COBALT-SERIES
いばらの森
マリア様がみてる
今野緒雪
集英社

Volume 3
Forest of Thorns
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 as to not disturb the plaits in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves here.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

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

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

It’s the season of autumn.

The city’s filled with the color of Christmas.

But even so.

Before the fun, joyous event, the obligatory trial awaits the middle schoolers, commanding upon them a gloomy feeling.

Christmas, wasn't that supposed to be Jesus' birthday?

They could abolish the second-semester exam in a Catholic school, at least, couldn't they? That way everyone would be able to happily celebrate.

But the sky was big and clear again, today, enough to wrap up the students' deep sighs.

I decided, quietly, to let it sleep for eternity.

That's why that forest, even now, firmly stretched out its thorns, repelling anyone from entering.

And I'll die, probably, until that time.

Forest of Thorns

The Semester Exam and the Paperback

Part 1.

She had a feeling something like that was coming.

It didn't take long after the start of the semester exams, she thought. But it's a "now that I think about it" sort of thing, so that might be wrong.

At the time, she didn't give it much thought, particularly given that it was semester exam time, so she simply wondered, "What is it?" and quickly switched her mind back to a different channel. After all, for an "Academically Average" student, the scope of the Japanese history exam, or memorization strategies for the periodic table were far more important information than the hushed whispers of classmates.

Of course, her goal was "Surpass Average-ness!" but if she slipped, she could fall under it. Being in the middle was tough.

(Rosa Chinensis en bouton having bad grades would be horrible...)

First-year peach-class attendance number 35, Fukuzawa Yumi quietly sighed heavily.

The student council of the Lillian Girls' Academy High School, the Yamayurikai staff, was filled with students with extraordinary academic marks. Since Yumi was already holding a complex about her appearance amongst these students, adding academics to the list of things she worried about was painful.

As long as you attend classes regularly all the time, there's no need to cram. That was once said by her onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, who she bonded with during autumn, but Yumi ignored that and during the break period between exams, scanned through the reference book like an express train.

People who end up at the top of the chart academically without putting much effort simply were built differently up there. Commoners needed to study with regularity. Unless she caught up a bit to Yoshino-san and Shimako-san, her onee-sama would look bad, too.

"-Rosa Gigantea..."

(Rosa Gigantea?)

Despite that situation, Yumi still reacted to her classmates' voices.

Rosa Gigantea obviously meant THAT Rosa Gigantea.

(Rosa Gigantea, with the very non-Japanese face and stone-statuesque figure, a middle-aged man inside with an obsession with hugging, and still popular among underclassmen anyways?)

Of course, no one else was called Rosa Gigantea, anyways.

Well, she was always being talked about, so Yumi heard that name said aloud all the time. Then why'd she respond to this one? Well, it wasn't accompanied by pink heart marks, but had a more secretive tone. And that tone matched perfectly with the hushed whispers floating around.

(What's going on?)

When she looked up toward the voices, she saw Katsura-san and a number of other students whispering to one another.

Speaking of Katsura-san, she was similar to Yumi, being the type to dive into reference books before exams to cram, but for whatever reason she was expending all her effort into gossip. Curiosity, rather than the exam in front of her. Well, that wasn't too far off of her, either.

However.

(I don't know.)

Katsura-san's subject seemed to be based on the book she was holding. Yumi could tell that much, at least, by looking at them.

(……)

Yumi placed the mechanical pencil she was holding on her textbook, and tilted her head. How does Rosa Gigantea come up when talking about a book?

(Maybe she borrowed the book from Rosa Gigantea.)

However that was more believable if it were Shimako-san, being Rosa Gigantea's little sister. But she hardly had any contact with Katsura-san, so that was unlikely.

Or maybe the book had been left behind. And the name inside the cover was Rosa Gigantea's.

(That might work.)

And because few people call her by name, she wanted to confirm the name with her classmates.

(But.)

Then you would ask Shimako-san, first. Plus, they'd been whispering for a few days.

When she glanced at Shimako-san's seat, she found her elegantly leafing through her text book, like she was gazing at a magazine. Maybe she didn't hear the "Rosa Gigantea" earlier.

(- but this isn't the time for this!)

She hurriedly looked back at the textbook, but her piqued curiosity was like lint in a drying machine – you couldn't get rid of it that easily. This personality of hers was why she was probably destined never to be able to get out of being average. Even Shimako-san, who easily took first or second in academics in the class, was completely focused on her textbook. At this rate, rather than catch up, Yumi felt like the gap was simply widening.

Maybe I should just give up on Japanese history, she mused, but she imagined the angry face of her onee-sama and threw that thought away.

It would be so much easier if she had a more suitable onee-sama for this kind of situation-. Katsura-san and others were still in a clump talking to each other.

Incidentally, Oda Nobunaga's sister, whose face was on the textbook page she was opened to, looked a bit like Sachiko-sama.

Part 2.

“Ahh, I’m sorry, I’ve actually been out of the loop for that one, too.”

Tsutako-san folded her arms and nodded.

“Really?”

“I mean, obviously it smells like something’s up, but only a handful of people are in on it.”

Afternoon, after another safely concluded exam day. Yumi was still curious, so she tracked down Tsutako-san and asked for her opinion.

She could have asked Katsura-san, but she seemed to keep her distance from Yumi as she stealthily left school, and at some point Shimako-san vanished, too. And then she noticed Tsutako-san, so she was like, “Nice timing!” Tsutako-san’s always useful in these circumstances. After all, the photography club was right next-door to the newspaper club, so she picked up little gossip all the time.

“Only a handful of people?”

“Right now, it just seems like a bunch of people in our class secretly talking about it. I don’t know about other classes, but I doubt they’ve really caught on. The newspaper club wouldn’t let it go if it were, you know?”

“- That’s true.”

“That’s all, see you.”

“Ah, wait.”

Even Tsutako-san restrained herself from barging in on club activities during exam time, so Yumi hurriedly put on her school coat and followed after Tsutako-san. Even Yumi had restrained herself from forcing her own timetable to match with Sachiko-sama so they could leave school together during exam time, so this was a good opportunity to listen to Tsutako-san more.

If it was just an irresponsible rumor begun by her class, there was no point in making a big deal out of it by speaking to her onee-sama. After all, these things often end up just being some simple misunderstanding.

“But I don’t think that would be the case.”

Pointing her camera at Yumi, who was taking her shoe out of the shelf, Tsutako-san quickly answered.

“No?”

“Yumi-san. You seem to be thinking that the book Katsura-san was holding belonged to Rosa Gigantea, but that’s not the case.”

“Why?”

When Yumi asked as she snapped her shoes, Tsutako-san seemed to have liked her bent-over pose, as she took several photos.

“Tsutako-san!”

“I’m sorry, I got carried away. What was it?”

“You-”

“Oh, right. It’s not Rosa Gigantea’s book… I mean, you saw the book, right?”

“I only noticed it was a novel, though.”

She caught a glimpse of the front cover because there was no book cover, but she wasn’t able to check the title.

“You didn’t notice after seeing the front cover… Hmm. I guess Yumi-san doesn’t read that sort of book.”

“That sort?”

“Perfect. Let’s take a detour.”

“Eh?”

After they left out the front entrance, Tsutako-san grabbed Yumi’s arm and walked across the street.

“L, Library?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“It’s faster to show you than to explain, right? If Rosa Foetida en Bouton were here I don’t think we’d have to go to the library, though.”

“…?”

Why is Rei-sama mentioned here-? Yumi’s mind was like a ball of yarn, with everything needing to be carefully untangled.

Hello, Tsutako-san. Weren’t we talking about Rosa Gigantea?

“Oh just come on.”

Without explaining anything, Tsutako-san happily pushed open the fogged-glass door and pushed Yumi, sporting a bewildered expression, inside.

It’s amazing how passing through one doorway can lead you into a whole different world.

Libraries feel like they have this soft, but heavy feeling drifting in the air. Maybe it’s because of the material of the walls and the floors. It’s a bit like the music room. But a lot thicker, and dignified.

“What’re you standing there for, it’s not the first time you’ve gone into a library.”

After a quick bow to the librarian working at the front office, Tsutako-san grabbed Yumi’s arm and led her through the sound-proof door to the left. And then. A spacious room, a high ceiling, the unique scent of books, the soft lighting. The reading room for high school and middle school students was in view.

“Umm. Where was it.”

After heading to the bookshelf she was looking for, Tsutako-san quickly moved ahead. Of course, she was still grabbing Yumi’s arm.

“I feel like I’m being brought to the police.”

“If you don’t like it, walk faster.”

“…Yeees.”

Probably because it was exam time, there were a lot of students still remaining in the library. But there were almost no students at the bookshelves or the counter. They were all packed into the seats and desks. They were using the library to study.

“Here we are.”

Tsutako-san abruptly stopped in front of a bookshelf stuffed with novels. Yumi couldn’t help but notice, though not for the first time, that different bookshelves were used for different shapes and sizes of books. The gap between the shelf holding the encyclopedia and the shelf holding the novels was like comparing a sumo wrestler to a newborn baby.

“Yumi-san, the book you saw was like this, right?”

Yumi looked at the book Tsutako-san pulled out and nodded. It was a beautiful cover, and the light-pink flower insignia was outstanding.

“Wow, Tsutako-san, you saw the title?”

“-Of course not. Even with glasses, my eyesight is just 0.7.”

I see. Her trademark frameless glasses weren’t just for show. Then why, Yumi thought, but her question was immediately answered. Tsutako-san pulled out another book and showed Yumi. “Here.”

“Huh?”

They all looked the same. The book Katsura-san held included. But the titles were all different.

“They all use the same cover?”

“I think there are four different colors. You really don’t know?”

“No.”

“Cosmos Book Collection. That the very typical Yumi-san wouldn’t know of them is quite an astonishment.”

Tsutako-san grinned and looked at Yumi.

She would have preferred it if she wasn’t being looked at like a rare animal. Typical, meant for better or for worse, she wasn’t very outstanding, so it wasn’t a particularly fond way to be called.

Apparently, Cosmos Book Collection was a type of book collection published by Kyuuteisha, and it specialized in shōjo novels. In reality, they didn’t all use the same cover, but rather, they used yellow, blue and white, other than pink, to signify genre.

(But I thought shōjo novels had cute, florid covers like comics, but I guess I was wrong?)

“Yumi-san, you’re wondering why Cosmos Book Collection doesn’t use illustrations for their cover despite specializing in shōjo novels, aren’t you?”

Tsutako-san, you’ve even picked up mind reading.

“Of course, illustrations are important. After all, they lend a hand to the dreams and imaginations of young maidens.”

“…”

Tsutako-san fit into that “young maiden” age group, too, Yumi thought. But she spoke like she was ten or twenty years older.

“Plus, for first-time readers, the cover illustration goes a long way toward introducing the story to them, right? Even if the author doesn’t have name-appeal, if the illustration has enough of an impact, they’ll pick the book up.”

“Um… Tsutako-san-”

The story was becoming extremely specialized. She would start off on odd tangents, and once she began speaking, she was like a rolling snowball. As time passes, it grows and gains speed.

“I understand the cover illustration is important.”

Finding a good time to interrupt, Yumi quickly blurted that out. She decided it was better to cut her off now.

“It’s not just the front cover. See.”

Tsutako-san opened the book and flipped through the pages for Yumi. No good. She seemed to have been nudged from her original path, but she kept rolling onward.

“No illustrations inside, either. Because-”

Roll, roll, roll, roll.

Yumi gave up and decided to listen to Tsutako-san. She decided if she spoke up and said something wrong, Tsutako-san would simply begin rolling down a brand new path. She brought up the topic, after all. Just because she’d become hungry, it wouldn’t be proper to abruptly close the curtains and say good bye.

It would take a while to use Tsutako-san's exact words, so to summarize, Cosmos Book Collection basically strives for adult-oriented shōjo novels. Or put another way, novels supporting mature girls.

Commuting to work, commuting to school, during break time, people like to read in all sorts of situations. But they don't often like having the book they're reading identified.

Normally, it's almost impossible to figure out what the book is about by its cover and title. But shōjo novels are different in that they often have whole pages devoted to an illustration. What could one illustration do? you might wonder, but at the very least, it becomes obvious you're reading shōjo, and if the illustration is a boys' love scene, that could be pretty bad.

So Cosmos Book Collection eliminated every illustration. The story was introduced by the catch-copy sash that comes with the book, a summary was found on the other side of the cover, and they color-coded the books and made them a bit more pleasant to see. Boys' love is blue, for instance. People who don't know about Cosmos Book Collection won't understand the meaning of the colors, and if someone sees them that does know, that's not as big of a deal. And if people are bothered by even that, they can just slip on a book cover.

"…So I don't know what book Katsura-san was holding."

After speaking at length, Tsutako-san finally returned to the original topic. There're no illustrations, the covers are the same, so even though we know it's by Cosmos Books, it's impossible to know right now which book they were talking about. –Gosh, that took a while.

"Even so, it's definitely not Rosa Gigantea's book. She doesn't read novels."

"How do you know Rosa Gigantea doesn't read?"

“I think it was around May this year, they had an interview article in the ‘Lillian Kawaraban.’ She said she doesn’t read many novels or manga.”

“Oh.”

Ever since she entered high school, she only watched Sachiko-sama, so she didn’t remember. Come to think of it, she didn’t even know about Rei-sama and Yoshino-san’s relationship even though the ‘Lillian Kawaraban’ had apparently run a big article about it, so she felt like she was a rather blissful creature.

“Ah.”

And everything clicked together.

“And that’s why you mentioned Rei-sama.”

“Exactly.”

Contrary to her boyish looks, Rei-sama was a girl’s girl. And because she said she loved shōjo novels, she must have knowledge about Cosmos Books.

“Rosa Foetida en Bouton might be able to sort this out for us, but she’s not really the type to delve into other peoples’ gossip, so I don’t know.”

Tsutako-san did her camera obsession proud, showcasing her great observational skills.

Yumi had just been thinking the same, that it would feel extremely awkward asking Rei-sama about gossip.

Part 3.

Speaking of Rei.

While the two lambs were with one another in the library, she had diligently opened her math textbook to a set of problems.

Living close to the school comes with its own set of joys. While other people are busy being tossed and turned inside buses and trains, she would already be home, so she could sometimes even eat lunch there.

She'd become so accustomed to a ten-minute walking distance that she couldn't imagine having to bear traveling an hour and a half to go one way. And with that, it'd been a quick twelve years and nine months of attending a school for princesses, contrary to her boyish looks. And now, she was somewhat apathetically thinking that at this rate, even after graduating high school, she'd probably end up going to Lillian's college or junior college.

"Gosh, Rei-chan's lunches are the best. This hot sandwich, the cheese is so neatly melted, and the corn-cream croquette and the minced cabbage somehow works so well together, it's so good!"

One of the reasons for Rei being fastened into Lillian - her sœur and cousin, Yoshino, popped the last bit of the hot sandwich into her mouth and admired the lunch menu.

"Flattery won't bring you anything. Come on, if you're done, open your textbook."

"I'm not flattering!"

As she exclaimed, Yoshino reluctantly placed her tray on the floor, and brought her textbook onto the table.

This was Rei's room.

It was the year-end bargain sale or something, so both of their mothers had gone out together, so in turn, Rei had called Yoshino over to have lunch. Incidentally, their mothers weren't blood-related, but they'd been classmates at Lillian, so they were rather close friends.

They were such close friends that they married each others' brothers. And then they settled down next doors, so they were way too close, Rei sometimes thought, somewhat exasperated at their mothers.

But she could understand now. She wanted to live next-door to Yoshino forever. Ahh, she didn't want their relationship to be messed up ever again.

- And as she was sentimentally thinking that.

"Rei-chan."

A super-close-up of Yoshino.

"Woah, you scared me!"

Placing her hand on the low-dining-style table, Yoshino leaned over like she wanted to tell a secret, and whispered.

"Rei-chan, umm. I just remembered, at class today-"

She should have been used to it, but it still made her heart race. Yoshino's eyes were this big.

"...Yoshino, if you want to just chat, save it for later."

She mumbled, hiding her embarrassment.

"Weren't you the one that asked for help, because you were in trouble for tomorrow's math exam?"

"But, Rei-chan."

"Private tutors usually don't come with a meal."

"Fiiine."

In truth, the math textbook Rei had opened was "Math I" from last year, and she'd gone out of her way to dig it out of her bookshelf for Yoshino. Yoshino was hospitalized for surgery over the fall, so she'd fallen behind in classes. Let's have lunch together, of course included a study session afterward. As her "onee-sama" she felt obliged to help her little sister avoid the hell of red test marks.

"For starters, I want to know how far along you are, so go through all of these problems. Then..."

She glanced at Yoshino. She was fiddling with her braids, and looked like she was almost about to explode. Gosh, who did she think Rei was spending such valuable time for, anyways?

Sheesh. Rei shut her textbook.

“So, what?”

“Eh?”

“What you were saying. I’ll listen. But you have to promise you’ll concentrate fully on studying afterward, okay?”

And simultaneously, Yoshino’s face brightened like a lamp.

“And that’s the Rei-chan I know.”

“I’m way too soft.”

But there weren’t many people who wouldn’t be moved by that sort of cute face, she thought. An angel’s smile. They say people are drawn to things they don’t have, and that definitely felt true here.

“Umm, it’s mainly about our class, but there’s this weird rumor circulating.”

Yoshino happily began.

“A weird rumor?”

She had a bad feeling about this. There was never anything good to come out of gossip. She herself got wrecked by the “Yellow Rose Revolution” gossip just last month. And then the pregnancy rumors of her big sister, Rosa Foetida, took off on its own, and half of the student body actually spoke of it like it was the truth. She still couldn’t understand how wisdom teeth and pregnancy get confused.

“Ah, this has nothing to do with Rei-chan and I, by the way.”

“That would be dreadful… So?”

Relieved, she urged Yoshino on. And there, she lowered her voice a bit.

“This time, it’s Rosa Gigantea.”

“Uh?”

“This time Rosa Gigantea’s the protagonist of the rumors.”

"…"

Crimson October, Yellow November, and now White. What a lovely order of stories. It was enough to make her wonder if the newspaper club caused all of this, but if that were the case, they'd run it as a scoop article. Given that club captain that definitely felt more likely.

"But. If it's Rosa Gigantea I can't find myself being surprised at whatever she did."

Aloof, flirty, carefree. Unless she did something super extraordinary, it was easy to just say, "Oh it's just her."

"Then, how about an autobiographical novel?"

"What do you mean?"

"For example, Rosa Gigantea composes a frank confession of a hidden part of her past? That would be incredible, and it'd cause a lot of uproar, wouldn't it?"

"…She did?"

"Well, that's the 'rumor,' anyways."

"But that's a lie, right?"

"Oh how cruel! Rei-chan's doubting me!"

"No, that's not what I mean."

That rumor can't be true, she meant. But, having misunderstood her, Yoshino became excited and tossed a cushion at Rei.

"Even if I don't like studying I wouldn't lie to get away."

"That's not what I meant."

On one hand she felt she should be happy Yoshino was this energetic again, but it wouldn't be funny if it got to bloodshed, so she used both hands to stop Yoshino, who was about to lift a tray filled with dishes.

"I don't think the first-years, Yoshino included, know."

Rei said to Yoshino, who looked clueless. That meant she'd have to explain.

“Rosa Gigantea’s past… is like, taboo, I guess? We’re not really supposed to talk about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“An unspoken agreement, sort of. Everyone who knows about it closed their mouths to protect her.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know… I was just a first-year, and they never told me about it.”

But she knew something happened to Rosa Gigantea last year, right before Christmas.

“Past, you mean, last year?”

“Yes.”

Around winter last year, Rosa Gigantea changed. Yoshino might not believe it, but that Rosa Gigantea was hardly imaginable with this Rosa Gigantea, being extremely cold and apathetic.

What could possibly change a person this much? It probably had to do with the student that suddenly vanished from Lillian before the third semester-. She thought of a lot of scenarios, but she never found out the truth. But she could assume something big happened.

So, it was unimaginable Rosa Gigantea would turn that into a novel on her own accord. After all, everyone staying silent around her meant they were afraid of wounding her further with just their words.

“If the rumor were to spread, Rosa Gigantea probably will come out and deny it, but I think it might be good to shut down these irresponsible rumors before they spread.”

They are rumors after all, so they needed to act quickly if they wanted to shut it down.

“I don’t think it’s possible to suppress it, though.”

“Why? We just have to find where the rumors started, and then deal with it.”

“Where the rumors started? Where are you talking about, Rei-chan?”

“Where Rosa Gigantea’s book is supposedly going to be published. The literature club? If it’s just a ‘Lillian Kawaraban’ special, it would be the newspaper club.”

It was the middle of exams, but if the situation called for it, she was prepared to walk into the classroom of the person responsible and request a meeting. She’d been helped by Rosa Gigantea so many times that she wanted to help her whenever she could.

“Ummm.”

But Yoshino still looked troubled.

“Where did it come from?”

This time, Rei probed Yoshino.

“I think Rei-chan will be stunned.”

“Stop dancing around, spit it out.”

Then, Yoshino pointed at the bookshelf, stuffed with books with floral symbols.

“That.”

“…What?”

“Kyuuteisha’s Cosmos Book Collection.”

- This was no longer the time for math study.

Part 4.

By the next day, the rumor had spread like influenza.

The virus had certainly spread throughout the entire class, and if this were a real case of influenza, there would no doubt have been a quarantine.

“Yumi-san, how was your test today?”

Yoshino-san asked, propping her head on her hand.

“Bad. Even though I tried to study, I couldn’t get Rosa Gigantea out of my head.”

“Same. And then I tried to get some sleep, but I couldn’t do that either.”

“…Yes.”

It was past noon, when the third exam had finally ended.

The two sisters of Boutons had come to the Rose Mansion, even though they had no particular reason to be here, and with no one to see them, they sighed.

Tomorrow would be the last day of exams. So they would usually enjoy their brief respite between exams this afternoon, and also get ready for winter break, by going home and studying for their last exam. But even if they’d gone home, it would have just been a repeat of yesterday, so they’d gathered here. They couldn’t study, because the Rosa Gigantea rumors wouldn’t leave their minds.

“The upperclassmen aren’t coming?”

“Rei-chan… I mean, onee-sama said she would come-”

The rumors were centered more around the first-years, so the second and third-year students didn’t seem to pay it as much heed. After all, they were the sort to immediately gather at the Rose Mansion and think of a counter-measure.

“How about Shimako-san?”

Yoshino-san asked Yumi, lifting her head abruptly, like she had just remembered. Because, see, Shimako-san’s in Yumi’s class.

“By the time I left the classroom, she was gone.”

“Oh.”

They sighed together, again.

First-years couldn’t do anything when push came to shove. They’d only been born one or two years earlier, Rosa Gigantea often said, but that one or two year difference was definitely huge. But even with another two years, she couldn’t imagine herself being anything like those super-humans, so people are probably born with different dispositions.

“Mm?”

They heard the dull sounds of feet climbing the stairs. They couldn’t tell, at first, but by the time it’d come close, they could hear the unique characteristic of those footsteps.

“I wonder if it’s Rei-sama?”

“It could be.”

For the inexperienced first-years, even despite knowing that footsteps have a unique characteristic to them, they couldn’t actually tell who they belonged to.

The squeaking sound of feet crushing down on the decrepit floors stopped in front of the second-floor salon that Yumi was in, also known as the conference room.

“Is someone there?”

The person who came in through the biscuit-shaped door made her appearance with scarlet roses behind her back (at least, that’s how Yumi saw it).

“O, Onee-sama!”

“Oh, Yumi. And Yoshino-chan.”

Always the brilliant and cool expression. Yumi’s onee-sama, a true, elegant, noble princess, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, entered the room.

“It, it has been a while, onee-sama.”

But they'd passed each other in the hallway this morning. But Sachiko-sama smiled, "Indeed," and sat down next to Yumi at the round table.

"And?"

Sachiko-sama straightened her back, intertwined her fingers above the table, and asked.

"What are you two trying to do?"

Yumi and Yoshino-san both asked, "Huh?" Speaking of which, what was Sachiko-sama doing here, too?

"I was thinking about going home, but Rei stopped me in the hallway. And she told me to go to the Rose Mansion."

"And that Rei-sama?"

"I'm not really sure, but she was caught by some first-years."

Like background music to Sachiko-sama's words, they could hear the "grush, grush" sound of someone climbing the stairs. This time it was no doubt Rei-sama.

"Sorry for being late."

Rei-sama appeared with her very-short front hair disheveled, making her forehead bare. Because there were almost no students left, she'd apparently run from the hallways.

"I wish you would be a bit more quiet."

Sachiko-sama muttered to herself, and Yoshino-san wiped Rei-sama's drenched face with a handkerchief.

"I stopped by the Milk Hall, but they don't have a whole lot of supplies right now, so they were sold out."

But Rei-sama placed a cute bear-symbol pouch on the table.

"What is that?"

Yoshino-san asked.

"A first-year gave it to me just now. Handmade snacks, apparently, let's eat it together."

Yumi was the only one that squealed, kyaa.

"I'll pour tea, then."

And she stood up quickly. To be honest, she'd been hungry for quite some time. She intended to go home right after exams, so she hadn't thought to bring any lunch.

"Making cupcakes during exam time."

Yoshino-san looked troubled.

Ah. Because Rei-sama received those cupcakes. Which meant, of course, the patissier had to be a big fan of Rei-sama. As her sœur you end up being jealous. She probably didn't want to say it, but Yoshino-san had to have been a bit hungry, too. So this had to be a dilemma.

But when they re-started the meeting after distributing tea, Yoshino-san seemed to have completely forgotten the circumstances involving the cakes, as she happily gobbled them up. It might have been because she was bothered far more about Rosa Gigantea's rumors.

"I don't actually read everything by Cosmos Books, so I can't say for sure."

Rei-sama began.

"But I haven't read anything like that, so it's probably a new release."

"When did the new books come out?"

Sachiko-sama inquired.

"Today. It's the sixteenth of every month."

"Today!?"

Yoshino-san and Yumi both stood up.

"If you intend to go to the university book store, it's futile. They were sold out."

With Rei-sama's one statement, they both sat back down. Hmm, she's reading them completely.

"They only order one copy each of Cosmos Book releases. And since apparently a high school student waited for the store to open, and bought it then, there were a number of students that dashed out between exams."

“How powerful.”

Yoshino-san mumbled, exasperated. Even though she was just about to dash out, herself.

“So we have no leads?”

“But, Yumi-chan.”

Rei-sama reached into her bag, like she was waiting for the chance to do so.

“Huh?”

It was a book exactly like the ones she saw at the library with Tsutako-san yesterday. –Right, Cosmos Books.

“But, Rei. You said they were sold out?”

Sachiko-sama elegantly tilted her head to the side.

“So I bought a different book that was released today.”

“Gosh, Rei-chan, you did your own shopping instead?”

Yoshino-san was so exasperated she forgot “onee-sama” and polite speech.

“No. Well, I’m going to read it later, but…”

Rei-sama found the leaflet tucked inside the book.

“‘Cosmos News’?”

Is how the title, in elaborate decorative font, read on what would count as the front cover of the quad-folded leaflet. Rei-sama nodded, “Yup.”

That was a “news” leaflet detailing new publications, quick notes by authors, and other such introductions.

“After all, how do you think people find books without knowing their titles?”

“I don’t know…”

Well, she said that, but it wasn’t actually a question.

“And that’s where ‘Cosmos News’ comes in.”

Rei-sama kept talking, engrossed, but without any offense, Yumi still only saw a handsome man. She would definitely be so stylish in a Hanadera uniform, but given that she loved shōjo novels this much, it definitely would feel a bit weird.

“The new publications summaries, see, there’re only a few, but they are listed.”

“Ah, that’s true.”

Everyone looked at where she pointed.

- “Forest of Thorns” by Suga Sei –

Were those months spent at school an illusion-?

Sei shut everything inside the forest of thorns that was her soul.

The anticipated new novelist, a shocking autobiographical tale!

“So that’s why.”

Sachiko-sama whispered. But Yumi had no idea “why.” Why would that link to Rosa Gigantea?

“Yumi. Say Rosa Gigantea’s name.”

Sachiko-sama suddenly posed a question.

“Umm… I think it was Satō-, Satō Sei.”

“Right.”

Safe. If she couldn’t say the Roses’ names, Sachiko-sama might go beyond just scolding her.

Right, Rosa Gigantea’s name is Satō Sei. For such a flamboyant exterior, her name was actually relatively mundane, so it didn’t really stick.

“Ah, Sei is the same.”

She noticed that much, but “so what?” she thought. Even if they sounded the same, they were written differently.

