

COBALT SERIES



マリン様がおみえしてる

今野緒雪

集英

Volume 1

Maria-sama ga Miteru

Prologue

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

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

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

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

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

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

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

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

She-, Fukuzawa Yumi, is just one of those ordinary ladies.

Monday of Uneasiness

Part 1.

“Wait.”

It was Monday.

Down the rows of ginkgo trees is a fork in the road, and it was here that Yumi was called upon from behind to wait.

It was a cold, piercing voice, strong enough to seem like an illusion. Furthermore, because this happened right in front of Maria-sama’s figure, for an instant she thought that perhaps it was Maria-sama telling her to hold still.

Having been spoken to, you must first stop and answer “yes,” then turn your entire body. Even if it was unexpected, you must not act rushed. Suffice it to say; simply “turning your face” is definitively unladylike conduct.

As elegant as possible, as well as beautifully. All in order to get even one step closer to being like the elder sisters.

That is why as soon as you turn about and stand facing your company, you must smile and say gokigenyou-.

Unfortunately, Yumi was unable to answer “gokigenyou.”

“---”

It was because recognizing who had called out to her struck her speechless.

The reason why she had not immediately jumped up is because she had dedicated herself to conduct herself the way a student at Lillian Girls’ Academy should, and her restraint at this moment was show of progress toward this goal ... at least, that is how she wished it would have been. Rather, her astonishment was so great that her actions lagged far behind her racing mind, leaving her frozen in time.

“Um... would you be speaking to me?”

Somehow managing to thaw herself, Yumi managed to ask, incredulously. Of course, Yumi had already confirmed that she was the only one in direct eye-sight, and she was the only one that could possibly be spoken to. Even so, it was difficult for Yumi to believe.

“You are not mistaken. I am the one who spoke, and you were the one to whom I spoke.”

Not mistaken, she had said. Yet, Yumi desperately felt like responding, of course there was a mistake, and then running away. Having no idea why she would be called upon, her mind was in a state of near-panic.

She floated a thin smile and walked straight toward Yumi, not knowing what sort of state she was in.

Because they were in different grades, there had been no prior chance to see her face from this close. This was even the first time Yumi had heard her voice this clearly.

Her waist-length straight hair shined so brightly that it begged you to ask what shampoo brand she used. It was so well-kept that it was hard to imagine there was a single strand of ill-conditioned hair.

“Hold this.”

She held out her bag. When Yumi, still puzzled, took the bag, she reached out behind Yumi’s neck with both of her empty hands.

(Kya-!!)

Not knowing what was happening, Yumi shut her eyes, lowered her chin and stiffened.

“Your tie, it was crooked.”

“What?”

When she opened her eyes, that beautiful face was still in front of her. Apparently, she was fixing Yumi’s tie.

“You should always be aware of your personal appearance. Maria-sama is watching, after all.”

And with that, the person took back her bag from Yumi, said “gokigenyou,” and walked ahead to the school building.

(That... that was...)

Standing there, left behind, blood slowly flowed back into Yumi’s head, and she began registering what just happened.

There was no doubt about who that was.

Second-year pine-class Ogasawara Sachiko-sama. Incidentally, her name was 7th on the attendance sheet. She was known as “Rosa Chinensis en bouton.”

She was such the object of the school’s affections that you could not help but wonder if it was okay to say her name, for someone of such lower stature to even mention her.

(That’s...)

Yumi was just about to boil in embarrassment.

(That’s not fair!)

She stood dumbfounded for a few moments.

She had exchanged words with the onee-sama she aspired to for the first time. Yet, it was a horrifically embarrassing episode. It was too cruel.

Maria-sama is mean!

When she looked up out of spite at Maria-sama, the latter maintained her ever-present chaste smile and stood, silently, in the middle of the small, green garden.

Part 2.

“Ooh, so that’s what happened.”

Katsura-san, who sat in front of her, just laughed when she heard the story.

“You were so gloomy when you showed up to class, I was wondering if you ran into a molester in the train or something.”

“A molester might have been better.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t stick with you.”

“Yumi-san, it seems you haven’t run into a molester.”

“I commute by bus.”

Students of Lillian Girls’ Academy generally took a circulation bus from M Train Station’s North Exit at JR town to get to school. Both of them were the same in this regard, but Katsura-san took a crowded train to get to M Station, whereas Yumi took a bus to M Station South Exit, resulting in the difference in pleasantry (or unpleasantry).

“Wasn’t there talk about a Lillian rail car, though?”

“There is one, but you know, it’s more like the Yamayurikai council gathered everyone together so that Lillian students all crowd into the second car from the back. But because of day duties and club activities and the likes, if you leave too early there aren’t enough students, so it’s kind of pointless.”

Apparently, though, because rumours circulated, female students from schools other than Lillian had begun using that car, making it pretty effective against molesters. Of course, there was no real method of squeezing out males, but apparently the number of gentlemen with the courage to step into a car full of young women was not very high. Plus, there was hardly any opportunity to make any suspicious moves, anyways.

The Lillian uniform used a non-lustrous black cloth that seems like it had a drop of green, and was very refined throughout. The ivory sailor collar with a single black line was tied up as is into a tie. During this season, the one-piece, low-waist plaited skirts were knee-high. Combine all this as a set with the threefold white socks and the ballet-style leather shoes and you get a very traditional outfit, one that had a firmly-rooted popularity with ordinary people as well as, of course, the uniform maniacs.

This attractive outfit advertised a lady's upper-class stature. And sailor uniforms attracted unwanted attention as it were, too.

"Trains are crowded, so I always check how I look beforehand."

Saying that, Katsura-san, using Yumi as a mirror, acted out how she fixed up her forelocks and re-tied her tie. Like this, she meant.

"I see, I was so careless."

Yumi bent over her desk. Then, Katsura-san pat her head, as if saying "there there."

"Pretty much. But people that can sit elegantly as they ride to school wouldn't think of these things. Don't worry about it, it's not a big deal."

"It is a big deal."

"As long as we forget, it's fine isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Because she's the star of Lillian Girls' Academy. Stars don't worry about each and every amateur."

Stars and amateurs.

Even though it was the truth, or rather, because it was the truth, it hurt. Katsura-san's consolation was a bit of an extreme treatment.

Incidentally, Katsura was a name and not a surname. At Lillian, nicknames generally did not exist. The custom was to speak to those of the same grade as "-san". When speaking to an upperclassman, "-sama."

“There’s no helping withering away when you’re called upon. The only first-year in our class that can handle being spoken to by a ‘Yamayurikai’ council member is her.”

And with that, Katsura-san shot a glance behind her. Following her line of sight, Yumi saw Tōdō Shimako just step into the room.

“Gokigenyou, Katsura-san. Gokigenyou, Yumi-san.”

As she greeted the two, Shimako-san elegantly advanced to her seat.

“Go- Gokigenyou.”

Yumi and Katsura-san looked at each other, as if they wanted to ask, “What’re you so embarrassed about?”

Even though they’re the same age, the discrepancy was enormous. Although completely unlike Sachiko-sama, Shimako-san was also stunningly beautiful.

Looking at her depressed you, making you think beautiful people are beautiful even from when they were young. Any hope of becoming as beautiful as Sachiko-sama just by becoming a second-year high-school student was snuffed out, just like that.

“Did you hear?”

Katsura-san began whispering, so Yumi also lowered her voice.

“That Shimako-san became Rosa Gigantea en bouton? Even skipping over the 2nd-years.”

It was famous. The story about Shimako-san exchanging sisterly vows with Rosa Gigantea despite being a 1st year student.

“Not that.”

“Not that?”

Implying that it was the latest scoop, Katsura-san put her index finger over her lip and said “Onee-sama told me.” Her Sœur was a tennis-club senior, who was in the same class as Sachiko-sama.

“Shimako-san, not only did Rosa Gigantea propose, but apparently so did Sachiko-sama.”

“Ehh-!!”

“Yumi-san, you’re being loud.”

The two of them scrunched up over a single desk. It was a spectacle very un-befitting of ladies, but the two of them had not noticed. –Maria-sama, please forgive them, no matter what generation it is, women love rumors about other people.

The Lillian Girls’ Academy’s Sœur system was said to have been borne out of the school’s attitude of respecting the autonomy of its students in High School. As students graduated from compulsory education, in which they lived under the management of teachers and Sisters, they were expected to lead an ordered life with their own power. The Sœur system was adopted so that elder sisters could guide their little sisters through this rather overwhelming time. As that system became completely immersed throughout the school, it became such that even without any strict school regulations, the pure and righteous school life was passed down from generation to generation.

Sœur meant sisters, in French. Presumably in order to prevent confusion with Sisters, they avoided using English. Originally every senior and underclassman was called sœur, but eventually it became a way of designating two tightly bonded girls. No one was sure when the ritual of vowing to become Sœurs through a give-and-receive of a rosary began.

“According to the stories, Sachiko-sama proposed first, but she accepted Rosa Gigantea’s hand, even though it came later.”

Katsura-san seemed a bit disdainful, but she was definitely getting excited by the rumor-mongering.

“I wonder if she just preferred white over crimson.”

“That’s not the point. Sheesh... Yumi-san, you’re a bit weird. See? When you’re in Shimako-san’s class of people, you can even have your pick between two roses.”

“Your pick, that’s such a despicable wording.”

“But, truth be told, Sachiko-sama was rejected.”

“Mmm.”

What a wasteful thing to do, thought Yumi.

“What do you mean ‘mmm,’ don’t you think it’s horrible?”

“Why? If you can’t have two onee-sama, you do have to pick one.”

“And you pick the one that came later?”

“But it’s not a race.”

“Yes it is!”

And thus did Katsura-san conclude the discussion, heaving a sigh. Come to think of it, she had exchanged Sœur vows the day she joined the tennis club.

“Speaking of which, what about Rosa Foetida?”

“Rosa Foetida is peaceful and secured with a 3rd-year, 2nd-year and 1st-year.”

“I see.”

For Yumi, as opposed to Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis en bouton fighting over Shimako-san, the fact that neither of them had younger sisters was more surprising.

“Either way, the reality is, Sachiko-sama proposed to her, and she didn’t immediately accept.”

As she said that, Katsura-san looked at the clock.

The bell would ring for the morning prayers.

Then, a hymn would sound from the school broadcast system. Aside from the once-a-week morning prayer at the Sanctuary, everyone prayed in their classroom. Everyone sang the hymn, listened to the principal speak, then calmed their spirits and offered prayer to God.

Please allow me to live righteously today.

However, on this day, despite praying, she had the feeling that she was about to be jarred from her peaceful daily life.

Part 3.

“Yumi-san, Yumi-san.”

Yumi was called upon after school, just as she had finished her cleaning duties and had walked out of the music room.

“Ah Tsutako-san. Have you already finished cleaning the classroom?”

“Yes, and that’s why I hurried here, to ensure we wouldn’t walk past each other. Yumi-san seemed to have taken her bag to cleaning duty, after all.”

Because the first-year classrooms were distant from the music room, first-years always took their bags with them. As the entrance and the club houses were close by, it was convenient for going home or for going to club activities.

“You were looking for me?”

“I wanted to discuss something.”

“Discuss?”

This prompted Tsutako-san to raise her frame-less glasses by the nose-bridge with a finger, nod, and say “yes.”

“Yumi-san. We have club activities to get to, so we’ll excuse ourselves now. Oh, I’ll return the cleaning journal to the staff room on the way, too.”

The three students whom were helping with cleaning duty smiled with pure eyes.

“Why... thank you.”

“No, no. Think nothing of it. Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The uniforms, with the color of damp crows’ wings, leniently flowed down the hallway. Tsutako-san and Yumi saw them off together.

“You are, I think, aware that I belong to the photography club?”

Tsutako-san turned back toward Yumi and asked, abruptly.

“Y, ... yes.”

Because she’s notorious.

Aside from class time, she rarely lets go of her camera. Yumi vaguely remembered hearing her mourn, at one point, about how chagrined she was whenever she missed a shutter chance, and that feeling of regret was the reason why she had no choice but to hang onto her camera at all times. Since the beginning of high school, this had been the first time Yumi ended up in the same class as Tsutako-san, but already she'd been shown two or three photos that she never realized had been taken. Though she couldn't really tell how 'good' Tsutako-san was, she had to admit that even her ordinary self looked at least 30% cuter in the photos.

"You know how the school festival is close by? Well, because of that, I've been coming to school early to take photos from early morning."

She only used people as her photo subjects. Well, specifically, "female high-school students." Honestly, there was no problem in that, but she claimed "good photos can't be taken when the subjects even subconsciously pose," so she had a tendency to take secret photos.

"Tsutako-san, don't you think it might be better to stop taking photos as if you were a peeping tom?"

"Why should I throw away the privilege I have, being an active Lillian Girls' Academy student? I just want to seal away beauty as beautifully as they come, within these frames. We'll all age, eventually, but it's possible to preserve 'now' in all its glittering glory. I just think that's my God-given duty, having been chosen by the camera."

With that, she raised a clenched fist.

"Even so."

"Not to worry. I've gotten permission from every one of my subjects. I burn everything, including the negatives, for rejected pictures. And before I present them, I always, always make sure the people involved are willing."

"Permission?"

"Like this."

Tsutako-san presented two photographs to Yumi.

“What?”

Three, two, one.

It required three seconds to realize what the photos were of.

“Ehh!”

As Yumi had raised her voice far beyond what was generally accepted of a Lillian student, Tsutako-san covered her mouth.

“Th, this.”

Ahh, and what it was.

The morning scene, that same scene she wished could be erased from her memory. A two-shot photo of Ogasawara Sachiko-sama and Yumi.

Even so, it was definitely worthy of the photography club’s ace. She had not let the shutter chance go by. Both of Sachiko-sama’s hands were firmly gripping Yumi’s scarf. You could imagine hearing the sound of the knot being squeezed.

Even while struggling to hold onto her bag, Yumi stared, absorbing everything in the photo.

As always, Sachiko-sama was lovely. And as a direct result of her presence, Yumi, standing to her side, looked like an angel.

“The first one was taken with a long-range lense, the close-up. But this one, the one where your whole body is photographed, has more of a ‘forbidden’ mood to it, making it look better, don’t you think?”

By the way the title is “Training,” Tsutako-san said, and Yumi could do naught but agree.

“Can I have this?”

As Yumi asked, Tsutako-san laughed and took back the photos. She looked as if Yumi had just been snagged hook, line and sinker.

“I don’t mind, but on two conditions.”

“Conditions?”



“Condition one: that you allow me to use this photo in a panel for the photography-club exhibit during the school festival.”

“Eh...”

Exhibit? Panel? Was she out of her mind?

How reckless, to line up someone like Yumi, with an extremely average academic, height, weight and figure, to someone who’s perfect in every regard, like Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, in front of every student.

“Tsutako-san. You must be kidding.”

“Why would I be kidding? I’ve been confident, ever since I snapped the photo, that it was my best work this whole year. That’s why I developed the film at the cost of lunch break.”

As she said that, Tsutako-san’s stomach let out a decidedly un-lady-like growl. Ah, her lunch lay untouched in her bag. Hobbies take precedence even over the nurturing appetite.

“But, a panel...”

Yumi looked down.

“You don’t want the photo?”

Tsutako-san plucked the two photos and waved them in front of Yumi’s face.

“I know. You’ve always admired Ogasawara Sachiko-sama in secret. Yet, ignoring the remote possibility of a two-shot, I know you don’t even have a close-up photo of her head. When the field trip photos were put up outside the staff room, you were vexed that you couldn’t request copies, because you were of a different grade, am I right? And as you aren’t part of any club, you had no 2nd-year student to request for a copy. The only photo you have is one from the athletics meet. That’s the picture where Sachiko-sama, waiting in line for the relay, happened to be in the background and, well, I won’t say a rice grain, but she is really just a speck.”

“Excuse me. She was at least the size of a pencil. And even so, it’s a treasure to me.”

Tsutako-san could pursue a career as a private detective if she so desired.

“I wonder if that pencil will satisfy you, after today’s events.”

The lens of her glasses shined like a camera flash.

“...You’re evil.”

Of course there was no way she’d be satisfied, having seen such a good photo.

“But, isn’t there a chance Sachiko-sama refuses?”

“That’s why.”

Tsutako-san put up her index finger and laughed, triumphantly.

“The other condition is that you receive permission from Rosa Chinensis en bouton.”

“Ehh!? That’s impossible, absolutely impossible.”

Again, she says something so stunning so smoothly.

“Why?”

Tsutako-san widened her eyes in surprise.

“You two look so intimate. Like sœurs.”

“I wish!”

Yumi explained. This morning, while heading to school, she’d been suddenly called out, and when she wondered what was going on, she’d been cautioned about her appearance.

“Well. And she fixed your tie while at it, too. If your classmates found out they’d be envious.”

“As if they would say, ‘Oh, I’m so envious?’”

Just remembering the incident made her want to blush.

“Sachiko-sama probably thought, what a slovenly student.”

It wasn’t supposed to be like that.

In reality, meeting onee-sama in the near future was supposed to be a more beautiful situation.

For example, like a scene in a movie. A scene that would make you blush just remembering it, even after graduating. Even if it were just an instant. Like picking up and returning Sachiko-sama’s handkerchief after it got blown away by wind, or something trivial like that.

But, a bent tie. On top of that, she panicked so much she couldn't even greet or thank her. She'd fallen to the status of an impolite underclassman.

"A slovenly student, isn't that fine? After all, it let you get close to your lovely onee-sama."

"Err..."

There was no retort to that. Had her tie not been bent, it would have been likely she would have never been called to, in her entire life.

"Tsutako-san, why don't you negotiate in person? You do that all the time, after all."

"Even Tsutako-san, brave and fearless as she is, is intimidated by the Yamayurikai council."

The Yamayurikai was the student council of the Lillian Girls' Academy High School. The council, called the White, Red and Yellow Roses were, despite being students, on a different social standing than the regular students, like court officials. Sachiko-sama was the petite sœur to Rosa Chinensis.

"Also, Yumi-san, I decided that it would be profitable to use you for negotiations."

"W, Why?"

"Because you caught the attention of Sachiko-sama."

"That's because of my tie-"

"If a bent tie were all that were needed to get the attention of Sachiko-sama, every Lillian student would walk around with bent ties."

That was Tsutako-san's retort.

"No way."

"Quite frankly, I've seen such calculating first-year students."

First-years that undertook a bold deed the likes of walking in front of Sachiko-sama with a bent tie, all for the sake of catching her attention for one moment. Tsutako-san spoke of this in a serenading tone, as if she were a leading actress, standing at the middle of the stage, basking in the spotlight.

“Especially Sachiko-sama, she’s considered one of the most compulsive about cleanliness in the school. She’s famous for disdaining slovenly appearances, so there might have been more than one person who foolishly attempted such a stunt.” To carry a proper soul, one must first tend to their person appearance-. For roughly 11 years since kindergarten, that had been a repeated mantra, and breaking that schooling in order to get the attention of their beloved senior simply awarded them one, icy glance from Sachiko-sama. And then complete disregard.

Even worse, sometimes that student’s onee-sama was called out for a discussion about personal appearance.

“Sachiko-sama... is scary.”

“Did you just find out? Ogasawara Sachiko-sama is scary. Of course, this is only with matters that she disapproves of.”

“And you’re telling me to face that scary Sachiko-sama...?”

Frankly, she thought Tsutako-san was just as scary.

Already Yumi was getting ready to run. The toes of her indoor shoes were already facing the entrance.

“You don’t understand, Yumi-san. Sachiko-sama is no demon. She’s an angel. Archangel Michael.”

“A, Archangel Michael...?”

What is she saying, does she even understand what she’s saying? Tsutako-san’s eyes were focused on something far away.

“She is, in reality, sublime and tolerant. However, everything that opposes her aesthetic sense is absolutely unforgivable. She is, after all, a born princess. She has her own peculiar sense of rules.”

Tsutako-san was swimming away alone. Yumi could not help but raise her hand, say “Um,” and request.

“Tsutako-san, I only get mid-marks for language class.”

“Yes?”

“Can you lower the level and explain, please?”

“Lower the level?”

“Umm, in other words, can you explain more clearly, please?”

Tsutako-san folded her arms and went deep in thought. It was hard to explain to someone else a theory you had already completed yourself.

“To put it simply, Sachiko-sama is never irrationally angry, so it’s alright. When she’s angry, there’s always reason in her words.”

“So?”

“So don’t worry and get persuading.”

“Why me?”

“Seems to be a fit. You and Sachiko-sama.”

Sheesh, I can’t understand Tsutako-san’s thought process.

“And what basis do you have for that?”

“Basis? I have no basis. These things are all about instinct. Intuition.”

Sachiko-sama, who never bothered with the ties of underclassmen, spontaneously decided this morning to call out to her, chastise her, and then re-tie Yumi’s scarf with her own hands. Tsutako-san seemed emphatic that this was a brilliant achievement, one that couldn’t have happened with pure luck.

“Even if the person is not aware of it, I think like-minded people subconsciously step closer to one another.”

“And again you’re being irrational.”

Essentially, it seemed like she was simply pushing something she didn’t want to do on Yumi.

“If you’re regretful of being thought of as a slovenly student, then replace that image. If you politely thank her, ‘Thank you for warning me this morning,’ you’ll turn out to be a polite lady.”

“Ugh, Tsutako-san, you’re persuasive.”

“Why, thank you. I have been invited by the debate club once.”

Her triumphant laugh was so masterful that it felt she could be invited by the theatrics club, too.

Ten minutes later, Yumi stood in front of the door for the Yamayurikai headquarters, the “Rose Mansion.”

In the end, Tsutako’s killer blow of “You don’t want the photo?” had pushed Yumi into accepting the job of negotiating with Sachiko-sama.

Part 4.

The Lillian Girls' Academy High School Student Council was named the Yamayurikai (Mountain Lily Council) in homage to Maria-sama's soul.

Maria-sama's soul was a blue sky, was an evergreen oak tree, was a Japanese nightingale, was a mountain lily, and was a sapphire. That was the song you were made to learn first, upon entering kindergarten.

(But why is it a sapphire...?)

She had wondered this as a child, and had dragged that bewilderment to the present. Blue sky, evergreen oak, nightingale, mountain lily, and then spontaneously a sapphire.

She could understand the comparison of Maria-sama's soul to such beautiful things, but a materialistic symbol such as a jewel, as opposed to natural beauties such as the sky and plants and animals had always felt out of place. Plus, a sapphire was an expensive possession, so while anyone could look up at the sky and bask in its beauty, only a select few could adorn themselves with sapphire.

(But a lady the stature of Sachiko-sama probably wouldn't find the sapphire out of place.)

And that was what went on in the mind of Yumi, who stood rather blankly in front of the Rose Mansion.

Lillian, being what would have to be considered a 'school for upper-class ladies', was filled with daughters of comparatively prosperous households. Yumi, who'd been attending the school since infancy, technically counted as a daughter of a company president, for her father was the president of a designing office.

While the exchange of their parents' occupations was not standard practice in the classroom, people nevertheless slipped out this sort of knowledge every so often during regular conversations, and from this you could hear of doctors, lawyers, company presidents of smaller enterprises, department heads of larger enterprises, university professors, and other such varying degrees of remarkable titles.

However, the Ogasawara Sachiko she was about to meet was on a different level from such ladies. She was the granddaughter of the president of the Ogasawara group, an extensive management over department stores and leisure parks, among other things, and her mother was reportedly of former nobility, making her a princess of perfect pedigree.

The Rose Mansion. It was called a mansion, but it was actually a small building, roughly half the size of a classroom, taking up floor space in the corner of the courtyard for high school buildings. However, being an independent building used solely by the student council and, with the aid of its wooden two-story appearance, you could surely see why it became known as a mansion.

“I wonder if Sachiko-sama is really in here.”

Yumi-san said to Tsutako-san, temporarily lowering the fist she had raised for knocking.

“Well she wasn’t in the classroom, and everyone says the Yamayurikai council have been gathering in the Rose Mansion after class every day to prepare for the school festival.”

With that, Tsutako forced Yumi to look back at the door. Apparently she had tagged along purely as an escort. Yumi was the main dish. She wanted to complain, whose fault is it that she had come this far, but she had to restrain herself until she got a copy of the two-shot photo. Plus, as Tsutako-san mentioned, if things went well, she could undo the ruined reputation she might have garnered in the morning, and if things went really well, she could be on speaking terms.

“Yes. They come here every day...”

In other words, there was no turning back.

Yumi raised her fist again, but could not bring herself to knock on the wooden door.

(Ahh, how weak I am.)

However, for any normal first-year student, Yumi notwithstanding, it would have taken a considerable amount of courage to knock on this door. That was why Tsutako-san knowingly did not hurry her. If Tsutako-san were to ask, “can’t you even knock?” Yumi was prepared to counter with “then you go ahead.”

She felt sweat in her palm. That’s odd, it’s not a sweat-inducing temperature.

Her heart began throbbing more violently, and her legs began trembling.

The world beyond this door was too alien.

Just as she lowered her fist, giving up all hope, a voice called out from behind the two.

“Do you have business with the Yamayurikai?”

“Huh!?”

Yumi and Tsutako-san spun around like a spring-loaded mechanism.

“Oh dear, I apologize. I seem to have surprised you two.”

Standing there was Tōdō Shimako-san.

Yumi sighed heavily, relieved. If Sachiko-sama appeared when she hadn’t yet steeled her resolve, she might have fainted. Well, even if fainting was an exaggeration, it was definite she would have disgraced herself even more than she had done in the morning.

“Shimako-san, too, why...”

And as Yumi began to speak, Tsutako-san, at her side, elbowed her lightly. “Idiot.”

“Shimako-san is *Rosa Gigantea en bouton*, so she would obviously be here.”

“Oh, yeah.”

She was not a “regular first-year.”

“Yumi-san and I wish to speak to *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*. Shimako-san, would you act as an agent for us?”

As if thinking, nice timing, Tsutako-san immediately began speaking to Shimako-san. Even though they were both en bouton, the difference of comfort between white and red was drastic.

“Oh, if that is the case, would you like to come inside? I believe Sachiko-sama is on the second floor.”

Swaying her curls, Shimako-san opened the door and beckoned to the two, whom were rooted to the spot outside.

Not just beautiful, but kind and cute as well, Tōdō Shimako-san. Yumi-san stood awestruck for a moment.

Because of this, it was easy to see why Sachiko-sama and Rosa Gigantea would scramble over her. She was, after all, the type of person you would love to stand next to and walk with. Pure white, with soft, brown, curly hair.

In contrast, even with the same colour of hair, Yumi simply had unruly hair. She had managed to subdue her jumpy bristles with ribbons by dividing them in two. –A wild animal part cotton-candy, part Savannah.

“Come in?”

Shimako-san spoke to them once more, holding open the door.

“Let’s go, Yumi-san.”

Gulping hard, Tsutako-san grabbed Yumi’s arm. If all else failed, she was planning to drag Yumi down with her.

After taking one step, a mysterious space surrounded them.

“Uwah...”

Immediately inside was a blow-through floor. When you turned left, you were greeted by a steep staircase. Straight ahead as you reached the second floor was a stained-glass window the size of a door, and the evening sunlight stretched down like it had walked down the steps and to the lower floor.

There was no sign of life on the floor. To the right and above that were rooms, but as Shimako-san said, there didn't seem to be anyone on the first floor. Knowing this, it was apparent that even had Yumi knocked on the door, it was likely that no one would have noticed anyways, causing her to feel exhausted even before beginning the monumental task that lay ahead.

“This way.”

Shimako-san deftly walked up the stairs, holding down the pleats of her dress so they wouldn't rub against the stairs. Yumi and Tsutako-san looked at each other, nodded to each other, and followed suit.

Roughly half of a year since becoming a high school student. For Yumi, the Rose Mansion was as forbidden a space as a Sister's residential ward.

“Um... Shimako-san?”

Yumi suddenly felt anxious.

“Yes?”

“Is it alright for you to bring in an outsider this easily?”

Shimako-san stopped and turned around at the highest step, briefly looking surprised before saying “Oh dear.”

“Why do you consider yourself an outsider? This building is being used as the Yamayurikai headquarters, so the staff members maintain it, but each and every student is a member of the Yamayurikai. We more than happily welcome people who wish to speak to us. Of course, if a hundred students all pushed in at once the floor might collapse?”

Lowering her shoulders a bit, Shimako-san laughed.

As she said, this old wooden building probably could only fit fifty people at once.

