

COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

ウァレンティーヌスの贈り物(前編)

今野緒雪



集英社

ロサ・フェティダ・アン・ブットン
黄薔薇のつぼみ
(支倉 令)

ロサ・フェティダ
黄薔薇さま
(鳥居江利子)

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

ロサ・ギガンティア・アン・ブットン
白薔薇のつぼみ
(藤堂志摩子)

ロサ・ギガンティア
白薔薇さま
(佐藤 聖)



主要登場人物紹介

ロサ・キネンシス・アン・ブットン
紅薔薇のつぼみ
(小笠原祥子)



ロサ・キネンシス・アン・ブットン フェティ・スール
紅薔薇のつぼみの妹
(福沢祐巳)

ロサ・キネンシス
紅薔薇さま
(水野蓉子)

Volume 5

Valentine's Gift - Part 1

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 are the deep-coloured school uniform.

Walking slowly as to not disturb the plaits in their skirts and so as not to 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 much an undignified sight that students do not wish it 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.

Now, Lillian Girls' Academy welcomed February with open arms.

When it comes to February, the first event that comes to mind is Valentine's Day.

Who was that? Who said 'setsubun'?

Think about it. Wearing an ogre mask, shouting and throwing beans at each other, don't you think elementary school is around when you grow past that? As proof, look at the department stores during this season. The big space set aside for groceries isn't enough, they even use the display tables usually saved for bags and scarf sales for chocolate. It's never the beans used for throwing, those are usually just piled in a wagon at the supermarket.

And of course, the taste of sweet chocolate that melts in your mouth wins always. Also, giving chocolate to someone you like feels so much better than throwing beans at an ogre.

What? How does Valentine's Day come into the picture for an all-girls' school?

No worries. Gender doesn't get in the way of that precious feeling of "thinking of someone." Even the most stubborn of teachers avert their gazes that day.

That's why the fourteenth of February is the perfect chance for, along with chocolate, presenting the feelings you stowed away deep into your heart, or for showing your appreciation for everything the other person has done for you.

Surprise Chocolate

Research

Part 1.

“Valentine’s Day?”

Yoshino-san repeated after a blink.

“Aww, it’s that season already?”

Yumi had brought up the topic as they walked through the hallway toward the Rose Mansion after school.

Because, she thought, now that the student council elections were over, it was time to turn her attention to Valentine’s Day.

“Already? The department stores and supermarkets start fighting over Valentine’s Day about a month before the day.”

“Right, right... Less than three weeks.”

Yoshino-san, wearing gloves, bent her fingers and groaned. It was unusual, because Yoshino-san was always at least a step ahead of Yumi, so the fact that she’d forgotten about Valentine’s Day... after all, she talks about “first-strike victory” being her motto, so she was the type who’d already have thought things out by now.

“I guess people are built to not think about things they don’t like.”

“What?”

Yumi asked.

She’d been placing her hands over her ears to warm them, after using the disposable hand warmers in her pockets, so she didn’t hear it very well.

“Just as I said. Valentine’s Day bums me out.”

“Why? You don’t give Rei-sama chocolate?”

“Of course I do. Every year... Which means I have to give her chocolate this year, too.”

Yoshino-san seemed extremely depressed. Heavyhearted, and her legs must have become heavy, too, because she stopped dead in her tracks.

They'd just popped out into the courtyard. The Lillian Girls' Academy student council staff headquarters, the Rose Mansion, stood in their sights.

"Well, it's not like you must, but it'd be odd if an annual thing were to stop this year of all years, right?"

"Right, because she'd be stunned if I didn't give her a Valentine's gift after the 'Yellow Rose Revolution.' Considering Rei-chan's personality, anyway."

"You don't want to give her chocolate, Yoshino-san?"

As they spoke, they arrived at the Rose Mansion, but she gave no signs of wanting to enter yet, so they leaned against the door and continued their conversation. Yumi was actually really cold, but she brought the topic up herself, and it'd be horrible if Rei-sama were to hear them, so she endured it. Rei-sama would become depressed by the smallest things if Yoshino-san was involved.

"It's not that I don't want to give her something."

But in Yoshino-san's case, it was what she would give that was the problem.

"Because it's Rei-chan, you know? Can you imagine the pressure I feel? What am I supposed to do, in exchange for the chocolate cake that grows every year?"

"Eh, what? Rei-sama gives you a present, too?"

"Yes."

Apparently they exchanged chocolate pastry every year. And then they'd exchange candy and cookie on White Day the next month.

"Chocolate cake that grows every year..."

For a moment, Yumi felt envious, but then when she imagined being on the receiving end, she realized how much pressure that would be.

Yoshino-san's onee-sama, Hasekura Rei-sama, was the type of person with very-short hair waving around a shinai, so she might seem one way, but in truth she was a girl that absolutely loved baking snacks, so she was almost like a professional when it came to cookies and cake.

“It was alright so far, I mean, I used to have a sickly body, right? I don’t think she expected much, at all, so it was okay that I’d give her store-bought chocolate-”

But that wouldn’t work anymore.

And on top of that, Yoshino-san had the added burden of having broken up earlier, and then reconciling. So it wouldn’t look proper unless she opened the new chapter in their relationship with a flourish. Thus, Yoshino-san was feeling pressure from all sorts of angles. Maybe that’s why her subconscious had deliberately sealed away any thoughts about Valentine’s Day.

Of course, Rei-sama would probably be happy with any chocolate Yoshino-san would give her. So “not tolerating store-bought chocolate” was more Yoshino-san’s own will. And she was just cornering herself like that.

(...)

But Yoshino-san knew that. That’s why Yumi didn’t say anything. Even if they both thought it was sad, everyone has things they seriously ponder and worry about.

“I wonder why we’re stuck giving chocolate.”

White breath poured out of Yoshino-san’s mouth.

“I don’t think that’s the case? You could give something else. Like, something handmade.”

“Handmade?”

A twitch. Yoshino-san’s eyebrows furrowed.

“Ah...!”

Yumi thought, “Shoot!” the moment she said it, but it was too late. She’d wanted to lend her friend a hand, but instead she dunked her in a bog herself.

“Hand-knit sweaters? Or mufflers?”

Yoshino-san looked dejected as she spoke.

“...Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, it’s not Yumi-san’s fault.”



The gloves that were warming Yoshino-san's hands were handmade by Rei-sama. Not just her gloves, but the lap blanket she used during class, her winter zabuton covers, they were all handmade by Rei-sama.

When it came to Rei-sama, she wasn't just about baking, her knitting was also very professional. So when faced with someone like that, just what kind of handmade thing could you give? Gosh, with different onee-sama, you end up with vastly different worries, Yumi thought.

“Sorry I'm not any help.”

Lowering her shoulders, Yoshino-san reached for the doorknob.

“What?”

“This Valentine's Day. Yumi-san, you're giving Sachiko-sama chocolate, aren't you? And you wanted advice.”

“Wow! You see through everything.”

There's detective Yoshino for you. But when she praised her, she was given a bitter smile.

“Yumi-san's just too easy to guess.”

She mumbled, exasperated. Rosa Gigantea always teases her about it, but what she thinks is actually always revealed in her face.

When they opened the door, her skin felt slightly warmer, and they could faintly hear the friendly chatter from upstairs.

“Ah.”

They both heard their onee-sama's voices among the chatter, and with glittering eyes rushed to the stairs, vying to be first. Their cuffs of their skirts tossed so that if their onee-sama were to have seen them, they would have been scolded, “How naughty!”

Yumi's heart beat quickly at the thought of Valentine's Day.

Excitement and fascination mixed and made her feel restless.

And that happened around the end of January.

Part 2.

And a few days later.

“Valentine’s Day?”

Yumi didn’t expect anything to begin with, and Shimako-san tilted her head, asking, “What do you mean?”

“...Umm.”

Yumi thought while scratching her non-itchy head.

How predictable. Shimako-san was clearly not the kind of person who gave chocolate to people on the fourteenth of February every year.

“Oh, Yumi-san, even I know about Valentine’s Day.”

She giggled politely. Oh, that’s good, Yumi sighed, relieved. She didn’t know what she’d do if she had to explain Valentine’s Day from scratch.

“Saint Valentine, or Saint Valentinus, there’re lots of pronunciations, but in Japan they call him ‘Valentain’ don’t they.”

“Vale...?”

“Valentine. The name of an Italian saint that was martyred. February fourteen is a holiday for him.”

“Mmm.”

Shimako-san’s explanation sounded extraordinarily genuine and dignified. Regretfully, she wasn’t able to ask about this in the sanctuary. Instead, they were in the dressing room inside the gymnasium. It was the break-time before physical education, so the appearances of other students’ thighs and their underwears leapt into her eyes.

Yumi’d paused in the middle of changing for the conversation, so she hurriedly shed her petticoat and put on her knee-high, black spats. Then, she took off the three-quarter sleeved v-neck shirt that she wore instead of a one-piece or a **babashirt**, and put on a white collared gym shirt that had “1 Peach 33 Fukuzawa” sewed on to the front. And with her arms exposed, she felt goose bumps all over. Not that she could do anything about that, it was retribution for keeping herself too well cared for on a daily basis.

“I don’t know when or how the holiday arrived on Japanese shores, but chocolate is very unrelated.”

Having finished changing, herself, Shimako-san bundled her soft, cotton-like hair with a plain, thick black rubber band, and then tightened a hachimaki that matched our class color – peach. Shimako-san often looked soft and impossible to restrain, but in truth, she always walked around with a straight back, and no matter the weather, she carried herself without ever letting down. It is like that she’s always tense. She looked like such an angel, but you could never figure out what she is thinking, so in a way she is quite mysterious.

“Then, you’re not giving Rosa Gigantea chocolate?”

Lowering her voice, Yumi whispered in Shimako-san’s ear.

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

Shimako-san smiled, finally piecing together what Yumi had meant. She’d been asked, what are you going to do for Valentine’s Day? But Yumi thought, wouldn’t you normally immediately think about chocolate?

“Chocolate...”

“Yup. Shimako-san became Rosa Gigantea’s sister a little earlier than me, right? So I was wondering what you planned for Valentine’s Day.”

Would you call it research? She wanted to gather as much information as possible and come up with a masterful plan. It was the idea behind her asking around. But Yoshino-san was completely unreliable.

“...I’d not given it any thought.”

“Probably.”

She didn’t feel disappointed at all. Because Shimako-san was a question mark from the start, so she’d given up before she’d asked.

Yumi and Shimako-san's image of Valentine's Day was too different. After all, she talked about Saint Valetine. She'd probably never done something as mundane as sending a gift of chocolate... Probably not even to her father.

"I'm sorry I couldn't serve as a reference."

Shimako-san concluded the conversation the same way as Yoshino-san and stepped out of the dressing room.

Even with a sweatshirt and a jersey training pant, February physical education was tough. The light jogging to warm-up bodies didn't work, because cold air drifted through the space in the cloth, so it ended up being more of a war of attrition. Blowing hot air into her cupped hands, Yumi simply wanted to avoid jamming her fingers as she ran.

Because today, they were going to play basketball.

Part 3.

“Of course.” Tsutako-san laughed heartily.

“Yoshino-san and Shimako-san are both unique cases, Yumi-san’s in the wrong for trying to use them as an example.”

“Hmm.”

Yumi folded her arms and groaned; she didn’t need to be told that. It was the afternoon of the day Shimako-san had told her, “I’m sorry.” On the way to the science room for class changing, Tsutako-san pointed her pocket-sized camera at Yumi in the hallway.

“But there’s no point in asking me, either. Unfortunately, I have neither an older sister nor little sister.”

Yumi wouldn’t have even thought about asking, anyways.

“Tsutako-san, don’t you have anyone you look up to in your club, at least?”

“Nope.”

An immediate answer, after moving her face away from her camera. And then she said, “Who do you think I am?”

“The photography club ace, Takeshima Tsutako-san.”

“Exactly.”

Her frameless glasses glimmered.

“Do you think there’s someone in Lillian with better photography skills?”

Tsutako-san’s answer seemed a bit off the mark from the question. She’d taken “look up to” as “respect,” and then taken that to a “goal” perspective. Though in her case, it might be that the starting condition for a senpai would be someone better than her, so in a way, it wasn’t really that off.

“Oh, what a shame.”

“What?”

“Take it as an opportunity to be in the spotlight.”

“Like Yoshino-san? Please.”

Feeling daunted by just the prospects of it, Tsutako-san pulled her head back. Maybe she remembered the “Yellow Rose Revolution.” Speaking of which, Tsutako-san completely left the originators aside, and instead rebuked the follow-up break-up sisters.

Think about it, said Tsutako-san as her eyes glittered.

“Lillian is filled with wonderful students. Do you think I can narrow that down to a single person? First of all, think about what would happen if I found a sibling. What if an obstacle were to arise, like her demanding I only take pictures of her?”

“I see.”

Which meant Tsutako-san had resolved to be alone for the whole three years. What a splendid resolve, or something. Because on the other hand, it also meant she had no intention of changing her ways. Yumi thought she should re-think her peeping photos, though.

(However.)

As expected, Tsutako-san wouldn't be any help, either. Yumi reflexively sighed, and instead of an apology, Tsutako-san gave a point of advice.

“You might get advice if you ask Katsura-san and others, but it'd be a waste of effort to ask.”

“Why?”

“Oh, can't you imagine it now, the stereotypical Valentine's Day.”

“Mmm.”

True. –Though that's a bit rude to Katsura-san. But Katsura-san and the others really did try to live a fairy-tale school life. But maybe Valentine's Day would bring out something off the wall for them.

“Yumi-san, you should think about what you were actually looking for, and start over again.”

“What I was actually looking for?”

“Why're you gathering information. You know, because the person you're giving chocolate to is so big, right? So you want to set everything up perfectly, right? Then there's no point in asking normal students. Really, the only people who could possibly be of any help would be those in the Rose Mansion, am I right?”

“But Yoshino-san and Shimako-san were of no help.”

“Why do you have to ask first-years?”

“What? But I’m a first-year...”

Mumbled Yumi, and Tsutako-san, exasperated, lifted her index finger.

“Second-years and third-years experienced being first-years, too.”

She said.

Part 4.

“Chocolate for onee-sama? Yes, I gave her some last year, why?”

After finishing her cleaning duty, Yumi ran to the martial arts building at the back of the school and caught Rei-sama before club activities began.

“Ah, umm, I was hoping for some references. Umm, you didn’t... give her a super large chocolate cake, did you?”

“Oh come on. I can’t bring that to school.”

Rei-sama cackled, then mumbled, “Yoshino must have talked,” while looking proud. Oh, no. Rei-sama doesn’t get how Yoshino-san feels, at all. She wasn’t bragging about the super large chocolate cake, but rather quite the opposite.

But Yoshino-san’s agony wasn’t important here, so Yumi felt sorry for her, but decided to leave it aside.

“Indeed.”

She concurred, laughing, hahahah.

“Just a trite thing. Something that fits in a bag.”

Using her thumbs and index fingers, Rei-sama made a square. It was around the size of a book. Something that size could be called “trite,” and it would be perfectly safe to bring to school.

In a sense, her treatment of Yoshino-san and Rosa Foetida was wildly different, but on the other hand, the only person she could make a super large chocolate cake for was her neighbor. And of course, to Yoshino-san, that could also be called a “heavy burden.”

Finally, someone I could use as a reference, Yumi thought. Tsutako-san was right, after all. Indeed, things went smoother by asking people who were first-years last year. Plus, since it was in the past, there was the added bonus of knowing the effects. So she could ask the onee-sama who received the chocolate, and would be able to set up a perfect Valentine’s Day.

Last year, Rei-sama was the sister of a bouton, like Yumi, so she was the perfect person to ask. And only because there was no way she could ask Sachiko-sama, whom she was going to give the chocolate to.

“So what was it?”

She asked, excited. Pure chocolate by a famous chocolate company? Adult-flavored chocolate bonbons?

“What was it? Oh, the chocolate?”

In Yumi’s mind, she was already thinking back to the department store’s chocolate display. High-class chocolate in modest-looking boxes seemed like such a perfect fit.

“Umm, if I may ask, for reference’s sake.”

What would she do if she were told, they were dried-plum-sized chocolate worth several hundred yen? But the opponent was Sachiko-sama, so cheap chocolate might not fit her tastes. But at the same time, Yumi decided that if she’d have to use up her New Year’s money, she would, and that’s when Rei-sama answered.

“Bitter chocolate truffles. I think six in a box.”

“Truffles.”

What an expensive echo. The little, dried-plum-sized chocolate in the department window might have had that name too, yes, and they were absurdly expensive.

And Yumi, being a commoner, quickly began calculating in her head.

If they were 200 yen each, it’d be 1,200 yen.

300 yen would be 1,800 yen.

400 yen would be 2,400 yen.

500 yen would be- she stopped. She felt a bit faint. Because for a commoner, the thought of six balls of chocolate costing 3,000 yen was unbelievable.

Even though she attended a ladies' school, it was troublesome to be bundled up together. Because each household had different fortunes and assets. She knew this from the start, but when she visited Sachiko-sama's house over New Year's, it was really hammered home.

Even though they both lived in Japan, and both attended the same school, they were really, really different in terms of value. Not that she was dissatisfied with her home or anything.

“What's wrong, Yumi-chan?”

“I feel faint.”

Little bills were flying around chocolate like butterflies, in her head.

“Did the thought of giving truffles to Sachiko exhaust you?”

“Umm, something like that.”

“Don't worry, it's not that bad, give it a shot!”

“---”

Not that bad? Maybe Rei-sama, who seemed like someone closer to her in terms of class stature, actually wasn't? “Give it a shot”, she said. Yumi felt like withering.

And, the more expensive it became, it also felt like she was going further and further away from her original intention of giving Valentine's chocolate. Maybe that was a vulgar way of thinking, though.

“I'll write the recipe down for you.”

Rei-sama pet Yumi's head and smiled.

“Re, recipe?”

“If you want to make truffles. I'll help you a bit, just keep it a secret from Sachiko.”

That's when Yumi realized.

“Um, umm, do you mean, how to make truffle chocolates, when you said recipe?”

“Mm?”

Rei-sama's confused face spoke volumes. The chocolate Rei-sama gave Rosa Foetida was, like what she gave Yoshino-san, handmade.

“What, Yumi-chan?”

“...Nevermind.”

Yumi mumbled. There was no need to confess having made the wrong assumption.

Rei-sama was superhuman. On one hand, chocolate truffles and on the other hand, chocolate cake. And she made them both almost simultaneously.

But, in the end, it wouldn't be much of a reference, after all. It wasn't something to brag about, but the most Yumi'd ever done with baking was help her mother bake doughnuts by taking them out of the moulds. So to tell that sort of person here, try making chocolate truffles? Skill was a bigger problem than money.

Rei-sama said she'd help, but if it ended up with her doing most of the work, she wouldn't be able to make truffles next year. And if Rei-sama did more than half, it would lose the “handmade” part of the gift. But all that said, Yumi'd never even imagined making truffles by hand.

“Thank you very much. I'll think about it.”

Yumi bowed her head and dashed away. She'd underestimated things, fixating on chocolate, and now she felt like she had nowhere to go.

A Gift from a Rare Visitor

Part 1.

Without ado, after school at the start of February... A rare visitor appeared at the Rose Mansion.

“Gokigenyou, is anyone there? Well, nevermind that, I showed up because I knew the boutons would be here.”

“---”

Yumi had been sent to check on the visitor, and upon seeing that oh-so-distinctive fearless laugh, couldn't help but want to turn around and run back up the stairs. Why was this person here?

“Oh, my, how bent back. Like a puppy with its tail curled into its belly.”

“P, puppy...”

“We had not yet exchanged greetings. Gokigenyou.”

“...Gokigenyou. Welcome to the Rose Mansion.”

Yumi said, as she had no other choice. Not that she really wanted to welcome her.

“I've come to speak to the boutons today, are they on the second floor?”

“Um.”

“Then allow me in, please.”

“Uh.”

But she didn't wait for an answer as she helped herself into the building and climbed the stairs. So Yumi quickly followed.

The newspaper club captain, Tsukiyama Minako-sama, showed up very boldly today, for an astonishing change. Normally she sniffed around like a dog for scoops.

You needed to exercise extreme caution around her. Whenever you happened upon a scene, she would always, always be in the area. Was she causing everything, or do happenings call upon her? Anyway, to Yumi, she was like a “god you shouldn't wake up.” Maybe she even lives on the northeastern direction from the Rose Mansion – oh, what an un-Catholic thought.

When they arrived at the biscuit-shaped door, Yumi forced herself in front.

“Umm, Tsukiyama Minako-sama.”

Maybe she was too hasty as she announced it. Because Minako-sama pushed Yumi’s face to the side and peered in.

“How rude. You’re like a vassal announcing an enemy attack.”

But it’s true, Yumi wanted to interject. But the opponent was an upperclassman, and was a guest, too, so she stopped herself.

That’s when.

“Indeed. Yumi, you need to calm down a bit.”

Sachiko-sama, who was sipping tea while seated, placed her cup back on the saucer, stood up elegantly, and welcomed Minako-sama.

“I apologize on behalf of my sister. Welcome, Minako-san.”

It was like a bourgeois wife greeting a visitor at an upper-class party, that was how ostentatious her treatment was. If it was a shōjo manga, she’d have flowers as her background, and if it was a movie, the background music would be baroque, despite there being no musicians in the vicinity.

They didn’t have to act so amicable to one another, Yumi thought, as she pouted. Plus, she called her (cute) sister “not calm enough” in front of everyone.

It wasn’t fun, but Yumi decided to look at it from another perspective. After all, Sachiko-sama was always strict to those around her, while being gracious to the actions of others. So Sachiko-sama, as Yumi’s “onee-sama,” was treating her like a close person.

Minako-sama sat down at the chair pulled out for her and crossed her legs. She seemed to have been straining to compose herself with dignity, but sadly, in contrast to the born-and-raised princess, Sachiko-sama, she looked like a monkey’s imitation. But that didn’t perturb Minako-sama at all.

“Sorry for your intruding upon your friendly chatter.”

“No, don’t worry yourself. Shall we have tea together?”

The room was filled with the usual members, excluding the Roses, whom were busy with exam studies. Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, Shimako-san, the three boutons, plus Yoshino-san and Yumi.

The moment Sachiko-sama's glossy lips said "tea" Yoshino-san jumped up, but she then said, "Yumi," so it became Yumi's job. At first, she thought about making super-bitter tea, but that was too immature. What was the point in exacting revenge by making her drink super-bitter tea, anyway? And Sachiko-sama didn't single her out to do something like that.

Please, she said as she placed warm black tea in front of Minako-sama, and then she wordlessly resumed sitting next to Sachiko-sama. Was she watching her the entire time? As she sat down, she locked eyes with Sachiko-sama for a moment, and she felt her heart skip, but it wasn't a throbbing heart. No, it was more that she felt her malicious intent seen through, and became a bit scared. Though, in reality, she didn't do anything to the tea.

To calm herself down, Yumi reached out to her own cup. Judging by the temperature of the cup, she could tell it was no longer hot tea, but rather more like ice-less iced tea. Nevertheless, she was about to take a sip.

"What do you have planned for Valentine's Day?"

She was about to spew the tea back out because of what Minako-sama brought up.

"Valentine's Day?"

Yoshino-san and Shimako-san and Rei-sama all simultaneously turned to look at Yumi. Tsutako-san would have done the same, too, if she were here.

And of course, Sachiko-sama did not. Never taking her eyes off the guest, she merely raised an eyebrow and calmly asked.

"I seem to have heard you asking about my plans for Valentine's Day, am I right, Minako-san?"

"Y, yes."

She seemed to have wilted a bit under Sachiko-sama's cold gaze, but as you'd expect from the newspaper club captain, and editor of the "Lillian Kawaraban," after a quick, deep breath, she resumed explaining herself.

Of course, she already knew what the students of the Rose Mansion thought of her. "Despite that," she came here, so she must have had her reasons. She wouldn't turn tail and run at a mere gaze.

"Valentine's Day, isn't it wonderful, to express your hidden feelings to people?"

Minako-sama suddenly stood up, intertwined her fingers in front of her heart, and looked at the wall with dreamy eyes. Not that she was interested in the structuring or materials of the wall, but rather, everyone else was seated, so there was nothing else that would be in front of her eyes, so she ended up looking like she was staring at a wall. But her heart was past the wall, in some dream land beyond.

Minako-sama spoke about the religious nature of Valentine's Day, similar to Shimako-san's explanation the day before, and then spoke passionately about how the fourteenth of February, as Valentine's Day, had become a day of confessing love. There were plenty of explanations for why this happened, but the one Minako-sama chose to use was that it was around this season that birds mated. Yumi had no idea.

"We understand Minako-san is passionate about the fourteenth of February."

Sachiko-sama coughed. She looked relaxed, but she seemed to have been straining to remain silent throughout Minako-sama's one-sided discussion. She quickly dabbed at her sweat with a laced handkerchief before continuing.

"But it is difficult to discern how your passionate Valentine's Day has any relation to us."

"My, after all this explanation?"



Minako-sama feigned surprise. She definitely stood out in this room.

“Umm, Minako-san. Please be direct.”

Rei-sama cut in, like her paralysis had worn off. Yumi also nodded, deep down. Minako-sama said, “after all this explanation,” but at the very least, Yumi didn’t know what she wanted to say. And given everyone’s puzzled faces, aside from Minako-sama, no one understood.

“Oh, really?”

Finally realizing how everyone felt, she took documents out of a brown envelope she had brought with her.

“Directly, right? Well then, please keep your February fourteenth open, on behalf of the newspaper club.”

“Huh!?”

The boutons aside, Yoshino-san and Yumi both shouted. It was direct, alright, but this time it felt like she’d skipped a ton of things and ended up firing a shot from the blue.

“In other words, I’d like to request help on a Valentine’s Day project. A joint effort between the Yamayurikai and the newspaper club, to make the day more exciting. Wouldn’t you like the regular students to enjoy themselves for day? And judging by everyone’s reactions, the Yamayurikai has nothing specific planned.”