Yoshino-san, next to her, didn’t seem to understand either, mumbling “Suga Sei” and “Satō Sei” over and over again-.

“Shuga Sei!”

Yoshino-san suddenly shouted, a rarity, along with her sudden understanding.

“I get it. Suga must be Sugar. Sugar, Yumi-san what is sugar?”

Yoshino-san is completely excited.

“Sugar? Would be Satō… oh, Satō!?”

So, Suga Sei equals Satō Sei. It was a bit of a rough guess, but it might actually be a good deduction. Suga, Shuga, Sugar, and then Satō.

“But that’s not enough to conclude that Rosa Gigantea wrote the novel.”

“Right, it’s still a stretch. So I wonder if the rumors only began because of that leaflet?”

In stark contrast to the excitable first-years, Sachiko-sama calmly and collectedly kept thinking.

“By which you mean?”

In an effort to at least give appearance, Yumi asked, setting the muscles in her face.

“I haven’t read it, so I can’t say for sure… But if the contents of the novel were extremely similar to Rosa Gigantea’s past. Then that would be a good way to deduce Rosa Gigantea is Suga Sei.”

“Um, but, it was released today, was it not? Then it would be weird my classmates were whispering about it since three or four days ago?”

If it wasn’t released yet, they wouldn’t know about its contents. And the first-years wouldn’t know about Rosa Gigantea’s incident last year, either.

“But there’s a way to grab these books before the release date.”

Rei-sama folded her arms and confidently said.

“Go to the big bookstore around Kanda. They sell books and comics three or four days before the release dates.”

“Kanda, you mean Kanda, with the used bookstores?”

“Yes. It’s pretty famous.”

If that were true, people living in mountainous regions or on small islands had reason to be annoyed. Tokyo is useful… although a person living in Tokyo really shouldn’t be admiring that.

“Then, Katsura-san and others bought ‘Forest of Thorns’ at Kanda or some store like that, and already read it?”

“I don’t know who Katsura-san is, but that’s probably what happened, I would think? Even if they can’t talk about it outright, I’m sure some upperclassmen talked about what happened. Yumi-san, too, if you had a sister two or three years above you, you might have found out about it, you know?”

“But Rei-chan never told me.”

Yoshino-san interrupted, somewhat cross.

“I’m only one year ahead of you, I don’t really know much, either. I specifically said two or three years, didn’t I?”

Umm. You two, I don’t think this is the time to be having a lover’s quarrel.

While exasperated, Yumi felt a bit envious. After all, there was no way she could act cross to Sachiko-sama.

When she glanced at Sachiko-sama, by chance their eyes met. Yumi immediately became embarrassed, like she was a child that got caught peeping.

“But, it’s the middle of exams, it’s amazing they’d actually go to Kanda to buy the book, and then even read it.”

Yoshino-san smiled, “They must be confident,” but that felt a bit wrong. Katsura-san’s actions weren’t so much confidence but rather-. “Evasion, isn’t it?”

Rei-sama harshly said what Yumi was thinking. “Evasion?”

Sachiko-sama cocked her head to the side, like she just heard something fascinating. It was unthinkable that someone like Sachiko-sama wouldn’t know what “evasion” meant, but Yumi explained, anyways, to keep the conversation moving.

“Evasion, umm. Is a phenomenon when there’s something you need to be doing, but you run away by doing something else.”

Sachiko-sama responded with an “of course I know that much” look. Rei-sama came in to help.

“These cupcakes are an example. I do it sometimes, too, by knitting.”

“What I don’t understand is what ‘what you need to be doing’ is.”

“Wait, what-”

That’s studying for exams, of course. Excluding Sachiko-sama, the three looked at each other.

(Sachiko-sama, you… do you…)

Yumi’s premonition came true.

It wasn’t even a joke, Sachiko-sama truly, honestly never studied for exams.

Part 5.

Deciding that they wouldn't be able to solve anything by thinking without any new information, the four decided to breakup and leave the Rose Mansion.

After all, none of them had actually seen the book yet (save Yumi, who'd seen Katsura-san holding the book from a distance), so guessing and pondering would lead nowhere.

It was already past three.

After saying farewell to Rei-sama and Yoshino-san, who'd decided to purchase "Forest of Thorns" at a bookstore near their homes, Yumi headed by bus to M Station with Sachiko-sama.

There was a big bookstore inside the station. They had an abundance of Cosmos Book Collection products, so even if it were a heavily-anticipated book, it probably was unlikely to be sold out, Rei-sama had advised.

Sachiko-sama stood silently next to her in the rumbling bus.

"I wonder if it's really Rosa Gigantea."

"...I doubt it."

"Why do you think so?"

"No reason."

Whenever she tried to start a conversation, it would end up one-sided like this. And in the end, Sachiko-sama would just resume staring out the window, so Yumi began wondering if her existence there was a bother.

The bus rounded the rotary and stopped at the station bus stop.

They climbed the stairs to the station, glanced at the wickets, then went into the station's building. Their objective, the book center, was on the third floor.

When they went through the glass doors, and when they went on the elevator, Sachiko-sama still remained silent. (Did I say something bad...?)

The sight of the two of them standing together reflected off of the elevator panes.

When she looked carefully, she noticed Sachiko-sama didn't look particularly displeased, but rather she seemed to be deep in thought. If only a sign saying "Deep in Thought" were to hover over peoples' heads in such situations, then she wouldn't have to end up worrying so much.

(-As if.)

Sachiko-sama probably never thought such pointless thoughts.

The book center, occupying almost half of an entire floor, radiated a very book-store-esque atmosphere so much it felt like they were in it before they even got off of the elevator. Sachiko-sama wordlessly ploughed ahead, skipping past the magazine racks at the front and entering the store.

"May I enter a small inquiry?"

Oh, what a lady with impeccable form, Sachiko-sama asked a male employee sorting through books.

"Where might I find the newest publications of Cosmos Book Collection?"

Dancing around the subject was not something Sachiko-sama would do. As always, she was cool and composed, and on top of it all, she was beautiful.

"Ah… uh, umm, Cosmos Books."

The employee was trying to recover his composure. Yumi couldn't blame him, because when he looked up, a person so beautiful it put even some models to shame was right in front of him.

(Or something like that. Gosh, I'm a totally obsessed little sister…)

Straightening herself out, she followed Sachiko-sama. Leading the way was the employee, who this time was no longer stunned, but was blushing all the way to his ears.

"Over here."

The two of them were guided to the corner labeled “Junior Novels” between the book collection shelves and the comic shelves. All of the books here had florid cover illustrations and a gorgeous mood. This was the shōjo novels section.

“Thank you. And, the ‘Forest of Thorns’ that was published today…”

Sachiko-sama, you’re incredible. She was going to make the employee do all the work, without her laying a finger on anything. Like she was purchasing drapery at a draper, or having a diamond ring taken out of a glass case at a high-grade jewelry store. I mean, she must know about finding things yourself via self-service, taking them to the cashier and buying them, the more common way of purchasing, right?

“Is this what you are looking for, ma’am?”

(…Wow, the employee’s speaking differently now, too.)

Sachiko magic. This employee, he looks under twenty, I wonder if he’s ever said “ma’am” to someone before in his life.

“May I have two copies of that?”

Sachiko-sama said. She probably meant one for herself and one for Yumi.

“Yes, hold on-”

But the employee’s face grew dim. The hill of books was a valley at one place, and that valley had only the thickness of one book. And that was where the employee had retrieved the “Forest of Thorns.”

“It’s sold out?”

Sachiko-sama asked, noticing.

“I apologize.”

The employee lowered his head – he didn’t have to bow so much though.

“There’s no helping it.”

Then I’ll just have the one, Sachiko-sama told the employee, and then she turned around to Yumi.

“I’m sorry, Yumi. You’ll have to find a copy somewhere else.”

“Ah, yes.”

Well, in Yumi’s case, it was probably going to be easier for her to buy the book than Sachiko-sama. But she wondered if the book was still in stock inside the drawers under the shelf. Apparently not, though.

“We were supplied two hours ago, but they’re all gone…?”

The employee seemed to have question marks floating around his head, so they must have sold out extremely fast. Yumi knew the reason. The Lillian students going home probably snapped them up like piranhas.

(There’s no helping it.)

Yumi mimicked Sachiko-sama’s speech in her thoughts. She would have to stop by different book stores on her bus-ride home to find “Forest of Thorns.”

After paying at the cashier, Sachiko-sama went straight toward the second floor, where the wickets were, without even glancing at the year-end super-bargain show-window. Of course she wondered about Rosa Gigantea, too, but Yumi was a bit disappointed, because she was hoping for the possibility of going shopping with her onee-sama.

Well, it WAS after school, and they were still in uniforms, and Sachiko-sama probably barely had time to even stop by at the book store. But still, they were sisters, but they never went out together, so she wished they could slow down and enjoy some time together, and she thought that wasn’t entirely being greedy.

“…Yumi.”

In front of the wickets, Sachiko-sama fixed Yumi’s tie, as always, and then spoke in an unusually doubtful voice.

“I wonder if we shouldn’t.”

“What?”

Because it was so abrupt, Yumi blinked, confused.

“Shouldn’t… what?”

She fearfully asked. Sachiko-sama wasn’t going to say we shouldn’t be sisters, was she?

“Read this.”

“Huh?”

She was surprised, because “this” was pointed toward the newly-purchased book that was settled into Sachiko-sama’s bag.

Because.

“But you bought it to read it, didn’t you?”

“…That’s true, but…”

Why was Sachiko-sama having doubts about reading the last copy of the book in the store, that she’d gotten by even having her little sister give up on it?

“It feels like we’re digging up Rosa Gigantea’s past on the merits of simple curiosity.”

“Ah.”

“How do you feel?”

How…

(Onee-sama’s always so self-confident, but now she’s asking for my opinion-)

I don’t think it would be any useful.

Frantically resisting the urge to run away, she glanced up at Sachiko-sama’s face, and noticed Sachiko-sama was simply awaiting Yumi’s answer.

“Umm, I think.”

She reluctantly opened her mouth. Yumi wasn’t grand enough to ignore her onee-sama’s question.

“Assuming that means what I would do…”

“Of course?”

Sachiko-sama tilted her head to the side, urging Yumi on. Her straight black hair swayed.

“I would read it.”

“Why?”

“Because I like Rosa Gigantea.”

“I like her, too. But still.”

Because she likes her, it wasn’t right to uncover things, and her role was to protect Rosa Gigantea. Yumi understood Sachiko-sama’s feelings painfully well.

“Onee-sama, you said so yourself, that Rosa Gigantea probably wasn’t the author of ‘Forest of Thorns.’”

“Did I?”

“Yes. Then I would want to read the novel right away and find proof that it isn’t her.”

“And what if it turned out to be definitively Rosa Gigantea?”

“Nothing…”

“Nothing?”

“If Rosa Gigantea were Suga Sei, I would probably respect her. I might even ask for an autograph.”

When Yumi finished, Sachiko-sama sighed.

“Um… onee-sama?”

Did she say something completely out of line, again? But Sachiko-sama was laughing.

“It’s good, your attitude.”

“?”

“You’re right. I should learn from you. I should just read it, and think about it afterward.”

“Um…”

She couldn’t figure out what Sachiko-sama was talking about. There was no way that Sachiko-sama meant lining up together to receive an autograph from Rosa Gigantea, of course.

A bit of a summarizing, but Sachiko-sama vanished on the other side of the wicket without expounding further. If they lived closer together, like Yoshino-san and Rei-sama, it would be so much better. Because then they'd be able to share more time.

The book store she stopped by on the way home was a small family business that only received one copy of Cosmos Books on release dates, but aided by the long distance away from the train station as well as the store's rather plain appearance, Yumi was able to safely obtain a copy of "Forest of Thorns."

The White Rose

Part 1.

What is this feeling? I asked myself.

No one answered. It wasn't a relatively cool relationship that you could just call "friends," but because they were the same gender, it probably couldn't be called "love," either.

This nameless feeling swelled day by day, and it asserted itself to the point where my little body couldn't suppress it anymore.

Please, get me out of here.

I need to tell Kahori how I feel.

In the spring of her second year of high school, Sei found herself in the same class as Kahori.

In the beginning, she could remember feeling a bit of repulsion over how opposite to herself Kahori was, but gradually it transformed into a feeling of Kahori supplementing the areas she lacked, and so she became a bigger and bigger part of her life.

I want to be with her forever, Sei wished. But after graduating high school, Kahori was to enter a convent.

The adults worried about the growing intimacy of the two girls and pushed ahead the convent discussions in secret. Despaired by their future, and losing faith in adults, they took each other's hand on Christmas and left on an aimless journey.

Stepping out of the terminal station, Sei and Kahori walked into the forest and decided they couldn't be separated in heaven, and so they took sleeping pills.

But they weren't able to die together.

By the time Sei woke up, Kahori's hand, which she was supposed to have gripped firmly, was no longer there. As she stared up at the white hospital ceiling, Sei lamented losing something far more important than herself.

- that would be a concise summary of "Forest of Thorns."

"What, what a depressing story!"

Yumi, rolled up on her bed, reached out to her box of tissues placed by her pillow. First, she wiped away the tears that had flooded down her face, then blew her nose.

The image of a forest, with white mist rising from the snow, remained in her soul.

Forbidden love. You could summarize it like that and that would be the end of it, but on top of that, it cleverly used psychological descriptions of the characters, so it invited the reader to place themselves right into the story. Yumi found a little bit of the story overlapped with her relationship with Sachiko-sama, so while she cheered for Sei, she also couldn't shake the feeling that a "bad" ending was in store while reading.

About two hours, it was the first time she'd ever read a novel this quickly. She'd begun as soon as she came home, and it was already somewhat dark outside.

"Yuuumi, can I come in?"

Right after knocking, her brother, Yūki, walked in.

"Woah, why don't you have any lights on?"

And with that, he turned on the lights without waiting for a response. When he saw her older sister's face, still plainly showing signs of fresh tears, he became speechless.

"You're supposed to wait for a 'yes, you may,' before you walk in."

Yumi said, as she sniffled into her tissue. She didn't know how her brother saw her, but she still tried to act like a lady.

"What… what happened, if I may ask?"

Yūki asked, probably after mustering every ounce of courage he could. Well, he was a boy, after all. If it came down to it, he was willing to try to help her out.

"A novel, I was reading. Sad story."

"Ohh, whatever, then."

She felt a bit conflicted watching him look visibly relieved, then take a deep breath. Maybe she should have scared him a little more.

“What is it?”

“Could you lend me your archaic dictionary? You have a different one from mine.”

Mine doesn’t seem that good, he said, waving around his own dictionary. Do these things differ that much with different publishers?

“Fine with me.”

Yumi took her dictionary from her shelf and handed it to Yūki. “Here.” After taking it out of its case and then flipping through some pages, Yūki nodded, satisfied.

“Can you let me borrow it until tomorrow?”

“No.”

She wasn’t actually teasing her brother or anything. But Yūki pouted, anyways.

“Why?”

“I have my archaic test tomorrow.”

After hearing Yumi’s response, Yūki said “are you stupid?” without changing his expression.

“You have an exam tomorrow, but you’re reading a book and crying?”

Well, it was the truth, so she couldn’t give a retort. Yes, brother, you’re right. But big sis isn’t strong enough to not read a novel that’s lying around her room.

“Well, I don’t say anything other than, let’s study. We haven’t been granted special genes that let us naturally score 100s.”

Pat pat. Yūki patted Yumi’s shoulder, like he was talking to a child ten years his junior. Hey, it might not be that big of a difference, but I was born earlier than you, Yumi wanted to point out, but she didn’t dislike the feeling of being protected, so she let herself feel like a little sister.

Ahh, if only this were Sachiko-sama instead of Yūki, she thought.

“Sounds like you’re having fun at school, too.”

“Why?”

“It sounds like you have someone close to you that easily gets 100s.”

“You too, big sis.”

“…”

Indeed there is. And plus, hers is an exquisite beauty and even has an incredible house, take that! -but she knew if she said that out loud, she’d be the one who’d be “taking” it, so she kept quiet.

“Well, everyone has their own traits.”

Yūki mumbled, trying to cheer up his sister before she felt down.

“So what’s ours?”

“…Being born with faces that remind you of a baby raccoon, and natural-born ditzes.”

“What’s that?”

“My senior told me that.”

“What part of Yūki is a natural-born ditz?”

“Yumi’s even more of a ditz than I, so you just don’t notice.”

“But the baby raccoon part suits you more.”

“…”

“…”

“Let’s stop, the childish argument is even sadder.”

“Time spent on sibling fights is time better spent on studying.”

“Yup.”

“You can take the dictionary, I’ll use Yūki’s.”

And so she acted out the “good big sister” part. Siblings licking each other’s wounds. It feels a bit awkward. Like an old drama you can only see through re-runs.

“Sorry.”

Yūki left the room. But, within five seconds of the door being shut, the warm, homely feeling was dried faster than an air conditioner at work.

“It’s dinner, you two.”

At their mothers' shout from downstairs, the two hungry children joyfully answered, "Okay-," leapt out their doors and bounced down the stairs in a me-first way.

Raccoon face and natural-born ditz. Maybe we should add "gluttonous" to the list of traits, Yumi thought.

It was about half-past-nine in the evening when Yoshino-san called.

"I'm sorry for calling at night, I just wanted to hear someone's opinion."

"What happened?"

Though, as she asked, she imagined it would be about Rosa Gigantea. If that was the case, it meant Yoshino-san read "Forest of Thorns" instead of studying for exams, too.

"It's about Rei-chan."

"What?"

For a moment she thought she heard Rei and Sei wrong. But Yoshino-san wouldn't call Rosa Gigantea "Sei-chan," plus it would be weird calling a novel character by –chan, so it couldn't have been Sei from "Forest of Thorns."

"What about Rei-sama."

"...She said she's not going to involve herself with the matter anymore."

I wonder why, seemed to say Yoshino-san, whose voice was trembling a bit.

"Why... I don't know. That would be my question to you, Yoshino-san."

"Alright... then it's not just me. I'm just so confused right now, I was worried I was being insensitive or something."

"Calm down, Yoshino-san. What do you mean by Rei-sama is not going to involve herself? Do you mean she's going to put off reading 'Forest of Thorns' until after the exams?"

"She already read the novel."

"She read it?"

Rei-sama apparently also lacked self-restraint with these things.

“But, she said she’ll act like she never read it. And she won’t have anything to do with the rumors anymore.”

“I don’t get it. –Oh.”

While scratching her head, Yumi suddenly remembered.

“What, Yumi-san?”

“Sachiko-sama was also hesitant. Even though she bought the book, she was wondering whether to actually read it or not.”

“Sachiko-sama, too?”

“…Yes.”

I wonder why? The two of them became silent, still gripping the receivers.

Even if Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama both became passive for the same reason, there was no hint as to why they’d suddenly changed their attitudes.

“By the way.”

Yoshino-san gathered herself again and asked.

“Yumi-san, did you already read it?”

It, would definitely mean “Forest of Thorns.”

“I read it. Yoshino-san?”

“Same. What did you think?”

What did you think was posed by Yoshino-san more as whether Rosa Gigantea might have written it rather than what Yumi thought about the novel, itself. Like a sort of tacit understanding, where you have a feel for someone even if you don’t actually have them in front of you.

No clues could be found in the author’s column for “Forest of Thorns.” Actually it was basically a blank page. Of course, it’s not a misprint, but a deliberate hiding of her identity.

“I don’t know. I think the protagonist Sei is a bit different from Rosa Gigantea.”

But rather than an “autobiography” it was an “autobiographical novel,” so even if the frameworks were to be the same, the meat might be dramatized.

“Personally, when I was reading it, I remembered that Rosa Gigantea was a bit more like that, rather than her current, loose self.”

Yoshino-san is Rei-sama’s cousin, so they talked about school a lot. Especially last year, when they were split up between high school and middle school, Rei-sama had a bucket-full of stories about the Yamayurikai and the Roses, so she told Yoshino-san even more stories. So, obviously, Yoshino-san would find out a lot about the Roses-.

These things tend to burn an image more on the listener than the speaker because the person who doesn’t know reality might leap ahead with their imagination.

“Yes?”

“Rosa Gigantea- well, she was Rosa Gigantea en bouton back then, but I thought she was a scary person. So this April, when I actually saw her in person, I thought it was a totally different person.”

“…”

That squiggly, cackling person being scary? From what Yoshino-san said, Yumi couldn’t help but agree that it sounded like a different person.

“But their names were identical. Satō Sei.”

Maybe Yoshino-san thinks Suga Sei is Rosa Gigantea because Rosa Gigantea from a year ago seemed similar to the main character of “Forest of Thorns.”

But, that would mean Rosa Gigantea attempted a lovers’ suicide, then somehow ended up being the sole survivor of that. It was hard to believe that would have happened to Rosa Gigantea just last year.

“At the very least, Rei-chan and Sachiko-sama might have thought Rosa Gigantea was the main character, and so they decided to stay back.”

“…Maybe.”

Even if they didn’t know everything, as high school freshmen, they might have known a bit about what happened last year. And because they had made the decision to do so, with a greater understanding of what happened, as their little sisters, it felt right that they, too, should drop it.

She felt like she was withering away.

“What are we going to do?”

The determination they had during the day had vanished.

“Let’s do our best for the last exam.”

“…Yeah.”

Yoshino-san’s voice also sounded a bit let down.

After putting the receiver down, Yumi stared ahead blankly and realized she was beginning to understand.

No matter what, she didn’t know anything about Rosa Gigantea. Rosa Gigantea’s past, her feelings now, nothing.

So she thought she began to understand, after reading the novel.

There was no way you could comprehend the past by ignoring the Rosa Gigantea of now.

Part 2.

The homeroom teacher was supposed to talk about rather important things like how to get in touch during vacation-time.

But most of the students were, while acting like they were listening, completely spaced out, so the teacher simply jotted down the important things on the blackboard and ended class.

Because she'd slacked off a bit for exam studies, Yumi was afraid of receiving her second semester report card. But leaving aside things that would happen a week later, she decided to revel in the week-long exam break, where she'd not have to worry about anything like homework.

After all, exams were over.

(But, before that.)

"Shimako-san, would you like to visit Rosa Gigantea before we head to the Rose Mansion?"

A French doll neatly packing her textbooks into her bag, - Yumi called out to Tōdō Shimako-san.

"Why?"

Her soft, coiled hair bounced along with her deliberate, slow-tempo movements.

"You've heard the rumors, right? I was thinking of directly asking Rosa Gigantea about them."

At first, she thought about adopting Rei-sama's stance of acting like she never knew about it. But had she not known about it, it would be okay, but knowing as much as she did now, she knew it wasn't going to be possible for her to act like she knew nothing.

So she thought. How would she feel if she were Rosa Gigantea? Rather than people avoiding it like a bruised wound, she would feel much better if people simply asked her, outright. Of course, this was just Yumi's opinion, so she didn't know if Rosa Gigantea would feel the same. And if Rosa Gigantea felt displeasure in her asking, then she would apologize.

“I would ask at the Rose Mansion, but then it would drag the people who would prefer to stay out, like Rei-sama, into it.”

“…So why are you inviting me?”

“Because Rosa Gigantea is Shimako-san’s onee-sama, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

After smiling, Shimako-san added, “But…”

“I think it is wrong that I would accompany Yumi-san for that reason alone.”

“Wh, why?”

“Because I lean toward Rei-sama’s side on this matter. Plus, if you’re acting in regard to Rosa Gigantea, there is no need to bother with me, as I am simply her sister.”

Yumi thought she’d heard similar words from Rosa Gigantea before. Something like Rosa Gigantea not minding if Shimako-san depended on someone else.

“But, don’t you want to know?”

“No.”

An immediate answer.

Because that’s the sort of siblings we are, Shimako-san’s words seemed to say.

(That sort of sibling, that sort of sibling, that sort of sibling-)

Is weird, she thought.

Well, it is a human relationship, so they come in all sorts of shapes. But at least in Yumi’s case, she’d not like it if a first-year were to be friendly with Sachiko-sama, and Yoshino-san was bothered by the student that offered cupcakes to Rei-sama.

Rosa Gigantea and Shimako-san were very cooled down. This was clearly not simply because they were two years apart. If that were the case, the problem would have to be their personalities. Rosa Gigantea said before that she and Shimako-san were similar, so they felt at ease with each other.

“Anyways, Yumi-san, shouldn’t you go?”

“Eh?”

“She doesn’t know Yumi-san is looking for her, so unless you hurry, Rosa Gigantea will already be at the Rose Mansion.”

“That’s right…!” Yumi grabbed her bag and hurried down the hallway.

“Later, Shimako-san.”

What a blunder. It’s her bad habit of being easily distracted.

They’d decided earlier to have a tea party after exams were over, so Rosa Gigantea might already have left her classroom.

The third-year classroom, or the Rose Mansion. After pondering which to choose, Yumi chose the former, and after taking a step, the school broadcast streamed some pleasant music, and then…

“Third-year wisteria-class, Satō Sei-san. Please come to the Guidance Office immediately. I repeat-” (Eh?)

Faster than her thoughts could keep up, Yumi’s body deftly changed directions. Satō Sei-san was Rosa Gigantea.

“Third-year wisteria-class, Satō Sei-san.”

Her goal wasn’t the classroom nor the Rose Mansion.

“Please come to the Guidance Office immediately.” It was next door to the faculty room.

(But, why…?)

After confirming the words on the plate hung out in front of the room, Yumi felt terrified.

For Rosa Gigantea, who’s a role model for students, to be called out to the room where teachers “guide” students on how they “conduct” themselves. It was incomprehensible. Even Yumi felt mortified by this, and she wasn’t even the one being called! She couldn’t imagine how humiliated Rosa Gigantea must be feeling.

Even so.

“Oh? Yumi-chan got called on, too?”

That Rosa Gigantea showed up bright and sunny. She slowly lumbered over opposite the hallway Yumi had dashed. It seemed Yumi had arrived faster than the person who was called.

“Then, that would mean the reason I was called was for homosexual adultery!”

“What…!”

She didn’t think it was the time to be joking around. That said, the sight of girls stalking a cackling Rosa Gigantea from a distance was rather disturbing. Most of them were freshmen, but the newspaper club captain was also among them. It was a group of students that had heard the broadcast and couldn’t restrain themselves from finding out what was going on.

“Yumi-chan, would you happen to know why I’ve been possessed by these stalker-ghosts?”

“Happen to know… Well, roughly, I guess.”

There’s Rosa Gigantea for you, picking out some brilliant word choice. “Stalker-ghosts.” -Not that she should be admiring that right now.

“W, would that mean… Rosa Gigantea, you didn’t know about the uproar…”

“What happened?”

This time she had a serious look on her face. That’s a big-shot for you, I guess. Even though she had no idea why she was called out to the guidance office, she was still as cheerful as ever.

“That’s right. I was actually wanting to ask, too. Rosa Gigantea, did you write ‘Forest of Thorns’?”

“Forest…?”

As Rosa Gigantea tilted her head to the side, the door behind her opened.

“Ahh, Satō-san. You’ve arrived. Come in.”

The guidance sister poked her head out the door and urged Rosa Gigantea to enter.

“Yes… Well, Yumi-chan, talk to you later.”

In contrast to Rosa Gigantea, who was so full of composure she even winked before going through the door, Yumi felt her heart sink. As for why, she only caught a glimpse, but inside the guidance office was the academy principle, the middle-school and high-school principle, the third-year official, and the homeroom teacher for the third-year wisteria class. If that sort of line-up were to stare at her, Yumi thought she’d blurt out “I’m sorry!” even if she hadn’t done anything.

“Yumi-san.”

Yoshino-san split through the stalker-ghosts and rushed over to Yumi, hair swaying. With that as a trigger, the tense atmosphere loosened, and the mass of nervous girls broke up a bit. But no one felt like leaving, so they milled about in front of the faculty office and the guidance office. They all seem to intend to wait until Rosa Gigantea came out.

“What did Rosa Gigantea say?”

Yoshino-san, too, heard the broadcast and had rushed over.

“…She was as cheerful as always. Also, she didn’t seem to know why she was called.”

“She didn’t know?”

But it was this big, Yoshino-san was surprised. Even if it wasn’t up to the first-years’ scope, it must have reached the third-years by now.

Just then, a shadow crept forth, stooped low, like a scrambling mouse. That uniform-wearing mouse stopped in front of the guidance office, then leaned against the door. Like a ninja trying to blend into the wall.

“…You know, the guidance office uses sound-proof walls and doors.”

Yoshino-san, watching, pointed out.

“Oh, dear, I’d become so engrossed. It’s not like I was trying to listen in, or anything, ohohohohoho…”

Mouse, ninja, also known as the newspaper club captain, Tsukiyama Minako-sama cackled, hiding her embarrassment.