Yumi wondered, during what era was this built? The Lillian high school buildings were definitely not new by any account, but even their stairs did not squeak like these.

After climbing the stairs, a biscuit-shaped door appeared on their right. When they followed Shimako-san toward the door, they suddenly heard an earsplitting voice.

“Even so, why do I have to do it?”

It was a loud enough voice to have traveled through the door. When Yumi thought about how such a loud voice didn’t seem befitting of the Rose Mansion, that same voice yelled once more.

“This is tyranny! The onee-samas are being mean!”

The word “mean” and the plate hanging from the doorknob reading “Please be quiet, as we are in the middle of a meeting” felt strangely unbalanced.

Incredible. A student capable of saying “mean” in the presence of seniors.

This was, after all, the Rose Mansion. There was no doubt that, inside, beginning with the Roses, distinguished members sat, almost enshrined.

A normal student couldn’t attend this meeting and say “the onee-samas are being mean.”

“Oh, good. Sachiko-sama seems to be present.”

Shimako-san turned the doorknob.

“Eh!?”

“Then that voice was Sachiko-sama’s...”

Yumi was, honestly, stunned. That Sachiko-sama would raise her voice in such a way, would use a word like mean and sound so cross while at it. It seemed like Tsutako-san was just as stunned.

On the other hand Shimako-san just smiled, saying “It’s always like this,” and opened the door without knocking.

And that exact moment.

“I understand, then. If that’s what is being demanded, then I just need to bring her here! Yes, I will bring her here at once!”

And with what could be taken as a sharp parting remark, one student shot out of the room. It was an unfortunate accident that arose because she had been leaning on the doorknob just as the door was opened from outside.

“Ah!”

“Uwah!”

As soon as she thought a person had flown out, Yumi felt a light impact on the front of her body. Then, her sight tilted, the ceiling spun, and she felt a sharp pain at her rear.

Ignoring Shimako-san, who had used the door as a shield, and Tsutako-san, who had held back to be last in line, the direct hit almost seemed like the person had aimed directly at Yumi, who was second in line.

That’s why the “ah!” was the person who flew out, and “uwah!” was Yumi’s voice.

“Are you alright?”

She heard Shimako-san and Tsutako-san’s voices.

“Hnn... nn.”

It had become a confusing situation, and she didn’t know what was happening. Only her buttocks had hit something, but a soft pressing feeling remained around her stomach and breast. Plus, because someone else’s hair was covering her face, even though she knew she was supposed to be facing upwards, she had no idea where she was and she had lost directional senses.

“Ow...”

Murmuring that, the person lying on top carefully raised herself. When Yumi’s vision cleared, the first thing she saw was none other than *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama. She, too, had not yet realized what had happened, and simply sat, slowly shaking her head.

The straight, long, black hair swayed like the hair for models in commercials and, gradually, returned to their native positions. The difference with TV was that a floral scent accompanied this hair.

“Aww. That was a flashy fall.”

“Eh, she got crushed by Sachiko’s 50kg? How miserable-!”

“Heeey. Victim, are you alive?”

The students whom were in the room slowly crept out, having noticed the crash. It was a line-up you could only see in a Yamayuri general meeting. Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida, Rosa Gigantea. Next to Rosa Foetida were her bouton and her respective petite sœur.

“Eh, I crushed someone!? Are you alright!?”

Having finally realized what happened, Sachiko-sama hurriedly tried to raise Yumi.

“Sachiko. You shouldn’t simply move them. If they hit their head it could be disastrous.”

Rosa Foetida en bouton came forward from the crowd. Second-year chrysanthemum-class number 30, Hasekura Rei-sama. Being the daughter of a martial arts family, she had probably seen her fair share of people who had gotten concussions.

However, her sailor collar and low-waist plaited-skirt uniform made her seem even more like a handsome person in male attire – a sight that was a rarity in Lillian. A slender figure with very short hair. Even this uniform, that seemed like one that an antique doll would wear, was worn by her like a man’s formal divided skirt.

“Ah, I’m alright, I only hit my back.”

Yumi hurriedly stood up. Her butt still throbbed, but otherwise it seemed like it could turn into an uproar.

“Are you sure?”

Sachiko-sama leaned forward with a worried look.

Ahh, if you look at me at such short range, I feel like running away. Your beautiful eyes will get sullied.

“Yes, as you can see.”

Unable to bear the atmosphere, Yumi stood up and hopped around like a phoenix bird. She disliked her clownish behavior, but the atmosphere felt like had she not done so, they would have called an ambulance.

“That is a relief.”

Perhaps relieved, Sachiko-sama hugged Yumi tightly. The same feeling in her breast as before. Ahh, so that’s what it was. It was Sachiko-sama’s breasts. Because of the uniform’s construction, it’s difficult to tell the difference between different peoples’ figures, but her breasts are along the lines of the abundant... This wasn’t the time to be thinking of this. Graciously, at the moment, Sachiko-sama was embracing her.

“By the way.”

Still embraced, Sachiko-sama whispered in Yumi’s ear.

“You are a first-year, are you not? Do you have someone to call onee-sama?”

“Huh?”

That moment, she thought of that first-year student who self-destructed by wearing a loose tie. In her stead, Sachiko-sama berated her onee-sama.

However.

Would she drag in a scœur over colliding? In this case, it was an accident, and Sachiko-sama had been the one that had crashed into the standing Yumi.

“Which is it?”

Sachiko-sama whispered urgently.

“I don’t... why?”

Because it felt like a secretive conversation, Yumi also suppressed her voice as she answered. Then.

“Splendid.”

“Um, what...”

“No worries. Just do as I say.”

Extremely forceful. Without given any reason, she was dragged out in front of the extravagant members.

“I have a report for the onee-sama.”

As opposed to the hysteric voice that cut through the door, Sachiko-sama had returned to the icy voice of norm.

“Oh my, I wonder what is starting?”

Rosa Chinensis inquired with an intellectual smile. As expected of Sachiko-sama’s onee-sama. She had the composure and presence of someone who could make even Sachiko-sama dance on her fingertips.

“This girl-.”

After leading with that, Sachiko-sama whispered toward Yumi and informed her, “Introduce yourself.” She had just realized she had never asked Yumi for her name.

“Ah, first-year peach-class number 35. Fukuzawa Yumi.”

When she tried to introduce herself to Sachiko-sama, she half-turned Yumi’s body. Apparently, she had wanted her to introduce herself to the Roses.

“I see, Fukuzawa Yumi-san. How do you write that with kanji?”

“Fukuzawa from Fukuzawa Yukichi, you add ‘right’ to a shimesu-hen for Yu, and Mi from the year of the snake.”

“A joyous, and good, name.”

Rosa Gigantea smiled brilliantly.

“And?”

Finally, Rosa Foetida looked at Yumi from head to toe, as if appraising her.

“What with this Fukuzawa Yumi-san?”

All of a sudden, Yumi had been surrounded by the three Roses.

Maybe this is how it felt to be a frog hunted by a snake. Even though her name had “snake” in it, she wanted to be pardoned from this. If it weren’t a snake, it was a briar forest. They say pretty roses have thorns, but she definitely realized the Roses weren’t merely pretty onee-sama.

Even though she had only hit her buttocks, her head felt light from the invisible pressure. What was Sachiko-sama planning to do after capturing a frail first-year?

“Onee-sama. Would you please cease staring in that way? Look, Yumi is absolutely terrified.”

(Yu, Yumi...!?)

Woah, woah.

She didn't even know her name until just now, and yet they were already on a first-name basis? Is, how Yumi would have liked to retort, but because it was Sachiko-sama, her mind simply went blank.

Yumi.

The standard at Lillian was to add –san to the end of every name, so first-name basis was limited to only extremely close relationships. Even her parents went by a “friend-like parental relationship,” so she was called “Yumi-chan” by her parents. The only person to call her simply Yumi was her little brother, who'd become cheeky as of late.

However, it sounded good. To be called “Yumi” by Sachiko-sama.

Even though she didn't really know what was happening, it felt good, so she decided to play along with Sachiko-sama. Even she could come in useful to her. –That sort of feeling.

“That's true, it could have been unpleasant, we apologize... umm, Fukuzawa Yumi-san.”

Rosa Gigantea craned her neck for a slight bow. This person was Shimako-san's grande sœur. Her face was, in contrast to Shimako-san, more of an exotic look, but she was still far too beautiful to look at up close. Her graded semi-long hair flowed behind her hair like wind and looked pretty.

“However, we cannot help but be attentive to Sachiko's, as Rosa Chinensis en bouton, conduct. I hope you will understand?”

“...Y, yes.”

Yumi could understand why the Roses would be attentive of Sachiko-sama. But she could not comprehend why they would be staring so intently at her.

“Rosa Gigantea. I would appreciate if you did not speak to Yumi so off-handedly.”

Sachiko-sama stepped in front of Yumi, as if shielding her.

“Oh, since when did Yumi-san become your personal possession?”

Rosa Gigantea raised an eyebrow and giggled. Having had her fault taken away, even Yumi, standing obliquely behind of Sachiko-sama, could tell she was beginning to contort her face in anger.

“Well, Rosa Gigantea. Let us hear what Sachiko has to say, first.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. She did say she had something to report.”

As Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida brought back order, Sachiko-sama seemed to cool down, lose her angered look, and then nod.

“I will have you carry out that promise from earlier.”

“Promise?”

Rosa Chinensis asked back.

“As long as I choose now, everything is settled, correct? In that case, I am choosing Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama grabbed Yumi’s shoulders and pushed her out front. As if she was showing off a newly-bought toy.

“Um...”

Because Yumi had no idea what was said “earlier,” she had no idea what was happening. Rather, she had been brought into a mess without knowing it.

She looked to Tsutako-san and Shimako-san for help, but they both shook their heads. They had both arrived at the same time as Yumi, so they, too, could not grasp the situation.

“Would ‘earlier’ mean the parting remark you cried out right before you walked out that door?”

The three Roses looked intently at Sachiko-sama.

“Of course.”

Smiling triumphantly, Sachiko-sama flowed on, speaking the words that plucked the spirit out of the entire room:

I declare Fukuzawa Yumi to be my petite sœur.

Part 5.

“Please.”

A white cup was filled about seven tenths to the brim with a red, steaming liquid and placed in front of me.

This is a liquid called ‘black tea.’

“Would you like sugar or milk?”

A relatively short, pony-tailed girl offered a stick-shaped item from the basket. This girl was, if I remember correctly, also a first-year. I forget her class and surname, but she was the *petite sœur* for Hasekura Rei-sama, the *Rosa Foetida en bouton*, and I think her name was Yoshino-san.

“No, thank you.”

I thought in a daze after refusing. Umm, what was milk again?

Ahh, I’m so confused.

The one who was the most surprised by Sachiko-sama’s declaration was none other than Yumi herself. She was frozen in place, even oblivious to the uproar around her. How many times must Sachiko-sama petrify her in one day?

Let’s settle down and talk about it. Is what happened, and thus everyone moved into the room, past the door with the “meeting” plate.

Sachiko-sama, who’d made the selfish declaration in the first place, left behind her *sœur*, Yumi, even if the declaration was a temporary loss of mind, and angrily shouldered her way into the room. Prepared for battle, would be the most suitable way to describe her state.

“...War, with Sachiko-sama.”

In reality, if you went by image, the two of them probably were more suited to being in completely separate positions.

“Oh dear, what a helpless onee-sama, leaving her little sister behind.”

When Rosa Gigantea embraced Yumi by the shoulders and walked into the room, Sachiko-sama seemed to have realized her clumsiness and so she stood up, pulled out the seat next to her, and beckoned, “sit here.”

Then, when everyone sat down, black tea was distributed. And that was where we were.

This room had an atmosphere unlike any other school facility. Just like the stairs and the hallway, the floor and walls were of worn, wooden boarding. Aside from the one adjacent to the hallway, the other three walls each had a wooden-framed bay window, and the clean cotton curtains for each were opened and fastened with a thin ribbon. The size was about half that of a classroom, and there was an arrangement of flowers on the elliptical table in the middle of the room that could probably seat up to eight people. Rather than a student council headquarters, it felt more like an old, western-style dining room.

Of course, the three Roses were seated at the table, as were Sachiko-sama, Yumi, Shimako-san, and Tsutako-san, who was treated as a guest. Rei-sama and Yoshino-san pulled chairs over from around the washstand by the wall.

The electric pot was making a bubbling sound, having had fresh water recently added. I had never even imagined students elegantly sitting and drinking black tea after school in a school building. At some point, even cookies were placed on top of spread tissues.

I had no idea you were treated this well when you became a Yamayurikai staff member.

“Let me start off by saying, please do not misunderstand, we put in a lot of personal effort into keeping this a pleasant space to be.”

As if reading Yumi’s mind, Sachiko-sama, sitting right next to her, whispered. The Yamayurikai budget was not used for tea, she seemed to be want to say. Each member brought in tea themselves, and cookies tended to be donations from classes that had cooking class.

“If you prefer, we have coffee and cocoa. They are, however, instant, so their taste is not top-notch.”

Rosa Chinensis smiled.

“So come and play any time you wish. As you are Sachiko’s sœur, you are a valuable friend.”

Lowering my guard and then nonchalantly firing off the main question. The Roses certainly were not a normal kind of people.

(That, that’s right, the crucial matter was still left unanswered.)

Sachiko-sama’s bombshell of a statement had left everyone staring at each other.

While certainly not having forgotten, Yumi honestly wished she could simply forget. She could not think of a reason. In fact, having ended up as a victim of an accident, she could not grasp why she was being made to sit in such a seat. It felt more like she was being summoned as a witness for a trial or a parliament.

“Oh, Rosa Chinensis, so you accept Sachiko’s assertion?”

“But Rosa Foetida, if Sachiko has made the decision, we are not in the right to pursue the matter, am I wrong? Rosa Gigantea, do you have an opinion?”

“I think whether we accept it or not should be left for later. At the very least, not while one of the protagonists is looking like her eyes might pop out in surprise.”

Immediately, everyone looked at Yumi.

(Pr, protagonist, does that mean me-!?)

“Poor thing, she’s struggling to grasp the circumstances.”

The Roses giggled. Yumi began thinking they were simply having fun at her expense.

(Of course, that has to be the case. It must.)

She could not think this gorgeous membership would have taken that earlier joke seriously. To begin with, regardless of what condition Sachiko-sama was in, there was too much impossibility in her making Yumi her little sister.

(Wait, wait.)

Maybe it's all a joke that Sachiko-sama is a part of. Of course, that must be it. Then it all makes sense. "We apologize, our joke might have gone too far." –if they were to say that now, I could laugh, return, "I knew it was weird," and squeeze out of this in one piece.

However.

"No matter what anyone says, Yumi is my little sister."

Sachiko-sama still refused to bend with her statement. What could she be thinking?

"Personally, I would like to ask Yumi-san too, not just Sachiko."

"M, me...!?"

Yumi flinched at the sudden shift of focus. As had been evident, Yumi had not been able to grasp the circumstances. It would be easy to say "I don't know," but she could surmise from the atmosphere that such a statement would simply corner Sachiko-sama into a further predicament.

"Umm-."

If possible, she wanted to be an ally for Sachiko-sama. However, how could you fight when you didn't know who was an ally and who was an enemy? She wished Sun Tzu could teach her the art of war right there.

"If I say so, it must be so, am I wrong? There is no need to confirm with Yumi."

She stands firm. Sachiko-sama looks unwilling to crumble her firm stance.

"Ah, umm..."

"Just be silent for the time being."

Zap! Even to her ally, Yumi, she was merciless.

Of course, had they really been sœurs, onee-sama's order would be absolute, so she would remain silent. But as that wasn't the case, Yumi felt Sachiko could have been a bit kinder.

“It seems you want to continue this conversation without Yumi-san, but I won’t allow that.”

Rosa Gigantea’s eyes sparkled.

“Sachiko. You simply dragged a passer-by into this mess for the sole purpose of escaping from the job imposed on you, right?”

(Job imposed on her...?)

The moment Yumi tilted her neck to the side, a person sitting far away raised her hand and said “wait.” That was Tsutako-san, who Yumi had forgotten existed.

“What is it, Takeshima Tsutako-san?”

“I am honoured that you know of me, Rosa Gigantea.”

“Yumi-san notwithstanding, there is no student that knows not of you. You are notorious, after all.”

I’m sorry I don’t stand out – Yumi whispered, deep inside.

“I am grateful.”

Tsutako-san continued after fixing the position of her glasses.

“I do not mind if you simply wish to consider me an outsider, but may I ask one thing, having been allowed to listen in on the conversation?”

“Of course?”

“I have no idea what is going on.”

Why Sachiko-sama had to declare Yumi to be her *sœur*. What connection that has with this “imposed job.” Tsutako-san seemed to be wanting to know.

“That is true, forgive us for not explaining.”

Rosa Foetida nodded. Sachiko-sama urgently stood up.

“There is nothing to explain. I chose a *sœur*, that is all. The meeting is over.”

“How selfish. If you wish to break up the meeting, you may return home by yourself. Of course, Yumi-san will stay here with us.”

Sachiko-sama had no choice but to sit back down to Rosa Chinensis’ words.

“To put it shortly, Sachiko decided to reject a job for the school festival she had previously accepted, today, after all this time.”

“Because you changed your story.”

Sachiko-sama complained, but Rosa Chinensis continued.

“The story did not change. Even if there was not enough information presented at the time, your own role remains unchanged.”

“Umm, ... what is Sachiko-sama’s job?”

Now Yumi asked.

“Ahh, we were short on explaining once again. Actually, for this year’s school festival we are planning to hold a play.”

“The Yamayurikai staff will get together and perform.”

It sounded extremely extravagant. Yumi wished greatly to be allowed to watch.

“Us three Roses, being part of the executive committee for the school festival, are busy every day. Of course, that means the boutons will have to be the central figures for the play.”

Rosa Foetida added that they planned to borrow members from the dance club as extras.

“Dance club, what play are you expecting to perform?”

Tsutako-san eagerly asked, it seems her blood as a cameraman was beginning to catch fire.

“Cinderella. The dance ball scene.”

Wow.

“And, and the lead role?”

Forgetting her situation entirely, Yumi also became excited. This one had her ‘closet Sachiko-fan blood’ catching fire.

“Of course, Sachiko.”

Kyaaa.

Sachiko-sama, as Cinderella.

Then Rei must be the prince!?! A splendid recital contest of two boutons.

It's beautiful just imagining. Too beautiful. It was getting into Takarazuka territory.

I have to secure a ticket, no matter what. I wonder if they hand out numbered tickets prior to the event, or something. It was something to look into before heading home.

Wait, hold on.

They did mention Sachiko-sama rejecting the job earlier. That means she wants to stop being the lead actress-.

“This year we intend to call upon a guest from Hanadera. Sachiko seems to object.”

“Guest?”

“It's customary. As both schools neighbor each other on the same hill, Lillian and Hanadera Institute help each others' student councils during the school festivals. We helped out during their school festival last month, too.”

It sounded like a neighborly relationship from the countryside. Funerals, weddings, fires, moving. No matter what, people are willing to take a break from work to help out, that sort of custom.

I had a culture shock when my grandfather died in Yamanashi, and his neighbor took a break from his bank, even though it was a busy time at the end of the term, to help take condolence calls. But to see the same thing carried out so close, and by high school students, at that.

“I have no objection to the inviting of a guest. But I see no reason why the Hanadera council leader has to be the prince.”

Sachiko-sama muttered.

Ah, I see. Rei-sama is not the prince.

“Then what would you have him do? Cinderella? Will Sachiko do the prince, then?”

Yumi was probably not the only one who thought, ‘that might be more interesting.’

“Why does it end up like that. I was just thinking, maybe back-stage work like carrying around props-.”

“How could you even insinuate making a guest do menial labour? We were the judges for their main event. Even if it might have worked, they did not request us to pour tea. Although Sachiko might not have known this, having skipped out on the appointed day?”

“What I cannot stand is that we are changing role distribution now, two weeks before the school festival.”

It was a verbal dispute between Sachiko-sama and Rosa Chinensis. A duel between sisters.

“And as I said, Hanadera’s council leader was intended to be the prince from the start.”

“That’s a lie. Rei was saying the prince’s lines all the way up to yesterday.”

“I was told from the onset I was just a stand-in.”

Rei-sama raised her hand to fan away the electric pot’s vapours.

“See, look. Aside from Sachiko, everyone knew. If you are still in disbelief, you may speak to the handicrafts’ club whom are working on the costumes. The princes’ costume is being tailored to suit Hanadera’s council leader.”

“So you decided this while I was not in attendance.”

Sachiko-sama grinded her teeth, frustrated at how her position was becoming disadvantageous.

“Oh, wake up, we have no need to call secret meetings... Ah, however, come to think of it, Sachiko did skip out on a number of meetings. We might have decided upon this then. However, in that case you brought this upon yourself, did you not? You always fled when we had a meeting with Hanadera. This is what happens when you never deal with your dislike of men.”

(Dislike of men?)

I got it! Yumi clapped her hands in her mind.

To combine everything so far, Sachiko-sama accepted the leading role for the play, as decreed by the Roses. Whether it was intended or whether it was an unfortunate communications miss, only Sachiko-sama missed out on the notice that Hanadera's council leader was to play the prince's part. Having found this out today, Sachiko-sama became as furious as the raging flames, and proclaimed that she was withdrawing from the leading role. The reason is, -well, because she hated men.

(But, hating men...)

She'd never thought about it, but Sachiko-sama and the description 'hating men' seemed to fit together perfectly. There were students in Yumi's class whom admitted to having arrhenphobia or simply hating men, and she did have the same sort of aura.

(I wonder if she dislikes her father, too...)

As she absent-mindedly had such thoughts, she felt as if she was being stared at, and when she looked up, she noticed Rosa Gigantea, jaw protruding and eyes narrowed, laughing at her.

"You're amusing."

"Huh?"

"You were going through life's many phases."

"Eh!?"

Yumi rushed to suppress her face. However, it was too late. She couldn't take back the 'life's many phases,' and a great wave of red attacked her face, like it was delivering a finishing blow.

"You have an unpredictable nature, you're pretty fun."

That.

Is almost definitely not praise. Even though my grade in Japanese is rather average, I can tell that much, Rosa Gigantea.

“Hmm. However, how does Sachiko-sama disapproving of the lead role tie into her making Yumi her little sister? The plate outside says ‘in a meeting,’ but does that mean you were discussing a role change?”

Tsutako-san continued her my-pace questioning. However, Rosa Foetida smiled bitterly and lowered her shoulders.

“Well it was meeting, in the beginning.”

The staff members who packed into the Rose Mansion after school every day for school festival preparations. Presumably, they intended to discuss a number of problems that had arisen.

They began the meeting without waiting for Shimako-san, who was going to be late because of day duties. Plus, as she was just a bouton, her attendance was not mandatory.

To explain things a bit, the Yamayurikai is the student council, as it would be called in an ordinary school. The official staff members that would be called the “staff” were the three Roses, Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Foetida. These three filled the student president, vice president, secretary and accounting roles, as per the management structure passed down through generations.

No one really knows when the student council roles became synonymous with the Roses. Whether the chicken or the egg came first. Anyways, when someone mentions the Yamayurikai staff, they mean the red, white and yellow Roses.

However, beginning with the student council, they are also the School Festival Executive Committee, they organize the seasonal events such as the Freshmen Welcome Party and the Graduate Farewell Party, and though not as gaudy also are the Budget Committee and hold general student meetings, and perform a vast number of other small duties, certainly too much for the three to handle alone. As such, you could almost call them apprentices, but the Roses have their sœurs lend their hands as assistants. As long as there is no stunning upset, the Yamayurikai management tends to be passed down in such a way, so that the little sisters of the Roses are called boutons. Everyone accepts them as Roses waiting to blossom.

“Most of the agenda was easy to make decisions on, so the meeting was going smoothly.”

“Then Sachiko began complaining about the play appointment.”

“When we teased her to silence her, she exploded. Sachiko carries herself well outside, so she’s popular, but she has a rather violent temperament, so it is extremely difficult to keep a handle on her.”

The Roses said plainly.

“Tease!?! That was not mere teasing, you were driving a stake into my heart!”

Sachiko-sama was agitated by the reminder.

“You said I have no right to speak, as I cannot even find a *petite sœur*.”

“I did say that, but that did not mean ‘Regardless of who it is, get a *petite sœur*.’ To grab the first first-year you see upon stepping outside, how hasty, how simplistic. You are not **warashibechouja** after all.”

(...Warashibechouja.)

A bead of sweat appeared on Yumi’s forehead.

(So that would make me a straw.)

Well, thanks to their explanations, I can see what’s going on, but this is becoming ridiculous.

“Warashibechouja, that is splendid. If I remember correctly, it had a happy ending, did it not?”

Sachiko-sama, now you’re making no sense.

“So you intended to simply hold onto Yumi-san until you found a better person? I cannot accept such a relationship. As your grand *sœur* even my dignity would be in tatters.”

Rosa Chinensis sighed, disgusted. However, Sachiko immediately responded, staring straight at onee-sama.

“I will take care of Yumi forever. I will train her and turn her into a magnificent Rose. There is no problem then, correct?”

Even if that was prompted by the way the conversation was going, was it wise to say such big talk? It would just magnify her shame when she would have to take it back.

“Stop saying things as you think of them, Sachiko.”

“Why do you claim I am simply thinking as I speak?”

“You just met Yumi-san just now. How could you make such a promise?”

Invisible fireworks kept scattering.

However, it was three versus one. Plus, the three were the strongest third-years among the Lillian Girls’ Academy High School students.

“If I am not mistaken, you did not even know Yumi-san’s name until just earlier?”

“That...”

Sachiko-sama’s tone fell. As if seizing the opportunity, Rosa Gigantea spoke softly.

“Isn’t that enough? That’s enough stubbornness.”

That’s right, Yumi thought. It was better to admit defeat in a dignified manner. If she did not want to be Cinderella, there would surely be other ways to resolve the matter. Little sisters are not there to be impulsively bought. She should think harder and find a more suitable partner.

Of course

If Sachiko-sama were to choose another first-year, it would be a shock. Even if it was arbitrary, Yumi was happy Sachiko-sama announced her to be a *sœur*.

“Please wait.”

Just then, Shimako-san stood up.

“I think Sachiko-sama and Yumi-san did not just meet.”

Until then, she had faded into the background like she didn't exist. Like Rosa Foetida en bouton and her petite sœur, it might be that boutons are supposed not supposed to intrude unless needed. Sachiko-sama seemed to be the exception.

“And why do you think so?”

Rosa Gigantea asked her own sœur.

“Because Yumi-san came to visit Sachiko-sama.”

“Eh? I thought Shimako brought them here?”

Rosa Chinensis shifted her eyes between Yumi, Tsutako-san and Shimako-san.

“It seems we did forget to ask why Yumi-san and Tsutako-san came here.”

Apparently everyone simply assumed that Shimako-san had brought her personal friends, or had brought students volunteering to help with the school festival, or wanted to bring up a problem with a club or the gymnasium usage, or something of the sort. Of course, there was no helping this, as Sachiko-sama's hysteria and the collision and the sœur declaration had left everyone in a confused state.

“Is this true?”

Rosa Gigantea directly asked Yumi, not Sachiko-sama.

“...Yes.”

Wrangling out an almost inaudible voice, Yumi answered. Even though she had nothing to be faulted for, she disliked these situations. It felt like when her mother was asking for her reasons after a sibling fight as a child.

“I have proof, too.”

Tsutako-san took the opportunity to cut in. She handed something to Rosa Chinensis.

(Ah, the photo from the morning...!)

She only got a glimpse, but there was no doubt it was the two-shot photo.

But still. The situation seemed to be settling down, but the two classmates, whatever they were thinking, complicated everything again.

“I see, so the two had already met before. Excuse my discourtesy.”

The snapshot made its rounds, and finally fell before Yumi and Sachiko-sama. In this way, Sachiko-sama learnt of the existence of the photo.

Yumi lay in wait, curious as to how Sachiko-sama would react.

When Sachiko-sama took hold of the photo, first she tilted her head to the side the slightest bit, and then slowly began to look at Yumi.

She’s contorting her forehead. But it wasn’t a look of displeasure.

(This-, this puzzled look-.)

Sachiko-sama whispered so that no one else could hear.

“I wonder when this happened.”

I knew it.

She had completely forgotten.

Even though it had occurred just that morning, the fact that she had already forgotten meant that Yumi was too bland to remember. Either that or, for Sachiko-sama, it was too trivial to bother remembering.

