright then.”

Sachiko-sama backed down surprisingly easily. To Yumi, it felt like the life had been sucked out of her.

“Onee-sama ... ?”

Yumi hadn’t intend to say anything about Rosa Chinensis entrusting care of Sachiko-sama to her. If asked what happened, all she was going to report was that Rosa Chinensis treated her to some hot milk. But since there didn’t seem to be any interrogation forthcoming, she chose to keep her mouth shut.

The mere mention of Rosa Chinensis’ name had been enough to acquit her. Was Rosa Chinensis a get out of jail free card?

Sachiko-sama returned to the seat at the table she must have been sitting on earlier without asking any further questions. As Yumi idly watched this:

“Yumi-chan, Yumi-chan.”

Rosa Foetida en bouton, Hasekura Rei-sama, had been watching events unfold from the table, and quietly beckoned Yumi over.

“?”

Yumi walked over, her head tilted in confusion, and Rei-sama whispered to her:

“You’ll have to forgive her. Sachiko was so worried about you that she couldn’t focus on her work, and that’s why she verbally lashed out at you.”

“Ah ... ”

“Rei, what are you blathering on about!”

“Nothing. I was just telling Yumi-chan to have a seat. Ooh, scary. You’re

scary when you're hysterical."

"What did you say – "

Sachiko-sama stood up and raised her clenched fists, but the outcome of any fight between herself and the second-rank kendo student was obvious, so she glared at Rei-sama as she lowered her fists and kicked at the legs of her own chair instead.

"Good, good, it's bad for your body to bottle up your anger."

When did Rei-sama get so good at controlling Sachiko-sama? She'd deflated like when the Roses poked fun at her.

(Take care of Sachiko for me.)

Remembering the words that Rosa Chinensis had said to her, Yumi felt her confidence slipping. With such a reliable friend already by her side, Yumi had no idea how she was supposed to take care of Sachiko-sama.

Shimako-san had already returned to her seat, so Yumi hastily settled into her regular position. Without realizing it, it had become her home position, next to her beloved Sachiko-sama.

"Well, now that we're all here, let's start – "

Yumi heard her onee-sama's voice from right beside her. The topic for discussion was the post-graduation ceremony private commemorative photograph.

"I spoke with Takeshima Tsutako-san from the photograph club regarding this, but the newspaper club must have overheard because they approached me asking to be present too ... "

As she listened to Shimako-san's report, Yumi sipped from the teacup that had been placed at her spot.

It was cold.

The complete opposite of the hot milk.

It had probably been cooling for as long as Sachiko-sama had been waiting for her.

Part 3

“A final request, huh. I think I understand.”

Yoshino-san muttered as she put the cleaned teacups in the cupboard.

“You understand?”

Yumi squeezed the sponge under running water, making sure she got rid of all the foam, then returned it to its holder.

The meeting was over and the boutons had gone to the first-floor storage room ahead of them. To check that the Roses hadn't left any of their personal belongings behind. In truth, Yumi was relieved to be left behind to clean up the second-floor salon with Yoshino-san. Helping with a task whose sole purpose was to ensure the Roses never had to return to the Rose Mansion again would be absolutely heartbreaking.

“It's like going to the shrine for pre-wedding jitters. Well, it's also like making a love confession just before graduation.”

“It's like those? How?”

“In every way.”

Yoshino-san turned off the tap as she spoke.

In her mind, Yumi questioned how a last request was similar to pre-wedding jitters. That said, she could sort of understand how it was like a love confession.

“It's like this. When people leave an environment they've been familiar with

for so long, they're bound to have all kinds of thoughts about the things they've left undone."

"So they make a final request."

"Right. That's just another name for it. It's called pre-wedding jitters when they're wondering if it's really okay to get married. And it's pretty common for people to make a confession when they'll never have to see that person again if they're turned down."

"Hmm. Wait, what about the shrine?"

Yumi innocently asked, and Yoshino-san momentarily stopped moving and said, "Huh?"

"I mean, is it really regret, if they're going to the shrine to thank the gods?"

"It's just a figure of speech. At school, "going to the shrine" might mean, hmm, getting a teacher you hate to meet you behind the school gymnasium ... and then venting your frustrations at them ... well, all sorts of things could happen."

Probably expecting some kind of reaction from Yumi, Yoshino-san had been deliberately vague in her explanation.

"That dreadful sort of thing actually happens?"

"Well, Lillian's doesn't really have that sort of tradition, so you can relax."

"Ah, right."

Even if she hated a teacher, she didn't want to become like that student. It was kind of sad, slinging mud around right on the verge of leaving.

"As for the back of the gymnasium, I was called there by Rosa Foetida."

"Oh."

"Rei-chan's in the middle of our love triangle. There were things we wanted

to say to each other.”

Yoshino-san posed holding an invisible blade, like the samurais Musashi and Kojirou about to duel.

Still, why would she go straight to that example?

“Like what?”

“Who won. About the closeness of Rei-chan to her next door neighbor and cousin, me. And whether that was outweighed by her onee-sama, Rosa Foetida. We covered it all.”

Given her usual attitude, they probably went into minute detail, like how much sugar and milk she liked in her coffee.

“And?”

Who was Miyamoto Musashi and who was Sasaki Kojirou? Basically, who won?

“There’s no way we could come to a conclusion. It’s because we couldn’t decide that we’ve been able to get along so far. It was ... simply a performance.”

“A performance?”

“Yeah. Everyone does it. Their methods may differ, but in their own way they’re reluctant to let go.”

Ahh, so that was it. Yumi felt like she understood. And because Sachiko-sama knew that, she hadn’t scolded her petit soeur for being taken aside by Rosa Chinensis.

The wise Sachiko-sama had probably guessed what the general topic of conversation had been too. Perhaps Sachiko-sama had even been entrusted with the care of Rosa Chinensis by her onee-sama, one year earlier.

After they’d finished cleaning, Yumi and Yoshino-san met up with the

boutons in the first-floor room. When they entered the room, they were surprised to see what looked like three bodies huddled together, crying. But that wasn't it.

“Here, take a look. There's a lot of Rosa Gigantea's personal belongings.”

Noticing their entrance, Sachiko-sama smiled as she held out a paper bag.

“Textbook, sports towel ... ? Oh, that's the lunch box she made such a fuss about when it went missing!”

“Yumi-san, don't just take everything out of the bag.”

Yoshino-san looked away. The case of the missing lunchbox dated back to before winter break. A small consolation was that it was empty, the contents having been eaten. But if the lid of the box were opened, it would almost certainly smell awful.

“It had fallen down behind a stack of cardboard boxes.”

Rei-sama smiled, dust piled on her shoulders.

While on that topic, the number of items stored in that room had increased since then. The end result of them being busy and neglecting to properly sort things.

“Back then my onee-sama was so adamant that it was on the second floor.”

Everybody nodded at Shimako-san's statement. And because of that, everyone had focused on searching the second-floor room. They'd moved the table and looked through the mainly unused shelves. Right, right, they'd even checked the courtyard thinking there was a possibility it may have fallen from the window.

“She must have eaten lunch on the second floor, then stopped in here on her way out. That's why she had the wrong idea.”

“So no matter how hard we searched, it wouldn't turn up.”

“Since it was on the first floor.”

They all suddenly burst into laughter. It may be their last opportunity to laugh at Rosa Gigantea’s expense.

“At any rate, I’m glad we found it before the graduation ceremony.”

Sachiko-sama placed the lunchbox back in the paper bag. Indeed. It did seem sort of pathetic to come back to your alma mater merely to pick up a forgotten lunchbox.

They’d unearthed a single mechanical pencil belonging to Rosa Chinensis, and one handkerchief of Rosa Foetida’s. Both items had probably got mixed in with the storage boxes back during the rehearsals for their Cinderella play in the lead-up to the school festival.

As well as the Roses’ personal belongings, they’d also found a pair of scissors and a couple of marker pens that were part of the Rose Mansion stationery.

“Even though they don’t have names written on them, you know whose they are?”

Yumi asked bluntly, and Sachiko-sama picked up the mechanical pencil and rubbed it against her own cheek.

“Of course we know. Because we’re their petit soeurs.”

Tears streamed down Sachiko-sama’s face, but no-one moved to comfort her. No, they couldn’t move. They all knew their own eyes were equally clouded.

“Let’s return these tomorrow.”

Sachiko-sama said, as though issuing instructions.

As though drawing a clear line in her heart.

Perhaps the various pre-graduation performances were necessary rituals for the heart.

Farewell Gift

Part 1

“A final request from my onee-sama?”

As feared, Shimako-san’s reaction was one of non-comprehension.

“Well, was there something she wanted to do? Or something school related she wanted you to take care of? Did she say anything like that to you?”

Yumi plowed on, not getting discouraged. Her feelings for Rosa Gigantea couldn’t be put into words. Gratitude, certainly, but that word alone wasn’t sufficient. The closest emotion was probably “love” after all, although it felt completely different to her love for Sachiko-sama.

So, while she’d been talking to Yoshino-san, Yumi had wondered. What sort of regrets did Rosa Gigantea have left? What can we do for her?

Yumi thought that Rosa Gigantea may have given some hints to Shimako-san. She’d agonized over it all last night, but hadn’t found an answer.

“And “final request.” She wouldn’t say something like that.”

Shimako-san muttered as she steadily packed her textbooks into her school bag. Fourth period had just finished and the students were out of their seats chatting, waiting for their homeroom teacher to arrive. Even though they were only first-years, there seemed to be more nervous energy than usual. Everyone was restless.

But it wasn’t like they’d made today a half-day because of the lack of a studious atmosphere. After this, the students were scheduled to go about their regular cleaning, then return home. The chairs had been set up in the gymnasium yesterday and this afternoon the teachers would place the red and white seat covers over them, hang up the school flag, can’t forget the picture of Maria-sama either, as well as all the other preparations that had to be

completed for tomorrow.

“At the very least, she wouldn’t tell me.”

Shimako-san added, smiling.

“I see ... you’re probably right.”

Indeed, it would be out of character for Rosa Gigantea to talk seriously about Lillian’s future. Moreover, that pair of soeurs were peculiar in that they very rarely talked to each other. Perhaps now that she was about to graduate, Rosa Gigantea had even less to say to her petit soeur.

But, as she slid her pencil case into her schoolbag, Shimako-san said:

“But she might say something to you, Yumi-san.”

“Me?”

Yumi asked, pointing a finger at her face.

“Yes. My onee-sama is quite affectionate to you.”

Hearing those words, Yumi was shocked. Which was immediately followed by introspection.

“I’m sorry.”

Yumi swiftly bowed her head. Shimako-san looked confused and asked, “Why?”

“I didn’t consider your feelings, Shimako-san, and let Rosa Gigantea dote on me.”

“Oh, no. I never thought about it like that. Actually, it’s something I’m grateful to you for.”

“?”

When Yumi raised her head, Shimako-san was looking back at her with her usual saintly smile.

“I’m not good at being doted upon. That was never a part of our *soeur* relationship. And since we’re two years apart, Rosa Gigantea couldn’t lavish her affection on her *petit soeur*’s *petit soeur*.”

“Her grandchild, so to speak.”

“Grandchild? Ahh, right. Something like that.”

With the second-years placed between them, the relationship between first- and third-years was a strange one. To Yumi, Rosa Chinensis was indulgent, like a grandmother.

“I see. Shimako-san’s *petit soeur* will enter high-school just missing Rosa Gigantea on her way out.”

“A *petit soeur* ... I can’t imagine it.”

Shimako-san’s gaze turned towards the window. It looked like she was reliving scenes from her past.

“But surely Rosa Gigantea would have thought the same thing when she made you her *petit soeur*, right?”

Shimako-san said, “Perhaps,” but she didn’t seem convinced. Yumi felt like she understood Shimako-san’s feelings.

Having a *petit soeur* – it was unthinkable. She had her hands full just with herself. Where would she find the time to look after a younger student too?

“There’s always the question of whether or not I’ll be able to fortuitously meet a compatible younger girl. But for my *petit soeur*, she’ll become Rosa Gigantea en bouton as a first-year.”

Shimako-san seemed to think that that alone would be quite the heavy burden.

“But that’s what happened to you, right?”

“Of course. But I’ve been wondering if I really have to have a petit soeur.”

Shimako-san mournfully looked down as she spoke. Yumi suddenly felt uneasy.

“Shimako-san.”

Yumi firmly grasped Shimako-san’s hand.

“Oh, you surprised me. Um, ... what?”

Because it had been so sudden, the captive was quite shocked.

“Shimako-san. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Yumi-san ... ?”

“Don’t go anywhere, stay here until we’re third-years. So we can run the Yamayurikai together. I would hate it if you weren’t there.”

It felt as though Shimako-san was moving somewhere far away. Not knowing what to do, Yumi had instinctively moved to restrain her. Perhaps Shimako-san was going to leave Lillian’s, and not by graduating. Not because she wanted to, but because she had to. Yumi had caught glimpses of that steadfast determination numerous times over the past year.

Rosa Gigantea had said that she couldn’t save Shimako-san on her own. So Yumi wondered where that left her, Shimako-san’s classmate. For now, she decided all she had to do was hold on to her.

“Umm ... ”

But as for Shimako-san herself. The beam of warmth emanating from Yumi’s entire body coupled with the overpowering grip on her hand seemed to leave her a little bit bewildered.

On top of that.

“Fukuzawa-san.”

From the side came a hand that belonged to neither Shimako-san nor Yumi, settling atop their hands like an arm-wrestling referee.

“I hate to throw cold water on your beautiful display of friendship, but please take your seat. I’d like to get homeroom started.”

Laughter burst forth around them. While they’d been having their heart-to-heart discussion, their homeroom teacher had arrived and everyone else had taken their seats.

“Sorry.”

Yumi hastily dropped Shimako-san’s hand and returned to her seat red-faced.

What a failure, what a disgrace. Of all the things, to grab Shimako-san’s hand and prattle about, “running the Yamayurikai together,” and to do it all in front of her classmates.

(Ooooh. If only I could press the backspace key and erase it all ... just three minutes or so.)

Her cheeks were so hot it felt like steam was coming out of the top of her head. If she were a kettle, she’d be making a loud and continuous whistle.

But maybe Shimako-san wasn’t all that bothered by it – thinking this, Yumi cast a sidelong glance towards where she sat. And waiting there for her was Shimako-san’s gaze.

Thank you.

Shimako-san slowly and silently formed the words with her lips, erasing all of Yumi's discomfort without the backspace key.

As long as Shimako-san understood, that was all that mattered.

Friends really were incredible.

Regardless of what the thirty other girls in the class thought, it had all been settled in one instant with one phrase from one person.

Part 2

On further reflection, if Rosa Gigantea were worried about something, and that something was related to Shimako-san, then she probably wouldn't speak about it directly with Shimako-san.

Similar to how Rosa Chinensis had entrusted Sachiko-sama to Yumi's care.

While on her way back to her classroom after finishing cleaning, Yumi spotted Katsura-san standing in front of the statue of Maria-sama. They were in different cleaning groups, and Katsura-san was obviously on her way home, wearing her school coat and carrying her bag.

“Katsura-sa ... ”

Just as Yumi was calling out to her, another student appeared from the path leading alongside the library and jumped in ahead of her.

“Katsura-chan!”

Yumi watched on as Katsura-san spotted the other student and crouched down. Then, oh, what's that? She's crying?

(Oowaah.)

Yumi felt like she'd just seen something she shouldn't have. But if she left, she'd only worry about it anyway.

The other girl was carrying a tennis racquet, so at first Yumi thought she was Katsura-san's onee-sama. But on closer inspection, she wasn't the person that Yumi had previously been introduced to. Inspired by the Yellow Rose Revolution, Katsura-san and her onee-sama had temporarily broken up, but they should have returned to normal within the month.

So who was that?

"She's the vice-president of the tennis club. Katsura-san really admires her."

Hearing this explanation suddenly coming from behind her, Yumi jolted upright.

"Mmm. A sad looking Katsura-san works too."

Click. The sound of a shutter closing rang out just as the tennis club vice-president helped prop Katsura-san up. Which meant that the person beside Yumi was none other than the self-styled "Photography club ace."

"Tsutako-san."

Yumi was about to voice her complaint, but Tsutako-san cut her off by raising her hand.

"Stop. I know what you're going to say, but this was Katsura-san's request."

"It was?"

"She wanted a photo of her and the vice-president. A graduation keepsake."

"Graduation ... "

Which reminded Yumi of something about the person alongside Katsura-san. She thought she'd seen her somewhere before, as a classmate of Rosa Foetida's. Which made her a third-year. And graduating tomorrow.

The pair were off in their own world, not noticing the gallery watching them from less than ten metres away.

The vice-president held out the racquet, offering it to Katsura-san. It didn't look like it was brand-new. It was probably the one she always used. Katsura-san looked a bit surprised, but she accepted the gift and hugged it tight, treasuring it.

“But Katsura-san won't be able to use that for another year.”

Tsutako-san added her commentary to the scene.

“Why not?”

” ... Using that in front of her onee-sama would be a big deal.”

Ah, right.

Katsura-san had someone else as her onee-sama, someone who was also a member of the tennis club. It was probably a pretty complicated relationship.

“Well, I've heard it was all pretty much one-way admiration from Katsura-san. So it wasn't all messed up. Still, she'll hesitate because of her onee-sama.”

Yumi thought that everyone had their own dramas. Even though, usually, Katsura-san and her onee-sama got along splendidly.

“That's why it's happening now, so close to the graduation ceremony ... alright, time for me to get to work.”

Tsutako-san patted Yumi on the shoulder, then walked towards the girls at the statue of Maria-sama.

“Can you two look this way so I can take your photograph?”

Already turning into a professional photographer.

Part 3

Watching Katsura-san made her want to see Rosa Gigantea.

She peeked into the third-year wisteria classroom, thinking no-one would be there, but was surprised. Because there she was.

Apparently the third-years had had a short homeroom that simply covered the important points of their graduation ceremony tomorrow. As evidence of that, it was one in the afternoon and there was only one student left in the classroom.

Rosa Gigantea didn't really look like she was staying around because she had something to do. She wasn't sitting down, she was just standing there, idly running her finger over her desk.

"Have you lost something?"

Those were the words Yumi called out, even though it didn't look anything like that.

The paper bag filled with actual lost items that had been found in the Rose Mansion the day before stood alone on her desk. Looking kind of sad, like an opened mystery gift bag.

"Ah, Yumi-chan."

Noticing her, Rosa Gigantea waved Yumi over.

Usually, she'd be quite reluctant to step foot inside another class's room. Especially a third-year classroom. But since she'd been invited, Yumi stepped inside.

"Sorry, can you close that."

Rosa Gigantea pointed at the door. Was it because of the cold, or because she wanted to hide what she was doing from people outside her class? They were both girls, so it wasn't as though they had to leave the door open. Yumi did

as she was asked, and closed the door.

“I guess, in a way, I have lost something.”

Rosa Gigantea sat at her desk, looking up at the ceiling, then scratched her head, looking embarrassed.

“I wanted to say goodbye to the classroom, you know. I’ve been killing time at the library, waiting until everyone left, so that I could come back here.”

Rosa Gigantea laughed, indicating it was okay to do so. But Yumi couldn’t laugh. Sure, it didn’t seem very Rosa-Gigantea-like, but it wasn’t for those around her to arbitrarily decide what Rosa Gigantea should be like. Rosa Gigantea usually appeared to be happy-go-lucky, but from time to time she could be deadly serious, as well as an occasional romantic.

“I was fine all through March, it was only when I thought that tomorrow would be the last time that I’d ever come here, that I started to feel a bit sentimental.”

It seemed she’d treated her previous graduation ceremonies as mere formalities, participating in them perfunctorily. But for Rosa Gigantea, this one was special.

“Because you’re leaving Lillian’s?”

Yumi asked. Rosa Gigantea didn’t say anything, but she had a curious expression on her face. Just as Yumi was getting nervous, thinking she’d put her foot in her mouth again, Rosa Gigantea relaxed and smiled.

“For all sorts of reasons.”

“Like what?”

“There’s been fun times, and hard times. There’s some things I’ve regretted, and some good memories. I think these three years of high-school have been the most fulfilling time of my life so far.”