“Ohohohohohohoho.”

Her hand held up to her mouth made the shape of a fox.

“I can’t help but notice, that here is the sœur of Rosa Foetida en bouton, Miss Shimazu Yoshino. And the sœur of Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Miss Fukuzawa Yumi. Gokigenyou.”

“Go, Gokigenyou.”

They couldn’t just ignore a greeting from a senior, so Yumi and Yoshino-san answered back, then quickly turned to their right.

Yoshino-san probably accidentally spoke, because this Minako-sama was the type of person you really didn’t want anything to do with. When you deal with the newspaper club, anything ends up becoming exaggerated a hundred or a thousand times over.

“My, you don’t have to run, do you?”

Minako-sama placed a hand on each of their shoulders, then spun them around.

What happens when you turn around, then get turned around again? Yes, correct, you return to your former position. And that former position happened to be right in the face of Minako-sama.

“Running away means you have something to hide from me, because it would be a bother if I found out, right?”

Minako-san’s eyes glittered.

“N, no.”

“How absurd.”

The two of them shook their heads. She wasn’t quite as stubborn as Sachiko-sama, but talking to her was probably about the same. They open their mouth, and before you know it, you’ve been swallowed whole.

“Leaving that aside. You’ve showed up at a good time. Can you tell onee-san what you two feel about this ‘White Rose Incident’?”

She suddenly switched her energetic voice to a purr, and sidled up to them. In a way, this was even scarier. And she already titled this the ‘White Rose Incident’… It was a lot more easy-going than the ‘Yellow Rose Revolution,’ but that must mean she’s having trouble finding out what’s behind things this time.

“Don’t say anything, Yumi-san.”

Yoshino-san prodded Yumi with her elbow.

“I know.”

She didn’t need to be told, because she already intended to say nothing. She could imagine how much trouble she’d cause Rosa Gigantea if she said anything.

If the “Lillian Kawaraban” was to have “A conversation with insider source Fukuzawa Yumi-san,” she’d have to pack her bags and go off on a journey, alone.

“How distrustful. I’ll have you know, I’ve reconsidered since the last time, and so I’m restraining myself a bit.”

“Last time…”

Would that be publishing Yoshino-san and Rei-san’s surveys the wrong way. Or would that be when she wrote a tearful shōjo love story based on Yoshino-san’s returning of her rosary to Rei-sama.

“Actually, I’m in a bind. With so much time taken up by exam studies, this Tsukiyama Minako had no idea about this uproar until this afternoon. See, if the newspaper club’s behind the times, that’s no good, right? And break starts tomorrow, so I’d like to have a big, concise wrap-up next week, you know? So could you lend me a hand?”

(…Wow.)

She hasn’t reconsidered, at all.

“If you could lend me a hand, I could help out Rosa Gigantea on ‘Lillian Kawaraban.’”

If you can't push, pull. Minako-sama dangled a beautiful meal, this time. But as much of a glutton as Yumi may be, she wasn't foolish enough to- enough to-

"Is it okay to watch your lovely Rosa Gigantea get expelled like this?"

"Ex, expelled!?"

Yumi leapt at the suspicious bait, the needles behind it in clear view.

"Yumi-san, calm down."

Yoshino-san grabbed Yumi's shoulders and pulled her back.

"But, if Rosa Gigantea becomes expelled!"

"Calm down and think about it. The school wouldn't expel someone just for writing a novel."

"...Ah."

Yumi spat the bait out from her mouth.

Calm down, calm down. She was about to become food for the newspaper club.

"Are you sure? I wonder."

Minako-sama laughed.

"Our school forbids working, you know? If she wrote a novel and received stipends for it, that would clearly be against school rules."

"Working is just prohibited on a basic level, if you get permission, you can work."

Surprisingly, Yoshino-san re-thought or something, and began verbally firing back at Minako-sama. They were a rare, but there were students at Lillian who received permission to work, based on their reasons for needing the jobs. Aiding their household with money, or wanting to cultivate specific skills, for instance. Specific skills such as serving tea or flower arrangement or having an apprenticeship for dancing, some even act in troupes to improve their acting skills. Of course, no matter the case, the students are receiving money from outside, so the school requests a meeting with the student and a guardian and finally gives permission after discussions.

“Do you think Rosa Gigantea received permission? That’s why she got called here, didn’t she?”

“…Well.”

But Yoshino-san, despite fighting bravely, couldn’t continue. Well it’s futile, trying to fight with words against the newspaper club captain.

“Of course, you don’t usually get expelled for a single breach of the school rules, but that’s not to say it never happens.”

She danced around the point so much that Yumi found herself struggling to keep up. In other words, she wanted to say that you could get expelled for breaking the rules a single time.

“According to my data, one student was working in a sex-service-related store a few years ago, and after being called to the guidance office, she was expelled that day.”

Data, what data was she talking about?

“But, sex service and novel writing are on different levels altogether.”

Yoshino-san responded after gathering courage. But a cold smile came back. “Oh?”

“That just depends on the person. Selling your body or selling your mind, what’s the difference?”

“…Umm.”

They’re clearly different, but it was hard to explain. If Tsutako-san were here, she’d probably be able to win this sort of argument.

The first-years who were in the distance ended up hearing the uncommon phrase “sex service” and had begun whispering among themselves.

Gosh. At this rate, rumors of Rosa Gigantea working a sex service job and getting called to the guidance office because of it could spread.

“I can use the ‘Lillian Kawaraban’ to call the attention of the faculty, if you’d like. Please don’t expel Rosa Gigantea.”

“But, we really don’t know anything.”

“Oh, Yumi-san, but you were to speaking to Rosa Gigantea just now. So what is it? ‘Forest of Thorns.’ Did Rosa Gigantea write it? Or did she not?”

Yet, she’d already decided Rosa Gigantea had written it just moments earlier. Tsukiyama Minako-sama was investigating again.

(This is a different sort of scary from Sachiko-sama’s close-up.)

Slow, deliberately approaching. She found herself being backed into the wall.

As expected of Minako-sama. Rather than attack the visually less imposing and more brittle-looking Yoshino-san, she chose to attack Yumi. She knew how to read people. Yoshino-san might look weak, but she was actually quite strong and level-headed.

“I really, really don’t know anything.”

When Yumi closed her eyes and shouted, the wall behind her fell.

“Yumi-san, behind, door, opening!”

Yoshino-san’s advice was as fruitless as that of a foreigner just learning Japanese, and Yumi was sucked into the black hole that suddenly opened behind her.

“Hieeeh-”

Why did she go to the door, or, why didn’t the door open outwards, or, why did the door have to open with such great timing. As she fell backwards, she lamented the string of bad luck that caused this situation.

(And I’ll end up hitting the back of my head, and become even dumber!)

“Woah!”

Foomf.

(...foomf?)

Yumi was saved in the nick of time by something soft. Her head didn’t hurt, and her body seemed to be leaning backward, but her indoor shoes were still on the floor.

“Yumi-chan, you’re pretty heavy...”

“Eh.”

She heard a familiar voice from behind her. What saved her by countering her weight was none other than Rosa Gigantea. Maybe it’s the scent of her shampoo, when Yumi turned around, she was face-to-face with a smile that fit perfectly with the scent of mint drifting in the air.

“Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Gigantea… I,”

“Sorry. I don’t think I can hold you up any longer.”

Rosa Gigantea heaved, and made Yumi stand on her own. She had to hold Yumi without any forewarning, so apparently she’d been using an awkward posture, so even Rosa Gigantea was a bit winded.

“Plus, if we crumbled to the ground hugging each other in the guidance office, it’d be a bit awkward.”

Yumi’s heart leapt when Rosa Gigantea whispered in her ear. On the other side of the opened door, the principles and the sisters were watching, mouths open.

“Sorry for the disturbance. Excuse us.”

Rosa Gigantea politely bowed to the teachers inside, forced Yumi to bow with her, and then left the room.

“I’ve gotten the gist of the ‘Forest of Thorns’ Yumi-chan was talking about.”

After smiling a bit bitterly, Rosa Gigantea raised her voice for the stalker-ghosts (although now they’re just wandering ghosts).

“I’m sure you all are wondering about it, so I’ll tell you now, sorry to disappoint, but I’m not the one that wrote ‘Forest of Thorns.’”

Now that the scene was over, the girls began mumbling to each other, clearly disappointed. Gosh, what did they follow Rosa Gigantea for?

“Oh, Yoshino-chan, you worried for me and came, too?”

Rosa Gigantea smiled happily and called to Yoshino-san.

“Uh huh. And is that true?”

“True. True. I just found out about it, after all… And so, we can’t offer any stories to the ‘Lillian Kawaraban.’ Sorry, Tsukiyama Minako-san.”

And she doesn’t forget to throw the newspaper club gentle sarcasm along with a check. You won’t hear the end of it if you try to turn this into an article. Even Minako-sama probably didn’t have the courage to go against a senior, and a Rose on top of that. Especially because this wasn’t even newsworthy.

“Now now, let’s be off now.”

Yumi in her right hand, Yoshino-san in her left hand, and drawing both shoulders to her, Rosa Gigantea happily began walking.

“To where?”

“The Rose Mansion? Didn’t you two come to pick me up?”

“Oh yeah, the tea party!”

She’d completely forgotten, because of the broadcast.

What was everyone thinking as they waited at the Rose Mansion?

Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida, Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama.

And Shimako-san-.

“It’s hot.”

Icy wind was blowing outside, but Rosa Gigantea said a very unseasonal thing, and smiled.

Part 3.

“Well, wasn’t that a flashy summons.”

Rosa Chinensis, who was waiting in the Rose Mansion salon, spoke first.

“Personally, I’ve never been called like that, so I’m a bit envious.”

Said Rosa Foetida.

“Thanks.”

Waving her hand, Rosa Gigantea nimbly proceeded to the center of the room and lowered herself into an open seat.

A somewhat nostalgic three-shot of the Roses. Yumi simply stared in adulation – oh, how splendid.

However, should they simply be elegantly smiling to each other, like that? Even though she was told Rosa Gigantea was not Suga Sei, Yumi was still overflowing with questions, yet unable to digest the news. But the ones that were waiting at the Rose Mansion casually mentioned the summons, then showed no signs of caring.

“Here.”

Shimako-san entered the stage and passed around steaming teacups. Even Yoshino-san, who entered the room with her, was placing sugar and sticks of powdered milk on the table.

All of which meant there nothing left to prepare, so Yumi added water to the electric kettle and sat down.

“You were at the guidance office?”

Sachiko-sama, sitting next to her, whispered to Yumi.

“…Yes.”

At first, she thought she would be scolded, but Sachiko-sama simply whispered, “I see.”

Sachiko-sama did not come to the guidance office. She was also hesitant about reading the novel. Perhaps she was not comfortable with her little sister sticking herself into Rosa Gigantea’s past. But Rei-sama said nothing to Yoshino-san, too.

In any case, they had a toast with black tea over finishing exams. She didn't know who brought it, but someone laid out marketplace cookies on tissues.

It had been a while since they last held a tea party, and it could even be the last time this year everyone got together like this.

"Let me say something."

After some time, Rosa Gigantea stood up and declared.

"I already told Yoshino-chan and Yumi-chan, but the rumors of me writing a novel, well it wasn't me. –That's all."

That's all. And after that concise declaration, Rosa Gigantea quickly sat down and sipped tea, like nothing happened. She even commented, "It's wonderful," about the tea Shimako-san poured.

"Was that why you were called?"

Rosa Chinensis asked.

"That's why."

"So?"

Rosa Foetida said.

"Nothing. I said it wasn't me, and they let me go. That's all. I haven't read it, myself, and I didn't even know that sort of rumor was circulating until just now. So even if they were to ask me questions, I wouldn't have had anything to say."

The teachers had also not read the novel, but the rumor was circulating, so they called her to the office to ask her about it before they left for vacation.

"And you really didn't write it?"

Rosa Chinensis confirmed, and Rosa Gigantea raised her right hand and said, "I swear to Maria-sama."

"Understood. Then, this case is closed. What do you think, Rosa Foetida?"

"No objection. Rosa Chinensis."

The two Roses nodded, and quickly concluded things.

(Eh-!? That's all?)

Deep down, Yumi shouted, unsatisfied.

Of course, in reality, Rosa Gigantea was probably saying the truth, so there was no problem with concluding things by taking her word. But she thought the Roses would try to find out who began the rumors, and come up with a way to suppress them in the future.

Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida probably paid the rumors little-to-no heed, so they weren't very attached to the topic of Rosa Gigantea. But Yumi ended up wailing after reading "Forest of Thorns," and ended up thinking the main character was Rosa Gigantea, so she didn't feel satisfied with things being cleaned up this abruptly.

(Ahh… but the topic's already completely about Christmas.)

Completely, but also incompletely, combusted. At this rate, she'd end up consuming her exam break by pondering about Rosa Gigantea. –And when she thought about that, she realized this was no different than a peeping tom.

(In the end, I was just another of Rosa Gigantea's stalker-ghosts.)

Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida, Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, and Shimako-san. The reason why they weren't being proactive was because they weren't acting out of curiosity.

She felt a little, well, no, considerably depressed. Being such a shallow, easily excitable person seemed extremely out of place here, she ended up thinking.

She was feeling so ecstatic after being chosen by Sachiko-sama to be her sister, but aside from appearance and intelligence, maybe she was missing something fundamental. Something that came with you when you were born, so it was something she'd never be able to attain.

(…Depressing yourself more and more to the point where you can't even stand back up on your own. I'm so stupid.)

Just as she felt herself hanging her head in shame, something fell from overhead and hit her square in the forehead.

“?”

After one bounce, it landed next to Yumi’s teacup. The rolling object was a silvery sphere, and remarkably small. When she lifted it, she realized it was chocolate, wrapped in silver paper.

When Yumi looked around, the suspect gave herself up by waving slightly with her hands on the table. Everyone else simply continued their discussion.

(What is it, Rosa Gigantea?)

When she lipped the question, this time Rosa Gigantea opened both of her hands.

(10?)

Then she made a cross with her index fingers.

(X?)

Then she opened her palms again, and then pointed to her face.

(Ten, X, ten, face?)

She didn’t understand. When she twisted her face in thought, Rosa Gigantea repeated her movements again, but this time she lipped her words.

(Ten times ten.)

10x10… was, of course, 100. 100, and face…? “Life’s many phases!?”

Yumi stood up. Of course, the maidens’ discussion came to an abrupt halt, and everyone looked at Yumi.

“What? Yumi-chan, do you have something to say?”

Rosa Foetida asked, like she was asking a child a question.

“Ah… umm. No, -I’m sorry.”

Blushing red, she sat down.

“Don’t be half-asleep.”

Sachiko-sama cautioned with a whisper.

(I wasn’t half-asleep, though…)

As for the ringleader, her shoulders were visibly trembling in the seat diagonally across from Yumi, and she even had tears in her eyes.

(And I was worried over this person…)

It began to seem foolish, so she decided to stop being negative.

Part 4.

“Sachiko-, let me borrow Yumi-chan.”

As the tea party came to an end, Rosa Gigantea wrapped an arm around Yumi’s neck and shouted.

“Well, I don’t mind, but-”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, I won’t strip her down and play with her.”

“…If you keep making such jokes, I may refuse.”

Sachiko-sama seemed to be getting used to it, as she side-stepped Rosa Gigantea’s teasing.

“Umm, could you also prohibit kissing?”

The captive Yumi interjected into the conversation. Rosa Gigantea was the type to spontaneously hug and kiss someone else’s sister, so she couldn’t drop her guard.

“Ok. That’s disappointing, but I’ll promise. So, I’m borrowing her.”

Turning about, Rosa Gigantea dragged Yumi with her and this time went to Rei-sama, this time requesting to borrow Yoshino-san.

“As long as Yoshino is fine with it.”

Rather than give an order, like Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama cheerfully consented.

“Why Rei doesn’t say anything? That’s simple. Because she knows I won’t do anything to Yoshino-chan.”

Rosa Gigantea cackled.

“Eh!? Wait, why just me?”

Why was she bait for an evil senior?

“I guess it’s because your reaction is awesome. Also, Sachiko’s reaction is great, too. Two delicious sœur with one grain of rice. –Thank you, with respect.”

“…”

She could find no words of retort. Because it was a reply with such clarity. But “with respect”? Lillian’s a Catholic school, not a Buddhist one…

“- anyways. The three of us will finish cleaning, so everyone may go ahead.”

While she spoke in polite terms, Rosa Gigantea was clearly meaning to simply shoo people out of the room. What was she trying to start, kicking everyone out? Well, Yoshino-san was with her, so she assumed she wouldn’t be attacked or anything.

Then, farewell. –said they, as “everyone” filed out of the second-floor room. Sachiko-sama still had a dubious look, but she had business to deal with in the afternoon, so she reluctantly followed Rei-sama down the stairs.

“Shall I lend a hand?”

Shimako-san asked, last. Well, Yumi and Yoshino-san were remaining, so as a fellow first-year student, it wasn’t surprising she would wonder if she should stay to help, too. And it was also strange that she would be left out, being the little sister of Rosa Gigantea.

“Nope, not especially.”

Rosa Gigantea’s words had no hidden meaning behind them. It’s hard to explain, but between sisters, words often have meanings like, “Actually I want you to stay,” or “I have something to do with Yoshino-chan and Yumi-chan, sorry,” but it was a bit unbelievable that Rosa Gigantea meant nothing. She didn’t even look sorry about leaving Shimako-san out.

“Is that so. Well, farewell, then.”

Hey, wait, you’re just going to back down? But when she looked at Shimako-san, she simply smiled, and even said, “I’m sorry you have to put up with onee-sama.”

“Gokigenyou.”

As always, Shimako-san gave an angelic smile and left. The afterimage of the soft, curled hair stayed in Yumi’s mind.

“Is it bad if Shimako-san stays?”

Yoshino-san probably felt the same as Yumi, and so she asked Rosa Gigantea.

“Why? If Shimako wanted to stay, I wouldn’t have minded.”

“But the way you said it, I don’t think she’d be able to stay even if she wanted, right, Yumi-san?”

Yoshino-san, excited by the response, looked for agreement from Yumi.

“Really? Yumi-chan.”

Rosa Gigantea looked like she wanted to say “I really don’t understand,” as she looked at Yumi.

“If I were Shimako-san, I think I would have felt like I needed to be gone.”

“Hmm.”

What did she mean, hmm. If she understood, she should go chase down Shimako-san. Rosa Gigantea stayed put in her seat, without any hint of wanting to move.

“If you want, I could go-”

When Yumi started toward the biscuit-shaped door, she was stopped.

“Ah, don’t worry about it.”

“Why?”

“Even if Shimako were told not to stay, if she wanted to stay, she would stay on her own accord.”

“What?”

“That’s how it is. So don’t worry about it.”

She felt like she’d just been thrown a smoke screen, but Rosa Gigantea sounded confident, so she left it at that.

“Is that how it is.”

Yumi and Yoshino-san tilted their head to the side and were forced to simple accept it as fact. In that case, what was Shimako-san to Rosa Gigantea?

“Yumi-chan, Yoshino-chan, I don’t care who, do one of you have ‘Forest of Thorns’ with you?”

“Ah, yes.”

Both of them simultaneously reached into their bags. Yumi found hers first, and Rosa Gigantea pointed to it.

“May I borrow it?”

“Sure. What are you going to do?”

“If someone says they want to borrow a book, it means they’re going to read it. Did you think I was going to make stew with it?”

“No, autograph it, or something.”

“Suga Sei? That’s not even funny, Yumi-chan.”

But she was laughing, anyways. But if she was going to read “Forest of Thorns” now, it definitely meant she wasn’t the author.

“Well, shall we start cleaning?”

“…Yeah.”

The person who brought them together had pushed a chair to the window sill and begun reading, so Yumi and Yoshino-san began carrying the teacups from the table and gathering the leftovers of the cookies.

“Secret skill, instantaneous teakettle technique!”

Yoshino-san poured the hot water from the kettle into the washing tub, filled it with water, and then dunked the cups, spoons and sponge into it.

“We can just wash it in here, and then use the faucet to rise. Right?”

“That’s a good idea, but… Yoshino-san, you’ve been reading ninja stories instead of just fencer stories as of late, haven’t you?”

“I’ve been had.”

The sink water had become colder, and it reminded Yumi that by the time they went deeper into winter, it would freeze.

(…cold water.)

Cold air.

A misty, deep, green forest. Sealed away by thorny tendrils, the forest where Sei's feelings were asleep.

The sense of cold re-awakened the scene in "Forest of Thorns" in Yumi's mind. Sei and Kahori held each other's hands, and wandered through the forest, finding a place to rest, that sort of scene.

She could feel herself tearing up just by remembering it.

Worn out from walking, the two of them took turns drinking sleeping pills along with the cooled tea. When they ran out of pills, they intertwined their fingers so they wouldn't be separated, and kissed, for the first and last time.

"Wow, thanks for your hard work."

Like she was parading into that world of illusions wearing shoes, Rosa Gigantea crept up behind them with her usual old-man-like methods.

"You already finished?"

Yoshino-san, who was wiping the table with a rag, glanced at her wristwatch.

"Of course not. You can't read a novel in ten, fifteen minutes."

True. Plus she'd never heard about Rosa Gigantea having incredible fast-reading skills.

"Both of you worked hard, so I paused to give you two a reward. Of course, I'll go back to reading in a bit."

"What do you think of it so far?"

Is what Yoshino-san asked, but Yumi's question of, "Reward?" overlapped. Rosa Gigantea glanced at Yumi, then, in an effort to stop herself from bursting into laughter, turned back to Yoshino-san. She had to have, no, she must be laughing. But that aside, why was Yumi so straight-forward like this?

"Well I'm not that far into it so I can't say much, but it's interesting… I can see why some people would think I wrote it."

As she spoke, Rosa Gigantea reached into her pocket, took our two slips of paper and waved them in front of Yumi's face.

"Here, the reward you were so eagerly awaiting."

"What is this?"

They were slips of colored paper that had been marked with a rubber stamp. When she looked closely, she noticed it read, "Pasta." They were meal tickets for pasta, used by university students.

"I forget when, but I stayed late to help my homeroom teacher, and she gave me those two tickets as thanks. Eat some ramen with a friend and go home. But I didn't have any friends that stay that late into the evening, and the food courts close at four, anyways."

I see. On the back of the tickets was the third-year wisteria-class homeroom teacher's name. Generally speaking, middle-school and high-school students weren't able to use the university food court, but if they received teacher permission, it was okay, but they'd have to receive their teacher's signature on the back of the tickets.

"And, I just kept them. Because two is not an easy number to find."

They were lacking one, if the Roses wanted to go together. And it would be awkward for her to go alone to the university food court, with her outstanding uniform, twice.

"Then, you could have gone with Shimako-san."

Yoshino-san said, exasperated. For Yoshino-san, two seemed to shout out sisters. Like, if Rei-sama received two meal tickets, Yoshino-san was supposed to be invited.

"With Shimako? And while eating ramen sitting across from each other, what do we talk about?"

Rosa Gigantea asked. She'd never even given it any thought, before.

"Anything. What you two talk about normally."

"We don't really talk much."

"But, you're sisters!?"

“Shimako is precious. An irreplaceable little sister. But we prefer not to interfere with one another. That’s more comfortable for both of us.”

“That’s…”

Yoshino-san gave it serious thought. It was probably incomprehensible for her, because she was always together, and her relationship was so intimate. But Yumi could understand, a bit. Rosa Gigantea simply preferred “that kind” of relationship.

If Rosa Gigantea and Yoshino-san were at the opposite ends of the spectrum, Yumi and Sachiko-sama were slightly more toward Rosa Gigantea’s side than the middle. Actually, it was far more than just slightly.

“But if we both have one ticket, there’s nothing left for Rosa Gigantea.”

“Oh, I don’t need any. You two go ahead.”

“But. We could split two ramen with three people.”

Yumi was already preparing to have a meal. Just cookies weren’t enough to satisfy her, so she’d completely forgotten about discretion.

“More important, I want to read. So, I’d actually prefer it if you two took your time.”

“So we’re an intrusion?”

“Frankly.”

“…I could let you borrow the book without any interest for a week.”

Yumi didn’t think Rosa Gigantea needed to read the book now, to the point of treating her juniors to a meal (though in reality she received the meal tickets, herself).

“If I go home, I’ll lose interest. Sorry, could you just let me read it, here?”

I guess that’s how it is. –Yumi helplessly accepted the meal tickets and dragged Yoshino-san off to the pasta cafeteria.

“Hey- you forgot something.”

Just as they stepped out of the Rose Mansion, they heard Rosa Gigantea's voice from above.

"What?"

When they stepped out toward the middle of the courtyard, they saw Rosa Gigantea leaning out of the window.

"Sorry, could you get canned coffee from the vending machine by the cafeteria on the way back? The small, hot, black one."

And she was unprepared for the small purse flying at her. "Gyah."

The reason she was able to catch it anyways was not because of the catcher's skill, but because the pitcher's control was incredibly good.

"Instead of a tip, you two can buy a can for yourself, too. Well, have fun."

Without waiting for a response, the second-floor window was shut. The two on the ground looked at the tasteful purse in Yumi's hand, then at the window that was shut, then sighed.

"Rosa Gigantea..."

"...is unfathomable."

"Let's go."

"...yeah."

It wasn't because they were hungry, but they suddenly felt exhausted. And they walked wordlessly to the pasta cafeteria.

Rosa Gigantea was alright as an "acquaintance senior," but she was probably extremely difficult if they were close. Well, not because she gave them meal tickets or threw purses at them.

Sachiko-sama was unreadable sometimes, too. But she was straight-forward, so once you figured out her pattern, she wasn't that difficult. Rosa Gigantea was a lot more twisted, so her real self seemed to be hidden behind layers and layers.

So Shimako-san, being the little sister to this Rosa Gigantea, was incredible, Yumi concluded, as she huddled and walked through the windy, university grounds.

Part 5.

The pasta cafeteria was by the university school store.

Including the kitchen, it was about the size of a single classroom. A café was above the pasta cafeteria, and you could get sandwiches, coffee and cake (or so I hear). The school store, cafeteria and café all made up one building.

As for the reason why it was standing in between the school dining hall and the university buildings was that, as you probably imagine, the students desired such a building, so they built it afterwards.

It was some time after noon, and as it was just before break, the university was fairly vacated, too, so the pasta cafeteria was rather empty.

As they had no real choice, the two quickly ordered ramen and handed the lady behind the counter their meal tickets.

“I just put out the fire, so it might take a bit.”

The lady said, as she checked the stamps behind the tickets. Because there were few people remaining at the university, she’d turned off the heating to save expenses. Business seemed to be extremely slow, as she was the only one working the kitchen, where you might expect two or three.

“We’re not in any hurry.”

Yoshino-san innocently smiled, “So would you be willing?” That she could smile so without deliberately needing to try might be one type of natural talent. And there couldn’t be that many people that would see that and feel ill will.

“Alright, I’ll start up the fire again.”

The lady tossed the tickets into a specific box, heaved herself off the seat and moved to the big pot.

“Go ahead and take a seat, I’ll call you two when it’s done.”

They nodded and took a seat at the edge. Even though there were no other people, they didn’t feel comfortable taking full advantage of the university building.

“It’s my first time eating at the pasta cafeteria.”

“Same.”

Yumi and Yoshino-san looked around and lowered their shoulders. They’d attended Lillian since kindergarten, but this was outside of their own territory, so it felt like they were on an adventure. They weren’t doing anything bad, but their heart beat rapidly. It was probably similar to the feeling of eating a chocolate ball for the first time.

“It might take a bit, she said.”

“I wonder how long.”

Well, Rosa Gigantea had told them not to come back for a while, anyways, so it was a good way to spend time. –Just as they were whispering, in only about five minutes, they heard, “It’s done.” Gosh, how many seconds does it take normally, then?

When they went up together to receive their bowls, the lady advised them to wear a handkerchief down from their neck. Apparently ramen soup splashes no matter how hard you try.

“I see… I guess it would be a pain if it ended up on this ivory collar.”

It was a bit baby-ish and embarrassing, but there was no helping it, so the two of them hung a handkerchief from their collar and split their chopsticks. The ramen had one roasted pork filet each, along with shredded spring onions, dried seaweed and soaked bamboo shoots.

“Itadakima-su.”

First, a sip of the soup.

“…It’s good.”

“Yes.”

The warm soup had a thick taste of soy sauce, and it felt like it spread throughout her body from the stomach. She wished Rosa Gigantea, left behind at the Rose Mansion, could have had a sip.