Either way, Yumi was disappointed. If her face wasn’t remembered, then there was no need to fix her reputation.

However, with that knowledge, Sachiko-sama’s actions were nothing short of bold. In her mind, she had taken a first-year she’d never met and declared her to be her sœur.

She has no right to be angry at being called warashibechouja.

“As you can see, Yumi and I, as shown in the photo, have already established an intimate relationship.”

Wait a second.

Now armed with a prop, Sachiko-sama seemed to relinquish her hysteria and adopt a more logical attack.

What fast regeneration. The whisper of “I wonder when this happened” must have dried at the rate of a gas-based drying machine, such was the speed at which she recovered.

Sachiko-sama persisted.

“Plus, I feel you have no right to intrude on who I choose to be my *sœur*?”

It seemed she was fully intent on keeping to her lie about Yumi to the bitter end.

No, that’s not the case. Sachiko-sama probably wants to convert it from a random declaration to reality. It was hard to say, but probably to get out of being Cinderella.

“Indeed. Even if you came up with it on the spot, to have qualms about you proactively choosing a petite *sœur* or intending to tear you two apart is not within our rights. You are first and foremost a student in this academy.”

Even so, Yumi felt they had to say something. –Lest this goes in a bad direction.

Sachiko-sama was still *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*, and was destined to become *Rosa Chinensis* in half of a year. For her to call this normal, average student her *sœur*, even for a moment, was synonymous with creating an uproar. There was no need to even test this.

In that case, Tsutako-san is unique enough to be a better fit. Even so, why did I have to be the one to run into Sachiko-sama.

“Okay, I approve.”

Eventually, *Rosa Chinensis* said that, and Sachiko-sama’s expression brightened. With just that, the atmosphere in the world transformed into a glittering space. Right, just like the scene where Cinderella has magic cast upon her.

“However-.”

Rosa Chinensis continued, smiling.

“This does not mean you do not have to be Cinderella. Just remember that.”

“The promise!?”

Sachiko-sama slammed the table with enough force to overturn cups. Cinderella after the magic had worn off.

“Promise?”

Rosa Chinensis laughed scornfully.

“You made that up yourself, did you not? I clearly said that people without a little sister have no right to speak. Therefore, feel free to speak, from now on.”

“Then please remove me from the role.”

“No.”

“Why.”

“Hating men does not fall under ‘a critical reason for which the change of roles is the only solution.’ In your case, it is not like you have an allergic reaction from seeing men, or you feel like vomiting, or anything, correct? Just because you say ‘I do not want to’ does not mean the world will conform to your wishes. We call that self-centered. I am sure you, as the next Rosa Chinensis, are aware of that fact?”

With that, Rosa Chinensis, put her hand to her cheek and exaggerated despair.

“I am sure this comes back to my inadequacy at teaching. But I had no idea you would not understand such a basic thing.”

What a pity. Sachiko-sama had no retort.

Perhaps in this way, the Roses become stronger from generation to generation. It felt like I had just experienced a dreadful dressing room scene.

“I am leaving.”

Sachiko-sama abruptly stood up.

“Wait.”



Rosa Chinensis remained sitting, looking up at the sœur whom she had just crushed.

“Let me confirm one thing. What is Yumi-san to Sachiko?”

“Eh?”

“Do you still feel as though Yumi-san is your sœur?”

Rosa Chinensis is probably asking whether, now that the role of Cinderella is unrelated, Sachiko still asserts Yumi as her sœur.

“Of course-.”

-I retract what I said before. Of course Sachiko-sama would say that.

After all, making Yumi her sœur was a big act to extricate herself from being Cinderella. With that no longer possible, there was no reason for her to keep Yumi, whom she didn't know the face nor name of, as her little sister.

However.

“Of course, Yumi is my little sister.”

Sachiko-sama said something unexpected. Yumi sat up and apprehensively searched Sachiko-sama's face for clues.

She was hysteric until just recently, and she was confused, so maybe she messed up her use of Japanese. Surely she must have meant to say 'she is not my little sister.'

“Onee-sama, are you attempting to slight me? You make it sound as if I made Yumi my sœur for the purpose of using her.”

Woah, woah, but wasn't that the case? However, because the opponent was Sachiko-sama, Yumi held back on her desire to interject.

Will someone please say something, in my stead?

“Splendid.”

Rosa Chinensis nodded, satisfied.

“If you were to throw away Yumi-san now, I would have had to cut our sisterly ties.”

Why do things have to become so outrageous?

There was no premonition of this when I woke up. When I stepped out of my house, when I walked through the school gates, nothing was different than usual.

Only, my sailor collar was bent. From something so trivial, I was sucked into such a big incident. I felt like a person in a vortex.

However, for someone stuck in a vortex, it kind of felt like I was in the outfield.

“Did you hand her your rosary?”

“Not yet. I would not mind performing the ceremony in front of everyone, if you so desire?”

“That sounds good.”

Wait a second.

Is no one going to stop Sachiko-sama? At this rate, this average person is going to become the petite sœur of Rosa Chinensis en bouton. This isn't the time to be saying “that sounds good” while smiling and sipping cooled tea!

“What's wrong? She looks like she wants to say something.”

Rosa Gigantea noticed Yumi's expression.

“I wonder if she has qualms about performing the ceremony here and now.”

“Oh come now. Is there any student dissatisfied with receiving a rosary to become a formal sœur?”

Quipped Rosa Foetida, as matter-of-factly as if she were repeating an equation.

“But see, some people prefer to be alone.”

“Well aren't you romantic.”

That's not what I mean, that's not what I mean, but-. Yumi sat speechless, unable to find the timing to butt into the Roses' musings.

As for what Sachiko-sama was doing while Yumi stuttered, she had quickly reached into her breast pocket and retrieved her rosary.

(Are you serious!?)

Once you place that over an underclassman's neck, you can no longer take it back. It might seem over-the-top, but the sanctity of the give-and-receive of a rosary is like that of a marriage registration.

Or maybe I was the one being insane. This is all a dream. The typical pattern, where the alarm rings as the rosary is placed around my neck, waking me up.

(But do you feel pain while dreaming?)

When I hit my butt in the hallway, it actually hurt. I tested this by pinching my arm, and it did hurt.

“Stay still, Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama orders. The rosary in her hand was on stand-by above Yumi's head, its lace opened wide for ease of placement.

If that hung around my neck, I would become the petite sœur of Sachiko-sama, whom I adored.

Botamochi from the shelf. A top from the gourd.

No, more like a horse. A spinning top from a gourd is no surprise. But if you plucked a horse out it would be like ‘are you serious?’

Ahh, this isn't the time to be thinking about that. There is only one thing to think about.

Is this okay?

Is it okay to just become a sœur like this?

“Um, umm...”

“Wait.”

Yumi and Shimako-san simultaneously shouted.

“Sachiko-sama and the other onee-samas, everyone forgot the most important thing.”

“Important thing?”

“Yumi-san's feelings.”

“Yumi-san's feelings?”

The Roses scoffed.

“Do you think she would refuse the rosary?”

“I will not presume. However, I feel it is proper to hear her feelings.”

Shimako-san said this firmly. While you might not expect it from how she looks, when it comes to it, she stands up for her opinions. As expected from Rosa Gigantea en bouton. Even so, as a fellow first-year, it was an envious trait.

Anyways, the ceremony was halted, so I was thankful of Shimako-san.

“Indeed. Even if it is an offer from Rosa Chinensis en bouton, there are those like Shimako who say ‘I’m sorry.’”

Rosa Chinensis lightly threw a ball to **check** Shimako-san. It seems that rumour was true.

“However, Yumi-san is Sachiko-sama’s devotee. Of course she wouldn’t refuse?”

Tsutako-san spoke to Shimako-san, almost like idle chatter.

“I agree. She... Yumi-san, just by observing her I could tell she was a Sachiko fan almost immediately.”

Rosa Gigantea nodded. I see, she saw all of my facial expressions because she was observing.

If that’s the case, maybe Sachiko-sama likewise figured out in an instant, and that would explain why she had no hesitation in dragging Yumi into the mess.

And by her side, Sachiko-sama was rolling the rosary in her hand, seemingly oblivious to the outcome of the discussion. It seemed she was supremely confident that Yumi would not refuse the rosary.

“Still. There is that chance. Shall we ask, then?”

Rosa Chinensis turned to Yumi and asked.

“Sachiko wants to make you her sœur. Have you the intent of accepting?”

Asked so directly, Yumi lost her words.

Become Sachiko-sama’s petite sœur was a fairy tale, like marrying a Hollywood Star. But because it was an unattainable dream, you could continue to dream, and enjoy it.

And now, a ticket for an express train to that dream was in her grasp.

It would be a lie not to say ‘yes.’

But deep down, she thought, ‘is that okay?’

Everyone stared at the silent Yumi. Then, Yumi solidified her resolve and spoke.

“I apologize. I cannot become Sachiko-sama’s *sœur*.”

Everyone began murmuring.

“Now it’s getting interesting.”

Rosa Gigantea irresponsibly laughed, Rosa Chinensis rolled her eyes, and Rosa Foetida was petrified with jaws agape.

“Do I, have the right, to ask why?”

Sachiko-sama trembled a bit.

“I was certainly a fan of Sachiko-sama, but.”

“What, did you become afraid after seeing her true self?”

Rosa Chinensis cut in and asked Yumi.

“Not at all.”

Although it was slightly different from her selfish image of Sachiko-sama, she was glad she could see the human side – her sulking and her being angry. Because of that, she felt she couldn’t attribute it to disliking Sachiko-sama’s personality.

“It’s hard to explain, but. Just because I’m a fan, it doesn’t mean I would do anything to become her little sister...”

“Hmm.”

“Because as a fan, I do have a bit of pride.”

“It’s disgraceful to be expected to follow orders, tail wagging and all.”

“Not quite, but...”

I thought it was hard formulating how I felt into words.

“Well, either way, Sachiko got rejected again.”

“Poor Sachiko, two consecutive upset losses.”

“The first-years this year are really something.”

The Roses surrounded Sachiko-sama. Although rather than consoling, they seemed to be having fun.

“If you think I’m pitiful, will you do something about Cinderella?”

Sachiko-sama forced a smile.

“Oh dear, Sachiko, who hates being pitied, is starting to beg.”

“How rare.”

“You say to do something, but do you have anything in mind?”

Even though they know.

If you were to step back and look at the whole scene, you would see an interesting image. Sachiko-sama had turned into a toy for the Roses.

“Drop either me or the Hanadera council leader from the leading roles.”

“Oh what are you saying, just because you were rejected by Yumi does not mean we have to feel that much pity for you.”

Of course, that sort of logic wouldn’t fly. However, I began to think it was a bit cruel to force her to dance with a man like this.

She was so averse to co-starring with a man that she tried to make Yumi her little sister.

“Ah, um.”

Yumi suddenly shouted out.

“You were still here?”

Perhaps because she was still stung by the rejection, Sachiko-sama sounded bitter. Even though, as they stood next to each other, she clearly would have known had she left, how uncute.

“Um, would it be possible to tell the Hanadera council leader to step aside this time?”

“Are you trying to back up Sachiko now?”

Rosa Chinensis swayed her jaw-length hair happily.

“It’s not about backing her.”

Yumi surprised herself, noticing that she was opining to Rosa Chinensis.

For whatever reason, she felt different from usual.

“We sent a formal commission to the Hanadera council leader, so that is impossible.”

“Then how about swapping Sachiko-sama’s role, at the very least?”

“Swapping roles?”

“For example, swapping with Shimako-san’s role. Shimako-san is just as pretty as Sachiko-sama. Plus she is also *Rosa Gigantea en bouton*.”

Shimako-san, at having been singled out, shot a look of “how could you say that!” Yumi put her hands together and apologized, in her mind. Even though it was a supposition, maybe it was a bad idea.

“Shimako, a first-year, for the lead role?”

“I think first-year second-year is inconsequential.”

“That is true.”

I thought, just one more push. *Rosa Chinensis* stared up at the ceiling in thought.

“Since it was a communication mishap, it seemed like everyone was laying the blame solely on Sachiko-sama. But everyone also-”

And then a voice cut in.

“Silence!”

Sachiko-sama, standing next to me, suddenly shouted.

“If you say any more, I will not forgive you.”

“Sachiko-sama...”

Rather than the usual hysteria, this was a more weighted tone.

“I understand you are saying this for my sake. However, please do not trouble the onee-samas over me.”

Sachiko-sama laid a soft hand on Yumi’s shoulder, then snapped right and lowered her head to the Roses.

“I apologize. I will scold her later.”

The shoulder she was touching felt sad. Even though I’d tried to help Sachiko-sama, it might have been a complete whiff.

“True.”

Rosa Gigantea mumbled.

“What Yumi-san tried to say is true. As Sachiko did just find out today, and the responsibility for that lies at least partly within us. How about we think about the role a bit more.”

The other Roses immediately began countering. No matter the reason, the costume and posters were already ordered, and as it was almost time for the dress rehearsals, role re-distribution was too tough, seemed to be the strongest argument.

“However, forcing her to dance with a man is wrong, too. For Sachiko’s sake, as well as ours.”

“I see. People who coerce their juniors into doing things are not fit for leading the student council. Plus, ‘Cinderella’ is going to be our banner production.”

“But it’s hard changing roles now.”

Rosa Gigantea happily cut into Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida’s worries.

“Basically, we just need to make Sachiko willing to play Cinderella.”

“Even though we cannot change the Prince?”

“Yup. And without changing the cast.”

Rosa Gigantea explained.

“Lets have a bet.”

“Bet?”

“Unsparingly forcing her to do Cinderella is unfair. So we’ll give Sachiko a chance, and if she loses, she has to undergo the penalty.”

I see.

However, what is bothersome is how she seems confident that Sachiko-sama would lose.

Rosa Gigantea whispered into Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida’s ears, already gaining their approval. It seemed like she was using Sachiko’s numerical inferiority to her advantage.

“If I win?”

Sachiko-sama asked, unperturbed.

“I’ll promise this, once and for all, you can step out of Cinderella.”

“I understand. I accept the bet.”

“Sachiko-sama! You’re accepting the bet even without asking what it is!?”

Even though it might have been meddlesome, even Yumi burst out at this.

“It hardly matters. It makes no difference if I lose.”

Sachiko-sama’s rather surprisingly a gambler. Even though she was fastidious, she didn’t seem to disgust bets.

“Well, as per Yumi-san’s request, I’ll explain the rules of the bet.”

Rosa Gigantea simply stated, suppressing a laugh.

“Whether Sachiko can make Yumi-san her sœur or not. Of course, Sachiko will be betting on ‘yes.’”

“Eh!?”

The one that was surprised the most was, of course, Yumi.

(I thought I was done here!?)

“You were already refused once. Getting her to accept your rosary by the school festival is almost impossible. However, the moment it happens, you’re immediately off the hook. In exchange, you will participate in dress rehearsals as normal until that time comes.”

“I see. If I do not want to hold hands with Hanadera’s council leader, I need to seduce Yumi as soon as possible, correct?”

“That’s right. We will not interfere in any way. Winning or losing is entirely up to you. I think the terms are pretty fair, would you agree?”

“Sounds better than I expected.”

Sachiko-sama already looked like she was confident of winning.

“Oh, and, one more thing.”

Rosa Gigantea spun around to Yumi and spoke.

“No accepting the rosary simply to be useful to Sachiko. The moment you say okay and the Cinderella role becomes vacant, you’re stepping in.”

“Eh, why me?”

“What are you saying? When you accept the rosary, you become Sachiko’s *sœur*. Of course it becomes your duty to fill the vacancy left by your *onee-sama*.”

Are they insane?

“I, I, I can’t replace Sachiko-sama! That, that’s impossible!”

“No worries. You won’t accept the rosary. As long as you stay true to that, Sachiko is guaranteed to lose.”

And if it falls to Yumi, that would be amusing in itself, says Rosa Gigantea, a dreadful thing to suppose.

“Then, then rather than a bet between the Roses and Sachiko-sama, it becomes a match between Sachiko-sama and I-.”

“You can look at it that way... Well, if you’re going to regret anything, regret the Buddhist heart that made you think, even for an instant, of helping Sachiko.”

Rosa Foetida’s word choice of “Buddhist heart” felt out of place at Lillian Girls’ Academy.

“Unbelievable.”

Tsutako-san muttered, as they walked along the ginkgo tree roadside.

“Why didn’t you just say ‘ok’? If Yumi-san became her little sister, it would have been so easy to negotiate.”

The autumn sun was falling quickly, and when Yumi was freed from the Rose Mansion, you could already call it twilight.

“Then Tsutako-san, you were worried more about the photo than me, during that whole time?”

“Of course. Who do you think I am?”

The photography club ace, Takeshima Tsutako-san, I think.

“But it’s getting interesting.”

Tsutako-san said the same thing as Rosa Gigantea.

“Because it’s someone else’s business.”

“I’m at ease because it’s someone else. Ah, that’s right, now it’s Yumi-san’s turn to finally collect land tax. It’s disappointing that another precious *sœur*-less person leaves the world, but, well, if the opponent is Sachiko-sama, it’s only a matter of time, I think? It would have been more amusing to designate a deadline date, in my opinion.”

“Tsutako-san, you think Sachiko-sama is going to win?”

“Because Yumi-san seems so much less energetic about this.”

“...”

To be honest, I was thinking the same thing. When attacked from head-on, I can’t help but wonder if I would end up shaking my head vertically, crushed by sheer power.

“But. Cinderella is on the line, so I can’t just lose.”

When I raised my fist with resolve, Tsutako-san corrected, “That word choice makes you sound like you want to play it.”

When we arrived at Maria-sama’s statue, we stopped and put our hands together. This is customary. Heading to school and leaving from school, every day one time each. Actually, any time you passed by this statue, you always greet her.

(Maria-sama, today was a terrible day. If it’s possible, please return me to my peaceful days as soon as you can.)

I opened my eyes and turned around, and then.

“Wait right there.”

It was *déjà vu*. Just as in the morning, an icy voice that seems to have come from Maria-sama.

“Sachiko-sama...”

Whether she had come running, she was panting and standing roughly 10 meters behind Yumi.

“Remember this. I will absolutely become your *sœur*.”

Even amidst the odorous fallen gingko nuts, the figure of Sachiko-sama standing straight and proclaiming the challenge was awesome.

“Gokigenyou. Do have a safe trip home.”

Having said all she wanted, Sachiko-sama smiled and vanished off to the school buildings.

“She looked pretty cool.”

Tsutako-san quipped, as we watched her off.

Even Yumi, that moment, felt her resolve teeter off its base.

Tuesday of Storms

Part 1.

Rumours circulate quickly.

By noon the next day, every high school student had learnt of the fact that Yumi had rejected Sachiko-sama.

“Tsutako-san, did you tell?”

“Of course not. These things are far more amusing watching than participating.” In that case, the Roses probably proactively spread the rumor, fueling the fire with their peculiar sense of humor. Of course, there was the possibility that Sachiko-sama was the originating source, too.

It wasn't that I wanted to track down who spread the rumor so I could complain, especially because we had made no mention of the topic being secret, but since this was an obstacle for my desire for a peaceful life, I think I at least had reason to complain.

First came the stares of classmates, who, upon meeting eyes with Yumi, must have thought, “as if,” and then looked away. No one spoke directly to her.

“There's a weird rumor circulating about you, but you shouldn't pay it any heed.”

Katsura-san concluded during class.

The students in the same class already knew how Yumi looked, but because they didn't know the gap between truth and fiction, they settled into a pattern of being confused, and then gradually accepting that it was probably a baseless rumor.

However the reverberation among the students who didn't know Yumi (and granted, those people were far more common) was great.

A person of such magnificent traits that Sachiko-sama would shift gears after being rejected by Tōdō Shimako-. The rumor took on a life of its own, and many people gathered in front of the first-year peach-class room during recesses.

“That they need someone to tell them who’s the subject of the rumor is fortunate, but painful.”

Tsutako-san mumbled as they put away their textbooks after the fourth-period class.

“Indeed. I feel conflicted.”

Yumi laughed drily. As Tsutako-san said, Yumi was the perfect image of ordinary, so people who had come to see someone that stood out like Shimako-san had to be pointed in the right direction.

Her classmates, however, were being thoughtful, and so they constantly guarded her with “Yumi-san is not here right now.” Because of this, she was able to walk out through everyone and even go to wash her hands.

“Alright, then I have some advice too. Don’t be in the classroom during lunch.”

Tsutako-san spoke quickly, while smiling peacefully and acting like she was simply having a normal conversation.

“Why?”

“I caught news that the newspaper club was intending to interview Yumi-san. The newspaper club is persistent. They have a lot of sensationalist, paparazzi drama-lovers.”

“Fueh...”

She turned pale. Paparazzi would be like, those people that ask, “Did you really marry?” or “Did you really divorce?” or something out of the blue, right? Sachiko-sama is powerful in her own right, but the newspaper club seemed like something she preferred to be away from entirely.

“Understand? Okay, then, pick up your lunch.”

Tsutako-san pulled out Yumi’s boxed lunch from her bag, hanging from the side of her desk, and, forcing Yumi to grab ahold of it, began pushing her.

“Oh? Yumi-san where are you going?”

Katsura-san asked curiously, as they usually ate together.

“I’m borrowing Yumi-san for a second.”

Tsutako-san answered in Yumi’s stead. Then, she swiped her own lunch and urgently whispered, “Hurry hurry.” As if she were saying, “Hurry or the newspaper club’ll arrive.”

“Woah.”

Just as they walked out in the hallway, three students whose appearances screamed “newspaper club!” were standing in wait.

“...Too late.”

Tsutako-san’s regretful voice only reached Yumi’s ear.

Camera, tape recorder, memobook... Of course, despite calling them “paparazzi” earlier, they did not have a hand microphone or one of those shoulder cameras.

“Oh, gokigenyou, you were part of this class, too?”

The one in the lead noticed Tsutako-san and began speaking. Newspaper club and photography club, as expected, they’d had previous relationships.

“Gokigenyou, and what matter brings the newspaper club here today?”

Even though she knew everything, Tsutako-san smiled, feigning ignorance.

“We came to interview Fukuzawa Yumi-san. Delightful timing, would you mind calling her here?”

“Umm. Yumi-san, Yumi-san... is.”

Acting senile, Tsutako-san looked back into the classroom without giving Yumi even a single glance. Her eyes scanned the peach-class room, beyond the door from whence they had come.

The classroom was in the midst of getting ready for lunch. Some clumped their desks together and laid down table-cloths, some distributed milk and bread and other such ordered food, students from other classes joined in... All in all, it was chaotic.

“Ah, I think she might be Yumi-san, over there?”

Tsutako-san acted like she was adjusting her classes and pointed to the furthest reaches of the class.

“I’ll go call her, wait one second.”

Just as Yumi was wondering what Tsutako-san intended to do, she took a step into the class, then stopped, abruptly, and turned around, as if remembering something.

“Natsume-san, you were in a hurry, correct? There is no need for me to keep you waiting, go on ahead.”

“Huh? ...Ah, yes.”

As Tsutako-san had deliberately looked into Yumi’s eyes and winked, she assumed that meant her.

“Then I will go on ahead.”

Yumi gave Tsutako-san and the newspaper club members a quick bow and left the scene. As she walked down the hallway, she thought of Natsume Souseki -> Fukuzawa Yukichi -> Fukuzawa Yumi, and clasped her hands in realization. The connecting point was the figures on printed money.

Even so, she wondered what Tsutako-san was going to do. Because it was her, she might be able to weasel out by claiming, “I got the wrong person,” but despite claiming things were more interesting as an observer than a participant, she was pretty caring.

As Tsutako-san was gone, she wondered where to go. As she walked down the stairs in such thought, a voice called out.

“Yumi-san. Over here.”

When she looked down the handrail, she noticed a white hand beckoning. When she leaned out to look, Shimako-san’s face popped out.

“Let’s eat lunch together.”

Yumi rhythmically skipped down the stairs, relieved to see that angelic face.

Shimako-san led Yumi to her personal seat.

“Do you eat here every day?”

Here was behind the auditorium. One cherry blossom tree stood among the gingko in an obscure place. There, the two opened their lunches and sat.

“Only seasonal. When the weather is nice during the spring and autumn.”

“The summer?”

“This cherry blossom tree, it gathers a lot of caterpillars, and I am not too fond of that. But the gingko falls soon after, and that I do eagerly await.”

Shimako-san wistfully stared up at the gingko trees while plucking taro out of her varnished, square lunch box. It was slightly off balance from how she looked like a Western-style doll. The talking about gingko, the tasteful lunch box, oh and, incidentally, the boiled potato balls, too.

“...You are a bit odd, Shimako-san.”

“Am I? But as long as they do not get squished, gingko does not smell too awful. And that is why the gingko pathway is a sight of misery.”

“Shimako-san, does that mean you happen to take home uncrushed gingko nuts?”

“Precisely.”

Shimako-san laughed happily, fufufu.

“Why do you like gingko?”

“Yumi-san, do you hate them?”

With the question turned, she thought. Hmm, she had no idea people actually ate them.

Until today, she thought it was like the shiso leaves for sashimi platters, or like the decoration placed on savory egg custard.

“I love things like gingko and lily and soya beans. My parents always say it is unlike a normal teenaged girl, but I think taste preference is affected by your environment, don't you? Because I was raised by them, I like bitter tastes, most likely.”

When I asked, I learnt that Shimako-san's house is almost purely Japanese-style architecture, with no Western-style rooms. Image-wise, though, I would have guessed a great, chalk-white mansion complete with a grand piano. Also, a lunch of club sandwiches or fried chicken seemed to suit her looks better.

"Not what I look like?"

Shimako-san asked, staring intently at Yumi's face.

"Mm, a bit, but it's unexpectedly interesting anyways."

Told so honestly, Shimako-san giggled and responded, "Yumi-san, too."

"I am honestly glad we were able to become acquaintances."

The two of them looked at the sky.

The clouds slowly flowed across the clear sky.

Sky-blue and the white of clouds, and below that, the sun's rays shone through the yellow ginkgo trees, casting a golden sparkle upon the ground. If I were a painter, I would have been able to paint that scene into a giant canvas. Or if I were a poet, into a poem, or a song, if I were a musician, saving that scene for eternity.

"Shimako-san, why did you reject Sachiko-sama?"

When she spontaneously asked, Shimako-san responded, "Should I not return that question to you?"

"That's right, we both did the same thing."

Even so, it wasn't as though their affinity got closer. She felt that Shimako-san and her approach to Sachiko-sama was completely different.

"In my case."

Shimako-san looked up at an oblique angle, still in thought.

"I am not a fit for Sachiko-sama. Conversely, Sachiko-sama is not a fit for me, either."

"In what way?"

"I like Sachiko-sama, but we look for different things in our partners. Subsequently, what we can offer one another differs."

“...That sounds too complicated for me.”

“Sachiko-sama said the same thing. She understood what I meant to say, but that it was too vague. Even I would have to admit that it is simply a vague feeling that I have.”

What you can offer the companion and what you seek from a companion. Because it is a one-on-one relationship, it makes sense that a concurrence of that would be of the utmost importance, but-

“If Shimako-san was no good, wouldn't that mean there is no one who could fit with Sachiko-sama?”

“I do not know. Of course, because such a person is so hard to find, she probably is still left with no *petite sœur*. But Rosa *Chinensis* and Sachiko-sama do face each other, as you saw. Compatibility is possible.”

“I see...”

Then perhaps that would mean Shimako-san complemented Rosa *Gigantea* well, thought Yumi. After all, rather than two-timing, it was a decision borne out of taking a careful look at herself and her opponents.

“Well, shall we return?”

Shimako-san stood up. Fifth period would start in five minutes.

“The newspaper club also has class, so it should be safe.”

As a consequence of the conversation earlier, Yumi took care not to step on ginkgo nuts.

She had never paid the ground much attention, but upon closer inspection, the fallen ginkgo nuts looked like ripe plums.

“In the case of Sachiko-sama, I think her shock was far greater when you rejected her than when I did.”

“Why?”

“I believe she felt it coming, in my case. We acted as temporary sisters, so I am sure she had come to notice that we would not be perfect fits.”

But in the case of Yumi, she had supreme confidence.

“But she didn’t seem to have been that shocked?”

“She is a contrarian who absolutely despises losing. So when she is truly vexed, she refuses to show it.”

The two of them lined up and walked up the empty stairs. They overtook the meticulous old teachers whom were entering their classrooms with a greeting, and the chime rang. They had arrived in front of the classroom with a minute to spare.