Minako-sama took it upon herself to distribute the documents among the boutons, as they’d stayed on the table, untouched.

“What do you plan to do?”

Sachiko-sama asked, as she drew the document to her.

There were only enough of the cleanly-printed A4 pages for the boutons, so Yoshino-san and Yumi both looked over their onee-sama’s shoulders.

“If you’d take a look at the project plans-”

“‘Treasure Hunt, where’re the boutons’ chocolate!?’ What in the world is this?”

Rei-sama stood up and smacked Minako-sama's plans. Well, of course. Because that plan that was shoved in front of them without any warning included their participation. And not just as a "supporting cast" but as a "main personality."

"Just as it reads. The boutons hide handmade chocolate somewhere in the school. And the students that find them win."

Minako-sama, still seated, smiled up at the standing Rei-sama.

"So there would be up to three winners."

Sachiko-sama's chocolate, Rei-sama's chocolate, Shimako-san's chocolate. They would each hide chocolate, and it would be a game to find them. Minako-sama's plan slowly became understandable.

A treasure hunt. It sounded a bit exciting.

"But I don't get it. Why would the newspaper club captain bring this to the Yamayurikai?"

They'd been bothered enough, why would they end up doing most of the work this time, too? After all, the "Lillian Kawaraban" newspaper had always done things on its own, so it was rather independent from the Yamayurikai. Plus, the Yamayurikai staff labeled the newspaper club as "a bother," so they were still looking at this like there would be a trap somewhere.

"I understand, completely, Rei-san. Unfortunately, the newspaper club has no flowers."

"Flowers."

Rei-sama was still standing, so Yoshino-san said, "Would you like a seat, onee-sama?" and dragged her to a seat.

"Events are more exciting with more participants. And to get participants, the reward needs to be attractive. But we don't have much funds, so it's not like we can buy an expensive prize, right? And that's why we're requesting help from the boutons. Understand?"

So they would pool the Yamayurikai and newspaper club's resources and pay for the event, Minako-sama explained. Well, the event funding would be the ingredients for chocolate and the costs of wrapping. She'd already estimated a figure, and listed that in the plan. Minako-sama was far more level-headed than Yumi had thought.

“And, the newspaper club’s merit?”

That newspaper club would never act without something to gain. Knowing that, Rei-sama asked.

“What a direct question, Rei-san.”

Minako-sama tilted her head just a bit, and laughed.

“Oh well. I hate skirting the edges, personality-wise.”

“Alright. Then, I’ll say it ‘directly,’ as Rei-san wishes. If this event were to come to fruition, the ‘Lillian Kawaraban’ gets to monopolize the reporting.”

An exclusive report on a Valentine’s Day event!

“...Sounds like something the newspaper club would come up with.”

Exasperated, Sachiko-sama sighed as secretively as possible. And then she placed her paper on the table.

“I appreciate the idea, but we won’t cooperate. There are too many things we don’t agree upon.”

“Tell me them. We’re open to changing things to gain your support.”

“There’re lots, but the definitive problem is chocolate.”

“Chocolate?”

“Oh, that stuck me, too.”

Rei-sama raised her hand, agreeing with Sachiko-sama.

“I understand they would be as a prize for the treasure hunt, chocolate is no good.”

Chocolate is supposed to be eaten deliciously. So the ‘no good’ might have been used by design, Yumi could tell that much. Rei-sama was trying to say that chocolate wouldn’t work as the ‘treasure.’

“I get it, because it’s too bulky!”

Yumi blurted out what she was thinking. And everyone immediately turned to her. Sachiko-sama wasn’t even drinking, but she looked very bitter.

“S, sorry.”

But when she quickly lowered her head, her forehead slammed into the table. Now she was definitely in a corner, alone.

“...Yumi, you’ll confuse everyone, please be quiet.”

“Yes...”

Why does it always end like this? How wonderful would it be if she didn’t have to raise her head from the table, ever again?

“Are you okay?”

Yoshino-san asked, suppressing laughter.

“...Yes.”

Rubbing her forehead, and on the verge of tears, Yumi answered. Her forehead hurt quite a bit, but the damage to her heart might be greater. She’d embarrassed her onee-sama again.

“Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama are probably worried about the sanitary issues?”

Maybe she was trying to help a classmate, because Shimako-san returned to the subject.

“To be concise, yes, something like that.”

“The problem is definitely the handmade part. Even with store-bought chocolate, leaving something people will eat unattended for so long is a problem.”

The handsome-looking Rei-sama received plenty of chocolate from students every year, apparently. And the shy ones would leave them in her shoebox or on her desk. And most of those had no names, so even Yumi realized that would be a bit scary. Though up until then she used to think, attractive people got to eat a lot of chocolate every year.

There was nothing wrong with the boutons’ handmade chocolate, but if something were to happen, it’d be terrible, and even worse, if someone found it earlier and acted maliciously, well, it was difficult to agree with using food as a “treasure.”

But it was amazing they could think that far ahead. Though in a way that's to be expected of the boutons. Yumi couldn't help but respect her onee-sama even more. Yumi had now completely bounced back from her red-faced embarrassment moments earlier. –But that blessedness was a mere fleeting moment. Because the next moment, onee-sama's words seemed to hammer Yumi into pieces.

“Personally, I have doubts about the practice of bringing chocolate to school, in general.”

She was saved by being seated, otherwise she may have dived out the window. Sachiko-sama continued.

“I know the teachers let it pass. But I feel sick just imagining the school smelling like chocolate on the fourteenth.”

“---”

Sachiko-sama didn't seem to think fondly of Valentine's Day. And the finishing blow.

“Plus, having chocolate pressed onto you is simply a bother.”

(...Umm.)

Yumi tried to remain collected as she organized her thoughts.

But no matter how hard she tried to remain cool, she became too agitated, and the answer that came up was always the same.

A bother.

(Then my plan to give her chocolate is futile-)

At first, she simply felt shock, but as time passed, she felt more and more depressed.

“Alright.”

Minako-sama nodded.

“Indeed, the idea of hiding chocolate was a bit reckless. After all, with the school filled with chocolate on the fourteenth, it would also become difficult discerning what's a prize and what's not.”

Yumi thought she'd give up, then, but there was no way the newspaper club captain would give up that quickly. That might be a trait Yumi could learn from.

“Give me a moment, please.”

Minako-sama went into a solo planning time and, staring at her planning sheet, began mumbling to herself. And after five minutes.

“Would you cooperate if we changed the treasure?”

“Change? What are you thinking of?”

“A hand-written Valentine’s Card. After all, the original fourteenth of February involved the presenting of cards, rather than chocolate.”

Indeed, Minako-sama was thinking hard about this.

-However.

“Is a hand-written card that attractive?”

Shimako-san mumbled. Is it suitable for a treasure hunt prize? The prize for a long, arduous hunt was just a sheet of paper, that did sound a bit weak. But compared to handmade chocolate, it was cheaper and less of a hassle, so it might work.

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama seemed to agree. Was their own writing valuable enough to attract students, or not? Not being modest, but through calm, cool thinking, they decided, no.

A handwritten letter was lacking in excitement. And the newspaper club, trying to use this for as reporting material, would end up whiffing.

Yumi would have gladly received a hand-written letter by Sachiko-sama, but that would be screaming “sister-obsession” so she kept silent.

“If the boutons agree, then we can move on to the next idea.”

Minako-sama’s eyes glittered as she spoke. When she looked like this, she was no doubt thinking of something wild, so that’s when she was most dangerous.

“Then let’s make it more attractive.”

Minako-sama seemed to realize this was her chance to become aggressive, so she leaned over.

“Make it more attractive?”

“Like the card being a ticket to the real prize?”

“Real prize?”

What would that be, everyone asked. The card itself wasn't the prize, after all?

“Like, the prize would be a half-day date.”

“Objection!!” Before Minako-sama could even finish, Yoshino-san stood up and shouted.

“Objection, objection, absolute objection! That's wrong! Turning personal time into a reward is wrong!”

Yoshino-san, she was in such panic, that she completely shed her weak image. Even if people had gotten a glimpse of her audaciousness, Yoshino-san's myth still stood strong, so people like Minako-sama who'd only seen her from afar might be taken aback. Look, even now, she was clearly more disturbed than when the tall Rei-sama had given her a scary look.

“Yumi-san, you object, too, don't you?”

“Eh.”

Well of course she'd object, too, right? Is the glare Yoshino-san shot at her. She wasn't an enemy, so she'd appreciate if she was treated more kindly.

“Uh...mm.”

Yumi finally thought about it. Well, she'd been struggling to keep up, so she hadn't had time to consider it herself. To begin with, she was still trying to shake off her failure a few moments ago, and was trying to act as inconspicuously as possible.

Approve, or object.

Well, if she had to answer, she'd probably object. Because, she didn't want her own onee-sama, Sachiko-sama, to be with someone else. Yoshino-san was talking about personal time, but she was probably against the idea of her precious Rei-sama being with someone else. If this was about the Roses instead of the boutons, she probably wouldn't object this much.

(But.)

If she were to think about it as someone who was just helping out at the Rose Mansion? The Yamayurikai were trying to lose the hedge between them and the common student, to make it a friendlier student council. So that the Roses wouldn't become so deified, so they'd become more approachable.

If the next Roses, the boutons, were to interact with the students, wouldn't that be a plus for the Yamayurikai?

But despite that honor student-like thought, a part of her still burned with jealousy.

"There's school on Valentine's Day, though."

Shimako-san asked Minako-sama.

"Yes, so the treasure hunt is planned for just an hour after school. Don't worry. As long as we get enough participants, an hour should be enough to find the treasure, isn't it? If it still can't be found then, then it's hidden somewhere that would take at least half of a day to find. So we would just keep them for an hour after school, that day-"

Even as Yumi pondered, the idea was moved forward. Come to think of it, accepting or objecting was really up to the boutons. Their sisters' opinions were just an example.

"And the date would be on Sunday."

"Objection! Objection!"

Yoshino-san was forcing the issue by constantly shouting. She was completely in hysteria. So Rei-sama placed a hand over Yoshino-san's mouth to quiet her. Indeed, with that sort of "objection!" mantra, nothing would get done.

"What do you think?"

After the explanation was done, Sachiko-sama turned to the other two boutons.

"While the idea of a treasure hunt sounds interesting."

Shimako-san didn't look like she was too happy with the idea.

“The sticking point is the half-day date. I’m not as bad as Yoshino, but I don’t like the idea of making humans the prize.”

Rei-sama agreed with the person to her right. But Shimako-san’s reason for objecting was partly the half-day date, and partly because of Valentine’s Day. After all, it was supposed to be a day of commemorating Saint Valentine, rather than a day of confessing love.

“I also object. Then we unanimously turn down the proposal.”

When she said that, Sachiko-sama collected the project proposals and returned them to Minako-sama.

“Wait a second.”

Minako-san was becoming flustered. Placing the proposal sheets back on the table, she desperately pleaded.

“Could you at least think about it over night?”

“It would feel bad giving you false hopes.”

“If you would feel bad!”

Minako-sama looked into Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama and Shimako-san’s eyes. Of course, she didn’t even glance at the sisters.

“Sympathy for a warrior, could you at least wait until after school tomorrow?”

Sympathy for warrior? What era was Minako-sama from?

“I walked dramatically out of the clubhouse, please don’t turn me down right on the spot.”

No matter how much she tried to talk her way through, since her opponents were of the same year, it seemed futile. And of course, it didn’t work on Sachiko-sama at all, as she received a cold response.

“Then you may keep quiet about it now, and tell them tomorrow.”

“Oh, please. The moment I walk back, I’ll be questioned until I spill the beans. My little sister is quite persistent.”

“That’s not our problem.”

The closest to a warrior in the room, Rei-sama, had no sympathy for a warrior, either. Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama were steadfast, and that somewhat pitiable Minako-sama turned to Shimako-san, her last hope, and grasped her hand.

“Shimako-san, please.”

“...Even if you say please...”

“Your senpai is begging you this much, can’t you do anything?”

Wow. If she can’t beg, then she threatens. If you can’t push, then pull.

“Oh come on, Minako-san, don’t you think trying to get a kōhai to help you by pulling the senpai trick is unfair?”

Rei-sama looked angry, as she hated such things.

“Call it what you want, as long as the answer is delayed, I don’t mind.”

(Eek...)

Yumi, who was listening without standing out, stepped back at Minako-sama’s words.

Minako-sama was really a self-serving person. As long as it was for her newspaper, she was willing to do anything. That is one way of living, though.

“-Gosh.”

After “call it what you want,” there was nothing more to say. Rei-sama lowered her shoulders, exasperated, and Sachiko-sama sighed. And Shimako-san’s clear voice sounded.

“Then how about this. Prolonging our answer by one day does no harm, and if that’s the case, you can await our decision until tomorrow.”

There didn’t seem to be any other way to settle the matter. It was Minako-sama, after all, she seemed the type to keep everyone hostage in the Rose Mansion until they agreed. They agreed that they’d leave the final decision until tomorrow, and that they’d be better off with Minako-sama departing earlier.

“Fine. But Minako-san, nothing will change our decision, so please don’t hold any weird hopes.”

Rei-sama repeated. That tomorrow, she’d hear the exact same answer. But Minako-sama smiled, satisfied.

“I understand. Thank you. I shall return tomorrow, after school.”

Before they changed their minds, seemed her purpose, as she dashed out of the room.

“Oh, take the proposals with you.”

Sachiko-sama called out.

“Tomorrow, tomorrow.”

Minako-sama called back, without turning around, and vanished beyond the biscuit-shaped door. Yumi heard the steps creaking to the tune of skipping.

“What was that?”

Sachiko-sama muttered, and everyone tilted their heads, “Who knows?”

She was that excited with the decision delayed a single day. What was Minako-sama thinking?

“Is it really okay?”

The first thing Yoshino-san said after being freed from Rei-sama was that.

“Okay?”

“Because they’re the newspaper club.”

Yoshino-san was sharp. After all she’d done, Minako-sama’s inexplicable move was troubling.

“But, like Shimako said, there’s nothing to trouble us by delaying it.”

Rei-sama cackled.

“Indeed. I don’t think anyone would change in a single day.”

“Yes.”

Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san nodded. They were strong-willed people, so they probably wouldn’t retract their own decisions that easily.

But, they were underestimating her.

Just a single day.

Just by delaying things a single day, trouble did begin.

In a way, Minako-sama was a Yamayurikai maniac. She knew exactly how to make the boutons act.

Part 2.

“Huh?”

After a full day, Yumi heard something completely unexpected as she went straight to the Rose Mansion.

“I said, we’re going to have to accept. Don’t make me say it twice.”
Sachiko-sama was clearly displeased.

“Umm-”

So she was forced to find someone else for an explanation. In the second-floor room, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san and Rei-sama, who’d left club activities, were looking very annoyed, though not to the level of Sachiko-sama, as they sat around the table.

“Minako-sama found way to pressure them.”

Yoshino-san said, slamming her fist on the table.

“I knew she was up to something, but still! It’s so frustrating!!”

“So, what happened?”

Yumi was still puzzled, so Rei-sama lifted her index finger.

“From above.”

“Above?”

She looked at the ceiling. Not that she expected something like a hole, which would mean rain would leak through.

“No, no, above, as in third-years.”

“Third-years? Oh, the Roses!”

“Right. The three of them were together today and neatly called their sisters together during lunch break.”

“...Ahh.”

Come to think of it, Shimako-san was supposed to eat lunch with her at the Rose Mansion today, but come lunch, she suddenly canceled it and vanished. Yumi didn’t pay it any mind because Shimako-san was often called out for committee meetings, but that must have been Rosa Gigantea.

“So, then?”

Like a baton touch from Rei-sama, Sachiko-sama continued.

“A command, to accept the newspaper club captain’s Valentine’s Day project. As their final request, could we refuse?”

“Umm.”

Well, no, you wouldn’t usually be able to refuse. –Is what Yumi thought. But the first time she’d come into the Rose Mansion, she heard Sachiko-sama yell, “The onee-sama are mean!” Considering Sachiko-sama among the realm of “normalcy” would probably be a mistake, too.

“Anyways, that’s why we’re having a special meeting. So I’ll probably miss club activities today.”

Rei-sama had assumed she was the only one being pressured, and thought with Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san vehemently refusing, it wasn’t a big deal. So, after school she quickly went to change into her kendo gi and began practice swings. And when Yoshino-san blasted in after running from the Rose Mansion, she finally realized how important the matter had become. Because no one had thought Minako-sama would be able to persuade all three Roses at once.

Right on time, so to speak. Because when they’d finished explaining things, the three Roses arrived with one another.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida, and Rosa Gigantea. It was the first time they’d been together since the student council election speeches, Yumi thought. And belying their tough exam studies was their sparkling appearances, with glittering eyes, glossy skin, and lovely, silky hair. They were so beautiful Yumi’s eyes felt like they might implode.

“Not that we were really waiting in anticipation.”

Sachiko-sama said venomously, but she looked cute, sulking the way she was. Even if they’d sown the seeds of annoyance, she was still giddy at being able to see her onee-sama.



“Oh, then I suppose the meeting will have commenced without any stagnation without us.”

Excellent, she nodded, as she took a seat. The Roses were in perfect spirits. The five that were in the room originally seemed to be sucked in by their presence, as their determination seemed to be cut in half right at the onset.

“So?”

Rosa Chinensis asked Sachiko-sama, her sister.

That began round one.

“Have you decided on your answer to the newspaper club?”

“...”

“Sachiko.”

When she was scolded for being silent, Sachiko-sama seemed to explode, letting out her feelings at once.

“If the onee-sama are going to order us like that, then no matter how unwilling we may be, we shall have to consent.”

“Oh, how unthinkable. You make it sound like we’re forcing you.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Yes, of course. The student council election was a splendid opportunity to slide our responsibilities to the boutons. We’re living a humble life of retirement. How you wish to manage the Yamayurikai is up to you.”

“Then why are you interfering?”

“Interfering?”

“Interfering. You said to collaborate with the newspaper club.”

“All I said was to think it over.”

“And that is interfering. We made our decision yesterday.”

“Stubborn, as always.”

“Oh, how wrong of me. But I wonder who chose this inflexible person to be their sister?”

“Me. And that’s why I want you to be more flexible. Intermingling with the students, isn’t that a splendid idea? You’ve become so much more open since choosing Yumi-chan to be your sister.”

“---”

Sachiko-sama loses by KO.

Onto the second round.

Resting her elbows on the table, then resting her chin on her intertwined fingers, Rosa Foetida narrowed her eyes.

“Rei.”

“Yes.”

Rei-sama, called upon, looked troubled. It was a bit different from a frog being stared at by a snake, but for once, she looked hesitant. Like she wanted to say “have mercy!” knowing what lay in store. But Rei-sama knew it was a road she couldn’t avoid. Also, that it wasn’t going to be fun.

“It’s almost been two full years since I made you my sister, so I’m sure you can guess what I’m about to say.”

“Yes.”

Like a balloon leaking air, Rei-sama seemed to shrink every passing second. On the other hand, Rosa Foetida, who looked so bored most of the time, had a glimmer in her eyes and looked excited.

“So may I assume I know your answer?”

“I’ll do whatever onee-sama thinks is best.”

“Oh, no, you have to decide, on your own.”

Say it, Rosa Foetida egged Rei-sama on.

“...I’ll help the newspaper cl-”

“Objection!”

Yoshino-san said, unable to restrain herself.

“Rosa Foetida, don’t you think that sort of pressure is dirty? Rei-chan is Rei-chan, too, if you don’t like it, say it!”

She was so excited she forgot to change “Rei-chan” to “onee-sama.”

“Yoshino, be quiet.”

“That’s right, don’t confuse her. I’m talking to Rei, outsiders should remain silent.”

“Outsiders!?”

Yoshino-san was about to squeal in anger when Rei-sama stopped her, “Idiot, don’t let her goad you.”

“The more Yoshino screeches, the more persistent onee-sama gets!”

“What?”

“Exactly.”

Rosa Foetida smiled victoriously.

“You still have tons to learn, Yoshino-chan.”

Yoshino-san still hadn’t really fully grasped her “auntie” Rosa Foetida. What that multi-talented Rosa Foetida loved most were unusual things and rarities. And the moment she found something she was interested in, she would suction onto it and never let go, like a soft-shelled turtle. Persistence aside, it was a sight to behold. Knowing that, Rei-sama just wanted to squeeze through with minimal resistance. Because she knew the more she would show she didn’t want to, the more Rosa Foetida would begin to act.

But all of Rei-sama’s actions just went to waste.

“You’ll do whatever I think is best, you said, right, Rei? Then, I’ll have you cooperate.”

Rosa Foetida was just that kind of person.

Third round.

Rosa Gigantea looked at Shimako-san.

“Well, that’s how it is, good luck.”

“...Okay.”

Well, now that the second-years Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama surrendered, the first-year Shimako-san really didn’t have much fighting power to begin with.

But, gosh, Rosa Gigantea. The “good luck” cheer, why couldn’t she say that during the student council election?

“Whaaaaaat, Yumi-chan. You look bored.”

Rosa Gigantea laughed, looking at Yumi's face.

"Not really."

"Oohh? You should go straight into a fury, like Yoshino-chan."

"Yoshino-san?"

When Yumi turned around, she saw Yoshino-san with an expression that definitely couldn't deny it, as she sat leaning against Rei-sama. Like a child that came down with a cold.

Yoshino-san was brutally honest.

She was steadfastly against Rei-sama going on a date with someone else, so she objected to the fullest extent, and once she lost, she began to pout like that. Intense, but easy to understand and cute. Forcing a smile, Rei-sama was patting Yoshino-san's shoulder.

Sachiko-sama glanced at Yumi. As for why Yumi noticed that, well, it was because she was looking at Sachiko-sama first. She couldn't help that her eyes kept wandering to onee-sama.

After a moment of exchanging glances, Sachiko-sama quickly turned away. If only she would give a quick smile, or something, Yumi thought. Then she'd be able to settle down, knowing that at the very least, her sitting there wasn't a discomfort.

But Sachiko-sama seemed to be too busy to bother about her sister.

"Anyways, even if we are to cooperate with the newspaper club, we'll have to add our own conditions and amendments."

She sought agreement from Rei-sama and Shimako-san. Her mind was already working.

"Exactly. Why do we have to do what she says?"

"Agreed."

Rosa Foetida glanced at her wristwatch, and Yumi ended up doing the same. Four in the afternoon.

-And that's when they heard the creaking of stairs. The Rose Mansion was old, so when someone jubilantly went up and down, they could even feel the vibrations.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

After a quick knock, the door opened, and as expected, Tsukiyama Minako-sama came in. Maybe she waited to allow plenty of time, or maybe it was just a coincidence, but although she could have come earlier, she arrived well after the meeting had come to an end. After all, she glanced at the Roses, seeming to ask, “How did things go?” Clearly she’d gone to the Roses and requested assistance with the Valentine’s Day project.

Part 3.

“We shall go through the details of your project again.”

After waiting for Minako-sama to be seated, Sachiko-sama took a copy of the project scheme that Minako-sama had left the day before in her hand and spoke. She'd apparently decided that it would be a farce to explain why they'd suddenly changed their minds. Obviously Minako-sama knew exactly why, and she, too, didn't seem bothered by the lack of explanation. After all, for the newspaper club captain, the important thing was simply that the boutons were willing to help.

As Yumi and Yoshino-san began pouring tea for everyone gathered, the project meeting went forward.

“In terms of the Valentine's card format, I'd like to hear your opinions. Color, size, any opinions are welcome. However, they will basically be traded in for dating tickets, so the newspaper club would like to reserve a bit of space. On the back, out of sight, is what I'm thinking.”

“If the cards are the tickets, they would have to be collected, is that alright?”

Rei-sama asked, as she mindlessly folded the corner of her project plan.

“Oh, good point, how careless of me. It's a precious handwritten card, so how about we think about making something else to be a dating ticket?”

Minako-sama scribbled on her own planning sheet. The cooperating party was the boutons, so the Roses and the sisters of the boutons kept quiet. They kept quiet, but they still paid careful attention. The former out of amusement, the latter out of jealousy.

“Um, are we picking the hiding locations?”

Shimako-san was the one who asked.

“Of course. After all, the fun for the participants is wondering where the boutons would hide them, right? If a third-party were to spontaneously hide them, it wouldn’t be as fun. Of course, the newspaper club would need to be notified of the locations beforehand, but otherwise, you may hide it wherever you please.”

The prior notification would be so that it wouldn’t be hidden out-of-bounds or in a place too easy, because then it wouldn’t be much of a game, Minako-sama explained.

Well of course. If it were hidden in the drawer of the principal’s desk, only the principal would be able to find it. Of course, it’d probably be impossible to hide it there, anyways.

“I think we should keep things within the confines of the high school facilities and part of the courtyard. We’re planning to publish a special edition of the ‘Lillian Kawaraban’ on Valentine’s Day explaining the rules, along with a map of the campus listing where you can and can’t go. We can’t really be bothering the teachers and the non-participating student body, after all.”

“Staff room, reception office, principal’s office, guidance office... Well, there’re plenty of places we shouldn’t intrude on. So we’d have an upper limit of where students can frequent on a daily basis.”

“Courtyard, hallways, library... what about classrooms and club rooms?”

“Classrooms and club rooms are out of the question, I think, because people who usually reside in them would have an advantage, and personal belongings are stored there, too. It would also intrude upon students who don’t wish to take part.”

“Right. How about the athletics related buildings?”

“Well we exclude the buildings that are used for club activities on that day, to begin with. I suppose we can ask for teacher permission with the buildings that aren’t being used, and mark them down as ‘fair game’ on a case by case basis?”

“The locker rooms are out, but the gymnasium bathrooms and the basement passages are in. The gymnasium storehouses that are usually locked are also out of the question.”

They’d reluctantly agreed to the plan, but the boutons participated with utmost seriousness in the discussions anyways. Since they were going to participate, they wouldn’t stand for halfway measures, they seemed to be saying.

“May I?”