“Rosa Gigantea,”

Yoshino-san mumbled after a mouthful of noodle.

“I wonder why she made us stay.”

“Eh…?”

Chewing off a bit of pork filet, Yumi lifted her head. Yoshino-san was looking puzzled.

“Because if she just wanted to borrow ‘Forest of Thorns,’ as Yumi-san mentioned, she’d just have to take it home, right? If she didn’t want to read it at home, she could read it on the train-ride home. And if she didn’t want to borrow it for a whole week, she could just buy it at a book store, right?”

“But it’s free if she borrows it, so that might be why?”

Not that she was too stingy to pay four-hundred some yen, but she didn’t see any other reason in sight, so Yumi said it, anyways.

“If you think about three peoples’ worth of canned coffee, you could buy ‘Forest of Thorns.’”

Well, that’s true. But she couldn’t think of any other reason, so she gave up.

What started this all, anyways, she thought, but even though things really began two or three days ago, it felt extremely distant, like everything had vanished beyond the ramen steam. As her stomach was becoming filled, her thinking power, already not particularly gifted, seemed to deteriorate further.

“How about, we’re so cute, she wanted to treat us to ramen.”

“Yumi-san, your brain’s melting.”

Yoshino-san sighed, exasperated, and returned to her ramen. Carefully, so as to not splash the soup, several yellow noodles were sucked into her pink lips.

Yumi looked at the clock. It’d been roughly 30 minutes since they left the Rose Mansion. An hour minus 30 minutes was another 30 minutes.

(It would be close.)

If they kept eating ramen at this pace, they might be able to have spent an entire hour without needing to kill time elsewhere.

(But the ramen would go bad.)

But she didn't want the soup to splash onto her uniform, either. In the end, there seemed to be nothing to do other than to learn from Yoshino-san and carefully eat little portions of the noodle at a time.

Even if the ban on entering the pasta cafeteria were lifted, you could say with utmost confidence that there was no risk of a mass of middle-school or high-school students flooding into the building. Because eating ramen without dirtying your clothes was a difficult and time-consuming task.

In the kitchen, one of the ladies that was resting outside had apparently returned, and they began closing the store in earnest.

Part 6.

“Was there coffee?”

Rosa Gigantea’s greeting to Yumi and Yoshino-san, who’d arrived back at the Rose Mansion, was not “welcome back” but “was there coffee?” Somewhat disappointing, because it sounded like she was more interested in the coffee than her cute juniors.

“…Yes.”

Rosa Gigantea jumped out of her seat like a little child chanting “coffee, coffee,” so Yumi handed her the requested coffee and the purse.

“If you wanted to drink coffee that much, you could have made instant coffee.”

“I wasn’t feeling like instant coffee. Actually if I had things my way I’d be ordering blue mountain coffee at a coffee shop.”

She pulled back the can’s pull-top, gulped down the coffee, and sighed. It was a small can, so she probably drank half of it in one gulp.

“Instant coffee < canned coffee < fresh-made coffee?”

“Yup. How about you, Yoshino-chan?”

“In my opinion, it’s more about the amount of milk, rather than type. Oh, and temperature.”

“The mild faction. You’re the same as Yumi-chan.”

“I’m not as much of sweet-tooth as Yumi-san, though.”

Yoshino-san waved her can of café au lait, with scaled-back sweetness, next to her face, said “gochisousama” and laughed.

“What did Yumi-chan get-?”

After being called a sweet-tooth, it became awkward to show it. And amused by Yumi’s reaction, Rosa Gigantea chased her around, “Come on, show it.”

“I wonder who bought you that drink?”

Gosh, sponsors are powerful. Rosa Gigantea pinned Yumi from behind and grabbed the can.

Three, two, one.

“Bwahahahah.”

As expected, after three seconds, Rosa Gigantea’s hearty laugh echoed through the second floor of the Rose Mansion.

“What is this? Canned sweet red-bean soup!? These things exist!? And they’re sold at a university vending machine, so there’s even a demand for them!?”

“…Probably, even the reserve forces, a high school girl, just bought one.”

She’d become used to this massive laughter, so Yumi turned defiant and answered. Yes, she’s a sweet-tooth. What’s wrong with being a sweet-tooth… that sort of attitude.

“I see. Hmm…”

Rosa Gigantea admired the can, mumbling, “I guess that’s how things are.” It seemed like she seriously didn’t know canned sweet red-bean soup existed before, so when Yumi told her there were even canned sweet half sake, she became delighted, again.

The two of them pulled up chairs alongside the chair Rosa Gigantea was sitting in by the window, and they sat down facing each other. The sunlight shining through the glass window, while just a bit, felt warm.

The canned drinks, which were hot and thus difficult to carry back, had finally cooled and become drinkable.

“Well, I read the novel.”

Rosa Gigantea jumped straight into the topic, without any preface.

“A novel in an hour.”

When they praised her for her concentration, she calmly replied, “Because it was in Japanese.” Yumi wondered if Rosa Gigantea was the type to read straight through original documents, but she didn’t ask. If the person next to her was superhuman, she’d feel a bit down.

“When I realized Suga was Sugar, I totally laughed by myself. I mean, Satō and Sugar, that’s quite a stretch isn’t it? But I wonder who thought of Suga Sei being Satō Sei, first.”

Tossing her graded hair, Rosa Gigantea laughed listlessly, and she seemed a bit different from usual. It was hard to explain, but the difference must have been as subtle as removing a single, thin cardigan. Of course, maybe this was closer to the real Rosa Gigantea, that sort of thought was Yumi’s own convenient thought. Rosa Gigantea was always Rosa Gigantea, and there could only be one of her, of course.

After drinking the rest of the canned coffee, Rosa Gigantea properly washed the can out at the sink, then tossed in the can recycling bin. There’s your student government president, never letting up even for disposing waste.

“But they had good instincts.”

“Huh…?”

Who, Yoshino-san asked. Like Yumi, she was filled with question marks, not knowing how this related to Rosa Gigantea.

“The person who thought I might have written it.” Rosa Gigantea laughed, came close, grabbed Yumi’s canned sweet red-bean soup, and gulped.

“Ahh!”

“Oh it’s just one sip, tightwad.”

The can came back considerably lighter. Well, she couldn’t complain, because she was the one being treated, but Rosa Gigantea’s “sip” seemed to be quite large.

“But, you didn’t, right?”

After waiting for this sibling argument-like skirmish to end, Yoshino-san returned the conversation to the topic. Yoshino-san was calm, she thought.

“Of course, I didn’t write it. As I said earlier. I’m not mentally strong enough to write about something that happened last year and show it to people.”

“But, you said they had good instincts?”

Rosa Gigantea nodded at Yoshino-san’s words.

“Because, she’s similar. To me.”

A fastball.

It wasn’t a particularly super meaningful phrase, but it felt like she threw a fastball with impeccable timing and speed.

Nothing more, nothing less, people often say. And that answer fit perfectly, so that sort of thing does happen, after all.

Because she’s similar. To me. –Rosa Gigantea’s words simply meant what they said. Similar was such a vague thing to say, but the phrase simply told one truth. Is what Yumi absent-mindedly thought.

At the same time, Rosa Gigantea’s words were so powerful they couldn’t find anything to say.

Then, they heard her say, “You can ask.” Rosa Gigantea said that to the speechless Yoshino-san and Yumi.

“Both of you were worried about it, right? Because both of you knew it wasn’t just the name that made people think I wrote it.”

“…”

Because it was the truth, they couldn’t make a retort.

They definitely wanted to know about Rosa Gigantea’s past. But at the same time, that was intruding on Rosa Gigantea’s privacy, so the fact that their desire had been so blatantly obvious to Rosa Gigantea made them feel guilty. Even though they didn’t intend to look so greedy.

“I didn’t say that to make you two look like that…”

Rosa Gigantea sat back into her chair and raised both of their chins with her fingertips. She usually never felt anything from Rosa Gigantea’s close-up, but this time she felt her heart race.

“I won’t talk about what I don’t want to talk about, but if that’s alright, I’m willing to tell you what happened.”

“Why-”

“Because, if you two are the only ones that don’t know, it’s a bit unfair, don’t you think?”

“…”

Leaving aside whether that reasoning was flawed or not, that Rosa Gigantea could say such a thing was incredible.

“Then was borrowing ‘Forest of Thorns’ just a way of keeping us here?”

“Of course not. After all, I did need to read ‘Forest of Thorns’ as soon as possible. Even if it’s not true, rumors about me are spreading, so I needed to know why that was the case.”

That said, the reason why she sent everyone else home was so remove any intrusions. If Sachiko-sama were here, she would have definitely stopped Yumi from asking about Rosa Gigantea’s past. Given her actions the past few days, that much was clear.

“The reason why the second and third-year students won’t explain anything is because they’re worried about me. Last year, I was really severe about people touching on that subject, and they know about that.”

I’m probably still not completely over it, said Rosa Gigantea. She understood how people were worried about her.

“I had a really good friend. More important than parents or siblings, and I liked her enough that I didn’t need anything else.”

Yumi remembered Sei and Kahori from “Forest of Thorns.” The image fit perfectly with Rosa Gigantea, who mentioned they were similar.

“She was pure-hearted girl who intended to become a sister in the future. But she vanished last Christmas.”

“Eh!?”

Yumi and Yoshino-san shouted at once.

“But that’s the exact same!”

Having the same name was already astonishing, but the fact that the other person was also a sister, and vanished during Christmas. Was it possible to have this much overlap? Because not everyone experienced the same thing as Sei did.

But Rosa Gigantea did have a similar experience as “Forest of Thorns,” after all. That was dreadful. Yumi understood why Sachiko-sama and others didn’t want to touch on the subject.

“Not exactly. That’s why it’d be troublesome if you took everything from that book and called it my truth. I never went on a journey with that friend, and there was no romantic experience like taking sleeping pills together.”

And “Forest of Thorns” implied that Kahori didn’t pass away, either, but Rosa Gigantea’s friend ended up transferring.

“Then she’s alive? Kahori-san.”

“What, are you disappointed she’s alive?”

Rosa Gigantea flicked Yumi’s forehead with her index finger. Well, it was a good thing to find out she was still alive, but for a person who ended up crying over “Forest of Thorns,” it was a bit of a let-down. –And that was because she hadn’t fully gotten over the knowledge that Rosa Gigantea wasn’t the writer nor main character of “Forest of Thorns.”

“And Yumi-chan, she’s not Kahori. Her name was Kubo Shiori.”

That sort of revision was another nail-in-the-coffin for the Rosa Gigantea being Sei theory.

But Yoshino-san was sharp.

“Rosa Gigantea, do you think someone used you as a model and wrote the novel?”

Yumi was so surprised she wasn’t even thinking of that sort of possibility, but in retrospect, that sort of thing did seem possible.

“I don’t know.”

Rosa Gigantea laughed.

“Some places are drastically different, but some places frighteningly overlap.”

But because it was an autobiographical novel, rather than an autobiography, it was possible the author employed some fictional aspects.

“Autobiographical novel.”

That’s a complex thing. “Autobiography” meant it was the writer’s own life story, and “ical” made it “based on.” And “novel” implied more of a “fictional” story. Autobiography, plus fictional, but that wasn’t any more clear.

“But, wait a second. This is supposed to be an autobiographical novel, so that would be wrong.”

Yoshino-san realized something, and drew closer to Rosa Gigantea.

“Wha, what?”

Yumi interjected, trying to keep up.

“If someone used Rosa Gigantea as a model, it wouldn’t be an autobiography anymore.”

“Oh, yeah.” If “Forest of Thorns” were written with Sei as Rosa Gigantea, then Suga Sei had to be Rosa Gigantea. But Rosa Gigantea completely refuted that. Then… then… then what?

“Well, a similar thing could have happened by chance.”

Rosa Gigantea mumbled. But Yoshino-san pressed on.

“It could have been a lie, though.”

“A lie.” And they began talking back and forth, like a ping pong rally. Yumi couldn’t slide herself into the conversation, so she just looked left and right and followed Yoshino-san and Rosa Gigantea.

“For a chance occurrence, the school was far too similar to Lillian Girls’ Academy. One of our students had to have written it.”

“But Yoshino-chan, publishers don’t lie.”

“But if the author said they wrote about themselves, the publisher would have to believe it, wouldn’t they? This is Suga Sei’s debut work, and she has no profiling, so she might simply be thinking there’s no way she’d be caught.”

“I see.”

“I see, aren’t you frustrated? That someone wrote about you, then you got mistaken for the author, and then got called to the guidance office?”

“Not really, it wasn’t the first time I went there.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

Yoshino-san was getting angry in Rosa Gigantea’s stead. Well, Yumi could sympathize. Rosa Gigantea was acting very apathetic.

“Even if someone were to, as Yoshino-chan said, have used me as a model and wrote a novel, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“What?”

“Do you want to sell the story to the newspaper club after catching Suga Sei? Or are you going to ask for royalties on the book as a reference fee?”

That’s true, Yumi thought. It was already published, so there was no way to erase it from everyone’s memory. Plus, if Rosa Gigantea acted, it’d just become an even bigger deal.

“I just can’t stand the thought of Rosa Gigantea being hurt by this.”

“But I’m not hurt at all? I mean, I was called to the guidance office, but they just asked me about it, and that was that. No problems.”

“But-”

Yoshino-san stopped, at a loss for words.

Yumi could understand the speechless Yoshino-san’s feelings. Yoshino-san was about to say Rosa Gigantea was clearly being hurt. Even if it were proven that there was no basis for the rumors, the past she’d buried had been dug up. To say she’d taken no damage would be a lie.

But she couldn’t say that, Yoshino-san thought, so she stopped.

Rosa Gigantea’s pride was the stance of “I don’t care if you found out about my past.”

“You know. I don’t need everyone in the world to understand me. As long as people precious to me understand, that’s enough. Understand?”

Rosa Gigantea slacked in her chair and spoke. Her legs, poking out from the pleats, were straight and white and cool.

“That’s why I wanted Yumi-chan and Yoshino-chan to hear me. Because I didn’t want you two to have the wrong idea.”

“Rosa Gigantea…”

Her heart skipped. Because Rosa Gigantea just called them precious to her.

Rosa Gigantea said she didn’t care about the outfield, but Yumi wondered if she simply wanted to drop the topic.

Of course.

A tragic past wasn’t something you wanted to dwell on. Bereavement or transfer, Rosa Gigantea was hurt by the person vanishing to a place where they would never see each other again, so there was no difference there.

Other people have no way of understanding the weight in other peoples’ hearts. After all, Rosa Gigantea probably needed that person more than anyone else.

She asked if anyone had questions, so Yumi raised her hand. If the question was taboo, she was confident Rosa Gigantea would simply say so.

“Your friend, what’s she doing now?”

“I don’t know… I wonder what she’s doing.”

Rosa Gigantea looked out the window. They hadn’t met after splitting up, she mumbled.

“Do you want to see her?”

This time Yoshino-san asked. But the answer wasn’t “I want to see her” or “I don’t want to see her.”

“I don’t think we ought to meet.”

Peoples’ relationships weren’t quite that simple, after all.

She didn't know what happened between Rosa Gigantea and that person, but it was clear Rosa Gigantea still liked her. She liked her, but she mustn't be with her. Yumi found out for the first time that such a relationship existed.

Rosa Gigantea's true character might be as violent as flames. Is what Yumi thought, all of a sudden. So she distanced herself from the person she loved, to spare her from being burnt.

Being able to see the person you like as much as you want was actually incredibly good fortune.

Yumi suddenly wanted to see Sachiko-sama.

Part 7.

“Yumi.”

After she’d gotten off the last stop for her bus and had climbed the stairs to M Station, she heard a familiar, resounding voice from behind.

(Sachiko-sama…?)

Taking a step back, she looked around. But no matter how hard she tried to look, forget Sachiko-sama, she couldn’t even see a single other girl wearing a Lillian uniform.

(Was I hearing things?)

Maybe she heard Sachiko-sama’s voice in her head because she wanted to see her so much. What a simpleton I am, Yumi thought, as she returned her attention to the stairs.

“What are you doing, Yumi, I’m over here.”

This time she heard it clearly. So she turned completely around and walked back a bit. Then, on the road beside the bus terminals, she noticed a black automobile was parked, and Sachiko-sama was waving her hand from a rear-seat window.

“What, what are you doing here, onee-sama?”

When Yumi fearfully crept toward the shining, obsidian car, the window Sachiko-sama was waving out of slid shut, and this time the door popped open.

“Uwah, uwah, uwah.”

Yumi was excited because the door opened in fashion. –Not really, it was because Sachiko-sama was wearing a very unexpected type of clothing.

“I was waiting. Please, get on.”

Sachiko-sama naturally ordered Yumi as she slid to the other end of the car. Her hair was meticulously braided, she wore a kimono, and she even had cosmetics done. She looked like an authentic princess.

“Please, hurry, it does feel cold.”

She didn't have time to fret. Onee-sama's orders were absolute. Though she worried about dirtying the carpet with her shoes, Yumi boarded the car.

"Go."

When Sachiko-sama spoke that word to the man in the driver's seat, the car began gliding.

"Uh, umm…?"

"I'll take you home. When we get close, give us directions."

The driver presumably had been told the rough directions already, as he quickly began taking the shortest routes from the station. Using the underground passageways under the tracks, they left M Station. She had no idea. Different cars gave the passengers different levels of comfort.

"Why are you wearing a long-sleeved kimono? Ahh, onee-sama, you look so wonderful in a uniform, but you look astounding in a kimono, too!"

She became excited and bounced around a bit, but Sachiko-sama didn't scold her. With her back still straightened, she giggled.

"Actually, this isn't a long-sleeved kimono, but rather a visiting dress. A Japanese-style painter who's an acquaintance of my father had an exhibition today, and I was required to attend, so I had to leave Yumi behind."

But she was worried about Rosa Gigantea, so she returned after simply greeting the painter. If she was lucky, she'd be able to snag Yumi at M Station as she went home, so she was waiting. Good read.

That said, Sachiko-sama definitely was a lady in an upper-class household, she realized, yet again.

Her refined, indigo kimono with white and pink plum flower patterns was fastened with a silver obi with blue bird patterns. Even though she was 17, she exuded an aura of "I'm used to wearing kimono," so she was definitely different from normal people, who only really wore a kimono during shichi-go-san or New Years. Sachiko-sama probably wore a kimono often, and practiced serving tea and arranging flowers.

But a personal exhibition for Japanese paintings that required wearing a kimono? What kind of place would require that? Plus, it was a jet-black car you tended to see more on TV for the Imperial household, rather than something you often saw in town. A driver wearing a hat and white gloves. And at their feet, carpeting that she still couldn't figure out if it was dark-red or not.

"What did Rosa Gigantea want, with you two?"

Sachiko-sama asked, bluntly. So Yumi didn't skirt the edges either, reporting to Sachiko-sama everything that had happened. After all, there was nothing to hide, and Rosa Gigantea had told them they were free to tell everything to their onee-sama. Of course, if she hadn't, Yoshino-san might have had trouble restraining herself, what with how intimate she was with Rei-sama.

"I see… so Rosa Gigantea told you two."

Sachiko-sama sighed heavily, like she was the one who let out the secret, and said, "She's strong."

"I was just a first-year then, and Rosa Gigantea was an en bouton who never really came to the Rose Mansion, so I wasn't very close to her. But I knew Rosa Gigantea was very close with Shiori-san, and I could infer what happened last year, around this time."

Yes. Rosa Gigantea's Kahori was named "Shiori."

"But, I was so surprised at how much Rosa Gigantea changed her looks after Shiori-san transferred before the third semester."

"Changed her looks?"

"Yes. She'd cut most of her hair, she'd lost a great deal of weight, she was worn out, and she looked like a hollow puppet, so it was difficult to watch. Rosa Chinensis and the Rosa Gigantea then lent their hands, so she managed to stand back up on her own. And… yes. Shimako-san's had a big influence on her, too."

"But, Rosa Gigantea doesn't say anything to Shimako-san, she said. They don't interfere with each other, or something-"

"Indeed."

That's why she couldn't beat Rosa Gigantea, Sachiko-sama laughed. Come to think of it, Sachiko-sama and Rosa Gigantea had fought over Shimako-san in the past.

"It doesn't matter to them what the other is doing or thinking. They're connected on a more essential level, so they don't bother with what's on the surface, in a way. So from that perspective, they're very unique sisters. Out of place from the normal expectation of an older sister training the little sister, it's like they exist on a different dimension altogether."

"An essential level…"

Because they were so deeply intertwined with their souls, they would never waver about how much the other means to them?

"Give nothing, seek nothing. If anything, I think it means, as long as they exist, they're at peace. Of course, I've only recently begun to understand them."

After being rejected by Shimako-san, Sachiko-sama probably calmly observed the sisters. Not because she had any lingering affections, but because she genuinely wanted to understand them.

As Yumi listened to Sachiko-sama, she couldn't help but think of faith. As long as they exist, it was like peoples' love for God.

The car that had been going straight ahead smoothly turned right at the intersection.

"I'm not envious, by any means. I'll acknowledge such a relationship exists, but I can't imagine being in one, myself."

Answering Yumi's worries, Sachiko-sama turned to Yumi, said "so it's alright to be imperfect," and touched Yumi's ribbons. Yumi, too, preferred the skinship that came with having herself straightened out.

And Sachiko-sama's blunt "I'm not envious" matched precisely with Yumi's own thoughts.

Maybe that sort of overlapping emotions was vital. Because they felt the same, they could be sisters, she and Sachiko-sama.

Affinity wasn't so much about whether they were alike, but rather whether they could create an atmosphere where both could feel comfortable, she thought.

They passed the bus she usually took, which was waiting at the bus stop, and took a left at the T junction. The expensive car drove past convenience stores and little fields spotting the residential area without paying any heed.

They'd come close to her home, so she gave directions such as take a right at that light, or take a left at that intersection, and they finally ended up at her home. She liked her home, which had been designed by her father's firm, as it was homely and looked nice, but she did lose a bit confidence, showing it to a super-rich lady.

"What a wonderful home."

Sachiko-sama's home was probably not visible from outside, being surrounded by an enormous garden. It probably had a big fence, and it was a Japanese-style garden with gardeners-. Ah, no good. She was making herself feel down, again.

"Well, I'll see you again at the closing ceremony."

Sachiko-sama didn't hesitate at all to say her farewells and depart. Well, they weren't in a heterosexual romance, so leaving with a kiss would have been strange, but a handshake didn't fit, either. Plus, that sort of Sachiko-sama wasn't right.

When Yumi told her she would call her mother to give thanks for being sent home, Sachiko-sama stopped Yumi, saying, "That's alright."

"Dressed this way, your family would be surprised. And there's a car waiting behind. Next time I'll properly greet them."

"Okay."

It was almost evening. Cars would use this road to avoid the traffic at the main street at this time.

"Thank you very much for taking me home."

"You're welcome. Gokigenyou."

"…Gokigenyou."

Yumi absent-mindedly thought, as watched the car drive away.

(Is Sachiko-sama busy every day?)

She felt a bit lonely. I'll see you again at the closing ceremony, meant she had no intention of meeting during the break.

Almost a week, and Yumi had nothing to do, so if she were given a phone-call, she would jump at any opportunity to meet. And if that wasn't possible, simply being able to talk would be splendid.

But she couldn't imagine Sachiko-sama calling her. But her calling Sachiko-sama was also a dreadful thing to imagine.

And that's how a week will pass, she sighed, depressed.

Yoshino-san would probably laugh and ask, "Why don't you just call her?" if she found out.

That's the sort of siblings we are, right now.

That made her feel better.

Who's Suga Sei?

Part 1.

It becomes difficult distinguishing the feeling of cold from the feeling of pain. Eventually you just stop feeling, altogether.

I gripped my right hand, trying to confirm the hand I was holding onto was still there. But I couldn't feel my own, numbed fingertips, much less Kahori's hand.

Even if you decide to end life together at the same place at the same time, death was something you faced alone, I thought, as I lie there.

***

In the morning, after about three days, when Yumi called Yoshino-san, she invited her to come over. And while it may have been a bit shameless, Yumi decided to go.

It wasn't to replace Sachiko-sama or anything, but Yumi wished they could meet up by the train station so she could gather her wits while eating a fast-food hamburger. But Yoshino-san said she had to stay home until after noon.

So she bought two meat-croquette sandwiches and two types of cup salad at the neighborhood pastry store, and stepped on the bus she normally took for school. After arriving at M Station, she walked straight past the wickets and found another familiar-looking bus. But there were no Lillian students nearby today.

Maybe that was why the bus felt different, even though nothing had actually changed. The scenery outside looked fresh, too.

Yoshino-san, as promised, was waiting in front of the school.

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

Neither of them were wearing their uniforms, but they greeted each other formally out of habit, and lowered their shoulders.

Yoshino-san was wearing a black high-neck sweater, a knee-high yellow tartan-checkered plaited skirt, and black tights. Just as with the uniform, Yumi thought Yoshino-san's pale complexion matched brilliantly with black.

"Ahh. Yumi-san, you're wearing men's clothing!"

"Heheheh. Yoshino-san, you have keen sight."

Yumi was wearing a culotte skirt along with an unbleached sweater and thin, blue coat, but the sweater and coat were borrowed from her brother's closet. A sibling who wears the same size clothing as you is always good to have. Unfortunately for Yūki, he, on the other hand, wasn't really able to borrow any clothing in return, but if the situation arose that he asked to borrow girls' clothing, Yumi was more than willing to lend him as many skirts as he might need.

When you meet in unfamiliar clothing, it feels harder coming up with something to talk about. Plus, neither of them had their hair done. Of course, in Yoshino-san's case, that was true while she was hospitalized, anyways, but it felt odd nonetheless.

After about ten minutes of walking, or maybe less, they arrived at Yoshino-san's house.

It was a large site surrounded by fencing, and the nameplates "Shimazu" and "Hasekura" were lined up side by side. There were two gates, and each one had their own stone paving leading to their buildings, but the courtyards were firmly connected.

"This isn't next-door-neighbors so much as-"

"Yup. More like living in the same apartment."

In the back was Rei-sama's father's dojo, and it was apparently connected to the Hasekura house. During the evening, the neighborhood's elementary school kids would come to learn kendo, so it would become lively.

"Come in."

Yoshino-san opened the rattling, sideways door. It wasn't locked. Aren't you being too careless? Yumi thought, but it wasn't really her business.

"Sorry for intruding-"

After entering the foyer, there was immediately a step up.

"By the way, didn't Yoshino-san have to watch over the house? Was it alright for you to come pick me up?"

Yumi asked Yoshino-san as she followed.

"No worries, there's a caretaker for the caretaker."

"What?"

When they opened the dark, brown door, there was-.

"Oh, welcome home."

Rosa Foetida en bouton making herself at home in the kotatsu.

"Re, Rei-sama!"

"Eh, what, Yumi-chan!?"

Yoshino-san seemed to have kept it a secret from both parties, so they both were stunned as they yelped out each other's name.

But, wow. Yoshino-san and Rei-sama really were close to each other. Because they could even ask each other to watch over their houses.

(Don't compare, don't compare.)

"Ah, Yumi-san. You just imagined asking Sachiko-sama to watch over your house, didn't you."

"What, how!"

"It's totally written on your face."

Yoshino-san has good instincts, so she needed to be careful. It was so easy to be tricked by that innocent smile, the one Yoshino-san had as she said, "Make yourself home," as she lifted the covers to the kotatsu. She loves mystery novels and figuring things out, so you could almost call her a girl detective.

Yoshino-san's room wasn't very decorated. The walls were ivory, the tables and the shelves and the window sills were all a burnt brown. And the curtains and bedcovers and kotatsu covers that were brought in were all a pale, plain color, so it didn't feel like a young girl's room. Even though bringing in some laced, or flower-patterned, things could instantly turn it into a romantic room. But because the books lined up on the shelves were like, "OO Detective Stories" or "Fencer XX," it might just be impossible to make the room seem like that of a maiden.

"I didn't know Yumi-chan was coming over."

Excuse me, said Rei-sama, and she stepped out of the room.

(Hmm. Rei-sama looks cool in jeans, too.)

Her hips were relatively high, and her legs were long. And since she already looked the part in a uniform, she totally looked like a guy like that.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, as she listened to the rhythmic steps going down the stairs, Yoshino-san whispered.

"On the last day of exams, when I went back home, Rei-chan ambushed me at the living room."

Rei-sama, like Sachiko-sama, wanted Yoshino-san to report what happened after school immediately. Well, that was expected, considering how close they are. But Yumi wondered if that becomes suffocating, but Yoshino-san replied, not entirely. –Being close came with its perks.

"I did some thinking, after that."

Yoshino-san said to Yumi, looking serious.