The newspaper club as well as other students had, as Shimako-san expected, already cleared out of the hallways.

Shimako-san spoke as she opened the rear door.

“Yumi-san and Sachiko-sama may be compatible fits.”

Yumi mumbled, “What are you saying,” as she stepped in and looked at the backs of the students who had arrived earlier.

How could Yumi be a fit and Shimako-san, who could even describe Sachiko-sama as a contrarian and sore-loser, not?

Sheesh, Shimako-san is definitely an odd-ball.

Part 2.

Apparently Japan was around the only country that introduced a system such as “cleaning duty” to school. In the US and Europe, schools were thoroughly ingrained as “places in which to learn.” -I forget the exact details, but I vaguely remember a foreign commentator mentioning that on television.

(Certainly.)

It was a strange feeling, in that she was polishing the school’s floors, but her mother cleaned her bedroom. You could put it off as being linked to home economics class, but the cleaning process for a school and an ordinary home was too different.

Perhaps it was a matter of morals. Return things you borrowed in a clean fashion.

By the way, while Yumi was quite ordinary in that she was not particularly fond of cleaning, for some reason she disliked it much less while in the music room.

Possibly as a result of soundproofing, the floor was made of a packed, felt-like material, meaning there was no need for water mopping nor the weekly waxing. Because the walls were made of a special soundproof material, they only needed to be dusted once in a while, and as the chairs and tables were built-in, there was no need to move them around.

You simply needed to move around the special vacuum cleaner, rinse the top of desks, and clean the blackboard and the scaffold around the windows. The usual portraits of Mozart and Beethoven were left up to the supervisor for the room.

“Yumi-san. Shall we leave it at that?”

Said the classmate in the same cleaning group, as she shut a window.

“Yes...”

Normally, she scurried off immediately upon finishing cleaning duties. But today she felt like taking her time.

“Everyone may go on ahead, I’ll take care of the cleaning diary.”

If you were to step out of the school now, you would run into the end-of-school peak. She didn’t mind crowded buses, but having become the center of rumors, she did not have the courage to jump out into the open on her own. But, she had no place else to go to spend time.

“Then we shall stay with you until it is completed. It would not be suitable to leave Yumi-san alone, after all.”

The kind classmates offered to help.

“But you do have club activities, do you not? All I have left to do afterward is to go home, and I did hand over diary duty yesterday, so I’ll take care of it today.”

When Yumi insisted, the other three discussed among themselves, “Shall we leave go, then?” and then left the music room.

“Gokigenyou.”

“See you tomorrow.”

Tap tap, their footsteps faded into the distance at a rapid pace.

So as to not disturb the plaits in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray. They were actually so busy that such standards had slipped their mind.

“Ahh. I’m so bored.”

Having no attachment to a club or a committee left her quite lonely at this time of day.

The class’ presentation was to be an exhibit about the “path of the Cross.” They intended to reproduce 14 pictures from the proclamation of Christ’s execution, to his walk to Golgotha hill, to when he was buried after crucifixion, and then place captions under each of those pictures. However, as honest Lillian students should, they had already completed most of their preparations over the summer. Maybe everyone had realized that they would become busy for their respective clubs as the school festival drew closer, thus preparing for the inevitability that they would not be able to extend much of a hand to their classroom exhibit.

“I wonder how much time I should take.”

It would be bone-headed to take so much time that her departure coincided this time with the club-activity students.

“Oh, I should go hand in the diary.”

However, she did not yet want to move. She could hear the excited sounds of students still moving to classrooms or club houses or the gymnasium beyond the half-opened door.

Yumi absent-mindedly opened the cover to the piano. There was nothing to be afraid of, even alone in the piano room.

-Maria-sama protects this school, after all.

Because of this, there were no horror stories of midnight pianos or Beethoven’s eyes at Lillian.

Mi-.

With her right index finger, she pressed down the higher Mi key. Yes, she thought everything started from that sound. Yumi drew up a chair and properly faced the piano.

It had been quite some time since she had last touched a piano. She had attended piano school once a week for the six years of elementary school, but as it never managed to become a significant part of her, she quit as she entered middle school.

Mi-.

She played the same sound once more. This time, depending on her memory of sound, she tried to reproduce that song she heard half a year ago. If it were just her right index finger, she could somewhat reproduce the melody.

Fa-.

So-ReMi-.

This was Guno’s Ave Maria.

Half a year ago, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, introduced as Rosa Chinensis en bouton, played this piece for the freshmen during the Yamayurikai-sponsored freshmen welcoming ceremony. That was the first time Yumi had encountered Sachiko-sama.

Having been played on an organ inside a sanctuary, the sound echoed deeply and stained a part of her soul. Sachiko-sama, who was playing the piece, looked almost like Ave Maria herself.

Even after the performance, Yumi was unable to take her eyes off of Sachiko-sama. Not just her lovely appearance, but the way she carried her each and every conduct with dignity, and with her upper-classman tone of voice, she was absolutely beautiful.

She wanted to become a person like Sachiko-sama.

She wanted to get even an inch closer to a person like Sachiko-sama.

When she thought so half a year ago, she did not imagine in her wildest dreams things would end up like this. No, not even yesterday, at this same time, had she even imagined this.

Her school life just changed drastically. –Just as she leaned into the piano with such thoughts, she saw something at the edge of her vision.

“*×■^@\$———!?”

Before she could even begin to recognize what had appeared, an indescribable and curious sound jumped out of Yumi’s vocal chords.

That was because a human hand had reached out from behind her, toward the keyboard. There could be no helping her heart leaping out of her chest.

“What a sound you make, as I were attacking you.”

She jumped, once again, when she looked up at the face of that hand.

“Anyone would shriek if someone came up silently from behind, Sachiko-sama.”

On top of that, if that person were the person for whom the thoughts were about, it would be further surprising.

“I was being considerate, about not intruding on your piano performance.”

Sachiko-sama pressed down on the Do key with her still-stretched left hand. It's the key you first learn to press with the thumb of your right hand when you begin learning.

“Play.”

“Eh!?”

“Once more, play just as you did earlier.”

“Ehh?”

When she tried to scramble off the seat, Sachiko-sama held her down by the shoulder with her open right hand.

“The rhythm is... one, two, three, four, two, two, three, four.”

“Ah, umm...”

Sachiko-sama notched the rhythm into Yumi's right shoulder as truthfully as a metronome, and signaled, “Start,” on the third count.

When humans are told, “Start,” they seem to have the trait to begin doing something. Yumi had begun playing out of momentum.

Then a second sound jumped in, intertwining itself with Yumi.

Do Mi So Do Do Mi So Do.

Sachiko-sama was playing the left hand's part. Plus, she was using the pedals, so the sound had an echo.

(It's a four-handed performance.)

Her own sound, combining with the other sound, returned to her ears in a pleasant fashion.

However, the fun feeling only lasted for a short while. Soon, she remembered that Sachiko-sama was near, and the excitement turned into fear.

The song was not designed for a four-handed performance, and because it was being played with Yumi's right hand and Sachiko-sama's left, it was a case of one person closing in on the other's personal space. Sachiko-sama's breasts kept brushing with Yumi's left arm, the glossy straight hair fell on Yumi's shoulder, and the pleasant fragrance began making Yumi feel like this was all commonplace.



Even so, the performance continued. Sachiko-sama probably would not stop for as long as Yumi's right hand could keep up the melody line.

On one hand she wanted this to last forever, but part of her also wanted this to end, immediately. Deep within Yumi, those two contradicting feelings fought.

Sachiko-sama's breathing softly swayed Yumi's hair. However, that breath was almost irritatingly calm. Unlike Yumi, Sachiko-sama was not one to be thrown in disarray from just this.

The beautiful harmony was broken.

Yumi purposefully went off-key.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't keep up with Sachiko-sama, after all."

Chuckling softly, she scrambled off the chair and turned away.

"Is that so? You were playing wonderfully."

Sachiko-sama shut the cover softly. The small clunking sound felt oddly loud in the room devoid of anyone but them.

She noticed Sachiko-sama was slowly walking toward her. The soft floor absorbed most of the sound from the indoor shoes. She thought, ah, no wonder she didn't notice Sachiko-sama entering earlier.

"Well, shall we get going?"

"Huh!?"

"What do you mean, huh. Just why did you think I came all this way?"

"Ah, why DID Sachiko-sama come here?"

"Of course, to pick you up."

Sachiko-sama raised an eyebrow, adopting an "isn't that obvious?" sort of tone.

Yumi was spared the need to ask where to, as Sachiko-sama began explaining.

“Alright? From now until the school festival, you will take part in performance recitals with everyone else. That is your obligation, after all.”

Sachiko-sama’s reasoning was thus.

There was a degree of impossibility to Sachiko-sama persuading Yumi within the small time frame given, before the school festival. In conclusion, in order to help make things fair, Yumi, who had no after-school obligations anyways, was to take part in Yamayurikai business.

“How unreasonable.”

“What do you mean, unreasonable. The Roses were already quite aware of this. Also,”

Sachiko-sama placed her index finger on Yumi’s jaw and looked into her eyes.

“Do think about it. You are the substitute for Cinderella. Of course you are expected to attend rehearsals.”

“Substitute... But that’s only if I accept the rosary-.”

“Do you plan on missing rehearsals because you are confident you will not accept? If so, by that logic, I can miss out on rehearsals, too.”

“But.”

Sachiko-sama admonished Yumi with a faint, quiet voice.

“However, I will attend rehearsals. There are not too many things in the world where you can claim ‘absolutely.’ Plus, the bet with the onee-sama, aside, ignoring confidence and probability, there are only one or two results lying in the future. If the Cinderella role is down to either you or I, then I will practice. Even if it were to contradict how confident I feel, it is better than running the risk of being embarrassed during the actual performance.”

Sachiko-sama chuckled, curling Yumi’s straggling hair over her ear.

“Sachiko-sama...”

There was nothing she could say. Even if she were to refuse, raising hysteria, Sachiko-sama was certainly being reasonable. There was no doubt that, in her mind, right and wrong were organized neatly just like garbage and recycling.

Her heart constricted, have I disappointed her? It was the same feeling as the four-handed piano performance, a feeling totally different from the excitement or dread. Rather, it was a mysterious mental state, in that she felt that, left alone, she would have ended up in tears. Similar to the feeling of, as a child, having lost sight of her mother in the middle of a crowd.

Had Sachiko-sama not lifted her head that moment, Yumi probably would have latched onto Sachiko-sama and cried "I'm sorry."

"Of course."

Sachiko-sama blurted out, as if just thinking of something.

"You have your own way of thinking, so I will not coerce you. However, will you not at least come watch me practice?"

"...Yes."

"Then, take your bag."

Having been urged onward, Yumi took the bag she had left on a table, as well as the cleaning diary.

She wondered if she was allowing herself to be swept along into Sachiko-sama's pace in a nice way. However, as she tilted her head slightly, she admonished herself for such damning thoughts.

Despite her hysteric behavior yesterday, Sachiko-sama was supposed to be like Maria-sama: pure, right, and beautiful, like an artist's depiction of the perfect onee-sama. No, she had to remain like that in Yumi's thoughts.

"What is the matter? Yumi, come along."

Sachiko-sama called from the doorway.

"Ah, coming."

When she hurried over, Sachiko-sama informed her, "Be quiet," and fixed Yumi's tie.

It was the same as yesterday morning. For a moment, it synchronized with that moment in front of the Gingko trees.

“Ah.”

Sachiko-sama blurted, stopped, and looked at Yumi.

“That photo. Was it taken yesterday morning?”

“Ehh?”

Unbelievably, Sachiko-sama had just remembered that scene.

“Could you not remember from the photo?”

“I could see it was myself, and that it was Yumi with me. But I could not remember when it happened. Because Takeshima Tsutako-san’s photo had no date on it.”

She thought, that’s not the problem. There was no need to confirm once again that Yumi was too unmemorable.

“Then Yumi and I truly did just meet yesterday.”

“Yes.”

Yumi nodded as she shut the door to the music room. It had been mere hours before Sachiko-sama’s *sœur* declaration. When they mentioned “warashibechouja,” she had no retort.

“I feel so much better now that I remembered.”

The two of them walked down the hallway together. She felt it was awkward to be walking together the same day the rumors spread like a wildfire, but Sachiko-sama seemed to give it no mind. Particularly as there was almost no one left in the corridor, Sachiko-sama probably would have disliked being shadowy about it.

“Sachiko-sama, do you fix underclassmen ties that frequently?”

In that case, Yumi felt there was no helping her forgetting Yumi. However, the answer Sachiko-sama imparted from her lips.

“Quite the opposite.”

“Eh?”

“Seldom... No, basically never. I wonder why I did such a thing.”

As they walked down the stairs, Sachiko-sama wondered, truly fascinated. She had presumably kept thinking about it, as after descending one flight of stairs, she had an answer.

“I am not much of a morning person, so I am always in a daze in the mornings, so I might have subconsciously called out to you. That might explain why I could not recall the incident immediately.”

“You do not seem the type to be weak to mornings.”

“I am told that all the time... But in reality, I have low blood pressure.”

“Ah, low blood pressure.”

It seemed like, more and more the character of Ogasawara Sachiko-sama became a mystery. Right next to her was definitely that person of adoration, but the image of her had changed quite a bit since three days ago.

Yet, normally, you were supposed to learn more and more about a person as time passed.

When they stopped by the staff room to hand in the diary, Yamamura-sensei, who was in charge of Yumi’s class, said, “Oh my.”

“I thought there must have been a mistake, but what was that rumor true, after all?”

It seemed the story had spread to even the teachers.

“But, that is fascinating. I heard Ogasawara-san was rejected by Fukuzawa-san? But why are you two walking together? Or was it actually an OK?”

As expected of a former Lillian student. Her eyes twinkled and she asked with the curiosity of a young girl, shedding the 20-year differential in their ages.

“Umm, that’s, that’s-.”

When Yumi became stuck, Sachiko-sama spoke out from her side.

“We apologize for making a fuss. I will leave what happened between us to your imagination.”

She smiled, and then, “Well, excuse us.” Sachiko-sama took Yumi’s hand and walked away elegantly from the staff room.

Yamamura-sensei smiled bitterly, having had the opportunity to speak sealed.

“Sa, Sachiko-sama.”

After they had walked a fair distance from the staff room did Sachiko-sama finally let go of Yumi’s hand.

“There is no need to say more than what is necessary.”

“But.”

“The more you respond, the greater and wilder the rumors become. If you wish to explain, explain it at once, in great detail, to a large audience, rather than explaining little by little. When it is still a big fuss, be a willow in the wind.”

But being able to silence people with just a smile like Sachiko-sama is impossible to replicate for a normal high school student. Sachiko-sama’s reasoning was, well, quite reasonable, but difficult to put into practice.

Part 3.

She was brought to the second gymnasium.

This was a bit to the back of the school facilities, and was nowhere near as expansive as the primary gymnasium, which could hold every middle school and high school student. It was about the size of a basketball court, but had no stage. In its stead were a changing room, bathroom, washroom, and lounge, making it rather popular among students. It was used quite often for friendly matches with other schools, or for other athletics or club activities.

“Put on those slippers and come up.”

Sachiko-sama pointed at the vinyl slippers on the shelf, furnished for visitors. Every gymnasium required the use of athletics shoes – regular shoes were forbidden.

While Yumi took off her indoor shoes and put on the slippers, Sachiko-sama simply walked up in her socks.

“Ah, Sachiko’s here.”

“You’re late.”

Amidst the echoing voices of the Roses, Yumi chased after Sachiko-sama and entered the gymnasium. After one step, she felt a painful number of stares.

Awaiting them were yesterday’s members, sans Tsutako-san, plus another twenty or so students. Among them was one student in Yumi’s class, and that was all she needed to see to realize this was the dance club.

Sachiko-sama instructed Yumi to watch from the side, and joined the dance club.

“I apologize for disrupting practice. Please, continue.”

Then, classical music flowed in from somewhere, and Sachiko-sama held hands with Hasekura Rei-sama in the middle. Every other student likewise found a pair and began dancing to the music.

It was triple time, a waltz.

“Welcome, Fukuzawa Yumi-chan.”

When she turned to look, Rosa Chinensis was beckoning with her hands.

“The view is better from here.”

Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Foetida were with her as well. The three were leaning against the wall and watching the dance. Yumi stood next to Rosa Chinensis, as per invitation.

The young ladies danced to the elegant music.

Even though they all wore the same uniform, her eyes were magnetized by Sachiko-sama. She spun around like a flower, as if controlled by the music, performing even the most difficult of steps with the ease of walking.

It was not that other students were inadequate dancers. They, too, danced smartly, living up to their name proudly as the Lillian Girls' Academy dance club. Yet, none of them could beat Sachiko-sama when it came to being described as a flower. Even without any costumes, it was easy to tell Sachiko-sama was the lead role.

“It's decent enough, what do you think?”

Rosa Chinensis asked Yumi, still staring straight ahead.

“Decent... Even though it's this spectacular?”

When she asked how long they'd be practicing, she was surprised to hear they had just started that day.

“About thirty minutes before Sachiko arrived, I think? Shimako and Rei learnt the steps from the dance club, and they just tried fitting everything together for the first time now.”

“For the first time?”

“You learn the rudimentary aspects of dancing in class, and Shimako is already experienced with Japanese dance, so she seems quite good at learning dancing styles. Rei memorized it with the concentration she gained from martial arts, but she is struggling a bit... See, she just stepped on her foot.”

Rei-sama had just stepped on Sachiko-sama's foot. Even so, the two of them continued dancing as if nothing happened. That they weren't wearing shoes probably was out of consideration to the possibility of stepping on one another's foot, it being their first rehearsal.

"In the case of Sachiko, you know. She is an authentic lady, so it's expected of her to be able to dance socially."

Rosa Chinensis spoke rather proudly of Sachiko-sama. She had been doing ballet since she was five, but began private tutelage of social dancing from the first year of middle school. English conversation, piano, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, all the way through middle school she had at least one tutor every day.

"It's like, she's from another world."

She sighed. She'd been alive for fifteen years, but society was still an immeasurable thing.

"Right? You'd suffocate. So, I made her quit them all. I made it so she had to quit, I guess? I made her my *sœur* and pulled her into every task imaginable for the Yamayurikai."

"...Wow."

Sachiko-sama was amazing to be able to do all of that practice all the way through middle school, but Rosa Chinensis, in her second year of high school, to be able to make Sachiko-sama quit everything was also amazing.

"Sachiko is just so diligent to the core, so if someone expects something of her, she does exactly what is expected. That's why, sometimes, she needs to be allowed to breathe. Do you understand?"

"...Sort of."

"Sort of... Well, that's fine."

The song was reaching its climax. Sachiko-sama was sweating a bit, and a line of black hair had adhered itself to her white nape.

"But, even if she knows how to dance, would she ever have the opportunity to dance?"

When Yumi blurted out the question, Rosa Chinensis returned with the question, “Why do you think that?”

“If she were dancing frequently, I don’t think she would all of a sudden refuse to dance with a man...”

“Exactly. Actually, we were wondering the same thing. For Sachiko, this is ‘just a dance.’ Yet, she refused it so desperately. She wanted out so badly we began wanting to know the reason, too, so we were waiting a bit to let her off the hook, but-”

But it turned into something even more amusing, Rosa Chinensis happily laughed.

“A spice named Fukuzawa Yumi was added to the mix, now I wonder what it will cook up.”

(Eek...)

It felt like dry wind has sliced straight through her body.

It was like a scene from a historical play, where a person with no place to stay, and with no place willing to let him stay, despite being in an inn town, stands out in the open, alone. The dusty, dry wind was irritating to the skin, and enemies were to his left and right, with no knowledge of what the future held for him.

Even though in the background was an elegant waltz. Ah, how unsuitable.

“Just as Rosa Gigantea said.”

“Eh?”

“When Yumi-chan starts thinking, she goes through life’s many phases.”

Rosa Chinensis’ intellectual expression broke down, and she began giggling.

When the song ended, Rosa Chinensis imagined them to have been on a stage and began giving directives about starting positions, body position, and other things. Even though she had been talking to Yumi, she was still paying careful attention to details.

“Yumi-chan have you danced before?”

Rosa Gigantea had come close and began fiddling with Yumi's curled hair, which had been split in two and individually tied.

"N, no. Not at all."

"Really-? Hey, did dance class start from second year?"

She twisted her body and asked Rosa Foetida.

"That was the case, I think."

Rosa Foetida answered indifferently as she re-winded the cassette tape.

"Then, I'll teach you. Here, put out your hands."

"Eh!?"

"Here."

Rosa Gigantea forcibly grabbed Yumi's hands and glued her body to hers.

"Ah."

"Yumi-chan uses so much 'eh' and 'ah' and 'wah'!"

Even if she were told that, she couldn't hold back her voice. She thought there was some responsibility on the person who surprises her.

"It's in three-time because it's a waltz. One, two, three, one, two, three."

Left with no choice, Yumi took off her slippers.

Left foot back a step on one, spin $\frac{3}{8}$ while stepping to the side with the right foot on two, move the left foot to the right foot on three. Right step forward and then a half turn right on the next one, left foot back diagonally and turn another $\frac{3}{8}$ to the right before collecting both feet back together on two, then a small step forward with the right foot on three.

She tried to do as she was told, but it wasn't going very well.

"Your hip's too close. See, don't look down. You can step on my foot."

One, two, three.

One, two, three.

Just as she became accustomed to not looking down, she noticed the crowding atmosphere around them. The dance club, having finished their review of the rehearsal, all stared at Yumi and Rosa Gigantea as if they were watching some curious animal.

“Ah, that’s bad, now Yumi-chan’s two-timing rumors might spread!”

Rosa Gigantea laughed and let go of Yumi. Then, she raised one arm high and shouted to everyone.

“Alright-! I’m introducing our new friend, Fukuzawa Yumi-chan. She’s joining the group dance from today on, so please be kind to her-!”

“-!”

She wanted to shout “eh!” but, having just been teased about it, Yumi covered her mouth.

“It’s boring if you just watch, isn’t it? Plus, if we think about what ‘could’ happen, you probably should get used to dancing.”

Whispering that dangerous line in Yumi’s ear, Rosa Gigantea pushed Yumi’s back.

However, ‘could’ would be a case of her standing up on stage in Sachiko-sama’s stead.

(Rosa Gigantea was betting on me winning, so is it alright to be giving such a negative image to her playing piece?)

However, winning or losing hardly mattered to the Roses. They were just watching, amused by the course of events.

“Someone pair with her.”

Rosa Foetida requested, looking at the faces in the circle.

“Alright, I will.”

When Yumi looked up at who replied so simply, it was none other than Rosa Foetida en bouton, Hasekura Rei-sama.

“B-but. Rei-sama is with Sachiko-sama.”

“I’m just a stand-in. Once the real prince arrives I say farewell to that role, so there’s no problem with pairing with Yumi-chan.”

Oh dear. This didn't seem like it would end with just the level of dry wind.

No matter how alien she was to the scene, she could feel the inquisitive stares stab her like knives. No, rather than inquisitive, it might have been more like envious.

First was the rumor that she rejected the Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Sachiko-sama. Then, when she appeared like friends together anyways at the gymnasium, she was on friendly terms with Rosa Chinensis. Then she learnt dancing from Rosa Gigantea, and now was a dance partner with the Rosa Foetida en bouton, Rei-sama.

Just who does that girl think she is. –They were no doubt thinking that.

Even though she had no intention in the least of garnering attention. Ah, why do things always have to flow away in a completely different direction from her hopes?

Then, when practice resumed, she felt like a pincushion.

Although the boutons dancing with her hardly seemed to care, the majority of the people, the dance members, kept staring at her.

From straight ahead, from behind, whether she looked left or right, she would always lock eyes with a dance club member. On top of that, Rosa Gigantea's practice was quite slow, so, unable to keep up with the pace of the song, she kept stepping on Rei-sama's feet, and Rei-sama kept stepping on her feet, and it was all-in-all a mess.

Through it all, Sachiko-sama remained elegant. She turned aside Rosa Gigantea's offer to be her dance partner, instead dancing her steps alone. As she arched her torso, and softly curved her arms, she gave the impression that the prince was, in fact, dancing right there with her.

What sort of prince was Sachiko-sama looking at? What sort of prince would Sachiko-sama be willing to stretch her arms out to?

“Don't look elsewhere.”

When she snapped back to attention, Rei-sama was deliberately feigning anger.

“It looks like you can’t take your mind off Sachiko.”

“No, that’s not it.”

Even as she answered, she thought, maybe I can’t. Because immediately, her eyes followed Sachiko-sama again.

Sachiko-sama danced as lightly as a winged creature with the invisible prince.

Assuming there were a prince the likes of which Sachiko-sama imagined-, Yumi thought. The one definite thing was that the Hanadera student council leader was not he. That thought made her feel a certain amount of compassion for the Hanadera council leader.

What a pitiable Prince.

The Lillian Girls’ Academy Cinderella was, unlike the fairy tale, proud and idealistic.

Anxious Wednesday, Friday of Battle

Part 1.

“What is going on, Yumi-san?”

On Wednesday morning, Katsura-san leapt at her as she stepped into the classroom.

“Wh, what?”

Before she could walk into the classroom, Katsura-san had grabbed her shoulders and pushed her against the locker. As if she were going to discuss something evil, Katsura-san lowered her voice and asked.

“There’re rumors that Yumi-san is going to be a part of the Yamayurikai-sponsored play.”

“I’m just going to dance in the corner.”

Yumi answered truthfully.

“But, your partner is Rosa Foetida en bouton?”

“Umm... well, yes.”

“Really!?”

Katsura-san’s voice abruptly changed from pianissimo to fortissimo. The volume of the voice hurt her ears, and their secretiveness went to waste. Even the classmates who had not yet noticed Yumi took notice.

“Yumi-san, gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou, Yumi-san.”

The faces that smiled like angels began to gather en masse. Even that looks creepy in a large group.

If a group of chicks, or human babies were to come close, it’d be the same sort of freakiness.

“We were just talking about Yumi-san.”

“Y, yes.”

Of course, if the incident at the Rose Mansion two days ago could spread all over school before lunch the next day, it was obvious yesterday’s gymnasium incident would spread even faster. After all, there were at least three times the witnesses, and there was even one student from her class.

“Um, could you clarify everything now?”

“Did you really reject Sachiko-sama’s proposal?”

“But then why are you two doing things together?”

“What sort of position do you have in the Yamayurikai?”

“Which onee-sama do you like most?”

They had held it all in up to that point, but the classmates began throwing questions like a water dam had been broken.

“Umm...”

Yumi faltered amidst the advancing wave of classmates.

Even though the median level of the students were the daughters of rich estates, they were still girls. They loved gossip and rumors of ‘who liked who.’ If this were a case of, for example, which group or committee grabbed a school facility for their own, people wouldn’t be so desperate for answers.

“What happened, Yumi-san? Please, do feel free to explain.”

No matter how much she wanted to explain everything, it was impossible. First of all, there were so many questions she had already forgotten the first ones. Plus, if she answered questions one by one, there would be no end in sight. Further still, it seemed like everyone had already made up answers in their minds, no matter how Yumi were to answer.

(What was I supposed to do in a case like this?)

She thought of Sachiko-sama.

(Umm, Sachiko-sama would.)

Smile, without any hurry or panic.

“Everyone, I apologize for kicking up a fuss.”

Elegantly, was, well, impossible, but Yumi felt she started fairly well. 75 points, if she were to grade herself.

“Because of a variety of reasons, I’ve ended up helping the Yamayurikai with their sponsored play. The reason why the staff calls on me every so often is because of that.”

When Yumi explained herself clearly, everyone backed off.

After all, she had been doing nothing troublesome. Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida being kind to her, Rei-sama being her partner, all of it was because they were kind, not because it was Yumi.

“Then, how about Sachiko-sama?”

One person asked from the crowd.

“Sachiko-sama?”

“Did Sachiko-sama really ask for you to be her *sœur*? Rumor has it Yumi-san rejected her.”

Everyone nodded, hearing that question.

“Sachiko-sama,”

Her voice became stuck as she tried to answer.

“Sachiko-sama,”

Huh? What was it? What would Sachiko-sama do?

Umm, Sachiko-sama, would probably smile, and say. –I’ll leave it to your imagination.

But Yumi could not say it. I’ll leave it to your imagination, means, take it whichever way you want. However, as she did not feel that way, she could not use such a reckless response.