Rosa Chinensis raised her hand, speaking for the first time.

“Yes?”

“How about here?”

“Here?”

Here, would be the table Rosa Chinensis was pointing to. –No.

“Here... Onee-sama, do you mean the Rose Mansion?”

Sachiko-sama quietly asked.

“Yes. If possible, I’d like the Rose Mansion to be part of the treasure hunt, too.”

“I don’t mind, but why?”

“I have just one regret before I graduate.”

“And this is it?”

“Yes. The Rose Mansion.”

According to Rosa Chinensis, they’d been able to do almost everything they’d wanted to do in their three years of high school life, except for this one thing: opening the Rose Mansion to the student populace.

So that the Rose Mansion wasn’t just a meeting ground for one group of students, so that any student could stop by at any time to raise concerns. The Rose Mansion was the student council room, after all, so what could they do to make it a more relaxed, approachable place? -That’s what they’d been pondering for so long.

But the Roses were deified more and more as the years went by, and along with the fact that the Rose Mansion was like a separate entity from the school facilities, it'd gradually actually become even more difficult for the students to approach it. And it was too difficult to remove years and years of branding in one generation, so here they were, on the eve of their graduation, without much progress.

“So, just once, before I graduate, I'd like to see the Rose Mansion filled with students. So, I truthfully don't mind how you erect the Yamayurikai in your generation. But I'd like to request this one thing, as a parting gift. Because this is my dream.”

Students who'd stepped in once would find it less difficult to step in a second time. Rosa Chinensis must have envisioned that, too.

“Understood.”

Minako-sama nodded.

“If that's the case, I'll gladly add it to the list of treasure hunt locations. Truth be told I was hoping to use the Rose Mansion as a headquarters-”

“Headquarter?”

“For the newspaper club and the boutons.”

If a student finds a card, there needed to be a place where they could go and report their finding. And the boutons, well if the boutons were found wandering about the facility during the treasure hunt, it would simply spread confusion, so there needed to be a place for them to stay, too.

“You can use it as a headquarters, too.”

Rosa Foetida pointed out, stifling a yawn.

“The boutons and the newspaper club won't be too busy once the treasure hunt starts, right? Then, pour yourselves some tea during the event and watch the proceedings. Tea is readily available for self-service for students, too. You can even go ahead and mingle with the students, too?”

“If that many people gathered, it would be hysteria...”

“That’s fine. That’s Rosa Chinensis’ ideal, anyways, isn’t it?”

From the way Rosa Foetida sounded, it was clear she was going to come to school on the fourteenth of February no matter what. If something sounded amusing, as long as her body was able, she was absolutely not going to miss out.

“By the way, may I make a request, too?”

Rosa Gigantea stretched out as she spoke.

“This event, can we just say the Yamayurikai boutons are participating in the project?”

“Huh?”

“So, once this is settled, we’ll leave the room. Yumi-chan and Yoshino-chan, too.”

“Ehh!?”

“What do you mean ehh, what’s the point in outsiders participating?”

“If the overseer goes away, can you imagine what this could turn into?”

“Yoshino-chan, do you not trust your onee-sama, at all?”

“...”

“Pity, I thought it’d be better for Yoshino-chan, too. Oh well, go ahead and get abused like a participant. Minako-san, do you get what I mean?”

“Completely.”

With Minako-san’s response, the Roses stood up. They giggled. What was so fun?

“Yumi-chan, how about you?”

“What?”

“Would you like to bet on a one-in-a-hundred chance to win a date with Sachiko?” Well, of course-.

“I do!”

Answered Yoshino-san. And as she answered, she leapt out of her chair and dashed to the Roses. Woah, hey, what happened? Rosa Gigantea said “Sachiko,” not “Rei.”

“Yumi-san, you should come to this side, too.”

Yoshino-san, whose mind clearly worked faster than Yumi, had a body that traveled at lightning speed, too.

“...What do you mean?”

“Outsiders can participate in the game, too. Isn’t that right, Rosa Gigantea?”

“Yup, right, captain?”

“Yes.”

The verbal game of hot-potatoes finally landed at Minako-sama.

“If the sisters of the boutons are also participating, it becomes even more attractive, so I welcome it with open arms. The newspaper club should be sufficient staffing. As long as the boutons are willing?”

“I don’t mind.” Shimako-san said.

“If that’s what it takes to settle Yoshino down.”

Rei-sama simply seemed to want Yoshino-san’s mood to brighten. A displeased Yoshino-san was an absolute terror, after all. Even the sturdy Rei-sama wouldn’t be able to withstand a flurry of “objection!” until the end of Valentine’s Day.

As for Sachiko-sama.

“Even though this is where sisters are most needed.”

She muttered, but she didn’t really have much of a reason to oppose it, so she consented. If she was going to consent anyways, she didn’t need to complain. But, you know, Sachiko-sama hates losing, and she’s a contrarian, so...

“Then it’s decided.”

So the meeting ended. The “outsiders” didn’t even need to wait outside, because it was already dark, so the students were forced to go home, anyways.

Part 4.

“Wow, it’s getting outrageous.”

As they walked home along the ginkgo pathway, Yumi spoke to Yoshino-san. The boutons were walking roughly three meters behind them, discussing the details of the fourteenth of February. While the first-years were cleaning up after the meeting, Minako-sama had gone back to the newspaper club room, and the Roses, busy with exam preparations, quickly went home, so they were left to the usual members, but today they were walking in a cluster of three and two.

“I’ll definitely find Rei-chan’s card.”

Yoshino-san raised her mitten-covered fist. As always, she was optimistic and strong and confident.

“Don’t worry, Yumi-san. Sisters have their own advantages. For sisters, it’s not a one-in-a-hundred chance. You know?”

“Uh, umm.”

To be honest, she shook her head mostly because of Yoshino-san’s intensity. Because all of a sudden, Yoshino-san’s head popped up right in front of her in the darkness.

“First, we know about their preferences.”

Yoshino-san may have raised her index finger, but the mitten made it look like she raised four fingers, so it was hard to tell. It just looked like its shape was being ever-so-slightly distorted.

“Why is it an advantage knowing their preferences?”

“Because it’s a clue for where they hid their card.”

“Oh, right.”

For example, Sachiko-sama would never hide a card amongst the ginkgo pathway, because she hates them. But that’s such a rough conclusion.

“Also, they might accidentally let slip where they may have hidden it.”

“No way.”

That would never happen, Yumi thought. At least with Sachiko-sama, that would be an unthinkable mistake.

“It’s not impossible.”

Yoshino-san was brimming with confidence.

“...I see.”

You could never know with Rei-sama. Of course, she wouldn’t tell her deliberately, but if Yoshino-san grinded away at her, she might eventually accidentally let it slip.

“I can tell when she hid it by her behavior, too.”

“---”

So, in the end.

The advantage wasn’t for being a “sister” but rather because Yoshino-san was Yoshino-san. And because she was confident, she backed off from her stubborn objection. It all made sense now.

“I’m totally not confident.”

The big, white puff that blew out of her mouth was a sigh. And it felt like she could see just how unconfident she was.

“Gosh, a half-day date... lucky.”

She was envious of that person in the future who would win a date with Sachiko-sama. For Yoshino-san, who was always with Rei-sama, it was probably more a case of being unwilling to let her time with Rei-sama be intruded upon, so the date itself wasn’t really much value.

“What do you mean, lucky? Yumi-san, weren’t you with Sachiko-sama for New Year’s?”

“But we weren’t alone.”

Forget being alone together, she might have just been one of a crowd to Sachiko-sama. Plus, an archenemy was among the crowd, too.

“I see. If Yumi-san were to win, I was thinking of doing a double-date, but if that’s the case...”

Fufufu, Yoshino-san giggled. How dreadful, Yoshino-san was so sure she would find Rei-sama's card that she wasn't even thinking about it not happening. If she were to be beaten, what would happen? Because no matter how confident you are, it doesn't mean everything will work out.

"On a different note, I guess we'll end up like this a lot, until Valentine's Day?"

When they reached the school gate, Yoshino-san stopped and turned to the path they'd walked. There, they saw their two onee-sama and their classmate. The three people who would become the next Roses.

"...Yes."

As she nodded, Yumi absent-mindedly thought, "And maybe more." That this sort of thing might happen even after Valentine's Day.

Once Sachiko-sama became Rosa Chinensis, it would be hard for her to keep looking after her younger sister. A busy year as student council president awaited her, after all.

And then.

And then what was she supposed to do?

As she imagined her own future, all she could think of was to sit there and watch as her onee-sama kept growing.

"What's wrong?"

Sachiko-sama asked.

"Nothing."

Nothing's wrong, Yumi replied. So that she wouldn't become baggage for onee-sama, so that she wouldn't trouble onee-sama so much, she had to grow, too.

"Did our bouton-only talk make you lonely?"

Sachiko-sama giggled, and then she continued, "Shall we go home?"

Rei-sama had run to Yoshino-san, and together they began walking home along the sidewalk next to the school walls. As for Shimako-san, well at first Yumi was surprised to see Shimako-san run like that, but then Shimako-san was simply waving down a bus.

“Sachiko-sama, Yumi-san, hurry.”

This bus route was taken mostly by Lillian students, and at this hour there weren't many Lillian students left, so if you missed one, you were in trouble, because the next bus wouldn't come for some time. And so when she noticed the bus lights, Shimako-san had dashed to the bus stop.

“Oh, my.”

Sachiko-sama gasped, and she grabbed Yumi's arm and ran. Emulating Shimako-san, the two of them ran to the bus stop and jumped onto the bus.

The bus began moving. When they tumbled into the rear seats of the empty bus, the three of them chuckled to each other, “That was close.”

That's why.

Yumi forgot to tell Sachiko-sama.

That if she were lonely, it wasn't because of the darkness. Yes, in truth, she was supposed to have told her that then.

Outsider

Part 1.

“So, how’d it go?”

Tsutako-san leaned in, brimming with curiosity.

It was lunch break a few days after the “special meeting.” Yumi was eating lunch with Katsura-san’s group, but her hand that was holding her chopsticks was frozen.

“How’d it go? I’m sure you can tell just by looking at me.”

Because she’d been eating lunch in the classroom for three straight days.

“My, my, Yumi-san, whose most notable feature is her vigor, is sighing. Which means the little sisters aren’t particularly amused by all this.”

“Pretty much.”

It wasn’t like they were expelled from the Rose Mansion, but it didn’t feel comfortable sitting there. Because even if they were eating lunch together, the boutons would gather and discuss things amongst themselves. And when that happened, the “outsiders” would feel obliged to remain “outsiders” and scoot themselves to a corner, so they wouldn’t hear.

Then, it would be better if they weren’t there to begin with. So after discussing it with Yoshino-san, they decided not to frequent the Rose Mansion for the time being. If something were to happen, Shimako-san would notify them, anyways.

The boutons were all in different classes, and Rei-sama had club activities after school, so Yumi understood they didn’t have much time to discuss things together. So when they did manage to gather in one place at once, it would be better to let them be.

“Tsutako-san, would you like to sit here?”

Katsura-san said as she stood, and offered her seat.

“Oh, don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

“No, no. We finished eating, and we’re going, now.”

The five had pushed their tables together for lunch, and other than Yumi, everyone had stood up. Her four classmates neatly packed up their lunches and placed them in their bags.

“Everyone?”

Tsutako-san put a finger to the bridge of her frameless glasses and raised them.

“Yes. We invited Yumi-san, but she doesn’t seem interested. But it would probably be lonesome eating lunch alone, so please, Tsutako-san.”

Katsura-san quickly explained, before she hurried to catch up to the classmates whom were waiting by the door, and then they all skipped along to their destination.

“...What was that?”

Now that only Yumi could hear her, Tsutako-san let her guard down and muttered.

“They’re going to the library to look up chocolate recipes.”

Apparently one of them had found a wonderful recipe book at a bookstore, but it was extraordinarily expensive, so she couldn’t afford it with her allowance. Well, she could, but then she’d be short on ingredients for the chocolate itself, or something. Anyways, someone else pointed out that she thinks she saw that book in the library, so they all decided, “let’s look for that wonderful book!” and that was that.

And on a side note, the speed at which they ate lunch after deciding to go was incredible. Katsura-san had taught Yumi that it was better for one’s health if one deliberately chewed and ate their food, but that same Katsura-san was swallowing down food after four or five bites.

“I see. A wonderful chocolate book. That would be fascinating, indeed. Why didn’t you go with them, Yumi-san?”

Tsutako-san stretched back to her seat and grabbed her milk box, then sat down on Katsura-san's seat, which had been warmed like a zabuton.

"Sachiko-sama seems to hate chocolate."

Yumi meekly replied. She didn't want to talk about this.

"You jest. Sachiko-sama was eating Rosa Foetida en bouton's handmade Bûche de Noël on Christmas."

That was delicious, said Tsutako-san as she stared off into space. It wasn't really handmade, as she'd simply touched up a marketplace good, but Tsutako-san didn't really see it being made, so she didn't know about that.

"...That's right."

The Bûche de Noël is in fact filled with chocolate cream. Yumi saw Sachiko-sama eating it, too, and it was not like she was eating something she disliked out of courtesy.

Sachiko-sama was extremely picky with food. They'd only known each other for four months, but Yumi had completely grasped Sachiko-sama's expression when she found something she disliked. Someone who would look that disgusted by something wouldn't be able to completely hide that fact.

"Then I wonder if she's just against the act of giving chocolate on Valentine's Day? It's all the same to me, though."

"You lost the joy of giving chocolate on your anticipated Valentine's Day, is it?"

Even though you went through such lengths to do research, remarked Tsutako-san. Her milk box made a hissing sound as she drained the rest of it. She might have been being compassionate, but that spontaneous noise was intrusive, and so if she was being cordial, it ruined the feeling.

"Well that's indeed harsh. You've basically been kicked out of the Rose Mansion, but the classroom is filled with Valentine's Day talk."

Tsutako-san glanced around the lunch-time first-year peach-class.

Exactly.

It wasn't just Katsura-san and others. Two-third, maybe even three-quarters, whatever the number, the majority of the students were thinking almost entirely of Valentine's Day, so outside of class, conversations naturally drifted in that direction.

How to give the chocolate, which chocolate stores are good, I saw a chocolate recipe on TV, that sort of thing. The ones that were truly excited to the point of intending to present handmade knitting were even knitting at every non-class opportunity.

For the teachers that put up with us every day, for that senpai we admire, for that boy from another school that we have a one-sided love for, everyone had different people they wanted to gift, but everyone was thinking along the same lines.

It was just a week until Valentine's Day.

"So, what are you going to do?"

What is she going to do? She was gloomy because she didn't know what she was going to do.

"If this is how it'd be, I should have stayed an insider. Even if I become an outsider, it's not like I'm confident I can find Sachiko-sama's card."

Hearing Yumi's complaint, Tsutako-san mischievously prodded back.

"Mmm. So you don't care if someone else dates Sachiko-sama."

"Of course not."

Absolutely positively not.

"Then there's nothing else you can do. I mean, you stepped out knowing it would be a long shot to begin with. What an ungallant way of thinking."

She knew that almost as much as she knew it would be a long shot.

That's why Yoshino-san was gallant. Because she knew it would be a long shot, but she stepped on that plane without any hesitation, and on top of that, she was proactively trying to figure out where Rei-sama would hide it. She only has one body, after all, so she was already planning out where she'd start looking, and so even though she wasn't with Rei-sama, her days were always busy. Plus, Yoshino-san still had the joy of giving Valentine's Day chocolate, on a completely different note from the date.

"I wanted to give Sachiko-sama chocolate, too."

Said Yumi, as she somberly looked up at the dreary sky.

"Then, why don't you make it and forcibly give it to her?"

Gosh, Tsutako-san, she even clapped her hands, as if she'd come up with a stroke of genius. Furthermore, Yumi could do it like how Yoshino-san returned Rei-sama's rosary, but calling Sachiko-sama to the Maria-sama statue. Tsutako-san was definitely aiming to grab a photo.

"Do you think I could do it? Me?"

After all, her onee-sama was her onee-sama. Yumi didn't think she could even call Sachiko-sama out anywhere.

"That's true, it might be impossible for Yumi-san. More befitting might be an image of you holding back tears while despondently making chocolate, and those tears drip into the mix, knowing that this chocolate would never be eaten. And the chocolate that should be sweet ends up being a bit salty."

Tsutako-san acted out a melancholic face and balled her hands, but all Yumi could do was sigh.

"...That's just enka."

Plus, how do held-back tears drip? She wished Tsutako-san wouldn't make fun of it just because it was someone else's problem.

“But Yumi-san, thinking is ‘free.’ If you want to give her chocolate, think of it from the perspective of giving, okay? If on the fourteenth of February Sachiko-sama suddenly wants chocolate, how would you feel if you weren’t prepared? You would regret it forever. So you should start off by making chocolate, and if she wouldn’t accept it after all, then you can call me and we can eat it together in the classroom.”

I’ll even treat you to canned coffee then, she concluded. Because after all, friends exist to be there for you. And Yumi began to feel better.

Tsutako-san then finished things off by adding that, if possible, she’d like to be present (if hidden) during the chocolate presentation, but Yumi graciously declined. It wasn’t a documentary, and she wouldn’t be able to speak with seriousness to Sachiko-sama when knowing there was a camera somewhere. If she wanted a perfect shot that badly, Tsutako-san could try to track them down. Her very own treasure hunt.

“Well then, good luck!”

While they were conversing, the early bell for the afternoon classes rang. After seeing Tsutako-san back to her seat, Yumi wrapped her empty lunchbox with a bandana.

Katsura-san and friends came back from the library filled with excitement. And the knitting students seemed to intend to keep knitting until the late bell.

-Which is when Tsutako-san came back, apparently remembering something.

“I forgot to tell you. This treasure hunt, actually the photography club is going to get a bite of the pie, too. But we’re more like assistants rather than cooperatives, so we won’t be told who hid what where, but the photography club is in charge of the photographs for the ‘Lillian Kawaraban.’”

That's all, said Tsutako-san as she walked back in good humor. And from that, Yumi guessed Tsutako-san didn't intend to give anyone chocolate this Valentine's Day. The camera and photo-loving photography club ace was going to chase young ladies this year, without any holidays, again.

Part 2.

“Ah, Yumi-chan?”

After school.

Would you call it habit? After finishing cleaning duties, Yumi realized her legs had absent-mindedly carried her to the Rose Mansion.

“Are you alone?”

Rei-sama seemed to have come straight from class, as she grinned in her school coat while holding her bag.

“Long time no see. Speaking of which, I have something I wanted to give you... Hold on, -hmm.”

She tried to sort through her bag, but she seemed to have decided that scouring through her bag while standing was difficult, so she said, “Well, let’s go in for a bit,” took Yumi’s hand and went inside.

“Uh, umm.”

It was bad enough that Yumi had come by the Rose Mansion, wasn’t it really bad if she actually went in?

But Rei-sama bounced up the stairs without any care, and breaking free and escaping wasn’t an option. So Yumi resigned herself to following Rei-sama upstairs. As long as Sachiko-sama isn’t here, she thought.

“Ooh, first!”

When they entered the room, Rei-sama turned on the lights after that gleeful exclamation.

“I’ll prepare the teakettle.”

Out of habit, Yumi dashed to the electric pot.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

She tossed the old water from the pot, rinsed it, and filled it with new water. Then when she plugged the cord into the electric socket, it began making a dull, “I’m boiling the water now” sound. After that, she rinsed the dish rag, drained it, and wiped the table. She wanted to mop the floor, too, but she was afraid of the dust rising and decided against it.

“Well, I’ll be going now, then.”

When her cleaning habit came to a halt, she suddenly realized, “Why am I here?” and wanted to get away.

“Hold on. Thanks for doing all these chores, but that doesn’t mean you have to go as soon as you’re done, you know?”

“Umm, but, aren’t you all going to have a meeting now?”

Because Rei-sama has club activities today. But she came straight to the Rose Mansion, so there must be something planned today.

“Well, we are.”

Rei-sama laughed as she pulled out the seat next to her and beckoned for Yumi to sit.

“But I said I had something I wanted to give Yumi-chan, didn’t I?”

“Oh.”

She’d completely forgotten. That’s right, that’s why she came to the Rose Mansion.

“Here.”

Rei-sama took something out of her bag and placed it in front of Yumi. It was a book, like a thin magazine.

“This...?”

“I was thinking of handing it to you when I ran into you, so it was in my bag the whole time. A cookbook for pastries. There’re a lot of recipes for handmade chocolate, and the directions are really clear, so it should come in handy. The recipe for Rei-san’s specialty chocolate truffles is pasted somewhere inside, too.”

“But, Rei-sama, won’t you need this, too?”

“Don’t worry. The important bits... well mostly just the ingredients, I jotted them down. And I have a bunch of other books like this, anyways. Or do you not need it anymore?”

“Nonsense.”

“OK. Then, let’s keep it a secret from Sachiko and surprise her. How about this?”

Rei-sama was lively, because it was her field of expertise. Her handsome looks got in the way of this image, but she was always caring to begin with. After all, she'd been able to get along with that Yoshino-san for this long.

While they were leafing through the chocolate pastries book, filled with color photos, the door suddenly opened behind them.

“Sa-Sachiko-sama...”

They'd been so absorbed they didn't notice the footsteps on the stairs, so the two of them hurriedly stood up and quickly hid the book under their bags.

“- Why are you so surprised?”

“No, nothing. At all.”

Since she'd gotten up anyways, and the electric pot had finished boiling the water, Yumi poured tea for the two second-years.

“Yumi, how about yours?”

Sachiko-sama coldly asked.

“Ah, I'm about to leave.”

“Do you have something to do?”

“...Yes, kind of.”

Because she couldn't answer “well it's uncomfortable staying here.” Truth be told, she didn't mind if she stayed until Minako-sama or Shimako-san arrived, but Sachiko-sama seemed to be in ill spirits today. If she milled about and displeased her any further, it would be horrible, she thought. When Sachiko-sama was this stressed, you had to exercise extreme caution. You wouldn't guess it from how she usually conducts herself, but she did have a tendency to enter full hysteria.

“Then quit milling about and go.”

Ouch, pretty harsh.

“Sachiko, stop acting like that. I pulled Yumi-chan in here.”

“Rei?”



Sachiko-sama raised her head a bit, looked Yumi and Rei-sama, then said, "I see," and sipped her tea.

What do you have to do, or why did Rei-sama pull Yumi in, she didn't ask anything. It would be troublesome if she had persistently asked her, too, but it was just as awkward when she didn't ask anything at all.

"Well, excuse me."

When she headed toward the door after a quick bow, Rei-sama said, "Wait, Yumi-chan," and stopped her.

"Sorry, could you stop by the chrysanthemum class and hand this to Yoshino?"

"Yes?"

She was handed that book. The title was hidden because it was flipped, but it was still an audacious way to have gone about things. To Yoshino, she said, as she winked out of Sachiko-sama's view.

(...Which means she's letting me borrow it.)

Instead of "thank you very much," Yumi answered, "Alright," and left the room. Sachiko-sama wasn't interested at all by what Rei-sama would give Yoshino-san, and just sat still, elegantly sipping her tea.

Right as Yumi went down the stairs and went to open the door, it was opened from the other side, and she bumped into Shimako-san, who'd stormed into the building.

"Sorry."

Luckily, the only damage caused was that what they were holding fell to the ground.

"I was trying to come here as soon as I could after cleaning duty, but a number of things delayed me--"

While she was explaining why she was in such a hurry, Shimako-san began picking up the scattered documents. Yumi also helped.

"Oh, this--"

Noticing an unfamiliar book among the scattered documents, Shimako-san said, “Oh.”

“Yumi-san’s? So you’re making chocolate for Valentine’s Day after all?”

“...Mm. I don’t know. Well, I borrowed it from Rei-sama, in any case, but I’m just looking through it, for now.”

“I see.”

Placing the documents under her arm, Shimako-san flipped through it.

“Come to think of it, I do recall everyone talking about this in the classroom.”

After a quick smile, Shimako-san closed the book and held it out. As she received it, Yumi thought, she’s probably not going to give Rosa Gigantea chocolate.

“If I knew Yumi-san would be here, I wouldn’t have had to hurry so much, after all.”

Farewell, said Shimako-san as she went up the stairs.

(Oh, that’s right.)

When she left the Rose Mansion and entered the courtyard, Yumi finally realized.

The two “outsider” first-years had not gone to the Rose Mansion in quite some time. Which made Shimako-san in charge of most of the chores. Not that the upperclassmen were forcing the job onto her, but she must have felt it awkward to have the upperclassmen clean the room and pour her tea. So Shimako-san, despite being encumbered as it was with class and committee obligations, was doing her best.

When onee-sama and sister end up being separated for one reason or another, other people are hit by unexpected repercussions, Yumi thought.

She couldn’t just become absorbed in her own problems.

She tried to reflect on her actions.

Part 3.

The newspaper club announced the Valentine's Day event through a small leaflet.

The "Lillian Kawaraban" was normally a weekly newspaper, so they printed a smaller version as an extra issue, or a supplemental issue, depending on how you look at it, and distributed it every day.

They titled it the "Lillian Kawaraban petite-sized Valentine's project countdown special." Even the broadcasting DJ might twist their tongue on that one. After all, that title alone took up most of the small issue, but it did grab peoples' attention, so it was hard to criticize it.

As a daily paper, it gradually let the students know about the Valentine's project that the newspaper club had brought forth to the Yamayurikai. No one knew what was going on at first, but the slow, daily leaking of bits and pieces of news captivated the curiosity of the girls. Especially the second issue, where the involvement of the boutons was printed, that definitely was big. After all, it hadn't been long since the student council election, so the popularity of the future Roses was still peaking.

"And so like, all the students think the sisters of the boutons must know something, so they've been cornering me all day."

Yumi shrugged her shoulders as she finishing cleaning duty and was shutting the windows to the music room.

"So, Yumi-san, you do know something?"

Shizuka-sama slowly lifted her hand from the piano cover and turned to Yumi. Her neat, short hair settled down in an outline for her face.