"Rosa Gigantea said she doesn't care, but I think we should prove Rosa Gigantea didn't author 'Forest of Thorns.'"

"I thought we weren't going to talk about that anymore?"

"But if it would help Rosa Gigantea, I think it would be permissible to investigate on our own."

"I don't understand what Yoshino-san is trying to say."

If it would help Rosa Gigantea? If that Rosa Gigantea is saying, “Let’s drop it,” then it wouldn’t even be possible to investigate without having Rosa Gigantea finding out.

But, Yoshino-san was clearly excited about it, so Yumi decided to listen, anyways.

“The newspaper club captain… I keep remembering Tsukiyama Minako-sama’s words.”

“Minako-sama’s words? Oh, you mean that Rosa Gigantea might be expelled? But Yoshino-san, you were the one that said that wouldn’t happen.”

“I thought so at the time-”

That the school wouldn’t unfairly punish her, mumbled Yoshino-san. But it was also worrisome how much the school would trust Rosa Gigantea’s words.

“And what if the teachers read ‘Forest of Thorns’ over the break? Even Rosa Gigantea herself mentioned it looked like she was the one who wrote it. Teachers who know about what happened last year might end up believing she wrote it.”

“But as long as Rosa Gigantea keeps denying it…”

But Yoshino-san didn’t agree.

“Maybe Rosa Gigantea would stop denying it.”

“Why?”

“Because she read ‘Forest of Thorns.’”

“What?”

“Because she read ‘Forest of Thorns.’ Rosa Gigantea might turn around and take the blame. To cover for her friend. Because the author of ‘Forest of Thorns,’ Suga Sei, is Kubo Shiori.”

“What-!?”

Yoshino-san made a bold declaration. And it was so surprising Yumi was speechless.

“Th, then, Shiori-san is Sei, and Rosa Gigantea is Kahori?”

“No, she just wrote from the other perspective.”

In that case, she would be direct witness, so she could still pass off “Forest of Thorns” as an autobiographical novel. It all fit together, they were too fixated on Sei being the protagonist of the novel!

“But, is that true?”

When she leaned forward on the kotatsu and asked, Yoshino-san just giggled.

“It’s just a guess.”

“Oh.”

“But.”

If you assume the autobiographical novel label wasn’t a lie, that’s what you end up with.

“There’re three possibilities.”

“Three?”

Yumi tilted her head. There are that many?

I guess I’ll explain, then, Yoshino-san laughed, so Yumi bowed her head, please.

“First, is that ‘Forest of Thorns’ was an autobiographical novel written by someone completely unrelated to Rosa Gigantea. That would mean everything like Suga Sei and the same gender and everything was a miraculous set of coincidence.”

Not that they could definitively say such a thing could have never happened, Yoshino-san said. But with the school seeming so much like Lillian, that might be a stretch.

“What if it’s someone who’s enrolled at Lillian or even an alumni?”

“The more you limit the extent of things, it becomes less and less possible.”

“Oh, right.”

Coincidences on top of coincidences. With such a small set of people, it wasn’t very likely that such a similar event could happen multiple times. It was far more likely it was based on one person.

“Second, is that Rosa Gigantea wrote it.”

“But she said she didn’t.”

“Right. So this is removed. I also believe Rosa Gigantea. And the third.”

Suga Sei and Kubo Shiori being the same person.

“I wonder if Rosa Gigantea feels the same way?”

“I don’t know. Either way, she’s spaced out right now, so it’s a tough situation. Even if Shiori-san didn’t write it, what if she got her hands on ‘Forest of Thorns,’ too?”

“Shiori-san would think Rosa Gigantea wrote it.”

Yes, that would be tough.

But, they hadn’t met ever since breaking up, and she said they shouldn’t meet, so Rosa Gigantea would never be able to correct any wrong assumptions.

“So, shouldn’t we unmask Suga Sei’s identity? Because Rosa Gigantea is probably afraid of dealing with ‘Forest of Thorns’ any more than she already has.”

And because exams had finished, this would be the most relatively free time they have.

And, everything came back to Yoshino-san’s first statement, of how they could investigate to satisfy their own curiosity. Yoshino-san was persuasive.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Rei-sama came back, so they halted discussions.

“Is Japanese tea fine?”

Placing the tray on the floor, Rei-sama picked up the tea in both hands, placed it in front of Yumi, and said, “Here.” The tea was served in a porcelain teacup complete with a top and a saucer, so it was a very genuine style.

“Rei-sama serving tea…”

“Mm? Oh, yeah, because it’s like my own house.”

Even Yumi didn’t even think about imagining Sachiko-sama serving tea in Yumi’s house.

(…Wow, and tea cakes.)

Small, delicious-looking petit cakes were piled on the pastry tray.

If she were asked if she could give this much service without any prior notice to a guest, Yumi would answer that it was doubtful. For starters, she had no idea where snacks were even store in her own house, nor did she know where pastry trays were stored, or anything.

“Rei-sama’s like an adult lady.”

“Why thank you.”

And the person who looked so much like a man on the outside smiled happily.

“- so I was thinking about calling them.”

Suddenly, Yoshino-san picked up where she had left off.

“Calling? What are you talking about?”

Having finished serving tea, Rei-sama had begun to leave, when she heard Yoshino-san and scurried back.

“Cosmos Books, of course.”

Yoshino-san said.

“Seriously!?”

“Yup. Rei-chan, you’re going to help me.”

Yoshino-san tilted her head forward cutely, and Rei-sama visibly took damage.

“You shouldn’t be sneaking around like you’re sniffing out a suspect.”

But Yoshino-san was firm. And she bore down on Rei-sama.

“There’s nothing wrong with worrying about Rosa Gigantea. And it’s not sneaking around, we’re just not telling Rosa Gigantea.”

“That’s called sneaking.”

“Just because Rosa Gigantea doesn’t want to deal with it doesn’t mean we can’t deal with it, does it?”

They just say what they want, just like that, these sisters. Because it felt like she was being privy to a side they don’t show at school, Yumi felt elated, but she also wondered if she should interject, lest their bickering continued. That was what Yumi was pondering.

“Yoshino, are you seriously trying to unmask the identity of someone who clearly would prefer not to be known?”

“You don’t need to say unmask.”

“But it’s true.”

“It’s not. Rei-chan’s mean.”

Oh, Yoshino-san. She threw a cushion at Rei-sama.

(Woah, woah, just because you can’t win verbally doesn’t mean you should turn to violence, Yoshino-san.)

Rei-sama looked used to it, as she easily caught a cushion in one hand.

“Oh settle down. Yumi-chan’s here, too.”

(Ehh, she’s shifting the attention to me!?)

“She can watch. This is how we are, anyways.”

Like she didn’t like how Rei-sama was being self-conscious. Yoshino-san became out of control, like a yelping puppy.

Yumi found out for the first time, that day.

Yoshino-san was a lion at home and a mouse abroad.

Part 2.

As for what happened eventually, Rei-sama folded.

Or rather, she ran out of patience.

While she was against digging up the author to “Forest of Thorns,” she decided she might as well tag along to keep an eye over Yoshino-san plus Yumi, to make sure they didn’t do anything ridiculous.

(Why was I lumped together with Yoshino-san?)

She didn’t remember ever favoring one side or the other, but at this point, there was no stopping the rampaging Yoshino-san, anyways. To start, Yoshino-san decided, “Let’s call them.”

“Yoshino-san, you know the editorial department’s phone number?”

She was already reaching for the phone, so Yumi asked, worried.

“I’ll just ask for Kyuuteisha’s phone number from the telephone guidance services.”

Yoshino-san said, like it was obvious. And then Rei-sama.

“Hold on. Give me three minutes.”

Remembering something, she dashed out the room and ran down the stairs. As they absent-mindedly watched their watches, the door opened almost exactly three minutes later, and Rei-sama returned with a magazine in her hand.

“Here.”

The magazine she held out was about the size of a monthly comic collection, but half the thickness. The cover had an illustration of a girl surrounded by flowers. The title was four kanji letters: “秋桜友達.”

“Akizakura tomodachi?”

Yoshino-san and Yumi both read, simultaneously.

“It reads Cosmos Friend. The Cosmos editorial department sends it out every two months.”

“Rei-chan’s preferred reading?”

“Who cares, look here.”

Rei-sama turned the book around and pointed to the side of the back cover. In small print, the Cosmos editorial department's phone number was printed.

"Wow, Rei-sama."

"And that's our watchful eye at work."

Yoshino-san immediately entered the number into her phone.

"Hello, Cosmos editorial department."

After seven rings, someone picked up. Yumi and Rei-sama both leaned into Yoshino-san to listen to the phone.

"Hello, I read Cosmos books, and I phoned today because I wish to ask a question."

"Ahh, I'm sorry. All the Cosmos staff members are out, could you call again in the afternoon?"

A light voice, probably belonging to a young man.

"Um, about when in the afternoon-"

Yoshino-san glanced at her watch. Eleven fifty in the morning. Kyuuteisha lunches seem to be earlier than an ordinary one.

Hmm, I think someone should be in around one or two."

"Okay, thank you, I'll call again then."

Yoshino-san clicked the phone off, and sighed. She called out of momentum, but it was like she bit into a feint.

"Speaking of which." Rei-sama said.

"Publishers don't necessarily work nine-to-five. I hear they often work deep into the night."

"If they work deep into the night, when do they come in the morning?"

"Probably the afternoon, right? Would be when they arrive to work?"

"...At around one or two."

"...Yup."

"..."

Professional baseball players, night life workers, she'd already guessed those kinds of jobs had abnormal work hours. But a more normal-like publishing company working into the night and coming to work in the afternoon felt strange. Like the adult world has a completely different measure of time than the children's world.

Without anyone being able to say any further thoughts, it became noon, so they had lunch by splitting the sandwiches and salad Yumi had bought into three shares.

"On that note, I doubt the editorial department would answer that question just by asking."

Said Yumi, as she drained the crust of the bread with warm royal milk tea. Incidentally, Yoshino-san had poured this royal milk tea. As the daughter of the house, it was probably supposed to be unthinkable to let a neighbor serve the guest twice or thrice, but at the same time, Yoshino-san didn't seem to be the type to be bothered by that. Rather, it felt more like a way of thanking Rei-sama for helping her try to find Suga Sei's identity. Because she poured it very carefully.

"Probably not."

Rei-sama said matter-of-factly as she looked at the name on the plastic bag that had held the sandwiches.

"This store has good bread, is it near Yumi-chan's house?"

"Yes… I guess they wouldn't talk about the author just like that."

Soothing. Just when it was beginning to feel like friendly banter over a tea party, Yoshino-san interceded and scolded them.

"It just depends on how you ask. Where'd your excitement go!?"

"Excitement… umm…"

"…Right?"

Excitement? The two looked at each other. After all, Yoshino-san was the only one truly excited, from the start.

"By the way, Yoshino-san, how do you intend to ask?"

When she asked, Yoshino-san replied, you just watch, and picked up the phone again.

“Yoshino, no lying.”

Rei-sama pointed out.

“I know, gosh.”

Fifteen minutes had passed since one.

Beep beep beep beep.

Telephones these days were smart, so with one button, they’d call a number you’d already dialed.

“Ah, hello.”

Comparatively quickly, someone picked up the phone. Again, Yoshino-san informed the person that she was a reader of Cosmos books, and politely said that she wanted to speak to the person in charge of “Forest of Thorns.”

“Oh, is that so. No, that’s alright.”

They weren’t leaning into the phone this time, so they couldn’t hear who Yoshino-san was speaking to. All they could do was imagine the conversation based on what Yoshino-san said.

“Well, ‘Forest of Thorns’ has caused quite a fuss at our school… Yes, rumors that a senior wrote it. Because the author, Suga Sei, has no profile information, right? That senior had a similar experience last year-”

Just like that, Yoshino-san explained how the school prohibited work, and that the senior was called to the guidance office for questioning. Then she said without any proof that she wasn’t the writer, she might end up being expelled. Well, Minako-sama was the one that brought that up, so it wasn’t a complete lie-.

“Ah… Yes… I see. Yes, I understand… Yes… Yes. I’m sorry for taking your time. Thank you.”

It took about five minutes. Was that short or long for that sort of phone call? Anyways Yoshino-san thanked the person and hung up.

And from her expression, it was obvious it failed.

“They said they couldn’t answer that sort of question. Even if it might cause a student to be expelled, they wouldn’t be able to act unless the school formally made an inquiry.”

“Well, of course.”

“There’re probably people that lie to try to find out.”

The prospects were grim. The three of them folded their arms and pondered.

Anyways, there were apparently many people who asked about Suga Sei’s identity. The person Yoshino-san spoke with wasn’t really in charge, but that person sounded used to answering that sort of call.

“Oh well.”

Yoshino-san stood up from the kotatsu. Yumi and Rei-sama asked, “You’re giving up?” That’s fine, they were beginning to think.

“Of course not.”

But Yoshino-san was like an immortal. Like adversity simply fueled her onward.

“Phone calls get us nowhere, so it’s time to see them directly.”

“Eh-!?”

How are you so energetic, Yoshino-san? You had a bad heart until just recently, but now you’re like a completely different person! Or maybe she was building up to let everything out today.

“- says this. Apparently you need an appointment to see them, though.”

“Then, Rei-chan, your turn to call. Tell the ‘Forest of Thorns’ publisher that we want to see them.”

“Why me?”

“Because if I call them again, they’ll turn it down. Do it with an ‘I’m calling for the first time today’ tone, please.”

“Aww. But it’s just Yoshino.”

But despite the complaining, she still took the phone. That's why Rei-sama was far too lenient on Yoshino-san. Yumi had no idea what she would do if Yoshino-san had turned around and said, "Then Yumi-san," but Yoshino-san really knows who she can manipulate.

Rei-sama called Cosmos books with a very formal conversational tone. Apparently it wasn't going to be possible to call them today and immediately schedule a meeting, so she said she'd talk about it with a friend and call again.

"Either way, the person in charge isn't in today."

"Mmm, okay."

Nodded Yoshino-san, so they thought, finally, she's giving up.

"Then let's go, now."

Matter-of-factly. How can her mind go like this? When they say today wouldn't be possible, wouldn't the correct thing to do be to settle down and plan things out?

"What if that editor was actually meeting with Suga Sei, so when we arrive at their doorstep, she's already back?"

Yoshino-san was still driving full-steam ahead. But that sort of miraculous thought was really far-fetched. Authors don't really work at the company, and she had to know that much.

"And there's nothing to lose."

"Yes there is. Travel costs, feeling cold, and then if you're turned away, it's all for nothing."

Exactly. Yumi wanted to send Rei-sama a round of applause.

"Yumi-san, do you agree?"

Yoshino-san seemed to notice that, as she turned a cold stare at her.

"Umm…"

(Gosh.)

She looked like she would explode, based on Yumi's answer. Well, she could calculate this much: if Yoshino-san were to explode, it would be chaotic. Her hysteria rivaled Sachiko-sama.

“I think we should lay off for today. Plus, Yoshino-san needs to stay at home, right?”

“As long as I’m around for home delivery, I’m free to lock the doors and go out.”

“And did the delivery person come?”

“Not yet.”

“Then we can’t go.”

Yumi thought, good, this’ll keep her down. Rei-sama was also cheering Yumi on, out of Yoshino-san’s sight.

“…I guess it’s impossible today.”

Just as Yoshino-san was beginning to give up, a bright “ding dong” could be heard from the intercom.

“Lucky-”

Yoshino-san smiled victoriously as she skipped down the stairs.

Part 3.

After three o'clock in the afternoon.

The three of them stood in front of Kyuuteisha with vastly different facial expressions.

"Frontal assault!" was how Yoshino-san looked. Rei-sama seriously reflecting on her inability to stop that Yoshino-san. And Yumi, wondering, "What now?"

They went to Shinjuku using Japan Rail, and then used the subway. After popping out of J Station, it took as long as it takes for cup ramen to finish cooking to arrive at the company's building.

It was a bigger building than she expected. So she assumed they also did printing here, and so Yoshino-san and Rei-sama were in tears laughing at her. Printing is done at printing shops! Of course.

"Alright, time to go.

Yoshino-san lead the way to the front door. The automatic glass doors slid open.

"Welcome."

As they entered, the two receptionists smiled brilliantly at them. They were pretty enough that you could assume they were hired for their looks.

Past the receptionists was a big, physical-looking security guard, and there was another glass door behind him. Apparently you needed to go through that door, too.

"Um. I'd like to see the Cosmos editorial department."

Even the "frontal assault!" attitude of Yoshino-san wasn't gung-ho enough to knock down the security guard and charge through the glass door, so she went straight to the receptionist and made an inquiry.

"Yes. If you have an appointment, please sign in here."

The paper that was pushed forth was like a library borrowing card, with the visitor's name and phone number, among other things. Yoshino-san began writing on the sign-in sheet, but she gave up halfway through and put her ball-pen down. Because she didn't have anyone in particular she was "scheduled" to meet, so she couldn't fill in those blanks.

"I'm sorry, I don't have an appointment."

"Huh?"

The receptionist looked baffled as she accepted the half-completed sign-in sheet.

"Don't... have an appointment?"

"Yes. But I really would like to speak to the Cosmos editorial department."

"You want to show them something you wrote...?"

"No. I'm just a reader."

Yumi, listening in on the conversation, just then found out that there were people that took their works straight to the company. She'd been dragged here by Yoshino-san, but it ended up being somewhat of an educational trip.

"Hi, this is the front desk-"

After hearing Yoshino-san out, the receptionist picked up the phone and called in-house, to the Cosmos editorial department, about an appointment-less reader visiting.

"Please wait a moment."

After putting down the phone, she smiled at them. She was definitely a professional, dealing with children with ease. Yumi actually assumed they'd be deflected by the receptionist.

While they waited, she noticed there were a lot of people going in and out of the building. She noticed a lot of people signed in, like them, while the rest simply walked through after showing what seemed like an identity card.

After about ten minutes, a slightly rounded man wearing jeans and a sweatshirt appeared.

“Are you three? The ones that wanted to speak to Cosmos books.”

He didn’t seem the type to care about how he looked, to other people, so it was difficult to guess his age. When she found out he was from the editorial department, Yumi felt a bit disappointed. Because with a company this size, she expected someone to come out wearing a suit.

“We’re quite busy today, so we can’t really spare much time, could you three come again some other day? Just make sure to schedule a time.”

“May I ask one question?”

“Go ahead, but I won’t answer any questions about author profiles.”

Yoshino-san took a quick jab to the nose. The Cosmos editorial department guy’s premonition was spot on.

“‘Forest of Thorns’ is an autobiographical novel, right? Is the author, Suga Sei, the former student of Lillian Girls’ Academy, Kubo Shiori?” Yoshino-san quickly asked.

(Wasn’t it just one question?)

And on top of that, she was told he wouldn’t answer any questions about it, but she still asked. She’s probably just not wanting to give up, at this point.

“We get a lot of questions like that, but in the case of Suga Sei-sensei, she has her reasons for not saying who she is.”

“But couldn’t you tell us if she is that person or not?”

“If we answer every inquiry about names, we’d be here all day answering questions.”

Because if they do it once, everyone would want to be treated the same. Yumi could understand how he felt. But Yoshino-san kept going.

“If Suga Sei-san herself were to say it’s alright to answer, would you?”

“Well, yes.”

But he laughed, that’ll never happen.

“Then, could you ask Suga Sei-san? I’m Shimazu Yoshino from Lillian Girls’ Academy. Satō Sei is a dear friend of mine. So would she be willing to answer whether she is Kubo Shiori-san or not?”

“No, no, I can’t do that. That would be making an exception for you. Plus, I’m not the one in charge of her stuff… Anyways, please, give up about this.”

Ahh, this person’s already wrapping things up. He seemed to be about to say “thank you for coming to Cosmos books, anyways,” and then leave.

Just then.

“Oh, Yamagishi-san?”

When the automatic door behind opened, they heard a lady’s voice.

“Woah.”

The sweatshirt + jeans person in front was apparently “Yamagishi-san,” and he quickly straightened his back. But she didn’t know why he went, “Woah.”

“What’s going on? Oh my, and you’re surrounded by such cute girls.”

When they turned around, a lady that looked like a typical ‘career woman’ was smiling at them. While other people who’d entered went to the receptionist to sign in, she just walked toward them.

(I guess she works at the company…?)

But then Yamagishi-san started flailing about, like he was trying to ward her away from them.

He might be panicking because he likes her, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Hello.”

She ignored Yamagishi-san and greeted the three girls.

“Gokigenyou.”

Habits are fearsome. Even though they were greeted with “hello,” maybe it was because they were with other students from school, Yumi promptly replied, “Gokigenyou.” Then, Rei-sama and Yoshino-san both followed suit and also replied, “Gokigenyou.”

“Kyaa, how wonderful. Gokigenyou sounds like it’s from ‘Forest of Thorns’!”

Yamagishi-san looked like he was about to be KO’d, in contrast to the lady next to him, who was innocently enjoying herself.

“My, what’s the matter? Yamagishi-san, did I do something wrong?”

Yamagishi-san didn’t reply, but his attitude said everything. She’d said exactly what Yamagishi-san didn’t want her to say.

“Bingo!”

Rei-sama muttered. She turned to the lady and prudently asked.

“Excuse me, are you related to ‘Forest of Thorns’?”

“Ahhh…”

They could hear Yamagishi-san’s wail.

Part 4.

The career-woman-ish lady's name was Sasaki-san.

The drained Yamagishi-san told Sasaki-san what had happened, and she said, "I see," and nodded. Well I came at the perfect time, didn't I.

"Well, I'm in charge of Suga Sei-sensei, but I think everyone would tell you the same. And no one in the editorial department would tell her secret, either. Also, I have work to do now, so I'm sorry-"

Sasaki-san glanced at her watch.

"Hmm."

Suddenly, another person joined the conversation. It was a woman who'd just finished signing in.

"Oh come on, Sasaki-san, it wouldn't hurt to hear them out, at least?"

That person handed the sign-in sheet to the receptionist and received a badge, then walked over in high-heel shoes. She had a diminutive stature and was a bit thin, and you couldn't really tell from afar, but relatively old.

"I'm the one you're working with, anyways, and I don't mind waiting a bit."

"But, Kasuga-san..."

Both of them looked bewildered at the unexpected help.

"You shouldn't shut everyone out like that. You should listen to what they have to say, and then explain based on their situation. That's how human relationships need to be, right?"

Yumi thought she was about the age of her grandmother. People this age tend to make somewhat intrusive lectures. Though they were saved by this one.

"On the other hand, because I helped out, would you mind if I sat in?"

She wanted to hear what young people had to say, she smiled. She was like a cute grandmother.

Of course, the three of them firmly nodded. Without her, Sasaki-san wouldn't have listened, anyways.

Sasaki-san sighed, "Fine."

"It might end with just me listening to you three, is that okay?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Come in, it's better than standing around and talking."

After asking the receptionist about an empty room, Sasaki-san lead them to a café-like room that was just off to the side of the front desk. Yamagishi-san ran away, saying, "Not my problem anymore," so the five ladies ended up sitting around the square table.

In one room that she glanced into while they walked down the corridor, Yumi saw two men, sitting over manga-like documents spread out over a table, thinking hard with their arms folded.

Yoshino-san, urged on, explained in detail about Rosa Gigantea, referring to her as "Senpai," and Shiori-san, "her friend." Sasaki-san, in response, replied with "and?" and "I see," and listened intently to the end. Good listeners, would be how you would describe those sorts of people.

"I see. You three just want to make sure your senpai is proven innocent, and you don't really care for the identity of the author, Suga Sei, as long as she's not related. I understand that much. But you know, that's already taken care of."

"What?"

Rei-sama, Yoshino-san and Yumi all tilted their heads to one side, like you'd see in an anime.

"This Satō Sei has some good friends."

When the old lady smiled, she brightened everything around her. Yumi hoped that when she grew old, she'd also be able to smile like that.

"-Wait, hold on a second!" Yoshino-san leapt up from the table using her hands.

"I never once said 'Satō Sei'!!"

(… Ah!)

Yumi noticed that, too. Yoshino-san never said Rosa Gigantea or Satō Sei. But how did the old lady know?

“Lillian Girls’ Academy’s Rosa Gigantea. I don’t think anyone at Cosmos books doesn’t know of Satō Sei-san.”

Sasaki-san smiled bitterly and explained.

“In the past four, five days, a lot of people called us about whether Suga Sei is Satō Sei.”

And then the only lady said she and Sasaki-san were just talking about “young women these days being quite proactive,” as they ate lunch. Rosa Gigantea had become famous without knowing it.

“When we decided to publish Suga Sei without announcing her name, we didn’t really expect this to happen, so we do feel bad for Satō Sei-san.”

“The unfortunate happenings of having a similar name.”

“Exactly.”

Sasaki-san and the old lady both nodded in agreement, and that’s when Rei-sama asked another question.

“Um, that means Satō Sei-san isn’t Suga Sei-sensei, right? And the school already knows?”

“That would be the case.”

“Lillian Girls’ Academy made a formal inquiry?”

“No, that’s-”

The old lady began speaking, but then she noticed Sasaki-san glaring at her, and she stopped, then said, “Oh, it’s alright, isn’t it?”

“Well, even if I were to stop you, you’d tell them anyways, right? In return, you three must agree to this being kept off-record.”

Sasaki-san deliberately made a scary face, so they nodded vigorously.

“That’s-”

Returning to where she’d left off, the old lady began explaining.

“Because yesterday, a person called the editorial department.”

“A person?”

“Yes. But I’ll keep that person’s name a secret, for now. But this person asked about Suga Sei, but instead raised a name very different from Satō Sei. And the Cosmos editorial department was stunned when they heard that name. Do you know why?”

“Because it was Suga Sei-sensei’s real name.”

Yoshino-san answered.

“That’s right. And when they asked who she was, they were even more surprised.”

“Because she was the other protagonist of ‘Forest of Thorns.’”

“Correct. After reading ‘Forest of Thorns’ three days ago, she realized she was the one the book was based on. But she didn’t know how to get in contact with her friend, so she called the editorial department.”

When she heard that, Yumi thought the caller was Rosa Gigantea. And Rosa Gigantea wanted to confirm Kubo Shiori was Suga Sei, and called.

“Kubo Shiori-san is Suga Sei-sensei?”

Rei-sama asked before Yumi could.

(Bingo!) She thought.

It felt like the jigsaw puzzle was coming together. She was sure of it.

But Sasaki-san said something unexpected.

“Kubo Shiori-san… who is that?”

They were frozen in place, like someone had stopped time.

Even though they didn’t say it, Yoshino-san and Rei-sama and Yumi had come to the same agreement. The expressions on their face said it clearly.

“Hold on a second…”

Yoshino-san placed her head on her hand, like she was gathering herself back together. Then, she weakly asked.

“If the editorial department doesn’t know of ‘Kubo Shiori,’ that would mean Satō Sei-san has nothing to do with ‘Forest of Thorns,’ correct?”

Of course they’d be stunned. Even if it weren’t Suga Sei, they’d all believed “Sei” was Rosa Gigantea.

Clatter clatter clatter.

The finished jigsaw puzzle noisily crumbled apart. Something like, could this be happening?

“Yes. We did say that, didn’t we?”

The old lady said, matter-of-factly, but all they were told was that Satō Sei wasn’t Suga Sei, so the fact that Satō Sei had nothing to do with ‘Forest of Thorns’ was a first.

“But the fact that the school knows of Rosa Gigantea’s innocence-”

“That’s right, Yumi-san. That would mean whoever called the editorial department has to do with Lillian.”

Yumi and Yoshino-san were both excited, but when they wondered, “Then who?” they couldn’t think of anyone.

“Wait.”

Rei-sama mumbled.

“That person would be Kahori, in ‘Forest of Thorns,’ right? Would that mean the story took place at Lillian? But isn’t that weird? We ruled that possibility out immediately. Because other than Rosa Gigantea, no one like that exists.”

And the assumption that Kahori was still at the school. Or maybe Kahori is who wrote it, and Sei is the one at school.

(Ahh, my head’s going to explode.)

Without training her mind to do deep thinking, she realized she probably wouldn’t survive the next two years.

“Do you give up already?”

Sasaki-san aside, the old lady seemed to like quizzes, and was amused by the sight of them struggling. Come to think of it, these two women already knew the answer.

She wanted to raise her hand and say, I surrender, but Yoshino-san probably wouldn't forgive her if she did that, so she decided against it. And Rei-sama was fiercely competitive, so she wasn't the type to give up easily.

"The person is supposed to be there, but isn't."

Rei-sama mumbled.

"What?"

"It takes place at Lillian, but the person isn't there. Then-"

"...Time machine?"