She’d probably been reminiscing, alone in the classroom, about Shiori-san,

Yamayurikai events, and other such things. It was kind of heartrending. Rosa Gigantea's feelings were contagious.

“Rosa Gigantea, I!”

Yumi planted her hands into empty space on the desk that Rosa Gigantea was sitting at. Startled by the surprise attack, Rosa Gigantea literally jumped up.

“Wh-what is it, Yumi-chan?”

While Yumi reflected on her actions, thinking it was wrong to surprise Rosa Gigantea, she also enjoyed the novelty of seeing Rosa Gigantea startled. No, now wasn't the time to be thinking about her face –

“I want to know if there's something I can do for you.”

If she was going to hear Rosa Gigantea's final request, now was the time.

“You? Do something?”

“Something you want to ask me, or something you want to do. A promise, or something you want to entrust to me.”

Et cetera, et cetera.

“Say wha-at.”

Rosa Gigantea cackled. Such rudeness, despite how serious she'd been.

“Anything at all. It could be about Shimako-san, or about Lunch ... ah, I mean Goronta. Is there anything, anything at all?”

Naturally, Yumi expected to hear, “There is something,” but Rosa Gigantea's answer confounded her expectations.

“Nope.”

“Huh!?”

“I said nope. There’s nothing I want to ask you, Yumi-chan. Goronta’s already an adult, so she doesn’t need someone to feed her. If she couldn’t look after herself, she wouldn’t be much of a stray.”

The way Rosa Gigantea spoke, it was as though she was trying to thrust her away. But it could also be interpreted as saying she had to live by herself.

“And regardless of what I say, you won’t ignore Shimako-san if she’s in trouble. You’ll spin into action to help her, even if you make a fool of yourself. So as long as she has a true friend, there’s no need for me to impose.”

As she spoke, Rosa Gigantea patted Yumi on the head.

“If you were the sort of person who only helped Shimako-san because I asked you to, Yumi-chan, then I wouldn’t ask you to help in the first place.”

It was somewhat reminiscent of a Zen koan. But, strangely, Yumi understood. That Rosa Gigantea valued her for it.

“But I want to do something for you, Rosa Gigantea.”

“A farewell gift, you mean?”

Rosa Gigantea stood up from her desk, stretching.

“Let’s see. Mmm, I’ll take a kiss on the lips then.”

“!?”

Rosa Gigantea solemnly brought her face closer to Yumi’s, causing Yumi to panic and lean back. Rosa Gigantea was terrifying because it was impossible to tell how serious she was being.

“Oh, running away, are you? Even though you said, “Anything at all.””

“Oooh.”

Quit it, you. Now Rosa Gigantea was embracing Yumi, holding her chin in

her hand. It was like a scene from a foreign movie.

“See, now close your eyes like a good little girl.”

The camera zoomed in on her exquisite, exotic features for a close-up.

(She really is pretty ...)

Yumi watched on in rapt fascination, before suddenly realizing that the partner in this kiss scene was none other than herself.

Lip crisis!

“Cut!”

Yumi cried out, instinctively. “Stop” or “Timeout” would have worked just as well, but she called out the first thing that came to mind.

Rosa Gigantea immediately stopped, like the spell had been broken, when her fellow actress called cut. It really was like a scene from a movie – Be that as it may, Yumi took the opportunity to break away.

“G-good-bye.”

Having escaped from Rosa Gigantea’s grasp, Yumi’s sense of direction failed her and she staggered over to the window.

If she turned around, she’d slip back into Rosa Gigantea’s arms, so she made a 90 degree turn and walked to the back of the classroom, then at the back wall she made another 90 degree turn taking her to the back door, not the one she had entered by.

“I won’t be able to graduate without Yumi-chan’s kiss.”

Despite Yumi’s panicked escape, Rosa Gigantea hadn’t chased after her. She was still in the same spot as before, facing the window, only turning her head to say bye to Yumi.

So it was probably a joke. One last chance to tease Yumi – very in keeping

with Rosa Gigantea's character.

The solitary student remaining in the classroom with the western sun streaming in on them seemed somehow lonely. Yumi knew that she herself was the lonely one. But this may be her first and last chance to see her playful senior like this.

It wasn't the same as the chest-tightening longing she had to be embraced by Sachiko-sama, but if there were some machine to measure compatibility or affinity, then it would undoubtedly show that they were well matched.

"What's the matter?"

Rosa Gigantea asked, as Yumi stood in the doorway, not leaving.

What's the matter? – In her heart, Yumi asked herself the same question.

Indeed. What on earth was the matter?

It was just, for some reason, she didn't want to leave Rosa Gigantea in the classroom like that.

What should she do?

"If you don't leave quickly, I'll attack you again."

Rosa Gigantea said jokingly, and seeing this Yumi felt troubled in her heart.

It was too late now, but she was already regretting running away. Even though, if Rosa Gigantea had actually been serious, it meant she would have snatched a kiss on the lips. The scary part was that imagining that wasn't so bad.

What was it, this feeling?

No good. No good at all.

A sinking feeling that perhaps Rosa Gigantea had meant it like a greeting, a quick peck that she could have readily accepted.

It was dangerous. Very dangerous. That line of thinking.

“What are you thinking about, Yumi-chan?”

What? About the kiss – but there was no way she could say that.

Needless to say, it would be her first kiss. So the lips were the problem, after all.

Yumi slowly took her right hand off the door handle.

They were only lips, but they were still lips.

Take care of the lips, and the lips will take care of themselves.

Alright.

She balled both her hands into fists.

(This is infidelity. Yumi-san!)

With the ghost of Yoshino-san nagging at her from behind, Yumi weaved her way back to the desk.

“Uh ... !”

Yumi kissed Rosa Gigantea on the cheek, a short distance from her startled lips. Stretching up just a little bit.

That sort of performance seemed just right to Yumi.

” ... Yumi-chan!”

Embarrassed, Yumi was about to make a quick exit, but Rosa Gigantea grabbed her by the arm and softly embraced her.

“I kept quiet because I didn’t think I had anything more to say, but I’m glad to have met you, Yumi-chan.”

“Ah.”

Perhaps Rosa Gigantea was also embarrassed, because they remained in that position, not looking at the others’ face.

“I’ve never really fit in with normal girls of my age. But, when I saw you, for the first time in my life I was jealous of a normal girl.”

Jealous, huh.

Yumi couldn’t believe her ears. It seemed unbelievable that this attractive, smart, well-spoken, immensely popular superstar would yearn for a normal high-school life. Well, taking the Shiori-san incident into account, a life full of highs and lows would be tough too.

“In my third-year of high-school, I’ve been able to change for the better. I don’t know if it’s just being less picky, but I’m able to live much more easily. There’s a lot of things that have gone into making me the way I am now, but your existence has played a big part in that, Yumi-chan. So what you’ve given me isn’t just a kiss.”

“What did I do?”

She had no idea. Yumi peeled herself away from Rosa Gigantea’s body and looked up at her face. Which earned her a, “Clear your ears out,” and a flick

on the forehead.

“You made me a university student.”

“No way.”

“It’s true. Seeing you, I thought I should have another go at studying.”

“Ha.”

“No, really. Towards the end of last year. I’d just missed the deadline for applying for priority placement, so I had no choice but to join the exam group. Surely you heard about that.”

She knew that Rosa Gigantea had only started studying for exams this year. But this was the first time Yumi had heard that she was the cause of Rosa Gigantea wanting to go to university.

“What should I do?”

That was a huge responsibility, wasn’t it? Influencing someone’s life at such a crossroads was such a huge responsibility that she wanted to forget all that she’d just heard.

But Rosa Gigantea said, “You don’t have to do anything.” That even if she’d been an influence, the decision had still been Rosa Gigantea’s.

“So you see, Yumi-chan, you should have more self-belief. Because you’re admired by someone as totally awesome as me.”

Rosa Gigantea patted her on the back, like she was patting a cushion. Rather than cheering up the graduating senior, Yumi had been the one to receive encouragement.

“That’s all, the end.”

Rosa Gigantea quickly bowed, then spun Yumi’s body around, aiming her towards the front door.

“I love you, Yumi-chan. I’m truly blessed to have shared this time with you. Countless times I’ve thought that I wanted to be like you.”

Without even a countdown, Rosa Gigantea shoved her forwards like a rocket. Maintaining control of her body took all of Yumi’s concentration. Her body tottered onwards and came to a stop by the door.

“I’ll bet you tell everyone that you love them.”

Yumi turned around to check. Whereupon.

“Yep.”

Spot on, that. Said without a hint of shame. But it wasn’t malicious. Whether Rosa Gigantea said that to everyone or not, it didn’t change Yumi’s feelings for her one bit.

“Thanks for the kiss.”

Rosa Gigantea said to Yumi’s back, as she was walking out the door.

“Not at all, it was simply a going-away gift.”

After Rosa Gigantea had graduated, they’d hardly ever see each other. This was her graduation present. And she might as well really, really, really, really splurge.

“Simply, huh.”

Rosa Gigantea nodded slightly.

“By the way, Yumi-chan, do you know which university I’m going to?”

“Huh?”

Yumi asked, poking her head back into the half-open door from the hallway.

“No, never mind. I just thought you might have been too busy running from place to place that you hadn’t heard. Too preoccupied with the thought of

your beloved Rosa Gigantea going away to university.”

“Get over yourself.”

Yumi snorted in response, and closed the door.

That Rosa Gigantea sure was sharp.

She’d definitely hit the bulls-eye.

Part 4

The morning of the graduation ceremony dawned.

Blessed with fine weather befitting such an auspicious occasion, the kimono clad members of the PTA had just started making their way towards the gymnasium to farewell the young ladies. It was right at that time:

She tricked me,

tricked me,

tricked me – !

Yumi walked silently down the corridor that ran alongside the third-year classrooms.

“Rosa Gigantea!”

The door to the third-year wisteria classroom was open, so she stood in the corridor and shouted at Rosa Gigantea, who was in the middle of the room.

Everyone in the classroom turned to look at her.

She immediately thought, “Oh no,” but it was too late. Nothing she could do now. Her head had been so full of rage that she’d forgotten that today was a special day, as well as the proper way to request someone’s presence.

“That’s a scary looking face, Yumi-chan. What’s the matter?”

Smiling, Rosa Gigantea weaved through her classmates, over to where Yumi stood.

“... Gokigenyou. Congratulations on your graduation today.”

“Thank-you.”

Belatedly, Yumi offered the standard greeting, then dragged her out of the classroom.

“Wait, where are we going?”

“Anywhere’s fine, as long as there’s no audience.”

“Somewhere private? Sounds nice. Are we going to continue what happened yesterday?”

“Hmph.”

Rosa Gigantea followed in silence, then stopped Yumi next to the first-floor stairway.

“This should be fine. There’s people everywhere today.”

“Ah.”

She’d forgotten. Much like Valentine’s Day or the Christmas Eve closing ceremony, there would be plenty of students openly expressing their feelings on graduation day. Particularly if their target was a third-year – a lot of students would be spurred on by the thought that this was their last chance. All of the secluded areas would be quite popular.

On that note, the stairway was a bit gloomy, so not a particularly romantic place for a love confession. Naturally, there were still people using the staircase, but it was a strange place to stop and listen in on the conversation of people standing at the bottom of the stairs. It was probably a safe spot, as long as the head of the newspaper club didn’t sniff them out.

“So, what is it?”

Rosa Gigantea asked, looking directly at Yumi.

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“The university.”

“The university?”

“Still playing dumb, huh.”

What was it she’d said? “You’ve been too busy running around, preoccupied with thoughts of your beloved Rosa Gigantea.” If she’d known that, then she should have told her. No, even then would have been too late. Before the farewell gift.

“Oh, you found out? That was surprisingly fast. I thought it’d be funny if you didn’t find out until April.”

“So it is true then. My head burst into flames this morning when Shimako-san told me.”

She’d been fooled by Rosa Gigantea’s sorrowful face, going so far as to kiss her on the cheek, exposing herself as a fool. Even though she’d only done it because she had thought it was an ending.

“Oh, really? Burst into flames? I would have loved to have seen that.”

“Keep mocking me and I’ll hit you.”

“Whoa, a settling of scores?”

“Oooh.”

How did it turn out like this?

“Oh, don’t whine like that. Sure, it was my fault for not making a full report to you. But I thought you would have heard about it from someone else, normally.”

“You weren’t intentionally hiding it from me?”

“Why? For the kiss?”

“Don’t say that.”

To keep her from talking, Yumi pressed both her hands over Rosa Gigantea’s lips. But, due to her strength, Rosa Gigantea easily removed the makeshift gag.

“But it’s fine, right? It’s true that I’m graduating. It’s true that I’m going to university. So I should get a farewell gift. Where’s the problem?”

“But the university you’re going to is Lillian’s!”

Yumi shouted.

“Yep.”

Rosa Gigantea agreed, with every fiber of her being.

By chance, one of the old male lecturers wearing a traditional Japanese hakama had just come down the stairs and turned to look at them.

So that’s how it was.

From April, Rosa Gigantea would be enrolled in the Lillian’s Girls University’s Literature Department, majoring in English Literature. Naturally, the university campus was on the same grounds as the high-school.

“I’m not going to university to study. I like school, but more than that, I’m going to university to make my peace. That’s why it had to be Lillian’s. Besides, once I’ve graduated, I can’t be hanging around the high-school all the time anyway.”

“... I guess not.”

Now that Yumi had cooled down, she could more or less accept it.

She should have guessed when she'd heard that Rosa Gigantea was only applying for one school. Or if she'd paid more attention when she heard about her missing out on the priority placement deadline.

“It's the same as Youko and Eriko going to a different university.”

The point Rosa Gigantea was trying to make was probably that they couldn't rely on her. Even so, knowing that she would be on the same campus made Yumi a little bit happier. No, a lot happier.

Hang on, wasn't she supposed to be angry? How long has she been grinning like this?

So the sense of relief at knowing Rosa Gigantea would be at Lillian's had won out over the feeling of being cheated about the kiss.

Suddenly, the number of people using the stairs swelled. Looking at the time, it was 8:25. They weren't having morning prayers today because of the graduation ceremony, but they were still taking attendance in homeroom, so they had to head back to their classrooms soon.

“What a shame. It looks like we're out of time.”

“Yes.”

They parted quite naturally, one heading down the hallway, the other up the stairs.

“Well, see you.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

As she climbed each step, Yumi felt something lifting from her.

Tap-tap-tap.

Her footsteps kept getting lighter.

Then, at last, from the bottom of her heart, she thought:

Rosa Gigantea.

I'm fine with you graduating.

As the Years Pass By

Just Before Graduation

Part 1

Fine weather.

Like Maria-sama's soul, the blue sky stretched on forever. They couldn't say that there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but the desire to do so was limitless.

As befitting the graduation ceremony, it truly was a "fine day."

"But even so," Youko thought, "why the heck doesn't it feel real to me?"

Even as she looked at the words, "Congratulations on Graduation," written out in large lettering on the blackboard, she couldn't help but feel like it was happening to someone else.

Sure, there were nerves. But despite being one of the main players in this fine day, it seemed like the deep emotions just couldn't soak into her.

Feelings of solemnity and excitement welled up in her from time to time, but they never seemed quite enough.

Indeed, if pressed to say, the feeling was most similar to just before some task she had to perform. A desire to see things go smoothly, right through to the end of the ceremony.

It was a bad habit, or so she thought. No matter how much time passed, she'd never lose the mantle of "Rosa Chinensis." Even though she hadn't hesitated to slide into comfortable retirement after the election for the following year's school council. But, after all, it looked as though she herself had been the one dragging it out all the way to the end.

“Best wishes for today.”

As their homeroom was drawing to a close, a few second-year students arrived carrying the white floral corsages that were the mark of the graduating seniors.

This was an annual tradition. Students from the class of the same name in the grade below would pin one to the chest of each graduating student. So these girls were from the second-year camellia group.

Youko wistfully thought back to last year when she'd been part of the group to visit the third-years. The happy job of pinning the flowers to the graduating students was a really popular one. Because of that, the six positions were decided by scissors-paper-rock between all those who wanted to take part.

(...)

Youko tilted her head to the side, reconsidering that story.

For some reason, she had no recollection of winning a place through scissors-paper-rock. Even more than that, she didn't even remember participating with the other applicants.

(– Ahh, that's it.)

Youko suddenly remembered. That memory shouldn't be there. She hadn't played scissors-paper-rock. Youko alone was an exception, her place reserved from the beginning. As the class representative, she went straight to the head of the line.

The vast majority of her classmates had wanted to pin flowers to the seniors, but hadn't wanted to be the one to lead the way. For those shy students, Youko's existence was a godsend.

– Please, Youko-san.

How many times had she been asked in that manner? Countless times, impossible to remember each and every instance.

But she didn't think she was just being used. Thanks to that, she'd been able to pin the corsage to the chest of her graduating onee-sama. Her onee-sama just happened to be in the same class as her, but in a different year. Just like Eriko and Rei now.

(Rei, huh.)

That reminded her of an interesting story she'd heard about Rei.

Apparently she was going to be one of the girls pinning flowers this year. Rei wasn't the type to nominate herself, nor was she prevailed upon by her classmates – but there were no objections when she was chosen without playing scissors-paper-rock.

Why was that?

Apparently a fervent request came through from the third-year chrysanthemum class. All the third-years wanted Mr Lillian to pin the corsage to their chest.

As Rei's onee-sama, Eriko was bound to have mixed feelings. Then again, knowing her, she was probably ecstatic about it.

“We'll now begin pinning the corsages. We'll do our very best, but we're not very practiced in this, so please forgive any clumsiness on our part.”

The apparent leader announced. Youko saw it overlaid with her memory of last year.

She was sidetracked for a moment by the word clumsiness. In other words, sorry if we stab you with the safety pin attached to the corsage. In that case, all she could do was pray for a lack of clumsiness.

“Congratulations on graduation.”

The basic formation was a group of two, one to carry the basket of corsages, the other to pin them to the graduating students. These three basic formations moved from desk to desk, and it wasn't long before one such group was

facing Youko.

“Congratulations, Rosa Chinensis.”

They started by bowing deeply. Then, the moment she raised her head, large teardrops started falling from the eyes of the one holding the basket.

“Wh-what’s the matter?”

Youko was frankly astonished. She couldn’t understand what had happened in those few seconds.

“I’m so sorry.”

As she spoke, the girl hastily wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

“I’m just overcome with emotion ... ah.”

Since she’d taken both her hands off it, it looked like it wouldn’t be long until the small basket of corsages tipped over.

“She’s been a fan of yours for a long time now, Rosa Chinensis.”

The girl with the task of pinning the corsages explained. Then she unfastened the safety pin, gathered a loose piece of Youko’s school uniform and pierced it with the safety pin. But her hands were shaking too, so she wasn’t that nimble.

“Pardon me ... oww.”

Pricking her finger on the safety pin, it took the girl about twice as long as normal, but finally a white flower bloomed on Youko’s chest.

“I’m so sorry. It looks like it’s a bit crooked.”

“Thanks. It’s fine.”

As she smiled, Youko felt like she should be the one apologizing. Because these anonymous second-years were feeling the emotions so much more

keenly than Youko herself.

Even after pinning flowers to all the graduating seniors in the room, the second-years chrysanthemum students seemed reluctant to leave. For some reason, they'd gathered in a corner and were whispering to each other. Had there been some kind of accident? They were occasionally peeking into the baskets, and looked like they were counting on their fingers. This continued for a little while.

(I wonder what it is.)

Seeing that kind of a scene, even though it had nothing to do with her whatsoever, Youko couldn't help but take note of it.

(The numbers don't match ... ?)

The second-years were still looking puzzled, but perhaps deciding that they were overstaying their welcome, they gave their farewell message and started to leave the classroom.

"Ah, hold on."

Youko instinctively called out.

"What is it?"

By the door, the representative who had given the speeches turned around.

"I just remembered. One of our students is out sick today with the flu. If you happen to have a corsage left over, would it be okay if I took care of it? I could give it to her along with her diploma."

Voices of agreement, saying things like, "Oh yeah," and, "That's right," came from her classmates. Everyone had been on such a high that they had completely forgotten about the absent girl.

"... So that's what it was. That's a relief – when we had one left over, we were worried that we must have mistakenly picked up another class's flowers."

The second-years' confusion was immediately resolved.

