

COBALT-SERIES

ママ様がみてる

今野緒雪

レイニーブルー

集英社

Volume 10

Rainy Blue

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

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

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

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

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

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

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

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

The season is early summer.

Despite the change into lighter clothing, the mood had not lightened alongside it.

The reason for the sighs wasn't something as obvious as mid-term test results. A faint outline was visible, but nothing that could be definitively pointed to as the cause.

The closest expression would be, "There's just something not quite right."

So it was all the more troubling.

Like sighing when looking up into a cloudy sky with a prediction of rain, that kind of feeling.

Was it going to rain or not? If it does rain, how long will it last?

Would it be better if it just started pouring down immediately? Those kinds of thoughts.

But, just by waiting quietly, perhaps the rain clouds would dissipate soon enough.

Hah.

Three silhouettes sighed simultaneously.

It was obvious that only someone deeply important could be the cause of that kind of feeling.

Rosary Droplets

Peppermint Candy

Part 1.

It all started with something trivial. Perhaps a passing statement from Sachiko-sama.

"Say, Shimako, when are you going to bring Noriko-chan?"

"Pardon?"

Shimako asked, uncomprehending. She thought it was with the same tone of voice she used in the classroom when she didn't understand a question.

"I thought I heard you say Noriko, but – "

Mindful of the steam rising from the kettle, Shimako turned around still holding the teacups.

"Yes, that's unmistakably what I said. And since I was asking you, the 'Noriko-chan' in this case would be Nijou Noriko."

Was she in a good mood or a bad mood? Sachiko-sama politely moved the conversation forwards. Speaking as though ordering the conversation towards a conclusion that she already knew.

"What of Noriko?"

If the conversation were about Noriko, then it wasn't as though Shimako had no idea what it was going to be about.

No, it was more accurate to say that she had some expectations. However, she hadn't yet had time to practice her answers to the anticipated questions, which was troubling.

It was lunch time, much like any other.

The two boutons in Shimako's grade had not yet made their appearance, so it was only the three Roses in the mansion they lent their name to.

As it was just the three of them, they weren't actively engaged in conversation, nor was there the awkward silence that came when there was nothing to talk about, instead they were going about their own business and occasionally trading remarks, as they would on most other days.

A pleasant guitar melody from the folk-song club came drifting in through the window that faced the courtyard. Rei-sama was reading a new novel, Sachiko-sama was writing something in her student diary, and, as the 'heating' light on the kettle had just gone out, Shimako had reached out for the teacups.

It was at that point that Rosa Chinensis, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, had made her remark. So, to Shimako, it was nothing more than a feint.

"As I was saying, when are you going to bring her to the Rose Mansion?"

Sachiko-sama closed her student diary and put it back in her pocket.

"To the Rose Mansion?"

As she asked for confirmation, Shimako turned her back on the other two Roses and resumed her task.

The water was poured into three cups, then the teabags were set drifting.

Shimako idly watched as the teabags slowly stained the water inside the white cups.

It was a crude way of making tea, but Shimako was abiding by Sachiko-sama's request of, "Anything as long as it's quick." Her fourth period class had been PE, so she seemed to be prioritizing appeasing her thirst over taste.

June had arrived, along with the fine weather that precedes the rainy season. Even without PE classes, cool water and tea seemed to taste better.

So as not to keep Sachiko-sama waiting, Shimako carried a teacup across to her immediately after taking the teabags out.

"Obviously I meant to the Rose Mansion. Where else would you be taking her?"

Shimako swallowed her reply of, "To an exhibition of Buddhist statues." It didn't seem like a smart joke to make.

"Shimako, Sachiko's saying that you should properly introduce her to the group. You understand, right?"

Rosa Foetida, Hasekura Rei-sama, joined the conversation, her explanation attempting to cut through the confusion. She, like Sachiko-sama, was a third-year.

"Understand? ... Yes, however."

Carrying her own teacup, Shimako sat down in an empty seat.

"By becoming your petit soeur, she became Rosa Gigantea en bouton. She's no ordinary first-year student."

By becoming your petit soeur. Rosa Gigantea en bouton. No ordinary first year. – Sachiko-sama's words caught in her heart like small fish bones in the throat.

"What is it, Shimako? Is there something you want to say?"

After finishing her tea, Sachiko-sama raised an eyebrow. So Shimako nodded, "Yes." If she didn't clear up this misunderstanding now, those small bones would remain stuck.

"Umm ... Noriko isn't actually my petit soeur."

It was said at the exact moment that the idly listening Rei-sama had the misfortune of bringing her cup to her mouth to take a sip, therefore:

Splutter!

The next instant, a splendid stream of black tea came spouting out of her mouth, like she was a fountain statue.

"No way. Then, then, then, then, the rosary!?"

"I haven't given it to her."

After Shimako answered, it was Sachiko-sama who spoke next.

" ... Nobody would believe it."

While frowning slightly, Sachiko-sama took a handkerchief trimmed with lace from her pocket and patted down her face and hair. Regrettably, she had been sitting directly across from Rei-sama, so had been struck with a shower of black (Darjeeling) tea. Still, the fact that she could retain her

composure while being embroiled in such a dreadful incident was quite admirable. As expected of a princess.

"Not believe it ... Is that so?"

"That's not the correct response. Why are you dilly-dallying?"

"Dilly-dallying ... "

While that expression wasn't exactly uncommon, it still seemed new to Shimako.

Was she really dilly-dallying? It was true that she had been exposed alongside Noriko in front of the first-years at the Maria ceremony the other day, which surely led to this misunderstanding that was coming from all sides.

"How long do you think it has been since the Maria ceremony? About half a month. We've entered into June and changed into summer uniform – what on earth have you been doing?"