"I wish."

Yumi emphatically shook her head. The scraggly hair she'd tied in two sliced through the air.

In regard to the project, all she knew was that it was a game to find the treasures the boutons were going to hide. And since she hadn't been participating in meetings, she didn't even know if the decision had made as to whether that treasure was going to be a card, chocolate, nor whether the extra prize had been decided upon to be the date. Since the treasure hunt was announced to the school, the sisters of the boutons basically only knew as much as the other students.

“And how is Shimako-san?”

“Well, at the very least, they seem to realize asking the person herself would be out of bounds, so our classmates are restraining themselves. Plus, Shimako-san has that aura around her, so that helps her, too.”

Holding the cleaning diary to her chest, Yumi sighed. The classmates that had been cleaning the music room with her had already returned to the classroom, and so for the short time until the chorus club members arrived, the music room was left to the two of them.

Yumi had gotten here late, so she penalized herself by appointing herself in charge of the diary.

“That's true, she's not really the type to get bothered by people. But, I'm a bit envious.”

“Right?”

“Of Yumi-san.”

“What?”

Don't worry about it, Shizuka-sama said, and she didn't speak any further on that subject.

“Then, Yumi-san, are you still being hounded by your classmates?”

“Thankfully not, Yoshino-san and I went to the newspaper club captain about it, and she printed the day that the sisters were participating as regular students, and so we weren't told anything. That settled things.”

“Ahh, that’s good, then.”

Shizuka-sama was about to study overseas, so maybe she just wasn’t interested to begin with, because she was acting rather indifferent to the Valentine’s Day project. Of course, if this involved fighting for Rosa Gigantea’s chocolate, things might be very different.

“Nowadays we’re bothered more by ‘where do you think they would hide it?’ sort of questions. I mean, I’m the one wanting to ask that!”

It’s a big school, and she’d never done a treasure hunt before, so she had no idea where good hiding places are. Plus, the boutons were smart, so they wouldn’t choose someplace easy.”

“Good question... I think I’d start by thinking where I’d hide it if I were them.”

“If I were them.”

Yumi’d never thought about where she would hide things. So she started off by imagining where the person in front of her might hide things.

“Shizuka-sama might hide something in the grand piano, for instance?”

She asked, patting the piano lightly.

“Wouldn’t that be too easy? Plus, if someone were to play it that day, they’d notice it right away.”

“Hmm.”

So somewhere anyone would think of would be out. Hiding treasure is difficult.

“But, piano aside, the music room is a nice starting point. Either here... Or the library.”

“Library?”

“I wouldn’t be bothered by who finds the treasure, but if possible, I’d prefer it to be found by someone who can at least understand a bit of how I think, you know?”

Shizuka-sama was a librarian.

“That’s true.”

She thought as she nodded. Where would Sachiko-sama hide it? What kind of person did she want it to be found by?

If she could find Sachiko-sama’s treasure first, it would solidify Yumi’s understanding of Sachiko-sama as her little sister. And that might entice Sachiko-sama to accept her chocolate. And Sachiko-sama accepting her even just a bit more would be the ultimate present for her.

“By the way, Yumi-san, are you giving Sachiko-san chocolate?”

“Eh?”

The conversation skipped such a great distance that Yumi emitted something of a squeal, in surprise. Although in retrospect it made sense, because the treasure hunt takes place on Valentine’s Day, which is when you give chocolate.

“My, was it a secret? Should I not have asked?”

“No, that’s not it.”

She intended to make chocolate, but she didn’t know if she could present it- wow, it could turn out to be a long story.

Actually, she’d already picked out what chocolate she’d make. She thought like 40 percent of the joy of making something was the act of planning it out. And then another 40 percent would be the anticipation of it coming out the way you imagine it. And the remaining 20 percent, well that was just a mish-mash of shopping for ingredients and actually making it. Well, she hadn’t really gone into the “making” phase of things yet, but she could imagine it. At least... at least with imagining, the chocolate would always come out perfectly, and you could re-do it as many times as you want.

“How about Shizuka-sama?”

Right after she asked, Yumi thought, “oh, shoot,” but Shizuka-sama didn’t seem at all bothered, and giggled.

“Yumi-san, you just tried to be sympathetic, didn’t you? Stop it, you don’t have to.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“I look up to Rosa Gigantea a great deal, but it’s not like an unrequited love or anything. I just didn’t get to become her sister, then suffered a crushing defeat at the election, and on top of it all, I’m about to head to Italy in a bit.”

But doesn’t that all add up to a harsh experience? Is what Yumi thought, but for Shizuka-sama, it might be that all of that overwhelmed any grief she might feel from her broken heart.

“So, I’m giving her chocolate. Of course.”

“What!?”

“Rosa Gigantea asked me, ‘I don’t think Shimako will give me some, so can you give me some?’ Of course, I was never going to defer to Shimako-san to begin with.”

(...Shizuka-sama.)

Was a different type of person, but she seemed to be as tough as Yoshino-san. In a way, they both used difficult circumstances as a springboard for greatness. And so they both were rather powerful.

“When did you two become so close-”

“Rosa Gigantea and I? It’s normal, just like you and I, Yumi-san.”

“Even so.”

Does Rosa Gigantea even have time to be worrying over chocolate like that? She showed up so rarely Yumi didn’t even know if she was coming to school.

“Rosa Gigantea is kind, so she always accepts everyone’s chocolate. So in that sense, it’s actually quite pleasant to give her chocolate.”

“Ah.”

Yumi didn’t know if “kind” would be the word to describe Rosa Gigantea here. Because, you know, it’s her.

“Oh, but I’m not saying Sachiko-san is unkind, just so you know.”

“Sachiko-sama?”

A name she couldn't just let slip without noticing. Plus, it came with the adjective "unkind." Well, it was actually "not unkind," but that wasn't the point.

"What about Sachiko-sama? If she's been mentioned in contrast to Rosa Gigantea, does that mean she does indeed reject chocolate?"

"What? Yumi-san, isn't that why you're in distress?"

"Yes... but still."

But Shizuka-sama seemed to be speaking like an eye witness, so Yumi thought it'd be normal to ask. Especially because she'd never mentioned to Shizuka-sama that she was agonizing over Sachiko-sama's apparent dislike of chocolate. And she hadn't been asking around to the point where it'd become a rumor.

"Because I'm of the same year as Sachiko-san. Why would it be odd that I know what happened last year?"

"Ah."

"I mean, she's beautiful, and has quite the presence. She was just a first-year, but she was receiving chocolate from first-years and upperclassmen."

"First-years?"

"Middle school is strict about this, so even during Valentine's Day it wasn't permissible to bring in chocolate, right? That might be why that happened."

The moment they became high school students, the rules were loosened, in order to "emphasize the students' autonomy." Well, that's why everyone patiently waited during compulsory education, because that loosening of rules awaited in the future. But anyways, "enjoying Valentine's Day" jumped near the top of everyone's list of how to enjoy high school life. And for students who otherwise had no real plans for giving and receiving chocolate, presenting it to a student they admired was the next alternative. And that's why the Yamayurikai staff tended to be swamped with chocolate.

“And basically, Sachiko-san became exasperated by the mountain of chocolate being offered to her, and began turning everyone away.”

“Eek...”

“But that’s one type of kindness.”

“How is turning everyone away kindness?”

Yumi earnestly asked, but Shizuka-sama simply smiled.

“You’ll know soon enough.”

She was side-stepped again. –Was she being teased?

The chorus club members finally began appearing, so Yumi bid her farewell and left the music room.

“Yumi-san.”

Shizuka-sama hurried to the door and stopped Yumi.

“You know, you only experience it three times. Enjoy Valentine’s Day, including the days leading up to it, to the fullest. All of your worrying and perplexing will simply pave the way to a better future, both next year and the year after.”

“Shizuka-sama...”

“I was just an observer last year. So I’ll definitely make it memorable, before I go to Italy. Yumi-san, you should-”

Yumi couldn’t make out the end, but she could guess what Shizuka-sama wanted to say.

She only had a little over a year left with Sachiko-sama. If that would be the case, she should make the most of it. Laugh without restraint and worry with all seriousness, so that she wouldn’t regret it later. That’s probably what Shizuka-sama wanted to say.

“I will.”

Yumi energetically responded, bowed her head again, and began walking to the staff room.

The Thirteenth of February

Part 1.

“-Anyways, while I know why everyone may become over-excited, but please conduct yourselves in a manner appropriate to a Lillian student. After all, classes will go on as usual.”

After listening to their homeroom teacher, Yamamura-sensei, with faithful ears, the students answer, “Yes.” But they weren’t really paying much attention. The teachers were warning them beforehand, but that was also a bit more for show, because they weren’t really holding very high expectations tomorrow, either. The students were this excited, so it was far, far too late to expect that to settle down.

Homeroom was ended quickly, too. If there were any important papers to distribute, it would be more definite if they were distributed the day after tomorrow. She’s a veteran as well as a Lillian alumni, so sensei knew exactly how we felt and would act.

“That’s all.”

Kiritsu, rei.

After homeroom, the teacher disappeared on the other side of the door. And Yumi, who’d sprung up and hurried out, was stopped by a classmate.

“Yumi-san, we don’t have to clean the music room today.”

“What?”

“The contracted floor cleaners are in today, so feel free to spend time as you please.”

She was in Yumi’s cleaning group, so she knew why Yumi was in such a hurry.

“Thank you, gokigenyou.”

She was told to “feel free to spend time as she pleased,” but Yumi dashed out to the hallway anyways. After all, it wasn’t a warning about her hasty departure. Rather, Yumi had always been visiting a certain place before going to the music room lately, and so she was actually being told that she didn’t have to scurry to the music room after she was done.

Tomorrow awaited a joyous Valentine.

As well as a somewhat suspenseful Valentine.

Moving her legs forward, she began silently singing impromptu.

Trotting down the hallway, and then resuming her trot after going down the stairs. After entering the courtyard, she went straight to the Rose Mansion. And it didn't feel like anyone had gotten there.

"Safe."

Creak, creak, creak, creak, she climbed up the stairs, opened the biscuit-shape door, and walked straight toward the electric pot and began setting things up.

When she glanced at the sink, she noticed there were no dishes awaiting cleaning. Shimako-san had probably stopped by during lunch break and finished that. With that aside, Yumi went to open the windows for ventilation. She did a light sweeping of the floors, wiped the table, rinsed the washing rags, and was done. She didn't have cleaning duty at the music room today, so she didn't really need to hurry back to the school, but she didn't feel comfortable staying here. So she began leaving.

-And then.

"Are you **gongitsune?**"

"Gyah!?"

The person who'd been standing in the shadow of the door suddenly spoke, so Yumi almost had a heart-attack.

"- Haven't I been telling you to start using 'kya'?"

"...R- Rosa Gigantea."

Yumi'd also thought that most people can't control what they say when they're surprised. "You didn't even notice me standing by the entrance when you flew into the Rose Mansion, so I was wondering what was going on."

Rosa Gigantea coldly said.

“So, what is this? Yumi-chan’s sense of aesthetics? Coming here every day without being seen, cleaning everything up, and then leaving?”

“Umm.”

She wasn’t really doing this every day. Because if homeroom ended late, or if Shimako-san beat her here, she didn’t come.

“Oh well, not really my place to say anything... It would be coarse to dampen Yumi-chan’s sense of self-satisfaction.”

Rosa Gigantea groaned as she stretched, and then began walking down the stairs. But Yumi couldn’t let those words be, and she quickly pursued.

“Umm, am I making a mistake!?”

“Hmm?”

Thump, thump, thump, thump, the stairs sounded.

“Because, self-satisfaction, dampening...”

“I said those words, yes?”

When they reached the bottom, Rosa Gigantea finally turned to Yumi.

“You know, I think Yumi-chan’s just charging ahead with your emotions. Like a mother doing ohyakudo for the success of her child.”

“Ohyakudo.”

She’d seen that acted out in historical plays. She couldn’t remember if it was a Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple, but people with wishes would go back and forth to pray. If she remembered correctly, sometimes they’d have conditions, like not being caught doing it.

“But you shouldn’t stop someone doing ohyakudo and say ‘come come, that’s eerie, so stop,’ either “

Said Rosa Gigantea, who was saying she shouldn’t be doing so, but had already done it.

“Eerie?”

“Yep.”

“How direct.”

“Well you followed me because you wanted to hear me be direct, didn’t you?”

“Umm.”

Yumi didn’t think that was her exact reason, but it wasn’t wrong, either.

“Rather than a mother doing ohyakudo or cold-water ablutions, I’d prefer a mother who’d make me warm dinner every day.”

“Huh?”

“Just my personal opinion. Because my mother’s more like the former, so a delinquent child is too heavy a burden for her... Umm, but that’s an example, my mother doesn’t actually use sorcery, so you don’t have to worry there.”

“Uhhh.”

Wow, she was able to understand Rosa Gigantea before, but now the conversation was taking quite the detour and was going beyond her grasp.

And that’s when Shimako-san came in through the door, having finished her cleaning duty, so the conversation abruptly ended. Of course, it might have been ended in Rosa Gigantea’s mind anyways.

“Ah, onee-sama.”

Noticing Rosa Gigantea, Shimako-san smiled like an angel. She was already like an ephemeral beauty, but her smile was on a different level. Even though they were of the same age, how could people be so different?

“I passed.”

No preface. Rosa Gigantea faced Shimako-san and made a V with her hand, in a peace sign.

(Eh.....? What?)

“Congratulations, onee-sama.”

But Shimako-san's bouncy reply made Yumi realize what happened. Rosa Gigantea was accepted into her first-choice school.

(Oh, so that's what happened.)

Rosa Gigantea wanted to let Shimako-san know first, and that's why she'd come here.

Because the way she looked at Shimako-san was gentle and kind. It wasn't the old-man version of Rosa Gigantea that'd generally been teasing Yumi.

"Congratulations."

She felt bad for intruding on their world, but she felt compelled to say that word, being a bystander.

"Thanks, Yumi-chan."

Rosa Gigantea patted Yumi's head, then tossed her front hair and laughed.

"Gosh, it was tough. I mean I didn't plan on going to university at all, so I only started studying after the turn of the year. But whatever, I'll be a student at a women's college this spring."

She only had one university she was aiming for, so she was set. Still, she managed to get into a university after a little more than a month of studying, so Rosa Gigantea was definitely superhuman.

"Then you must feel relieved."

"But Eriko and Yōko aren't done yet, so..."

Yumi didn't even think about Rosa Foetida and Rosa Chinensis there. But Rosa Gigantea didn't seem to notice she'd called her friends by their names, either.

The university exam dates differed depending on the universities, so some people had even finished last year, while others will be waiting until graduation. Of course, most schools had their exams take place during January and February.

"Anyways, it looks like I can enjoy myself to the fullest tomorrow."

Snap, crackle. Rosa Gigantea cracked her white knuckles and let the somewhat pleasant sound echo off the ceiling.

“Then I shall have to do my best for onee-sama, too.”

Shimako-san forced a smile.

Knowing Rosa Gigantea was going to participate, she may decide to change her hiding place. Placing it in an easier spot? No, probably the opposite.

Shimako-san knew Rosa Gigantea understood her. So if she hid it in an obvious spot, it'd be too easy. And Rosa Gigantea wouldn't be able to have fun.

“I'll be waiting.”

She looked completely excited. Rosa Gigantea was like a child when she was like this.

Like, I won't let anyone else get Rei-sama's card! Well, it's a harsh way of putting it, but Rosa Gigantea wasn't like Yoshino-san in that regard, because Yoshino-san would use any means necessary to win. Rather, Rosa Gigantea was more the type of person to enjoy the treasure hunt, itself, so the harder the better.

Then how about herself? Yumi thought, but she didn't really know.

Thinking is hard.

She didn't know how she felt, so it was even more difficult imagining how others might feel. Or maybe she didn't know how she felt because it was herself.

That's when she noticed a person was standing on the other side of the wooden door to the courtyard, the person's shadow visible through the ornamental glassing.

Yumi quickly opened the door.

“Ah.”

There stood Sachiko-sama.

“Onee-sama, gokigenyou.”

“___”

But she knew onee-sama wasn't in good spirits, before the fact that a response never came, just by looking at her. She didn't know why, but Sachiko-sama looked particularly angry. Her whole body screamed “displeased.”

However.

Why didn't she come into the Rose Mansion if she was standing outside? Just as Yumi was beginning to wonder, Sachiko-sama's mouth opened.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself."

Yumi didn't know how long Sachiko-sama had been standing outside, but their laughter had definitely been heard. "Oh. Rosa Gigantea was here, and-"

She was going to relate the news of Rosa Gigantea's university acceptance, but Sachiko-sama cut her off.

"I see. If Rosa Gigantea is here, you can enjoy yourself."

"...Huh?"

"So? Since when have you hated me so much you don't want to look at me?"

"What?"

She didn't know what Sachiko-sama meant.

Because she'd never even imagined Sachiko-sama saying such words, so even if her ears could take it in, her brain wasn't able to keep up. Peoples' nervous system works better when there's a precedent.

"I... hate onee-sama?"

She repeated the words she'd heard, and immediately doubted them. Where did Sachiko-sama come up with such a thought?

"Are you saying I'm wrong? Then why are you avoiding me?"

"I haven't been avoiding..."

But Sachiko-sama didn't believe her.

"You are."

She stated clearly, and didn't budge. Yumi didn't intend it that way, but her actions and behavior might have been working against her.

“At first I tried to understand, because I am a bouton, but you’ve been interacting with Rei and Shimako just fine. Even when you come to the Rose Mansion you leave before I come, and when I arrive earlier than usual, you dash out like you’re escaping.”

“That’s-”

Because she was going to be late for cleaning duty.

And she was speaking with Rei-sama because she was being taught how to make chocolate for Sachiko-sama.

“What’s the matter? If you have something to say, speak it clearly.”

But she couldn’t.

She couldn’t say it was for Sachiko-sama. Because she was the one forcing everything on her.

She’d been conceited.

As Rosa Gigantea said, self-satisfaction. No, even worse, she finally realized it.

Yumi looked at Sachiko-sama.

“Why are you silent? Why don’t you throw your thoughts at me? I can’t possibly understand otherwise.”

Onee-sama looked extremely scary.

“I’m sorry... onee-sama.”

That was all she could muster. She was ashamed of herself, for making onee-sama look like this, for forcing onee-sama to speak like this.

But no matter what, she would never hate onee-sama.

Still, all Yumi could do was watch as her vision of her most beloved person became blurred.

“Um, Sachiko-sama?”

Perhaps realizing the situation was going downhill, Shimako-san stepped toward the door and spoke, but she was powerless in this strained atmosphere

“...Shimako, come.”



Rosa Gigantea held Shimako-san's shoulder and dragged her away.

"Why do you cry?"

With the foyer left to the two of them, Sachiko-sama whispered.

"Please, stop. Now it just looks like I'm picking on a kōhai. I'm the one that wants to cry. I'm being avoided by my sister, and I don't know why-"

"Ukk."

A strange sound was emitted from Yumi's throat. She tried to speak, but she couldn't formulate words, because it felt like a lump of meat was lodged in.

"Why won't you tell me? Is that all I was to you? Then why are we sisters? Why did you accept my rosary?"

She wanted to say that's not how it is, but her tears just kept flowing. She could tell her eyes were beginning to swell.

She felt incredibly stupid. Sachiko-sama was angry, she knew that, but she could only keep crying.

But, this was the first time Sachiko-sama had ever shown her such strong emotions, and it confused her.

"...Enough."

Sachiko-sama said, exasperated.

"Let's talk about this again some other time. I may be high-strung, myself, so I may have been too harsh."

"Ah..."

Sachiko-sama had turned around, and she looked so lonely that Yumi instinctively began following, and that was when Rei-sama and Minako-sama arrived at the Rose Mansion.

"W-What happened, Yumi-chan?" Rei-sama shouted.

"Nothing. Let's just finish the final meeting."

Sachiko-sama quickly went ahead, leaving Yumi behind.

"Nothing...? Umm."

"Yes."

Minako-sama and Rei-sama looked at each other. Well, it was obvious just by looking at Yumi's face that it was clearly not "nothing." But Yumi just wanted to be left alone. It would be worse if someone acted kind to her.

"Are you two going to label me a villain, too!?"

A hysteric-sounding voice came from above.

"...eally, it's nothing."

Finally managing to wring her voice out, she ran in the complete opposite direction from Sachiko-sama, out the Mansion. She felt like she her Rei-sama and Minako-sama's voices, but she didn't turn around.

Or rather, she couldn't.

Part 2.

“All of your worrying and perplexing will simply pave the way to a better future, both next year and the year after.”

As she ran down the hallway, Shizuka-sama’s words kept repeating in her mind.

(It was no good, Shizuka-sama.)

How could she expect good memories now?

Her self-hatred and her despair, along with her tear-drenched, sloppy face, no matter how many years and month passed, she would never be able to look back upon this and smile.

“Then why are we sisters?”

Sachiko-sama must have lost patience with Yumi this time, once and for all.

Yumi was absorbed in finding a place to be alone. From Rei-sama’s expression, she could guess she looked to be in a bad shape. There would probably be some people left in the classroom, so she couldn’t go back just yet. They’d try to get to the bottom of things, and that’d just make things worse.

Anyways, she didn’t want to see anyone.

Eventually she found herself at the corner of the building, where the emergency exit in front of her blinded her with its green lamp. Yumi opened the door and stepped out.

The cold air felt a bit painful, but that was just a surface thing. Avoiding the students leaving through the rear gate, she hurried to that place. Because she knew most people didn’t go near it.

The old greenhouse, it’d been a while since she’d come by. It hadn’t changed much. The flowers had all wilted, so the leaves were by their lonesome, so it looked a lot more dreary, but as it was, most people avoided coming here, so no one had bothered to fix any of the cracked glasses. So even though it was a greenhouse, she wasn’t here to be cheered up.

It was a crumbling greenhouse, but it was a good windbreaker, so she was able to settle down.

The day before the school festival, Sachiko-sama had also come here, escaping from Kashiwagi-san and everything he symbolized. Come to think of it, Rei-sama had come here, too, after Yoshino-san had returned her rosary.

She wondered why. Did this greenhouse have the power to heal wounded hearts?

“-Rosa Chinensis.”

They were there, between the dead branches and the skinny trees sleeping winter away. They weren't in a pot, but rather were growing from the ground, where someone had pried away a piece of floor tiling. The greenhouse was darkening, but it seemed like there was a single spotlight shining down upon them, so Yumi could see them clearly.

It wasn't like there was a nameplate, but Yumi knew. Because someone she loved had taught her. Yumi stepped close and placed a hand on that strong trunk. That's when she realized she'd come here to see that rose bush.

“So, you bloom every season.”

But unfortunately, the red flowers from back then weren't there. She realized she was bitterly smiling. It almost looked like there was some kind of apocalypse.

“I wonder if onee-sama hates me, now.”

Her feelings for Sachiko-sama hadn't changed since that day she was taught about this plant. No, maybe it was even stronger, the more she'd come to know Sachiko-sama. But then, how did things come to this?

Thump, thump. She raised her head, hearing the knocking sound from outside. Her eyes, barely getting used to the darkness, made out Rosa Gigantea through the dirty glass.

“I knew you'd be here.”

She walked around and poked her head in through the entrance. What an uncommon occurrence: Rosa Gigantea asked, “May I come in?” before she took a step in.

“I wondered if you’d prefer to be alone, but Yumi-chan is scared of the dark.”

“...I’m sorry I’m such a bother.”

How strange. She’d been so adamantly against seeing anyone, but the moment Rosa Gigantea appeared, she felt relieved and comforted.

“Not at all, not at all.”

Rosa Gigantea chuckled, walked to Yumi, and also squatted down by the Rosa Chinensis bush.

“It’s not like I’m part of the meeting, so I had to walk out anyways. Plus, that happened in the middle of our conversation, you know? It left a bitter aftertaste.”

The conversation before Shimako-san had come to the Rose Mansion. She still remembered.

“But wow, that felt like a complete flashback.”

Fidgeting around with a dead branch she’d picked up, Rosa Gigantea sounded nostalgic. Yumi didn’t know what “that” was exactly pointing to, so she stayed silent.

“Yumi-chan, you might think you’re totally unlike Sachiko, but from my perspective, you two are stunningly alike.”

“...That we’re always one step too slow?”

“Ahh, I did say something like that before, didn’t I. Well, roughly speaking, yeah, but I think the nuance is a bit different.”

For example, Rosa Gigantea said.

“Sometimes you’ll always feel differently about something with someone else. When that happens, Yoshino-chan immediately brings forth an aggressive discussion, to make sure the other person knows her stance, and sometimes even to make them a turncoat. But Yumi-chan closes her mouth and leaves. Sachiko, too. You two are similar like that.”

“Sachiko-sama always says what she thinks.”

Yumi interjected almost reflexively. Rosa Gigantea, aren't you thinking of someone else?

“Because Rosa Chinensis really disciplined her, she's improved.”

But she used to be dead silent, and tough to get along with. Hard to believe.

“But she's probably still fundamentally the same. The type that doesn't like to explain how she feels, for fear of it being rejected. Like, Kashiwagi, she'd kept that bottled up for a really long time. So when she realizes she can speak out, she kinda flaunts it. Like, I can speak out in front of this person, that sort of thing. I guess in the end it just means she's not really self-confident.”

Rosa Gigantea freely went ahead and broke down Sachiko-sama's personality.

“And, what I meant before was that Yumi-chan and Sachiko was almost exactly like Sachiko and Yōko a year and ten months ago- you know, the current Rosa Chinensis.”

“What?”

“I think it was right after they'd become sisters? Or maybe it was before. I didn't really care about other students back then, so I don't really remember the time and stuff too well, but it was right around the beginning of the first semester, when I saw Yōko saying ‘if you want to say something, say it clearly!’ in really harsh tones.”

“To Sachiko-sama?”