“Thank-you Rosa Chinensis, you’ve been a great help.”

“Really, Youko-san, we can always count on you.”

Youko shrugged in exasperation. Truly stunned by how, even up to the very end, she was still in full-blown meddling mode.

Part 2

The formal name of the Graduation Ceremony is the Graduation Diploma Awarding Ceremony.

As the name suggests, the purpose of the ceremony is to award graduation diplomas. And since this is for high-school, the diplomas are awarded to people who have completed the accredited high-school curriculum.

“But even so,” Sei thought, “why do they have to make such a big deal out of it?”

She wasn’t saying that they shouldn’t have the ceremony. But all the singing practices and rehearsals took their toll, leaving her feeling apathetic about the actual event.

“Huh.”

While standing in line in the corridor that led to the auditorium, Sei stretched her arms. She was a bit fed up with it all, feeling exhausted before it had even begun. But apparently that wasn’t how she looked to those around her.

“Are the nerves getting to even you, Sei-san?”

The person ahead of her in line, Sasaki Katsumi-san, asked, turning to face

her.

“Do I look nervous?”

“You’re not the type to show much, so I thought I’d ask.”

“I see.”

Sei nodded, smiling. As she did, she thought, “Oh wow.” She felt like she’d changed quite a lot. In the past, she wouldn’t have been able to have this sort of frivolous conversation with a classmate. She remembered how she would interpret the other girls’ innocent, well-intentioned words as sarcasm, and shut them out completely.

“We’ve done it before, so there’s nothing to be nervous about.”

This sort of meaningless conversation was fine, wasn’t it? When had she first started to think like that?

She didn’t know whether it was because she’d softened, her hard edges removed, or if she’d been unknowingly polluted by the adult world. It was probably more complex than that, not something that could be boiled down to just one cause.

“But the real thing’s bound to be different.”

The innocently giggling Katsumi-san was more the Yumi-chan-type. For the past year, they’d been next to each other whenever the class was arranged in alphabetical order, but they’d never talked like this. Due to her Yamayurikai work, Sei had spent most of her free time in the Rose Mansion rather than her classroom, so she had this superficial sort of relationship not just with Katsumi-san, but with the rest of her class too.

“What’s the matter?”

“Hm? Nothing. I was just thinking I didn’t contribute much to our class.”

“That’s not your fault. You were the entire school’s onee-sama.”

Katsumi-san said something darling. Instinctively, Sei felt like kissing her, but then she remembered Yumi-chan's angry face and restrained herself. Why was it that at times like this, when she had to put the brakes on, that it wasn't Shimako-san's face she saw?

One of the Seven Wonders of Satou Sei. Who knew what the other six were.

"Katsumi-san, Sei-san, there's a gap ahead of you."

From behind Sei, another Satou-san – this one Nobuko-san – quietly pointed out. The line had moved on while they'd been talking, so there was a five metre gap in front of them. It looked like plum class, the one ahead of wisteria class, had already started to enter the hall.

"Sorry."

Sei called behind her, then jogged forwards.

(The real thing?)

To start with, was there even a need to rehearse the graduation ceremony?

It was probably out of concern that they might embarrass themselves by making a mistake in front of their parents, siblings, and other guests, but surely by high-school everyone should be able to follow a program correctly.

The vice-principal was the host, or, rather, master of ceremonies, so there shouldn't be any concern about the actual event going off in a strange direction, even without a rehearsal. Even if the students got bored, they weren't about to act up – that sort of behavior didn't persist beyond kindergarten.

The school entrance ceremony didn't have a rehearsal, and it went smoothly. Wedding ceremonies and funerals didn't have full rehearsals with everyone present, yet somehow they managed.

"Wisteria class, please enter."

Following the directions of the student acting as usher, they filed into the

auditorium.

Her feet trudged forwards in something resembling resignation, now that it had finally started.

The background music of the choir flowed over her. They weren't the marching band, they didn't all have to walk in step with each other.

When she got to her seat, the first thing that caught her eye was the program displayed to the right of the stage.

The big, black lettering of the calligraphy teacher jumped off the imitation vellum. It was marvelous. The letters were all gracefully flowing, with no hint of formality.

After glancing at the day's events, Sei quietly sighed. From the opening remarks right through to the closing remarks, it was a full course banquet. The main dish, awarding the graduation certificates, was squeezed in between various speeches and hymns.

Couldn't it be more businesslike, like the handing over of a driver's license? – That's what Sei was thinking, but it wasn't a criticism of the graduation ceremony specifically. It's just that she knew better than anyone how her body reacted to boredom by getting tired.

She'd been guilty of dozing off during last year's graduation ceremony, even though her onee-sama was graduating.

This time around she had more of a central role. Sei consoled herself with the thought that she'd be less likely to nod off since there was something she had to do during the middle of the ceremony, unlike other years.

Even after entering the auditorium she still felt as unconcerned as before. There was a part of her that was uneasy about leaving behind the people dear to her, but she seemed to remember feeling the strain a lot more last year.

The graduating students continued to enter.

In her mind, Sei muttered, "This isn't good."

She was already feeling sleepy.

Part 3

The school entrance ceremony and graduation ceremony were a given, but they even showed up for parents day, the arts festival, as well as the sports carnival and singing competition.

Whenever someone showed up to see her at one of these school events, she became determined that she wouldn't look their way. She knew the reason for that was her first painful memory.

At the time of her spring kindergarten sports carnival, even though it was just a kids sports carnival, her father and older brothers had all worn traditional hakama skirts with the family crest on them, drawing attention to themselves.

Since these these people came even when she told them not to, she didn't think twice about searching the auditorium for her family.

“But even so,” Eriko thought, “today's a little bit different.”

As she entered the auditorium, she glanced at the family seating area. Having spotted the most conspicuous member (the old raccoon), she surveyed the area around him. She very rarely had to look all that hard. All of it was because of love. It was often said that love was thinking of people.

(Not yet, huh.)

As she walked, Eriko slumped her shoulders. She'd spotted her mother and brothers lined up next to her father, in the front row. The only one missing was the bear of a man, Mr Yamanobe.

(Even though he told me he'd come.)

He'd said that he might be late due to work, but she believed he'd make it there on time. After all, it was a measure of his feelings. Although his affection was on a different scale to her brothers, who had cleared their schedules six months in advance and feverishly scrambled here.

(Well, Hanadera Academy is next door.)

She cleared her head and took her seat. The person Eriko was thinking of was a lecturer at the neighboring Hanadera Academy.

(He doesn't have a homeroom class, so he should be able to come as soon as lessons are over.)

Since he'd said he might be late, she'd asked her mother to reserve a seat for Yamanobe-san. Her father and brothers hadn't been too happy about that, but it was none of their business.

It would probably take a fair bit of courage to show up late, then take a seat in the front row of the family seating area. But in that case, it would be Yamanobe-san's fault for showing up late.

(At any rate, he'll be here soon.)

Hanadera Academy's graduation ceremony was tomorrow. It seemed unlikely that there would be much for a part-time teacher to do on the day before the graduation ceremony.

It was a tradition that the Hanadera Academy's high-school graduation ceremony took place on the day following the Lillian's Girls Academy's high-school graduation ceremony.

They differed in that one was a boys school and the other a girls school, as well as one being Buddhist and the other Christian, but the two schools had long enjoyed a close relationship. They coordinated with each other so that entrance ceremonies, graduation ceremonies, and other significant events like school festivals didn't overlap.

There were lots of families that sent boys to Hanadera and girls to Lillian's. It

was no problem when there was an age gap, like between Eriko and her brothers, but families with children at both Hanadera and Lillian's concurrently were surely grateful for the coordination.

(Yumi-chan's family must benefit from that staggering of events.)

She remembered hearing that Yumi-chan's younger brother had been born the same year as her, and was attending Hanadera Academy.

(Ah, that's right. Kashiwagi-san's graduating too...)

When she thought about Sachiko's fiance, Eriko realized that she'd already forgotten his face.

(...)

Until just before the school festival, she'd been under the perfectly normal impression that charming princes didn't really exist.

But instead she'd fallen in love with a bear-man that didn't resemble a prince in any way whatsoever. That's what made life interesting.

(But even so.)

As she sat on the folding chair, Eriko was amazed at herself. The ceremony was about to begin – why on earth was she thinking about that?

But really, it seemed unavoidable given her complete lack of nerves.

Eriko, Sei, Youko

Part 1

– An American?

It was probably the Japanese national anthem that resurrected those words.

Noticing the students near her were standing, Sei raised her head. She glanced at the program.

(National anthem?)

So that meant that the opening address and scripture reading were already over? She'd dozed off, so hadn't noticed.

(Now then.)

She followed everyone else's lead and stood up, ready to sing the anthem. While listening carefully for the short prelude, Sei thought back to the unbelievable first words that her friend had said to her, back when they were kids.

Suddenly grabbing her shoulder and asking, "Are you an American?" Then it had turned into a fight.

Eriko the kindergartener didn't have her trademark hairband, but her parted hair left her forehead wide open, so the effect was much the same. Nor was she a shy girl back then either.

Children with older brothers or sisters tend to mature faster than others, and that certainly seemed to be the case for Eriko, who was doted on by her older brothers.

Sei was in a different class to her, but occasionally saw Eriko leading her friends in games when they played out in the garden. Back then she probably hadn't lived long enough to "lose interest" or "get bored" with things. She led with gusto.

In contrast, Sei wasn't all that energetic. Human nature doesn't change that easily.

Shyness was something Sei had been born with. When she was suddenly tossed into kindergarten, she responded with bewilderment.

Even though they were young children, there was still a wide range of personalities. With her personality, she found it hard to innocently play together with friends.

But that wasn't to say that Sei didn't have any friends or avoided people. She just felt more comfortable when she was alone, so she didn't go out of her way to join in with her classmates, that's all.

Sports and painting were easy, as were the lessons about the hiragana alphabet and simple maths, but pacing herself to someone else was hard. She was something of a highly-strung child, and sometimes the teacher's presence alone was enough to make her feel down.

Then one day, while she was waiting for the bus home, someone suddenly grabbed her shoulder from behind. It was Eriko.

Sei already knew her as the king of the mountain called "Eri-chan." But she had no idea what this girl wanted from her.

Without any introduction, Eriko said:

"Are you an American?"

Click.

Sei felt like some switch had been flipped inside her head.

As young children they were both equally ignorant of proper manners, but

there were definitely good things to say and bad things to say. Looking back on it now, some ten years later, it was hard to know why exactly, but at that time Eriko's words had definitely fallen into the "bad" category.

Finely-chiseled features and light colored hair. Sometimes adults she didn't know would ask about her parents' nationality.

She could laugh about it now, but back then it had been a very sensitive question.

It was rude to ask, "Are you an American?" to a child who considered themselves Japanese. Not being conscious of discrimination, it felt like a denial of self.

Asking, how is your appearance different to my appearance?

And, have my parents failed as Japanese people in some way?

And, no big deal, but maybe you're not their child. These were all things she seriously pondered.

(Is that an American?)

Her anger flared. Quiet does not equal timid. While she didn't usually talk much, that didn't mean she didn't have any feelings.

"I get it, you're a half."

Probably completely convinced she was right, Eriko managed to avoid hearing Sei's, "No I'm not."

"Hey, is your papa an American? Or is your mama an American?"

"Is America the only country name you know?"

Sei didn't answer with either a "Yes" or a "No," instead verbally lashing out at Eriko before turning her back on her.

In reality, it was admirable for children that young to even be able to say

words like American, but that wasn't something she could appreciate. The truth of the matter was that, at that age, they were both equally ignorant. It wasn't until elementary school that she learned that Africa and London weren't countries.

"If it's not America then which country is it?"

Despite Sei's attempt to shake her loose, Eriko stubbornly followed her. Even though her pride had probably been wounded by having her lack of education pointed out, this was overpowered by her curiosity, spurring her into action.

"Stop following me."

"Running away? Half."

"Get away from me, big head."

"What did you call me – "

She couldn't remember who had made the first move. But, immediately following the conversation, there was no mistaking that Sei and Eriko got into a spectacular scuffle. The pair were pulled apart by a teacher and Eriko's mother, who had arrived to pick her up, but even then continued to menace each other, all while covered in dirt.

They were both escorted to the nurse's office to get their cuts and scrapes tended to, but a partition was put up between them due to the explosive atmosphere.

The antiseptic lotion used on the cuts stung quite a lot, but Sei didn't cry. She thought that if she showed any weakness to Eriko on the other side of the partition, she would have lost.

The teacher asked both of them about it, but neither said anything about the cause of the fight. Even if they told her, as an adult she might not understand. They both knew full well what the other had said to hurt their feelings.

"Now shake hands and make up."

She understood the teacher's position, but even as a child, Sei couldn't accept a resolution so easily. Would shaking hands make their feelings disappear? No, it wouldn't. Because it was pride that drove them to fight.

"Come on Sei-chan. You too, Eriko-chan."

Sei didn't hate the teacher, but she thought that that was the event that spurred her to build a wall around her. She coldly regarded the teacher, who was, after all, an adult. Even though Eriko was her enemy, they still had more in common since they were both children.

So even though the situation hadn't been resolved, they reluctantly reached out and shook hands, barely touching each other.

In the end, it looked like they were on the same level. They only shook hands to appease the adult, and the truth was that they hadn't forgiven each other at all.

Neither of them knew the technique of a smiling reconciliation, to avoid drawing the feud out into the future. But even if they had, they certainly wouldn't have used it.

That single incident seemed to be the start of Sei being regarded as a problem child, rather than an unremarkable one. That didn't mean she acted out violently, but she stopped talking to both her classmates and teachers. From time to time she'd pass Eriko in the hallway, and they'd stick their tongues out at each other, but it never escalated to violence.

Even though that was their only connection, Eriko had still made more of an impression on Sei than anyone else in her class. Consequently, Eriko's was the only face that she could remember from kindergarten. So all through elementary school and middle school, even when Sei was in the same class as girls from her kindergarten class, she couldn't recognize them. On the other hand, when she did finally get put in the same class as Eriko, she remembered everything.

Upon entering middle school, Sei saw that she'd been put in the same class as Eriko for the first time. They'd long since stopped poking their tongues out at

each other, but they both must have looked appalled when they realized they were sitting next to each other, with only an aisle between them.

– This sucks.

She remembered that they'd both muttered that simultaneously.

Neither of them had been in a fight either before or after, they'd only ever fought with one person. And that person was right there in front of them.

“Sei-san.”

Nobuko-san, seated on Sei's left, tapped her on the shoulder. Sei looked around, seeing that Katsumi-san, on her right, wasn't there. There was no need to search for her, all of the seats ahead of her were empty, their occupants on their way to receive their graduation certificates. They were supposed to go and wait at the bottom of the stage five students in advance, so that the ceremony flowed smoothly.

“You were sleeping with your eyes open?”

“I wasn't sleeping.”

She stood up and shook her head.

“Get it together.”

“Yep, my bad, like always.”

“What can I do? We're both Satou-sans.”

Sharing the same surname, but with a first name appearing later in the alphabet, Nobuko-san had long since resigned herself to this sort of thing.

Thinking back, Nobuko-san had been looking out for her all year long. Before Sei had taken Shimako-san as her petit soeur, she'd occasionally asked Nobuko-san to help out the Yamayurikai when they were shorthanded.

It was undoubtedly a bother to Nobuko-san, but since Sei didn't have any close friends in her class, all she could do was impose on those seated close to her.

“Sei-san, your eyes look gentler than in the past.”

Nobuko-san said softly from behind, after another student had received her diploma.

“The past?”

“Like kindergarten, or elementary-school, or middle-school ... huh?”

Nobuko-san's expression changed in a flash, and she looked at Sei as though she were seeing something inconceivable.

“I can't believe it, you don't remember me.”

When Sei got home she checked her albums, establishing that she and Nobuko-san had been in the same class one third of the time.

Part 2

Satou Sei.

The wisteria class homeroom teacher called out the name. Her dear friend named Satou Sei walked onstage, bowed and received her graduation certificate.

– Satou-san.

Youko remembered their first exchange, and those were the first words she said.

“Satou-san, wait up.”

It wasn't long after entering into Lillian's middle-school that, for some reason or other, Youko had called out to Sei. From memory, it was when they were supposed to be going in groups to check out the various clubs, and Sei had wandered off on her own – or something like that.

“...”

Sei had turned around and looked coldly at Youko. Unlike now, Sei's gaze used to be quite cutting. She had a difficult atmosphere up close, but she wasn't particularly scary.

“You're in the same group as us, Satou-san, so why don't we all stick together?”

Hearing Youko's words, Sei's face had suddenly changed to a smiling one. In truth, Youko had been astonished. It was the first time she had ever seen her cold classmate smile.

“The entrance exam group?”

Sei muttered, her lips more sarcastic than jovial.

“What do you mean? I said that during the self-introduction, right?”

Youko said, a bit sullenly, feeling like she was being taken for a fool.

Those who had come through from Lillian's elementary-school, and those who had taken the entrance exam to get in. They didn't have to split along those lines, but since they'd just entered into middle-school, their groups tended to be of people in similar circumstances.

“Sorry. I must have missed that part.”

Rather than missing that part, she hadn't been listening at all. Sei had been gazing out the window all through her classmates' self-introductions. When her turn came around, she'd stood up, said her name and attendance number, then sat back down, displaying no social graces whatsoever.

But it was probably that which had made Youko interested in Sei. If she'd said everything, then the desire to know more about her would never have been born.

“And? Does that have anything to do with whether or not we can go and inspect the clubs together?”

Youko felt her tone of voice steadily growing stronger. She'd definitely been annoyed by Sei's attitude. But, more than that, excited. Talking with Sei was, in some respects, stimulating. Although they were the same age, she couldn't predict what Sei was going to say next.

“Not really.”

Sei said, relaxing her expression slightly.

“It's been a long time since anyone in the same grade has called me Satou-san. It's a fresh feeling, *Youko-san*.”

Youko-san. That had been pronounced quite clearly.

This was the first time that Youko had been made aware of it. That, at Lillian's, it was typical to call people by their first name.

Sure, the classroom had been filled with a chorus of first names. But she'd put that down to old friends becoming new classmates, or gatherings of overly familiar students.

It was four days after the entrance ceremony. There were so many things that were natural to those who had come up through Lillian's elementary-school, so no-one explained each and every little thing. Youko had read the student notebook from cover to cover but it hadn't touched on this topic.

“Thank-you for teaching me this, *Sei-san*.”

“Not at all. My pleasure.”

After exchanging forced smiles, Youko's group went around to check out the club activities, as though nothing had happened. Sei silently followed them,

staying at the back.

Youko felt relieved.

Back when she'd gone to a public elementary school, there had always been one rebellious boy in any group – but Sei didn't seem to be that type of person. As she observed Sei, Youko gradually came to understand that the reason she didn't listen to what other people were saying, and slipped out of group activities, was simply because she found them tiresome.

“Sei-san, are you going to join a sports club? Or a cultural club?”

In Youko's eyes, Sei had become an incredibly interesting person. So she asked her about various things. The girls who had been in a class with Sei during elementary school probably thought Youko was acting unconcerned about the scary stories about her, but that was of no concern.

“Cultural club.”

Sei responded lethargically when spoken to directly. Or she'd ignore the question, or, very rarely, answer energetically.

“But you look like you'd be good at athletics.”

“I don't care, I just want a club that's as easy as possible.”

In middle-school, one hour per week was set aside for all students to participate in compulsory school club activities. So they had to join a club, even if they didn't want to. In the end, Sei chose the reading club, and was able to productively spend her club time engrossed in her own private world.

As expected, Sei completely ignored all after-school club activities. Despite this, due to her athletic ability, she was often asked to join sports clubs, like the softball club and the volleyball club. Youko wanted to tell the girls that came around to scout her that Sei wouldn't participate in organized competition, but she held her tongue.

(Because, that would be needless meddling.)

But despite being cautious about this, she was still called a “meddler” and a “busybody.” Mainly by Sei.

She interjected whenever something bothered her, which had led to countless arguments so far.

Youko, being who she was, knew the truth. If she’d just stayed silent, she and Sei could have lived out their school lives in peace and harmony.

But if people could change their personality that easily, no-one would ever suffer.

“Torii Eriko.”

Hearing that very familiar name, she was suddenly brought back to reality.