Yoshino-san answered. I've got it, she looked like she was about to say. Rei-sama nodded in agreement.

Time machine.

Yumi first imagined Kahori riding off in a time machine, but she knew that couldn't be the case. After all, Yoshino-san had to have said time machine as a joke.

"It's a different time period. Of course. And that way, there won't even be any rumors left."

If Sei and Kahori did attend Lillian, that would explain why they didn't know about them.

If it had happened just a few years ago, it would probably have remained as a legend.

Even with Rosa Gigantea, what happened to her slowly permeated to the clueless first-years. And when Rosa Gigantea graduated, the rumors would become a legend. And legends became myths, over time, and then eventually vanish, altogether.

"A time machine. I see, yes, that would do it."

Yoshino-san and Rei-sama both responded to the old lady's words.

"It seems like both of you figured it out."

They looked unsure, but they nodded, anyways.

(Wa, wait, how did you two get it, with that hint?)

Yumi panicked, having been left behind.

Maybe she just doesn't understand things well enough? Maybe her ever-average language test scores were because she didn't understand what was behind the lines, or because she could only answer certain types of questions?

She understood it was a different time period, but how do you go beyond that?

Where did the time machine carry them?

Who are Sei and Kahori?

"Your friend is confused, why do you two help her?"

That friend, Yumi, was in serious thought. Yoshino-san and Rei-sama both got it. So the hint had to be there, somewhere.

The important thing was what was said, here. By the two ladies sitting across from them.

One was a late-twenties, maybe thirties lady. Sasaki-san, the Cosmos editorial department worker.

She didn't know the age of the other. Probably somewhere between sixty and eighty, but she was like a refined, fashionable grandmother. Her name, Sasaki-san said her name once, but she couldn't remember.

(Huh…?)

Yumi looked away from her once, but she found herself looking at her again.

Who is this person?

She worked with Sasaki-san, and she'd happened upon them here. A bit intrusive, but inquisitive.

(…But she seems to be knowledgeable about all this?)

Come to think of it, the old lady was the only one that looked out of place. But she didn't seem like she was out of place, or rather, she seemed the most at home. Like she'd invited everyone to her home, that's how freely she spoke to everyone.

"Th, then…"

How long ago could something have been, to make everyone forget? Ten, twenty, thirty. No, it could have been even older.

Fifty, sixty, how old would someone be now if they were an adolescent then?

“Correct.”

Everything Yumi thought ended up on her face, so the old lady gave her a “good job!” smile.

“Then, you, you’re-”

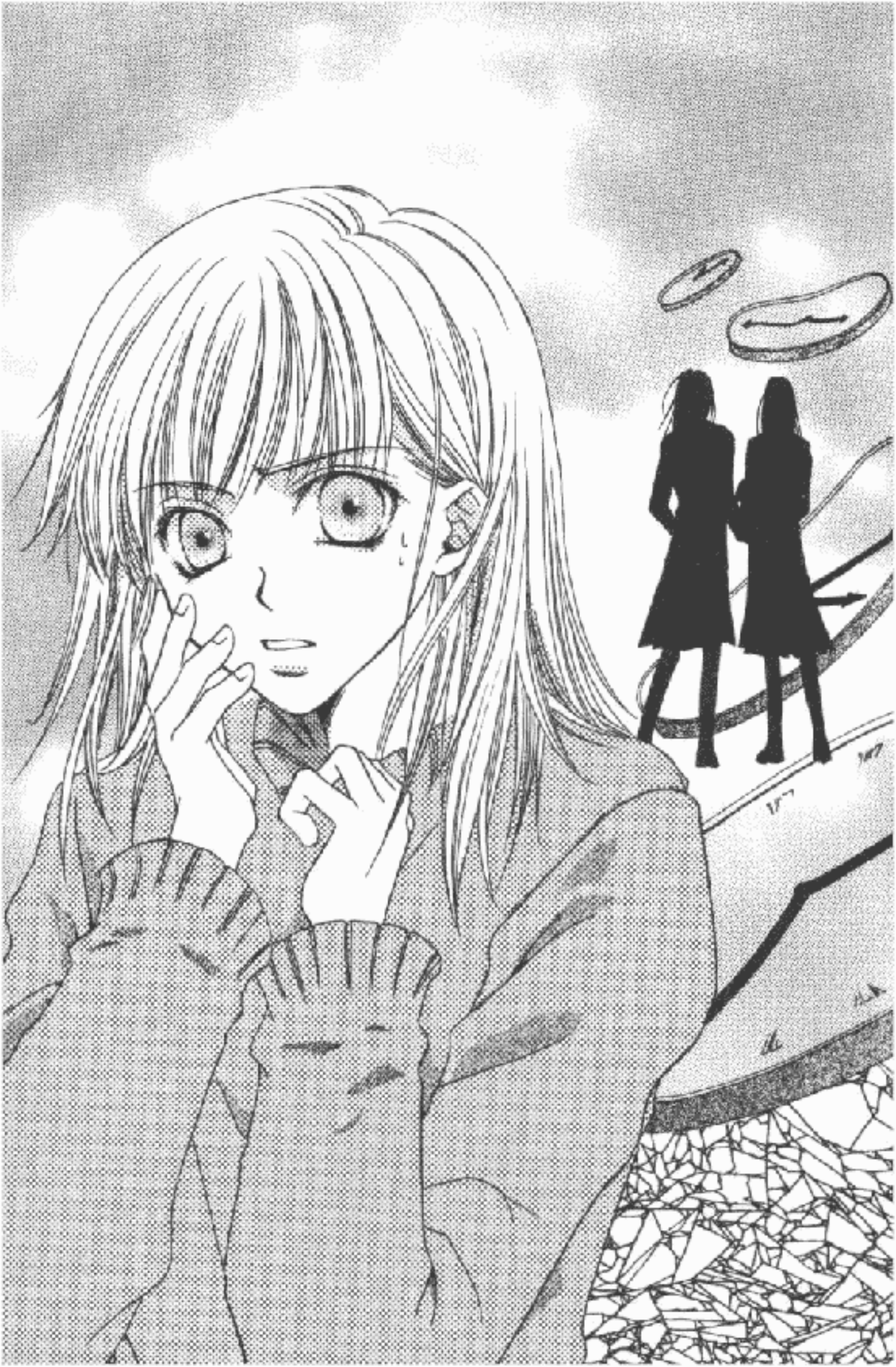
Even though she’d been affirmed, she couldn’t believe it, so Yumi sat there, her mouth trying to make words.

“I am Suga Sei. Thank you for reading my novel.”

Yoshino-san’s hope of running into Suga Sei came true. However unbelievable it may have been.

What if that editor was actually meeting with Suga Sei, so when we arrive at their doorstep, she’s already back? Yoshino-san had precognition, or maybe she drew Suga Sei over with her powers?

Either way, Yumi couldn’t shake the feeling that Yoshino-san was an ESPer. What a formidable friend, she thought.



Part 5.

“It was actually a big enough incident that it ran on newspapers, but sarcastically speaking, the war helped everyone forget about it.”

Suga Sei, or Kasuga Seiko-san, said, staring into the distance.

It was an “oh” feeling when she explained the pen name was simply the removal of a letter at the end of each name, and thus it was conceived simply.

Kasuga Seiko became Suga Sei. No matter how much she thought about it, she kept thinking, “Oh.”

Satō Sei turning into Sugar Sei, thus linking “Satō Sei” and Suga Sei was such a more brilliant tinkering of a name.

But the real person didn’t even realize Satō turned into sugar (Suga) until the three mentioned it, so upon mentioning, Sasaki-san and Seiko-san both roared with laughter. They thought it was just a simple mix-up of the name “Sei.”

“Um… if it was enough to have run in newspapers, does that mean the story was true?”

Rei-sama scolded Yoshino-san, “That’s rude!” when she asked the question, but Kasuga-san didn’t seem to mind.

“I re-wrote the setting so young girls could imagine it more easily, and I changed the names a bit, but everything is almost precisely true. Kahori’s name was actually Saori, and I’m Seiko, see?”

They had decided to tweak things out of respect for those concerned and alive.

But of course that meant the two had indeed tried to commit double suicide. It was hard to believe the grandmother in front of them had done something that severe.

So that they wouldn’t be found, they walked into a forest, holding hands, and drank sleeping pills, one at a time. So they would be together forever in a different world.

“But the ending was wrong, apparently.”

Apparently, Kasuga-san said, like it was someone else's business. It seemed strange for the author of "Forest of Thorns" to take that sort of attitude to it, but her explanation made it understandable.

"I had no idea Saori was alive until we received the phone call yesterday. She thought I'd died, too. Because the local newspaper that I was able to get a glimpse of read, 'One dead, one in critical condition.'"

"One dead?"

"They didn't publish the names, so of course, we'd assume the other was the one that died."

Kasuga-san chuckled.

"Why did such an article…"

"It was an accidental misunderstanding. I checked the newspaper archives at the library yesterday, and found out that they printed a recant the next day, along with an apology. But our parents probably took advantage of the mistake. That was probably the only way to split us up, after all."

So, "Sei and Kahori," or Seiko-san and Saori-san, both lived decades believing the other had passed away.

"Perfect, I have an idea, Kasuga-san. You could write a sequel to 'Forest of Thorns.'"

Sasaki-san suddenly switched into work mode and presented the idea.

"One day, you received a call from Kahori, whom you thought had already died. And that's where the story starts…"

"Indeed. But reality would be chasing us from afar."

Kasuga-san intended to go meet Saori-san. On Christmas Eve, decades after they'd been separated.

"We've both lived this long, it might be a gift from God."

Apparently, Cosmos Books intended to take a more flexible position regarding Suga Sei's identity. While they were eating lunch, Kasuga-san and Sasaki-san were speaking about that.

While they wouldn't release any profiling information, they would take a stronger stance toward making sure people wouldn't make the wrong assumption. That would hopefully prevent cases like Rosa Gigantea being needlessly bothered.

By the way, Suga Sei apparently had two reasons for being published under a pen name.

The first is that Kasuga-san was actually the chairman of a company, and so publishing under her real name would be a hindrance. The other was that they wanted to suppress the author's profile to uphold readers' image of Sei, from "Forest of Thorns." Because it was an autobiographical novel, the readers would end up wanting to see who the author is, but if the author was an old lady, their dreams would be shattered, is what they thought.

But Yumi thought that kind of dream wouldn't be shattered by looking at the old lady in front of her.

Because she was such a fantastic grandmother.

Let's meet again, Kasuga-san and Sasaki-san said, before they vanished into the back of the building. When she looked at her watch, it read five thirty, and Kyuuteisha was beginning to close its doors, too.

"Again, she said."

Yoshino-san laughed.

"Maybe she means in a book?"

Rei-sama mumbled.

"Ah."

After the door shut behind them, as they trudged forth, Yumi suddenly remembered.

"Umm, so in the end, how does Saori-san and Lillian connect?"

"Uh."

"Uh."

Yoshino-san and Rei-sama both squealed, in canon.

Even if they wanted to go back, the doors were locked, and since it wasn't really an emergency, they didn't have the courage to request the doors be unlocked for them. And even if they managed to do that, they didn't want to trouble Sasaki-san and Kasuga-san by calling them to the front again, so they gave up.

Anyways, a lot of things happened today, so they were already quite exhausted. They wanted to go home and take a bath. Otherwise they'd continue to be flustered.

Plus, as Yumi carefully sorted out everything she found out today, she remembered another big thing.

(I should have asked for an autograph…)

Ahh, gosh. Why now? She hated herself.

If I Could Meet Eve

Part 1.

I'm always sleeping in my forest of thorns.

Because I left my soul with Kahori's white body, unchanged since we were sixteen.

December 24th.

Along with being Christmas Eve, today also happened to be the closing ceremonies for the second semester for the Lillian Girls' Academy high school.

While the world is lively for it being a merry Christmas day, she didn't have any plans other than eating cake with her family at night, so she wasn't particularly excited. And while winter break began tomorrow, they'd be on break since the end of exams, anyways, so that wasn't anything special.

More importantly, report cards come back on the day of the closing ceremony. While some seem not to care for the grades they got, others, who lived a more normal life, definitely did. Yumi didn't really fit into the second category, but her New Year's Gift and her allowance hinged on her grades, so it was like a life-threatening matter, anyways.

"Sigh."

"Yumi-san, you've been sighing all morning."

Click.

Tsutako-san presented the camera she just took a photo with, bragging, "Look, it's a new one!" and appeared in front of Yumi's desk, like an old man holding a medicine box over his head. But it wouldn't look like the Edo-period group without at least an aid with her.

"Fufufu, Tsutako-san knows. The reason you're sighing like that."

Tsutako-san looked happy, having found the perfect remedy to boredom.

They'd arrived at school far earlier than usual today. The schedule today was a quick, simple home room session, and then a Christmas Eve Mass at the sanctuary.

"Yumi-san's concerns number one. Report card."

"Pretty much."

They hadn't been returned their marked tests, but she could estimate her marks based on how difficult she found it. Tests were simply to measure how well you understood the lessons, the teachers always said, but she wasn't naïve enough to believe that entirely.

"Number two. The year's end cards you haven't mailed out yet."

"Ah!"

She accidentally shouted. Forget mailing them, they're completely slipped her mind. She'd put aside a lot of things in favor of Rosa Gigantea's incident. Year's end cards after exams, was how things were supposed to be, as her mother gave her about thirty cards, and she stuffed them into her desk. It was amazing she'd managed to forget about them. They keep running commercials on TV about making sure to send the cards early.

"Yumi-san, you're finally getting even dementia."

How worrisome, she said, but she was snapping away with her camera. Hey, hey, is it fun taking pictures of the elderly?

"But the biggest reason for sighing would obviously be Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

"---" That was the truth.

They hadn't seen each other for a week, so she even woke up earlier than normal. But she felt it was too persistent and audacious to wait for Sachiko-sama to show up at the gate, so she simply stumbled into her classroom.

What a fool, at least if she wandered the halls she might run into Sachiko-sama. Well, she could regret plenty of things, but if she were strong-willed enough to move herself to action by thinking, "Well I might still make it," she wouldn't be having all these problems to begin with.

(Plus.)

Because the closing ceremonies were today, they wouldn't be able to meet for quite some time again, starting tomorrow. And if she saw Sachiko-sama once, her mind would be overwhelmed by thoughts of saying farewell.

Given Sachiko-sama's attitude prior to the exam break, there was a large probability that they wouldn't be able to meet until school opened again next semester. Actually, it's not even just a probability, it's almost guaranteed.

How lonely, she thought. They didn't live a few steps from each other, like Yoshino-san. And they weren't separate like Rosa Gigantea and Shimako-san, so she didn't feel fine if they never met.

This might be the first time in her life she felt lonely school was on break. She wondered if Sachiko-sama ever felt like this.

It felt unfair.

Part 2.

Her second semester grades weren't as bad as she feared.

But she still didn't feel like her day was any brighter, so the reason for her gloominess was Sachiko-sama, after all.

There's a Mass for students on Christmas Eve. Fundamentally, you're free to participate if you wish, but most people attend, anyways.

This day makes even atheists believers, so it wasn't surprising many students in a Catholic school prayed. Even students who intended to go on a date with their boyfriends later on attended Mass. Most non-attendees' reasons were like, going out to a different Mass with their families, or needing to be away because they volunteered to help with a Christmas party. Basically, most Lillian students ended up being pretty serious about it.

"Hey, over here."

At the front of the sanctuary, Rosa Gigantea waved her hand.

They'd come from the same class, so Yumi and Shimako-san, who'd come together, both went to "here." Even though many people were coming in and out of the sanctuary, it was a pretty bombastic action to take in a sacred place. She wanted her to stop, because she became embarrassed just being the target of it.

"We've got plenty of seats, so sit down, sit down, oh, Yumi-chan, you sit here."

She froze when she saw where Rosa Gigantea pointed. Right next to the empty seat was Sachiko-sama.

"O, onee-sama…"

"What are you surprised about? How rude."

Of course she'd be surprised.

Because she'd assumed on her own they'd first see each other at the Rose Mansion after Mass, it felt like she'd been hit by a surprise attack. She didn't think Rosa Gigantea would secure seats for everyone, so she thought she would sit in the back or somewhere discrete like that, and secretly admire Sachiko-sama from behind, however impure and disrespectful to Jesus that thought may have been.

“Onee-sama, long time no see. Ah, I’m sorry for being late, go, gokigenyou.”

“Oh hush, just sit down.”

Sachiko-sama coldly said.

“…Yes.”

Like a pet dog who’d leapt with joy at its owner returning home, only to be scolded for being overexcited. Ahh, but even if she was scolded, she felt at peace just being by her side.

When Yumi sat down with good manners, she noticed Shimako-san had already sat down next to Rosa Gigantea, naturally. A soft distance between them, like their arms may or may not touch, but it felt like that was where Shimako-san belonged.

It was a “White Rose Incident,” to quote Minako-sama, but the matter was surprisingly suppressed, despite it being the last day before vacation. Maybe it was because Rosa Gigantea flat-out refuted everything in front of the first-years, or maybe they were placated by Cosmos books’ countermeasures. Or maybe they simply lost interest. Anyways, you didn’t hear anything about Rosa Gigantea in class anymore. At worst, it would simply be by the classmates who just now began reading “Forest of Thorns,” being behind the times.

The newspaper club didn’t manage to turn it into an article, either.

“During the break, did you fare well?” Sachiko-sama asked, still staring forward.

“Ah, yes.”

“I did wonder what you were up to, but I hope you didn’t do anything absurd.”

Like she saw through everything. Well, it was true, so she couldn’t say anything back.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you.”

She wasn’t even looking at her, but Sachiko-sama today seemed to be able to read Yumi’s mind. She giggled, and re-worded herself.

“Even if I trust you, I can’t help but be concerned about my little sister when I can’t see you. Especially because I was out of the country because of circumstances involving my father’s work.”

“What?”

“I was in France.”

She said it so matter-of-factly, like she said she was in Shinjuku. Yumi was so stunned all she could say was, “Oh, is that what happened.”

But.

Oh, Sachiko-sama was out of the country.

Then it was obviously they couldn’t see each other during the break. It began feeling foolish, how she felt lonesome on her own.

The choir entered, so she had to stay silent, but she resolved to tell Sachiko-sama everything that happened during the break after Mass ended.

Even if Sachiko-sama didn’t show that much interest. She would just speak quickly.

She had to become proactive.

They were such similar sisters, in that they were both just a hair off of communicating well.

Part 3.

"What is this?"

After one step into the Rose Mansion, Yumi became wide-eyed at the scene in front of her.

"What? It's a Christmas party."

Rosa Foetida said, with a "what are you talking about?" face.

"Christmas, party?"

"Oh, Yumi-chan's still a child, so you might not know about these things. You know, since ancient times in Japan, there's been a tradition of holding a party on the day before Jesus' birthday. But the only rule is, you're not supposed to ask why. Because that's just how it is."

Whispered Rosa Gigantea into Yumi's ear, having entered after her. –Gosh, they're completely toying with her. No one asked what Christmas party meant, and the explanation was absurd, too.

Absurd, could also work for this room.

She could understand why they'd want to decorate the room for a party. But the room was filled with little trinkets to the point where you wouldn't see this even at a kindergarten party.

(It's like the July 7th festival instead of Christmas.)

Links made out of cut origami, cookie-shaped stars made out of rolled-up paper tape, among other things. Rosa Chinensis even happily pasted aluminum foil on drawing paper to create and wear a king's crown, then made flowers out of tissue paper.

(I guess this is called going full circle?)

When you become so used to being amazed, this sort of thing, in turn, becomes surprising and fresh, too.

They were marvelous people, so she did everything she could to try not to be surprised by everything. But she still felt like they surprised her on a daily basis.

"Yumi-chan was out of it while we were talking about party preparations."

Rei-sama painted a roll of castella with cocoa-colored whipped cream to make instant cake.

“Bûche de Noël!”

“Pretty extravagant for being made out of marketplace goods, right?”

Rei-sama laughed, proud, and let Yumi lick the cream off of the fork. The sweet, but slightly bitter taste melted in her mouth.

“Shall I help out somewhere?”

Yoshino-san and Shimako-san had conquered the sink, and taking joy away from Rosa Chinensis, who was still joyfully making decorations like a kindergarten girl, would make her feel guilty, and she certainly couldn’t assist in making cake, and if she tried to help out with setting the table, Rosa Foetida might lash out at her.

Sachiko-sama went to retrieve something she forgot at Mass, and wasn’t back yet.

“Do you want a job?”

She’d completely forgotten, but Rosa Gigantea was still right behind her, and so she asked, wrapping her arms around Yumi’s neck.

“I’ve got a good job fer ye righty ho, let’s be making our way yarr.”

“…”

Who was she supposed to be?

“Umm, what do you want-”

“Oh just come on, follow big sis to a nice place, okay?”

“A nice place!?”

Not allowing any complaints, Rosa Gigantea began dragging Yumi off, arms still wrapped around her. The other members, seeing this happening, simply waved their hands instead of stopping it, saying, “Have fun, just make sure to not be late.” This was why Rosa Gigantea could do whatever she pleased.

(Shimako-san~ keep a leash on your onee-sama~)

But Shimako-san didn’t hear Yumi’s silent plea, instead laughing heartily with Yoshino-san at the sink.

When they left the Rose Mansion, Rosa Gigantea finally let her go.

“First, the shoebox.”

“Huh?”

“Your mission is to quickly find camera-chan.”

(Ca… camera-chan!?)

She felt her strength drain out of her. If she was drinking milk, she definitely would have coughed it up.

“…Camera-chan, do you mean Takeshima Tsutako-san?”

She hesitantly asked for confirmation: it was right.

“In her case, I think camera-chan fits better than Tsutako-chan, don’t you think?”

“Uhh-”

But Yumi didn’t have the courage to ever call her camera-chan.

“What do you want to do, after finding Tsutako-san?”

“There’s only one reason to ever look for camera-chan.”

“…To ask her to be a cameraman for the party.”

“What a rude way of putting it. We’re just going to invite her to the party, right? And she can bring her camera with her. She’ll be so happy she’d be in tears.”

But they had to find her quickly or she’d go home, Rosa Gigantea insisted, but well, it would be nice to be able to contribute to Tsutako-san’s hobby, anyways, so she decided to listen to Rosa Gigantea this time and look for Tsutako-san.

Tsutako-san’s outdoor shoes were still in the small shoe locker. Which meant she was still around, taking pictures of girls before winter vacation.

“I wonder if she’s in front of Maria-sama.”

Rosa Gigantea said.

“Summer vacation and winter vacation, it’s popular to do sisterly vows right before those breaks.”

And today was Christmas Eve. It was the perfect situation for presenting rosaries.

Of course, in Tsutako-san's case, the problem lie in the fact that she wasn't the one participating in the ceremonies, instead being the one taking secret photos.

"What should we do?"

They could try finding her by the statue, but there was a possibility of walking past each other, and she might still be at the sanctuary instead, too.

"Let's take a walk."

They stepped back out of the entrance, and Rosa Gigantea licked her index finger and put it up in the air. It's not like she could find Tsutako-san based on wind direction, though…

"Hmm, hmm, someone is coming from that direction!"

Rosa Gigantea's sharp ears spoke true, as a person appeared from the around the library. Unfortunately, it wasn't Tsutako-san, but it was someone Yumi knew.

"Kasuga-san!?"

When she ran closer, the person, wearing an ivory coat and a dark, brown hat smiled nostalgically.

"My, I wondered who it was… Fukuzawa Yumi-san?"

"Yes. Thank you for your assistance then."

"Yumi-chan, do you know her?"

Rosa Gigantea slowly caught up and was in full "elder statesman" mode, greeting her politely with a, "Welcome."

"Gokigenyou."

Kasuga-san responded, uttering words that she most likely used many years ago with her friends every day.

"Umm. She's Kasuga-san, and she's a Lillian graduate, and-"

She wondered how much she should explain, but Rosa Gigantea, rather than inquire, simply bowed her head, "Thank you for looking after my kōhai."

“My name is Satō Sei.”

Kasuga-san looked surprised for a moment after Rosa Gigantea introduced herself, and then smiled, “So it’s you.”

“Oh, yes, would you like to come to the Rose Mansion? We’re about to have a Christmas party.”

Rosa Gigantea kindly invited the grandmother she’d met for the first time. Even though she didn’t know who she was.

“Thank you. But I need to see someone.”

Kasuga-san turned down the offer, and asked if they could guide her, so she wouldn’t get lost.

“Of course, if you wish. Right, Yumi-chan?”

“Ah, yes.”

Maybe Kasuga-san wanted to speak to Rosa Gigantea a bit more.

So Yumi accompanied them to the visitor’s entrance, then left Kasuga-san to Rosa Gigantea and went to search for Tsutako-san on her own. “Where are you headed?”

“To the principal’s office, please.”

After watching them leave, for whatever reason, Yumi became excited. Kasuga-san and Rosa Gigantea were walking through the school together.

The invisible time machine was right there.

It was fascinating.

If the Rosa Gigantea being Suga Sei rumors hadn’t been spread, Saori-san may have never read “Forest of Thorns.”

And if she hadn’t read “Forest of Thorns,” she would have never called Kyuuteisha, so they would both have lived out their lives not knowing the other had been alive.

(Huh…?)

While walking down the hallway inside the school building, she froze.

(Principal’s office?)

Kasuga-san said she had business at the principal’s office.

The principal's office, of course, was where the principal could be found. So she was going to see the principal.

(Wait, Kasuga-san said she was going to see Saori-san during Christmas Eve… And the principal's name, was-)

Sister Uemura. Uemura Saori.

Yumi spun around and looked down the hallway from the visitor's entrance.

She couldn't see Kasuga-san anymore. –Like she was an illusion.

Yumi stood there, dumbfounded.

"Yumi?"

When she turned around after someone tapped her shoulder, she saw Sachiko-sama.

"Ah!? Eh, onee-sama!"

"Oh, brilliant, shall we go to the Rose Mansion together?"

"Eh, umm, but…"

When she explained, Sachiko-sama said it was no problem.

"Takeshima Tsutako-san just skipped her way to the Rose Mansion."

Where did Tsutako-san sniff this one out? How fearsome. As expected of "camera-chan."

"Oh, yes, before I forget."

Sachiko-sama held out a small, wrapped box. "Here."

"A present for you."

"…A souvenir from France?"

Sachiko-sama smiled bitterly at Yumi's absurd question and corrected her.

"A Christmas present, of course."

"Eh!?"

Her mind went blank, like she hit the reset button.

Because she didn't even think about trading presents here and now. She'd only received gifts from her parents for the sixteen years she'd lived.

"Go ahead, open it."

She hesitantly opened the wrapping, and a white handkerchief appeared from the box. It was fringed by gorgeous lacing, and the letter S was embroidered with white thread in one corner.

“The same one onee-sama always uses…?”

Probably one of many that Sachiko-sama ordered in bulk.

“Will you use it?”

“Th, thank you very much… But, I-”

“No worry. I wanted to give you a gift… I know.”

Sachiko-sama reached past Yumi’s cheeks and loosened the black ribbon tying Yumi’s hair.

“If you are bothered, may I receive this?”

Sachiko-sama gathered her own black hair and tied it with Yumi’s ribbon. That spectacle was so natural, and so beautiful, that Yumi felt her heart about to burst.

“Merry Christmas.”

Sachiko-sama held both of Yumi’s hands and whispered.

-So that the world’s people could greet this day with good fortune.

“…Merry Christmas.”

As they walked back, holding hands, she felt like crying.

If only it would snow, she pleaded to the heavens.

The White Flower Petal

Springtime Buds

Part 1.

-If this is how I'm going to end up feeling, I won't desire for another person, ever again.

On my sixteenth winter,

I experienced a farewell so painful it cut my body apart.

***

I first met Shiori during a spring day. One morning that I arrived at school far earlier than I usually did.

Why did I come to school early, that day, despite not having anything planned? Frankly, it's because I thought it was time to wake up, that's all. I went through all of my morning preparations an hour early, hopped on the earliest train, and didn't realize my mistake until I noticed how much less crowded it was.

I hated keeping time, to begin with, so I don't really double-check what time it is. I'm the type that thinks I'd rather get to school late than hear the alarm clock ringing, so I've come to accept this sort of mistake happens.

When I stepped off of the circulation bus from JR's M Station in front of our school, the sunlight was blinding to my half-awake eyes.

Shielding my eyes from the sun, I walked through the high gate. The blue sky looking down on me through the thick roadway of gingko trees looked like it was etching out a soft pathway, like Milky Way.

(Milky Way…)

It had an embarrassingly romantic echo. If I were to say that during class, what kind of faces would everyone make?