“There’s no way Sachiko-sama would choose me as her *sœur*.”

Ah, that was it. As she spoke, she began crying.

“Yumi-san!?”

Her classmates became worried by her sudden tears.

“Oh, dear. We’re sorry. We weren’t asking to make you cry. It’s okay, if you wish not to answer, let it be.”

Yumi shook her head. She was not crying to avoid answering.

Yumi loved Sachiko-sama.

She loved her still. And because she loved her, her last bit of pride rejected Sachiko-sama.

It was too sad, if she were chosen because she happened to be there. Why could Sachiko-sama not understand?

How happy she was, being able to simply watch from afar. If Sachiko-sama had not known Yumi's name nor face, she would not have wrongfully offered her rosary. And if that hadn't happened, she wouldn't have had to act contrary to her heart.

“We're sorry. Here, stop crying, please?”

Her classmates held out a handkerchief and embraced her. But Yumi may have wanted, more than anything else in the world, for that embrace to have come from Sachiko-sama.

Part 2.

“Here.”

She was handed a booklet. It was bound quite simply, but it was painstakingly word processed.

“Lillian Girls’ Academy Yamayuri-version Cinderella...”

Yumi read the cover ornamentation aloud. It seemed to be a script-book for Cinderella.

“Right. I used pink and blue to highlight for you.”

“So?”

“Of course, you are to remember them?”

Sachiko-sama sighed, exasperated.

“Remember,-”

Flipping through the pages, she noticed it was almost all pink. There was hardly any blue.

“Okay? Please do not make me repeat myself two or three times. If you do not wish to embarrass yourself during the school festival, memorize the pink and blue, no matter what.”

“Y, yes.”

As she answered, her heart sank. The pink was all Cinderella’s lines. The blue was Sister B. Apparently they were short on people, to the point where some people had to take on two roles at once. At some point, Yumi had been given the Sister B role.

Well, if she was going to be in Cinderella, she would gladly do one of the sister roles.

“That aside, why are you eating lunch out... here?”

As she became curious, she bluntly questioned the three first-year peach-class girls. As she had come looking for Yumi, and found that she was not in her classroom, she had been guided to Yumi by Tsutako-san.

Yumi and Shimako-san had, as they did yesterday, come behind the auditorium to escape from the newspaper club.

“Well, Sachiko-sama.”

Tsutako-san ripped open the vinyl packing for the bread she had taken with her.

“There is a both deep and superficial reason.”

There was no need for Tsutako-san to also escape from the newspaper club, but she seemed to have a bit of a guilty conscience for letting Yumi escape yesterday. After Tsutako-san finished explaining in detail, Sachiko-sama sounded an indifferent “ah.”

“While I can understand your wish to escape from our school’s persistent newspaper club, what do you plan to do when it rains?”

“We would be in trouble.”

Tsutako-san, however, could escape into her photography room, so she didn’t seem to care. Shimako-san also simply was providing Yumi company, and had no real reason to be eating outside.

“It seems bound to rain tomorrow.”

“Eh!?”

Yumi hurriedly looked at the sky. However, looking at the clear and sunny sky was a futile effort at seeing the next day’s forecast.

“Accept my rosary. Then I will gladly be interviewed in your stead.”

“You jest.”

“Oh? Well, ask me anytime you want.”

Sachiko-sama playfully laughed and turned away.

“Ah, Sachiko-sama. Would you like to have lunch with us?”

Tsutako-san tried to stop her, but she was refused, “Thank you for the invitation, but I will pass.” That answer was quite expected, as she would have had to make the trip back to her classroom, and then back outside, in order to eat with this group.

“I wanted to bring up the photo, but she escaped.”

“There is no helping it. Sachiko-sama dislikes cherry blossoms and ginkgo.”

“Cherry blossoms and ginkgo?”

Yumi asked back. Then, the act of coming to school, itself, would be a painful ordeal.

“Yes. It’s a seasonal thing. Exactly the opposite of me.”

The season when cherry blossom flowers bloom, the season when ginkgo nuts fall. Sachiko-sama becomes blue.

“Allergies?”

“No, she just simply dislikes them.”

That sounded oddly familiar. –She did not get a rash or anything, she simply did not want to hold hands.

“I heard it was something like, they did not taste well.”

“You eat cherry blossoms?”

“Yumi-san, you have not attended a wedding ceremony, have you?”

Tsutako-san chortled. Apparently, in certain seats, Sakurayu is presented. Yumi remembered that her wedding experience for cousins and other such relatives generally took place in churches, so such customs were not observed.

“Sometimes they are placed on red-bean buns.”

Even the image of red-bean buns differed greatly from Shimako-san, Yumi thought.

Shimako-san loved cherry blossoms, loved ginkgo, loved cooked beans and loved lily bulbs.

Sachiko-sama hated cherry blossoms, hated ginkgo, hated sympathy and hated men.

“That is why.”

Shimako-san smiled and said.

“I am surprised, that she was willing to come here to find Yumi-san.”

Even though it would have been fine waiting until after school, she wanted to hand the booklet to Yumi as soon as possible. When she looked at the back of the script, Ogasawara Sachiko was written in pretty handwriting.

Sachiko-sama brought her own script book.

Plus, she painstakingly used a highlighter to mark out the Sister B lines.

“It was so unlike her.”

Yumi looked at the blue sky, like Maria-sama’s soul. There were almost no clouds, and she wondered how could you forecast weather in such a day.

Shimako-san loved cherry blossoms, loved gingko, loved cooked beans and loved lily bulbs.

Sachiko-sama hated cherry blossoms, hated gingko, hated sympathy and hated men.

Tsutako-san loved photography, loved photos of girls, and was not too fond of the newspaper club.

And, herself.

She liked cherry blossoms, but she hated gingko.

And.

She thought Sachiko-sama, who would do very unexpected things, was all the more attractive because of it.

Part 3.

Rosa Gigantea, who was sitting by the windowsill and looking outside, noticed Yumi and looked up.

“How admirable. We didn’t have to come pick you up?”

She’s treating me like a pre-school child who went home without a guardian.

“Now that I’ve been tabbed for the Sister B part, it wouldn’t be right to not show.”

“Oh my, now she’s talking back. Good girl.”

Rosa Gigantea jumped down to the floor, laughed weakly, and rubbed Yumi’s head.

“It looks like I arrived too early?”

There was no one else on the second floor of the Rose Mansion.

“Oh, don’t mind that. Help yourself to whatever drink you’d like.”

There was a teacup on the bay window sill that was still steaming. Apparently Rosa Gigantea had been in the middle of drinking, herself.

“What’s that?”

“Just pure instant coffee with hot water. If you want to drink this, go ahead and find some sugar.”

“Ah.”

Then, without any further ado, she found an overturned teacup, put instant coffee in it, and poured hot water. The pot was properly seething, and with the help of sugar and powdered milk, she was able to make instant coffee taste well enough.

“Yumi-chan, did you do cleaning?”

“Ah. The chorus club took over the music room today, and they said they would clean up as they left.”

Yumi answered, leaving her stirring spoon in the sink.

“The school festival is getting close, everyone’s desperate.”

Rosa Gigantea’s murmur sounded like it was all someone else’s problem.

Even the Cinderella play should be in the stages where everyone's running around on fire. Yumi worried if it was alright to be sitting around leisurely like this. After all, there were less than 10 days left, and they were still muttering about swapping roles.

"How about you, Rosa Gigantea, did you finish cleaning duty?"

It was the time of day for high school students to be cleaning, which is why Yumi had left her classmate Shimako-san and arrived at the Rose Mansion first.

"When you become a third-year, you become better with these things."

"So you skipped out?"

"Idiot-. How could a Yamayurikai executive skip out? You'd never hear the end of it. No, we split the cleaning groups in two, and work two groups' worth per day. Well, it's possible because third-years have to clean less places, of course."

Of course, that means group sizes become bigger. It's a system to have less people do more concentrated work, rather than have more people meander around.

"Ehh, I wish we were like that."

Her speech accidentally turned casual. For some reason, around Rosa Gigantea, her pace crumbled, or more like, Rosa Gigantea somehow didn't feel like her senior by two years.

"Don't you-. But, when we were first-years, we diligently cleaned, too."

"Rosa Gigantea, a first-year..."

"Oh, what's with that look."

As a response to Yumi's admiring sigh, Rosa Gigantea feigned an insulted face.

"I just thought, how unbelievable."

She had the presence of an eternal third-year.

"I hope that's a compliment?"

"Yes, of course."

When Yumi firmly replied thus, Rosa Gigantea laughed, “hahahahaha,” sat back on top of the window sill and looked outside.

When you think about it.

Even for these confident third-years, they did have first-year and second-year lives at Lillian. Even Rosa Gigantea was an underclassman at one point, and had experienced accepting a rosary. Yumi felt fascinated, realizing that, as the ceremony came with its own set of drama, Rosa Gigantea must have also gone through a phase of doubt and worries.

“Umm.”

“Hmm?”

“May I ask a question?”

“I don’t like tough questions, though.”

Because her previous class was mathematics, Rosa Gigantea’s brain was tired, she claimed. Even for someone maintaining a top-10 grade for mathematics in the school, she struggled fighting between mathematical formulae and the demon of sleep.

“Why did you make Shimako-san your sœur?”

“It’s not a tough question, but it is an unusual one. No one usually asks for my reasons regarding Shimako.”

“That’s because she seems destined to have been chosen.”

“Right.”

Because everyone was so accepting of her overall talents, everyone probably agreed with the choice. Something like, ahh, of course.

“The complete opposite of me.”

Yumi felt a bit depressed think about it.

“You’re pretty timid?”

“Because I’m just a rice stalk.”

“Rice stalk? What’s that?”

As Rosa Gigantea seemed to have forgotten the conversation from the day before yesterday, Yumi explained. Rosa Gigantea then, remembering, started laughing in tears, “Oh, yeah.” Well, the people who are told these things tend to remember these things best (or carry these words with them).

“Rice stalk, that’s fine, though.”

Rosa Gigantea said, as she wiped away her tears with her palm.

“What are you talking about?”

“The part where Sachiko’s still clutching tightly, maybe.”

Rosa Gigantea drained her cup of instant black coffee and placed the empty cup back on the window sill.

“Ah.”

Really, speaking to someone smart always opens up unexpected doors in conversations. Whether they’re speaking from instinct, or whether they’re simply abbreviating the development and turn parts of the introduction, development, turn and conclusion poetry structure I don’t know.

“Don’t you think someone with the talents of Shimako should be kept running in the Yamayurikai?”

“But that’s not your answer to that question.”

“If I’m answering as Rosa Gigantea, that’s my answer. But personally, I have other reasons. Those, however, are secret.”

Rosa Gigantea covered the center of her breast with both hands. She seems to want to say, those will be locked in her heart.

“Shimako-san said the two of you sought similar things in partners.”

“Mm, yes. That’s one thing. We’re a bit similar, in that we know how to keep our distance from each other, so we feel at ease together.”

Rosa Gigantea didn’t choose a petite sœur until she had merely half a year left in her high school career. There were plenty of wonderful people in the current crop of second-years. Yet, she decided they weren’t right for her, but that Shimako-san was.

Almost as an answer, Shimako-san also thought Sachiko-sama wasn’t right for her, but chose Rosa Gigantea. Human relations always provoked deep thought, whether they seemed simple or complicated.

“From my perspective, Shimako might be a bit envious of Yumi-chan, I think?”

“Again, why do you keep jumping topics so much?”

Because the statement was so abrupt, the cooled coffee almost went into her trachea.

“That,”

Just when she thought Rosa Gigantea was about to speak, she suddenly hugged Yumi tightly.

“Is because I want to see Yumi-chan’s cute life phases.”

“Hey... Rosa Gigantea!!”

The coffee was about to spill.

Or, more importantly, regardless of the mysterious thought process of Rosa Gigantea, if someone else were to see this scene, everything would become even more complicated.

Yet, at that exact moment, something did happen.

As she struggled to free herself while taking care to keep the teacup level, her body suddenly felt much lighter.

“The millionaire has arrived, so playtime’s over.”

“Millionaire?”

Sachiko-sama was standing at the biscuit-like door.

“You two looked to be having quite some fun. I walked up the stairs making quite the squeaking sound, yet you two were so busy frolicking that you did not notice me coming.”

Sachiko-sama walked into the room and placed her bag on a chair. Yumi slowly edged away from Rosa Gigantea, as the situation was somewhat awkward.

“Oh come on, I saw Sachiko coming, that’s why I did some service.”

Rosa Gigantea said, without any hint of evil.

“Service?”

Sachiko-sama’s forehead quivered.

“If I were going to seriously attack her, I’d do it where no one would see us.”

Uh oh. That’s not good.



She was deliberately saying things to annoy the fastidious Sachiko-sama. What should she do, at this rate she would snap, she would snap, she would snap.

“Ahh!” Yumi yelled.

“What!?”

Rosa Gigantea and Sachiko-sama both turned at the same time.

“Umm...”

She yelled, but she had nothing prepared afterward, so she stumbled. Helplessly, she exaggerated looking at her wristwatch.

“It’s already this time! Everyone will be arriving soon, right? Rosa Gigantea, are you done with your cup? I’ll go ahead and wash it for you.”

Ahh, why could she only do things this way? She was sure anyone else would have interceded in a smarter manner. Though it did seem they had evaded Sachiko-sama’s hysteria.

“Yumi-chan, good girl.”

Rosa Gigantea offered forth her cup, shoulders trembling. Judging by her unwillingness to look Yumi in the eye, she was definitely laughing. She whispered softly to Yumi.

“I made Sachiko envious.”

“Eh?”

When she turned around, Rosa Gigantea was in the middle of stretching herself, and then she walked out, deliberately thinking out loud, “Well, I guess I’ll go check downstairs.”

It seemed like Rosa Gigantea was having a tremendous misunderstanding. Sachiko-sama was not one to become envious over something as pithy as an embracing scene.

Yumi put both teacups in the sink and let the dishwashing detergent froth.

Sachiko-sama had pulled out the chair adjacent to the chair with her bag, had sat down, and had started reading a book.

(See.)

Sachiko-sama hardly cared about Yumi.

“Ah, there’s no hot water.”

It seemed like gas was not provided, so the water boiler wasn’t working. She helplessly rinsed with cold water and felt thankful it was still autumn.

“The water supply freezes during the winter.”

“Really...!” She was surprised.

Not so much about the water supply freezing, so much that Sachiko-sama had been paying attention to Yumi speaking to herself. She assumed reading was a sign of shutting out her surroundings. Of course, Sachiko-sama’s gaze was still upon the book.

After putting the cups and spoon into the drying basket and closing the top, Yumi turned 180 degrees to the right.

“Sachiko-sama, thank you for the scenario book during lunchtime.”

She flipped a page. Extremely difficult words were packed tightly into that book, from the looks of it.

“Did you have a look through?”

“Ah... Yes, a bit.”

“Why did you lower your voice?”

Sachiko-sama finally lifted her head from the book.

“I... don’t think I would be able to memorize Cinderella’s parts in time...”

She fidgeted and mumbled. Then, a saving “of course not” cut into her despondency.

“I did not request that much.”

Then “how much” is she requesting? Just as Yumi began thinking that, Sachiko-sama placed her book on the table, stood up and spoke.

“I will wear a red velvet dress with English-made frills.”

What happened to you, Sachiko-sama!? –Is what she thought at first, before realizing she’d heard those words before. Or more accurately, she’d read those words, in the Lillian-version Cinderella script. Right before one of Sister B’s blue highlight lines. It was Sister A’s line.

She did not know why Sachiko-sama suddenly said that line, but it was clear she was awaiting some sort of response. If she could not answer here, she had no doubt Sachiko-sama would be disappointed.

“I am fine with my usual skirt.”

Having resolved herself, Yumi began speaking.

“However, I will wear a manteau with a golden floral pattern and a diamond broach. That is an extremely rare product, after all.”

When Yumi managed to finish her line, Sachiko-sama stepped closer and stood behind her back.

“Sister, how does this hair look?”

The scene changed, and this time Sachiko-sama was Cinderella.”

One danger after another. Yumi tried to remember her lines for the sake of her life. Umm-.

“Cinderella. Do you not wish you could also attend the Ball?”

“Good.”

Sachiko-sama touched Yumi’s shoulders.

“You’ve properly remembered your lines.”

(Huh...?)

I wonder what happened. My heart’s throbbing.

She visited the right shoulder twice. The soft, delicate touch was a fresh sensation, totally different from “good girl” and “there there.”

Maybe that was why I felt so conscious of it. Even when Rosa Gigantea patted my head, or embraced me, my heart rate didn’t go up, at all.

“Everyone is late.”

Sachiko-sama suddenly turned around and walked toward the door. Yumi sighed softly, relieved.

She was embarrassed, as her heart was beating so fast.

“Rosa Gigantea has not yet returned from walking downstairs, too.”

“Perhaps they changed the meeting spot? I will go check.”

“Then, I, too.”

Yumi followed after, cooling her red face with her hands.

In the middle of the staircase, Sachiko-sama stopped and turned around.

“...Be careful.”

At first, she thought she was being warned about the steep stairs. Yet, she thought what she missed hearing in the beginning sounded similar to “Rosa Gigantea.”

“Be careful of what?”

Sachiko-sama replied, “The stairs, of course,” and walked down the remaining stairs.

(Ohh.)

She thought Sachiko-sama had worried for her just a bit.

Things don't work out quite so well in the world, though.

Yumi listened to Sachiko-sama and paid careful attention to each step as she walked down.

Part 4.

“Ah, there they come.”

The principal members were all present on the first floor of the Rose Mansion. I don't know how they usually use it, but it was currently being used as a storehouse for the settings and props for the play.

Half of the room was occupied by those things, and the other half was occupied by six people holding scripts.

“Were we not having a standing rehearsal upstairs? Or was there another communication error to Yumi and I?”

At first glance, Sachiko-sama had a gentle tone, but there was clearly a feeling of objection to everyone.

“We heard you two were having some valuable time together, so we changed places in a hurry.”

How regrettable, Rosa Chinensis answered. The other members had also been directed to where they stood, upon arriving at the Rose Mansion.

“Valuable time?”

Sachiko-sama and Yumi immediately looked at the culprit. Rosa Gigantea calmly looked away and began whistling.

“Because otherwise, you two don't seem to make any effort to have progress, at all.”

Her excuse was extremely self-centered, but for some reason, everyone aside from “you two” agreed.

“Indeed. We found a valuable source of fun in going toward the school festival, but it has been quite uneventful. Boring.”

“What is going on?”

“Sachiko has to become proactive enough to offer her rosary at least once a day.”

One utterance after another, and each spoken in a completely serious tone. It was enough to make you wonder if these were indeed the top students of the school. From the looks of it, there was a fair chance that the rumors were spread by them, for fun.

“Have no concern over Yumi and I. Now, let us begin rehearsal.”

Sachiko-sama suggested, looking fed up with everyone. Then, Rosa Chinensis clapped her hands, remembering, perhaps, in response to “rehearsal.”

“Oh, I have to give Yumi-chan her script. I apologize for it being sudden, but we’re giving you the Sister B part.”

“Ah, I have a script, here.”

Yumi pulled out Sachiko-sama’s script from her bag.

“Oh, Sachiko, nice move.”

Rosa Chinensis laughed, noticing the name “Ogasawara Sachiko” written on the back cover.

“Never you mind. I had already memorized my lines, so I had no use for it.”

“Excuses, excuses. Yumi-chan, was her rosary placed in between the pages?”

“Eh!”

When she hurriedly flipped through the pages, Sachiko-sama coldly said, “Oh, how foolish, they are clearly simply teasing you,” and walked where Rei-sama and Shimako-san were on stand-by. As if to substantiate that, Rosa Chinensis was trembling with laughter.

Come to think of it, if something were stuck between the pages, she would have already noticed. Plus, Sachiko-sama was not the type to do something that underhanded.

“Okay, let’s start from the top. Yumi-chan, stand at the right wing and look inward.”

“Yes.”

It seemed like Rosa Chinensis was the director. When she stood where she was told, she was told it was alright to hold onto her script. Indeed, Rei-sama was holding one in her hand.

“There is no need to worry.”

Sachiko-sama spoke before Yumi could act.

“Yumi has already memorized her lines.”

Sachiko-sama looked proud, being able to say, “There is no need to worry,” and Yumi felt quite happy that she was the reason for Sachiko-sama having that expression.

Perhaps even she could work hard enough to meet Sachiko-sama’s expectations, and that she was not destined to perpetually disappoint-. Just that tiny action by Sachiko-sama could excite Yumi that much.

“Excuse me-.”

Just as they prepared to begin the standing rehearsal, visitors arrived at the Rose Mansion.

“Ah, I’ll get it.”

In any case, Yumi, knowing that she was the newest of the people there, hurried to the door. When she opened the door, six students were there, and they all quickly bowed their heads, “Gokigenyou.”

“Go, Gokigenyou.”

Yumi hurriedly responded.

The six were not all one group, but rather three pairs, as their haphazard ranks and different behaviors expressed.

“We’re the handicraft club, if we could see Rosa Foetida.”

“We’re the fine arts club, if we could see Rosa Gigantea.”

“We’re the invention club, if we could see Rosa Chinensis.”

They were stiff with nervousness, as if they were reading from their national language textbooks that they had not prepared reading for.

When Yumi told them to wait and turned around, maybe they felt she couldn’t hear them, but they said, “See, it’s Fukuzawa Yumi-san.”

Maybe the others might not have appreciated this bland newcomer opening the door to the Rose Mansion as if it were her home, she repented. After all, Yumi's current standing was not even Sachiko-sama's sœur, but rather "that person who did not know her place and managed to refuse Sachiko-sama's proposal," so it would not have been surprising had people thought it awkward.

When she returned to the first-floor room and spoke to the Roses about their visitors, they replied, "Have them come in," so she awkwardly went back to call the six people in.

"Please."

"Apologies for intruding."

The six politely bowed and entered.

"But, I'm so glad."

One of the handicraft club members mumbled in the foyer.

"I had no idea what I was going to do if Rosa Chinensis came out and opened the door. But it was Fukuzawa Yumi-san."

"Eh?"

Yumi double-took as she closed the door.

"As much as I admire the Roses, they are somewhat unapproachable. Fukuzawa-san, I do not mean to offend, but you are a more intimate type of person."

"I agree, we were so relieved, too."

The fine arts club students nodded.

Apparently, they had not all agreed to arrive at the same time, but had all simply gotten stuck in front of the Rose Mansion. When they finally settled themselves down, they called in, and Yumi had opened the door. It was probably a feeling very similar to when Yumi and Tsutako-san had first come to the Rose Mansion, and Shimako-san had called to them from behind.

"It's curious, with Fukuzawa-san walking in and out of the Rose Mansion, the Roses feel a lot more accessible and human."

Wow. It was a completely different reaction than she expected.

“I’m sure there are things going on that I don’t know, but to be honest, I thought, it’d be nice if Fukuzawa-san were to become Sachiko-sama’s little sister.”

Ahh, I see. –Yumi thought.

She had grown timid from her own selfish imagination, but it seemed not everyone was particularly critical about Yumi. Realizing that, Yumi felt a huge burden lifted from her shoulders.

The fine arts club members had come to the Rose Mansion to discuss some finer points about the backdrops they were working on, the handicrafts club members had come to confirm the costume fitting for tomorrow, and the invention club members had come with their tricks for the magic scenes.

The rehearsal was halted once again, but Yumi had finally been able to see the serious faces of the Roses. She had a very fun-loving and carefree image of them in the Rose Mansion, but originally, even Yumi only had the serious, difficult-to-approach image of the Roses.

“There is quite a bit of help from other clubs, isn’t there.”

Already one completed bit of scenery was leaning against the corner of the room. Having gone through the hands of the fine arts club, it was extremely realistic, but also illusory. For her, an image of a backdrop was very fuzzy, and trying to think hard about it invoked a feeling akin to the jagged, green, vinyl leaf-like object placed in the middle of hand-rolled sushi.

“We only formally commissioned the dance club. The rumors of the Yamayurikai executives’ sponsored play spread by word of mouth, and a whole lot of people gathered and volunteered to help. We were actually intending to just wear our normal clothing and use some of the dormant backdrops in the school warehouse.”

Rei-sama, who was playing the part of the witch and the prince in today’s rehearsal, explained.

“Every club is already busy with the school festival, but they’ve been going the extra mile for us. They said, it’s a good change of pace, or it’s a good source of inspiration... Well, they make fantastic things for personal use, too.”

Having a surplus of good mood and being able to have fun with something else are both probably nutrition for their products.

When their matters were complete, and everyone settled back into getting ready for the rehearsal, the six students whom were preparing to leave asked.

“Umm, would you mind if we watched?”

Rosa Chinensis happily responded, “Sure,” and with that, the fine arts club, handicraft club and invention club all clumped together and squealed, “Kyaa.”

(Eek...)

For Yumi, she was about to have an audience for her first rehearsal.

“Everything is alright.” Sachiko-sama said, without any hesitation, and smiled brilliantly.

“Just do as you did before.”

Immediately, she felt better. Of course, she just had to do what she did on the second floor.

Miraculous.

Rei-sama was supposed to be the witch, and Cinderella was supposed to be the one having a magic spell cast on her.

Sachiko-sama had reason to say the script was of no use for her. She had completely memorized her lines, was splendid, and even those standing on the stage with her struggled to stop staring at her.

When she looked at the corner of the room, the six visitors were likewise entranced by Cinderella.

Yumi felt proud.

Isn’t Sachiko-sama fantastic?

She shouted jubilantly, deep down in her heart.

Part 5.

After school on Friday, clothing testing for basting took place in the clothing room for the Lillian Girls' Academy high school.

“My, what a lovely Cinderella.”

The ivory dress, with brilliant ornamentation of gold and silver thread, was so neat and gorgeous, and it fit Sachiko-sama so perfectly that all you could do was sigh in adoration.

“I think the breast area is too bare, is it not?”

Sachiko-sama said, worried. Then, as she rolled up the mother-in-law's dress, Rosa Foetida jumped in to respond.

“No, you aren't supposed to be packing the collar like that. It's supposed to be service.”

“Just what sort of service are you talking about?”

“The most beautiful figure possible, for the Sachiko fans, see?”

Rosa Foetida spun Sachiko-sama around and stopped her, face-to-face, with Yumi, who was in the middle of putting on the Sister B dress.

“Yumi-chan, what do you think? It looks just fine as it is, right?”

“Ah, y, yes, of course.”

It might have seemed like it was a coerced answer, but being able to see a bit of her white breasts was far more sexy and good. Even though they were all girls, she thought it was important to appreciate pretty things as pretty.

“Really?”

As Sachiko-sama leaned in to make sure, Yumi nodded her head vigorously. Although she had gotten a bit more used to it, the close-up view of a beautiful woman was still intense. Plus, today she had the added power of her clothing.

“If Yumi says so, then I shall leave it.”

Sachiko-sama unexpectedly withdrew quite simply. She walked toward Rosa Chinensis, asking, “What are we to do about hair?”

“-says she. There seem to be some reasons behind that.”

Rosa Foetida buttoned Yumi's back while verbally splashing Yumi with cold water. Even Yumi, after all, could not have let "if Yumi says so" slip without noticing.

"Oh dear, Yumi has less breasts than expected. Maybe we need to have it made smaller."

The clothing for roles that had not been definitively assigned had been made slightly larger than the standard high school student's size. Even though it was supposed to be slightly larger, that the waist was almost perfect while only the breast area was too big made her feel a bit sad.

When the handicrafts club member used a safety pin to note the extra cloth, this time Sachiko-sama spoke, "Wait," and hurried over.

"I am going to wear that, now."

"Eh?"

"Here, swap."

Sachiko-sama quickly took off the ivory dress and held it out to Yumi.

"Don't you forget. Who is to play Cinderella has not yet been decided... Come on, undress quickly."

"Sa, Sachiko-sama, that's..."

Sachiko-sama chased her wearing only her slippers, and finally cornered Yumi to the wall. No one offered help. Rather, they had all stopped working and turned to watch this amusing spectacle.

"Help!"

She was turned to her back, and her buttons were unfastened.

"Kya-!"

We just have to talk this out, we just have to talk this out. But she never mustered the courage to start talking. She ran, so she was chased, and if she had undressed herself in the first place, she would have been spared BEING undressed.

"---"

"Ahh, Yumi-chan's cute, too. Cute, cute."

The Roses praised her like that, but they, too, clearly were looking at Sachiko-sama, who was her usual brilliant self in the Sister B attire.