Youko looked up, just in time to see Eriko receive her diploma.

Time had flown past while she’d been deep in thought. They were already half way through chrysanthemum class. The speed was especially impressive considering the diplomas were being presented to everyone in the class, and not just a few representatives.

(Eriko ... what was it?)

Youko furrowed her brow, trying to reel in the memory. Then she remembered. In first-year, Eriko joined the Go club, in second-year the calligraphy club, and in third-year the table tennis club – changing clubs each year of middle-school. The reason was obvious.

The story goes that she’d lose interest whenever she found someone who was better than her. Incidentally, the reason for her losing interest in the calligraphy club was none other than Youko’s petit soeur, Ogasawara Sachiko. She’d heard this from Eriko herself, so there was no doubting its veracity.

At their first club meeting, the calligraphy teacher / faculty advisor had asked

the students to write some calligraphy of their own choosing, in order to assess their skills. Eriko lost all interest the moment she saw Sachiko's completed work. Her work was of such a high standard that there was no point comparing it to anyone else's.

Given that level of skill existed, having a discerning eye was unfortunate. For Eriko, one year of boredom was a long time indeed.

There was no way she could compete with Sachiko, who had been studying calligraphy since a young age. But being forced to settle for second place, when she was accustomed to effortlessly reaching the top, must have had a huge impact on her identity.

The prototype for the current Eriko had probably emerged during that time. Unknown students from other schools had arrived at the start of middle-school. Like the place where streams converge, the waters were muddied and the current grew tempestuous.

(Good grief.)

Youko stood from her folding chair. While she'd been replaying those memories, the camellia class's turn to receive their diplomas had arrived.

"Mizuno Youko."

"Yes."

Responding to her homeroom teacher's announcement, she took the stage, turned and bowed to the principal. Then she took a step forward and waited.

"Mizuno Youko, as announced."

The principal said softly, presenting the certificate. Youko reached out first with her left, then with her right hand, accepting the diploma, then bowed once more and turned away – and then the next student's name was called.

Too quick. That was the impression she had.

Upon descending from the stage, the certificate was temporarily collected

again. Their homeroom teacher had explained this, and said to silently accept the offered certificate even if it had the wrong name written on it, but the certificate she'd received did indeed bear the name "Mizuno Youko."

(Youko-san, huh.)

Thinking back on it now, it was a miracle that Sei had been able to remember her name when they'd gone to inspect the clubs. It had been something of an everyday occurrence for Sei to forget not only people's names, but also their faces. Given that Youko was able to match faces and names for all her classmates within three days of the entrance ceremony, she couldn't help but marvel at how Sei lived her school life.

Recently, that had become a topic of conversation between the two of them.

"Say, Youko. You said the character 'you' was from 'fuyou.' Back in your self-introduction."

Sei asked.

"The 'you' from 'fuyou?' Ah, the character (蓉) from cotton rose (芙蓉)."

That was Youko's typical answer when asked about the characters used in her name.

"At the time, the first thing that came to mind was the character (養) from dependents (扶養家族)."

"Dependents?"

That was completely wrong. But at least she hadn't immediately thought of the words useless (不用) and floating (浮揚), which were also pronounced as "fuyou."

"Well, you can have a dependent child, which is the character (養) from dependents, plus the character for child (子) – which can be pronounced as 'ko'. So I thought that you were saying your name was written with those two

characters (養子). ”

Sei squinted, sun streaming through the window she was leaning next to, on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion. Trying to use the sun’s rays to thaw out.

“Even though it was completely wrong.”

“That’s why I only paid attention to your intro.”

“Hmm.”

Was she telling the truth or not? Youko shrugged, choosing to believe what Sei said.

“From now on, I’ll make sure I say it’s the flower.”

“You could just say it’s the ‘you’ from subject (内容) with the grass radical.”

Sei probably didn’t understand the desire to convey as pretty an image as possible. Or perhaps she was embarrassed to use examples to adorn her name.

“Sei’s a good name. There’s Sei (聖) in Saint Maria (聖マリア), Sei in Christmas Eve (聖夜), Sei in hymn (聖歌) Sei in saint (聖人) – ”

“Quit it. Ear (耳), mouth (口), king (王) is more than good enough.”

And that, Youko thought, was because of what she didn’t want to convey.

On her way back to her seat, after handing over her graduation certificate, Youko snuck a glance at the third-year wisteria class seating area. Seeing Sei obviously zoned out with a faraway look on her face was a let down.

Part 3

Youko accepted her diploma and stepped down from the stage.

Eriko looked at the program of events – since camellia class was the last class, and they were already up to “Mi”, the distribution of certificates would soon end.

Next up was the principal’s formal address, followed by the dean and guest speaker’s congratulatory addresses. It was enough to make anyone sleepy, not just Sei.

Despite her boredom, Eriko didn’t turn around to look for the bear-man. Doing so would put her on the same level as an elementary school child on parents day.

She wondered if she should rest her eyes for just a little while. Because, unfortunately, she’d probably have to open them again for the farewell address and formal reply.

“Freshman representative, first-year peach class, Mizuno Youko.”

The first time Eriko heard Youko’s name was at the middle-school entrance ceremony.

Well, the words “Mizuno Youko” would have been neatly printed on the class list when it was published, but it wasn’t an interesting enough name for a stranger to have that Eriko’s eyes would have stopped to look at it, let alone remember it.

They had assembled in their classroom prior to the entrance ceremony, but since they’d been told beforehand to sit in alphabetical order, this put the “To” of Torii and the “Mi” of Mizuno in the same column, but one at the front and the other at the back. Anyhow, once she’d spotted Sei sitting across the aisle from her, Eriko hadn’t had the composure to survey her surroundings. She’d got into a brawl with her back in kindergarten. After

that, they'd snarl at each other whenever they met in the hallway, so-called mortal enemies.

Mizuno Youko.

Therefore it was a name completely unknown to Eriko when the vice-principal called it out at the entrance ceremony.

Youko stood up from where she was seated as part of Eriko's class and walked to the front. That was probably the first time Eriko saw her face, too. At the very least, it wasn't a face she'd seen at Lillian's elementary school. Her straight, jet black hair was cut, straight, at the nape of her neck, giving her the look of a beautiful young woman.

Her speech was magnificent too. Her words were unhurried and easily understood, and while her voice did seem to tremble slightly, the nervousness came across as innocence.

(Hmm.)

For some reason, it looked as though she'd been blessed by the heavens with a number of gifts. At the time, Eriko was experiencing a mild case of shock.

It wasn't as though she'd wanted to give the address. But she did feel a bit uneasy about being in the same class as Youko.

The freshman representative was decided based on grades. Therefore, it was clear that this "Mizuno Youko," who had joined the middle-school by taking the entrance exams from outside, had received top marks. Even the students coming from elementary school took the same entrance exam, purely for form's sake. Eriko did pretty well, even by her own standards. But apparently Youko must have done even better.

It was probably to be expected when comparing herself to someone who had studied for the exam, but even so, Eriko had always been able to succeed without trying. If she'd have to work hard to cling to her status as an honor student, then that felt like a complete denial of her current self, and that was no good. Eriko wasn't particularly interested in things that could only be

achieved by studying.

Therefore, she swiftly decided to withdraw from the competition.

There was no need for two honor students in the class. That position was ceded to Youko. Eriko wasn't being a poor loser, she'd steadily lost interest in taking a leadership position.

But when it came time to select the class representative, Eriko's plan came undone. Despite not being a candidate, when "Mizuno Youko" was elected, Youko herself nominated Eriko as another class representative, basically a partner. The plausible seeming reason she gave was that after just three days she wasn't all that accustomed to Lillian's. But that was undoubtedly an act of retribution against Eriko.

Basically, for the entire year, Eriko was tied to the person she wanted to keep as far away from as possible.

"If you'd please, Torii-san."

Even to this day, she couldn't forget Youko's triumphant grin. As petty revenge, Eriko made up her mind not to tell Youko that the standard manner of addressing someone at Lillian's was first-name plus "-san."

(Although she corrected that pretty quickly.)

As she listened to the principal's address, Eriko fiddled with her tie out of boredom.

Youko had an incredible capacity to learn.

– Your ribbon has such a pretty shape, Eriko-san.

She could still remember it. The day she realized she was no match for Youko.

“Your ribbon has such a pretty shape, Eriko-san.”

Youko said smoothly. From memory it was after gym class had finished, just when they’d returned to the classroom.

“Ah, now that you mention it.”

Some other classmates looked at Eriko’s chest and nodded.

“Really?”

Youko was quite skilled at giving compliments. Knowing her, she could easily discern someone’s strengths and weaknesses, but she only called attention to their good points. Because she was so accurate, it didn’t feel like flattery. It was probably because she’d been brought up receiving compliments that she spontaneously complimented other people.

“Is there a secret to it?”

Youko focused in on Eriko’s ribbon, gently touching it.

“A secret?”

It wasn’t something she was conscious of, so there couldn’t be any secret. But looking at Youko’s ribbon, it didn’t have a particularly bad shape.

“Actually, I noticed it a while back. I tried watching you tie it today in the locker room, but it was bam-bam-bam done.”

Youko asked Eriko to teach her how she tied her ribbon. But everyday she tied it without paying conscious attention, so she wouldn’t be able to teach that. When Eriko said this, Youko asked if she could watch while Eriko tied it a couple of times.

Youko was, fundamentally, a diligent person. After watching Eriko untie and retie her ribbon five times, she’d mostly taken the technique on board. She was able to tie her own ribbon in a way that looked quite close to Eriko’s.

“But I can’t do it as well as you, Eriko-san.”

Youko seemed satisfied as she said this, and turned her attention to something else. Eriko wasn't particularly interested in what had caught Youko's attention, but she was incredibly fascinated by Youko the person.

Like the way she didn't hide her efforts, or the way she was satisfied with the results after she'd done all she could – these were things that were unimaginable to Eriko, but Youko did them so naturally. Add to that the way she was always cheerful, never troubled.

Eriko realized that the ability to work hard was a talent too. For someone who didn't know what they wanted to do, but desperately wanted to find something where they wouldn't be beaten by anyone, the wide and shallow, unflagging accumulation of labor, and futile concentration of effort could only be thought of as painful.

But even so, Youko had gone out of her way to compliment her. Eriko thought she should be on guard to ensure that, at least in ribbon shape, she was never surpassed by Youko. It wouldn't take any time. All she had to do was tie it like she had up until now.

Squeak.

At the end, when she was satisfied and pulled the ends tight, her mood tensed.

She'd tied her ribbon this morning too.

Today was the final time she'd wear her school uniform.

“Everyone please be upstanding.”

At the MC's command, everyone in the auditorium stood up. After the congratulatory address came the singing of a hymn. From the parents seating area, the sound of rustling paper was mixed in with the sounds of people standing up. They'd been given copies of the hymn's lyrics and score when they entered.

Eriko pretended to smooth the pleats of her skirt and snuck a glance at the seats behind her. But the bulk of students already standing formed a barrier between her and the guest's seat she was interested in, so she couldn't tell what the situation was back there.

The sound of the music teacher playing the prelude on the piano rang out.

Had Yamanobe-san arrived?

Somewhere in the auditorium, was he singing along too?

Farewell Address and Formal Reply

Part 1

The nerves started when the graduation ceremony was approaching its conclusion.

Youko thought, “I’m done for.” Although her face didn’t show it, her heart was pounding. Then, becoming aware of her palpitations, she felt more and more agitated.

Why couldn’t God let her feel like this was just another rehearsal, right through to the end?

She wasn’t at all worried about the “Formal Reply” that she would have to read aloud. She was used to that sort of thing. Thinking back to the middle-school entrance ceremony, when she’d given the freshman representative’s speech to an auditorium full of complete strangers, this was nothing.

So, if asked what it was that was causing Youko’s nerves, it was the barrier that had to be overcome immediately before her “Formal Reply,” the “Farewell Address.” The farewell address was given by a member of the non-graduating student body, and her petit soeur, Ogasawara Sachiko, had been chosen to make this speech that would send off the graduating students.

Having said that, Youko wasn’t foolishly fretting about whether or not Sachiko was going to slip up. She wasn’t going to falter. In that sense, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that she had more poise than her grande soeur, Youko.

What was worrying Youko was her own mental state.

Would she be able to remain calm while Sachiko made the farewell speech? Surely the tears wouldn’t come flooding out, like a dam bursting?

(Maybe it was a bad idea to have a pair of soeurs give the farewell address and formal reply after all...?)

She blamed the teachers that had chosen them. Naturally, they hadn't been chosen as a matched set of soeurs, but their relationship would have been known. The teachers should have put more thought into who they nominated.

Youko glanced over at her homeroom teacher, who looked to be crying recklessly.

(While I'm doing all I can to suppress my emotions.)

Something she couldn't accept.

(If I broke down in tears, and couldn't read the formal reply, would it be alright?)

The teachers probably wouldn't mind such a display of heartfelt emotion. It wouldn't be what they were expecting, but if they started doubting how she acted in a crisis, then everything would look suspicious.

At any rate. Anger relieved the tension slightly.

By the time the hymn ended, Youko had more or less calmed down again. Or, rather, she'd accepted defeat.

Committing a major faux pas during the graduation ceremony right at the end of her time in high-school could be interesting too. There was no particular significance in maintaining her honor student image right until the very end.

"The farewell address."

The vice-principal's voice rang out.

"Student representative. Second-year pine class, Ogasawara Sachiko."

Sachiko said, "Here," as she rose from her chair in the students' seating area.

She walked to the front with her head held high.

A darling petit soeur.

An imposing, beautiful, young lady with a heart as clean and pure as glass.

Sachiko adjusted the mic, which had been setup right in front of the graduating students, then unfurled the white paper roll that contained her farewell address.

She lifted her head, silently gazed across the sea of graduates, then started to speak.

“To our onee-samas who are about to leave the nest of Lillian’s Girls Academy High-school.”

It was at this point that Youko thought, “Ah.” As in, “Ah, this isn’t good.”

“Congratulations on your graduation.”

(Not good. Not good at all.)

The introduction of the farewell address. Overflow had come incredibly quickly, even before the word “graduation” was fully spoken. Overflow of what? The promised tears, of course.

(Wh-wh-wh)

The words wouldn’t come. In this way, she was the same as Yumi-chan.

Even if she could have formed the thought, “What should I do?” there was nothing she could do. Given the number of tears she was shedding, they weren’t about to stick to her eyelids or eyelashes, and gravity wasn’t about to reverse, so the only possible outcome was that they streamed down her cheeks.

Like a waterfall.

Like a flood.

“Ulp.”

The sound of a voice heaving with sobs came echoing through the microphone.

The hall suddenly fell silent.

The tears had been dammed up by Sachiko.

“Ulp.”

This was the first time that Youko had seen this side of Sachiko. No words came out as she looked down, her shoulders convulsing as she desperately fought the tears.

Even though she was such a strong-hearted girl. Even though she was such an obstinate contrarian, who hated people seeing her weak points.

Seeing Sachiko sob like that may have been contagious, for the sound of people sobbing convulsively came leaking out from all parts of the auditorium.

Youko thought, “I want to be by her side.”

But it wasn’t possible for someone on the receiving end of the farewell address to rebuke the speaker with, “Pull yourself together,” or to put an arm around their shoulder and say, “You’ll be fine.”

Besides, if she was saved by her grande souer, then Sachiko might lose the self-confidence required to lead the student council. To be viewed as a “Rosa Chinensis who can’t do anything without her onee-sama” would be too humiliating for the proud Sachiko.

(Ahh. Fight back, somehow.)

She couldn’t watch any more. Just as Youko was at her wits’ end.

A figure burst forth from the second-year seating area.

That person lodged themselves right up against Sachiko and spoke briskly into the microphone.

“As a representative of all the students of this academy, let me offer you our heartfelt congratulations.”

It was Rei.

As though it were entirely proper, Rei continued to read the farewell address that Sachiko held in her hand. What a superb friendship.

Forgetting her gratitude to Rei for aiding her petit soeur during her crisis, Youko felt a twinge of jealousy.

Sachiko finally recovered halfway through the farewell address, and resumed reading it aloud together with Rei.

“Now that we’ve reached the end, we pray for your health and success, as we farewell you into the world.”

With that last word, this time it was Rei’s voice that shook like she’d been overcome with emotion, probably out of love and respect.

“Student representative, Ogasawara Sachiko.”

Sachiko continued with, “And.” Rei sounded embarrassed as she said, “Hasekura Rei.”

One moment the auditorium was silent, as though everyone was holding their breath, the next moment it was echoing with applause, like the last song of a concert had just finished.

A thunderous roar.

(Do farewell addresses usually get this sort of reception ... ?)

She’d attended the high-school graduation last year and the year before, but she had no memory of such a raucous reaction.

The noise of the crowd drowned out the sound of the mic. It took a couple of minutes until silence once again reigned. Probably long enough to make

some cup noodles.

“The formal reply.”

The vice-principal said, after coughing to clear their throat.

“Graduating student’s representative. Third-year camellia class, Mizuno Youko.”

“Here.”

As she rose from her folding chair, Youko thought, “Well now, this is going to be tough.”

As she walked, she thought.

After what had just happened, there was no way she could break down into tears during the reading of the formal reply. But that wasn’t likely to happen even if she wanted it to, since, thanks to Sachiko, her tension and deep feelings had been completely blown away. She had to be the honors student, and re-instill discipline into the graduation ceremony.

But, what if?

Youko thought.

What if Youko found herself in the same situation as Sachiko? Would her two dear friends come to her aid as Rei had?

What if?

Sei and Eriko’s faces came to mind, and Youko quickly discarded that hypothesis.

Those two.

There was no way they’d leap up, they’d be leaning back in their chairs, pointing and laughing.

Part 2

As expected of Rei.

There was no confusion in her eyes, Eriko proudly acknowledged.

Rei came across as a normal, gentle girl when she wasn't wielding her shinai, but it was plain to see why she was voted this year's Mister Lillian. When something had to be done, she did it. It was kind of cool.

The formal reply had begun.

As expected of Youko, her voice didn't waver. She spoke with an irritating calmness. Right up until the very end, she remained the perfect honors student.

“Thinking back, these three years of high-school have – ”

Eriko closed her eyes while listening to Youko's speech. Not to go to sleep. She wanted Youko's voice carved deep into her heart.

Lots of things had happened during their three years of high-school. Eriko had known Youko for six years, and Sei for getting on fourteen years now.

Fourteen years.

That was to say, for as long as Eriko had been attending Lillian's.

She could have stayed at Lillian's for another four years, but it felt like the right time to be heading outside.

Why, after all these years? – She'd often been asked this after she joined the ranks of students taking entrance exams to other universities.

Especially by the friends she'd known since kindergarten, they wanted to know why Lillian's University was no good.

Why, after all these years? Even when she was asked this, she couldn't easily come up with a clear answer.

Lillian's was a good academy. She had no complaints.

So then, why?

Eriko thought, vaguely, that it was probably because she was satisfied. Because she was content with her school life at Lillian's, and had no regrets, she could start her journey into a new world.

When they didn't stop asking, she decided to answer the usual way, with, "Lillian's doesn't offer the degree I want to do." Which wasn't wrong, but it wasn't completely true either.

The truth was that she hadn't found what she wanted to study, so she was going to university to look for it. So if she followed that through to its logical conclusion, she'd probably be just as happy studying literature or home economics at Lillian's Women's University.

In herself, she didn't fully understand her own mind. So, as a stopgap, she fell back on the easily understood reason.

Youko's formal reply would soon be over.

Now, as she was right on the brink of leaving Lillian's, all sorts of memories came flooding back.

Foremost among them were the things she'd done with the Yamayurikai. And, through it, the petit soeur and friends she'd found. They were irreplaceable treasures.

(Ah, no good. I'm getting all sentimental.)

Even though she was going off in search of even more interesting things. What's the point of being sad? Eriko gave herself a little pep talk.

Still.

She could overlook the small teardrops that had gathered in the corner of her eyes.

For today it was alright to cry. Nobody would blame her.

She could hear the intro to the traditional graduation song, “Aogeba Toutoshi.”

Part 3

The beginning was boring, but the ending was wonderfully amusing. – That was how Sei would remember the graduation ceremony.