“Yup. Because you know, Sachiko, I guess her upbringing plays a part in it, but she's really bad at expressing her opinions. So she'd just silently brood over it. So one day Yōko strongly told her, that's too hard to understand. And it must have hit Sachiko hard. And she started trying to express herself after that. So her hysteria is more like a remnant of that, or maybe just the kick-back from everything. And that's why no one really gets bothered by it.”

“Ah.”

“So she’s probably getting irritated.”

“Irritated... Sachiko-sama?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“Well, because she must feel like she’s staring at herself.”

That’s when Yumi remembered Tsutako-san’s words from some time ago. That Sachiko-sama probably didn’t want a sister just like herself.

People seek things they don’t have-. That was one of the reasons why she was attracted to Sachiko-sama, so Yumi knew full well what that meant.

Then, what if. What if she’d found someone close to her that had the exact characteristics she hated of herself? It would feel like she was looking at a mirror, and it’d obviously be quite discomfoting.

“So, forgive Sachiko’s harsh behavior.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about that...”

She shook her head vigorously.

“Then, you don’t hate her for it?”

“O-Of course.”

This time she nodded vigorously. Even if Sachiko-sama were to hate her, she’d never be the one hating back. Ever.

“Good girl.”

Rosa Gigantea ruffled Yumi’s hair and laughed.

“Alright, let’s go back then. I don’t like this greenhouse too much.”

Hoisting herself up, Rosa Gigantea patted down her own skirt. It’d already become quite dark, so she could hardly tell what sort of face Rosa Gigantea had. Luckily, one of the lamp-posts littered around the school managed to reach the greenhouse, so she made it outside without tripping. There might have been a light switch somewhere, but they were easily able to get out before they could find it.

“Yumi-chan, there’s a step here, so be careful.”

Rosa Gigantea reached out with her left hand. Yumi took it, and then grabbed the arm it belonged to.

“What am I going to do?”

“Hmm?”

“Rosa Gigantea is going to graduate soon. What am I going to do then?”

There would be no one left to help her through tough times like these. No one who could scoot in between her and Sachiko-sama like this.

“That makes me feel so happy, Yumi-chan.”

Rosa Gigantea didn't show any signs of displeasure at finding her arm suddenly grabbed. So Yumi, despite feeling a bit bad toward Shimako-san, decided to keep borrowing this kind arm.

“It'll be alright.”

The right hand lightly pinched Yumi's cheek.

“I was worried when my onee-sama graduated, too. But you know, you'd be surprised at how everything ends up working out.”

“Ends up working out-”

Will things really end up working out? She was this anxious over tomorrow, so she couldn't even begin to imagine beyond that.

“In Yumi-chan's case, you just need to tell Sachiko how you feel, even just a little more. As long as you can do that, no matter what happens, you two can overcome everything.”

“But...”

“You can do it, Yumi-chan. See, we both managed to express how we feel to each other, right?”

Rosa Gigantea seemed to point to herself as a practice dummy, but that's not right. Because to Yumi, speaking to Rosa Gigantea was the real deal, too.

“Alright then, homework for Yumi-chan. Making up with Sachiko with your own strength, okay?”

“...Yes.”



She wasn't confident, but she replied anyways. Because Sachiko-sama and Yumi were sisters. They shouldn't need someone else to come in for them to make up.

It was just the two of them when she accepted the rosary. When it came to matters involving sisters, they had to work it out with just the two of them.

Part 3.

After stopping by the classroom for her bag and coat, she walked home together with Rosa Gigantea. She could see the Rose Mansion lights from the window facing the courtyard along the way.

As Sachiko-sama said, they probably shouldn't speak today. She just had a gut feeling.

She rinsed her face with water using the hallway lavatory, then looked at the mirror. Her eyes were still bloodshot, but her face was much less swollen. Maybe it was because she'd been talking in the greenhouse for an hour. It would probably really become indistinguishable if she were to let the night breeze blow at it on the way home. Which meant she would probably avoid worrying her family.

As they walked along the ginkgo pathway, Rosa Gigantea explained that the sisters with both similar and different aspects get along best. And that most sisters were like that, anyways.

"Then Rosa Gigantea, do you see bits of yourself in Shimako-san, too?"

"Mm? Me in Shimako? Yeah, sometimes. I think, wow, what a pain in the butt. But I also think she's much better than how I used to be. If I could, I'd love to free Shimako from some of her shackles, but I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I know Shimako too well. So I can only patch things up."

So she was envious of sisters who would get in fights because they didn't understand each other completely. And she'd poke her head into things because of that.

I kinda understood her, and kinda didn't.

As she put her hands together in front of the Maria-sama statue, Yumi tilted her head to the side. Why was it that whenever she spoke to Rosa Gigantea, the conversation would always steamroll ahead without her understanding things? At least in the greenhouse she could keep up...

“By the way. I imagine the chocolate Yumi-chan makes being really sweet.”

As she stepped on the bus, Rosa Gigantea cackled, as if remembering. Sheesh, the conversation really had a knack for skipping around.

“You’re going to make some for Sachiko, right? Tonight?”

“Well, yes.”

Actually, she’d just been reminded. She was really just intending to go home and finish it before dinner, but so many things happened that those plans went awry. When would she be able to take a bath, she wondered.

“I hope it turns out good.”

Even as they sat down, Rosa Gigantea continued on the topic of chocolate. Like chocolate from one store should fit really well with blue mountain tea from a certain café, but it was a shame she couldn’t actually try it. Or the right temperature to store chocolate. It sounded like she was just hungry.

“So, like, I prefer ones that are a bit scaled-back on sweetness. And if Western liquor is dripped in just a teensy weensy, like a hidden taste, that’d be best.”

Now she got it, now she understood what Rosa Gigantea was getting at.

“Umm. Rosa Gigantea, I never said I was giving you chocolate.”

“Wait, seriously!?! I thought it was a given!?”

A given, just where did she come up with that? She’d already given up on receiving chocolate from Shimako-san, too...

“People who go pestering Shizuka-sama won’t receive even store-bought chocolate.”

“Woah, why do you know about that?”

And she said that without even a hint of remorse. So it left a bitter taste. She was probably going around pestering everyone for chocolate, at this rate, that Rosa Gigantea.

“Aww.”

She puckered her lip and pouted like a child. Reverted back to the usual Rosa Gigantea, from to that wise high school senior.

“If you want to eat chocolate, they sell it at stores.”

Especially at this time of year, they were lined up everywhere.

“I want to eat ones that’re filled with love.”

“Then call Shimako-san’s house. And tell her you want chocolate.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Then all you can do is give up.”

“Don’t wanna don’t wanna. I’ll eat Yumi-chan if you doesn’t give me chocolate!”

“Yes, yes.”

There was no use talking sensibly to her anymore.

“If I say I’ll eat you, I’ll definitely eat you!”

Because the bus was sparse, her perverted-old-man mode was on full blast. She’d dropped her voice to a level that other people would barely not make out what she was saying, and her head was turned, so it must look like innocent Lillian students chatting away. That a somewhat exotic-looking girl with such a beautiful face would be spewing this sort of vulgar language... the driver, the middle-aged men, even the silver-seat old women wouldn’t imagine that.

Until they arrived at the train station, Rosa Gigantea continued to chant “chocolate” at Yumi. For some reason, she began to feel a bit sorry for her, so she decided if she felt like it, she would make chocolate for Rosa Gigantea, too.

Of course, it would probably be left-overs from her cooking for Sachiko-sama.

St. Valentine's Prank

Part 1.

The reason her eyes were red wasn't because she'd cried the day before.

After all, that would mean a third of her class had been crying for some reason.

Obviously the probability that a chunk of her class had run into a disaster wasn't zero.

But this time it was almost certainly another cause.

Everyone had picked this day to become a rabbit. The cause of red eyes? Lack of sleep.

Think about it, you can't just make it and leave it for a couple days. So the first-year peach-class girls had challenged themselves to work late into the night – something they wouldn't do even for exam studies – and cook up marvelous chocolate pastries.

When she stepped into the room, Yumi was struck speechless by the amount of energy bubbling around. It was almost like how everyone was during the school festival.

"The recipe, you know, it said to let it sit for three days, so I made a batch three days ago and brought the best one. I guess you'd call it beginner's luck? The first one I made turned out the best. But I have to tell onee-sama, 'Please eat today.'"

"I'd promised to hand it to her during lunch, but now I'm worried about the chocolate melting because of the classroom temperature. It might be cooler in the locker."

"Oh no, the box got crushed a bit. But it's too late to make sure everything's alright inside..."

"I was worried about the cookie becoming moistened, so I included a drying agent from a nori can."

-And such.

Talk talk, clatter clatter.

Yumi had come to school thirty minutes earlier than usual, but most of the class had arrived before her. Maybe they'd left home early to beat the rush. Or maybe so they could hand chocolate to their onee-sama first thing in the morning.

Along the way, she'd noticed there were already pairs of sisters performing a chocolate presentation ceremony in front of the Maria-sama statue. On top of working late into the night, they'd come to work early. It was like, thank you for your efforts.

The people that had decided to just use store-bought chocolate might have been able to rest easier, but then they might have had to struggle over hand-made cards, so they might have ended up being sleep deprived, too. And people who'd challenged things like last year's Rei-sama and her cake probably looked in even worse shape, sleep-wise. Some people that were intending to give a hand-knit sweater couldn't finish in time and ended up presenting vests, instead.

"Yumi-san, gokigenyou."

Katsura-san, one such bunny, bounced over to Yumi.

"Katsura-san, you already presented your chocolate, didn't you?"

"Bingo. How'd you know?"

"You look much more relaxed than everyone else."

Everyone who was still needing to present their chocolate had a mysterious quality to them, expressing their anxieties. What if onee-sama rejects it? What if the chocolate runs into an accident before I can present it? No one was letting their guard down, so they looked extremely tense.

"How about Yumi-san? Are you giving chocolate to Sachiko-sama? Aren't the boutons busy after school?"

"...Yes."

Because we hadn't actually made any promises yet, Yumi laughed. Katsura-san, not knowing what was going on, simply pointed out that there didn't need to be any promises. They were sisters. But even Katsura-san had called her onee-sama to the tennis court first thing in the morning to present the chocolate.

“I’m going to step out for a bit.”

Yumi left the school coat she’d just taken off and her handbag, then left the classroom. Then she headed straight for the corner leading to the second-year classes.

Inside her handbag rested two little boxes of chocolate truffles that she’d been working on yesterday... no, more like today, at two in the morning.

She’d hoped to make her own variation based on Rei-sama’s original, but that was a mistake. She found out that a newbie should always work on the orthodox. While she was trying to find her own special taste, she’d created a number of astonishing things using weird spices and western liquor. So she actually ended up using three times the ingredients she’d intended to use, and even then she barely managed to make enough “proper” ones for Sachiko-sama.

But as she put them in a box, Rosa Gigantea drifted across her head, so as a bit of a prank, she put the others, hardly distinguishable from the right ones from looks, into another box. If she was acting proud after squeezing chocolate from Shizuka-sama, then Yumi would make Rosa Gigantea eat these.

So, there were two boxes in her bag. They were in different-colored boxes, so there was no way she would mix them up. The ivory box was for Sachiko-sama, the brown box was for Rosa Gigantea.

The second-year pine class wasn’t as boisterous as Yumi’s class, but there were still a fair number of students inside. In the case of second years, they were both on the side of presenting chocolate and on the side of receiving chocolate. In front of the pine class, as well as the next-door camellia class, first-years were waiting like fans looking for stars.

“Oh, Fukuzawa Yumi-san.”

Right as she’d been hoping to catch someone’s attention, a student came out of the classroom and recognized her face.

“Sachiko-san? Hold on.”

And then she turned on her heels and walked right back into the classroom.

“Um, umm...”

But it was too late to stop her. Of course, she was hoping to call Sachiko-sama anyways, so there was never any need to stop her.

(-Umm.)

Things were happening without her even saying anything. And it was deflating enough that she felt a big burden lifted from her shoulders and knees. Essentially, Yumi’s face and name were already input into the brains of students as Ogasawara Sachiko’s little sister.

She was nervous about approaching an upperclassman’s classroom. She had to make sure she didn’t mess anything up. She had to make sure she wouldn’t embarrass her sister. But all of that worrying was moot.

(Hmm...)

So she sighed. One problem was solved, but the next waited for her. The reason she’d mustered the courage to come here was to see Sachiko-sama.

“I’m sorry. Sachiko-san did arrive, but she’s not in the room. Have you gone to the Rose Mansion?”

“I have not.”

It was the headquarters for today’s treasure hunt, so she’d been avoiding it under the assumption that she shouldn’t stop by. That’s why she was hoping to catch Sachiko-sama before she went to the Rose Mansion.

“My guess is that she’d be there. Why don’t you take a look?”

“Okay.”

Regardless of whether she would or not, she replied, “Thank you very much,” and bowed her head.

“You’re welcome. Oh, Yumi-san, you’re participating today, aren’t you? Good luck, we’re all cheering for you.”

It probably wasn't her intent, but Sachiko-sama's classmate ended up putting more pressure on Yumi.

She wondered if the second-years just didn't care as much about the treasure hunt as the first-years did. But of course, if you think about it, a half-day dating ticket with a friend who you might even sit next to in class probably isn't that exciting. Yumi herself would probably hand Shimako-san's ticket to someone more worthwhile if she were to happen upon it.

Back to the classroom, or to the Rose Mansion. –Yumi wandered around the hallways as she mulled over her options.

Wherever she went, she kept running into students exchanging chocolate. At the landing of stairs, in front of the faculty room. Some students even met in the courtyard despite how cold it was. “Warmth” and “Quiet place to be alone” had to be weighed carefully.

As she milled about the school grounds, she found the newspaper club distributing copies of “Lillian Kawaraban Petite – etc. –” by the entryway.

“This is finally the day. After school starting three forty-five, the newspaper club presents the ‘Yamayurikai Rose bouton treasure hunt festival.’ You can find out how to enter here. Please finish exchanging chocolate during lunch break so you can make it on time.”

Minako-sama's sister was the one raising her voice. The fact that she was reading bits of the article really made her seem like a street kawaraban merchant, so Yumi felt a twinge of admiration for her.

“Yumi-san.”

When she'd picked up her copy, someone tapped her shoulder from behind. When she turned around, she saw Minako-sama.

“Thank goodness. I was worried you might miss school today after what happened yesterday.”

Come to think of it, Minako-sama might have seen Yumi's ragged face yesterday. She was in such a panicked state she could only vaguely make out bits of her memory, though.

"I apologize for causing you concern."

"Indeed. If the sister doesn't participate, things become less exciting."

"...Ah."

Minako-sama's worries began and ended at the hype level surrounding the event.

"How about Sachiko-sama? Have you seen her yet?"

"Not yet."

"That's no good, come."

"What?"

Minako-sama grabbed Yumi's hand and walked straight down the hallway.

"I don't know what's going on, but I'd prefer you two settle things down by after school. If the bouton and her sister were fighting, it'd make everything feel glum. But, Yumi-san, if things don't work out just yet, you'll still participate, won't you?"

"What?"

"OK, gotcha, it's a promise!"

(...Promise?)

She didn't remember ever agreeing to it. But Minako-sama was just sliding things along to her own hopes. Anyways she was intending to participate to begin with, so she didn't bother correcting her.

She was brought to the Rose Mansion.

"Umm."

"Yes?"

"Is an outsider allowed in?"

A piece of paper with "Treasure hunt headquarters" written across it was taped on the door.

“Of course. We’re leaving the Rose Mansion open for the treasure hunt anyways, so there’s event-related left inside. And the boutons are tight-lipped so I don’t think they’ll let anything slip.”

“Do come in.”

Minako-sama was acting completely like a regular inhabitant of the Mansion. By contrast, Yumi was acting the part of a customer, saying, “Excuse me,” as she stepped in. The roles were completely reversed today.

“Well, wish you luck.”

Yumi was expecting her to come in, too, but instead Minako-sama simply turned back around and left. She had a lot to do before the morning prayers, she said. If she was that busy, she shouldn’t be poking her head into the affairs of other sisters like this...

She carried herself heavily toward the stairs when the first-floor door opened.

“Wah!!”

Both people on opposite sides of the door. Neither expected the other to be there, so they both put a hand to their heart and froze.

“...Oh it’s just Yumi-san, you surprised me so much!”

“Oh, Shimako-san.”

“Wh... what is it?”

Shimako-san was acting extremely flustered. A very rare sight to behold. Like she’d been caught doing something bad.

“Is Sachiko-sama in?”

“What? Umm, yes, she’s upstairs... I think.”

“Thank you.”

She thanked Shimako-san and walked right up the stairs. She wasn’t busy like Minako-sama, but if she didn’t hurry, she wouldn’t make it back to the morning prayers.

(Shimako-san was really sweating, though.)

Yumi stopped half-way up the stairs and looked at the door Shimako-san had appeared from. It was hard doing things you don't normally do. Yumi assumed Shimako-san was doing something treasure hunt-related, so she acted like she didn't see anything.

When she got to the door to the salon, also known as the meeting room, Yumi heard not just Sachiko-sama's voice, but many voices.

Yumi froze, her fist placed over her chest. It wasn't really like she found the room itself menacing, but there was definitely an emotional hurdle in the way. She remembered how disgraceful she was yesterday, and it made her want to just run away and go home, but it was an obstacle she would have to make it past if she wanted to stay Sachiko-sama's sister.

This time, when she opened the door, Sachiko-sama would be on the other side.

(First, I'll apologize for yesterday, and then-)

She mentally planned out what she would do, then knocked. There was no answer. Then she worried that if she were to wait until there was an answer, she'd lose her momentum, so she opened the door and went in.

"Cut it out, Yoshino."

The first thing that greeted her was Rei-sama's shout.

"You don't have to tell me, just listen to my predictions."

She was being yelled at, but Yoshino-san showed no signs of backing down. Forget backing down, it looked like she'd grabbed her prey by the throat and didn't want to let go. Yelp, yelp, like a noisy little puppy. There was no way they'd have heard Yumi's knock through this.

"You're probably hoping to check right or wrong based on my facial expression, but I won't fall for it... Oh, Yumi-chan, good timing. Sorry, but can you take this loud bother elsewhere?"

“Eh... uhh, what?” As she stood there confused, Rei-sama grabbed both of Yoshino-san’s hands, dragged her to Yumi, and held her out to Yumi, like she was giving something to her.

“You could at least give me a hint. Stingy sister!”

She scowled and stuck out her tongue. For whatever reason, that hateful face suited Yoshino-san well. It actually made her look cuter.

“I can’t tell you, you know that. You’ve already got an advantage just by being my sister.”

In short, Yoshino-san had been persistently dogging Rei-sama trying to find out where the treasure was. Of course Rei-sama would yell at her.

“Umm.”

Yumi wasn’t especially pleased at being told to handle something this dreadful. But Yoshino-san had calmed down, her last words having expressed everything, so it was at least somewhat more manageable.

“Fine. I won’t rely on onee-sama... Yumi-san, let’s go.”

At first she was supposed to be taking Yoshino-san away, but now it looked more like Yoshino-san was taking her away. All of her mental preparations had gone down the drain.

Sachiko-sama was sitting beyond Rei-sama. She was sitting in her favorite chair and calmly looking this way-

“W, wait a second, Yoshino-san.”

Just as she’d been dragged to the other side of the door, Yumi planted her foot and shook herself free. It’ll be just a moment, she said, and then she dashed back in the room.

“Onee-sama.”

“Y... yes?”

Yumi had walked back in with such force that Sachiko-sama looked astonished.

“Umm, I apologize for how I acted yesterday. And, if you’re willing, I’d like to request some of your time today.”

Yumi said everything in one breath.

“Continuing from yesterday? ... Okay.”

After a moment of silence, Sachiko-sama clasped her hands, looked up, and suggested.

“How about in the evening. After the treasure hunt?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“If possible, somewhere we can be alone, like the old greenhouse.”

“Greenhouse?” Sachiko-sama furrowed her brows.

“Yes. If that’s an inconvenient place, I can try to think of another.”

“It’s not inconvenient, but... Well, no, the greenhouse it is.”

“Okay.”

Thank you very much, she said, and she turned away. Then Sachiko-sama stopped her with, “Yumi.”

“Are you going to participate in the treasure hunt?”

“Yes.”

Of course, she answered. After all she became an “outsider” to participate. And everything went downhill because of this. So if she decided not to participate now, of all times, then her priorities would definitely have been all over the place.

“I see.”

Curiously, Sachiko-sama looked conflicted.

Part 2.

There were six class periods that day, but unfortunately for the teachers, most of the students' minds were way out of the classroom.

Part of it was because of lack of sleep, but part of it was also because of their excitement of the afterschool event.

The students understood this, though, so the classes were spent with the teachers talking about their own Valentines' experiences. They never opened their textbooks the whole day. Even the teachers who thought it was outrageous spent their whole classes scolding everyone about it, so either way, the lessons never actually got underway.

And finally, we'd come to that afterschool day we'd waited so eagerly for.

The students who were participating quickly finished their cleaning duty (while also making sure to check places they thought the cards might be hidden) and gathered in the courtyard in front of the Rose Mansion.

Yumi arrived slightly late and slid into the mob. She noticed Rosa Gigantea and Yoshino-san standing close by.

Facing the participants, the three boutons and the newspaper club were on standby, their backs to the Rose Mansion. Some teachers were also looking at the courtyard from the school buildings, but their expressions were more of curiosity and amusement. That was probably because Minako-sama had formally presented an event proposal. At least she always did what she needed to do, Yumi thought.

“Shall we begin then?”

Minako-sama glanced at her wristwatch, confirmed it was three forty, and raised her voice.

“As of now, we're closing registration for the event participation.”

On cue, the newspaper club students began passing out A4-size papers to participants. That included, of course, Yumi.

She looked at it with excitement, and noticed there was a dotted line running across halfway down, and there was the symbol of scissors next to it. In other words, you were supposed to cut along the line. This paper was destined to be cut in half.

“As you can see, the left side has rule explanations for this game. And on the back it has a map of the school, please be sure to look through these.”

When she flipped the sheet over, she saw the map, clearly explaining which places were potential hiding spots. That left the right side of the sheet unexplained.

“After cutting the sheet, the participants will bring this side with them.”

Mmhmm. As with everyone else, Yumi folded the paper in half and creased it with her fingernails. There'd been no instructions about it yet, but everyone was preparing the sheet for cutting. Human behavior is pretty funny.

“We have some scissors and pens available over here, so people who are in need of them should come and use them after we start.”

The courtyard began bubbling with excitement, but Minako-sama fought hard to keep her voice heard. At the same time, the three boutons, Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, and Shimako-san, raised the scissors and pens in their hands to indicate where they were. It looked like those TV assistants on the sales shows.

That caused the participants to look straight at the boutons. They were just showing where the stationary was, but the participants swelled with excitement again, and when Rei-sama put a finger to her lips, everyone went silent.

(...W, wow.)

She knew the boutons were popular, but she didn't realize how charismatic they were. Yumi realized once again that she was surrounded by amazing people. After all, the courtyard was filled with students. Just with a brief glance you could guess there were

at least 200. Some of them were here just for the fun of it, of course, but most of them were here because they were attracted to the boutons. Otherwise you wouldn't waste this special day just to hunt for cards. The prize was a date with the boutons, after all.

“-So please write your class and full name in this space.”

While she was admiring the boutons' popularity, Minako-sama's explanation had proceeded quite a bit.

(Filling what out?)

When she looked to her side, she noticed a first-year from a different class pull out her student notebook, use it as a mat, and begin writing something on her sheet. That something was her name.

Speaking of which, Minako-sama did mention scissors and pen. Yumi skimmed the right side of the sheet, and realized it was a vow. (A vow...?)

When she looked closer, she noticed it was titled “Additional Registration Record.” It was basically a direct copy of the important points page on the left, but at the end there was, “I vow to participate in the games with the above rules firmly in mind,” and under that was the space for your class and name.

Smart move, Minako-sama. By forcing everyone to sign a vow, she was protecting herself from any reckless actions.

You couldn't register without signing the vow, so everyone had to sign it. And because they signed it with their own handwriting, the “I didn't read it” excuse wouldn't work. If something were to occur during the game, and it was caused by the student not following the rules, it would just be their own fault. At the very least it'd make sure the students restrained themselves to a fair degree.

“The boutons' handwritten cards look like this.”

Minako-sama raised a blue sheet of paper. So the people in the back could see, the other newspaper club members also raised the same sort of sheet around the crowd. It was around the size of a paperback book, but because it was folded in half, the actual sheet was probably twice that size.

“Because this is an example, it’s blue, but the rest are colored in respect to each rose.”

Sachiko-sama was crimson, Rei-sama was yellow, and Shimako-san was white.

“The crimson, yellow, and white cards are hidden somewhere in the school. If you find one, please bring it directly to the Rose Mansion headquarter. We’ll confirm the student notebook and the registration card, and if there’re no problems, we’ll confirm there’s a winner. Along with the card, we’ll present you with the bouton dating ticket on the spot.”

A sound erupted from the crowd, one that couldn’t be described as “Wah” or “Kya” or “Wooh.” And because the courtyard was surrounded by buildings, it bounced back and forth for a long time.

“If something comes up during the game, please talk to a newspaper club member. We’ll be posted at the Rose Mansion and at spots around the school. You can find the locations on your map... Does anyone have any questions?”

Having finished her explanation, Minako-sama swung things to the crowd.

“Yes.”

Several students raised their hand, so Minako-sama began with the person closest to her.

“If more than one student finds the card at the same time, what happens?”

Oh, that’s a good point, Yumi thought. With this many people, it would be possible more than one person decides to search the same place at once. People will just look “in the area,” after all.

“Hmm. The only way we can decide things is ‘whoever touched it first.’ If the situation were to arise that both people really get their hands on it at the same time, and they can’t let go, they should come to the Rose Mansion, and we’ll do rock-scissors-paper in front of the boutons. Sound good? Next question.”

“Are we allowed to donate the cards?”

If a Sachiko-sama fan were to find Rei-sama’s card, for instance, would that student being able to give the card to her friend.