“Everyone give me your handkerchiefs. Ah, towels would work, too.”

Rosa Foetida grabbed a towel, rolled it up from both ends, and stuffed it into Yumi’s chest.

“Hmm. One towel, or maybe two meat buns, would be necessary.”

Because of her efforts, Yumi was able to acquire a wonderful ravine, but it was also very lewd.

“Umm, I think the breasts might be too bare, after all...”

Yumi said, as she pointed to her breasts, which probably would fit better if she used a push-up bra.

“But Yumi, you said it was alright just a moment ago.”

Sachiko-sama tilted her head.

Well, I did say that, but at the time, I didn’t think I would also be wearing it.

“Uh. Does that mean Sachiko-sama was asking me about the dress out of consideration of me also ending up in it?”

“Of course.”

There was a “you just realized?” tone in her response.

Oh. That would explain her “if Yumi says so” earlier. She was a fool for becoming excited.

But, more importantly.

Sachiko-sama still had not given up about the lead role.

“Rosa Foetida, how about these?”

One handicraft club member offered two white objects. At first glance they were pincushions, but its shape was more unstable and felt more like an ornament. They were also both part of one set, and she thought she’d recognized it-.

“Ah, shoulder pad.”

Several people shouted at once.

“The material and size should be perfect.”

“I think push-up bras have that sort of material sewn in.”

“Oh? And might I ask how you know?”

“Excuse you, I do not use them.”

The handicraft club was excited over talk of push-up bras, and so Yumi was unable to make any comment.

In any case, the shoulder pad was wonderfully set aside as an intended prop. Because of Sachiko-sama’s phenomenal figure, regardless of whether Yumi was to act as Cinderella or Sister B during the performance, she was going to be forced to pad her breasts.

Spicy and Bitter Weekend

Part 1.

Saturday.

Just about two and a half hours after noon, there was a gift from the cooking room to the Rose Mansion.

“Second-year cherry blossom. We’re opening a curry stand for the festival, and we’d like to request a tasting.”

“Wah!”

A strong, spicy scent roused her appetite. They had been rehearsing for the play on the second floor, but everyone had stopped, and quickly moved the table back from the corner to the center.

“Please.”

Three students wearing pink apron-dresses labeled “Sakuratei” took out three dishes each from a Ramen-shop delivery box and placed them on the table.

“Oops, there’s one extra.”

They cocked their heads. They had brought nine, for eight.

“Who said it was three times three?”

“Oh, oops. Rosa Gigantea had no second-year.”

They were whispering to each other, but it was very audible. Yumi had already been counted, in a very matter-of-fact way.

“It’s better than too little, isn’t it? May I have the extra one, too?”

The three students from Sakuratei were relieved by Rosa Gigantea’s suggestion, and so the problem with the number of dishes was resolved. Finally, they could get to sampling the food.

“It’s a trial product, so please, be honest.”

There was a bank of rice in the middle of the elliptical dish, and on either end was a different curry sauce. A red curry with ripe tomatoes, and a white curry using coconut milk as its base.

They had eaten lunch two hours earlier, but as they were hungry from rehearsal, everyone eagerly lifted their chopsticks, or spoons.

“Being able to eat two types of curry on one dish is nice... But, I think there might be too much sauce compared to the amount of rice?”

Was Rosa Chinensis’ first impression.

“The colors, also, might be a bit bland?”

Rosa Gigantea said.

“Green is missing. Boiled broccoli, asparagus... turnips or pickles, anything, but I think you should place something green on the dish.”

“Green. Come to think of it, that’s true.”

The Sakuratei students earnestly took notes.

“Maybe you should cook rice with a little less water? Personally, I prefer a bit drier rice.”

Said Rosa Foetida, and Shimako-san answered, “I like rice puffed up like this.” Then, they took a survey of everyone at the table, which resulted in three preferring “drier” rice, three preferring “puffy” rice and two not caring either way. Yumi raised her hand for “not caring,” and she felt to a certain degree, her personality was shown in her answer.

There were some selfish comments, like Sachiko-sama’s “I don’t like coconuts, in general,” but as expected of the people at the Rose Mansion, everyone was offering earnest advice for the tasting. By contrast, Yumi could only offer the unhelpful comment of, “I think it’s good,” and so she felt a bit apologetic.

“We’ll head back and discuss it, then. We’ll come back later to pick up the dishes, so feel free to just leave them there.”

They hurried back to the cooking room, saying they were scheduled to take a peek into the staff room, count the number of heads, and deliver food.

“Speaking of which, what time is it?”

Rosa Chinensis flipped her hand and looked at her thin, silver wristwatch in response to Rosa Gigantea's question. Not just Rosa Gigantea, but almost everyone glanced at a nearby clock to confirm. –Two fifty. The three first-years began cleaning up the dishes.

“Almost three. Oh, yeah.”

“We need to go pick him up.”

“Who shall we send?”

The Roses softly discussed among themselves.

“Um, what should we do about the extra dish?”

Yumi pointed at the dish Rosa Gigantea mentioned earlier, as she wiped the table. Perhaps Rosa Gigantea planned to eat it now, or perhaps she meant to keep it until after the rehearsal. If she was going to save it for later, it was probably prudent to move it to a different plate and stick it in the refrigerator, as cleaning the dishes for the cooking students was something she preferred to have done now.

“Perfect. Yumi-chan can we ask you to do a chore?”

Rosa Gigantea said.

“Eh?”

“There's a person waiting for us by the main gate, if you could bring that person to us.”

“Fine with me...?”

Yumi wondered who it could be. The main gate meant it was not a person from within the school.

“We'll have that person eat the curry.”

“Ah.”

Rosa Gigantea explained, today was the day the Hanadera student council leader was arriving to join rehearsals. They had gotten permission from the school, but a young man walking alone into a girls' school was not a good idea, so they had promised to send someone to escort him.

“Why are we treating an outsider?”

Sachiko-sama spoke, unpleasantly, and Rosa Chinensis curtly answered.

“It would be impolite if only we are spicy.”

Even Sachiko-sama had to feel sorry for the Hanadera guy, who would be surrounded by people who had just eaten curry with garlic. Either that, or she preferred not to have that image of herself, regardless of who the opponent was.

“Eight minutes left.”

Rosa Foetida began counting down.

“But I don’t know how that person looks?”

“There are not a whole lot of Hanadera students waiting by the main gate. His name is Kashiwagi-san. He’s a pretty nice-looking guy, so you’ll recognize him immediately.”

Yumi hurried out, spurred on by the words, seven and a half minutes left.

It took a bit over ten minutes to walk from the Rose Mansion to the main gate. How long would it take if she walked quickly?

(Ahh, shoot.)

Yumi hurried back after stepping out. She could keep her indoor shoes on if she were just traversing the courtyard, but she would need shoes to walk to the main gate. There was a barrier of fallen gingko nuts, after all, along the way.

One minute lost due to the detour to the shoe box. She would have to run.

She disturbed her plaited skirt just a tad, she let her sailor scarf overturn a tiny bit, and she paid care to not step on gingko nuts. It was exactly three o’clock when she arrived at the main gate.

(Please don’t be here, yet.)

When she stepped out of the gate, a Hanadera Institute uniform was waiting right in front of her. Still, even though the uniform was identical to the one her brother wore, his height allowed him to look 20% more grand, a fascinating effect.

“Excuse me, are you Kashiwagi-san?”

“Ah, yes.”

He lifted his head and smiled.

“Are you the person sent by the Yamayurikai? Kashiwagi Suguru, pleased to meet you.”

The pitiful prince that was hated by Cinderella was a pretty good looking young man.

Part 2.

Kashiwagi-san is a third-year at the Hanadera Institute. As he'd already received an early acceptance into the Hanadera University, he was able to be the student council leader despite it being this otherwise busy time period for third-year students, and he was also able to help out with other school festivals. A man of such elegant social status, is how he introduced himself on the roadside while walking with Yumi.

"I must say, unlike Lillian, it seems like Hanadera's rather prepared for examination conditions?"

"Indeed. Thus, I was saved because the early-acceptance entries were low in number."

"Right..."

Hanadera University was extremely high level, so it supposedly only accepted up to thirty students with exceptional records from its affiliate high schools without any exam. Those that failed to grab an early acceptance would then take an exam for Hanadera University, as well as other schools, so it had an image of a school that had high examination requirements.

(That means, this person is a super elite...!)

A slender figure, a generous mask, a well-mannered attitude to other people, and a brilliant mind and leadership ability to boot. Just how could Sachiko-sama complain about a man like this?

"Ah, the Maria statue."

Kashiwagi-san stopped at the fork in the road.

"When Lillian students pass by, they always stop and put their hands together, correct?"

"You're very knowledgeable."

"Yes. For whatever reason, in my household, men go to Hanadera, and women go to Lillian. My mother, my grandmother, my aunt, and my cousin all went to Lillian."

Whether he was just acting the part, he put together his hands and closed his eyes. Because of this, Yumi was also able to pray, in peace. Because it was such a habit, she felt bad every time she neglected to perform the rite.

“With Maria-sama watching like this, Lillian students really cannot do anything bad.”

Kashiwagi-san mumbled, having opened his eyes.

“Anything bad?”

“I don’t know. Girls’ schools and boys’ schools have different standards of ‘bad,’ so I can’t give a specific example.”

“Shakyamuni watches over Hanadera, though, right?”

“Even so, there is no statue in clear view like this.”

Hanadera Institute was a Buddhist school.

After taking a left at the fork, there was another fork. When you took a right, the high school facilities were on your left.

“Please come in here.”

She led him to the visitor entrance and took a slipper from the shoe box.

“I should have brought indoor shoes, it seems. I heard we were to rehearse in the gymnasium, so I just brought my indoor athletics shoes.”

“It’s alright.”

He seemed to feel awkward wearing visitor slippers while wearing a school uniform.

“I apologize, could you wait here a moment? I’m going to change into my indoor shoes.”

With that, Yumi hurried outside. Ah, how busy. She turned around, entered from the main entrance, changed shoes, and now had to return, this time from indoors.

(Huh...?)

She thought she saw Sachiko-sama.

(Was I seeing things? Sachiko-sama should be at the Rose Mansion still.)

That shadow vanished to the library road as Yumi watched. She thought she should chase, for a moment, but then realized there was no need for her to investigate whether that was Sachiko-sama or not, and she had a guest to attend to, anyways.

(Oh, well, I guess I'll ask Sachiko-sama later.)

Thus, Yumi remembered her original mission and ran to the other side.

“Welcome, Kashiwagi-sama.”

“Thank you for transporting yourself all this distance today.”

“Ahh, please, put down your luggage here.”

The Roses smiled their special smiles and welcomed the visitor.

“Thank you for the invitation. It is a wonderful mansion.”

The person named Kashiwagi Suguru seemed extremely used to the situation. He was very settled down, a curious man, who was pulled into the Rose Mansion, a building that could only be called “strange” by an outsider. Then, despite being surrounded by girls of similar age, conducted himself sociably without any hint of timid-ness.

“My little brother would come home flushed and crying from this situation...”

Having completed her important job, Yumi stood off to the side, relieved, and watched the scene.

“Oh, Yumi-chan has a little brother?”

Rosa Gigantea was unwrapping the curry dish, having stepped out of the circle and walked next to Yumi.

“Yes. At Hanadera Institute.”

“Being flushed is more normal. Being this sociable at a high school age is kind of creepy.”

She was talking about Kashiwagi-san, and although they were far away and probably couldn't be heard, Yumi still felt a pang of fear.

“Rosa Gigantea's mouth is as sharp as the taste of coconut curry...”

“Then it wasn’t that spicy?”

Rosa Gigantea laughed heartily.

She was searching around with her hand, so Yumi handed her the spoon, that was being guarded by a paper napkin.

“Thank you.”

“It’s cooled, you’re still serving it to him?”

She asked with a whisper, and the response she got was a childish “well, duh.”

“Speed is the name of the game. If we don’t make him eat, soon, Lillian students will be stuck with the label, ‘smell like curry.’ Unfortunately there is nothing quite as handy as a microwave in the Rose Mansion, anyways.”

It would have been faster if she just said that. Regardless, Rosa Gigantea said, “I apologize for keeping you waiting,” a decidedly uncharacteristic sort of behavior, and placed the cold curry in front of the student council leader from the neighboring school.

“Sakuratei special menu, named ‘Curry that’s good even when it’s cold.’”

What a liar.

As she walked back, Rosa Gigantea, out of view of the customer, stuck out her tongue and laughed.

“You may have already eaten lunch, but as you are a man, I hope you could eat this, too?”

“As you will be participating in the rehearsals with us, please, do fill your stomach, first.”

Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida both spoke in a nonchalant manner, but they very proactively recommended him to eat. As expected, even if he were to never notice, they were not so keen on having eaten curry and being near a guy who hadn’t.

“Of course. Thank you for the treat.”

And as expected of a man, Kashiwagi. He said, “Itadakimasu” with full expression and began eating the two-colored curry. Even with people watching, he ate fluidly and without hesitation.

“What do you think?”

“What, do you mean?”

“What do you think of him?”

At first, she didn’t know what Rosa Gigantea meant. So she responded, “He eats like they do in the curry commercials,” but that was a huge miss.

“Not that. The Hanadera student council leader, it’s your first time seeing him isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m asking about your impression of him.”

“Impression.”

Yumi glanced at Kashiwagi-san. He was half-finished with eating. Perhaps it was his personality, but both colors were evenly diminished.

“Intellectual, sociable, and punctual. Also, he is refreshing.”

Rosa Gigantea nodded, “yes yes,” as she listened to Yumi.

“Objectively, how do you think of him as a guy?”

“How...?”

What in the world are you talking about, Rosa Gigantea? Was she trying to be a formal marriage mother?

“I’m not really good with that angle, so I’m asking Yumi-chan, a normal girl.”

“Huh!?”

She had no idea what was going on. So she answered half-heartedly.

“Objectively, he’s a pretty good line to follow...”

Still chewing away at curry, he probably couldn’t have even imagined two girls standing by the sink would be talking about this.

“- so that would mean, he passes.”

As Sachiko-sama's partner, Rosa Gigantea said. In this play, there was an ulterior motive of trying to beat Sachiko-sama's hate of men.

"Sachiko's household is quite bizarre. Her grandfather and father both have many mistresses. There are people that stupidly think that's the true nature of men, but those type of men really don't know how women feel. So, girls like Sachiko, stuck around that sort of men, end up with an intense hatred of all men."

The concubines of the Ogasawara family men were quite famous, Rosa Gigantea whispered. People with stature and prestige had a hard time keeping that sort of thing under wraps, apparently. Of course, that means Sachiko-sama knew about her father's relationship with women.

"I see, hating men, has a reason behind it."

"Pretty much. I mean, liking men takes so much less explaining."

So what they needed was a perfect, clean man with absolutely no chinks in his armor.

If Sachiko-sama were to be in a play with such a man, she might recognize the better virtues and qualities of men, and everything would end happily. Was how they wanted to script everything.

"But, I wonder if it'll go that well..."

"Don't worry. He won't draw near Sachiko-sama too much, even by mistake."

It had nothing to do with making them a couple, or anything. The first step was simply placing a "good man" near her. It was none other than Rosa Gigantea who fired the white-plumed arrow at him, saying he was the perfect fit for the job. And, now that the plan was coming into fruition, she had decided to ask for someone else's opinion.

"Has Sachiko-sama not met Kashiwagi-san yet?"

As she asked, Yumi suddenly realized.

Sachiko-sama was not there.

(Huh? Was she here when I came into the room? Or was she not?)

“Yumi-chan heard, right? That girl always ran away.”

She didn't go to help Hanadera Institute with their school festival, she would not attend if they were having a meeting, and she even began complaining about wanting off the role when she found out the Hanadera student council leader was the prince.

“Speaking of which, where is Cinderella?”

With good timing, Kashiwagi-san put down his spoon and asked.

“Sachiko seemed to be discontent, and ran off to the gymnasium first.”

Rosa Foetida seemed to feign curiosity, but it seemed everyone had already known.

Discontent could only have meant one thing, and that was the prince. Cinderella hated the prince, and even though the midnight bell had not yet been struck, she had fled somewhere. –Ah, the story of Cinderella was changing into something else entirely.

“I was looking forward to seeing her.”

Gochisousama, and he stood up. He pulled out his script and his indoor athletics shoes from a vinyl bag. He was itching to get going.

Yumi thought about what had transpired earlier as she began cleaning the dish.

That shadow she saw outside of the guest entrance must have been Sachiko-sama.

(But, why was she there...?)

If she continued on the path through the library, she would arrive at Maria-sama's fork. The other two roads from that intersection were to the main gate and the auditorium, and both cases were simply longer routes to get to the first or second gymnasiums.

(Did she, return home!?)

If she, if she really did not want to even touch the hand of man, and had run away-. Yumi could not hold herself any longer, and took off.

“Yumi-chan?”

“I’m sorry, I’m going on ahead.”

Yumi took her gymnasium shoes in hand and rushed down the screeching stairs by herself.

Part 3.

Had Sachiko-sama simply gone home, there would be no way to catch up, but she couldn't allow herself to simply stand pat.

After entering the school facilities from the courtyard, she shuffled along quickly. When she passed by a Sister, she put on an "I was walking the entire time" face. Being so deceptive was not something she was proud of, but finding Sachiko-sama was her first priority, and so she had no time to be receiving an unnecessary lecture.

Yumi first went to the visitors' entrance. She was sure she had seen someone like Sachiko-sama as she walked out from there. She walked out and ran down the path to the library. She took a right on Maria-sama's intersection and went to the main gate, and even ran outside the auditorium on her way back, but she saw no sign of Sachiko-sama.

Did she really just run away-. As Yumi thought that, she walked back to the school facilities.

That proud Sachiko-sama running away with her tail between her legs was not suitable. She seemed more the type to raise hysteria and fight back.

Yumi looked down at her feet. She had dashed out in her indoor shoes.

Had she found Sachiko-sama in that state, she had no idea what she would have done.

If she forcibly brought her back, lectured her, and forced her to hold hands with a guy, would she have been satisfied?

That would be even more unsuitable. Definitely not good.

Instead of returning to the visitor's entrance, Yumi went straight to the primary gymnasium. Scheduled for today was primarily a dance lesson for Kashiwagi-san, preferably using stage they would be using for the actual performance, for rehearsal.

There was one indoor shoe in the shoe box for the gymnasium.

"A preceding visitor...?"

When she peeked inside in her socks, she noticed a figure.

“Sachiko-sama!?”

Yumi began running. The person sitting on the stage looked up with a miserable face.

“Ahh, Yumi.”

“So you didn’t go home!?”

Why, why, why, why, was she here?

“I told everyone ‘I will go ahead to the gymnasium.’”

- so she did. Yumi also heard that.

“I’m, an idiot.”

She hated herself for coming to conclusions on her own. No one said Sachiko-sama had gone home. Yumi had simply let her imagination run berserk.

“But you were on the road to the library, weren’t you?”

“...No.”

That was a lie.

She was dubious until then, but that was clearly Sachiko-sama. She had looked away for a split second before answering, and that confirmed her suspicions.

“Okay.”

Yumi didn’t ask any further. She placed her hand on the stage and jumped up, sitting down next to Sachiko-sama.

“Your skirt will become dirty.”

Sachiko-sama laughed with a side glance.

“How about Sachiko-sama?”

“I just noticed.”

No need to be in a hurry now, Sachiko-sama seemed to say, as she calmly remained seated, so Yumi stayed, too.

They were alone in the big gymnasium. On the day of the school festival, there would be many pipe chairs, turning this into an assembly hall.

She struggled to believe that, on the very stage she sat on, she would eventually stand and act in front of many people. Come to think of it, the entire week was fresh and intense and dizzying, and she still felt like she was just in a big dream. Thus, even though the performance was in a mere week, she struggled to realize it was a reality.

She wondered what Sachiko-sama was thinking in this empty gymnasium before Yumi arrived. And now, with Yumi by her side, what could she be thinking?

“I was there.”

It was so sudden that she didn’t immediately recognize where “there” was. So she glanced at the entry to see who had come.

“I was actually there, by the library road.”

“Ehh!?”

“Yumi went to pick up the Hanadera student council leader, correct? So, I went to take a look at him, first.”

She secretly waited, to take a look at his face. Although she had answered “no” earlier, for whatever reason, she became willing to open herself up.

“Why did you run off to the library?”

“Because Yumi seemed to notice. I didn’t mind if it was just Yumi, but if Hanadera’s student council leader noticed, too, it would be a bit awkward.”

“...Well, it would be a bit impolite.”

Yumi sighed. It was a bit stingy to steal a look prior to their supposed “first meeting,” but at the same time, Sachiko-sama might have needed that mental preparation, as it was clearly going to be an intense thing for her to handle-.

“What did you think, then?”

“Think. Well, nothing in particular. I just wanted to see the opponent before I was seen, that is all.”

Sachiko-sama hopped down from the stage.

“Okay? I am unwilling to dance with the Hanadera student council leader, but I will not run from myself. If I run, I lose. And I hate losing more than anything else.”

Awesome.

Sachiko-sama definitely needed to keep looking strong.

But, Sachiko-sama winning would mean Yumi being Cinderella, so as much as she wanted to, she couldn't cheer on Sachiko-sama in that regard.

“Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama was stretching, perhaps the burden lifted by speaking.

“I shall be your dance partner until everyone else arrives.”

“Eh?”

As she processed this, Sachiko-sama pulled her off the stage, took Yumi's right hand with her left hand, and drew in Yumi's hip with her right hand.

“Eh, it's alright, it's alright.”

Sachiko-sama being a practice partner was absurd. Yumi lightly refused. However.

“Even if you're alright, I'm not. You seem to have remembered the steps, but Yumi's dancing was not smooth and it was bothering me.”

When told that, she had no choice.

One, two, three, two, two, three.

With the count started, she gave up and stepped back with her left foot.

“Don't be nervous. You have to be able to dance with anyone.”

Their clasped hands, the hand around her waist, all of this was too much for her, and she couldn't concentrate. Robotically, mechanically, she felt like she was going through the steps like an assembly-line worker. Her palm was sweaty. She wondered if Sachiko-sama noticed.

“There’s no need to think. Just trust your body’s memory and leave everything to it.”

Unlike Rei-sama, their heights were not that different, so it felt like their faces were close.

One, two, three, two, two, three.

“Don’t rush, smile.”

Even though her partner was this bad, Sachiko-sama seemed to be having fun. It might have been forced, at first, but as she smiled along, she felt like she became less tense.

“Right. You’re doing superb.”

Sachiko-sama was the one who was superb. She was performing the male steps, despite not knowing them all too well, perfectly, and her leading was incredibly skillful.

“I had no idea dancing was this fun.”

When she mumbled that, Sachiko-sama narrowed her eyes and nodded.

“Indeed. I had no idea, either.”

She wished they could remain dancing like this forever. At least for now, Sachiko-sama felt the same way as her, and so she allowed herself a moment of conceit.

Cinderella and the Prince’s meeting went without any further delay and chaos.

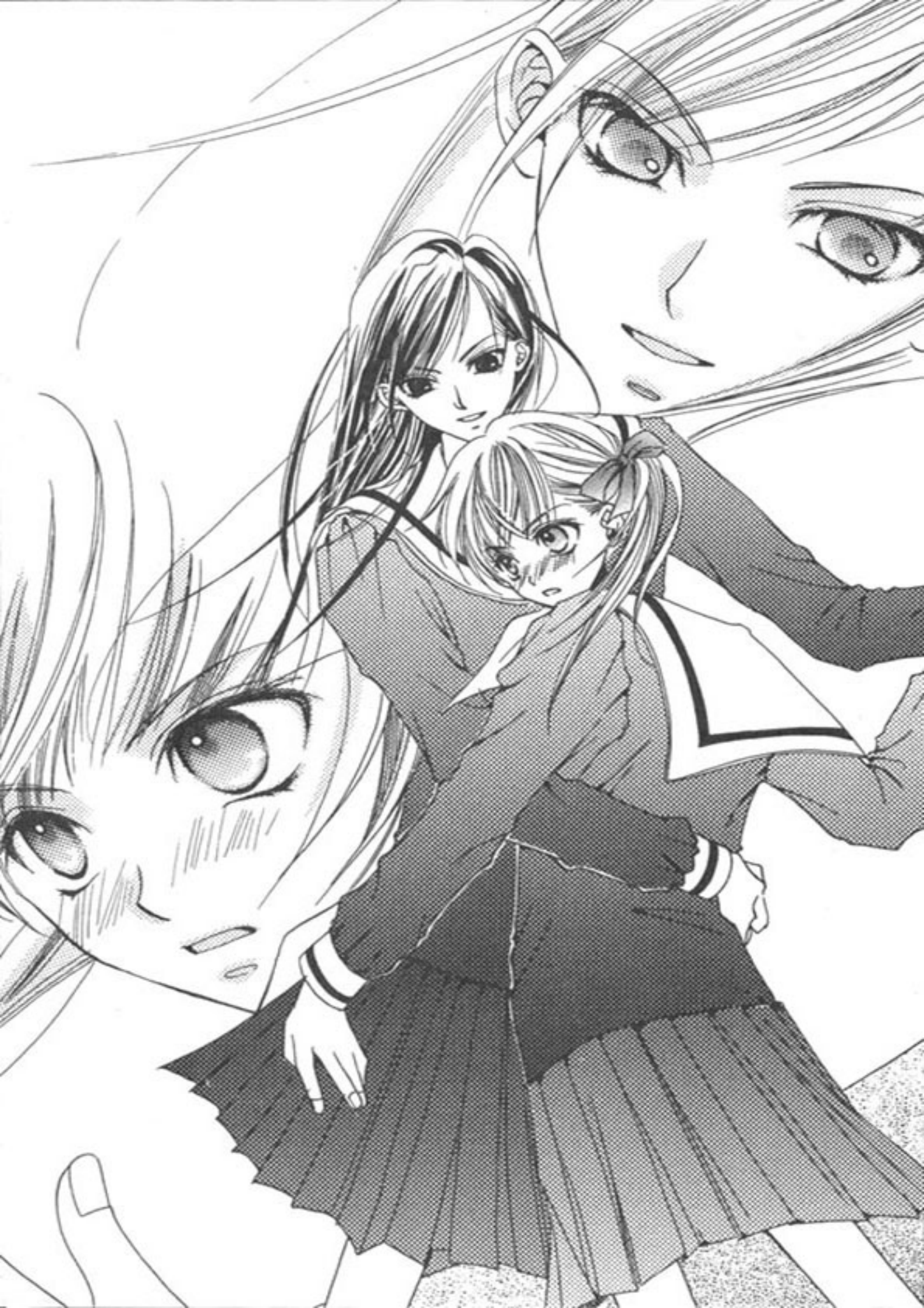
(Well, not that I expected there to be any biting upon their first meeting.)

However, even Yumi was honestly surprised when Sachiko-sama stepped forward and began greeting.

“Good day, I am Ogasawara. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“...Good day.”

Perhaps he had heard about Sachiko-sama beforehand, but Kashiwagi-san seemed to be a bit perplexed by her proactive greeting.



Ahh, but Sachiko-sama. A smile was a smile, but she was clearly forcing it. She had no need to force herself that much.

“But, boy, I wish Sachiko and Yumi-chan could have seen it. Kashiwagi-sama as the prince. We stopped by the clothing room to test the costume on him, and wow, he was hands-down the prince on a white horse!”

She felt bad for Rosa Foetida, whose eyes were sparkling and dreamy, but she was not particularly interested.

The character whose name was the title was the protagonist for these fairy tales, so as long as the Cinderella was beautiful, is how she felt. The prince was simply a supplement, vegetables pickled in soy sauce, to use a curry analogy, or minced Japanese leek. As long as he didn't upstage the heroine, it was enough.

Plus, the prince in Cinderella doesn't appear on a white horse. Rather, he simply sits in his castle, and most things popped up for him, an extraordinarily fortunate person.

After the dance club arrived a bit late, they decided to put together the ballroom dance scene. So they would get used to the starting positions and spaciousness of the floor, they decided to perform the full dance on the stage.

“Kashiwagi-sama, if we may request a natural spin turn.”

“Ok.”

Kashiwagi-san fluidly lifted his hand from the middle of the stage.

However, a high school student who could reply “Ok” to the name of a step. Is this person truly 18-years old?

Perhaps Sachiko-sama had already relented, but she stood next to Kashiwagi-san. Called over by Rei-sama, Yumi stood on stand-by at the front edge of the stage. When the other pairs found their positions, the music began.