At least nothing had happened to make her nod off. Her mouth wasn't dry either. So she obviously hadn't been drooling.

Sachiko's face, sloppy with tears, was worthy of her respect, and the way it let Rei enter the scene like an action hero from a children's TV show was also satisfactory. It would have been better if Youko smiled more, but if she let her emotions out who knows where it would have ended.

It was hard to make allowances for those sort of things. While the audience had been deeply moved by Sachiko, if Youko had then burst into tears it would have almost certainly been boring. Besides, Sei was never going to jump in and read the formal reply alongside a crying Youko. The same undoubtedly went for Eriko.

That didn't mean they were uncaring. Youko, Eriko, Sei. Unexpectedly, the three of them got along well together. When it came to dealing with other humans, everyone was different. Every group had its own way of getting along.

In Sei's case, a hands-off relationship seemed to work well. Shimako seemed to be the same way. Nothing more needed to be said about the failure of Sei's overly-close relationship with Shiori.

When both parties understood the unspoken rule of not delving too far into the other's territory, they were able to get along well together. With Youko, sometimes she'd enter in too far, and then they'd argue. But it was because she was always thinking of what was best for the other person, and they'd built their relationship with this understanding, so their friendship didn't collapse.

(When you find something precious, take a step back from yourself.)

The words that her onee-sama had spoken on this day one year ago came back to her. Sei looked up at the ceiling.

Back then, she'd been nervous about the year that lay ahead of her.

But the year had gone by in the blink of an eye.

In the blink of an eye, but still an incredibly fun time.

She could hear the intro to the traditional graduation song, "Aogeba Toutoshi."

Sei couldn't really identify with the lyrics.

Maybe some day, decades later, she'd be able to see the teachers' efforts as a "great struggle." But at this moment, she didn't see it as something she should be "deeply indebted" for.

(And all this "hold your head high, make your name, strive.")

Since the song had been written during the Meiji era, the lyrics were bound to contain some anachronisms. But wouldn't it be better if it just said to live a happy, healthy life, without all that career stuff? It was just begging to be mocked.

But this time was a little bit different. Because of Yumi-chan's extraordinary kindness, Sei decided to sing "swiftly" as "sweetly."

So she did, and, hmm, that was strange.

Even including the teachers she hadn't liked and the painful memories, the entire lot could all be bundled together and described as sweet.

Lots of things had happened, but in general, she had good memories.

As she thought this, she felt she could sing.

(Now is the time to say farewell with an eternally grateful heart.)

Even with those words of farewell on her lips, she wasn't overcome with emotion. Yesterday, she'd informed her classroom of her departure. She looked out through the windows of her classroom at the budding trees, and then through their branches to the sky.

If she could carve into her mind that she had been there, then that was enough for Sei.

There were no people she needed to inform about her departure.

She wouldn't say, "Farewell," to the people she held dear. If they felt the same way about her, then Sei thought that they would surely meet again one day, even without any specific plans.

After the final bars of "Aogeba Toutoshi" died down, the music teacher started playing the opening to the school song.

The very familiar Lillian's school song was more suited to a Sei-ntly place than a gymnasium.

Towards the Light

Part 1

The sunlight was warm.

Eriko instinctively squinted the moment she stepped out of the gymnasium.

Dazzling.

Her eyes had become accustomed to the gymnasium interior and, even with the lights on, it fell far short of the radiance of a sunny day.

“Eriko-san, Eriko-san.”

“Huh?”

Eriko’s shoulder was being shaken by her classmate beside her. Wondering what was happening, she opened her eyes fully and the first thing that sprang into view was –

“... Yamanobe-san.”

The bear-man.

“What are you doing here!?”

Eriko parted from the line of third-year chrysanthemum students when she passed by his location and stood beside him. “Here” was alongside the gymnasium, but quite a distance from the entrance.

“I’m ashamed.”

Those were the first words out of Yamanobe-san’s mouth.

“Ashamed?”

The line of Eriko's classmates continued on, as though nothing had happened. Those she'd told about Yamanobe-san gave her a wink and a thumbs-up.

"That's what I said. That's why I'm here."

Eriko was getting annoyed as she questioned him. At least he'd shown up outside the gymnasium just as the graduating seniors were exiting. It was obvious he hadn't attended the ceremony.

"... Did you just arrive?"

"No."

"Then why didn't you go inside?"

"Because I was ashamed."

Yamanobe-san's energetic bowing caught the eye of some students near the gymnasium entrance. They fleetingly glanced her way, but when Eriko caught their eyes they quickly turned their attention back to what was happening inside the hall. They weren't seniors lined up to exit the gymnasium. Since they were wearing armbands, they were probably part of the stage crew helping with the ceremony.

"Ha hmm."

Eriko could see the course of events that had unfolded.

"You were mistaken for a creep."

With his tattered sweater and beard, he didn't look like someone going to attend a graduation ceremony. On top of that, since he would have dropped everything and rushed here straight from Hanadera Academy, he probably didn't have proper ID either. So even if he said he'd been invited, it would have been a tough sell.

"That's why I said you should come with my parents."

The checks were rigorous because Lillian's was a girls school. So even though Yamanobe-san somehow made it onto the premises, getting into the gymnasium had proved to be impossible.

The students at reception weren't at fault. It was disappointing that Yamanobe-san had given up so easily when they asked for a student's name and his relation to her.

"When I thought about it, since I'm not family or anything, I didn't think I was entitled to enter the hall – "

"... Idiot. It's my graduation, and I asked you to come, so that more than entitles you."

Yamanobe-san seemed a bit startled by Eriko's caustic words, but in the end he nodded in assent.

"Ahh, right. That's true."

Eriko sighed, was this man really ten years her senior? But, well, she was in love, so she could let it slide.

"You should probably head off soon."

Yamanobe-san pointed to the line of students exiting the gymnasium. It was only now that he looked like a competent enough teacher.

"You're right."

Eriko meekly agreed, and turned her back on Yamanobe-san. Ahead of her was Youko. The last student of camellia class had just left the gymnasium.

She jogged a few steps, then turned around.

"Thank-you for coming."

"Not at all."

Yamanobe-san looked awkward, but he spoke sincerely.

“Congratulations on your graduation, Eriko-san.”

Happiness.

Part 2

The sunlight was warm.

Youko instinctively squinted the moment she walked she walked through the doorway. There were hardly any clouds to intercept the sun’s rays streaming down on her.

The seniors walked from the gymnasium back to their homeroom, where they were given their graduation certificates and report cards. Youko’s classmates were all excited, not really paying attention to what their homeroom teacher was saying.

Things like, “You’re considered students of Lillian’s Girls Academy right up until the end of March, so make sure you behave yourselves.”

And, “From April, you’ll be graduates of Lillian’s, so make sure you live a life that Maria-sama would be proud of.”

The teacher droned on and on with these pieces of advice. But she was probably just following standard operating procedure about what to say during the final homeroom period, and the students knew this so they pretended to listen and nodded along, saying “Mm-hmm.”

The Yamayurikai members assembled near the entrance to the school building.

Sachiko, Rei, Yoshino-chan. Shimako and Yumi-chan were nowhere to be seen, so it looked like first-year peach class’s homeroom hadn’t finished yet.

“Youko, have you got your indoor shoes?”

It looked like chrysanthemum class had been let out first. Eriko smiled as she

made her way over.

“Of course?”

“No mistake there. Unlike a certain someone.”

A certain someone? As Youko tilted her head in confusion, a shadow appeared behind her.

“A certain someone? You mean me?”

It was Sei.

“Listen to this, Youko. Sei left her indoor shoes in her shoe box, just like every other day.”

Eriko cackled, as though she found it hilarious.

“You’re laughing a bit too much.”

Sei looked gloomy, her expression one of a little child that had been woken up from their afternoon nap. She had undoubtedly fallen asleep during the graduation ceremony.

“Honestly. You’ve just graduated, what were you thinking, leaving your indoor shoes behind? That the next person to get your locker would use them?”

Even right up to the end, Eriko wasn’t about to go easy.

“Since her university’s on the same grounds, she was probably just completely relaxed.”

“Thanks for that. But this has nothing to do with university, it’s just one of my eccentricities. Surely you know I’ve got a 50% strike rate for leaving my indoor shoes behind after closing ceremonies.”

“No way. I don’t believe it.”

“I can tell you about it now, but I had to come and get them during summer vacation.”

Apparently even Sei wasn't game to leave her indoor shoes in the shoe box for the entirety of the 40 day summer vacation. They probably would have festered, being left in a dark, unventilated place.

“You shouldn't speak too openly. If you say any more, you'll ruin your fans' image of you.”

Listening to them talk, Youko was confused. Surely Sei's image was already pretty wobbly.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Shimako and Yumi-chan appeared, accompanied by “Camera-chan,” Takeshima Tsutako-chan.

They'd arranged for her to take photographs with all the Yamayurikai members, to commemorate their graduation.

Thankfully, they'd been blessed with good weather. While a photo with them all holding umbrellas might be interesting, it would also be a lot of effort.

“Where should we take the photographs?”

Once Tsutako-chan had joined the conversation, Yumi-chan stealthily pulled Sachiko aside.

(I wonder what she's up to.)

Finding this deeply interesting, Youko focused her attention on those two.

“Here, onee-sama.”

Yumi-chan held a pack of tissues out to Sachiko.

(Ohh.)

Youko watched on in admiration – that must have taken a lot of guts.

Sachiko looked refreshed, probably having washed her face somewhere, but it was hard to miss her red eyes and nose. Everyone had noticed, but no-one had reached out to help the downcast Sachiko.

“What?”

Sachiko responded with aggression, probably feeling awkward after breaking down in tears in front of the entire school, not to mention the parents and guests.

“You’ll feel better if you blow your nose.”

“What are you – ”

“It even works for dry-eye and allergies. You’ll feel better, no matter what. The day before yesterday, I was feeling the same as you, onee-sama, and Shimako-san gave me a tissue, so I thought ... ”

“_”

Sachiko was silent, overwhelmed by Yumi-chan’s intensity.

“I’ll really feel better?”

As she spoke, Sachiko pulled a tissue from the pack, then blew her nose with all her might.

Chi~n.

After putting the tissue in her pocket, Sachiko’s face had a wonderful expression when she looked up.

Part 3

The sunlight was warm.

Sei instinctively squinted into the light shining through the branches of the trees lining the path.

They had decided to take the photographs at the fork in the path, in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

Sei hadn't really cared where they took the photos, but both Youko and Eriko had wanted it done there. It must have been tough saying goodbye to the statue of Maria-sama that had watched over them for so long, now that they were leaving the school.

The eight members of the Rose families plus Camera-chan moved together in small groups. Trailing them, ostensibly just watching, was the president of the newspaper club and her petit soeur, so they must have looked like an odd gathering from the outside.

It wasn't long after the graduation ceremony, so there were still some students and parents lingering around the school campus, reluctant to leave. There were also plenty of groups like Sei's, that had gathered to take commemorative photos.

"So did Yamanobe-san come? Or not?"

Sei asked Eriko, walking alongside her. Youko looked like she knew something, because she suppressed a laugh and walked ahead, joining up with Sachiko's group.

"He did and he didn't."

Eriko seemed bored as she explained what had happened.

"Ho ho. I see."

Sei smiled as she listened politely to a recap of that episode.

She could just picture the scene, right at the end, where Eriko breaks out of line to go and remonstrate with Yamanobe-san by the side of the gymnasium.

"Even though he could have just pretended to be one of your brothers."

“He’s not really a cunning person. But that’s fine.”

Oh boy, she really was fond of him after all. Love truly was terrifying if it could change the big head Eriko this much.

“Hey.”

Eriko suddenly stopped, with a faraway look on her face.

“We got into a fight once, eons ago, right?”

“Ahh, that we did. Ten years is ages, so fourteen would indeed be eons ago.”

Sei walked slowly. As though savoring the last vestiges of a blissful time.

“What was it that caused it, do you remember?”

Eriko walked alongside her. Like they were an elderly couple.

“No way, you don’t remember?”

“I get the feeling we both said something that rubbed the other the wrong way.”

It wasn’t a joke, Eriko really didn’t seem to remember.

“You called me an American, then I called you a big head ... but.”

“Oh my.”

“... It’s easily forgotten.”

Indeed, if it had stuck in her mind, Eriko probably wouldn’t have kept her hairstyle with the fringe pulled back, exposing her full forehead, for all this time.

“My grandmother used to tell me that my forehead had a lovely shape. Ah, I see. That must have been why it hurt to be called “big head.””

Eriko spoke as though she were analyzing someone else. Human memories were fuzzy things. Even Sei couldn't really say how much of her recollection was the truth.

"At any rate, it was wrong of me to call you an American when we'd just met."

Eriko apologized for her verbal slip from fourteen years ago. However, Sei shook her head, and said, "No."

"I only found out about it much later, but one of my ancestors on my father's side was Caucasian."

"And you inherited their features?"

"Seems that way. So what you said wasn't necessarily incorrect. So you don't have to apologize."

"Same here. It's true that I have a prominent forehead."

Eriko held out her right hand and Sei grasped it firmly with her own. This time they didn't look away. Finally, after fourteen years, they had both agreed to reconciliation.

"That's weird."

They both started laughing, it was too funny. They didn't harbor any ill-will for each other at this stage, so the point of reconciling seemed fairly blurry. Even so, she wanted to face the adults from their time in kindergarten and tell them, "Serves you right."

"By the way, your ancestor, were they American?"

Eriko looked just like the Eriko of fourteen years ago as she bit into the topic. – Or, rather, it was a topic she'd been forced to postpone talking about for fourteen years.

"I don't know their nationality. But I'm told they themselves had mixed blood from a number of countries."

“So that’s it.”

Eriko stretched. A fair gap had opened up between them and Rei’s leading group. Rei smiled and waved at them, apparently misunderstanding something.

“At times it looked like you were going far, far away, but that was just a trick by the genes of your wandering ancestor.”

Eriko’s theory was preposterous.

She’d thought that the area around the statue of Maria-sama would be busy, but when they got there it was deserted.

“What sort of photos should we start with?”

Tsutako-chan suggested a couple of different styles. The newspaper club members said nothing, since they were only there to watch. Their eyes were sparkling, ready for action, as they waited a short distance away for the photo shoot to begin.

“Over here, Shimako.”

Sei called out to her petit soeur, then placed a hand on each of her shoulders. Sei couldn’t recall ever having her photo taken with Shimako, and she’d rather leave the group photo with everyone for the end.

“Ah.”

But, just as Tsutako-chan was about to take the shot, something caught Shimako’s eye and she suddenly dashed off.

“Shizuka-sama!”

“... Huh?”

Shimako rushed over to Miss Kanina Shizuka. She obviously hadn’t noticed

them as she was going home and seemed quite surprised when she saw Shimako sprinting over to her. – Or, rather, it was Shimako’s eyesight that was surprisingly good.

“Congratulations on your graduation.”

Shizuka was practically dragged over to the group by Shimako, and started out by offering her congratulations to the graduating trio.

“We’re just having some photos taken now. You can join us, if you’d like, Shizuka-sama.”

Shimako said. Being unusually proactive.

Shizuka was also leaving Lillian’s at the end of March, although not as a graduate. Shimako probably thought that she’d want to share these memories too.

However.

“Thanks. But I’ll have to give it a pass this time.”

Shizuka declined the offer with a smile.

“But.”

“Shimako. Don’t try and force her.”

Sei grabbed Shimako’s arm and pulled her back.

If Shizuka had wanted to be included in their commemorative photos, then there would have been no problems with it. But it didn’t look as though her heart wanted that. So there was no need to do anything more.

“I’m happy you were thinking of me, Shimako-san. But I want my normal, everyday life to continue unchanged, today, tomorrow and into the future.”

That way she could welcome the closing ceremony like a regular student, and maintain her desire to go to Italy. Sei felt like this wasn’t a fake sentiment

from Shizuka.

Shizuka turned to face Sei.

“I won’t say goodbye. Since I intend for us to meet again.”

“Indeed. See you later.”

Shizuka then said, “Gokigenyou,” and started walking towards the school gate. She certainly didn’t look back. Tsutako-chan trained her camera on the retreating figure.

Her head held high.

A photographer wouldn’t have hesitated to capture that image.

But the sound of the shutter clicking didn’t ring out.

“Now then, how about we resume the photo shoot?”

Tsutako-san turned around and asked cheerfully, once Shizuka had disappeared completely from view.

It can’t be explained in words all that well, but that figure looked like it possessed far too much good will.

Part 4

Click.

The happy sound of the shutter whirled.

Just for that moment, they were gathered in the frame. To confirm that, indeed, these friends of mine had existed here.

In truth, there was no need for it, but who could tell what tomorrow would bring.

A confirmation of the present, kept on file.

Besides the one with everyone gathered around Maria-sama, there were a number of other photos taken. Of the three graduating seniors, and of the various Rose families.

Everyone was in high spirits. Like something out of a dream.

“I’ll send you copies of the photos.”

Hearing Tsutako-chan’s words, Eriko looked up. The dream was nearing its end.

“Thank-you. I’ll look forward to it.”

“Umm, I’ll send you a copy of the Lillian Kwaraban graduation edition too.”

Ms Tsukiyama Minako barged into the conversation. She’d been restraining herself, but apparently there were limits to how long she could stay on the periphery.

“... We’ll look forward to that in a different sense.”

Youko smiled genuinely.

“Lady Roses. Um, I’m sorry for all the trouble that I’ve caused you. But I’m absolutely delighted that I was able to go through high-school at the same time as you.”

As she spoke, ragged tears fell from the eyes of Ms Minako.

“Oh? Ah? What am I doing?”

Noticing her tears she started to panic.

“Ahh, I’m sorry.”

– The end result being that she ran away.

“What was that?”

Sei watched, head tilted in confusion, as the pony-tailed figure ran off into the distance, skirt in disarray. An unintended see off.

“I’m so very sorry. Right at the end too.”

Miss Mami, Minako's petit soeur and up-and-coming writer for the newspaper, apologized for her onee-sama with a composure impossible for most first-years.

"I know you're all worried, with our editor-in-chief like that, but all of us in the newspaper club will work together to create a good farewell edition for you. Please forgive her for today."

"_"

Nobody said anything, but they were all surely thinking it.

"Who's going to worry, when there's such a good successor to the newspaper club president?"

"Later."

With that, their trio split up.

At the fork in the path that Maria-sama watches over.

Youko and Sei headed towards the front gate, Eriko towards the back gate.

"Later."

They had no plans for their next meeting. But even without them, they knew it would be okay.

Their adorable juniors remained at the fork, watching them leave.

Nobody said, "Good-bye."

There were undoubtedly still many things that were left unsaid. But that's because it's not possible to say everything.

Like the song, “Hotaru no Hikari,” they had only one wish.

Of happiness.

Of happiness, happiness for all.

They were so very glad that they were able to meet each other through this school.

Joined at Just One Hand

From a distance, the light-pink flowers of the Yoshino cherry tree looked white.

Maybe that was why the fake blizzard of cherry blossoms whipped up by the spring wind looked like real snow dancing before her eyes.

There were enough petals there to give the illusion that they were blocking everything out. Since it was enough to make her lose sight of herself, she wouldn't have noticed someone else ten metres away either.

Hidden, unaware of the other's presence, the two girls stopped in that spot. Inside the cherry blossom blizzard they gradually drew closer to each other, until, having done quite enough, the wind suddenly stopped.

“Ah ... ”

Simultaneously, they both noticed.

Not just the hair and uniform, but also the white petals adorning the girl looking their way with a strange expression.

But anyway, how to describe this feeling?

This young, white lady – it was like seeing their own reflection in a mirror.

Sheltered from the wind by the grove of trees, the petals of the Yoshino cherry tree fell like a light rain. For a moment, the pair faced each other in silence.

Such was the first encounter between Satou Sei and Toudou Shimako.

Spring Breeze

Part 1

The magnificent cherry trees at the back of the school building seemed to live solely for the brief two-week period at the beginning of April.

After their flowers had blossomed, the larvae that would become butterflies and moths made their presence felt, from the time the new leaves started sprouting right the way through until midsummer.

Black specks of feces would be scattered like seeds on the ground beneath the branches, and every year there were incidents with clumsy caterpillars losing their grip on the leaves and falling into the hair or onto the uniform of some unfortunate student below.