“Well fundamentally we’d rather that not happen, but there’s no way we can tell if that were to happen. Again, as long as the student notebook and the contract line up, we’ll confirm the winner. All that said, because of the time limit, I think giving the card to a specific person might be difficult. Also, the dating ticket can’t be used by anyone other than the winner.”

Minako-sama’s answer was complicated, but basically, if Yumi were to find Rei-sama’s card, it might be difficult to find Yoshino-san and give Her the card.

If she could track down Yoshino-san and give the card to her without anyone seeing, and Yoshino-san were to report that she found it, then they’d have no choice but to accept it. But it would be a difficult task to find Yoshino-san within the time limit. And people not looking for Rei-sama’s card might find Sachiko-sama or Shimako-san’s card in the meantime. Whatever the case, you’d still need to be the first person to find the card.

“Any other questions?”

Minako-san glanced around the crowd and made sure there were no other hands.

“If you don’t find the card before four forty, the card will become void... Well, I guess we shall start now, but if the boutons’ sœur are here, please step forward.”

“-Eh?”

Boutons’ sœur included, of course, Yumi.

As she tilted her head to the side, Yoshino-san and others went to Minako-sama.

“Here, Yumi-san, you too.”

Pushed forward by her classmates, Yumi joined them. Rosa Gigantea, Yoshino-san, and surprisingly, Rosa Foetida.

“Did you finish your exams?”

She whispered, and Rosa Foetida responded, “Not yet.” Well, it was Rosa Foetida, after all, it wasn’t surprising she’d decide not to miss out on an event like this.

“I apologize to the boutons’ sœurs, but we’ll have them start five minutes later, for fairness’ sake.”

“Eh-!?” The boutons’ sœurs all booed. But as Minako-sama hoped, the other participants rejoiced.

And because they’d been told right before the start, Yoshino-san couldn’t rampage in protest. She was complaining, but the crowd drowned her out.

“Well, hand in your forms and let’s start.”

Minako-sama blew into a whistle you’d expect to see at an athletics event.

And the participants began moving.

Part 3.

A step back allowed Yumi to observe the students' movements clearly.

First, as soon as the start sign was given, the students who'd finished signing their sheets and cutting it in half as Minako-sama explained things immediately dashed to the newspaper club members whom were holding cardboard boxes titled "Written Vows," tossed the sheets in, and scattered toward the school facilities. They were quick. –They probably had ideas of where to check.

Next, the methodical and somewhat nervous types. They acted as though they weren't willing to write without something solid underneath the sheet, and the idea of cutting the sheets without a scissors was impermissible. Not minding the fact that time was ticking, they lined up to use the desks that'd been set up for writing. At this rate, some of them would actually start even later than the boutons' sisters.

But the most common type of participant was the one in between. They were the ones who glanced around in confusion when the start signal was given, or the ones that finished signing their vows with their friends and left the courtyard chattering excitedly amongst themselves. Yumi thought it'd be better if they acted individually in the event they were to find a treasure...

As an extra, there some students that seemed to have given up finding the treasures to begin with, having come along simply to be near the boutons as long as possible. They were the ones that had turned in their contracts and then stood close by, gazing at the boutons.

As for Yumi, she held the sheet against the Rose Mansion door and wrote her name. Yoshino-san was more the first type, so she'd been completely prepared, and occupied her time kicking at the grass in irritation. They wouldn't accept her contract yet, so she couldn't even just give and run.

(Sheesh.)

Dirt was finally getting on the toes of her shoes. If she were to walk into the buildings like that, there would be dirt all over the place.

“It’s been five minutes. The boutons’ sœurs, you may begin.”

At the sound of Minako-sama’s voice, Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Foetida, Yoshino-san, and Yumi all rushed to the cardboard box.

“Hey, Yoshino-chan.”

Rosa Foetida grabbed Yoshino-san’s arm before she could run off.

“Your indoor shoes have dirt on them. Wipe them with a rag.”

“Ehhh.”

“Not ‘ehhh.’ It’s my job to caution you in the stead of busy Rei, isn’t it?”

“...Yes.”

She was full of complaints, but she couldn’t argue against her onee-sama’s onee-sama.

“But, Rosa Foetida. I can’t get a rag like this, can I?”

A small counter-attack. But grandmother Rosa Foetida wasn’t about to lose to her grandchild.

“I’ll go grab one from the Rose Mansion, so you wait here.”

“Um, then I’ll go.”

She couldn’t let a third-year do odd jobs like that. Yumi received permission from Minako-sama and entered the Rose Mansion. Of course, it was already acceptable grounds for the treasure hunt, so she was told she didn’t need permission to begin with.

“What? What?”

Rosa Gigantea gleefully followed Yumi, not having seen what had transpired.

“Nothing, sheesh.”

It felt like too much of a bother to explain, so she just trounced up the stairs and opened the wooden locker in front of the room. The cleaning utilities were stored there, so she grabbed a rag hanging over a bucket, rinsed it in the room, then jumped back down the stairs. Rosa Gigantea was following her up and down, but Yumi apologetically ignored her completely.

“I’m sorry for the bother, Yumi-chan.”

Rei-sama apologized to Yumi at the foyer. She’d been watching Yoshino-san from a distance.

“Yumi. When you’re finished, just spread the rag out and leave it here.” Sachiko-sama, who’d interjected, continued.

“In case the students coming in feel guilty, so they can clean their shoes.”

“Yes.”

She was ecstatic Sachiko-sama had spoken to her. She was so happy that she forgot all about Yoshino-san and just watched Sachiko-sama disappear into the Rose Mansion. It wasn’t even like Sachiko-sama had smiled for her.

The boutons were going to stay on the second floor of the Rose Mansion and wait for students to find their treasure. They climbed the stairs holding the cardboard boxes with the vows in the stead of the newspaper club members, who’d dispersed to selected locations around the school grounds.

Who would be the lucky one to report finding Sachiko-sama’s card? Yumi so dearly wished it would be her.

When she looked at the clock, it was already five past four.

There was only thirty-five minutes left.

Part 4.

“Hmm, I get it.”

When Yumi laid out the rag by the entrance after Yoshino-san had wiped her shoes, as Sachiko-sama had instructed, and wearily stood, she found Rosa Gigantea standing right next to her.

“What do you get?”

“I finally figured out why Yumi was running around.”

Had she been watching this whole time? She was standing around just inside the foyer, where there was a level difference. Yoshino-san had dashed away immediately, but Rosa Gigantea...

“Thank you for your time, shall I say? Well I guess I’ll start calling people.”

But Rosa Gigantea had stayed behind, and now began flirting with students that were still in the courtyard.

“Heeey. Wanna talk inside? The boutons are in.”

The students seemed to have been pondering whether to go in or not, so they graciously jumped at the opportunity and carefully stepped into the Rose Mansion. Yumi remembered the first time she’d come here, looking for Sachiko-sama. Had Shimako-san not spoken to them, she and Tsutako-san may have stood outside forever. The students walking in now probably felt as Yumi did then.

Still, what was with the students still in the courtyard? Yumi tried inviting them, “Would you like to come in?” but the five or six remaining shook their heads and smiled, “No, thank you.”

“How about Yumi-chan?” Rosa Gigantea asked.

“I’ll pass, thanks.”

There were only thirty minutes left. She would be starting incredibly late, but she had “an obligation to participate.” Plus, considering how Minako-sama had given them a handicap, being the *sœur* must have an actual advantage. “Rosa Gigantea, are you not going to look for it?”

“Look for what?”

“Shimako-san’s card.”

“Hmm.”

Apparently it’d become too much of a hassle. But Yumi could understand her feeling after seeing the number of participants.

“A date with Shimako isn’t that attractive, you know. Plus, I have no idea where she would have hidden it.”

“You’re kidding.”

Because Rosa Gigantea was supposed to understand Shimako-san really well. Which was why Shimako-san wanted to make sure she hid it well, Yumi thought. Or maybe they were playing mind games with each other, so it’d really be a toss-up.

“The only thing that comes to mind with Shimako is piety. But the sanctuary is off-limits, right? Well, even if it was allowed, I doubt Shimako would use such a place for a game, anyways. Which means it wouldn’t be anywhere near Maria-sama’s statue, either... I’d have to sit down somewhere quiet and think about it.”

She yawned without covering her mouth with her hand. “Thinking about it” was just an excuse. She was completely ready to take a nap.

(Errgh, but Shimako-san’s card should be in there.)

Yumi stared at the first-floor room of the Rose Mansion.

When they’d run into each other in the morning, Shimako-san was clearly flustered. Something was there. What other than the card? But telling her would be against the rules. Not that such a rule was actually printed, but it was a fact Yumi had accidentally run into as a sister of a bouton.

“-Yumi-chan is there something in that room?”

“What!?”

And she thought, shoot! She had the same reaction as when she pulled a joker in baba-nuki. This was like saying “yes, you’re right.” Well, her face had probably told everything anyways...

“Thanks, I’ll check it out.”

She jumped and walked straight to the door.

“Yumi-chan, good luck.”

“Ah, Rosa Gigantea!”

It was too late to regret her reaction, and her facial expressions.

(...What did I just do?)

She felt a bit down, but she also decided to leave that for later.

Time was ticking, and the time limit of four forty was inching closer.

She’d have to put introspection for later and go treasure hunting.

She felt a bit proud about her ability to set priorities, this time.

When she stepped outside, that group was still there.

(?)

Without knowing what they intended, she walked toward the school buildings. And then for whatever reason, the six girls followed Yumi.

(What...?)

At first it was just a subtle shadowing. But the faster Yumi walked, the faster they began to follow, and when she jumped up the stairs they followed in full pursuit. Yumi felt like a fugitive.

As she ran around the school, she ran into Yoshino-san, who’d come running from the other way.

“Yumi-san, it looks like you’ve got goldfish droppings, too.”

“Eh?”

Yoshino-san had a number of students chasing her, too.

“What do you mean?”

“They think we have an idea of where the card is, being the boutons’ sisters. So they’re probably hoping we’ll lead them. A stupid strategy.”

“Eek...”

Yoshino-san’s explanation was quite harsh. But it was probably around the mark. Even if they wouldn’t be able to get there first, they’d at least have the possibility of winning it through rock-scissors-paper. So they were banking on that probability over the probability of finding it first.

“Lose them somewhere. Otherwise you won’t be able to go where you want.”

Leaving such advice, Yoshino-san ran to where Yumi had come from. Then a group of students followed her like a flock of ducklings. They were probably Rei-sama fans. One of them was Yumi’s classmate, and she had an onee-sama, from what Yumi remembered. But this was probably an unrelated matter. What would she do if she found the card?

(But...)

Yumi sighed, turning around and looking at her pursuit. Treasure-hunting with that sort of group would be impossible. “Losing them,” as per Yoshino-san’s advice, would be necessary after all. But, and this wasn’t especially worth bragging about, she knew, but she wasn’t very confident in her leg speed. She might be able to sprint a bit, but she had no stamina whatsoever. So in marathon festivals it was always easier to count her position from the back, not the front. In short, she didn’t think she could lose them.

“Umm.” Yumi decided to talk to them instead. To the fans of Sachiko-sama.

“I don’t think it’s worth following me around. The boutons’ sisters really weren’t told anything.”

“Oh, we know that.”

A student with thick brows – that was Yumi’s first impression of her – stepped forward, perhaps being the group’s leader, or perhaps just being relatively self-confident, and replied. Yumi vaguely remembered being in the same class as her once in elementary school, even if she couldn’t remember her name.

“But Yumi-san must have ideas, right? At the very least, better ideas than us.”

“That’s not true. I have no idea where to look.”

She had no idea, but she'd run because she was being chased. She'd spend all night working on chocolate, after all. She hadn't actually given this much thought.

"Oh, come now."

They just laughed it off. They'd assumed she was running because she was trying to get somewhere. Well, she was definitely not being taken lightly, that was for sure.

"Someone will probably find it as you chase me around."

It might be futile, but Yumi tried persuading them anyways."

"You're just saying that so you can go get the card after we give up, aren't you? Don't worry, go right ahead. But there's nothing preventing us from going the same direction."

"Ugh."

That's right, it was impossible talking sense to this person. The type of person who, for example, during a class meeting, might take an opposing opinion and thoroughly hammer her points down. Someone who you might get if you were to take the "wow" parts from Yoshino-san and Tsutako-san and Rosa Foetida and make a single person using those parts.

Which meant mere Yumi wouldn't be able to win an oral battle. Which left-

"Ahh! It was there!?" With a shout, Yumi pointed toward the sanctuary.

"What!?"

The fans of Sachiko-sama jumped and turned around in surprise. And Yumi took the opportunity to run for it. The sanctuary was the other way, so they barely caught her ducking into the school buildings.

"Hey, wait!"

They shouted at once, like cops chasing an escaping criminal, and the girls started chasing Yumi. Maria-sama would be astonished at the sight. The skirts were completely disheveled.

The distance between them began shrinking. Yumi just remembered. One of the girls chasing her was the anchor for the athletics festival relay.

(I can't keep this up anymore.)

She was running around the building but her speed was dropping. She could see students laboriously searching for treasure through the open windows. That was how this was supposed to be, so why was she playing a game of cat-and-mouse like this?

(Window?)

Before Yumi could think further, she jumped through the next open window. It was just a bit higher than her heart, but she placed her hands on the sill like you would an iron bar, and jumped. She kicked her feet, tangled with her dress, forced herself to tumble forward, and somehow made it through.

“The window! She went through the window!”

She could hear shouts outside.

She had no time to rest. She closed the window she'd tumbled through and locked it. Luckily she'd tumbled into the student bathroom, so this was the only window in. The only way they'd catch up would be for them to enter the building through a different entrance and then track her down again.

Clatterclatterclatterclatterclatter.

She heard the window being shaken for some time after that. Of the fifteen private rooms, two were being used. And one student jumped out from one shouting, “What's going on!?” Yumi recognized her, it was Katsura-san.

“Yumi-san, what're you doing?”

Katsura-san, relieved that something crazy wasn't happening, went back to flush the toilet, then spoke as she washed her hands.

“...Tag, I guess?”

Yumi didn't really know what she was doing, either.

“Treasure?”



“Not yet.”

Finally, the window stopped rattling. Yumi peeked outside.

There was no one in sight. If she took too much time here, they would come in through other means and catch her.

“There we go!”

Yumi unlocked and opened the window. She felt this was a safer route than going through the hallway.

“-Yumi-san?”

Katsura-san didn't see her come in, so she was watching with her eyes widened.

“When I go out, could you lock the window, please? Oh, and could you also keep me going out this way a secret?”

“...Umm, sure.”

If the window was locked, then they'd probably not think she'd have left this way, so it'd buy her some time. But she didn't have the time to explain to Katsura-san.

“Well, see you later.”

Flutter.

This was the second time, so she made it out more smoothly. Although the ground was closer outside, so when she tumbled out she hit her legs on the ground, and it hurt a bit.

For now, she decided to get away from the building, and hid herself in the tree shades in the back. She didn't want to stand out.

(Now, what to do.)

She looked at her wristwatch. Four twenty-five. She'd unexpectedly spent precious time. What was Yoshino-san doing?

Considering the time needed to get back to the Rose Mansion, she had ten minutes. She'd have to find the card in ten minutes to be the winner. That meant she couldn't check around.

One place, maybe two at most. No, she should concentrate her efforts on one place.

(If Sachiko-sama were to hide something-)

Yumi thought.

Would someone hide something in a place completely irrelevant to them? It wasn't like she was hiding a number of things, she was hiding a single card.

Shizuka-sama mentioned that. She mentioned how if she were doing the hiding, she'd use either the music room or the library.

This treasure-hunt had no hints. No, the one hint was the person doing the hiding.

Sachiko-sama wasn't a part of any club. She wasn't part of any committee. Compared to Rei-sama and Shimako-san, the places she frequented was limited.

Her classroom, or the Rose Mansion.

But the classroom was off limits. And the Rose Mansion had Shimako-san's card. Would Sachiko-sama hide her card there, too?

She opened the map that she'd folded into her pocket and looked at it. At the back of the school grounds, the second gymnasium and the martial arts building were both open. Rei-sama's card might be in the martial arts building. No, she wasn't that simple.

(If I were to hide it-)

Like Sachiko-sama, Yumi wasn't a part of any club or committee. It was impudent to use herself as a test case, but she was willing to grasp at any straw.

(If it was me.)

Then I'd want Sachiko-sama to find it. Even if that were impossible, she'd want to get that feeling across.

Where the two of them spent time together.

(There.)

Yumi found where she'd hide it. She ran in a straight line.

She couldn't think of any other place. If Sachiko-sama was trying to send Yumi a message-

The old greenhouse came into her sights.

Part 5.

There was already someone inside.

“Oh.”

That someone seemed startled by Yumi, spinning around to face the unexpected visitor. Yumi could tell she was also a high school student based on her uniform, but she'd never seen her before. Like Yumi, her hair was tied into two parts, but it seemed her hair wasn't long enough, so there was some scattered hair behind the ties.

“Gokigenyou. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you.”

“No worries.”

She was small, so Yumi thought she might be a first-year. And like Yumi, she had a treasure map folded under her armpit, so she was probably a treasure-hunt participant, too.

“Yumi-san, are you here to look for her card?”

Yumi didn't recognize her, but she recognized Yumi. She'd really become famous.

“Yes. You, too?”

“I got here just ahead of Yumi-san, but... do you think there is one?”

Because someone had gotten here before her, Yumi felt a bit down, but the person hadn't seemed to have found a card yet.

“Hmm-”

Pacing around the greenhouse, Yumi wondered what would happen if she were to find a card now.

(I guess we'd have to do rock-scissors-paper.)

If she waited for her to give up and walk away, time would run out.

Still, if Yumi were to find it now, the student would be able to present at least a little claim. After all, she'd come here first. At the very least, Yumi wouldn't allow herself to just selfishly take it.

Rock-scissors-paper, that was best. Praying to herself that she'd find the card, she stopped where she guessed the card would be.

"I knew it."

She squealed.

It was a place where someone had pried away the floorboard and used the ground to raise flowers. And the area around that bed of Roses was different from yesterday.

"What is it, Yumi-san?"

The student who'd come here first followed her and asked.

"I thought it'd be here." One patch of soil near Rosa Chinensis had a different color. Which was proof that it'd been dug up recently. Sachiko-sama had hidden her card near what would symbolize her in the near future. This had to be it.

Yumi noticed she'd started digging away at the dirt with her hands. Like a dog, she thought to herself.

"Umm, Yumi-san?"

That person might have whispered something behind her. But Yumi was desperate, so she wasn't up to listening. She was using her bare hands, so the damp soil went into her fingernails, and it felt icky, but you can't do a treasure hunt minding stuff like that.

"Would you like to help? If we find it, we can present it together."

At this point it'd be a fight with time. She wanted even a little bit of help.

And then a little shovel was offered to her over her shoulder, along with, "If you'd like to use it. But I don't think it's there."

She said, as she handed the shovel to Yumi.

"What?"

She couldn't believe her ears. Did she just hear, "don't think it's there?"

How do you know that, Yumi's eyes seemed to telegraph. She struggled to find her words, and then answered apologetically.

"Because I'm the one that dug that up."

“Eh-!?”

“I’m sorry for bringing this up so late. Actually I’d looked there before Yumi-san arrived.”

“But...”

But Yumi had to accept it. The reason why she’d pulled out a shovel so quickly was clearly because she’d just used it.

And the reason why the soil was so easy to dig up was because it’d been gone through in the last thirty minutes.

She’d been so confident, but she’d whiffed, after all. In retrospect, burying a paper card in soil would be reckless.

“Yumi-san, why’d you think it’d be here?”

“Why?”

“After you entered the greenhouse, you walked here in a straight line. I wondered if you had a reason for that.”

“Oh, well.”

Yumi said the name of the Rose in front of her, its leaves growing a luscious green.

Rosa Chinensis. –The name of the flower most suitable for Sachiko-sama.

“...So that’s what it was.”

That person nodded in admiration.

“Then why did you dig?”

For once, Yumi’s mind was spinning pretty quickly. If she hadn’t gone through the Roses, why’d she pick this place to dig?

“That’s... because the color of soil was different, so I wondered if that’d be it.”

“Really!?”

Upon hear that, Yumi picked up her shovel and resumed digging. Maybe it was bingo after all. The other person had dug a bit and then put the soil back, but maybe she hadn’t dug deep enough. Maybe she’d just scraped the top and then given up.

But it never appeared. After digging about twenty centimeters, Yumi gave up.

When she glanced at her watch, the minute-hand was between the seven and eight. There was no hope.

The student, whose lasting impression was her scattered hair, silently helped put the soil back. In the end, they were both the same, having been unable to find the treasure.

After washing their hands at the water supply and then stepping out of the greenhouse, they heard the signal for the end of the treasure-hunt broadcasted. It called for participants to gather at the courtyard again, and Yumi began walking that way, but the other person didn't budge.

"I don't need to hear the result."

"Eh...?"

"Because I won't be the one with the card. That's all."

Sachiko-sama's card might have been found by someone else, or it might not have been found at all. Either way, the reality was that it wouldn't be hers. With that truth, the game was over for her.

Even though most of the students were probably like Yumi, who wanted to know where Sachiko-sama hid it, and who found it.

"Yumi-san, go ahead."

The students whom were looking outside began popping out, making Yumi wonder where they were all this time, and walked toward the courtyard.

"Then..."

Yumi lightly bowed her head and began walking.

"Gokigenyou."

She never did find out her name. She could have asked, but she felt there was a timing for these things. After all, the other person knew about her, so she felt bad not knowing the person back. Plus the memory of what happened when she first met Shizuka-sama was fresh in her mind.

They attended the same school. They would run into each other once again. She burned the person's face into her soul, so that when they met again, Yumi would recognize her at once.

But she knew it would be difficult remembering the face of a person without being able to attach a name to it.

After about twenty steps, her memory was already becoming hazy.

Part 6.

“Ah, Yoshino-san?”

Along the way, she thought she saw a familiar person, so she called out. But once that person turned around, she deeply regretted calling out... still, she couldn't take it back.

“What.”

Her face was full of displeasure. Which meant, of course, that her treasure hunting ended in failure.

“Yumi-san?”

“Nuh-uh.”

While walking, Yumi replied negatively, and formed an X in front of her with her hands. Yoshino-san's face softened. Even though they were looking for different cards, they both had the same feeling, as the sisters of boutons.

“But, if we couldn't find them, then maybe no one found them.”

Yoshino-san gradually began to regain her usual positive thinking.

“Maybe.”

But-. Yumi thought.

The person who she'd run into at the greenhouse mentioned the soil had a different color. So it might have been where Sachiko-sama had hidden the card, and someone might have beaten both of them to it. Actually, that was probably the case.

The emergency exit nearby was open, so they wiped their feet on the mat before walking into the buildings.

“Yoshino-san, where did you look?”

“After I shook off Rei-chan's fans, the library.”

“Library?”

“I opened all the books about knitting and cooking at the library.”

Ah. She attacked Rei-sama's hobbies. Because the treasure was just a thin piece of paper, books would be a good hiding place.

But then she'd realized that hiding the card in borrowable books could end in disaster, especially if someone decided to borrow the book between when the card was hidden and when the event would start, so Yoshino-san did a 180 degree turn in her mind.

“So, I went to the martial arts building.”

“How straightforward.”

“Well Rei-chan's pretty straightforward, isn't she? I tried to think through her, but instead I just ended up being the same as everyone else... Everyone was there, at the martial arts building. Though that meant we didn't have a lack of hands in turning over the tatami.”

Yumi felt like she was eccentric for digging through dirt, but Yoshino-san's checking under the tatami was fanatical:— There are always people stranger than you, she reaffirmed herself. Luckily it was listed as off-limits on the map, otherwise people might have jumped into the lake in Maria-sama's garden.

When they finished passing through the buildings and made it to the courtyard, they found many participants already there, and some students were coming out of the Rose Mansion. The newspaper club, the boutons, and some fans who'd soaked into (apologies for the language) the Rose Mansion.

“Ahh, ahh, thank you for participating, everyone.”

Perhaps she'd tired of raising her voice; Minako-sama had found a handheld megaphone and began talking into it. The murmurs quieted, and everyone began to listen. There were far less people gathered than had started. There were people who didn't care to see the results as well as people who'd withdrawn midway through. Maybe there were some who were still heading to the courtyard, and some who were so immersed in looking around that they missed the broadcast.

“Well, it's becoming late so I'll jump right to the results. First of all, two of the cards were found.”

Some shouted in excitement, while others cried, “Ehhh.” For what it was worth, Yumi was more along the lines of, “Oh well,” while Yoshino-san pumped her fist, “Yes!”

Two being discovered meant one was void. That’s why Yoshino-san must have thought she’d won. In her case, the handwritten card or dating ticket wasn’t important – she could ask Rei-sama for those anytime she wanted. What she wanted was to prevent anyone else from getting their hands on them.

And Yoshino-san was probably right.

Rosa Gigantea should have found Shimako-san’s card, and Sachiko-sama’s card had been dug up by someone.

“When I call your name, please step forward.”

The murmurs didn’t stop this time, so Minako-sama was forced to raise her voice even with the megaphone. And then things became quiet as everyone waited in anticipation for the names.

“First, the one who found the white card-”

Just as Minako-sama said that, Rosa Gigantea showed up, saying, “Yumi-chan thanks.”

“Huh?”

Why was the person who needed to be walking forward in a moment sauntering around in the back, Yumi was about to point out, but then she heard a name other than Rosa Gigantea.

“Second-year wisteria-class, Kanina Shizuka-san.” (-Eh!?)

And a wave of surprised cries swept through the crowd. “Eh-!?”

An “Eh-!?” of disbelief. Because everyone knew about Shizuka-sama and Shimako-san’s relationship.

Shizuka-sama, who’d challenged the boutons and been defeated in the election. Everyone was surprised she was a fan of Shimako-san. Even Yumi, who knew that wasn’t entirely the case, was taken aback in astonishment. Because she didn’t know Shizuka-sama was even taking part.

The commotion was the BGM as Shizuka-sama stepped forward.