“Don't look elsewhere.”

When she glanced worriedly at Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama cautioned. From that quick glance, they were in the fundamental holding position. At that point, Sachiko-sama was not having any rashes or anything.

The stage seemed extremely spacious when they were standing on it, but once the dancing began, it felt extremely confined. So they wouldn't collide with another pair, or so they wouldn't vanish into the sleeves of the stage, she was busy maintaining her pace, so she had no opportunity to look at another pair.

When the song finished once, orders were given from below the stage. The main pair needed to make sure they didn't stray from the center, or the size of each step needed to be more standardized, et cetera. When they danced again after adjustments, everything fit together more cleanly. Even the people dancing could tell that much.

“Okay, one last round.”

On the third dance, even Yumi began to have the chance to look at Sachiko-sama while dancing.

The confidence of being able to say “Ok” showed, as Kashiwagi-san smartly led Sachiko-sama. If their dancing was on par with one another, then Sachiko-sama could not complain-. Just as she thought that, Yumi felt something was amiss.

Sachiko-sama was not her usual self. She was dancing smoothly to the lead, but she was missing her usual brilliance. It was a bit hazy.

The song ended.

Sachiko-sama quickly separated herself from Kashiwagi-san and ran toward Yumi, as if escaping.

“Sachiko.”

Rei-sama, by Yumi's side, grabbed Sachiko-sama's arm as she passed.

“I know you don’t like it, but how about smiling a bit? You’ll have a negative effect on the audience like that.”

“I am not a hostess. I will smile during the actual performance.”

Yumi chased after Sachiko-sama, who had run outside after that declaration. Rei-sama tapped Yumi’s back, as if saying, “best regards.”

Sachiko-sama was leaning against the gymnasium’s outer wall and looking up at the sky.

“They said they would begin rehearsal in fifteen minutes.”

When Yumi spoke, Sachiko-sama looked at her. She seemed healthier than Yumi expected. She seemed to be in a distressed state, so Yumi thought Sachiko-sama may have run outside to vomit.

“What a hard schedule.”

“Because Kashiwagi-san can’t make it very often, they want to run through the entire play, said Rosa Chinenis.”

“I see.”

As she didn’t seem to be implying that Yumi was a bother, she, too, leaned against the wall. When she looked up, she noticed one cloud had torn off from the rest and was leisurely floating.

“Don’t worry. It was getting claustrophobic, so I stepped out for fresh air.”

“Yes.”

On the grounds, the track team was having a marathon on the running track. Maybe it was from the tennis court, but the sound of balls being smacked echoed around.

“Maria-sama’s soul.”

Sachiko-sama said, as she stared at the blue sky.

“Yes it is.”

Yumi answered, also looking at the sky.

“Oh, no. Not the sky. Here.”

Even though she said it wasn’t the sky, Sachiko-sama was pointing up. Then, she cocked her head and asked, “Can’t you hear?”, so Yumi silently focused on hearing. Then-

“Ah!”

“Understand?”

It was barely audible, but she could hear music from somewhere from the school. There were no lyrics, but an accordion or piano was nostalgically playing “Maria-sama’s Soul”

“I did not think I would run into this piece again from a high school site.”

Sachiko-sama softly laughed, and lifted herself from the gymnasium’s outside wall.

Come to think of it, Sachiko-sama had also attended Lillian since infant school, so she would have been made to sing the song, too.

Sachiko-sama checked the time and reluctantly walked to the entrance. It was almost fifteen minutes. Sachiko-sama scraped her shoes on the gymnasium foyer’s matt, before mumbling.

“Even so, I wonder why it’s a sapphire.”

“Eh?”

“Do you not feel it incompatible?”

Sachiko-sama giggled, and left Yumi, who stood stunned.

“...Sachiko-sama.”

If only she had waited just a bit, she thought. At least, so that Yumi could reply.

But Sachiko-sama never looked back, joining the others who awaited in the gymnasium.

In the end, Sachiko-sama’s discontented attitude was not resolved through the whole rehearsal. Even after switching roles with Yumi, it remained the case, and despite the perfect speaking of lines, her displeasure was extremely obvious.

In the case of Yumi, she was nearly perfect as Sister B, but she messed up her lines at least ten times as Cinderella, and she stepped on the prince’s foot twice.

“It’s better to have a hurting foot than be shot a sour look all the time.”

Kashiwagi-san kindly consoled her, but in truth, he probably would have preferred neither to have been the case.

He was forced to eat curry, then made to wear the costume, then concentrated on the dance practice, then ran through a rehearsal two times over, and even he was unable to hide his exhaustion. Even so, he smiled and walked through the gate, saying “until next week,” an incredible person.

The three first-years sent Kashiwagi-san off and returned to the Rose Mansion, where Sachiko-sama’s tense aura had vanished.

“Thank you for your hard work. The tea has just finished.”

Sachiko-sama’s tea was very dense and bitter. Everyone reached for the sugar and powdered milk after one sip, but not one person complained about the taste.

Yumi drank it without adding anything. Because it was how Sachiko-sama drank it.

What was Sachiko-sama thinking, as she drank this bitter tea.

She felt bad for the Roses, but she thought the plan for Sachiko-sama to conquer her dislike of men would fizzle.

The bad atmosphere during the rehearsal and this bitter tea made Yumi think that way.

The Hot Second Week

Part 1.

It was the next Wednesday that Tsutako-san told Yumi that Sachiko-sama was strange.

“Strange...?”

“Well, maybe strange is a faulty expression. Not her usual self.”

“They’re both basically the same thing.”

The school festival was only three days away, so most students were running around wild. Most classes were moved to the mornings this week, so that the afternoon would be freed for individual activities, such as club work, committees, and groups. The last spurt.

On the path to the different club houses, Yumi was told this.

“So, strange in what way?”

“She’s like a fish-paste cake.”

“Fish-paste cake?”

Tsutako-seemed to want to say that Sachiko-sama’s attraction was as a proud and haughty princess, an al dente that still had a wick. Yet, right now, Sachiko-sama was simply a hollow fish-paste cake, without that tough wick. She stared off into space, sighed, and at the end of that-

“She even came to the photography club looking for me.”

Tsutako-san bit into her handkerchief, frustrated, “That’s not Sachiko-sama.”

“Even if it involves her, she’s more the type to call people to her.”

“I don’t think it’s about type or suitability?”

Tsutako-san’s aesthetic sense was peculiar. But anyways, that meant Sachiko-sama had gone to Tsutako-san’s photography club house to settle something.

“And guess what she said? ‘If you want to use the photo of Yumi and I for the school festival, you may go right on ahead.’!”

“Sachiko-sama...”

That, was definitely strange. The usual Sachiko-sama would not allow such a thing if the person desiring something did not bring the topic up in person. Even if she heard about it from other sources, if the person did not come directly, she was strict, in that she would utterly ignore it.

“Anyways, this is, happily, yours. Congratulations.”

Tsutako-san lowered her shoulders and handed Yumi something.

“Ah, this.”

It was the two-shot photo from last Monday, of Sachiko-sama fixing Yumi’s scarf. Come to think of it, this was how it all started.

“She looks different now than she used to. I wonder what happened to Sachiko-sama.”

Tsutako-san said, as she stepped over the newspaper sheets for a class that had spilled working on their sign board to the hallway. Yumi did not have such confidence in leaping over things, so she walked around everything.

Yumi felt she knew “what happened” to Sachiko-sama.

That Sachiko-sama had become fish-paste cake or a wick-less pasta was because she met Kashiwagi-san on Saturday.

“Also, Yumi-san. About the newspaper club, I heard.”

“The newspaper club? That they stopped asking about an interview?”

“Yes. Apparently that was because of Sachiko-sama, too.”

Because of Sachiko-sama, sounded ominous. It seemed certain that Sachiko-sama had pulled strings.

“Last week, Yumi-san was in dire straits, because you were being chased around, right? Maybe because she felt a bit responsible when she found out, Sachiko-sama spoke directly to the newspaper club captain. Because they’re both second-years, it was probably easier for her to negotiate things.”

“But I don’t think they would pull back just because Sachiko-sama asked.”

“Exactly. I heard Sachiko-sama took the interview in Yumi-san’s stead. For the promise that they wouldn’t chase Yumi-san around.”

“Eh...!?”

She had no idea. That Sachiko-sama had unbeknownst to her, shielded her. Even though they met every day, she never noticed.

Tsutako-san said the newspaper club had become silent, because they had received the full story.

“Half of the article is already complete. Whether Sachiko-sama can make Yumi accept the rosary before the school festival, or not. And, whether she becomes Cinderella, or not. They’re just waiting for the aftermath.”

“You’re knowledgeable.”

“The newspaper club is in the neighboring room. When I’m developing photos by myself, I hear them talking, whether I want to or not.”

“Whether you want to or not.”

“Indeed, even if I don’t.”

When they finished descending the stairs and reached the first floor, they split left and right to head to their respective ways.

“Don’t you, somehow, feel uneasiness looming?”

Tsutako-san spun around and asked.

“Uneasiness?”

“You know. You hear about it all the time. A strict person becomes nice all of a sudden, and then they vanish. When you suddenly receive something, it turns out it was as a memento. Or something.”

“Oh come on, it’s not an omen.”

Yumi chuckled. The newspaper club had drawn back in the middle of last week. Sachiko-sama became strange on Saturday, so they were unrelated.

Plus.

Sachiko-sama would not run away. –Yumi believed her.

Sachiko-sama would never run away. Because, she promised.

On the second floor of the Rose Mansion, Sachiko-sama had drawn up a chair next to a window and was staring outside.

The cotton curtains were swaying, a telling tale of the visitations of the soft wind. Sachiko-sama's straight hair also swayed a bit around her ears.

Sachiko-sama didn't notice Yumi entering the room. She remained staring out, like an imprisoned princess.

"When did you come?"

Eventually, the princess noticed Yumi.

"About ten minutes ago."

"I see."

"Has no one else arrived?"

"They're probably busy with their class business, I think? How about Shimako?"

"...Environmental Care Committee."

"Ah."

Even the residents of the Rose Mansion did not spend their entire non-class life devoted to the student council. They all took part in other clubs or committees, so when they were inquired upon, they would appear there.

"Sachiko-sama, are you in any clubs...?"

"No."

Her answer came back matter-of-factly. Since she was stuffed with obligatory lessons her entire life, it might have been a result of that. As a result, the two people with no class or club or committee activities milled about in the Rose Mansion.

Sachiko-sama quietly sighed out the window.

She was probably thinking of Kashiwagi-san. –She intuitively thought.

Such a gloomy sigh was not befitting of Sachiko-sama. Yumi gathered her wits and asked.

"Sachiko-sama."

“Eh?”

“What is the matter?”

“Matter...?”

Maybe she had been intending to be acting as usual. Sachiko-sama replied, her face expressing, “What is she talking about?”

“Umm, you seem to be distressing over something.”

“If I were, would you save me?”

As she was asked with a straight face, Yumi timidly responded, “If it’s within my power.”

“Then, accept my rosary.”

“Eh!?”

“You would help, if it were in your power, correct?”

Sachiko-sama stuck out her rosary, as if saying, “Here.” Looking over it again, it was sparkling and beautiful. But, it came with heavy baggage, and she couldn’t simply say, “okay,” and accept it.

“If there is anything else-.”

“This is all I request of Yumi.” Without any further ado, the rosary was stashed back into her pocket. She had simply tried saying it, it seemed.

“Do you dislike it that much?”

Her desire to have Yumi accept the rosary was not based on the pure intent of making Yumi her little sister, that much was certain. As long as she could seduce Yumi by the fixed date, Sachiko-sama could extricate herself from the Cinderella role.

“Of course.”

She had not specified about Kashiwagi-san, but Sachiko-sama had understood the meaning behind the question and answered in kind.

“But you have practiced with him a number of times...”

“It is not a matter of getting used to it”

Sachiko-sama spoke, as if spitting venom.

But that was opening a whole new set of problems. After all, Rosa Gigantea's plan was to have Sachiko become used to men.

"I hoped, maybe it would be alright, if I met him... But that was not the case."

Sachiko-sama sighed, again.

Yumi thought.

Was it not the case because Kashiwagi-san was a man. Or was it because it was Kashiwagi-san.

It seemed the same, at first, but she felt it made a difference.

Sachiko-sama seemed to feel that there was, in fact, a difference.

Time passed, pressed onward by the sighs.

There were many things that needed to be done and still more than people wanted to do, so there was no choice but to flutter around wildly in the last three days. Even after receiving entire afternoons from the school, people were too greedy, so they were unable to use their time as wisely as possible.

Last spurt, Yumi memorized Cinderella's lines at home, rather than watch television. During recess, she practiced the dance steps with Shimako-san on the courtyard grass.

She didn't know herself why she worked this hard, but Yumi was the backup for the Cinderella part, so she felt obligated to do her best, for emergency's sake.

But what was that emergency? But because emergencies were extremely rare, she decided not to think about it.

And the day of the time limit crept ever closer.

Part 2.

“Okay, we’ll finish with testing Yumi-chan’s transformation scene one last time.”

Rosa Chinensis shouted, using her rolled-up script as a megaphone.

“I mean, I’ve said it a number of times, but this is a point of showing off our skill.”

“Yes.”

Yumi put on the dress that was a collaborative effort between the handicraft club and the invention club. At first glance, it was a servant-work dress made of ragged material and covered with soot, but it had a trick, where pulling a number of cords turned into a dress using the same material as the gorgeous ivory dress. But this was just a temporary dress designed for this transformation. For the ballroom scene, they would switch to their petticoat and skirt dress.

Even Lillian, on the day before the school festival, was savage. Had the ordered goods not arrived yet, or they’d found a misprint on the fliers, or seats borrowed from the school had been double-booked, et cetera. The pleats for the angels’ skirts were always completely disordered, and their sailor scarves tossed and turned. Today, even the Sisters consciously tried to remain out of sight as much as possible. They did not want to see their students act like this.

Even Yumi and the Yamayurikai were like this.

They could only borrow the gymnasium from two to four, so they quickly had Kashiwagi-san, who slid in just at two, put on the prince costume, and they had just finished the 45-minute run-through of the play twice. A Sachiko-version and a Yumi-version.

“When the smoke’s ready, I’ll signal, so pull the string then, okay?”

They made a screen of dry-ice smoke, just like they would in the actual performance.

Sachiko-sama only took one try, but it took five tries for Yumi to get the hang of the transformation.

“Bippity boppity boo!”

Rei-sama chanted the words to the charm, waving her conductor’s stick. She, too, wore a young nobleman’s costume under her cloak, and would join the next scene as a noble dancer, as if that was all she was.

Rosa Chinensis lowered her rolled-up script. Yumi pulled on the thin cords. Yoshino-san crawled over, hidden by the smoke, and pulled down the cords on her waist.

(Huh...? Yoshino-san.)

Yumi tilted her head. It was actually the job of Sister B, so when Yumi was Cinderella, Sachiko-sama’s job. Even though she had complained, “Why must I crawl along the ground,” she had performed her duty the last five times.

There was applause, and the illumination that was covered by smoke became more clear.

“Eh...?”

The transformation scene had ended as she was thinking. Oh yeah, and she noticed the ivory dress was in full view.

“Yumi-chan, succeeds!”

Rei-sama patted her shoulder, as she was closest.

“If you pull this off this well during the actual performance, even if you screw up a few lines, we’ll forgive you.”

Rosa Chinensis laughed as she said those carefree words.

“But. I’m surprised Yumi-chan would work this hard. She’s remembered the lines well, too. I look forward to the real deal tomorrow.”

As Rosa Foetida commented thus, Yumi quickly interceded.

“I appreciate the praise, but Sachiko-sama is the real Cinderella.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Everyone looked at each other, as if they had just remembered.

“Sachiko’s orthodox Cinderella, or Yumi-chan’s comedy. Unfortunately we can only run one of them tomorrow.”

“Co, comedy...?”



The word “shock” slammed into Yumi’s forehead, like a comic panel. Her efforts in trying to get even a bit closer to Sachiko-sama resulted in a comedy.

“Ah, Yumi-chan’s depressed.”

“No, no. All I’m saying is, both of you have your own distinct flavors.”

“It’s so effort-filled and cute, like a home-drama, Yumi-chan’s Cinderella.”

“Exactly. Just as Yumi-chan can’t imitate Sachiko’s Cinderella, Sachiko can’t imitate Yumi-chan’s Cinderella. That’s what individuality is, right?”

Hearing the rather relentless words that could be taken as consolation as well as encouragement cheered Yumi up.

Ahh, so that’s how it is. She felt she understood things better.

The Roses were not expecting perfection out of Yumi. Even if Yumi were a comedy, they loved the comedy for what it was.

When she thought about it, that was always the case. Even when Sachiko-sama declared Yumi to be her *sœur*, while they worried about the circumstances regarding it, they never had any dissatisfaction with Yumi herself.

Yumi was the only one fixated on whether she was “worthy” of being Sachiko-sama’s little sister.

“Speaking of which, where’s the prince?”

“Isn’t he changing out of his costume?”

Rosa Gigantea looked around.

“Sachiko’s gone, too.”

“Ah, Sachiko stepped out, saying she felt ill. I offered to accompany her to the health room, but she said she was alright, and requested that I take over for Yumi’s strings.”

Yoshino-san reported.

“Oh. Then we shall have to check on her later.”

They began cleaning up, as the time to vacate the gymnasium was approaching. About five minutes before four, the story-telling club members began arriving, so Yumi and others vacated the gymnasium as if they were being chased out.

Sachiko-sama was not at the health room. Yumi returned to the gymnasium just to make sure, but there was no sight of Sachiko-sama.

When she reported back to the Rose Mansion with that truth, everyone's faces turned pale. Apparently the first-floor room that had been used as Kashiwagi-san's temporary changing room still had his school uniform cleanly hung, with no trace of him having arrived.

"Maybe they're together..."

Someone anxiously mentioned.

"But they went out separately, did they not?"

"Yes, Sachiko-sama left earlier."

"I don't think anything would happen between the two of them..." As they spoke, their tones became more and more distressed.

"Umm, let's go look for them."

Yumi stood up.

"Sachiko-sama may have collapsed from illness, and Kashiwagi-san may have become lost."

"Y, yes, that's true, what Yumi-chan says is correct."

The Roses acted quickly, having regained their composure. Yoshino-san was told to stay behind, and they would split the search party into three pairs, each scouring a different section. The three pairs would go around the high school site in a surrounding path, so that they would meet together by Maria-sama's statue. The reason for the pairing is so that if something were to happen, one could run off to find help.

Yumi paired with Rosa Gigantea, and was to search the primary gymnasium, the grounds, the tennis court, and other such athletics locales, before taking the path by the library and appearing at Maria-sama's intersection.

“Thanks for saving us back there.”

Rosa Gigantea said, as they quickly shuffled down the hallway.

“Eh?”

“Yumi-chan cut through the moment. Everyone was lost in their depressing thoughts, you know.”

“Depressing thoughts...”

“Even though we might look extremely reliable, we’re still just high school students, so we get scared, sometimes. It was scary to think about what might have happened. There’s a feeling that we shouldn’t probe any further.”

She understood exactly.

She would prefer to skirt away from the dealings of men and women. Who do you like from an idol group, or who do you think looks good from the neighboring school, that kind of talk is enough to rouse the interests of a classroom. But you also hear many stories of people turning down relationships because they were afraid of being in one.

The world of imagination was beautiful, but reality was very raw and scary.

Kissing, and further. She preferred not to think of that sort of thing as being close to her.

They requested permission from the story-telling club to check the back and storage of the stage, as well as the changing room, but Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san were nowhere to be found. Rosa Gigantea looked relieved after scouring the darkness.

“If they’re not here, they must have moved somewhere. That would mean they’ve moved to a place where there would be witnesses. Luckily, there’re tons of students milling about, today.”

There was no high school student who didn’t know Sachiko-sama’s face. Kashiwagi-san would also be quickly spotted in a girls’ school. Plus, he was currently a flamboyant prince.

“Sachiko-sama and the prince? Yes, we saw them. We just passed by them, in the passage.”

The story-telling club captain said, “right?” to the girl on the stage.

“Were they together!?”

Rosa Gigantea and Yumi both shook the story-telling club captain’s shoulder.

“H, hold on, you two, calm down.”

The captain looked uncomfortable, so they quickly retracted their arms. She rolled her neck around and sighed.

“They didn’t seem to be together, so to speak. The prince was walking quite a distance behind. But where they went, ... well, we passed by them, so they must have gone to the other school building for the passage?”

“Thank you!”

The two of them thanked her profusely and rushed out of the gymnasium.

When they started backtracking from the passage, Rosa Gigantea stopped them.

“We just came from that way. If we didn’t see them there, they didn’t go there.”

“Then, where should we look!”

“Let’s just take the planned route. Even if we don’t find them, someone else should.”

“...But...”

She agreed with Rosa Gigantea, but she still wanted to find Sachiko-sama first. She felt, since they had grasped the first clue, they had the right to find her first.

Rosa Gigantea leaned into Yumi’s face.

“Do you like Sachiko?”

When she nodded, Rosa Gigantea patted her head and said “thanks.”

“I like Sachiko, too. So does Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida, Rei, Shimako, Yoshino, everyone likes Sachiko.”

So leave it to us. Is what Rosa Gigantea said. Because that was the best way.

Yumi silently nodded.

Yumi, too, starting with the Roses, loved everyone that gathered at the Rose Mansion. There was no way she couldn't trust them.

They glanced across the grounds as they hurried to the tennis court.

"However, why was Kashiwagi walking after Sachiko?"

Rosa Gigantea was already calling Kashiwagi-san purely by name.

"Is he a stalker?"

"But, Rosa Gigantea. You said you trusted Kashiwagi-san, right? I forget when, but you did say that?"

"Yes. I said that."

There was no one in the tennis court. They checked the parking lot through the wire fencing, too, but only Matsuyama-sensei from the social department's beloved car was there.

"Well, not so much trust, but I had confidence that he would not touch even the super beautiful Sachiko."

Rosa Gigantea said, as they went back.

"On what grounds?"

"Intuition, I think. We're the same kind of people."

"Same kind?"

Again, she was confusing things by talking about something she didn't understand. There were so many question marks jumping around Yumi's head that Rosa Gigantea turned, smiled, and said, "If you don't understand, it's alright."

"Then you were wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure I wasn't wrong, but I can't read Sachiko, at all."

They took a turn on the road and walked along the library.

"Sachiko-sama?"

"That girl, might like Kashiwagi."

“Eh!? ...but, you said.”

On the other side of her surprise, a part of her said, “I knew it.”

“I see. Yumi-chan thought so, too.”

Rosa Gigantea was very perceptive, so even though Yumi didn't say it outloud, she knew.

“Lately Sachiko-sama's been staring blankly. And sighing. And that seemed to fit into the symptoms of “Love-sickness” that I hear about all the time-.”

“Love-sick... But, I think it's not quite that.”

Usually in the case of being love-sick, you would be a bit happy. But in the case of Sachiko-sama, it was pure melancholy, so she didn't look at all like a “maiden in love.” Because Yumi was inexperienced in love matters, all she could do was listen to and accept Rosa Gigantea's explanation.

The two of them arrived at Maria-sama's intersection. The other two groups were supposed to meet by that little garden.

In the end, Yumi and Rosa Gigantea had not been able to find Sachiko-sama nor Kashiwagi-san. Just as she thought that-

“I said stop, let go of me!”

They heard a scream from ahead.

“Sachiko-sama!?”

“Sachiko!”

Yumi and Rosa Gigantea scrambled forward.

Part 3.

Yumi and Rosa Gigantea were both so absorbed into the task at hand that they forgot all about the fact that they were running through the gingko tree walkway, so they stepped on a ton of them. Plus, as they had gone from the school building to the gymnasium, and then stepped out directly, they were still in their indoor shoes.

When they arrived at the goal, they saw the prince holding onto Sachiko-sama's wrist.

"You bastard, Kashiwagi, you were a double-blade...!"

(Eh...? Ehh!!)

Even Yumi understood the meaning behind that word. It meant he was very self-centered, in that he was fine with the opponent being a man or woman. Or maybe it was simply convenient, rather than self-centered.

"Rosa Gigantea, I would prefer if you did not make such a statement that could breed misunderstanding."

Kashiwagi Suguru-sama could act smoothly and calmly even in such a situation.

"Then, that hand, what's with it! Let go of Sachiko!"

Her words were tumbled. Rosa Gigantea was so angry she struggled to be coherent.

"I can let go, but then she would run away."

"You're the one that needs to run away. Even if we're girls, with this many, you'd have trouble breaking free."

On cue, Rosa Chinensis, Rei-sama, Rosa Foetida, and Shimako-san all arrived. Sachiko-sama swung her arm out of Kashiwagi-san and escaped.

"Sachiko, are you alright?"

Sachiko-sama nodded softly.

"Let's have you explain this to us, Kashiwagi-san."

Rosa Chinensis stepped forward. Almost as if that were a signal, the ring around Kashiwagi-san constricted.

“I am stunned you could behave in such a shameful manner in front of Maria-sama.”

“There’s no need to ask for an explanation, we should stick him out to the police for molestation.”

“I agree. If he has any excuses, he can make them to the police.”

Even Kashiwagi-san, who always seemed to have composure, had to feel a bit rushed, surrounded by angry high school girls.

“Wait a second. Hear me out!”

He stuck out both hands, in a “calm down” pose.

“There’s nothing to debate. Yumi-chan, go call the police.”
Rosa Gigantea said.

“Yes!”

But right before she turned around, Yumi noticed, and froze.

“What’s wrong, quickly.”

“I can’t go, I... Sachiko-sama would be in distress.”

“Eh?”

All the stares at Kashiwagi-san switched instantaneously to Sachiko-sama. Yumi walked to the downcast Sachiko-sama and asked.

“You would prefer not to have Kashiwagi-san brought to the police, right?”

“Why, do you think so?”

Sachiko-sama lifted her face slowly and looked at Yumi’s eyes with curiosity.

“It’s, written on your face.”

“You understand me well... Yes. I don’t know why, but very.”

“I see.”

She nodded once, then turned toward everyone else.

“Everyone, I apologize for causing a problem. Kashiwagi-san being a molester is a misunderstanding. Please forgive us.”

Then, she bowed her head deeply.

“Sachiko!”

“Sachiko-sama!”

They did not expect that Sachiko-sama, who was fervently shaking Kashiwagi-san off, would then move to defend him. Aside from Kashiwagi-san and Yumi, everyone shouted in surprise.

“But, we saw you try to get away from him when he grabbed your wrist!”

Of course, now Sachiko-sama was being probed for an explanation. Kashiwagi-san fixed his pompous collar, with golden ornamentation.

“We were speaking in a civil manner at the start. But along the way we began arguing, and that was when everyone arrived.”

Sachiko-sama explained. But no one would be appeased by that. Yumi raised her hand.

“What were you talking about? Or rather, more importantly, why did you two have to come this far, to escape peoples’ sight? What’s going on between you two-.” Rosa Chinensis looked a bit angry.

“Tell them.”

Kashiwagi-san said, just then. Of course, he was speaking to Sachiko-sama.

“Even if our talks had broken down, the reality is that I did grab your wrist. If that were to be called molestation, that might be the case. However, I’m sure both of us would rather this not be dragged to the police. I would prefer this to be settled quickly and efficiently. To do this, we would have to explain well enough to appease everyone here. Don’t you agree?”

What, is he trying to say? -Yumi thought.

“If you would be willing to fix this mess, I would not be sent to the police, and we would be able to cleanly finish tomorrow’s play.”

What he said was full of holes, but his confidence and his excessive smoothness was a bit irritating.

(Sachiko-sama, if you don’t want to say anything, you don’t have to. Sachiko-sama is far more important to us than Kashiwagi-san.)

She didn't know what "tell them" meant, but Kashiwagi-san should say it himself if he so desired. If him saying it would hurt Sachiko-sama, then it would be the same, making Sachiko-sama say it.

"...You're right."

Sachiko-sama glanced at Kashiwagi-san.

"That might be better for both of us."

She had the eyes of a dead person. Or perhaps the eyes of a doll. Her eyes did not reflect Kashiwagi-san, who was in front of her, but rather something far, far in the distance.

"He, -Kashiwagi Suguru-san, is my cousin."

"C, cousin!?"

Everyone did a double-take at hearing this unexpected relationship. Because they had not given away any hint whatsoever.