That being said, this area behind the school building was a stopover point connecting the second gymnasium and the church, as well as forming part of the route used by students to get to the back gate. It wasn't shunned by any means. The students simply moved swiftly when passing under the trees during that time, paying attention to both what was underfoot and what was overhead. That was the accepted behavior at Lillian's.

Autumn arrived once those nuisances had grown wings and flown off, and it brought with it days of sweeping up the mass of fallen leaves.

Naturally, the blossoming of the cherry flowers meant it was harvest season, although these cherries weren't harvested. If anything, the ginkgo trees along the main path should be harvested, as that would at least lessen the smell somewhat.

But of course that was only a selfish human concern.

The cherry trees knew nothing of this as, year after year, they were immersed in the tasks of blossoming flowers, dropping petals, growing new leaves, scattering seeds and shedding dry leaves.

In this manner, they'd stood there for decades.

And they would probably continue watching Lillian's long after the current crop of students was gone.

"Right. It's no big deal."

I muttered as I looked up at the cherry tree, just like one month ago.

The flowers were on the verge of blooming fully. And so my onee-sama was no longer by my side.

Before I knew it, I'd reached the final year of high-school.

I removed the rosary that had hung around my neck for the past two years, then wrapped it around my right wrist. Having it hanging around my neck wasn't in any way inconvenient, but now that my onee-sama had graduated I hated the constant reminder of her. Winding it around my arm like a bracelet-substitute was perfect.

A petal coiled up, like a spring, then dropped off right before my very eyes. I held out my rosary-attached right hand, palm open, and caught it.

Was it comforting me, or laughing feebly? Either way, it looked like the cherry tree was trying to tell me something.

"That's right."

As I was agreeing, the round petal on the palm of my hand was blown away. Soon the small existence that had been on the palm of my hand was carried to the ground, where it quickly blended in with the other fallen petals, making it hard to tell which one it was.

Right. It really was no big deal.

There was no doubt that these cherry trees, which had survived the war, had witnessed far more disastrous events. They would know the serious tears and

unbearable memories of sorrowful people.

Even though I could be said to have lost a loved one, in my case, she was still alive somewhere out there.

It's simply a matter of course that for every meeting there is a corresponding parting. The hole that was left in my heart was small enough that I would be able to mend it myself.

A gust of wind blew past. The branches of the cherry tree shook and the petals fell relentlessly. I looked up at heaven and gently closed my eyes. Like that, I felt as though the incessantly falling petals were painting over me.

Countless times I've wanted to be absorbed into things of beauty far beyond the reach of humans, like the sky and the sea, or the trees. I regretted being given the life of a sinful "human" animal, and spontaneously apologized, desiring forgiveness. Running away from life is rightly condemned, and that's all there is to it.

What attracted me to Shiori was seeing the divinity inside her. While she was beside me, with that light shining on me, I felt that my life was worth living too.

"Rosa Gigantea ... huh."

Since April, the number of students calling me that had risen. I still wasn't used to it. It was, until a month ago, the title used to address my onee-sama.

My onee-sama had said, "If you feel a debt of gratitude to me, then pay that forward to someone else." But would I be able to do that kind of thing?

No. It was unthinkable that someone as weak as me would be able to attract a junior to them.

I no longer looked down on those innocent students like I once had. Instead, I found myself envying them. Just living was such an ordeal. But they possessed the strength to take everything in their stride and enjoy life.

Something within me was broken. That much I knew. But, this thing, it had

no concrete shape that I could definitively point to.

The wind had strengthened further, so much so that the petals scattered on the ground also became involved in the creation of this white world.

But despite all the petals swirling in the air, the human was a human, the cherry tree a cherry tree, and the boundary between them remained clear.

Such was the way of all things.

Shiori and I. Despite both being humans, we could not become one. Plunging down the evolutionary path until we could.

Tears didn't come.

Feelings of sorrow had accumulated until eventually they turned to resignation.

The wind suddenly stopped.

Then in my expanded field of vision I saw someone that wasn't myself.

“Ah ... ”

I wonder which one of us spoke up.

Less than two metres separated me from the girl, bathed in flowers, who was looking back at me with the same expression of wonder.

Instantly, I remembered Shiori. I didn't mistake this girl for Shiori, I just remembered her.

A fair-skinned maiden. Her features weren't showy, but she gave the impression of an antique western doll, thanks to the gentle wave of her light-brown hair.

Was she a first-year, or a transfer student? At the very least, hers wasn't a face I recognized. But then again, I wasn't the type of person to remember everyone's face.

I have a weakness for these kind of encounters.

“You’re ... ”

I started to speak, then swallowed my words.

Deja vu.

I was assaulted by a sweet and bitter bout of deja vu.

It was like this with Shiori too.

Shiori had known about me beforehand, but I first became aware of her existence when we met in the deserted chapel.

So was the rest going to be like it was with Shiori too? Persistently asking about her, eventually following her around like some kind of stalker, and then — .

It ending in ruin.

I didn't know how to proceed in this situation. I readied myself in case she was about to smile divinely and say, "Gokigenyou," like Shiori.

Would I kneel at her feet, or run away?

At any rate, it was obvious I wasn't in a normal state of mind.

"Pardon me."

However, she was the one that fled. She blushed and quickly bowed. Then ran off towards the school building.

I was saved. I leaned against the trunk of the cherry tree and let out a sigh of relief.

"Don't worry, it's a human girl."

A strange sensation came over me as I muttered this.

What had I been thinking?

Part 2

I knew of her existence.

Well, I knew her name but not her face, that level of awareness.

Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama.

On the day of the entrance ceremony, I'd heard the gossip from my classmates that her "exquisite foreign features" and "melancholy expression" made her look "totally sexy."

We would have been in the same school building for a year during middle-school, but I couldn't recall her face.

The forging of an intimate bond between older and younger students was a

tradition reserved solely for the high-school division of Lillian's Girls Academy. Before then, during compulsory education, it fell to the teachers and sisters, as well as fellow classmates, to provide spiritual and physical guidance. Even so, some precocious middle-school students who adored the soeur system but couldn't wait until they were in high-school would secretly meet with older students to share gossip.

Gossip such as, Rosa Foetida, Torii Eriko-sama, had silky hair and tied her ribbon beautifully, as well as being a superwoman who could effortlessly do anything. But she never looked triumphant. It took a connoisseur to appreciate her cool expression.

Or, Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Youko, had a mature presence and was always ready to take action, making her the quintessential class representative. This was balanced against her flawless beauty, giving her a charm that no-one else could possibly imitate.

We sat in alphabetical order at the start of the year, and the girl who sat beside me was well acquainted with the seniors, so the air around me was filled with gossip.

"Shimako-san, which Rose is your type?"

The first time I was asked this I was taken aback and answered truthfully with, "I don't know."

"Yeah, they're all wonderful, aren't they?"

My classmates chose to interpret my response favorably. That was when I realized that most of the students had arranged themselves into social groups based around which one of the Roses was their favorite. This made someone like me, who didn't really know who the Roses were, a somewhat unusual creature.

All of the various cliques adored their chosen Rose. Treating them like local celebrities, in a manner of speaking. There was a certain distance because the Roses were two grades ahead of us, making their existence more of a rumor. Even the students who had already exchanged soeur vows joined in the

commotion. Almost as though it was unthinkable that their onee-samas would get jealous, because they were talking about the Roses.

But I digress.

Eventually the day of the “New Students Welcoming Ceremony” arrived, with me still unaware of some of the finer details, such as Rosa Gigantea not yet having a petit soeur.

The reports from the girl who sat beside me were very accurate. I marveled at how the images I had of Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida matched up with the reality when I saw them among the Yamayurikai executive during the ceremony in the chapel.

All except for one. Rosa Gigantea was the sole exception.

Or, rather, I didn’t have a concrete image of the person Satou Sei-sama. No, that’s not right. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that because I had unknowingly met her before I formed an image of her, I imagined that she must look different to that, then got frustrated part way through imagining her.

The girl standing there with the calm expression was unmistakably the same one that I had met beneath the cherry tree.

But, why was it, I wonder? The impression of the girl handing out medallions at the welcoming ceremony was different to back then. Despite the fact that she was smiling, she looked pitiful. Although there had definitely been a loneliness in her expression as she’d gazed off at something invisible, while her entire body was baptized by flower petals, there hadn’t been this sensation of wanting to reach out to her in pity.

“Shimako-san.”

I came back to earth when I was tapped on the shoulder from behind.

“There’s a gap opening up.”

My classmate whispered. I saw that a space large enough for two people had

opened up in front of me.

“Ah, sorry.”

I quickly closed in on the student ahead of me. It goes without saying that I was a new student, and was lined up to receive a medallion from one of the Roses.

What had I been thinking?

It was quite presumptuous of me to consider a senior as “pathetic” or “someone to pity,” even if it had only been for a moment.

Plum class finished, and following them was my peach class. Standing in front of us was Rosa Chinensis. But my attention was focused on Rosa Gigantea, on the far side, with Rosa Foetida between us.

I wanted to know. Even though it was painful to look at her, why couldn't I look away?

The three Roses placed the medallions around the necks of the new students, one by one. Were the students assisting them their *petit soeurs*?

Eventually, my turn arrived.

“May the Virgin Mary bless you and watch over you.”

Rosa Chinensis placed the medallion around my neck. It felt as though Rosa Gigantea glanced our way, but that may just have been my imagination.

Shimazu Yoshino, of the first-year chrysanthemum class, came to visit the peach class after school one day, about a week after the welcoming ceremony.

“Yes?”

“You see, I was wondering if you could come with me. You don’t have any committee work or anything today, do you?”

Smiling, Yoshino-san started walking away.

I’d been in the same class as her only once during middle-school. She had a rare heart condition and the only impression I had of her was that she was often absent or had to leave early. But it wasn’t just her, I didn’t have many memories stuck in my head for any other classmates either. Since I’d joined Lillian’s, it had been especially hard for me to make close friends.

So, since we weren’t particularly friendly, I couldn’t imagine what business Yoshino-san had with me.

“Where to?”

“The Rose Mansion.”

“The Rose – ”

I swallowed my words.

The Rose Mansion.

That was the name given to the building that served as the headquarters for the Lillian’s Girls Academy High-school student council, or Yamayurikai. I knew, from the girl who sat next to me, that the Roses usually met there after school. But it was hard to approach, especially for first-years, so I hadn’t heard any stories of anyone actually going there to visit.

The Rose Mansion was located in the courtyard between the high-school buildings. Despite its small size, the old, wooden, two-story western-style building had a majestic appearance.

“Is it alright for us to just walk in like this?”

I impulsively asked when Yoshino-san opened the front door.

“Huh? ... Ah.”

Yoshino-san reached down the front of her sailor collar, and pulled something out to show me, just for a second.

“I’ve been Hasekura Rei-sama’s petit soeur since the day of the entrance ceremony.”

It was a pretty, green rosary.

Hasekura Rei-sama was the second-year student known as Rosa Foetida en bouton, since she was Rosa Foetida’s petit soeur. Yoshino-san apparently had access to the Rose Mansion due to that relationship. I really was stunningly ignorant of this news.

“There’s someone waiting here who said she wanted to meet you, Shimako-san.”

“Is that Rosa Gigantea ... ?”

I asked. In the month since I’d started high-school, I’d had practically no contact with the student council. There was only one thing that came to mind. My accidental encounter with Satou Sei-sama in the blizzard of cherry blossom petals.

“No.”

Yoshino-san said, as she entered the building, then started up the staircase that came immediately into view.

“Rosa Chinensis is one of the people waiting for you.”

The interior of the building looked as well-worn as the exterior. When I put my foot onto the staircase, the wood creaked as though it were going to break at any moment.

“Why did Rosa Chinensis ask to see me?”

“Who knows.”

It was obvious that Yoshino-san didn’t know either. She walked ahead,

looking puzzled.

“The only reason I went to get you was because I know what you look like.”

“I see.”

I gave up, and followed Yoshino-san. Thinking about it, it seemed unlikely that Rosa Gigantea would have asked someone else to fetch me. If she wanted it done, she probably would have done it herself. I had no reason to think that, it just somehow felt right.

Yoshino-san had said, “Rosa Chinensis is one of the people waiting.” If there were a number of older students who didn’t know me but wanted to talk to me, then it made sense for them to send Yoshino-san.

Yoshino-san finished climbing the staircase, then walked over to the large, brown door and knocked.

“I’ve brought Toudou Shimako-san.”

“Well done, show her in.”

The gentle reply came from inside the room.

“After you.”

Yoshino-san prompted me, holding the door open, and I stepped inside.

“I’m Toudou Shimako.”

I introduced myself and bowed. The two students inside rose from their chairs and ushered me in.

“Sorry for having to summon you like this.”

“We just wanted to have a little chat.”

They offered me a chair, pulling it out from the table and practically forcing me to sit down. In a spot that was directly opposite where they had been

sitting. It looked as though the topic of this chat wasn't going to be something simple.

“I wonder if it's necessary for us to introduce ourselves as well.”

“No, that's alright.”

They were famous enough in the high-school that even someone as tenuously connected to other people as myself knew who they were – Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida.

“Well then, I'll excuse myself now.”

After placing a cup of tea in front of me, Yoshino-san left the room.

“Thanks, Yoshino-chan.”

“Good work today.”

The two Roses showered Yoshino-san's back with these words of appreciation, then after she'd disappeared beyond the door, started to chat amongst themselves.

“Rei has club activities, doesn't she? Will she be alright going home by herself?”

“She told me she'd been feeling good recently. Apparently spring's easier on her.”

It seemed as though they were concerned about Yoshino-san's physical condition.

“Ah, now that you mention it, she is looking healthier.”

Rosa Chinensis seemed satisfied with this, but then she suddenly turned to me and said:

“Now then, do you have an onee-sama?”

“Huh!?”

Based on our positions, it was only natural that they would be asking me questions. But even though I knew that, it was such an astounding question that I couldn't avoid reacting.

“Do you have an onee-sama or not? It's a simple question, right?”

Rosa Foetida was all smiles as she pressed me, as though striking the final blow.

“I-I don't ... but.”

“Let me check something, just to be sure. We're not talking about a blood-related sister here.”

“Right.”

Either way, it was the same. An onee-sama from the soeur system, or an onee-sama born to the same parents. I had neither.

“I see.”

“I'm relieved to hear you say that.”

What on earth were they “relieved” by? Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida grinned as I was left in the lurch.

“Well then, Toudou Shimako-san. Shall we move on to the main event?”

“Okay.”

I waited, somewhat nervously, for the next question.

“This is the reason we asked you here. Actually, it's a request we want to make of you.”

“A request?”

Even though they said it was a request, I felt pressured to stay until I heard everything they were going to say. It felt like I was being let in on a secret, although that analogy is somewhat ill-suited to a high-school student.

However.

“We were wondering if you would take up a position as a Yamayurikai assistant.”

“Huh!?”

After uttering this exclamation, I looked at the two Roses. Rosa Chinensis’ “request” was too vague. There wasn’t enough explanation to know whether I should accept or refuse.

“I see. An explanation is necessary.”

Rosa Chinensis said, as though reading my mind.

“As you know, the Yamayurikai is the student council that’s centered around three students, called Roses. But it’s easy to see how three people wouldn’t be enough to handle all that, right? Therefore, we use our own petit soeurs as assistants. You’re aware of that?”

“The boutons.”

Yoshino-san’s onee-sama, Hasekura Rei-sama, held such a position. And I got the feeling that I’d heard it mentioned that Ogasawara Sachiko-sama was also a bouton.

“Wonderful.”

“The conversation’s proceeding quickly.”

The two Roses looked at each other and smiled, apparently pleased.

“Both I and Rosa Foetida have reliable petit soeurs. But, regrettably, Rosa Gigantea is without a petit soeur.”

“She doesn’t have a petit soeur.”

I repeated Rosa Chinensis’ words, trying to understand. It sounded like something I may or may not have heard from my classmates. But, from memory, there had been a rumor about one of the Roses not having a petit soeur.

“Right, she doesn’t have a petit soeur. The circumstances around this aren’t directly related to the main topic however, so don’t dwell on it too deeply. The main problem is that we are indeed short-handed. I suppose you participated in the new students’ welcoming ceremony, right Shimako-san?”

“Yes.”

In truth, Rosa Chinensis had placed the medallion around my neck, but there were so many first-years that it was only natural she wouldn’t remember. Becoming intrigued by someone after meeting them for the first time rarely happened.

“Since Rosa Gigantea didn’t have anyone to assist her for that, she reluctantly asked one of her classmates.”

Then the Roses raised a number of concerns, like the student may have agreed to help out just for that event. Or Rosa Gigantea might find it hard to rely on her friends as the third-years would be busy preparing for their post-graduation futures.

“Yoshino-chan is also a member of our group now, but she’s the petit soeur of Rosa Foetida en bouton, so she can’t be Rosa Gigantea’s assistant.”

“Ah, the various Rose families do help each other out as a matter of course. But, well, Yoshino-chan has a weak body, so we don’t want to overburden her.”

The two-person conversation continued. At any rate, their expectation was probably that if they picked an unencumbered first-year, she’d be willing to help out with the student council work.

“I understand what you’re saying. But, why me?”

“Congratulations, you were selected from a lottery containing all the eligible first-years.”

Rosa Foetida said, spreading her arms wide.

“... Really?”

“Shimako-san, you really should watch out for sleazy salesmen.”

Rosa Chinensis looked at me sympathetically.

“Oh? ... Then.”

“Of course that was a lie.”

Rosa Foetida said, poking her tongue out. Right at that moment.

“What are you doing!?”

The brown door was flung open with such noise and force that it seemed unthinkable that it was the same door that Yoshino-san had silently closed.

Standing there looking incredibly upset was Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama.

Part 3

“What are you doing?”

When I stepped into the room, the atmosphere momentarily turned to ice. But my two friends, Youko and Eriko, rallied and smiled as they shrugged.

“What ever could she mean?”

“I know, right?”

But given the situation, their feigned innocence was most definitely not

charming.

“I thought today’s meeting was “canceled due to external circumstances.””

I reached back and closed the door behind me. Not a single angry word until it was in place.

Their plan must have been to get the nuisance out of the way by politely informing me of this during recess.

“The meeting is canceled. Eriko and I remained here on personal business.”

“Like we often do, right? Is there something about it that displeases you?”

“Everything about it displeases me.”

I threw Eriko’s words back at her and walked over to the table.

Everything about it displeases me.

That they went behind my back and secretly called a first-year here, and that they were trying to get her to do something. And that the first-year happened to be Toudou Shimako.

“But first there’s something I want to ask you two. Why is it that you’ve invited this guest here?”

I was attempting to be as calm as possible, but I couldn’t stop a bit of my anger from spilling into my words.

“Guest? Ah, you mean Toudou Shimako-san?”

Youko muttered, being painfully obvious. Even if I’d been fine with the name, the superfluous exposition was enough to get me angry all over again.

“I thought Toudou Shimako-san might become an assistant to the Yamayurikai.”

“... What?”

Eriko pulled out the chair next to Shimako, offering it to me, but my agitation was reaching a peak as I remained standing and shouted:

“Aren’t you going to stop your damn meddling!?”

My voice was louder than I’d expected. I could feel it echoing around the room.

When the reverberations of my voice had completely stopped, Youko said coldly:

“What meddling? This has nothing to do with you, right?”

The calm attitude of my friend, as though in direct contrast to my own, was the most galling thing I had ever seen.

“Like hell it doesn’t.”

I shouted in irritation.

“Why would you think that, I wonder.”

Youko remained sitting, fingers interlaced, and looked up at me. Eriko wasn’t going to interrupt, having watched Youko and I face off countless times before. Unaccustomed to this, and not knowing what to do, Shimako looked uncomfortable as she sat in silence.

“Why would you think that?”

Youko asked, once more. It looked as though she was going to persist in playing dumb.

“The other day, I had a careless slip of the tongue and spoke the name of a first-year student in front of you. Then you invited that person to the Rose Mansion, keeping it a secret from me. There’s no way it’s just a coincidence.”

“A slip of the tongue?”

Youko grinned like the Cheshire cat.

“Like your slip of the tongue just before?”