-How unexpected. That twisted Satō Sei-san has a cute side to her, too?

But I had no intention of pleasing them.

Flipping her long, back-length hair, I muttered, “Idiotic.”

(What is?)

But the closest word to the answer to that was “everything,” as well as “myself.”

Like the innocently smiling students at this school, like they were saying, I have no dissatisfaction with this world.

Like those pathetic parents that never questioned if they were raising their children properly.

Like the school that didn’t bother labeling me a delinquent because I always had top-notch grades.

Like myself, living normally on a daily basis despite being annoyed by everything.

All of those, everything.

If I can’t find anything to love in this world, including myself, the biggest problem probably lay in myself.

This world existed long before I did, and so it probably headed toward a better place by majority vote. People who can’t conform to that world, then, bear responsibility for being unable to conform.

I’d figured that much out, so I’ve been lying low. But a sixteen-year-old adolescent sometimes rejects having to play out the role of a “pure maiden.”

Why do I have to laugh with everyone?

Why do I have to involve myself in conversations that I don’t care about?

So I keep myself silent.

Nothing I can do. Because this is the meadow of angels.

So Maria-sama, standing in the middle of the fork in the road, looked to me like Nio.

(See…)

She looks so serene, so kind, but in reality, she was dividing students walking into the school into good or bad.

I formed a pistol with my right hand and pointed it at the white Maria-sama statue. The holy maiden Maria stood in front of the small, green forest, and prayed to heaven for the sake of her students every second.

“Amen.”

“Bang!” I sounded in my mind, and I ran, laughing.

Rapture.

Running down the pathway of freshly-budding trees was invigorating. I’d always wanted to do it once, when there was no one around.

I didn’t mind people seeing me, but being questioned for it was a pain.

I didn’t believe in Maria-sama, so I wasn’t afraid of divine punishment. Jesus of Nazarene and his mother Maria were both real people that died long, long ago. After 2000 years, even ghosts must have gotten bored.

And if Maria-sama was really that close to God, she was supposed to save these bad sheep. Now, come, save my aimless soul!

-Amen!

I ran, shouting that, over and over again.

It was the middle of spring.

I’d just become a second-year in high school.

It wasn’t that I had any dissatisfactions. I just had no warmth. I was wandering in the dark, in a dried, vast wilderness.

I didn’t know what I should do.

I didn’t even know what I wanted to do.

Panting, I leaned against the sanctuary wall. I’d somehow ended up here. My subconscious seemed to have run me the opposite direction from the school buildings.

Oh well. I’ll rest here for an hour, and I entered the sanctuary.

After a few steps into the dark, silent corridor, the first thing you saw when you opened the thick, decorated door was a wooden statue of a crucified Jesus Christ. When you glanced to its left, a full-colored Maria statue. And to its right, a stained-glass window of brilliant colors. Long, wooden benches were on either side of the passage down the middle.

The morning prayer of the sisters must have ended, as there was no one inside.

I chose a seat by the wall on the second row from the back and leaned back. A picture of angels was painted on the ceiling. It was the first time I'd looked at it, relaxed, like this.

I wasn't a Christian, but the sanctuary was a beautiful place, I could say that much. I didn't dislike Buddhist temples, either, so I might simply have a liking for religion-based architecture.

I wrapped my arms around my shoulders and closed my eyes. It soothed me. It felt like I was rolled up in a ball, surrounded by a tough shell.

Don't touch me. Forget about me.

My body wanted sleep, but my mind was unusually active. But that's alright, I rolled over to my side.

How much time passed? Eventually, I lost track of time, and I didn't even know if I was awake or dreaming, when I heard something.

Like an herbivore that was at rest, my body immediately reacted, and I jumped up like a spring-powered doll. Who cares if someone saw you, a voice whispered inside my head.

And they were apparently surprised at my sudden movement, as the person who'd made the noise before spun around. –She sat in the front seat, near the middle.

Both of them had spent time not realizing they were there.

She had probably been kneeling and praying, and I gulped my own breath after watching her stand up slowly.

With the stained-glass window's light shining upon her right shoulder, she looked so white, so divine.

"...Gokigenyou."

Smiling, she walked toward me. She was wearing the Lillian Girls' Academy high school uniform, and her straight hair reached down to her waist. And her skin wasn't as pale as I'd first thought.

"...A first-year?"

I might have been looking at her like I was appraising something.

"Yes. I'd just arrived at Lillian this year."

Her bright voice sounded soothing.

"-Probably."

I didn't remember each and every face in school, but I probably wouldn't have forgotten her if I'd seen her a single time.

"Your name?"

"Kubo Shiori."

Kubo, Shiori.

I carved that name in my heart. It was just a name, but it was curious, how the fact that it belonged to her made it so much more special.

I'd never bothered with other people before, but when it came to the first-year student named Kubo Shiori, I became incredibly curious. So I smashed my feelings right at her. Not satisfied with her name, I asked about what class she was in, what middle school she attended, where she lived, I kept asking such impolite questions.

At first, Shiori looked bewildered. But because my questions were borne out of curiosity rather than being critical, she politely answered each and every one of them.

Shiori graduated from a school in Nagasaki, and she was recommended to Lillian. But her lack of an accent was because she was originally from Tokyo. Her parents died in a car accident when she was in third grade, so she was taken in by her uncle in Nagasaki, and now that her obligatory education was over, she decided to return to her home. She had no relatives in Tokyo, so she attended school from the school dormitories.

Shiori bluntly spoke of her tragic fifteen years of life. At the very least, that moved me. Her tolerance for an rude upperclassman, who she was meeting for the first time, and her willingness to accept me, it felt incredible.

She was mature, and she looked like even my twisted, thorny self could hold her hand, and she would be so divine that not a scratch would befall her.

“Will that be all?”

After a moment of silence, Shiori looked at her watch and spoke.

“I must be going now.”

I was conflicted, by the desire to stay like this, and the realization that it was becoming awkward. But I nodded anyways. And after I nodded, I felt incredibly heartbroken.

“I’m sorry for having taken your time.”

“No worries, I’m used to it.”

Transfer students from other schools were often questioned like this, she smiled, with no hint of bitterness.

“Oh, my name is-”

“I know. Rosa Gigantea en bouton, Satō Sei-sama.”

“What…?”

“During the first-year ceremony, you were introduced.”

After answering thus, Shiori politely bowed her head and stepped out of the sanctuary. Having lost Shiori, the sanctuary felt like it had lost some of its luster.

Part 2.

I'm more famous than I thought.

Shiori knew about me from the Yamayurikai-sponsored first-year welcoming ceremony. I do remember being forced by my onee-sama, Rosa Gigantea, to help out, but it wasn't fun, but I wasn't allowed to escape, so I also remember just sitting there.

If I'd paid attention, could I have found Shiori from the crowd?

The answer is yes, of course. No matter how many people there are, there was only one Shiori, and she would look unique, separate from the rest.

"Kubo Shiori?"

Mizuno Yōko looked surprised.

"Wha, what?"

"...No, it's the first time you've ever said someone else's name, so I was surprised, that's all."

After school, I'd stopped by the Rose Mansion for the first time in forever, and this was the response I got. Yōko, an honor student and a very caring person, finished reading some documents and then said, "So?"

"Nothing. I ran into a first-year named that this morning, that's all. I found out she's in the same class as your sœur, so I wondered if you'd heard any rumors or something."

"Sachiko's class...?"

She didn't seem to remember. I thought maybe there'd be information floating around, because of how strong of an impression she left, but that wasn't the case.

"If you don't know, whatever."

I'd begun to leave, when Yōko grabbed my arm.

"Since you've come this way, just stay for a bit. I'd wanted to point out before that you don't seem to understand your position as a bouton."

But Yōko's here, fully aware, so it shouldn't be a problem if I'm gone. Is what I thought, anyways.

"I didn't become a bouton because I wanted to."

"But you accepted it, by becoming Rosa Gigantea's sister, did you not?"

"She wasn't Rosa Gigantea then."

"What a quibble. My head hurts just thinking about next year."

Yōko put a hand to her head and sighed.

Of course. Because other than herself, none of the bouton were dependable.

Rosa Foetida en bouton Eriko does what she's supposed to, but she always looks bored. And I happily skip. When the three of us lose the "en bouton" from our names, the Yamayurikai may seriously collapse.

But that's alright. Because my head hurts thinking about next year, too.

"Anyways, stay a bit, at least until someone else comes."

Yōko wouldn't let go of my arm.

"Even if I get away, it's not your responsibility."

"But I still don't want to have let you get away, when I was by myself."

"Mmm."

I sat down in a chair. Not necessarily for Yōko, but because just standing was getting tiresome. Either way, Yōko said "thank you," and looked through documents again.

After about five minutes, I could hear the creaking sound of someone climbing the stairs.

"Oh wow, what a rarity."

My onee-sama, Rosa Gigantea, arrived with Yōko's sister, Ogasawara Sachiko.

That was a rare combination, too. When she got to the door, onee-sama held out Sachiko like a newfound doll.

“We ran into each other in the hallway, so we came here together. Sachiko-chan’s like a cute Japanese doll, so I can’t help wanting to be with her.”

As onee-sama said, Sachiko was undoubtedly beautiful. I knew about her from before high school, because she was a year under me. Of course, knowing about her simply meant I’d seen her once, as I’d never bothered to meet her.

In her case, she was a famous figure in school because of her appearance and her stature as a young woman of a rich family. When Yōko made Sachiko her sister, I thought, why would she bother with such a pain-in-the-ass person? But it was obviously because if Yōko didn’t do it, no one else would have had the courage to do it.

“I’m sorry to show up with a Western face, onee-sama.”

“Oh, are you sulking? Oh you fool, Sei’s face is Sei’s face, I picked you because of your face, after all.”

“Sorry, and thanks.”

I felt satisfied. I loved hearing “I picked you because of your face” from my onee-sama. People can’t see who you are on the inside, so when they praise you on your outside, it’s a lot more persuasive.

“Sit down.”

As Sachiko sat down next to Yōko, I moved myself to the seat next to onee-sama. I don’t like an intimate atmosphere, but I didn’t dislike the Rose Mansion. Maybe she knew it, because onee-sama never told me to show up at meetings or tea parties. In my case, I’d show up if I wanted, and I’d not show up if I didn’t. So she knew it would be a waste of breath.

Yes. Onee-sama has always been good at handling me.

When I entered high school, I received a lot of sœur proposals, but I turned them all down. I just wanted to be left alone, but everyone kept clamoring, why don’t you pick an onee-sama. When I began thinking that was becoming extremely annoying, Rosa Gigantea en bouton showed up.

She said she liked my face. I want to keep seeing your face, so be by my side. And with that, I decided to be her sister.

Having been told why I'd been liked, I felt a lot more at ease.

That's why sometimes I showed up at the Rose Mansion and sat down, for her sake. I didn't like meetings, but I just needed to sit there and pretend I was listening.

Using Yōko and Sachiko and onee-sama's voices and giggles as a BGM, I silently sang "Maria-sama's soul." As for why I decided to sing that, it was because it's the first song that flowed through my head. As long as it was a song I knew, I wouldn't have minded a modern Japanese ballad, either.

I wasn't fond of conversing with girls my age. That's why I spent time during recess reading novels. I knew I was an enigma in my class.

Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida arrived, so the meeting began. "Maria-sama's soul" ended with nice timing, so I began thinking about the girl I met in the sanctuary that morning, instead.

Kubo Shiori.

As Yōko said, I thought it was surprising I became interested in someone else.

Part 3.

I surprised myself with how aggressive I was.

To start with, I decided to wake up early and wait for Shiori at the school gate. Shiori had to go through the gate, as she used the bus at M Station. The reason why I picked the school gate, instead of the station or the bus stop, was because I decided it was the most probable place for her to pass through.

It was childish, I knew. I was filled with the hope of seeing her happen to walk through the gate, by chance. The possibility that she went to school together with a friend, or that I'd be rejected never crossed my mind.

In the end, that sort of unfortunate result didn't happen. Because Shiori never walked through the gate.

The wave of black uniforms came to a halt. I even forgot to run to the school buildings, instead absent-mindedly watching the doorkeeper close a part of the gate.

Before thinking about the possibility of her being late or simply missing school, I lost confidence. Did she really exist? Yōko didn't seem to remember the name Kubo Shiori, and no one else was in the sanctuary at the time, so there was no way to prove she was Kubo Shiori, a first-year student. But strangely enough, it seemed to suit her, being an otherworldly existence.

When it became lunch break, I peeked into the first-year pine class. They must have been used to seeing a second-year, but this class seemed more bemused by second-years, and didn't really bother helping them out.

"What's the matter, Sei-sama?"

Sachiko called to me from behind. She'd been out of the class when I'd arrived, apparently.

"Is Kubo Shiori in this class?"

I couldn't help but ask for confirmation.

"Yes."

Sachiko-sama tilted her head, wondering why I'd ask such a thing.

"Is she absent, today?"

I confirmed her existence, but I still didn't see her in the room.

"No."

"Was she late?"

"She was in class when class began. And-"

Sachiko answered my next question.

"As for where she is now, I think the sanctuary."

"Sanctuary..."

"She's a devout Christian. So she's always praying in the morning."

That answered everything.

Shiori arrived at school earlier than I did, and was praying to God while I was waiting at the gate.

Even though I met her there yesterday, I'd never wondered why she was there and when she was there from. It wasn't like Shiori had gone there to sleep, like I did, anyways.

And when I heard Shiori was a devout Christian, I couldn't help but nod, so that's what. The "whiteness" I saw in her was probably her faith.

"Shall I tell her Rosa Gigantea en bouton was looking for her?"

"That would be unnecessary."

"You are going to the sanctuary now."

"-Not really."

Without thanking her, I turned away from Sachiko. It wasn't like I had fault with Sachiko. But she was sharp, despite having no ill intentions. I knew that, but it still felt unpleasant having my affection toward Shiori seen through by a younger Sachiko.

After returning to my class once, I thought again and changed direction. It would be childish to not go to the sanctuary just because Sachiko said it, and I didn't want to step into a noisy classroom.

To begin with, I wanted to step out and get some fresh air. I walked out of the emergency exit, usually off limits. The fresh leaves were turning greener by the day, and their glitter beauty was so pleasant to the eyes it made class seem extremely stupid.

I would have brought a book. I wanted to skip class, imagining how wonderful it would be to spend time under this weather.

Consciously, or subconsciously, my legs carried me to the east. Maybe I could see Shiori. But it was okay if I didn't. I didn't know what I'd say, if I did.

My feeling, at that point, was honestly to just look at Shiori from afar. If I could watch Shiori without her ever noticing me-.

I looked up and closed my eyes. It felt like I was melting into the greenery. I would become twigs, the fresh leaves, and the wind that ran through everything. I wanted to vanish, like that. I wanted Satō Sei to be exterminated from this world, without anyone knowing I was here at all.

When I opened my eyes, like a miracle, Shiori was there. She was about ten meters ahead, and stopped a meter in front of me.

"Gokigenyou, Rosa Gigantea en bouton."

She was there, like it was the most natural of things. I couldn't help but think that she was the opposite of me, loved by the world and accepted by the world. Maybe that was why I was drawn to Shiori.

"I came to see you."

I wanted to be saved by Shiori. To purify this nonconforming soul, to return me to normalcy.

"I wanted to see you. Would this be a bother?"

I repeated myself. I was begging Shiori with an expression I wouldn't dare show my mother. At some point, I'd thrown away the armor my soul wore, that which protected me. There was nothing I could do if I was rejected. I'd found something in Shiori that I was willing to risk everything to get.

"How could I say it's a bother?"

With a calm voice, like a crystal-clear lake, Shiori replied.

"I was just wanting to see you, too."

I cried, surprising myself with how honest I was being. I wanted to thank God for giving me Shiori.

Summer Greenhouse

Part 1.

Ever since we met that spring day, Shiori and I slowly, but certainly, grew closer.

We were in different grades, but we found as much time as possible to be together, so that we'd see each other at least once a day. Sometimes I'd find Shiori at the sanctuary in the morning, and sometimes we ate lunch together at noon. Both of us weren't in any clubs, so sometimes we'd stroll through the campus together after school.

I wanted our time together to be precious. So I'd never to take her to the Rose Mansion, and I didn't even think about introducing her to onee-sama, much less the rest of the Yamayurikai.

I became even more distant from the Rose Mansion, becoming absorbed by Shiori.

"Shouldn't you distance yourself a bit more?"

On the first day of summer.

Yōko came to my class after school and warned me.

"What are you talking about?"

I was supposed to meet Shiori after class today, so it irritated me.

"You know what I'm talking about. Kubo Shiori. What is she to you?"

"What?"

She came to see me just to ask that stupid question? There's a limit to how intrusive you can be. Stuffing my thin English-Japanese dictionary in my bag, I laughed, bitterly.

"It's not a laughing matter."

"Oh, sorry. But you don't have time to be bothered by other people, either, do you? You've got your hands full with your own sister, anyways... The rumors about you making Sachiko quit all of her lessons, are they true?"

“This is not the time to be talking about my sœur. The problem is you and Kubo Shiori.”

“Problem?”

I understood what Yōko wanted to say.

I knew Shiori and I had a special relationship. It wasn’t like Yōko and Sachiko, and it was different from onee-sama and I.

It was hard to explain it, but it was like, we’d been born with two hands, but we’re busy grasping each other’s hands. As a result, we eliminate everything else.

It was decisively different from most people, who, while holding hands with one person, always leave one hand open to take ahold of other things. Yōko’s “distance yourself” probably meant that. I should let go of one of Shiori’s hands.

It might be dangerous to only accept one, single person, and ignore everything else. But I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to cut any bond with Shiori, and if we changed anything, it wouldn’t be us anymore.

“If you want to make her your sister, that’s fine. I don’t want to force you two apart, or anything. But the way things are, isn’t it bad? You should present her your rosary and formally introduce her.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Grabbing my bag, I shoved my seat under the desk. I didn’t want to continue this conversation any longer.

“I’ll think about… May I?”

“…Sure. Hopefully.”

Surprisingly, Yōko let me off easily. She was smart, so she must have known if she pressed further it would backfire.

I ran down the hallways, now devoid of students, to get to Shiori.

I said I’d think about it, but I had no intention of making Shiori my sister. Because we were always even. I didn’t want to present her my rosary just so other people would acknowledge us, that would be ridiculous. I laughed at the people who needed the sisterly symbol to ease their hearts.

“What happened?”

Shiori knew, the moment we saw each other.

“Nothing.”

I grabbed Shiori’s shoulders and began walking, to a place where there was no one else. I didn’t care how dirty a place it was. As long as no one else could see us, there was no place more pure.

I didn’t want to dirty Shiori. I didn’t want dirty eyes looking at our relationship.

No one would be bothered by our becoming intimate. At the very least, because of her influence, I’d begun paying attention in class, and I stopped being late or missing class. That was worthy of praise, not criticism.

We just wanted to be together. That was all.

I hugged Shiori behind the school buildings.

“Were you told something?”

Shiori rested her chin on my shoulder and whispered.

“Maybe there’s no one who will support us.”

“You shouldn’t say that.”

She must have been taking more flak than I, but Shiori never said ill of anyone. Even if I’d stopped being with them, I was still Rosa Gigantea en bouton, and the shadow of the Yamayurikai loomed over me. If people didn’t like Shiori and I’s relationship, and wanted to take it up with someone, they’d go to the new, young Shiori. She wouldn’t ever say it, but she must have been going through harder times than I.

“You shouldn’t just cast everything aside like that.”

We further isolated ourselves from school, and we began treasuring each other more, in turn.

Part 2.

It became summer vacation.

I went to school every day though, like usual, and spent time with Shiori.

Because the school dorms closed for most of August, Shiori lived in the cloister inside Lillian. Even though it was a long vacation, Shiori stayed in Tokyo instead of returning to her uncle's place at Nagasaki. I didn't know the specifics, and I didn't ask, but the Lillian Girls' Academy principal knew her guardian, her uncle, so the principal acted as a parent to Shiori while she stayed in Tokyo.

The day the library opened, I burrowed myself in the reading room and concentrated on finishing my homework. The exact time shifted depending on the day, but eventually, after helping the sisters out, Shiori would come and work on her homework, too.

We were serious. We didn't think anything would change by us doing our homework, but we assumed if our grades fell, people would oppose our relationship even more. So we sat together, and when we finished our homework, we read books together.

We were in an old greenhouse one day.

In the morning, Shiori had to attend supplementary swimming lessons, so I went to school when they were supposed to finish. I walked past a mass of girls with wet hair, and I realized the lesson must have ended earlier than expected.

Wanting to see Shiori, my pace quickened. Not just quickened, I began running.

Right as I took a right on the Maria-sama statue fork, I felt moist warmth touch my face and shoulders. –It was raining.

Passing by the library and running past the auditorium, I finally saw Shiori.

"Shiori!"

It began raining harder, so it wasn't a particularly romantic setting for a walk. It was bright and sunny when I left, so I didn't have any foldable umbrellas or anything. We looked for a place to wait out the rain. It was still noon, but it was like an evening shower.

We fled into the old greenhouse.

Parts of the glass exterior was broken, and there were holes in the floor, but it did a handsome job at protecting us from the rain. The warm, humid air was apparently comfortable to Shiori, who'd just finished swimming. Unfolding her arms, she smiled, "It's warm."

"It might rain soon, the teacher said, and we stopped. But it rained faster than the teacher expected."

Moving aside pots on the ledge, we sat down.

"There's no helping getting wet in the pool, but it would be tragic if the uniforms got wet, she said. I hope everyone got on the bus before it rained."

Shiori took a sports towel out from a vinyl bag and wiped rain from my hair. The scent of the pool that was soaked into the towel drifted in the air for a moment, but that vanished quickly.

"I'm fine, wipe your hair first."

The reason why I said that was because I didn't want her to know how I felt. When Shiori wiped my hair, my heart started beating so fast I didn't know what to do.

As told, Shiori gathered her hair, flipped it over her shoulder and patted it down with her towel. Watching her absorb the moisture out of her hair with her towel, I just sat there, not knowing what I should do, nor what I wanted to do.

Not knowing how I was feeling, Shiori yawned slightly, and then began drifting into sleep.

She must be tired.

Without waking her, I moved myself closer to her.

A violent rainstorm passes quickly.

Inside the greenhouse, locked in by rain, I felt Shiori, with no one stopping me. Just this instant, Shiori was all mine.

Why were we born in different bodies?

Why couldn't we fuse together to be one living being?

Feeling Shiori's long breaths, I absentmindedly grabbed a line of our hair and braided it together. But the hair, being of different color and texture, quickly separated the moment I let go. Bored, I even tried twisting the hair into ropes, but that didn't help.

For some reason, I became obstinate, and made a braided cord with our hair. Two lines of Shiori's hair, one line of mine. And finally, our hair became one.

"What are you doing?"

Shiori asked, with sleepy eyes.

"No, nothing. You can sleep some more, I'll wake you up when it stops raining."

"Okay."

Not satisfied with just hair, I slid my fingers in between Shiori's fingers. That tickles, giggled Shiori as she squirmed, but she didn't shake me off.

Please, rain, don't stop.

I close my eyes, too.

Please, rain, don't stop.

The darkness shielded us from everyone's sight. Shiori's palpitations, her warmth, and her breath were all that was certain.

I wanted to be like this forever.

I half-believed that time would honestly stop like this.

Autumn Love

Part 1.

As time passed, Shiori meant more and more to me.

September, where the shadow of summer had not yet fully receded.

I had trouble adapting to the peaceful day-by-days, despite the fact that it hadn't changed since before the break. This campus, which provided me glittered, warm days all through summer, suddenly felt suffocating. Because we were in different grades, our time together was limited, no matter how close to each other we were. Whenever I became free, I wanted to see Shiori. I began thinking about Shiori all through class, too.

Naturally, I began wishing I could melt into Shiori, to be absorbed into her.

What is this feeling?

What lies in wait at the end of this path, as I want more and more for someone else?

I couldn't understand what was different about this feeling from a heterosexual relationship.

I loved Shiori's mind. The body was simply a vessel, an accessory, something to encase the valuable good.

But I became confused.

I want to be with Shiori.

I don't want to let go of Shiori.

I want to become one with Shiori.

What is this feeling?

I read through tons of romance stories. Maybe there would be someone that understood how I felt, and could explain how I felt. But in the end, it simply made me despise books.

Even the most masterful of stories were simply textbooks about events that had occurred to the author.

I read stories about homosexual love, but my answer was still never to be found.

Then I began reading books about biology and reproduction.

In the end, all I thought was that, maybe, the traffic light inside me had broken. If heterosexual love is born out of the desire to produce children, then how about our relationship, where it was impossible to take half of our genes and produce a child? Why are we so drawn to each other? I didn't know.

Even the moon seemed to be bearing down on me. I never thought about not being a girl, but I began seriously questioning why gender exists.

I seriously, seriously envied the hermaphrodite worms.

Part 2.

Without an answer, the season turned its page to the school festival, so I began attending the meetings at the Rose Mansion.

Despite wanting to be together, Shiori was needed by her class to work on their exhibit, so she was always stuck in her classroom until late. Even if I was willing to boycott my class for Shiori, I couldn't request the other way around. That said, I wasn't interested in helping my class with their exhibit either, so I killed time by wandering around campus, until Shiori finished. That's when Yōko caught me and dragged me to the Rose Mansion.

"If you're not doing anything, come help."

The onee-sama welcomed me, not saying anything about my usual attitude. While they probably had tons they wanted to say, they made it feel like I was simply interacting with people whom I'd been with every day. Everyone at the Rose Mansion acted this way.

On one hand it made me happy, on the other hand it felt like they were being too considerate, so I had trouble accepting their feelings. Anyways, I went to the Rose Mansion on a daily basis to kill time.

Attending the meetings for the school festival preparation wasn't as boring as I expected.

That sharp, perfect Ogasawara Sachiko was actually extremely hateful of boys, and Hasekura Rei, Eriko's little sister, actually was a lot more of a girl than she looked, and I enjoyed myself interacting with the true personalities of the first-years.

That's when I thought.

In truth, it's supposed to be unacceptable that Rosa Gigantea en bouton doesn't have a sœur by this point. While I would have flat-out refused, if people'd tried to force me, no one bothered to make me act. At best, it was only Yōko's meaningful stare. Onee-sama was probably fending for me, but I didn't know how to repay it.

Once, I suggested to onee-sama that she should cut ties with me and find another sister. I had no intention of making Shiori my sister, and I couldn't exchange vows with another person just for show.

"No."

Onee-sama laughed once and rejected.

"I'm not a pitiful grandmother that simply wants to see her grandchild once. I don't care who becomes Rosa Gigantea after you. But please don't break our promise. Until I graduate, you're going to be by my side."

If I became a third-year and had no sister, I'd just cross that bridge when I got to it, onee-sama said, as she played with my hair. So there's no need to fret yourself. Just walk the path you chose.

Everyone had gone home by the time we had that conversation, and onee-sama's words soaked into my heart. Once again I realized how worthy onee-sama was of the title "Rosa Gigantea." I didn't think I'd be able to say such kind words when I became a third-year.

The school festival ended peacefully, and the Yamayurikai-sponsored play received favorable opinions.

I resumed keeping my distance from the Rose Mansion when Yōko grabbed me in the hallway.

"What?"

"Oh don't look at me like that, like I'm the plague or something."

You're not? I imagined asking. She must have sensed it, as Yōko laughed, bitterly.

"You seem to hate me quite a bit… Well, I don't blame you. I'm clumsy, so I can't take care of you as well as Rosa Gigantea."

"What part of you is clumsy?"

Meddlesome, mannered, honor student, beautiful. She looked like a complete mistress, and she still claimed to be clumsy with other people?

"Come with me, just this once."

Without waiting for an answer, Yōko began walking. I still had time before I was to meet Shiori. So I reluctantly followed her.

“Do you remember what I said before?”

Confirming there was no one in the area, Yōko invited me into the courtyard.

“Another sermon?”

I expected it, but it killed me. I didn’t like other people talking to me about Shiori, and when it was Yōko, for some reason, it agonized me the most.

“I said before that you should keep your distance.”

“Did you.”

“I still think it. No, rather, I feel stronger about it, now. You should cool your head and re-think your intimacy with Shiori-san.”

It felt a bit lonely in the courtyard. The flowers that were so vibrant during spring and summer were gone, and only the wild chrysanthemum flowers were in scarce bloom.

“You don’t know anything about us.”

It was just meant as a short check, what I told Yōko.

“Then, what do you know about Shiori-san?”

I stumbled, not expecting the counter.

“What…”

I knew. Shiori’s pure soul, her clear, striking voice, her divine face. –What more did I need to know?