"Blood-related?"

"Yes."

Sachiko-sama's father's elder sister's son was Kashiwagi-san, Sachiko-sama explained. Then, why would they have hidden their relationship all this time? Those sighs were unsuitable if they were just relatives.

"Not only that."

Sachiko-sama continued.

"He is also my fiancée."

"-!?" Everyone was speechless. Holy woman or lady aside, when surprised this much, they would stand speechless, jaws agape.

In the case of Yumi.

"F, fi..."

She was trying to remember the meaning of the word fiancée. It was written, those promised to marry, but maybe there was more.

(I mean, they can't be bringers of misery and ruin, or something, so they must be fiancés? Then, Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san are to marry in the future... So that means, they love each other!?)

And thus, she was flipping through life's phases, again.

"That's why it would be a bit awkward bringing the police into this. We're already intended to marry, so grasping her wrist is no big deal."

Kashiwagi-san held Sachiko-sama's hand.

"I can embrace her shoulder."

And as he spoke, he placed a hand on her shoulder. The refreshing hand of Kashiwagi-san looked extremely impure this time, to Yumi.

"And kiss." (Stop...!!)

Don't touch Sachiko-sama any more. –Yumi thought.

If they touched, Sachiko-sama would become dirtied.

Now, she understood. Sachiko-sama's feelings.

She didn't dislike men. She disliked Kashiwagi-san. –As she thought that, Kashiwagi-san drew his face closer to Sachiko-sama.

(Ahh!!)

Just as Yumi covered her eyes with both hands.

PAAAAANG.

The violent sound of the slap echoed around the ginkgo trees.

"Stop being caught up in the moment!" It was probably not a very long period of time, but it felt like everything went in slow motion after the slap.

Kashiwagi-san recoiled, holding his cheek. Sachiko-sama held her right wrist with her left hand.

Then, Sachiko-sama was the one who hit him, after all, Yumi dimly thought.

And then Sachiko-sama-

"Sacchan!"

Kashiwagi-san's voice brought Yumi back to her senses. Sachiko-sama was already far away into the distance, running toward the auditorium.



Yumi jumped out to follow. Kashiwagi-san took a flying start, but Yumi caught up when he slid on a ginkgo nut, and while she felt a bit apologetic, she pushed his shoulder and made him completely trip.

“I’m sorry, but Kashiwagi-san won’t cut it!”

It was her best parting remark, ever, in her entire life. It was probably because she thought it from the bottom of her heart, rather than acting it out.

When Yumi had also vanished into the distance, chasing Sachiko-sama, Rosa Chinensis held Kashiwagi-san’s shoulder, as he tried to get back up.

“I apologize for my junior’s conduct. However, the ginkgo sap on your costume, you are aware, I think, that it smells? I would like to remove its stains immediately, so I would appreciate it if you would accompany us back to the Rose Mansion. Plus, we have to discuss what we shall do tomorrow.”

Apparently, Kashiwagi-san lost the will to pursue after that.

Part 4.

Would it be a bit diagonally to the side of the auditorium, or would it be on the way to the secondary gymnasium. Regardless of how you would describe its location, an old greenhouse stood in an obscure place.

Because there was no gardening club at the moment, it was a mystery as to who tended to it, but someone was taking care of the plants inside. There was a separate, new greenhouse that was purchased two years ago for teaching purposes, so teachers took care of that one, and rarely popped in here. It was old and slightly broken down, so most students also didn't come here. However, it was not taken down, because there were some die-hard fans every year that took care of the greenhouse, and because there was no particular shortage of space, so there was no need to quickly tear down the greenhouse.

Sachiko-sama was in this greenhouse.

“Who is it?”

A voice asked, when she opened the door.

“It's Yumi.”

“...Okay.”

Yumi interpreted that answer as allowing her to come in, and so she stepped in.

It had been her first time taking a step in, and she marveled at how, despite being smaller than she expected, it was very tidy and packed. Even though it was a whole size smaller than a classroom, planters and pots were stacked on tables and shelves.

The western sun made the room very warm.

She avoided the hanging pots and walked down the path. A chunk of the floor here and there was cut out by squares, and from the ground there directly grew trees.

Sachiko-sama was sitting at the farthest ledge.

“Sorry for taking your spot.”

Yumi moved the potted plant that was stationed next to Sachiko-sama and sat down. Sachiko-sama said nothing, and did not move to stop her, and instead, simply watched.

Perhaps Sachiko-sama came here often. Or maybe she had come here by chance. Either way, because every student was crowded around the school, a silent place like this was a precious commodity.

Now that hide-and-seek was over, now that she had found Sachiko-sama, Yumi did not know what to do next. Although she said Kashiwagi-san wouldn't cut it, she didn't think she could do anything, either.

Just being by Sachiko-sama's side. Just as she was wondering if that was enough.

"Stay."

Sachiko-sama mumbled.

"Stay here."

Then, a soft weight landed on Yumi's right shoulder. It took her a while to realize Sachiko-sama had laid her forehead on her shoulder and was crying.

At first, she thought Sachiko-sama was simply trembling. But eventually she began hiccoughing, and unable to restrain herself, Yumi embraced Sachiko-sama, who then grabbed Yumi and kept crying. Yumi stayed silently, simply patting Sachiko-sama's back like she would a baby. She didn't know why Sachiko-sama was crying, but she was sure crying was the most important thing for her to finish doing, right now.

Eventually Sachiko-sama's breathing calmed down, an indication that she had finished crying, but they remained grasping each other for the time being.

"Sachiko-sama."

"...mm."

"Please, give me your rosary."

After a period of silence, Sachiko-sama answered, "No."

“Why!”

Yumi let go and asked.

“No matter what. I’ve changed my mind.”

Sachiko-sama’s eyes were like that of a bunny, but she smiled. Perhaps crying had made her feel better, as she had returned to her usual, proud self.

“Even if he’s my fiancée, it’s one of those things our parents decided upon. Sheesh, what do they plan to do making our bloodline even more dense.”

Sachiko-sama hopped off of the ledge and walked a short distance to the water supply. Then, she twisted the only knob and washed her face with both hands using the forcefully falling water.

“But, Sachiko-sama. You do like Kashiwagi-san, don’t you?”

Then Sachiko-sama looked up. “A long time ago.”

Instead of returning the handkerchief she used to dry her hands and head to her pocket, she stuck it on a comparatively clean window and then returned to sit next to Yumi.

“He... Suguru-san is not a bad person. But he acts only for himself, but he doesn’t seem to realize it. He can’t understand how other people feel, nor does he bother to even think about it. That’s why if he hurts someone, he doesn’t understand why, and he doesn’t even think about whether he was the cause. Every male in my family is like that.”

Sachiko-sama muttered, the fact that they have no ill-will is the most bothersome part.

I see, there are no perfect people in the world, Yumi thought.

“So you began to dislike him after seeing his selfish personality?”

“Hmm. Not exactly, but something like that. He can only love men. Even so, he plans to marry me.”

Sachiko-sama was an only child, so she would be used for arranged marriages, preferably to a man who could continue to manage the Ogasawara group. On that note, her cousin Kashiwagi-san seemed to be the perfect fit, so their parents agreed to the marriage.

“They’re both public companies, though, so there was no need to forcibly pull someone from the Ogasawara group.”

Apparently her grandfather was a stubborn, Meiji-born person obsessed with the welfare of his company. In that case, there was the option of simply adopting Kashiwagi-san and allowing him to inherit the company, but apparently he loved his only granddaughter, and wished to have Sachiko-sama inherit everything.

“What do you think Suguru-san said, when he came to celebrate my high school entry? We’re similar people, so our marriage will certainly succeed. That we should both live freely, without interfering with one another. When I asked, ‘What do you mean?’ he confessed, ‘I hate to tell you this, but I can only love other men.’ So he said I should fall in love with someone else, and have their child. He wanted to give everything to my child, as the future heir to the Ogasawara group. They would be related by blood anyways, so he would be able to love him like his own child... What was he thinking? Making a mockery of people like that.”

“A 16-year old high school student, to a girl one year younger.”

“Too much cuteness results in a hundred times the hatred. Because of him, my hatred of men grew even stronger.”

She tried to crack a joke, but it couldn’t have been that simple.

Because Sachiko-sama truly did like Kashiwagi-san.

Before she could tell the person she liked, “I like you,” they ended up becoming intended consorts. Even that was hard to digest, but then her hopes of a possible loving relationship were obliterated. –At the age of 15.

That would pervert your thoughts. Who cares about men!

“Then, why don’t you have the engagement cancelled?”

“We avoided each other for a year and a half, so there was no chance to bring it up. But it was a good opportunity, so when I brought up it, he got angry.”

“In front of Maria-sama!”

It all came together.

“Right.”

Everything else was as she knew.

Kashiwagi-san was misunderstood to be molesting, Sachiko-sama announced that they were engaged, Kashiwagi-san went too far and got hit, Sachiko-sama fled after hitting, and Yumi chased her here.

“He doesn’t know I used to like him. So he went too far.”

“Too far?”

Because Rosa Gigantea seemed to have realized he was a homosexual, he tried to destroy any suspicion. Kashiwagi-san probably thought Sachiko-sama would help him by accepting a kiss. But, that calculation was wrong. He underestimated Sachiko-sama.

Sachiko-sama was right. There was no way she should be able to happily dance with such a partner. Yumi thought it was no surprise that Sachiko-sama would try to get out of dancing the entire time.

Thank you, for listening. –Saying that, Sachiko-sama jumped down from the ledge.

“Eh?”

“It was like a confession. It was hard because I couldn’t tell anyone. But now I’m alright.”

She said she felt so much better now.

“But, Sachiko-sama!”

But the situation was no different from before. Even home-drama-Yumi couldn’t simply laugh off the matter like this.

But what could she do? What could she do to help Sachiko-sama?

“Please, give me your rosary.”

Yumi asked once more. There was still time. If Sachiko-sama shook her head vertically, the Roses would accept it. It was still Saturday.

But Sachiko-sama smiled and shook her head.

“Yumi, you seem to want to switch into Cinderella for me because of what I’m going through. But I refuse. I want to do Cinderella, now.”

Sachiko-sama leaned into Yumi’s face and stroked her cheek.

“Right now, I just ran from him. The only way for me to make this up is to perform, tomorrow. If I can perform on the stage with him by my side, it would lay everything to rest. Let me fight. I don’t want to run away anymore.”

“Sachiko-sama...”

“So, shall we return?”

Yumi could not say anything more. She simply nodded, and jumped off the ledge.

Sachiko-sama neatly folded the handkerchief that was dried by the western sun, and put it back in her pocket. The tears and the moisture in the handkerchief flew off somewhere. They were certainly still in the greenhouse, but they could no longer be seen.

Along the way out, Sachiko-sama stopped in the middle of the pathway.

“Had you noticed? Over half of the plants in this greenhouse are roses.”

“Eh, really?”

Because there were many that hadn’t yet bloomed, she didn’t notice. However, when she stopped to look, many of leaves were indeed of the rose family, and most of the flowers were roses. Roses bloomed even in the autumn.

“There are many types.”

When she looked again, it was breath-taking.

From field roses, to vine roses, to even roses that looked like they came from horticultural brands. The shape and color of roses differed, too.

“This is Rosa Chinensis.”

Sachiko-sama’s index finger pointed at a tree right in front of them.

“This...?”

The tree itself was thin, but it was a strong tree that grew straight from the ground. Several crimson flowers to blooming, and a reinforcing army of blossoms were in wait.

“It blooms during every season.”

Sachiko-sama said, proudly.

“Please remember about this flower.”

They walked together through the darkening school. They walked behind the school facilities for a shortcut and returned to the Rose Mansion, where a bright light from the second floor awaited them.

A message was stuck on the door for them.

“The visitor has returned home. Make sure to clean the bottom of our indoor shoes well before entering. Bringing in the ginkgo smell is forbidden. →”

Under the arrow were two wet rags, wrung and hung over the side of a bucket. The two looked at each other, and then carefully wiped away the ginkgo sap that had stuck to the bottoms of their shoes, and then entered.

For some reason, that whole cycle felt very warm.

I’m home, she wanted to say.

Waltz-like Sunday

Part 1.

It had become Sunday.

“Yumi, have you finished?”

At around eleven in the morning, Sachiko-sama came to the first-year peach-class to find Yumi.

“Ah, almost. The person coming to swap with me should be here soon.”

“Don’t worry, there’s no need to rush. I’ll look at this exhibit while I wait.”

After she spoke to Yumi, who was acting as the receptionist, Sachiko-sama walked along the exhibit, gazing at the fourteen drawings for the “Road of the Cross.”

“So what’s happening?”

Katsura-san, who was watching over the class with her, asked, after seeing Sachiko-sama come in. She was the guide. Her job was to answer questions for any visitors who had them.

“What...?”

Yumi was cornered in the small reception desk. The exhibition presentation was a bland job, and along with the fact that it was morning, there were only about three visitors.

“Yumi-san, what’s your role today?”

“Sister B.”

“—Well, you did mention that before. Then, I am not mistaken?”

“Yes?”

“That means you did not accept her rosary? Then why are you two so friendly?”

Yumi had no answer, because she herself wasn’t sure.

She was not given the rosary, but that didn’t mean they had an awkward relationship or anything, and there was thus no need to keep their distance, so it was the same as always.

“Umm... well, since we are going to be performing together, it’s a good idea to be friends?”

Well, to be blunt, that was the easiest answer.

“In that case, you might as well become friends with the Hanadera student council leader, too.”

Katsura-san said lightly, as she had no idea about everything that happened.

“Agreed.”

Yumi laughed, hahahah. Then, her replacement arrived, so she stood up from the receptionist chair. She had been seated for an hour, so the cushion was crushed, and the shape of her butt was clearly etched. When she hit the cushion to remove it, Sachiko-sama returned.

“Ah, Sachiko-sama, could you sign in?”

Yumi opened a notebook and held it out, as per her job.

“Okaaay.”

Ogasawara Sachiko was recorded using a calligraphy pen. After writing, Sachiko-sama took Yumi’s hand.

“Okay, let’s go. Excuse us, everyone.”

Katsura-san, as well as other students, seemed to have been overwhelmed by something, and simply stared, jaws agape, as they left. As she held hands and walked, Yumi thought, Sachiko-sama is definitely awesome.

“Aren’t those two looking even more intimate than before?”

Sent off by such words, the two of them slipped into the crowd of people in the school building.

The play started at two in the afternoon.

“Where were you? I said we were gathering by half past twelve!”

Yumi and Sachiko-sama arrived at the dressing room right behind the stage five minutes before one, and Rosa Chinensis, wearing the costume for the queen, looked absolutely irate as she welcomed the two.

“Onee-sama, you look like the queen from Snow White.”

Sachiko-sama’s remark simply served to agitate Rosa Chinensis even more.

“When you’re late, you’re supposed to apologize, first!”

“I’m sorry.”

Both of them earnestly bowed their heads, and then began changing. They had an hour until the performance. They decided to be lectured as they changed.

“You said you were going to go ahead as planned last night, but we were in a state of near panic, thinking you might have changed your mind again. We thought the two of you had vanished somewhere.”

“Oh, come now.”

They rubbed the foundation lotion on themselves as they chuckled. The theatrics club seemed to use Dohran, but as it was somewhat suffocating, they decided by majority vote to use regular cosmetics.

“Oh, speaking of which. Yumi, here.”

Sachiko-sama held out a paper bag that was placed in a corner of the dressing room. When she opened it, a gorgeous 65D-cup silk brassiere was awaiting her.

“You’d be in tatters if your shoulder pad were to fall off, right? I’m sorry it’s not new, but if you’d like, go ahead and use it.”

“Sachiko-sama’s brassiere...”

It was a bit awkward. She’d seen her classmates’ brassieres while changing for gym class plenty of times, so it was weird she felt this way.

“What are you worrying about, Yumi-chan. Ahh, how aggravating. Everyone, hold her down and put it on!”

At Rosa Foetida’s command, Yumi’s usual cotton brassiere was pulled off, and the extravagant brassiere that felt completely out of place on her was put on. Because they were all the same sex, it was okay, but it would have been a sight to behold, regardless.

Ahh, however.

Even so, she wondered why people had to have such a difference in body figure. Without stuffing, it was like wearing a numbered cloth bib for a relay.

While she was padding herself with her exclusive-use shoulder pad, Rosa Foetida appeared behind her like a rear ghost, and quickly tied her hair.

“Ahh, Yumi-chan, your hair is so simple, I finished in five minutes.”

“Is that sarcasm toward me, Rosa Foetida?”

When Yumi asked, Rosa Foetida answered, “More a complaint than sarcasm.”

“It’s springy, it’s silky, and it’s straight. And this length? You don’t often find hair this tough to tie, and yet it’s these kind of people that come late-.”

Kaguya-hime is good for next year, Rosa Foetida, muttered as she danced about. The foster mother fighting with pins and combs and rubber bands to do Cinderella’s hair looked a bit ridiculous and humorous.

“By the way, where is the prince?”

When she finished wearing the Sister B costume, the witch, Rei-sama, fastened the button on her back.

“He actually arrived on time, twenty minutes ago, and is on standby in the gymnasium waiting room.”

“Wow... Even despite yesterday, he came.”

She thought, “How remarkable.”

“And that is both a perk as well as a flaw.”

Sachiko-sama was smiling bitterly into the mirror.

“By the way, what were you two doing together? Yumi-chan’s duties ended at eleven o’clock, I thought?”

Rosa Gigantea asked, nearly bursting with curiosity, while turned into a king, using a cushion at her stomach to “dignify” herself.

“Well-.”

The two of them had a date around the school festival.

They had gone around to the exhibits by the invention club, handicraft club and fine arts club in that order, then had a commemoration two-shot photo taken by their big panel at the photography club's exhibition room by Tsutako-san, then ate curry at Sakuratei to investigate how it went.

"We ate curry before the performance..."

"I envy you two. Neither of you know what nervousness is."

The Roses said.

"That's not true."

As she retorted, Yumi actually thought, "Maybe."

Because things had become so sensational yesterday evening, even though today was the day of the school festival, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had accomplished her big job. And that was perhaps why she didn't feel very nervous.

"Yumi. You forgot your lipstick."

Sachiko-sama, whose hair was finally completed, put on Yumi's lipstick for her. The same colored lipstick as Sachiko-sama.

The matching lips were a bit embarrassing, but it made her extremely happy.

When she peaked out through the space in the curtain, she noticed there was a bigger audience than she expected. The Lillian seats as well as the universal visitors' seats were almost completely filled. By the time it had become ten minutes before the performance, the seats were completely filled, and they were awaiting the curtains' rise. A standing audience was already gathering.

"I apologize for smacking you yesterday."

Sachiko-sama stepped forward and apologized to Kashiwagi-san at the side of the stage.

Her smile was brilliant. Full of confidence, inviting him to bring it from wherever he wished.

On the other hand, the prince was his usual invigorating self, but he also seemed to look slightly dispirited.

“I’ve been beaten. The ginkgo stains were removed, but still smells.”

Even being remotely close to him, you could smell that unique odor. In that case, he definitely could smell it.

“However, it won’t reach the audience, so I shall turn it into perfume with my spectacular acting.”

That confidence, and that positive outlook, was something that could genuinely be praised. Apparently roughly two dozen people had come from Hanadera Institute to watch their adored student council leader. He was extremely enthusiastic, wanting to show his classmates and juniors a once-in-a-lifetime hour of triumph.

“It’s starting.”

The setting of Cinderella’s house was prepared on the stage. Sachiko-sama squeezed Yumi’s hand tightly once, and then walked out to the middle of the stage. Yumi went on standby at the side of the stage, ready to walk out when her turn came.

After the curtain-raising greeting, the illumination over the audiences’ seats went out.

Cinderella had begun, and Yumi walked out into the spotlight.

Part 2.

The blaze stretched out to the heavens with a crackling sound.

Prepared solely for today, and with their roles fulfilled, wooden planks and paper were gathered, and turned into a blaze of memories.

With the grounds empty after the guests returned home, a firestorm was underway, with the students stoking its fires.

“Be very careful of the fire.”

They said, but as this year’s post-festival night event had no wind, the teachers also relaxed and watched. Many students brought left-over fireworks from the summer and lit them together.

Yumi’s class’ “Road of the Cross” was to be kept by the school as an art and caption set, so they gathered their rough drafts and sign posters and tossed them into the fire.

The producers of the Cinderella costumes and props and settings took their respective bits back with them, so Yumi tossed her script book, with its two weeks of memories, into the fire. Now, nothing was left. She thought, because there was nothing left, memories would be vividly burnt into her heart.

Eventually, a number of students gathered with instruments and began playing, one after another. First, the mandolin club performed the rhythmical Oklahoma Mixer. Then, naturally, a number of rings of students gathered around the bonfire. Girls took each other’s hands and joined into rings, and so a folk dance flower bloomed.

Rather than joining a ring, Yumi climbed the moderate embankment outside the track, alone. Like the audience seating for an amphitheater, this was prime seating to look over the grounds.

Following the rock band’s tempestuous Jenka was the brass band’s wonderful Mayim-Mayim. Her heart felt like it had a hole poked through it, while she watched the dancing.

Everything ended today.

The dream-like days that began two weeks ago with a bent scarf.

With the Cinderella play over, she would no longer have reason to visit the Rose Mansion. After cleaning and returning the brassiere she borrowed, her link to Sachiko-sama would evaporate. Because the bet was over, Sachiko-sama no longer had reason to bother with Yumi, either.

Girls blessed with good fortune are often called Cinderella Girls, and Yumi felt precisely like one. She was just an ordinary girl with no real talents, but she was allowed to accompany the school's most adored girls, and was able to come away with plenty of memories.

Even though her ordinary days would resume again tomorrow, she felt it was going to be different from two weeks ago. It was hard to explain just how, but she felt she had changed for the better. So even though she felt a bit lonely now, she knew it was going to be alright.

“I found you.”

She turned around when a hand tapped her shoulder, and saw Sachiko-sama. The person she longed to see most had magically appeared.

“Are you free?”

“Ah... yes.”

Yumi stood up from her crouched position. Apparently she had been soaking in her grief for longer than she expected, as her calf throbbed.

The two of them walked for some time, looking for a quiet place to talk.

“It was so chaotic after the curtain fell, I was unable to settle down and speak with Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama's hand held two packs of apple juice, in paper packaging, from the Milk Hall vending machine. She stuck a straw in one, and handed it to Yumi.

“Congratulations on a successful play.”

A toast, in front of Maria-sama, and after they touched the sides of their paper packs together, they sipped at their straws. The folk dance had at some point transformed into a Bon Festival dance, and the Tokyo marching song played by the string quartet in the distance seemed like a national anthem for some exotic country.

“It was fun.”

Sachiko-sama exhaled, after sipping.

It was not a gloomy sigh, like before. Rather, it was more like the exuberant exhalation after swigging a can of beer, like in the beer commercials.

After that satisfied sigh, Sachiko-sama suddenly began giggling.

“What is it?”

“Did you notice? During the dance, I stepped on Suguru-san’s foot three times.”

“Ah...”

“He’s showy, so he’ll never admit it, but it must have hurt. Because I was wearing high-heels.”

When she imagined it, it seemed so absurd, that Yumi, too, began laughing out loud.

Sachiko-sama struck back with physical retribution, as Kashiwagi-san couldn’t understand the pain of others. It was not enough to counteract her feelings, but it must have at least made her feel better.

“Thank you.”

Sachiko-sama returned to a serious face.

“It’s because of Yumi that I can be laughing like this.”

Surprised, she looked at Sachiko-sama’s serious face. That unbelievable statement had indeed been spoken from the lips of the beautiful face in front of her.

“But, I, didn’t.”

“You did. Maybe you don’t know, but you did. So-.”

She placed her juice-box on the ground so that it wouldn't spill, then reached into her pocket.

"May I, hang this over Yumi's neck?"

That was Sachiko-sama's rosary, that she had seen several times.

"But, yesterday you said you-."

As Yumi began speaking, Sachiko-sama cut her off, "Of course?"

"If you were to accept, desiring to swap Cinderella roles with me, I wouldn't be happy."

"Eh, then..."

"Sympathy, bets, this has nothing to do with any of that. This is a sacred ritual, after all."

She thought about whether she was worthy of accepting that rosary that had already been spread into a loop. But, Sachiko-sama had chosen Yumi, and to think herself unworthy would be to distrust Sachiko-sama's choice of people.

Yesterday, she chased Sachiko-sama. Remember your feeling then, she told herself. That the person to chase Sachiko-sama had to be her. Even if she was inexperienced, she simply needed to work harder to overcome that.

Go for it. Yumi ordered herself.

"I accept."

"Thank you."

Sachiko-sama softly placed the rosary over her neck. A launching firework for residential use exploded in the air, as if blessing the two. Then, the music changed.

"Ah."

Both of them simultaneously spoke. The accordion, pianica, and harmonica played a nostalgic melody.

"Maria-sama's Soul."

What they had heard some time ago must have been practice for today.

"Three quarters... no, six eighths, I think."

One, two, three, four, five, six. One, two, three, four, five, six.

That means-

“You can dance to it with a waltz!”

“Right!”

The two clasped each others’ hands.

Joining the leading ensemble, the students had begun singing. They danced a waltz to the background of the soft, angelic singing voices.

The cold air was delicious, and it felt wonderful to the skin.

She felt she could dance forever under the moonlight.

The night Yumi became the petite sœur for Rosa Chinensis en bouton.

The moon and Maria-sama were watching them.

Postscript

Because it's a girls' school, it's full of girls. Like a cake smorgasbord.
Hello, it's Konno.

Nice to meet you, people who bought the book because the illustration was nice, even though you didn't know who the author was.

I've entered with a campus story very unlike my usual genre of story-telling, so I wondered if regular readers of my book collection were a bit bewildered. I'm not so fond of sweet things, or something (laugh).

This story takes place roughly half a year before my short piece, "Maria-sama ga Miteru," that ran into the magazine some time ago. That's why Shimako is still a first-year, and Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida in the magazine are still the boutons, Sachiko and Rei (ah, so young, so young). So, this time I decided to shine the spotlight on Sachiko and her sœur.

The Imperial story takes place in "Yume no Miya," the Lillian Girls' Academy is in "Maria-sama ga Miteru." I hope that's clear enough.

Now, having written a story like this, I'd like to answer a few obvious and far-reaching questions.

First, I'd like to shout, emphatically. "I did not experience this!"

My high school did not have any sœur system like that of Lillian Girls' Academy. Of course, there were no students like the Roses, nor was it Catholic, and there were no Sisters walking about here or there.

The similarities would lie in that they were both all-girl schools and the scenery was based on the school I attended. A gingko pathway stretched out from the main gate, a small gymnasium was at the back of the school area, et cetera. However, my school apparently reconstructed a fair amount, so it probably looks quite different than when I attended. Oh yes, it was not a university escalation school, so it had a laid-back atmosphere, like Lillian Girls' Academy. Of course, mine was not a school for ladies.

However, I was not in a world completely foreign to Christianity, as my kindergarten was completely Christian. There was a giant sanctuary and cloister in the middle of my school, and most of my kindergarten teachers were Sisters. In the mornings, and on the way home, we put together our tiny hands and prayed. That's why Yumi's questions about "Maria-sama's Soul" are directly my own.

In the end, I mixed together many sources and ended up with Lillian Girls' Academy. It's a fictional academy, but when students that attend (or have attended) all-girl schools say, "yes, yes, it's like that," or when they compare it to their own, it makes me happy, and people in co-ed schools can say, "so that's how it is."

Now, there are many people I would like to thank this time around (two and a half pages left, I'm flying through them...)

First, my colleague and seniors, K-Kawa-sensei, S-Shima-sensei, T-Se-sensei (in syllabary order). I forcibly offer up this story to you three (please don't send it back, I won't listen to cooling-off). If you three hadn't been there for me, "Maria-sama ga Miteru" would never have been born. However, it might have become a much softer content than you all expected. Sorry. I guess reason stops my imagination from going berserk.

Next, Cobalt Publishing's U-san. Because you were a graduate of a Catholic-based school, I ended up asking a lot from you, sorry. But because of you, it ended up becoming a book. Thanks.

She's probably decorating this book with pretty pictures. I'll use this space to thank Hibiki Reine-san, my illustrator.

Anyways, the next issue should be around summer-time. I'll have some sort of palace dinner for an unspecified country prepared, so please, stop by. –By, this pavilion storekeeper.

Konno Oyuki