(...Which means Shizuka-sama really did find it.)
Wow, Shizuka-sama. She was really unpredictable.

“Whew.”

Rosa Gigantea whistled.

“So it was Shizuka.”

What did she mean, so it was Shizuka. Yumi glared at her – how could she not find it with such a big hint? But it didn’t get across to Rosa Gigantea at all, who just looked back, “Why’re you glaring at me?”

Shizuka-sama’s winner’s interview began.

Congratulations, thank you. How do you feel? Actually I’m quite surprised. –After that sort of introduction, the interview went into the important questions.

“Where did you find Rosa Gigantea en bouton’s card?”

They were passing the megaphone back and forth so it was taking a bit. Yumi was sure she’d hear, “The first floor of the Rose Mansion.”

But.

“The committee board.”

She felt like toppling over in surprise. How could that be!?

Because Shimako-san was definitely hiding something. If she wasn’t hiding her treasure, what was she doing? Or maybe she’d quickly changed hiding places because Yumi’d seen her.

“Rosa Gigantea en bouton, was it indeed on the committee board?”

Minako-san brought the megaphone to Shimako-san for confirmation. And Shimako-san replied.

“Yes, I placed it on the board.”

She was unmistakably clear.

Wow, Shimako-san. How audacious. She’d thumb tacked her card on the corkboard the size of a tatami sheet, the one every committee used to post announcements to students. And she’d actually posted it under, “From the environmental care committee,” so there was a bit of cynicism about how little the students paid heed to the announcement board attached to the hiding place. Of course this was possible only because Shimako-san’s card was white.

“Then, why did Rosa Gigantea just say ‘thank you’ to me...”

But her question was drowned out by Yoshino-san’s “kyaaa.”

That told the whole story. A number of students who’d had their names called walked to the front, and they were lead by one person proudly holding the yellow card.

“Then it was Rei-sama’s card that was found.”

“Ugh...”

After her wail, Yoshino-san’s dejection was difficult to look at. She wasn’t really anywhere close to tears, but she’d lowered her shoulders and tried not to look toward the front.

Not concerned about that, Rei-sama looked on as the students played rock-scissors-paper with each other, under the direction of Minako-sama.

Yoshino-san had the right to feel dejected. After all, she was supposed to have shaken that group of students off. And the card was found in the library.

Actually, Rei-sama had hidden the card in a non-borrowable book about pricing during the Edo period. Rei-sama’s fans had probably acted like they’d lost sight of Yoshino-san and just followed her. And when Yoshino-san went straight for the cooking and knitting books, they were confused, and instead followed their own gut feelings. They believed the information that was presented in the “Lillian Kawaraban” survey some time ago. Which meant unfortunately, Yoshino-san knew too much about Rei-sama.

The student who’d won the rock-scissors-paper tournament was happily answering the interview. But Yoshino-san probably deserved to win, Yumi thought.

On one hand it looks like the straightforward Rei-sama had played a misdirection on everyone and hidden it in a strange place, but Rei-sama was straightforward after all, having hidden it in a place she felt Yoshino-san would look. And that was the end of the game.

Maybe she was overthinking things. But Yumi'd seen Yoshino-san looking through that book before. Rei-sama was so straightforward that she'd stuck her card in a book Yoshino-san liked to read. Wasn't that the truth?

“And so only *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*'s card was not found.”

Yumi snapped back to reality at Minako-sama's words.

That's right, if Rei-sama's card was found, that left the crimson card. That meant no one had found Sachiko-sama's card.

She felt conflicted. The joy that no one else had found it, and her chagrin and not being able to find it herself. But then the same thing as Yoshino-san could have happened to her, so she tried to be as happy as possible.

“As planned, we will retrieve it and return it to her. For more details, look forward to next week's 'Lillian Kawaraban.' It'll be a special edition about the treasure hunt. With the help of the photography club, we have plenty of photos of everyone searching around, so it should be fantastic. Everyone who finds themselves on the 'Lillian Kawaraban' may receive a copy of their photo.”

Minako-sama was stirring up the crowd. And to her side, the photography club ace Takeshima Tsutako-san posed with her camera.

Finally, the boutons handed out bite-sized chocolate wrapped in silver paper to everyone who'd stayed for the results. A participation prize, of sorts. Even Sachiko-sama who didn't like presenting chocolate for Valentine's Day wasn't able to get out of this. So there she was handing chocolate to many people.

Yumi lined up in Sachiko-sama's row and received chocolate.

And even though she'd received it directly from Sachiko-sama, she was so hungry she immediately popped it into her mouth.

Part 7.

Not that it was surprising, but...

Some students stayed in the courtyard after receiving their chocolate because they wanted to know where Sachiko-sama had hidden her card.

Roughly ten people remained. Some of them had chased Yumi around. Fans of Sachiko-sama, stubborn, disliking defeat, et cetera.

Even though Minako-sama told them three times the result would be published in the “Lillian Kawaraban,” they stood firm, and so there they were.

“I guess even with the people involved there aren’t more than twenty... it’s doable.”

Minako-sama mumbled to herself, and then turned to the ten.

“Fine. We shall head out to retrieve Rosa Chinensis en bouton’s card now. However on the condition that everyone becomes a witness to the location of the card. Understood?”

Of course, they nodded. “Becomes” and “witness” were mesmerizing words, even to Yumi.

In retrospect, everyone might have fallen into Minako-sama’s trap. After all, if only those involved retrieved the card, people might wonder if it was actually hidden in the first place. So the third-party witness was desirable.

Minako-sama may have actually wanted everyone. But that’d be too many people, and it’d make travel difficult. So she whittled the number down to Sachiko-sama’s fans. She announced the answer would be published in the “Lillian Kawaraban,” so everyone who gave up more easily would simply go home.

“Yumi-san, you’ll come as well, won’t you?”

Invited, Yumi happily answered, “Yes,” and joined the crowd of remaining students. The other boutons and sisters didn’t. They were probably only interested enough that they’d be satisfied reading the answer later. If the roles were switched around, Yumi felt she’d make the same decision.

“Well, let’s go then.”

None of them were holding any flags or banners, but it was almost like a tour group. Minako-sama was enthusiastically rounding everyone up. And Sachiko-sama was behind her. Yumi opted to give way to others, staying near the back.

Where did Sachiko-sama hide it?

Yumi excitedly pondered as she walked.

“Sachiko-sama, when did you hide it?”

One of the first-years in front asked Sachiko-sama. Yumi listened carefully, not willing to miss the answer.

“Early this morning. If I went during the break periods someone might see me.”

Sachiko-sama had apparently come earlier than normal to hide her card. Of course, she’d already told the newspaper club where she’d be hiding it.

“But I’m a bit stunned no one found my card.”

She began asking her fans where they looked. As they answered, they rounded the corner to the back of the school grounds.

(Huh...?)

Something was wrong. Because this was the way Yumi had walked back to the courtyard. And the half-abandoned greenhouse was in front.

The excitement turned into her heart pounding. They were just walking slowly, but her heart raced.

(That can’t be... But... what?)

That, that! She felt like someone excitedly pointing toward something. And amidst her impatience, they arrived at the greenhouse.

“I hid it here.”

Sachiko-sama turned around and announced.

“The greenhouse...!”

Half of the students in front of Yumi opened the maps. They probably were wondering if the greenhouse was listed. But it was, neatly in the corner, even if it wasn't especially noticeable. It was well within the boundary line.

“Shall we go in?”

Sachiko-sama held the door open and waited for everyone to enter. She was probably going to direct everyone after everyone was in.

“Um... onee-sama.”

And Yumi, being last, hesitantly raised her voice as she passed by.

“What's wrong? You look ill.”

Other people might have just assumed Yumi was sick.

“I, I came here. Today. But I couldn't find it...”

“Where did you look?”

“In the soil by the *Rosa Chinensis*.”

And this time Sachiko-sama's complexion changed.

“What-”

Sachiko-sama grabbed Yumi's wrist and dashed past Minako-sama and the fans, bringing Yumi to where the *Rosa Chinensis* was planted. Everyone looked on in surprise.

“You looked here?”

“Y, yes.”

The place Yumi had dug through had the tell-tale sign of blackened, lightly-packed soil.

“What happened?”

Minako-sama caught up, and Sachiko-sama whispered to her what'd transpired.

“Yumi-san, really?”

But Yumi didn't hear what was said, so she couldn't really answer that.

Did you really dig through here? And Yumi nodded.

“But there was nothing here.”

“That can’t be right, because I hid it here.”

Sachiko-sama was about to shriek in hysteria.

“Yumi, did you not dig deep enough?”

“I dug about this deep, but it wasn’t there.”

Yumi showed “this deep” by spreading her hands out about twenty centimeters.

“You probably just missed.”

Clank.

“If I did miss it, I think onee-sama is also at fault for digging it so deep.”

“What are you saying? Hiding is for the purpose of being found, I’m not foolish enough to hide it that deeply. I only went this far.”

And this time Sachiko-sama showed with her hands about half of Yumi’s distance.

“Then, how come I couldn’t find a card that shallow?”

At some point, Yumi’d also become defensive. Because she was being honest, but Sachiko-sama didn’t believe her.

And then someone poked her in the back and she snapped out of her mood.

“May I request you leave the sister spat for later?”

Minako-sama forced a smile. Sachiko-sama’s fans were staring at the two of them with their mouths agape. Well, they did start shouting at each other without any prior warning, so that wasn’t too surprising. Plus they were on hand to see Sachiko-sama’s “other side,” and Yumi herself was quite stunned when she experienced it the first time.

“Why don’t we just dig, then we can be sure.”

Minako-sama made a splendid suggestion. Sachiko-sama and Yumi were both so angry at each other they’d forgotten that obvious thing.

Yumi took the shovel she'd just used and handed it to Minako-sama. To ensure fairness, the third party was to dig.

“Dig... here?”

“What? Really?”

When Minako-sama started scooping, the students started to murmur.

“I thought I heard digging, did she actually put her card underground?” Sachiko-sama's fans finally began understanding what was happening.

“But, why there? ... Oh!”

The girl with thick eyebrows lightly shouted. People with good intuition are everywhere.

“Is this tree Rosa Chinensis-”

“Yes.”

When Sachiko-sama smiled like a flower, Minako-sama said, “Found it.”

Yumi and Sachiko-sama, and the people around Sachiko-sama, leaned over to look.

“- But...”

Yumi was the one who mumbled.

She couldn't believe it. A vinyl bag was visible alongside the shovel. And the red card was visible through the clear bag.

“But, it was definitely-”

She knew she just sounded like a sore loser, but she couldn't stop herself.

She couldn't accept that her own memory wasn't correct.

“Pity, Yumi-san.”

Minako-sama's eyes were filled with sympathy. Ugh. That was worse, she'd have preferred to be laughed at than be looked at like that.

“I'm not lying. There was another person with me, actually.”

“Another person?”

“I think she’s a first-year, she was a bit short, had her hair tied in two like me, and she had some scattered hair over her cheeks... she was with me.”

“That’s a bit lacking...”

The students not in Yumi’s class also pondered. She should have asked for her name, but it was too late now.

“Was there really someone with you?”

“Yumi-san, were you dreaming?”

Now she was becoming insecure. Who was she? Was she real?

But her hand remembered. The cold soil. That wasn’t a dream nor an image.

“Really. Believe me.”

She was on the verge of shouting, like a pouting child, when a hand was placed over her shoulder from behind.

“I believe you.”

She slowly turned around. Not that she needed to. Because she knew the feel of that hand and the voice of that person.

“Onee-sama...”

“Because you’re being that persistent. It must have truly not been there earlier.”

And along with her kind expression, Sachiko-sama nodded. Yumi lost any will to argue further.

She only wanted one person to believe her. So as long as Sachiko-sama believed her, nothing else mattered.

“Kya!”

Suddenly a flash illuminated the darkening greenhouse.

“Sorry. It looks like I surprised everyone.”

Tsutako-sama was standing among the crowd – when did she come in?

“But it was a great scene.”

And then with an, “Excuse me please,” she stepped forward, shooed Minako-sama away, and walked to the hole.

“I’ll be taking photographic evidence.”

Snap snap, she was taking pictures from different angles. And then, satisfied, she turned around and took pictures of the audience. Minako-sama was hoping there would be some good pictures for the newspaper, so she let the photography ace do as she pleased.

“Hmm?”

Tsutako-san was about to walk away when she froze, then pondered.

“Yumi-san, can I borrow your student notebook?”

“What?”

“Come come, quickly, I need two.”

Tsutako-san took her own and Yumi’s and walked back to the hole.

“What’re you doing?”

This time Minako-sama piped in.

“The student notebook is about ten centimeters on its long end. So when I’m taking photos of small things, I put my notebook next to it for comparison.”

Like what professionals often do with cigarette boxes.

“Anyways, my point was the depth of the hole.”

Tsutako-san put her notebook on the bottom of the hole. Her notebook was far from reaching the top.

“And one more.”

This time, she put Yumi’s notebook on top of hers. A bit of Yumi’s notebook poked out.

“Seventeen centimeters, maybe eighteen. This refutes Sachiko-sama. And I assume you won’t change your statement.”

“I will not. Because I don’t recall digging that deeply.”

Sachiko-sama smiled. Ah, rather than stubbornly refute it, she smiled.

“Then what’s going on?”

The card Sachiko-sama buried. When Yumi dug through, it wasn't there. And when it re-appeared, it was much deeper than where Sachiko-sama had buried it.

Like the card had moved around to prevent itself from being found. A mysterious happening.

“Who knows?”

Sachiko-sama laughed.

“Saint Valentine's prank-”

Sachiko-sama raised the vinyl bag out of the ground and handed it to Minako-sama.

“Rather than trying to find the truth, shall we just leave it at that?”

Everyone became silent at those words, like God had just come down from the skies.

That was best.

Yumi thought. Because today was the lovely Valentine's Day.

There shouldn't be anything wrong with a miracle happening.

When she glanced outside, thinking it was becoming cold, she noticed white fluff was falling from the heavens.

Part 8.

“We’d promised to meet at the greenhouse. Shall we talk now?”

Sachiko-sama asked Yumi as she was about to step out. They were the last ones left.

“Not yet!”

Yumi strongly shook her head. Because she didn’t have the chocolate with her. Valentine’s Day was to present chocolate, so it would all be pointless empty-handed.

“Okay. Then, let’s go back to the Rose Mansion. The sun’s going down, and it’s begun to snow.”

She probably couldn’t fathom what Yumi was going to do. So with her cold, blunt suggestion, she quickly walked ahead.

Yumi followed Sachiko-sama, who didn’t turn around even once.

The dark back lane.

The distance between them never grew smaller, so it felt like a scene Yumi would see in a dream.

Part 9.

When they'd arrived at the school buildings, they found themselves a part of a pack of students that dwindled as they split off in ones and twos to retrieve their belongings from their classrooms. In the end, only Minako-sama, Sachiko-sama, and Yumi remained.

Yumi actually needed to have gone to her own classroom to get her bag, her coat, and the important chocolate, but she'd ended up following Sachiko-sama.

"Umm, I'll be right back. Could you wait for me at the Mansion? I'll be really fast."

"Of course. No need to hurry."

With Sachiko-sama's permission, she went straight to her classroom. It was usually lonesome in the school buildings after school, but because there were so many who'd stayed behind for the treasure hunt, lights were on everywhere, and so it wasn't that bad.

The lights in the first-year peach class were on, too.

Yumi walked in, expecting Tsutako-san, but she found Shimako-san instead. She turned around in surprise and froze.

"I'm sorry, I surprised you again."

"...Indeed. Yumi-san, you surprised me so much this morning, too. –Yes, this morning..."

Shimako-san ran to Yumi and asked, "Do you know anything about it?"

"W, what?"

"A pink- nevermind."

She started, and then stopped herself.

"Yumi-san wouldn't know, I'm sorry."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't worry about it."

She looked gloomy as she turned her back to Yumi and closed her locker.

“Are you looking for something?”

“Yes... I am.”

But she wasn't expounding. She drifted to her desk, double-checked that there was nothing hanging off the hook at its side, and sighed.

“Shimako-san, where's your bag? Is it at the Rose Mansion?”

“...Rose Mansion. Yes, it must be the Rose Mansion. That's the only place it can be.”

She'd probably left it there herself, but Shimako-san only vaguely confirmed where her bag was.

“The treasure hunt was quite the event wasn't it?”

“...Yes.”

“Sachiko-sama's card is being raffled. Of course, without the dating ticket. Maybe I'll throw my name in.”

“Is that so.”

“Still, I was surprised by Shizuka-sama.”

“Huh? ...Oh, yes, a surprise.”

Yumi gave up talking to Shimako-sama. She'd tried raising topics since they'd left the classroom, but Shimako-san was completely out of it.

Furthermore she was mumbling to herself, “I was so careless,” every now and then. She figured she'd only get another absent-minded answer, but Yumi asked anyways. “What were you careless about?” But she received an unexpectedly clear answer.

“I didn't think that was part of the treasure hunt.”

“That?”

“The first-floor storage room. For some reason I thought it was out of bounds. So I-”

She answered, but she was still being unclear. Still, Yumi tried to figure things out with what little information she had.

“So Shimako-san is looking for something that was placed in that room? And so you're panicking because it wasn't there?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm.”

And that’s why she was at the classroom. Because she hoped she might have remembered wrongly. Something that should be somewhere wasn’t, so maybe it would be where it wasn’t supposed to be. Today was a mysterious day like that. Maybe it was Valentine’s prank.

“But, even if they’d gone there for the treasure hunt, they wouldn’t take someone else’s stuff, would they?”

“I’d like to think so...”

But there was no name on it, and it looked ambiguous... Shimako-san went off mumbling things like she was hosting a quiz show. And then they arrived at the Rose Mansion.

“Wow, Yumi-chan.”

The moment they opened the door, Rosa Gigantea jumped out and latched onto Yumi, like she’d been lying in ambush.

“W, wait a second.”

She was so clueless!

How could she go hugging with Shimako-san watching? Well, not that it was any better when Shimako-san wasn’t watching...

“I held myself because there were too many people before. So I was waiting to thank Yumi-chan for chocolate.”

“Chocolate?”

Shimako-san tilted her head.

“Yumi-san, did you give onee-sama chocolate?”

“Huh? No.”

She hadn’t had the composure to do so today. She was still needing to hand the chocolate to Sachiko-sama, so she’d never even thought of tracking down Rosa Gigantea.

“Come come, stop kidding. Shizuka just gave me chocolate directly, so it must have been Yumi-chan.”

She wondered if this was a new way of begging. Was Rosa Gigantea that desperate for chocolate?

“Here.”

Yumi took a box from her bag and gave it to Rosa Gigantea.

Well, if she was being begged, she was somewhat forced to comply.

Even though it was the brown box with ten really bad chocolate truffles. She was ecstatic over receiving chocolate from Shizuka-sama so it wasn't Yumi's care, though. It wasn't good, but it wasn't toxic, so she wouldn't upset her stomach over them.

“Shimako-san, this is courtesy chocolate, so don't mind it.”

“Y... yes.”

As she nodded, Shimako-san looked confused. But Rosa Gigantea, who'd accepted the chocolate...

Looked even more confused.

“...Wait, so it wasn't Yumi-chan?”

“Huh?”

“Uh oh, I ate it. Because I thought it was from Yumi-chan.”

Now Rosa Gigantea began blubbering inexplicably.

“Yumi-chan pointed with her eyes, and it totally looked like it was meant for me.”

That's when Yumi realized it. Shimako-san probably realized it, too. But she wasn't saying anything, so Yumi spoke up for her.

“Was that wrapped in pink wrapping paper?”

“It wasn't pink wrapping paper, it was a pink paper bag. With a white rose pattern.”

Meant for her because of the white rose pattern... that might be a thought process Rosa Gigantea would have to revise. Because there were plenty of things with white rose patterns in the world. Of course in this case it was fortunate it really was meant for her.

“Was it good?”

“Yep. It looked like a beginner made it, and it was a bit deformed. But it was a really good marble cake. Wait, why?”

Was it Yumi-chan after all? Rosa Gigantea seemed to wonder, and that's when Yumi plucked the box of truffles out of Rosa Gigantea's hand.

“Ah, why?”

“You shouldn't eat something this agonizing after eating something that good.”

Then, saying, “Congratulations,” to a blushing Shimako-san, Yumi left, rhythmically climbing the stairs.

She probably deduced correctly. That “really good marble cake” was what Shimako-san was looking for.

She climbed the stairs.

Sachiko-sama was waiting on the second floor.

Part 10.

“Thanks for waiting...”

Yumi found Sachiko-sama sitting alone at the second-floor room’s table reading a book.

“Oh, Yumi.”

She raised her head and smiled softly. Ahh, what a wonderful smile, Yumi thought. If she could, she’d freeze time so she could stare at it forever. It was that wonderful.

“Did you have something to talk about?”

Sachiko-sama closed her book and stood up from her chair. Yumi, in turn, rushed toward her, and they ended up standing across from each other, the table between them.

“Yes, um. I have something to give you...”

As she spoke, Yumi reached into her bag.

“What is it? I do hope it’s not the rosary.”

“R, rosary!?”

“I’m glad I’m wrong.”

Sachiko-sama smiled at Yumi’s startled reaction. She was just teasing her. Sachiko-sama was becoming more and more like the Roses.

But Yumi would prefer it if Sachiko-sama toned down on such heart-stopping words. Her heart was already racing as she tried to maintain composure in front of her onee-sama.

“Though, come to think of it, I would never have chosen someone to be my sister if they’d return the rosary after such a trite happening.”

With that mumble, Sachiko-sama tossed her straight hair over her shoulder. “Uhh.”

A prickle.

The cynicism stabbed at her, like one of Rosa Gigantea’s specialties. Truth be told, Sachiko-sama described it as “a trite happening,” but Yumi felt she’d tossed and turned over it. Of course, returning the rosary had never even remotely crossed her mind, but she did panic over what she’d do if Sachiko-sama had asked, “Can you give it back?” Because she felt like she wasn’t living up to onee-sama’s expectations.

“When I was a first-year, I felt like the current Rosa Chinensis saw through me all the time.”

Like God himself, Sachiko-sama glanced around the room, like she was looking for bits of nostalgia from a year ago.

“But then. I don’t really know what you’re thinking. I guess that made me lose confidence.”

As she spoke, Sachiko-sama seemed to be sorting through her thoughts.

“I may have been too harsh yesterday...”

“Not at all.”

Replied Yumi, but she silently felt it was pretty harsh. Sachiko-sama’s voice was already so clear and powerful that it was ominous on its own, so if she put any degree of extra power behind it, it’d become extremely overwhelming.

“That was because it felt like you were avoiding me, so I started to panic. But I must have misunderstood things?”

“Yes. Umm, that’s-”

Now! thought Yumi as she took a box from her bag and held it out.

“What’s this?”

“Chocolate. I tried making it with Rei-sama’s advice. I wanted to keep it a secret from onee-sama, and that’s why I was sneaking about. So of course onee-sama would feel like I was avoiding you. I’m so bad at arranging things properly, but I still ran around feeling excited on my own. I didn’t even think about stopping to wonder what onee-sama would feel about it. And when you asked, I couldn’t even explain it...”

“...Yumi.”

“I know. I know onee-sama doesn’t like Valentine’s chocolate. But I wanted to show my gratitude anyways, so...”

“Yumi!”

With a harsher tone, Sachiko-sama cut her off.

“...When did I ever say I don’t like it?”

“Huh?”

“Really, you’re always lacking on words, and yet when you begin talking, it’s like the floodgates have been opened. I don’t understand you, after all.”

“Umm...”

“I’m irritated by everyone using me as a way of letting out their desire to send Valentine’s Chocolate to someone.”

“Uh...”

“So, if you made it for me, of course I’ll accept it, happily. Isn’t that obvious?”

Sachiko-sama placed a hand on Yumi’s box.

“May I?”

Yes, began Yumi, before she stopped, realizing that the box was, for some reason, brown.

“W, wait, no. Give it back, onee-sama.”

She tried to pull the box back. But Sachiko-sama was gripping it tightly.

“It’s unsightly to wish a gift be returned.”

“That’s not it.”

The box Sachiko-sama was gripping with five fingers, that was the box Yumi intended to give to Rosa Gigantea. Even though they were all Yumi’s handmade chocolate truffles, and they all used to same ingredients, they tasted wildly different. She’d forgotten she’d taken it back from Rosa Gigantea, so she’d assumed the box she’d touched in her bag was the ivory one.

“Let go, Yumi.”

“Onee-sama, umm, actually this one-”

When Yumi pulled out the other box from her bag, in an unnatural posture, it happened.

First, the brown box neither was letting go of exploded (or so it seemed).

Then, the ivory box Yumi was holding out exploded (or so it seemed).

And the next moment, black, circular bullets (or things that looked like them, anyways) fell and scattered on the table.

“Ah—”

As a result of the two of them pulling on the box with all their might, the chocolate inside fell out. That was what happened. As for the second box, Sachiko-sama lost her balance when the first one ripped, so she grabbed hold of that box, and it went the way of the first box.

However.

The one fortunate thing was that neither of them had chocolate rain onto their head. Even if they were the size of dried plums, they were still chocolate – being hit by them would hurt.

The two of them stared, stunned, at the chocolate rolling about on the table, as well as some that had rolled off it.

“...What performance is this?”

Eventually Sachiko-sama laughed.

“Yes. Surprise chocolate.”

“Surprise chocolate?”

“Some really bad chocolate is mixed in. That’s the surprise.”

“How foolish.”

Sachiko-sama didn’t seem to take her seriously, laughing and then plucking one off the table and tossing it into her mouth.

“Ah!”

It happened too quickly to stop.

“Don’t worry, it was on the table.”

“Umm.’

Well, Sachiko-sama eating something that had fallen was a surprise, but Yumi was more terrified and curious about which sort of chocolate Sachiko-sama had found.

“...How is it?”



Yumi fearfully asked.

Sachiko-sama closed her eyes, rolled the chocolate around in her mouth for a bit, then opened her eyes and answered.