“It might be a bother, but listen. I don’t think you should go any further.”

“Yes, it is a bother. Why’re you telling me this, anyways?”

“Because I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Yōko said something completely unexpected. I didn’t understand why that would cross her mind. Me, hurt? How?

“It looks to me like you’ve devoted everything to Shiori-san. Have you two even talked about the future? Shiori-san is probably

strong, so it's alright for her, but Sei, have you even thought about the damage you'll take when Shiori-san is gone?"

"Future? Shiori gone?"

Yōko began saying phrase after phrase, like she was a jack-in-the-box, surprising me over and over again.

Indeed, we'd never talked about the future.

But at the very least, our relationship would be unchanged during school. As long as we went to the Lillian university after high school, we could stay together. I would be able to see Shiori every day. If Shiori wanted to attend a different school, I could take the exams to go there, too.

As long as we lived like that, eventually we'd hopefully find an answer to our relationship. I was procrastinating my answer for five years.

"You really haven't been told anything, have you."

Yōko's tone began shifting from sympathy to bewilderment. It was unpleasant. I didn't like being sympathized, but I hated feeling like people were speaking behind my back.

"What do you mean."

"After graduating high school, Shiori-san is to enter a convent, how do you not know this?"

"-What."

I didn't understand what Yōko was saying.

"She's going to become a sister."

I felt like my blood was being drained.

"Lies."

"Why would I lie? Just to make a friend hate me?"

"But..."

I'd never heard that, not once. Shiori was a devout Christian, but not all devout Christians had to become sisters. But at the same time, I thought it was the perfect fit for Shiori. After all, I'd first sought for help from her.

“…I need to ask Shiori.”

Yōko touched my shoulder, “Are you alright?” I wasn’t, but I managed to nod.

I needed to go to Shiori as soon as possible.

I don’t remember where and how I ran. But I realized I’d made it to the sanctuary, where we planned to meet.

Shiori wasn’t here. Usually this meant she was praying inside.

This time, that simply spurred my irritation. Usually I felt awed by her chastity, but now, that faith simply felt like an enemy, tearing my beloved away.

“Shiori.”

Entering, I harshly called her name. Shiori was in the same seat as she was when we first met, and she slowly stood up and turned around.

Noticing me take large strides toward her, she must have felt something, and she asked, “What happened?”

“When you graduate high school, you’re becoming a sister?”

Grabbing both of Shiori’s shoulders, I asked for the truth.

I wanted her to deny it. Even if it was a lie, I wanted Shiori to say that was wrong, I wanted her to become angry at the people who spread such a rumor, and I wanted her to apologize to me.

But the reality was harsh.

“Yes.”

Shiori looked straight at me and answered.

“It was decided upon before I entered this school.”

“Then why did you hide it from me!?”

“I wasn’t hiding it. I just didn’t know when to say it. And there was nothing we could do about it.”

“Nothing we could do about it-”

I didn’t know what else to say. No, I never had the right to intercede on it, from the start. Shiori didn’t tell me because it never mattered to me. I felt ridiculous, realizing that.

“I loved Shiori, but you didn’t?”

“I never-”

“You were just comfortable, knowing this was just until you graduated?”

Without knowing this all, I felt stupid, having seriously pondered over our future.

“I love Sei. You may not believe me anymore, but I’d never loved someone like this before, ever.”

“Then why?”

Why are you going to somewhere I can’t? If you love me, you don’t have to go away from me like this.

“I love Sei.”

Shiori said again.

“But… I’m sorry, my existence just ended up hurting you.”

In my stead, Shiori began crying. I didn’t think I was that fragile. But I realized that Shiori’s tears were enough to wound me, like Yōko had guessed.

“You have to become a sister, no matter what!?”

With lingering affection, I persisted.

“If you love me, tell me you won’t. Don’t disappear from me.”

“Sei…”

I was unsightly. But no matter how unsightly I became, I didn’t want to give up.

“You’re picking God over me? There are others that’ll become sisters, but I only have Shiori! You’re going to abandon me!?”

“It was my wish to become a sister. I decided it when my parents died.”

I wasn’t a good enough person to rejoice in a friend who found what she wanted to do. It was different from a friend who went to study overseas, because there was hope that she would come back. But Shiori was going to walk through the convent gates, determined to present her life to God. She would never come back to me.

“Please, don’t criticize me like that.”

Shiori looked away.

“Tell me you’ll stop.”

I sidestepped back in front of her.

“I already decided.”

“Then why can’t you look in my eyes and say it? Isn’t it because you’re still thinking!?”

“No-”

I began hating Shiori for sliding back, so I chased her and grabbed her.

“Shiori.”

I love you, I said, and I kissed her.

“…Stop.”

As we touched, a sharp pain ran through my face. It seemed like I’d be slapped by a resisting Shiori.

“Maria-sama is watching…!”

Right behind Shiori was a statue of Maria-sama, casting a benevolent smile upon us.

“Is that your answer…?”

Shiori didn’t say anything. But she looked straight at me, breathing deeply.

“Alright.”

I nodded and turned away from Shiori.

Suddenly, I understood everything. I lost to Maria-sama.

The Maria-sama that I derided for being a 2,000-year-old ghost.

To a constructed statue. Me.

It was so absurd I couldn’t even cry.

Deep down, I hoped Shiori would stop me, but I slowly walked away from the sanctuary.

I never heard Shiori’s voice.

And I never turned around.

The Last Flower of Winter, and Then

Part 1.

I didn't feel like doing anything, after that day.

My compulsion to study for Shiori vanished, so of course, my attitude in class became horrible and I don't need to explain my quiz scores.

I was called to the staff room numerous times, asked to explain what was going on. My behavior wasn't good to begin with, and I was never very harmonious with my classmates, but the moment my grades fell apart, the teachers turned around began trying to "guide" me, and it disgusted me.

If I could answer, my grades fell apart because I broke up with the first-year student Kubo Shiori, the teachers would probably be surprised. While I was being lectured, I just thought about that sort of thing. If I actually paid attention to things like "you have the talent to do well," my ears would rot.

Of course, reality and daydreams were different, so I never said a word about Shiori. My grades were a result of my own profligacy.

Even if we never met, I couldn't forget about Shiori. Yōko must be satisfied, knowing that we fought, and broke up. But my feelings contradicted our physical separation, and I yearned longingly for her.

The second semester exams ended, and one day in the following exam break. I received a summons from school.

I didn't want to go to school during the break, but my mom paled at hearing about my being summoned and forced me into the car.

I braced myself for receiving a lecture about my exam grades being bad, but it felt wrong. Because it was during the break, and I was summoned along with my mother, so it had to be something far more serious.

My mother and I were lead to the guidance office, a solemn room next to the staff room. I felt goose-bumps when I saw who were waiting: my middle-aged male homeroom teacher, the young female homeroom teacher for the first-year pine class, and two sisters. One was the guidance office sister, and the other was the school principal.

When I saw Shiori's homeroom teacher, I felt like I knew what was coming. Today's discussion wouldn't be solely about my grades. I didn't know how they found out, but it was evident Shiori and I's relationship was an issue.

When we walked in, the door was closed, and locked from inside. So I knew Shiori wasn't going to be called today. Perhaps she'd already been called, a different time. But I couldn't speak Shiori's name and ask. Rather than be apathetic, as usual, I felt obligated to pay attention to everything.

After greetings, the homeroom teacher pulled out my semester grades and my attendance records and showed them to my mother.

My mother thought I was an honor student, I guess, because she shrieked when she saw them, and asked if there was a mistake.

"Perhaps. After all, Satō-san was originally a model student."

After scaring my mother, the homeroom teacher began praising me. A person who's going to lead the student council next year, a person with many honor-student friends. And then he said there seemed to be a reason why I turned downhill, and he mentioned Shiori's name.

The way I saw it, it felt like he protected his teaching skills, laying down the first strike by mentioning her name. Like she was a witch, he spoke her name like the name of evil. He probably couldn't think of any reason other than Shiori.

"Is that true, Sei-chan?"

My mother yelled, hysterical.

“It’s not Shiori’s fault.”

I spoke not to my mother, not to my homeroom teacher, but to the principal. No one else mattered to me except the principal, who knew about Shiori.

“I don’t understand why you have to link Shiori and my grades. If anything went wrong, it was all my fault, not Shiori.”

“Kubo Shiori said the same. That it was her fault, not yours.”

The principal seemed to know everything. But she still called me here, with my mother.

For the first time, I regretted my shallowness. Even if I broke up with Shiori, I should have paid attention in class. As long as I was an honor student, my homeroom teacher wouldn’t have squealed like this. And if he didn’t, the principal wouldn’t have found out. Even if she might have overlooked another student, she felt directly responsible for anything to do with Shiori, as she was supposed to be her away-from-home mother.

I tearfully defended Shiori, but the homeroom teacher simply became even more arrogant.

Shiori’s homeroom teacher seemed to have lost out in experience, as she simply closed her eyes, silently waiting. I grew irritated, thinking she should defend her own student.

In the end, I was released, just given a strict warning. They wouldn’t expel me or anything just because of grades, but there was such a gap between my first and second-semester grades that they wanted to shake some sense into me. Apparently I’d barely managed to squeeze out of the red for all of my tests, and was about to break the record for the worst scores, ever.

“School life isn’t just about studying, but I wonder if it’s lonesome to become absorbed into one, single thing.”

The principal’s words felt like a finishing blow.

I understood. My mother, and other teachers and students would never understand. But the principal, she saw through Shiori and I's relationship.

I didn't know what was going to happen to me, starting tomorrow.

Part 2.

When I got home, I called Shiori's dorm. At first, my mother was too agitated and ranted insults at Shiori, but after a while she seemed to have finished venting and let me return to my room. I was too tired to care.

Shiori was not at the dorm. She'd requested a leave of absence two days ago, and hadn't returned since.

I then called the convent at Lillian. But they told me Shiori hadn't come. At that point, I had no idea where Shiori could be. I was at a dead end. I didn't know how to get in touch with her relatives in Nagasaki.

I just wanted to hear Shiori's bright voice. Even if she coldly hung up, if I could apologize for making her go through all this, I would have been satisfied.

I called the dorm every day, asking whether Shiori's returned, or if they knew where she went, but I couldn't even find out where she was, much less get in contact with her. And the closing ceremony in preparation for winter vacation came.

I expected it. My grades were considerably worse than they were during first semester. At Lillian, we were to have a Mass at noon, and the speaker was a guest Father from outside. It wasn't obligatory, so we were free to attend or not at our own accord, but I headed toward the sanctuary in the hopes of seeing Shiori. If she'd come to school, she'd definitely show up at Mass.

I was a lot more discrete than I thought I would be. The danger of bothering Shiori with anything I did suppressed my wildness.

As I expected, Shiori was at Mass. She sat near the front, with a serene look.

I took my distance and gazed at her. I was moved by her peaceful look. To me, Shiori looked closer to God than the Father.

Yōko came to my class to invite me to the Rose Mansion. They were going to have a Christmas party.

“Rei-chan said she baked some cookies. That might be reason enough to stop by, I think.”

“Yes…”

I’ll go if I feel like it, I told her, and I left her.

“We’ll be waiting.”

Yōko’s voiced seemed to splatter against my back.

Still wearing my indoor shoes, I ran to the sanctuary. We’d made no promises or anything, but I felt like I would see Shiori there.

Shiori was waiting for me, leaning against the sanctuary.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Shiori looked up when I spoke, and she leant into my arms surprisingly naturally.

“Shiori?”

I was confused, feeling a mix of happiness and surprise, and I pulled her to the back of the sanctuary, where less people were to come.

And then we kissed, and I don’t know if one of us lead the other. It was like we were communicating to each other our feelings, feelings that were too complex to describe with words.

“I kept thinking of you, when we were apart… even while I was praying, I kept thinking of you. I didn’t know why it turned out like this… and I felt pathetic.”

After calming down, Shiori began talking. About how she’d stayed at the principal’s room in the convent during the break. About how she met with her uncle, who came to Tokyo, and how they spoke about the future.

“The principal figured out what was between us, and she was greatly worried. She was vehement about me not taking a misstep. I understood what she tried to say, and I thought I shouldn’t be with you, and I promised with her, that I wouldn’t see you again, but it was no good.”

The dam broke the moment we saw each other. We were swept along by a great wave, not knowing where we would land. It took our all to hold onto each other's hand, so that we wouldn't lose sight of each other, no matter where we ended up.

"What's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know."

But we knew we'd be torn apart, at this rate. We became lonely all of a sudden, and embraced each other tightly. Feeling each other's warmth and heart beats, we calmed down, eased by knowing we weren't alone.

"Shiori, let's run away."

I must have thought about that, long ago. That we would have to throw away our current lifestyle and build ourselves a fresh home.

"…What?"

"Don't worry, we'll be okay, I know it. Let's live together, where no one can interfere."

"Live…?"

"Yes."

I asked Shiori if she didn't want to. If she didn't want to go with me.

"Of course I wouldn't. I'll go anywhere with you, Sei. But-"

I placed my index finger on Shiori's lips.

"We can."

There was no way of knowing if we can or can't without at least trying. I didn't want to give up before we tried.

"Bring the minimal amount of things you need. Let's go now."

I wanted to run away with Shiori right there and then. I knew deep down that if we took too long, our resolve would wither. Running away from home was something you had to do through momentum, I thought.

But reality came with its own set of problems, like needing to change out of our uniforms to stand out less, and we had to find out where to run, and how much money it would take. So I had to go home once, too, and grab my cash card.

Paying heed to being seen, we decided to leave the campus separately. And we'd meet up in the evening with our belongings.

"Okay."

Shiori and I split up behind the sanctuary.

"See you."

Shiori waved her hand slightly and watched me return to the campus.

See you.

I'll never forget that smile.

I whole-heartedly believed that I would see that smile again, a few hours later. I had no reason to doubt it.

Part 3.

I arrived at the meeting place 40 minutes earlier than we'd decided.

At the 3rd and 4th line platform of M Station. We picked the closest point of the advance direction, so we'd see each other easily.

Shiori wasn't there yet.

I backtracked a bit and sat down on a bench and looked at the timetable I'd bought at the station building. There was only one set of stairs to get to this station, so Shiori would have to pass by this bench.

I even wore a wristwatch today, despite how much I hated keeping track of time, and waited for Shiori.

But I didn't dislike the time I spent waiting for Shiori. Contrary to that, I actually enjoyed it.

We'd have to discuss where we'd go, first. We'd put marks on the timetable, finding the furthest places we could go without having to change trains, and think about the possibility of stepping off at Shinjuku Station or Tokyo Station, and as I mulled over those things, the time we'd decided on came.

I closed the timetable and placed it in my bag. It'd be a pain if my mother became suspicious, so I only carried enough to make me look like I was going shopping. I had a change of underwear and my passport and identification, so I could just buy whatever else I needed.

I lied, saying I was going to the Christmas party with the Yamayurikai, and left home. My mother didn't object, because I was supposed to go be with my trusted onee-sama and Yōko, who was well-received by adults.

Don't be too late, and have fun-. Her send-off made me feel a bit bad.

The orange-colored train stopped in front of me, and like a deep sigh, unloaded passengers, then swallowed other passengers and ran off toward the east. In the space of a few minutes, I saw this scene repeat itself.

Sometimes I'd see salary men carrying big, square boxes. Oh yeah, today's Christmas Eve. The trees around the south-end of the station were decorated with lighting, and it looked brilliant, as if the normally plain scene had been brushed up with make-up.

They knew the trains would be jam-packed, they could just buy the cake after they got off-. I felt exasperated, and looked at my watch.

Five twelve.

(Christmas cake.)

I hated the decorations, like the fir trees, the cabins, the angels, those things that embroidered Christmas cakes. I also hated the chocolate plates that read Merry Christmas. That's why my father always elected to order a cake weeks in advance, keeping in mind all of my dislikes, and had it carefully delivered.

But we'd stopped doing Christmas parties. After taking hold of a new company three years ago, my father had become busy, and I wasn't childish enough to eagerly await cake.

Even when it became five fourty, Shiori didn't show up.

They'd picked the time, giving ample room to prepare. So she was definitely late.

Maybe the roads were packed because of Christmas Eve, delaying her bus. Or maybe she forgot where we were supposed to meet.

Just in case, I walked across the platform. As I walked, I peeked into the first and second platform as well as the fifth and sixth platform, but there was no one like Shiori.

Maybe she was delayed by the principal. Restless, I picked up the receiver at a nearby public phone. I remembered the phone number to the convent, as I'd called it so many times during the break.

Thinking they might deliberately hide her from me, I used her classmate Sachiko's name. But around four, Shiori had politely told them she was stepping out.

Without dropping the receiver, I called her dorm. If she'd left at four, she should be here by now. Maybe Shiori forgot something important and backtracked to her dorm.

But Shiori wasn't there. But I found out she hadn't taken a quick leave, but had vacated the dorm completely.

I didn't remember anything about preparing to go somewhere.

Then, why?

She left her dorm, and she vacated the convent, where was Shiori trying to go?

And where was she now?

Time mercilessly kept ticking away, and it became seven.

I thought, Shiori wasn't going to come anymore.

But I couldn't leave the platform because I held a sliver of hope. Maybe Shiori would come walking down those stairs. I couldn't let myself give up.

Even though I could guess she wouldn't come, I didn't know why.

Maybe she changed her mind, or maybe an accident befell her. My mind was on verge of short-circuiting.

Everything was becoming such a pain. I wanted to disappear, today. I don't need tomorrow. Having nowhere to go, I kept sitting on the bench.

Once by a drunkard, once by the security guard, I was okay when they spoke to me, but when two office lady-ish women stopped and asked, "Are you feeling okay?" I was on the verge of tears.

"I'm alright, I'm waiting for a friend."

I answered, holding back tears. I wished they would just go away. I knew if I started crying, I wouldn't be able to stop.

"I guess it's a penalty game?"

Maybe they were a bit drunk, because they happily joked to each other as they went to the wickets. It felt cold, and I wrapped my arms around myself. I pulled my legs to myself, lowered my chin, and tried to make myself less wind-resistant, but the cold never went away. Even the coat, which I'd coaxed out of my parents in the stead of a birthday and Christmas present, with its thick material couldn't warm me. I needed the warmth of Shiori's hands.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to see Shiori, even if it was just a dream.

I woke up, feeling someone touch my shoulder.

I was groggy. I'd lost track of time.

I first started to glance at my watch, but I looked up instead. Whoever had shaken me away was still standing over me.

"It's past eleven. I don't think you can get out of Tokyo anymore tonight, can you?"

Looking amazing, my onee-sama stood over me, smiling lightly.

"Why…"

"I came to pick you up, in Shiori-san's stead."

"Shiori!?"

I looked around. I was hallucinating, just from hearing her name.

"Shiori-san isn't here. Shiori-san said she's not going with you."

"Lies! Someone hid Shiori, didn't they!? Where is she? I'll save her!"

I was confused, and kept searching for Shiori on the platform.

"No one hid her. She chose her path herself."

Onee-sama took a leaflet out of her pocket and handed it to me. Impatiently unfolding the neatly folded sheet with my numbed fingers, I realized it was written with Shiori's handwriting.

The first line threw me into a pit of despair.

"I'm sorry. I can't go with you."

It proved Shiori had chosen it on her own will. The letter spanned several sheets, ripped out of her notebook, and spelled out Shiori's feelings completely. I read through all of her words once, but I couldn't understand them. All I knew was that Shiori had cast me aside. That was all.

"Shiori-san came to the station. She saw you sitting here on the platform, and then realized she couldn't go with you."

"If she came… why didn't she tell me 'I can't go' directly?"

If she told me directly, maybe I could take it. I could have understood her better than hearing her words through paper.

“Because she might waver if she spoke to you.”

“Waver?”

“Of course? No matter how mature she may seem, she’s just a first-year in high school. It’s an age where you’re destined to sway. And the same goes for you, too.”

Onee-sama grabbed my hands and said, “Let’s go home.” I let myself be embraced by onee-sama, and we climbed the stairs, and passed the wickets.

“Is Shiori going somewhere?”

“Yes. Far away. She discussed it with the principal over the break, and decided to transfer. She already departed.”

From this station-. Onee-sama told me, and turned me around to face the station.

What was I doing then. I might have been dreaming about what we would do together, not knowing it would end like this.

“It’s my fault…”

A single tear rolled down my cheek, even though I’d been trying so hard not to.

“It’s a result she consented to.”

Uneasiness, despair, loneliness, anger, onee-sama caught all of the motions pouring out of me at once. Unable to stop myself, I kept crying in onee-sama’s chest.

“But, if she’d never met me-”

Shiori might have lived peacefully at Lillian for three years.

“Maybe. But it was a good thing you two met. Life is a lesson. As long as you think, it’s a good thing we met, in the future, it’s alright.”

“That sort of future will never come.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not like you died. Wounds heal, over time.”

But I felt like I’d died. Because Shiori was no longer by my side.

We went to the southern exit. The illuminations glittered through my tears, like the night stars.

“But I’m here for you, am I not?”

“What?”

“Oh dear, did you really think I only loved your face?”

I was so surprised by onee-sama’s words that, for an instant, I stopped crying.

“…No?”

“How rude. That was just a way of not being a burden to you. After all, I’ve always been good at handling you, you know this.”

“But onee-sama will graduate.”

“But I’m not the only one worried about you. See?”

Yōko was standing where she pointed. Standing in front of a 24-7 family restaurant and warming her hands with her breath, Yōko looked up, noticing us coming.

“Oh, Yōko-chan, she must have gone stupid worrying about you, I told her to wait inside the store.”

Onee-sama cackled.

That Yōko trotted over and just glared at me, wordlessly.

“Sorry, for making you worry.”

For once, I was honest. Because I knew from her face how much I’d worried her.

“Seriously.”

Yōko looked relieved, took a small pouch from her pocket, and stuffed what was in it into my mouth.

“Rei-chan’s cookie.”

The cookies she said were worthwhile enough to stop by the party for.

“…Mm.”

They weren’t freshly baked, but because they’d been in her pocket, they were warm. It melted sweetly in my tear-filled mouth, and it felt so delicious I started crying again.

“Let’s go, then.”

Onee-sama wrapped an arm around Yōko, too, and began walking.

“Where?”

“My house. I already called Sei’s mother to tell her you were staying over. Let’s re-do the party, with the three of us.”

“What…”

“No complaining. Onee-sama’s orders are to be immediately followed. A fun winter vacation starts tomorrow, so let’s party silently into the night.”

I’ll never be a match for onee-sama, my whole life, I thought.

Even if I’d gone home, I wouldn’t be able to sleep in my cold bed.

The wound of losing Shiori was big and deep, but that there was someone by my side, trying to understand me, I wondered how much of a comfort that was.

As we were talking past the roadside trees, onee-sama’s wristwatch alarm suddenly rang.

“Happy birthday!”

The two people other than me suddenly shouted.

Today, as of December 25, I’d become a year older.

Part 4.

I cut my hair.

It wasn't easy to cut off my feelings for Shiori, but it hurt to see the long hair that once touched Shiori.

I lopped it all off, so it felt really cold around my neck at first, but I got used to it. Just like my body, maybe my soul will get used to the cold of having no Shiori.

When the new semester rolled around, onee-sama dragged me off from one place to another, giving me no rest at all working Yamayurikai duties. I'd slacked off on duties all the way through my second-year second semester, so it was like giving me an extreme, compact course on my job, and it was something I'd brought on myself. Of course, even if I became Rosa Gigantea next year, as long as Yōko was Rosa Chinensis, the Lillian Girls' Academy Yamayurikai would be safe.

I was also forced to completely change how I felt about Yōko.

I found out later that it was Yōko that ran into Shiori at M Station, and that it was she who chased down Shiori, who was trying to vanish, and forced her to write the letter. She knew that even if Shiori vanished, I wouldn't believe onee-sama and Yōko, so I thought it was a pertinent treatment. After seeing Shiori off on a bullet train, she returned to M Station and contacted onee-sama.

I never asked where Shiori went. I simply hoped she was living peacefully.

Halfway through February, I'd calmed down enough to re-read Shiori's letter.

And gradually I began to understand how Shiori felt.

For example.

"At the time, I truly wanted to live with you. But when I saw you sitting on the platform, I was overcome with distress. If I departed with you, what lay in wait at the end? I didn't want to hurt you anymore, just because I met you."

When I first read it, I was angered, because I thought Shiori leaving me was the most painful thing she could do. But that was wrong.

Even if we'd run away together, what could we do, as powerless as we were? As Shiori said, what lay in wait was probably not a bright and sunny future.

In retrospect, at the end of the road for us was probably death. At some point, I would probably have chosen to die with Shiori. And she, too, felt the same.

So I decided to live, to carry out onee-sama's words.

That wounds heal.

That the future liquidates the past.

March.

We sent off the third-years.

"Listen, okay? You're the type to get absorbed by things, so when you find something precious, make yourself take a step back."

That was onee-sama's last bit of advice for me. Onee-sama was to attend a different university come April, so if anything were to happen, I wouldn't be able to depend on her anymore.

"I behaved like a spoiled child all this time, I don't know how to repay onee-sama…"

I appreciated her, from the bottom of my heart, for taking care of such a bad child. I felt extremely gracious for everything onee-sama did for me.

"It's okay. After all, that's what an onee-sama is supposed to do. If you really want to pay me back, return it to someone else. – Like, your future sister."

"A sister? Now?"

I snickered. Having come this far, it seemed like a ridiculous notion.

"Oh?"

It might be too early to use the phrase, but onee-sama smiled like a cherry blossom.

Unable to wait for the dream-like scenery that would unfold from these trees a month later, I looked up.

I knew the blue skies, visible through the naked branches, stretched on forever and ever.

Postscript

For example, after cake, you're served Japanese confectionaries. –Just an example, remember.

Then, what are you going to drink? You'd have to think about it, wouldn't you.

Rosa Gigantea might answer, "ground Blue Mountain."

Hello, this is Konno.

Umm, well I'm sure you could tell by the table of contents, but this time it was a double-feature.

The one subtitled "Forest of Thorns" is more of the usual story, and it's basically straight after "Yellow Rose Revolution."

"The White Flower Petal" is more of an extra story, I guess. When Rosa Gigantea was still Rosa Gigantea en bouton. But they're technically supposed to both be of the same story, so it's not like a supplement. I'd prefer if you read "Forest of Thorns" and then "The White Flower Petal," in that order. Oh, right, because it's a double-feature, I'm sure some people were hoping for "that" piece that ran in the magazine. Sorry, I'll get to it, I promise, but I've been slowing in moving to the future...

Plus, if I bring out Noriko and Tōko, Rosa Gigantea and others have to graduate. Well, even if it's slow, I am moving forward, so please, don't hold your hopes TOO high.

Speaking of which, about Kashiwagi Suguru.

There've been both extremes about him in fan letters. Some want him to show up again, while others don't even want me to mention his name (hahah). Hmm, I wonder if those people don't even want to see his name in a postscript.

When I made the character Kashiwagi, I honestly thought, "feh, what a horrible person," and I figured that would be the end of that. The kind you forget quickly, you know.

But because of that, I feel obligated as the author to be kind to him. So I made back stories for him. Like, he's not really the type of guy you want as a friend, but when you're in trouble, he's there to lend a hand, you know?

So, it might be a surprise that I intend to bring him back in the future. I mean, he only showed up in volume 1. And I promise, it's only in small chunks.

But, I haven't decided on how or when.

After all, he IS Sachiko's cousin, so he'll pop up when he needs to, and he'll be home (or at school?) otherwise.

As for names.

Rosa Gigantea's real name finally popped up, didn't it. Actually, Rosa Chinensis' real name shows up once, too. Rosa Foetida only had her first name revealed, I think? She has a surname, too, but I don't think I need to forcibly reveal it just yet.

Anyways, that's all fine and dandy.

Some people might not care, but "Odani no Kata," who showed up in Yumi's history textbook is Oda Nobunaga's sister. Some people might be more familiar with calling her Oichi no Kata. But she was Odani no Kata in the textbook I used to study, so I used that instead. She lived in Odani castle, so Odani no Kata.

But historical women are pitiful because they're recorded by their parents' land or by aliases. I wonder what's worse, for the author of those 31-syllable poems. "OO's mother" or "XX's wife?" I don't like either. So I guess I wouldn't care.

Anyways.

Usually I'd give a teaser for my next piece, but I'll pass, this time.

It's not that I'm being quizzical and hiding it, but rather, I haven't decided on what to write, yet. I need to see my supervisor soon.

I hope I can publish a book around summertime.

With that, farewell, everyone.

Konno Oyuki

PS.

Blue Mountain is expensive, so I think I'd go with Mandarin.