Hearing this, I immediately thought, “Damn it.” But it was too late. A crack opened up in the meager amount of pride that I’d scraped together after losing it all a few months ago. Immediately, I calculated which course of action would cause the least damage. In this instance, to keep the damage to a minimum, I had to pretend to not notice my crumbling pride.

“Get out.”

I ordered Shimako.

“Huh?”

“You. Can’t you hear? Get out of this room right now.”

“But.”

Shimako looked perplexed as I faced her and shouted, almost in tears, “Please, just get out.”

“Do as she says.”

Youko said, and Eriko led Shimako out of the room. I finally calmed down after the door had closed and I heard the sounds of two people walking down the staircase.

” ... Thanks.”

I expressed my honest gratitude for Shimako’s removal. This way, she wouldn’t see my failure. It was odd, but I was resigned to Youko seeing the ugly side of me. Maybe it was because I knew it was pointless trying to put up a facade, ever since she saw me when I’d been torn to shreds.

“Is she really that important a person to you?”

“I don’t know.”

To calm myself down, I washed my face in the sink.

I hadn't really thought about what Shimako was to me. But what I did know was that I didn't want Youko saying what was in my heart in front of Shimako. Probably because, no matter the topic, the answer Youko pulled out would be right for me.

"You said that I'd made a slip of the tongue."

I turned around and questioned Youko, and she nodded, "Yes."

"By a slip of the tongue, I meant you said something you shouldn't have. Even you must have noticed it. That is, why couldn't you call that first-year by her name? Because you consider her special, different to all the other first-years, right?"

I smiled, would you look at that. That Youko could analyze my heart so accurately.

I went back to the sink and turned the tap off, thinking that I should put a stop to the conversation before it got even more unpleasant. But nothing could make my anger subside, so I briskly turned back to Youko.

"In that case, so what?"

"So what?"

Youko asked as she held out a handkerchief to me. I refused it, and closed in on her, water sheeting off my face and hands.

"Even if I do have special feelings for Toudou Shimako, that's no reason for you to try and drag her into the Yamayurikai."

"I know, but."

"But nothing."

On impulse, I raised my right hand up in the air. If I brought it down, it would score a direct hit on Youko's cheek.

She had adequate time to get out of the way. But Youko wouldn't avoid it. Nor would I strike her. The palm of my hand came to a stop right next to her face.

We stood there looking right at each other for a short while. I was the one who finished it by looking away.

“Don't do this sort of thing without telling me.”

Left hand tightly grasping my right, I turned away. Then Youko's hand gently touched my shoulder.

“Sei.”

Youko's hand was warm. But I was a weak, half-hearted individual who could neither find solace in her touch nor shake off her hand.

“You know, even now I still have my regrets.”

Youko said, maintaining the same position.

“About what happened with you and Shiori-san.”

My body reacted when it heard the name Shiori. I jumped forward, flicking off Youko's hand, then turning around and coming to a stop with my back against the table.

“Don't talk about Shiori.”

It would probably be better if I could forget, but I didn't want to. She was someone I couldn't forget. To me, Kubo Shiori was Christ.

“No. In this situation, I want you to hear. I was hurt by it, although obviously nowhere near as much as you. You call it meddling, but I think it would have been better if I'd meddled even more. Even now, I think that if I had, then maybe you and Shiori-san could have been happy as soeurs.”

“A petit soeur.”

I snorted. What a joke. Youko had said the exact same thing a year before.

“Soeurs come in all different shapes. No matter how your relationship with Shiori would have ended, at least you could have had two years worth of happy memories at high-school. That’s why.”

“That’s why, what?”

Smiling, I looked into Youko’s eyes. I was certain I was looking my most malicious.

“You thought you’d give me Toudou Shimako, to play the make-believe game of sisters that I couldn’t with Shiori?”

“You’re wrong.”

Youko said, scowling at me.

“I know you don’t plan on taking a petit soeur. And that’s fine, I think. I don’t know and I don’t care who they make Rosa Gigantea after you. You’re more important than that. I just have this compulsion towards things you see as a burden.”

“I won’t do it. Leave Toudou Shimako out of it.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But.”

“But?”

I asked. I’d regained a bit of my composure during our conversation.

“Honestly, I was surprised.”

Youko said quietly.

“By what?”

“Back when you let Toudou Shimako’s name slip, you had the same expression as when you first mentioned Kubo Shiori. I wasn’t even thinking

about her as a replacement. Just that you wanted to get involved with other people once more.”

“Involved, huh.”

With the exception of Shiori, I’ve never wanted anyone. While I’m grateful for my graduated onee-sama, I never wanted to be her petit soeur. And I already have Youko, Eriko, and their petit soeurs around me. Surely there’s no need for any more relationships beyond those.

Youko looked down, and continued.

“In truth, I was shocked when I saw Shimako-san.”

“... She’s nothing like Shiori.”

I refuted the allegation ahead of time. It was upsetting to think of Shiori’s features overlapping Shimako’s.

“Obviously. I could tell you weren’t seeing the shadow of Shiori-san inside Shimako-san.”

Not only had Youko guessed my feelings, she’d also put them into words.

“Then, what?”

“That girl. She’s like you.”

“Like me?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. What on earth did Shimako and I have in common? But if that was what Youko thought, then maybe it was true.

Shimako and I had met in the cherry blossom blizzard beneath the Yoshino cherry trees. At that time, looking at her had felt like I was seeing myself in a mirror.

What had she been doing back then? And why had I gone to that spot?

“I won’t tell you in what way. Because if I did, this time you really might hit me.”

As she said this, Youko started preparing to go home. Did that mean that the conversation was over? Or had she simply decided that the conversation would take a turn for the worse if it continued? She methodically cleaned the cups we’d used and wiped the table clean. Indeed, now that we’d both said what we wanted to say, I needed some time alone to think.

“The parts that are similar, they’re my weaknesses, right?”

Had I asked this because I wanted to detain her? Youko was carrying Eriko’s bag as well as her own belongings.

“Yeah.”

In front of the brown door, Youko answered, turning back to look at me.

“But I like your weaknesses too.”

“I hate your strong points, you know.”

“I know.”

Smiling masochistically, Youko opened the door.

“Even I don’t like them.”

Part 4

“Um, is it alright to leave them alone?”

I asked Rosa Foetida, who had exited the room alongside me.

“It’s fine, don’t worry. Trying to mediate would just make everything more complicated. Without an audience, they won’t have to hold back, so they’ll come to a resolution sooner.”

“Ah...”

Even so, I still felt somewhat responsible since it looked like I was the cause of it. Rosa Gigantea blamed Rosa Chinensis for me being in the room.

“It’s Shimako-san ... right? I’ll bet that surprised you.”

“Yes ... ah, no.”

I hurriedly shook my head. But it looked like Rosa Foetida’s expression didn’t seem to be related to my response.

After leaving the Rose Mansion, we walked side-by-side down the corridor. As I’d become acquainted with the school building in the month since the entrance ceremony, I would have been fine without an escort, but Rosa Foetida stuck with me. Perhaps she was staying true to her words and leaving them, “without an audience.” Only Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea remained on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion.

“You’re quiet. Or is it because I’m a third-year?”

“I’m not much different even when I’m with my classmates ... ”

“Really?”

Rosa Foetida tilted her head in thought, the corners of her mouth creeping up just a little bit.

When the school building entrance came into view, I asked Rosa Foetida:

“What should I do?”

If we parted ways like this, I had an impending sense that I’d be trapped inside a labyrinth. I wasn’t worried about getting lost at school, but it didn’t look like I’d be able to find my way through the maze of people’s emotions that were blending together.

“About what? The assistant thing? ... Do whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want.”

“Ah, sorry. I’m not trying to throw you out. It’s true that Youko ... ah, Rosa Chinensis was trying to put you to work to help Rosa Gigantea, but that’s not really relevant to you, is it? You’re under no obligation, so you can come if you want to, or if you refuse, that’s fine too.”

“But.”

“Will pulling out like this leave a bad aftertaste?”

“... I don’t really know.”

In the hallway just before the building entrance, we leaned against the wall, alongside each other.

As we talked, I started to understand. Rosa Foetida didn’t seem to be as assertive about interfering with Rosa Gigantea as Rosa Chinensis. If pushed, I’d say she seemed to be watching on from a neutral position.

“Yoshino-chan told me that you’re on one of the committees.”

Rosa Foetida changed the topic, as though she was offering a palate cleanser.

“Yes.”

“Which one?”

“The environmental care committee.”

“– Fitting, very fitting.”

Was Rosa Foetida laughing? Arms crossed across her chest, looking at the toe of her indoor shoes.

“Do you want to live in a paradise devoid of humans too?”

“Huh?”

“One of my friends is like that.”

Looking out at the sky through the hallway window. At that moment, I remembered Rosa Gigantea. I didn’t actually see her, but for a moment I felt like I saw a ghostly image of her in the cherry blossom blizzard, eyes closed, looking up at heaven.

“But setting aside Rosa Chinensis’ expectations.”

Rosa Foetida brushed back the hair gathered by her hairband.

“Are you unwilling to assist with the student council work, Shimako-san?”

“Not really.”

I offered a weak denial. If I’d been asked, “Do you want to?” then I would have unequivocally answered, “No.”

I thought Rosa Foetida would tell me, “If you’re not unwilling, then you should agree to it.” I was used to conversations flowing like that.

I’ve been trapped like that a number of times during my lifetime. Like being group leader, or class representative, or manager. Despite not remembering ever nominating myself, before I knew it, I’d been installed into a position of leadership. I could have refused if I’d been unwilling, but I wasn’t unwilling enough to turn them down. How many times had I taken responsibility after looking at the people who were very obviously unwilling to do the job. Even though there was no way to measure a human’s unwillingness.

“You should come and visit the Rose Mansion again, Shimako-san. We’ll show you better hospitality, next time around.”

“...”

Rosa Foetida looked at me impishly as I hesitated.

“It looks like you’re having trouble deciding, and that’s no good. Come and take a good look at us and make up your own mind. You can take all the time you need before you reply.”

Rosa Foetida hadn't said that I should accept the offer. She'd consistently said that I should decide for myself. That may have been, in a sense, a more severe demand than forcing me into the role.

"But is it really alright that I delay my answer?"

"You can't calm down until you've decided between black and white then? You're way too serious."

Rosa Foetida smiled thinly, perhaps finding my suffering amusing.

"It's not that. If I visit the Rose Mansion while my status is still up in the air, my presence would be offensive to Rosa Gigantea."

"Maybe. But as long as you're at this school, there's a chance you'll run into her anywhere. You can't run away from that possibility."

"I can't ..."

I thought that maybe she was right.

For better or worse, it was now too late to completely erase my involvement with the top echelon of the Yamayurikai. Even if my presence was offensive to Rosa Gigantea, there was nothing I could do about that. Naturally, I couldn't choose to erase myself from Lillian's for Rosa Gigantea's sake.

"I told you before, right? You don't have to think about Rosa Gigantea or anyone else. Just think about yourself."

"Just myself?"

I thought, "What should I do here?"

Even though it felt like the cherry blossoms in the blizzard that surrounded us when we first met were at long last being reunited with the ground.

"Right. Then it'll be fine. It doesn't have to be black or white. Because Rosa Gigantea herself is gray."

“Huh?”

“Up in the air.”

Rosa Foetida whispered as she stroked my hair, as though sharing a secret.

Part 5

“It seems the vacuous are walking in their uniforms.”

I thought I heard a displeased voice and, as usual, standing there behind me was Youko.

“What?”

““What?””

As she spoke, she turned her gaze to the group ahead of me. About a dozen brand-new uniforms were assembled at the entrance to the first-floor walkway. All in a neat little line.

“P-pardon me.”

Perhaps faltering under Youko’s gaze, one of the students went bright red, held her sailor collar down, and ran off. Then the rest of the students scattered in all directions, like baby spiders.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing much. Just the morning greetings. “Gokigenyou, Rosa Gigantea.” “Gokigenyou, angels.” ... What’s the problem?”

“Why was it necessary to tie their ribbons, as a morning greeting?”

“Ah.”

“Don’t “ah” me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, really. Obviously it’s the job of a senior student to point out when a ribbon’s untied. Then she said, “Could you tie it for me?” Quite the precocious child.”

I followed the scattering groups of students with my eyes. Which classroom had the “precocious child” been sucked into.

“So then why did you get carried away and tie all of their ribbons?”

“Well, it wouldn’t have been fair to single out one of them.”

“Caring about fairness ... that’s not like you.”

“Go on, attack me. What, did you want your ribbon tied too, Youko?”

I reached out my hands but Youko hastily took a step backwards.

“Stop that. I don’t intend to participate in your little farce.”

“Farce?”

I asked.

“That’s right.”

Youko angled her chin towards the courtyard.

“I don’t know what you were planning. But if you’re trying to put some distance between you and her, then putting on a performance with the vacuum was foolish.”

Over there was Shimako. Doing some committee work or something. Crouched beside a flowerbed in her PE tracksuit, it looked like she was repairing some of the edging.

I knew that Shimako was over there.

Our eyes met. Looking into Shimako’s clear pupils, I instantly regretted it.

I wanted her to look away. To turn back and decide there was nothing here.

But, as expected, Shimako saw me. In the season of new leaf sprouts, I sparkled annoyingly.

“Don’t self-destruct, Rosa Gigantea.”

Youko murmured, shaking my shoulder.

Shimako noticed Youko standing beside me and bowed. Youko waved in response.

Time, which had been frozen for me, resumed flowing slowly.

Shimako turned back and continued on with her work while I moved to a part of the corridor that couldn’t be seen from the courtyard.

I was saved.

I had Youko to thank for that. As much as I hated to admit it, perhaps I’d never be a match for her.

Toudou Shimako came to the Rose Mansion after school.

“Gokigenyou.”

I greeted her and she stiffened, still holding onto the door knob.

“Were you here to see Rosa Chinensis?”

“Yes ... ah, no, any of the Roses will do.”

“They’ll be along soon. Come and wait inside.”

I was the only person in the second-floor room. Initially I’d thought it was Youko arriving, but now my only option was to struggle onwards. Invite Shimako in, politely entertain her, then quickly ask her to leave.

“Japanese tea? Black tea? Coffee?”

“Ah, I’m fine.”

“Unfortunately we’re all out of, “I’m fine.””

For whatever reason, the words that came from my mouth were antagonistic. This girl had done nothing wrong, but the words from yesterday’s conversation with Youko seemed to linger in the room like dustballs. Combined with my display of shameful behavior this morning meant I couldn’t meekly accept her help. My heart was such a brat.

“Then I’ll have the same thing you’re having, Rosa Gigantea.”

Shimako responded calmly, not discouraged by my teasing.

“It’s just black instant coffee though.”

“That will do.”

Was she showing off, or just plain dumb? Still, it was good that she had guts. As I was asking myself what would be better, I put the coffee granules into an empty cup and poured in hot water from the pot. I noticed that the cup I’d instinctively chosen was my onee-sama’s favorite.

“Here you go.”

I added sticks of creamer and sugar to the teacup then set it down on the table in front of Shimako. It didn’t look like she was a regular drinker of black coffee.

“Thank-you very much.”

Shimako bowed, then sat where I’d placed the coffee. I also sat down, choosing the seat facing her. Possessing a stubbornness that wasn’t in keeping with her outward appearance, Shimako sipped at her coffee, not reaching for the sugar or creamer. She struggled valiantly not to let it show on her face, but it was obvious she wasn’t enjoying it.

On reflection, it was like she was making an incursion behind enemy lines. The tension must have been a lot higher for her, so she was probably feeling the stress.

“Did you come to help?”

Ignoring the matter of the coffee, I asked about the real issue at hand. Neither Youko nor Eriko had arrived. Nor had either of the boutons or Yoshino-chan, so I could only assume this was a well planned operation.

“If you’re opposed to it, Rosa Gigantea, then I won’t impose.”

“This has nothing to do with me, right?”

“... That’s what Rosa Foetida told me too.”

Shimako looked down and smiled bitterly. So she could make that expression too. I relaxed and gazed at her face. Thinking about it, this was the first time we’d spoken to each other properly.

“So if I say I’m fine with it, you’ll come to the Rose Mansion.”

“Yes.”

“Let me just say, that doesn’t mean you’ll become my petit soeur.”

I said, intending it as a reminder. I was always sensitive about that when asking someone to help out because we were short-handed. It was useful getting girls from lower grades to help out, so initially I’d been asking Rei and Sachiko’s classmates, but that led to a number of misunderstandings about them being potential petit soeurs. As a last resort, I’d recently taken to imposing on my classmates.

“I understand. If this were about becoming Rosa Gigantea’s petit soeur, then I would not accept.”

Shimako said, looking straight at me.

“That’s quite direct of you.”

“Ah, pardon me.”

There wasn’t any real reason for her to apologize to me, but oddly

Shimako's, "Pardon me," wrapped itself firmly around my heart.

"So, what? Toudou Shimako-san's going to devote herself to the Yamayurikai just as an assistant? Why?"

Why couldn't I stop talking in this prickly manner? But Shimako responded seriously.

"Because this is a place where I'm needed."

"_"

I was suddenly struck by a memory.

I like your face, Sei. So stay by my side.

My onee-sama said that to me, and that's how I came to inhabit the Rose Mansion.

At the time, I'd said, "If you like my face," and accepted the offered hand.

Everybody wants to be needed by somebody.

Even though I hadn't been able to hit it off with most of my classmates, I still wanted to believe that there was someone out there who understood my feelings. Whether it was my face or anything else, just being told by someone that they liked me was a massive relief.

"Alright."

I stood up and grabbed my bag.

"Please assist the Yamayurikai."

The conversation was over. I walked out of the second-floor room, leaving Shimako there.

"Your first job is to wash those cups."

I couldn't look her in the eye.

Because Shimako and I were the very same thing.

Autumn Bonds

Part 1

After that, Shimako decided to come and help out.

But that didn't mean that she actively joined in the rambling chats over tea that were our everyday activities.

She wasn't the type to get ahead of herself. Yoshino-chan or Sachiko would call on her when we really needed help and she would respond. You could say she drew a clean distinction between the two activities. At any rate, her approach to the Yamayurikai was clearly different to that of a bouton or their petit soeur.

June.

With May over, and so too the Maria ceremony and new student welcoming ceremony, the Yamayurikai didn't have any public events scheduled and had entered into a relatively quiet period where we started preparing for the sports carnival and school festival in autumn.

"So given that, why are you dragging Shimako in?"

I jabbed at Youko one day. For the first time in a while, it was just the two of us having lunch in the Rose Mansion.

"No real reason."

Youko smoothly sidestepped the question.

"She's nobody's petit soeur, so you shouldn't be bringing her in during the planning stage."

Shimako was an assistant we inevitably turned to when short of hands – that was the expedient Youko used to bring her in to the Rose Mansion.

“But given our current situation, we’ll have to get her to help out with the school festival. So the sooner we get her involved the better, right? Ahh, right. We’ll need help with the Hanadera Academy cultural festival too. My petit soeur’s such a troublesome girl, she tells me she doesn’t want to have anything to do with an event at a boys’ school. Shimako-chan’s help is going to become more and more important.”

“...”

What Youko said was true. Although I had a sneaking suspicion it was a justification she’d made up after the fact.

“But besides that, Sei, don’t you want to improve the “current situation?””

The current situation. The phrase she used to point out that while I was the white Rose, I did not have a petit soeur. People who did not fulfill all their responsibilities did not have the right to find fault with others. Indeed, if I did have a petit soeur, then there would be no need to ask Shimako.

“You know, Youko, your personality really has taken a turn for the worse.”

“What choice do I have, given how rebellious my friend is acting?”

Youko really did have a sharp tongue. Despite her good manners, she was caustic towards me. Maybe we were alike in that only our surface appearance was good.

Looking at it that way, Sachiko was also very much a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Rei was almost idiotically honest, so her surface and her inside were the same, but Yoshino-chan, hmm, she looked like a bit of a lion at home and a mouse abroad.

Shimako was – . I had a think about it, but didn’t really know. It didn’t feel like I’d ever caught a glimpse of what lay beneath her surface.

“That girl does that a lot.”

Youko said, looking out the window.

“That girl?”

I asked, then looked out the window to where Youko pointed. It was Shimako. She was walking across the courtyard carrying a stack of printouts, probably either committee work or because she was on duty today.