“Delicious.”

Phew, Yumi sighed, relieved.

“Thank goodness. That was a hit, then.”

Even Yumi, who’d made them, would have to look very carefully to distinguish between the two batches of chocolate.

It was 50-50. How like Sachiko-sama. Luck was on her side.

To make sure Sachiko-sama wouldn’t choose a miss chocolate, Yumi quickly picked up the ones left on the table. And as she picked them up, she quickly, but carefully, looked at them and sorted them. If Sachiko-sama wanted to eat another one, she’d be able to pick up one of the relatively better-looking ones.

There was twenty chocolate in all, and fifteen had remained on the table.

“What happens for winning?”

“Umm.”

Shoot, she hadn’t thought about that. –Or rather, she’d just named it “Surprise Chocolate” out of whim. But hit and miss was like a lottery. And lotteries come with prizes.

As she went on her knees to pick up the chocolate on the ground, she thought about it. Technically the delicious chocolate was the prize, but she didn’t think of that.

The remaining chocolate had rolled under the seat, or behind the doors, or other such random places. They cleaned the room almost daily, but that didn’t prevent the rolling chocolate from losing its chocolate powder somewhere and picking up sand and dust. It hardly resembled what it used to be – in fact it almost looked like a sesame-sprinkled dango from a collection of Japanese confectionary.

She blew on the chocolate to clean it. Of course, there was no thought of eating it, but she wanted to know if it was a hit or miss, to keep track of numbers.

She found three somewhat easily, but she couldn't find the last one. Right now, there were nine hits and nine misses. Sachiko-sama had eaten a hit, so there was one miss somewhere.

Yumi looked at the table again, just to make sure.

And that's where she found the last one. In the corner of the box that'd been tragically torn rested, miraculously, one truffle.

"Onee-sama."

Yumi plucked it out of the box, marveling at it, and said.

"A hit comes with a half-day date with me-"

The last one, for some reason, had come out of the "hit" box.

The Yellow Rose Complication

18:50, Eriko

Torii Eriko, also known as Rosa Foetida, was in her own room, in her own house, troubled.

In front of her was a paper box, the ones you saw in Western confectionary stores, the ones where when you folded it up, it'd present to you a handle. It was around half the size of the box she'd been given last Christmas, when she'd been given low-heel shoes. But it was half as wide, not half as long, resulting in a very thin, long rectangular solid.

“So it's probably not truffles...”

That opinion wouldn't change whether you look at it from outside or inside. Well, no, the moment you opened it, you'd know its contents. But she wanted to try to figure it out without going that far. No deep reason.

It was handed to her just ten minutes ago by her sœur, Hasekura Rei, as a Valentine's Day gift. She'd ridden her bicycle here even though it was snowing outside.

Rei might have been feeling guilty about not being able to hand it to her during school. Not that Eriko minded.

After all, she'd been missing school of late for exam studies. Rei probably didn't know if she would show up. It was better to leave a delicate food like chocolate at home, in the refrigerator, than to carry it about. Plus, Rei's home was just a few minutes' walk from school.

Of course, she'd be lying if she said when Rei showed no hints of handing her chocolate because of the treasure hunt she didn't worry. But Rei had chased her to the main gates and whispered to her asking if she could “visit her house later that night,” so she'd stopped worrying then.

She wanted to invite Rei into the house for tea, but she seemed in a hurry to leave, so she decided against forcing her to stay. Rei said she was going to Shimazu Yoshino's house afterwards.

Yoshino-chan's house was next to Rei's. She could have gone to the closer person first, but maybe she'd wanted to prioritize the senior. How very like Rei, with her athletics-based discipline and conscientiousness. And that was not a bad thing at all.

“But, this-”

Rei had brought it, so it was doubtlessly a present from Rei. And it was handmade. There was no problem there. The problem-

“Is this really for me?”

Eriko had mumbled that nine times in the last ten minutes. So this was the commemorative tenth time. She'd probably not noticed it herself, but she was mumbling it once every minute.

“What if she made a mistake.”

She knew Rei changed the contents of her present based on the person she was gifting. Because she made things based on their tastes. So the chocolate truffles last year was delicious. The sweetness was a bit suppressed by bitterness, giving it a distinctly mature taste. She was so astonished at how good it was – she'd never eaten something that good before – that she expressed great admiration to Rei on the spot... and Rei replied happily, “If you're that pleased with it, I'll happily make it again next year.” Or maybe she suggested making it again next year. She didn't remember exactly how it was, but it didn't matter, there wasn't too much of a difference. Eriko believed without a doubt she'd get truffles again this year.

“So this looks more like Yoshino-chan's dominion.”

But she wasn't sure. If there was at least a message card...

She heard Rei made Yoshino-chan a cake filled with chocolate cream last year. Quantity over quality for children. Well, considering Rei was making it, there'd be no drop-off in quality.

“But, you wouldn’t usually mix it up, considering how different the box sizes are.”

But it was Rei. She seemed reliable, but she had a tendency to miss things. Usually she was so dependable, but at certain times she’d become completely useless. She was the headlong charge type, so if one thing occupied her attention, everything else ended up being pushed out of her mind. Though, as her big sister, Eriko found that part of Rei cute.

“But, hmm.”

Maybe Rei’d made a large quantity of truffles, because Eriko’d been so pleased by them, and there were so many she’d ended up needing this sort of box. And then she’d accidentally put Yoshinchan’s one into hers. How was that? Good reasoning, perhaps?

She looked at the clock.

Five minutes before seven.

Rei had come at six forty, so it’d been fifteen minutes since then. In five minutes, Rei would arrive home. And if she were to notice, it’d be after that, before she went to deliver the present to the Shimazu household. Even if Rei herself didn’t notice, Yoshinchan would notice, pointing it out when she opened her box. – Right, if the contents of that box were truffles.

“Mmm.”

She found herself with nothing immediate to do. Well, it wasn’t like she was going to start studying now, so it wasn’t really something she needed to mind.

She wanted to phone Rei to make sure, but she would be perplexed if Rei were to ask her why she thought there might have been a mistake. Because frankly it’s because she was expecting truffles. And then it’d sound like she was a narrow-minded person who’d accept nothing other than truffles.

That wasn’t true. Anything Rei made was lovely. But if Rei had indeed mixed things up, she needed to tell her, right?

Hello, did you hand me the right chocolate? -No, no. There must be a smarter way to do it.

“Eriko-chan, it’s dinner time.”

Her mother’s voice came through the interphone.

“Okay. Coming.” Well, no sense pondering it now. She left the present, and her thoughts, in her room and stepped out. Rei might come calling at some point.

She could smell demi-glace sauce wafting up from the kitchen. Beef stew tonight.

“Oh, right.”

Eriko stopped descending the stairs and hurried back to her room.

“Chocolate, chocolate.”

She dug out the paper bags hidden in her closet. For her beloved, sly father and her strange brothers.

The men of the Torii household had come home early tonight in eager anticipation of chocolate from the only daughter.

19:18, Yoshino

Shimazu Yoshino was in her own room, in her own house, troubled.

On her kotatsu was a paper handle-bag you would find at a cake store, one that could fit three or five little cakes into.

It was a Valentine's present from Hasekura Rei, her sœur at school and her blood-related cousin at home.

"...Strange."

Last year the box was large enough to fit a hat. So she prepared herself for an even larger gift this year. But...

"It's half the size of a shoebox. What's going on?"

As she'd said to Yumi-san, the chocolate cake grew every year, and while it was a burden, she was also pleased by it. How long would the cake continue to grow? When would it reach its pinnacle, and how would it look then?

"But I didn't think it'd be this year-"

Yoshino looked at the box again, and thought.

Lots of things happened last autumn-. And love wasn't really something to be measured by the size of a present, but she was feeling especially anxious this year.

"...Gosh."

She thought back to when she received it. She could have been able to ask, "Wow it's quite small this year," as a joking remark at the time. But they were in the midst of a little spat, so she didn't pay the size any heed.

Well, she called it a spat, but it was mostly Yoshino just pouting.

Rei-chan wasn't (especially) in the wrong, but she was still angry, so there was no helping it. Rei-chan hid the treasure in such a weird spot, so the half-day dating ticket went to some random first-year. And Rei-chan had the gall to show up smiling!

She became irritated again remembering all that, but she had to think about what to do with the box, so Yoshino left her anger aside for the moment.

Right, the problem was the content.

“It’s not chocolate cake.”

She opened the box, then sighed. What was this about?

Ignoring the size of its contents, they were quite different from what she’d expected.

Was this some sort of message? But Rei-chan wasn’t the type to use such means.

“I don’t get it-”

Even the famed detective Yoshino could only throw her hands in the air. Plus, her biorhythm was all over the place or something, because her deducing skills were failing her today. After all, she was the one who was supposed to understand Rei-chan the most, yet she couldn’t figure out where Rei-chan hid her treasure.

If things were to come to this, she shouldn’t have been so harsh a few moments ago. But that was just retrospective thinking. After kicking up such a hissy fit, she couldn’t just ring her up and ask about the contents of the present.

Plus, considering what she gave, she really had no confidence in bringing up such a topic. If you were to weigh them on a scale, Rei-chan’s present would end up significantly heavier. Both in appearance, weight, and probably taste.

“I don’t get it, should I just eat it?”

Truth be told, father hadn’t returned home yet, so they were still waiting on dinner. So she was actually quite hungry at the moment. She knew you weren’t supposed to eat sweets before dinner, but maybe it was alright to just eat a bite?

“Huh?”

The moment she decided to eat, she remembered.

“Rei-chan said she’d just stopped by Rosa Foetida’s house.”

That was why she’d been late. Usually they exchanged presents as soon as they got home, so she’d been wondering where Rei-chan had gone. They’d gone to school separately because of the treasure hunt, and then Rei-chan had gone home earlier, so that’d been nagging at her spirits, too.

“Maybe she switched Rosa Foetida and I’s presents...!?”

No, there’s no way she’d make that sort of mistake-

“No, it’s totally possible, because it’s Rei-chan.”

After all she was careless enough to stick her card in the Edo pricing book in the library. Of course, Yoshino understood that was supposed to be for her, but that sort of thought process was twisted. It was alright because Rei-chan’s fans found it, but if no one found it, or worse, if Yoshino had found it, how was she going to explain that?

Rei-chan seemed meticulous, but she tended to be careless.

“She messes up so much sometimes.”

She might not have thought about the size of the boxes. Ah, that must be it. It had to be. Last year she gave Rosa Foetida bitter truffles. So the size of the box must have been around that of a bento box. If that box were to become bigger a year later, it’d be around this size.

Such smooth reasoning.

“Then I shouldn’t just eat it.”

She closed the box and folded her arms. Rei-chan might call her at some point. Maybe Rosa Foetida was calling Rei-chan now. – That a large cake had been delivered to her.

She had to make sure she’d be able to return the present immediately when that happened. If she were to eat the present right now, it’d look like she was being super possessive, and she didn’t want to have that appearance.

She’ll sit tight for a bit. Yoshino rolled to her side in her kotatsu.

“I wonder if Rei-chan’s eaten yet.”

Even though they were neighbours, they couldn’t see the lights in each other’s room. Where was her hatefully beloved cousin right now, and what was she doing?

19:30, Rei

“Just take a bath after father’s done.”

Said mother, so Rei gathered her bath towel and change of clothes and walked toward the bath room.

“Oh, Rei, sorry for making you bother today. Everyone was happy.”

She ran into father, whose body was still steaming from the bath. The evening class was the end of training today.

“No problem. I hope it fit everyone’s taste.”

“What was it called, bound cake?”

“Pound cake.”

Bound cake would be something that jumped. She imagined cake bouncing around like a rubber ball.

“The senbei you made last year was good, too, but it worked just as well.”

“Is that so.”

She made cookies for Valentine’s Day last year, but she didn’t correct him. Father lived the path of the sword. There was no need for him to be knowledgeable about pastry.

“It’s simple to make, shall I make some more?”

“Hmm... well, if you’ve got time, you should go train.”

“Yes. I’ll make some as a change of pace, then.”

“Mm.”

On Valentine’s Day it’d become a tradition to hand pastry to father’s students. At first, mother invited the students secretly and popped chocolate in their mouths, but at some point Rei’s cooking had begun circulating.

“My daughter made too much, so help yourselves.”

Was how father put things, and so in order to keep up appearances, Rei made “too much” pastry on Valentine’s Day.

She didn’t find anything bad about that. Plus, because of that habit, she’d been saved this Valentine’s Day.

“Are you taking a bath now?”

“Yes.”

“Warm up well.”

“Yes.”

With a quick bow, she went to the bath. She was used to training during the winter, so she thought she was relatively strong against the cold, but riding a bicycle for forty minutes in the snow was harsh. It was just a flurry, so the ground wasn't frozen, but her hands and feet were freezing so there were a number of times she felt like she might lose control.

The bath room was nicely warmed because father had left the bath cover open. She scooped hot water with a bucket and dumped it over herself. Because her skin was cold, the water felt especially hot and electrifying.

Ah, paradise.

She soaked herself in the tub to her shoulders and unintentionally moaned. Her voice had become closer and closer to her father's, so that left her with complex feelings.

But, thank goodness.

She was able to hand onee-sama and Yoshino Valentine's Day presents.

After singing a full chorus of Maria-sama's Soul, she stepped out of the bath. If she kept soaking in it, she thought she'd fall asleep.

She wondered if the muscles used to make meringue differed from the muscles used in kendo. When she scooped more water, her arms felt heavy.

“Wish we had a shower.”

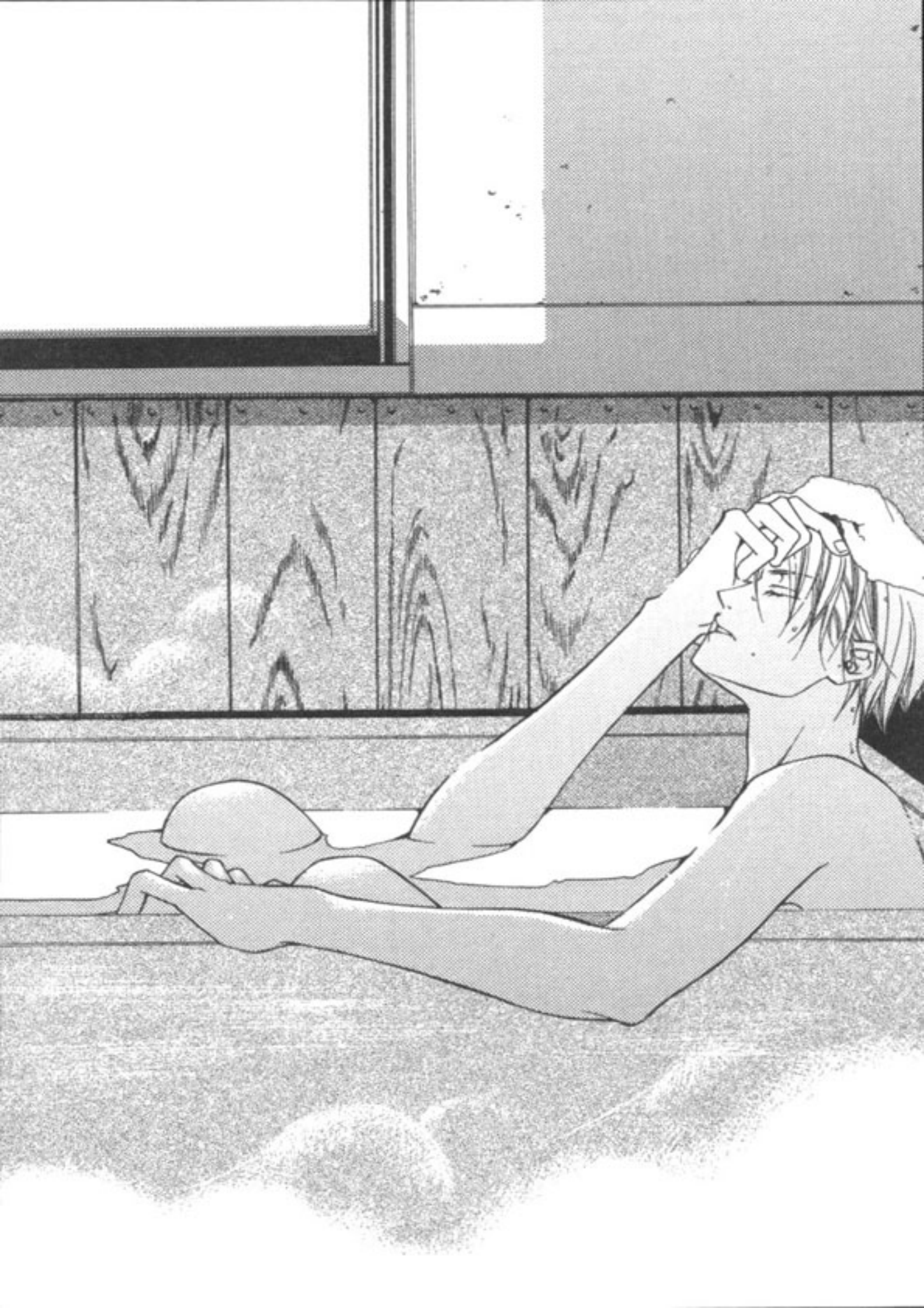
She thought this every time she shampooed her hair. But her stubborn father was adamantly against it, saying it didn't fit a Japanese cypress bath. She could understand the desire to stay with a pure Japanese style, but it became a pressing issue after mid-summer training. Father probably never thought about the fact that his daughter was now a grown girl. As a result, she tended to use Yoshino's house's shower, but that's a secret.

“Yoshino.”

Having washed her hair and scrubbed herself from head to toe, she dunked herself in the bath again, and thought about Yoshino.

Rei giggled in the bath. Yoshino probably wasn't amused by someone else finding the dating ticket. When she threw chocolate at Rei, shouting, “Idiot,” ah, that was cute. It was just a complete beginner's chocolate, where you boiled down store-bought chocolate and poured it into a mould, but it pleased her. Plus, compared to the straight, store-bought chocolate from last year, there was progress.

Was it because she was soaking in hot water? Rei felt like her brain was melting. And the strange feeling of satisfaction made her feel a bit high, so what the recipients were thinking was far from her mind.



23:10, Eriko

Shoot, I dozed off. Eriko looked up from the desk she'd been resting her head upon.

It was already past eleven at night.

There was no way Rei would call her at this hour. So that would mean the pound cake was hers.

“Hmm.”

If she knew it would come to this, she'd have presented it as she drank black tea with her family hours ago. Eating this before sleeping wasn't especially healthy, anyways.

“That said.”

As she stared at the cake in the box, she again questioned if it was actually for her.

She couldn't shake that feeling that there was a mistake, and wondered if Yoshino-chan had eaten the truffles before Rei could notice. At which point there wasn't much to be done. Come to think of it, that was easy to imagine.

“But there's no way to know for sure.”

She mumbled, as she flicked the box.

If she really wanted, she could ask Yoshino-chan tomorrow what she received from Rei. And if she'd received truffles... well, nothing changes.

“...Whatever.”

No point in fussing over it now. She began to feel stupid for pondering over a cake alone, and decided to eat. At this rate, the fourteenth of February would end.

But a whole pound cake sprinkled with chocolate chips sat imposingly on her desk. She didn't feel like making the trip to the kitchen to get a knife for cutting it, so she tore bits from it and popped it in her mouth.

“Itadakimasu.”

The sweet chocolate chip pound cake was neither truffle nor bitter, but she felt it was better than what you could get at one of those Western confectionary stores.

This is what Yoshino-chan's liking tastes like.

It was pretty good, so she just mumbled, "Hmm."

23:10, Yoshino

The sweet chocolate chip pound cake didn't have chocolate cream dumped all over it, but it was better than what you could get at one of those neighbor cake stores.

"Hmm."

Rei-chan didn't call her after all. Who cares if it was a mistake anyways? It's this late, Rosa Foetida probably would have decided to eat, too. Yoshino would have eaten earlier if she hadn't fallen asleep. Dinner, homework, bath, and then when she settled into her kotatsu, she'd fallen asleep until this late hour.

"Pretty good."

She'd just intended to have one bite, but that turned into two, three... She felt she wouldn't be able to stop herself if she went any further, so she tore off a fourth bite and shut the box.

"The cake being this good makes everything even more vexing."

Yoshino muttered, as she flicked the box.

The eldest and youngest of the Yellow Rose sisters have a rather complex relationship as they settle on different sides of the middle.

23:10, Rei

“Oh yeah, didn’t onee-sama want me to make truffles again?”

Rei remembered that at eleven at night. After she slid into bed.

“Oh well, too late for that.”

It wasn’t like the Olympics or anything, but there should be significance in that she was able to hand them the presents. –Right, because Rei came that close to missing that entirely.

She felt a cold sweat just thinking about how she felt when she arrived at school. When she saw the students exchanging chocolates in front of Maria-sama. Yes, that was when she first realized she’d forgotten entirely.

She was so caught up in the treasure hunt preparations that she’d forgotten to prepare Valentine’s chocolate.

Fortunately, she’d gone to school without Yoshino today, because of the treasure hunt. After switching to her indoor shoes, she flew to the public telephone in front of the office and called her mother to buy flour and chocolate chips and other ingredients. But she just said it was because she didn’t have enough for father and his students.

Her mother and Yoshino’s mother could almost read each other’s minds, so she had to be careful with what she said. Yoshino would find out in a heartbeat.

And when she got home, she baked the cakes. She didn’t have time for intricate things, so she simply made plain pound cakes, sprinkled chocolate chips on them, and tossed them in the oven.

Three stacks each, two times. For a total of six stacks. Thank goodness they had a large oven.

But mass production of handmade cakes, aside from the amount of time it took, they really drained her energy. And she had to keep track of the time and ingredients, so her mind and body both got worn out. Practice-swinging with an empty mind was so much easier.

When all was said and done, she'd managed to do a good job today.

“All's well that ends well.”

She rolled over in bed and mumbled.

“Onee-sama probably won't remember what she said last year. And I can always make truffles for her next year.”

Rei was just sleepy. Her body was begging for rest.

So the fact that Rosa Foetida, who was intending to continue studies in a different university, would be nowhere near Lillian Girls' Academy, “next year” didn't even begin to enter her mind.

By the way, she had no idea that her cakes for Yoshino had been growing every year, too.

If one thing occupied her attention, everything else ended up being pushed out of her mind.

She seemed reliable, but she had a tendency to miss things.

Oh, sœur.

Both of them were on the mark with their assessment of Rei.

Postscript

-Nothing comes to mind.

Good day, it's Konno.

In my case, I usually start out a postscript with an idea and run with it, but for some reason I'm coming up blank.

Which is troublesome. Because I have five pages this time... can I do it?

Then you should just write "things I should explain (see Maria-sama ga Miteru, Rosa Canina)," I point out to myself. But I don't know, I don't feel like it this time, so I'll pass. Explaining things in a postscript is, you know, it feels bad. Plus you keep thinking retroactively, "Ah, I shoulda written that," and such.

So, what to do.

A (Atogaki)

-Nah, I don't have enough pages for that (laugh) anyways. Also I'll probably be scolded if I keep using that trick.

Oh, I have to finish the "nakakiyo" conversation.

A good majority of the letters I received after "Rosa Canina" included an answer about "nakakiyo."

Thank you very much. I really appreciate it (laugh).

And the results, based on when I write this (it's the latter half of January. The time difference is unavoidable in published works)... of the reader reports, 100% said they'd never done it. – Ahh, where ever did my ancestors pick this up?

During the Edo period, papers were peddled with a picture of the Seven Dieties of Good Luck on a treasure ship along with the circular that began "nakakiyo" (I knew about this from the start), so folding the sheet into a boat probably evolved from that. Unfortunately I don't have enough time to really look into this.

By the way.

It made me chuckle because it was written almost like a pair with the “nakakiyo” topic, but I received a lot of information about the setsubun futomaki. Actually, I received a lot more information about that. Friends sending me mail and e-mail, fellow authors answering me in their New Year’s cards (!)...

...Apparently it’s quite a major topic. Geographically speaking it seems like more of a western custom. After all, everyone spoke of it like “eating mochi during New Year’s.” Seems extremely rooted.

In summary.

You’re not supposed to talk while eating futomaki, apparently. Although there are some places that don’t have such a rule, apparently.

The futomaki is a symbol of the ogre’s kanabou mace, apparently. (β I see!)

And in certain places, the supermarkets and convenience stores advertise setsubun with great fervor, apparently.

-that’s about it.

I’m sure if you look things up in books, you could find out its origins and changes in detail, but I’m personally more interested in the fact that it’s so entrenched in culture despite the changing times, so “in my house this is what we do” is enough for me. Change is culture, after all!

Thank you for your cooperation, everyone.

Now, there was one big abnormality.

The title has “Part One” on it, and it’ll be part one of two. The first two-part set in Maria-sama ga Miteru.

It’s a bit of an omnibus, and I titled it “Valentine’s Gift” to tie everything together. So there’re no stories using that title here. And that’ll probably be true in the second part.

Oh, speaking of which, in regard to lady Kanina Shizuka.

For those who thought that would be the last of her, she popped up again, didn't she. She's going to Italy, but she's remaining in Lillian until graduation. But of course. She'd been staying because of Rosa Gigantea. She probably intends to leave Japan after sending Rosa Gigantea off to university.

But as usual, she's quite audacious. She's about to become a "character too good to waste." By the way, number one on the list of "characters too good to waste" of course Rosa Gigantea.

Oh my.

I rambled and the five pages have vanished. I guess that's how things are.

The year 2000 has come and gone... Which means the next deadline is creeping up, too. Probably.

So, the first preview in a while.

The second part of "Maria-sama ga Miteru, Valentine's Gift," of course.

I'll probably do things like what happened the day after "Surprise Chocolate," or random chatter, or things like that and stick everything into the volume. I haven't started yet, though, so take that with a grain of salt (laugh).

I hope we meet again with the leaves are fresh.

Gokigenyou.

Konno Oyuki