“I did think about her becoming your petit soeur. But that aside, letting her go would be such a waste.”

“How so?”

“You haven’t considered her as a Rose? Losing her would be a great loss to the Yamayurikai.”

A loss to the Yamayurikai. I smiled bitterly. So sorry to bother you. Youko was even worried about what was going to happen after she’d graduated.

“Even though you’ve given up on making her my petit soeur?”

“I wouldn’t say I’ve given up – ”

Shimako disappeared into the school building and Youko shut the window and turned to face me.

“But there are other ways.”

“Other ways, huh.”

At that time, I thought she was going to try and persuade Shimako to run in the election in February of next year. I had no petit soeur. The annual student council elections usually took the form of a vote of confidence in the boutons, but if the current situation continued then the campaign for the post of Rosa Gigantea could turn into a fierce contest.

If that happened, what would Shimako do? I felt pity for her, if she was forced to fight like that.

(Pity?)

A strange emotion. I was worried about Shimako.

(Right.)

Certainly, I felt concern for Shimako. Or, to put it another way, I was charmed by her – but it didn't feel like it should be bundled up that neatly.

At the very least, the feelings I had for Shimako were completely different to the overwhelming emotions I'd felt towards Shiori.

As an example, they did share many common features. They were both devout Catholics, with long hair, as well as being neat and beautiful. But that wasn't what had charmed me.

I wanted the entirety of Shiori, and to give myself entirely to her. Our relationship ended when it became obvious that that wish couldn't come true. Shiori was the first to realize it. So, for us to keep living, we had to separate.

Thinking about it now, Shiori was my angel. It was fundamentally impossible that a human like me could tie her to the ground.

In that regard, Shimako was a human.

I watched Shimako from a short distance away.

That alone was enough.

Before I knew it, it had even become comforting.

Part 2

Shimako.

Being addressed in that manner was incredibly comforting to me.

Not Shimako-san or Shimako-chan. Just plain Shimako.

With the exception of my fellow first-year Yoshino-san, everyone in the Rose

Mansion called me “Shimako.” I felt like a part of the group every time they called me that, even if it was only temporary.

Rosa Gigantea was the first to call me “Shimako.”

It started with Rosa Chinensis taking a jab at her, saying, “Not using an honorific, even though she’s not your petit soeur?” to which Rosa Gigantea had gloomily responded with, “Well, everyone should call her that.” Sachiko-sama faithfully followed that directive and eventually they all settled on addressing me that way.

In every group, there were generally rules that governed how the members addressed each other. If everyone just did whatever they wanted, it would be chaos.

Take Yoshino-san as an example. She was called “Yoshino-chan” by girls in higher grades and “Yoshino-san” by students in the same grade as her. Her onee-sama, Rei-sama, was the only one that called her “Yoshino.”

As an example, if “-san” or “-chan” were attached to my name, then I would probably always be seen as an interloper. By calling me Shimako, I could obediently accept their affection as though I was everyone’s petit soeur. Even though I had no specific onee-sama.

I liked my time in the Rose Mansion.

I liked each and every one of the “Rose families” that formed the Yamayurikai executive.

Consequently, I’d occasionally forget my position and find myself blending in with the group. Because there was such a gentle, comforting atmosphere.

My impression of Rosa Gigantea changed depending on the situation. She was sometimes mysterious, sometimes scary, sometimes glib and sometimes tender. But through all this, she remained consistently conscious of me.

Whenever I was doing something, I’d look over my shoulder and feel relieved that Rosa Gigantea was there. Even when she wasn’t looking at me,

or when she was looking at me in a foul mood. No matter when.

I wonder why I found it calming.

It was, figuratively speaking, as though we were kindred spirits, and I could feel relaxed simply because she was there. Rosa Gigantea gave me the peace of mind that came from knowing I wasn't alone.

In early summer, I saw Rosa Gigantea in the courtyard after school.

She was merrily watching a cat eat the dry pet food she had given it.

“Do you like cats?”

I quietly asked her from behind.

It took a lot of courage for me to call out to Rosa Gigantea, but I felt compelled to.

“Yeah, I do. I like most animals.”

“Even snakes and worms?”

“I suppose.”

Rosa Gigantea scratched the cat's head with her index finger. The cat purred happily.

“As long as we respect the others' territory, we should be able to coexist.”

“Coexist?”

“Yep.”

The cat looked too old to be called a kitten, but it didn't look like it was fully grown either. It was a blackish tabby with patches of fur missing in various places showing scars that were still healing.

“Even the crows that attacked her would have had their reasons. Maybe they had hungry children of their own.”

Neither was in the wrong, they were just two different species trying to live. Rosa Gigantea mumbled that that was all it was.

“It may just be selfishness, but I don’t want to witness any more suffering than I have to. I’m not trying to gloss over it, I know full well that killing and dying are a fixture of this world.”

I wondered whether Rosa Gigantea counted humans as one of the animal species that she liked. Occasionally, when she sleepily looked out the window at the row of green trees, I got the sense she was longing to be in a place as far away from any humans as possible.

I had the feeling that Rosa Gigantea would reject me simply because I was a human.

“What are you going to do with this cat?”

The cat looked like it would be skittish, but when I reached out my hand it didn’t run away, letting me pat it.

“Nothing much.”

Then Rosa Gigantea smiled and made a bad joke about how she couldn’t sell its skin to a shamisen maker because of the wounds.

“But, you’re feeding it, right?”

“I shouldn’t feed it?”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t, but ... ”

I didn’t know what I wanted to say. I didn’t know, but I couldn’t say nothing to Rosa Gigantea.

“If it gets used to being fed, it won’t survive on its own.”

“I see.”

“And what about summer break? Or the cold winter vacation? You’re not going to stay here for the ten or twenty years that this cat will live for, right?”

Was I projecting myself onto the cat? Tears started to fall as I imagined the cat as the faithful dog Hachiko, continuing to wait for Rosa Gigantea long after she’d graduated.

“Won’t your momentary kindness in saving it just be more cruel in the long run?”

No. Even I didn’t think it would have been better if it had been eaten by the crows.

“As the wounds accumulate.”

Rosa Gigantea smiled fondly. I turned my head and rubbed beneath my eyes with the back of my hand so she wouldn’t see my tears.

“I suppose. Maybe it was cruel of me, like you said. But she’s still just a child. Her wounds have finally healed now. So I think my occasional indulgence of her with an afternoon snack is something that can be overlooked. It’s not something I do all the time.”

Because the cat would someday reach an age where it could hunt for itself. When that happened, was she intending to coolly let it go?

But was that really okay? The cat will surely remember the warmth of Rosa Gigantea’s hand for the rest of its life. It would never be able to forget the taste of the dry, crackly, biscuit-like pet food.

“Meeting and parting are a matched set. Sooner or later, the time to part will come. But to avoid relationships because you’re afraid of that is a bit desolate, don’t you think? ... For me, Shimako.”

Rosa Gigantea braced her right cuff with her left hand.

“I’m grateful to my graduated onee-sama. She gave me all the love she had.

There's no way I could resent her for leaving while I stayed. One way or the other, I can still keep on living at this school without her."

I caught a glimpse of what looked like a rosary near the cuff of her summer uniform.

Part 3

At the time, I may have been telling myself that, rather than anyone else.

"Things like remaining married for life are, in and of themselves, miraculous."

I wasn't sure how Shimako would take that.

Soon enough summer vacation arrived.

I spent that long summer vacation like any other student. Since I wasn't thinking at all about exams, I didn't have any summer lessons.

I went with Youko to visit Sachiko at her house when invited, and pulled an all-nighter watching movies alone. I did other things, like homework, when the mood struck me.

On top of that.

Perhaps feeling the sting of Shimako's words, I took some cat food to the school courtyard a number of times. The cat was there a few times, but in general it was somewhere else, out of sight.

I'd leave a small amount of cat food in a spot near the school building, out of the rain. It would be gone the next time I came, which I interpreted favorably as a sign that the cat was alive and eating the food.

Even if the pet food was being eaten by some other animal, that wouldn't have really bothered me either.

With the summer vacation over, the athletics carnival took center stage. I caught wind of a strange rumor.

That Shimako was going to be Sachiko's petit soeur.

"What's the meaning of this?"

During a break, I went to Sachiko's classroom and pressed her for an answer. But this was Sachiko, so she regarded me with an annoying iciness.

"Why should I listen to your complaints, Rosa Gigantea?"

"Huh?"

"I didn't think I needed anyone's permission to choose a petit soeur."

Even when talking to an older student, she was able to put forward a sound argument. As expected from Youko's petit soeur – I quietly marveled at this.

Little by little, the number of people watching us started to increase. A dispute between Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis en bouton. This kind of interesting spectacle didn't happen all that often.

However.

"You're serious about Shimako?"

"Yes."

We didn't have any spare capacity to pay attention to our surroundings. Scratch that, I was the only one without the spare capacity, Sachiko was simply refusing to acknowledge them.

"These last few months I've been observing Toudou Shimako of my own accord. Consequently, I've come to the conclusion that she is an indispensable resource to the Yamayurikai."

“So you’d take her as a petit soeur because she’s indispensable to the Yamayurikai?”

I couldn’t read Sachiko’s heart. But as long as she didn’t deliver a knock-out blow by saying that she wanted Shimako as her petit soeur, then I wouldn’t accept them as soeurs.

“What sort of reason would you accept, I wonder. Would it be more persuasive if I said I chose her because of her face?”

“— !”

I saw red, instinctively balling my hand into a fist. Why was it that I was still upset by badmouthing of my graduated onee-sama? I barely managed to restrain my fist within my skirt pocket.

After giving me a single glance, Sachiko said:

“If you value Shimako that much, why don’t you ask her yourself?”

“What’s that about me and Shimako ... !?”

I was flustered when the conversation turned towards me. Indeed, somewhere in my heart I’d been making light of it. Shimako couldn’t be anyone’s petit soeur. So she’d naturally be at the Rose Mansion.

There are other ways of making Shimako a Rose. – I thought back to what Youko had said. So that was it, if she became Sachiko’s petit soeur, then she would be Rosa Chinensis the year after next.

Shimako becoming Sachiko’s petit soeur. Indeed, she didn’t need to seek permission from anyone.

Perhaps I had been the first to spot Shimako. But I hadn’t made a move. Scared of having an intimate relationship with anyone. Despite that, I wanted to keep Shimako constantly in sight – such a cunning person.

So now that Sachiko had made her move, it was a mess. I lost my cool.

Was there value in having Shimako? – Almost certainly.

However.

Even if it was all done and dusted, I fundamentally didn't know when to give up.

“What do you know about Shimako?”

In response to my question, Sachiko said, “Not much,” and tilted her head.

“But treating her the way we currently are is no good for her. That much I do know.”

“Ah.”

“It can't stay the way it is. We either have to let her go, or someone has to officially take her as their petit soeur and bring her in to the Rose Mansion.”

“_”

I was lost for words.

“Ah ... ”

Right.

Why hadn't I noticed? How had I forgotten? Just what it was that Shimako needed right now.

“Alright.”

I agreed meekly. I'd prided myself on being the one who best understood Shimako. But despite that, I'd forgotten the most important thing and it took my junior, Sachiko, to teach me that. A complete loss of face. No, I'd never had any face right from the start.

“Alright, but I'm not handing over Shimako.”

Something broke inside me, but in its place something else began to grow.

“So what do you intend to do?”

Sachiko asked, looking dubious. Then I hit her with a declaration of war.

“Make her my petit soeur.”

The audience gathered behind Sachiko went “Ooooh.” Perfect. No turning back now.

“... You’re going to come from behind and snatch her away?”

“Don’t be absurd, I’m not snatching anything. After all, Shimako hasn’t accepted your rosary yet, right?”

In that case, this conversation was taking place before the start line.

No, maybe the sound of the starting pistol was still echoing around, but as long as the finishing tape hadn’t been cut, there was still time enough.

And if the tape had been cut – . I’d come from behind and snatch her away.

“Why would you think that?”

The bell signaling that class would soon begin rang out as Sachiko spoke.

“Why?”

I said, swiftly turning away.

“Because I’m obviously better for Shimako.”

Looking back over my shoulder, I winked at the gallery surrounding Sachiko.

I was confident of victory.

Sachiko would never sacrifice a lesson to participate in the war for Shimako.

I remembered Shimako's class as I ran through the hallway.

First-year peach group.

Part 4

With the bells for the beginning of class still ringing, I was taken from my classroom by Rosa Gigantea.

“Ah, umm ... !?”

“Come on.”

Rosa Gigantea paid no heed to my bewilderment. We continued down the corridor, flowing against the current of classmates hurriedly returning to the classroom. While I found abandoning class to be unthinkable, I didn't hate the way Rosa Gigantea was pulling me along by my arm. It's just that my heart was throbbing uncomfortably fast.

“Where to? I won't run away.”

I asked, in front of the emergency exit. The bells had already stopped ringing.

“Ah, sorry.”

Rosa Gigantea let go of my arm, as though she'd just remembered she was holding it.

Since my teacher was usually punctual, I wouldn't be able to make it even if I started back now. But even if I could have made it, I wouldn't have left Rosa Gigantea alone here just to get back to class.

With both our weights pushing on it, the heavy door opened and the gust of wind that blew in ruffled my hair.

Rosa Gigantea and I stepped out of the school building together.

Had she meant to come here from the beginning, or had it been the end result

of aimless wandering? We were standing beneath the cherry trees where we had first met.

“Although there’s a finite time limit to it.”

Rosa Gigantea said, looking straight at me.

“Please be my petit soeur.”

Were those the words that I’d been expecting? No, although somewhere in my heart they may have been the words I was hoping for.

“I can’t say I’ll be a typical onee-sama, but I definitely think I’ll be perfect for you. I won’t restrain you, you’ll still be able to do whatever you like. Besides.”

“Umm ... ”

I interrupted Rosa Gigantea’s speech.

Rosa Gigantea didn’t know about my circumstances. If she knew, would she still want me as her petit soeur?

But I didn’t know how to communicate that to her. With Rosa Gigantea, I could tell her anything. But how to do it without making her carry half of my burdens. Whether she rejected me or accepted me, I didn’t want to burden Rosa Gigantea.

“You don’t want to?”

“Not at all!”

I vigorously shook my head.

“But.”

“No buts. All I want to hear is yes or no.”

Rosa Gigantea looked straight at me. Her eyes were stern, showing she

wasn't going to accept any other words than those.

“I – ”

I stopped mid-sentence and, with a sense of relief, realized that there was no value to what I had been intending to say. My distress was because I had been underestimating this person called Satou Sei.

She wasn't interested in what I was carrying or being burdened by. She didn't know the reason. But what she was saying was that she was willing to accept me the person exactly as I was.

So I could temporarily set down my burdens, and stand before her stripped of my tough armor as I was now.

Like two people who had chosen to rest in the shade of the same tree in the middle of their long journeys. We could probably be together even if we didn't talk about ourselves. While knowing that at some point we would have to resume our separate paths, our souls could still gain some respite from feeling the others presence.

Without words.

We ought to be close to each other.

“Please make me your petit soeur.”

I took the hand she offered me.

“Alright.”

“I look forward to our time together.”

Although it took the form of a handshake, it couldn't be dismissed as merely a handshake. It felt as though our fingers were embracing and I felt completely at ease.

“Ah, right. The rosary.”

Rosa Gigantea unfastened the rosary that was wound around her right wrist like a bracelet, and moved to place it around my neck. Then, as though reconsidering, she wrapped it around my wrist.

“This way’s simpler.”

As though I could take it off at any time. Although she didn't say it, I thought that Rosa Gigantea had chosen the wrist to lessen the burden on me.

Faint traces of her body heat remained in the rosary.

“Um.”

I said, as Rosa Gigantea smiled with apparent satisfaction that the rosary had been safely conferred to my wrist.

“Hmm?”

“Shouldn't we go back to class?”

“Huh?”

“Class. If we go now, we'll only be about 15 minutes late.”

“Shimako, you're way too serious.”

“Onee-sama, you're not serious enough.”

Onee-sama.

It was a little bit embarrassing and surprising to both the one saying it and the one being called it.

“What can you do? Come on, let's go.”

My onee-sama grabbed my right hand and took off.

“Such extremes.”

With my arm being pulled, I started running. The rosary around my right arm bounced. Hanging from my wrist, it swayed around where we were joined by the fingertips.

How comforting it was.

Running like this, hand-in-hand with someone.

In my heart, I apologized to Sachiko-sama and Rosa Gigantea's fans.

I'm sorry. But she is definitely someone that I need.

Just six months.

With two years separating us, that was all the time that we would have together.

The day of our inevitable parting was six months away.

But until then, I wasn't going to let go of this hand.

"Run, Shimako!"

Because the rosary that swayed between us had made this place my own.

Afterword

Once again, I find myself in confusion.

What month is it?

Hello, this is Konno.

In the place where I am it's, somehow or other, late February. Since the beginning of the year, my head's been stuck in March, which is a strange feeling that's a bit of a win and a bit of a loss. A bit of jet lag. But I haven't had time to lag. Once I reached a place to pause, it was time to fill out my tax return.

By the way, what time is it where you are?

While I was writing this book I didn't have much time to think about such things, but now I'm thinking it would be nice if the cherry trees were still blossoming when my readers hold this book in their hands.

Because this is indeed an April edition ... Yeah, maybe that's not so bad.

While on the topic, because Japan stretches diagonally, the cherry trees blossom at different times. But turning that on its head, it means there are times when the cherry trees won't be blossoming in some places. But even after the cherry blossom front has passed through, it may be possible that they are still blossoming up in the mountains.

Ahh – that's nice. I don't usually drink a lot of alcohol, and rarely is there the opportunity for an outdoor party like the cherry blossom viewing presents, plus there's lots of good places for viewing them in my neighborhood, so I always look forward to this. Even just looking at them from the bus is good.

Now then, cherry trees.

I've written as much in the first part of "Joined by One Hand," but the damage the summer caterpillars do is incredible. When I was in middle school I used to commute by bicycle, but there was this long stretch of road that was lined with cherry trees, and going up and down that was such an ordeal. But in return, spring was absolutely wonderful!

Speaking of cherry trees.

Back in kindergarten, the "cherry group" was for the oldest kids. Incidentally, "rose group" was for the youngest, or at least, it was something from the rose family. As well as that there was "violet group," "lily group," "chrysanthemum group," and there should have been one more too. What was it? "Peach group," perhaps. But at this point, I couldn't say for certain.

Despite the conversation in "As the Years Pass By," I still have plenty of memories remaining about my time in kindergarten.

Like about the naughty little boys, and the crybaby girls.

Or the classroom scenery. Memories of diving beneath the sister's veil.

Or the words of the prayers, and the songs.

Or the etiquette for riding on the school bus. Really, it's strange how vivid these memories are.

Oh, right. Speaking of episodes related to kindergarten.

At a school assembly when we were all getting ready to go into middle school, I saw a girl that I hadn't seen since cherry group, six years earlier. I called out to her fondly, but she didn't remember me at all. What a great friend ... that was quite the shock. So I know full well the feelings of those people surrounding Sei and Yumi. They have my sympathies.

But it goes the other way too. Sometimes classmates that I haven't seen since

graduation will call out to me when I'm on the bus or walking down the street. So do I blend into the background or stand out in the foreground ... ? Yeah, I don't know.

– Now that I've finished avoiding the topic by reminiscing, the Roses have at long last graduated. Sniffle, sniffle.

Honestly, when I started writing the first volume of “Maria-sama ga Miteru,” I had no idea that I'd come to like them as much as I have.

When I wrote the magazine one-shot, while Shimako was Rosa Gigantea, Sachiko and Rei weren't even given names, so while I was fine with setting the book six months earlier to establish the characters, I was worried that since there were so many characters some of them might become leftovers. But once I started, they all asserted themselves wonderfully, making it interesting.

Writing about them was fun, especially Satou Sei. I wanted her to toy with Yumi even more. But the story of “Maria-sama ga Miteru” is only alive for as long as it continues, so graduation was unavoidable.

Even so.

While my “first generation” of Roses (me not knowing the history of Lillian's Girls Academy high-school) may have graduated, I think it would be nice to see them once in a while.

When April arrives, new students will enter into Lillian's High-school. The entire school will advance once grade.

It won't all be lonely.

Konno Oyuki.