Sachiko-sama shifted her shoulders back and puffed her chest out.

Even if it was called a change of uniform, the color and the design didn't alter much. It used a lighter type of cloth, and there was the choice of short sleeves, but that was the extent of the changes. The ivory collar and long black dress that was Lillian's signature kept going strong as the seasons changed.

Incidentally, the three people called Roses currently on the second floor of the Rose Mansion had all opted for long sleeved uniforms.

At first glance, everything looked as it always had. But something had changed.

Shimako and Noriko's relationship, as well as something closer. Due to the events of the Maria ceremony, their connection was out in the open. However, there hadn't been any visible progress. A friendly second-year and first-year student. That was the truth of the matter.

But the people surrounding them apparently expected something more than that.

"Do you wish to include Noriko in our group?"

"What are you saying? That you can't make up your mind until you've heard our opinion?"

Sachiko-sama looked displeased as she flicked her long black hair over her shoulder.

"Then, let me tell it to you. Shimako, is there anyone other than Nijou Noriko that you would want as your petit soeur?"

"..."

"Noriko-chan's your number one, right?"

Rei-sama provided the follow-up question. Shimako didn't fully understand the meaning of the phrase 'number one.'

If she was being asked which first-year she was closest to, then that was indeed Noriko. While that was true, and even if she subscribed to the idea that she should take a petit soeur immediately, she was still a bit reluctant.

"What are you worried about? With Noriko, things will be fine. Compared to someone like my Yumi, she's far more level-headed. No-one will oppose it."

It seems Sachiko-sama was talking about things like academic record and fortitude. But Yumi-san had a certain charm that no-one else had. And it was undoubtedly because Sachiko-sama recognized this, that she had wanted Yumi-san as her petit soeur.

"Although I don't really mind if you bring someone other than Noriko-chan."

"In other words, I should choose a petit soeur soon?"

"For the continued stability of the Yamayurikai, every day I eagerly await the announcement of Rosa Gigantea en bouton, wouldn't you agree?"

Sachiko-sama provoked her with intentionally innocuous words.

"It's a tradition, you know. Rise to the challenge."

So said Rei-sama, who had never been baptized in that tradition. The previous Rosa Foetida, Torii Eriko-sama, had called out to her not long after she'd entered into high-school, and making Yoshino-san her petit soeur was simply the enactment of a decision that had been made many years prior.

"Let me think about it some more."

Shimako said.

"For how long? If possible, I'd like to see this matter settled before summer vacation."

Sachiko-sama was slowly starting to resemble the former Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Youko-sama. Probably because she admired her, and wanted to be like her.

"Now, now. You procrastinated until the school festival, Sachiko."

Rei-sama didn't resemble her predecessor at all. She walked her own path.

"Procrastinated? How rude. I wasn't aware of Yumi's existence until the beginning of second semester, so there was nothing I could do. Plus, I wasn't going to mention it, but I did have the bitter experience of being rejected by a certain somebody prior to Yumi, didn't I?"

Sachiko-sama held out her empty cup, demanding a refill. Shimako, the aforementioned 'certain somebody,' silently took the cup, added a teabag and poured in the hot water. Sachiko-sama's prickly acerbity was soon discarded.

"At the very least, I was proactive. Whether the rosary was accepted or not."

"Which reminds me, Shimako only became Sei-sama's petit soeur just after summer vacation had ended. That pair dilly-dallyed for about six months."

Again, dilly-dally.

"Ah. Should we call this a White Rose tradition then?"

Sachiko-sama laughed cynically, perhaps still bitter that Shimako had refused the rosary that she had offered first, instead choosing Sei-sama.

"But, I will say this, Shimako. Don't let a year pass without making Noriko-chan your petit soeur. That kind of indulgence doesn't serve anyone."

"Yes."

Shimako felt as though they were seeing right through her. Then she realized it was some other, unknown, person's mind that was being dissected.

Previously, she had had a discussion with Noriko about the rosary. At that time, Shimako had felt that it wasn't yet a necessity for Noriko. For all intents and purposes, she had said this.

When she heard this, had Noriko felt disappointed? Or had she felt relieved?

It wasn't that Noriko was inappropriate, but that the time wasn't yet right. That sort of feeling. Perhaps she had wanted to avoid placing the burden of being Rosa Gigantea en bouton on a first-year student.

Shimako didn't want to become a huge burden to Noriko. Under normal circumstances, it was unthinkable to suggest that someone unacquainted with the school become one of its student representatives.

Just by being associated with her, Noriko's high-school life might be completely changed. To Shimako, that was something incredibly dreadful.

However, what would Noriko think of it?

At this point, Shimako regretted having unilaterally concluded that conversation. Perhaps it was something they needed to revisit to fully come to terms with.

Handing her rosary to Noriko.

It certainly wasn't an unpleasant thought.

However.

Even without it, they were still bound together. Rosary, soeur, Yamayurikai. With each step along that path, they would be the subject of rumors, and it seemed likely that their relationship would twist into a different shape to its original one.

Surely it was egotism. Changing the name was simply self-indulgence. However, Shimako understood that something which hadn't been turned over was controlling her behavior regarding Noriko.

"Sorry we're late!"

Yumi-san and Yoshino-san burst into the room. Their fourth period class had apparently been spent outdoors, and they were late as a result of that.

"You didn't have to run."

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama's eyes were calm and gentle as they looked at their petit soeurs, who were out of breath with a sheen of sweat on their foreheads.

Watching them, Shimako felt ashamed that she couldn't take that next step forward.

Even though she could see how pure and beautiful Sachiko-sama and Yumi-san's relationship had become since the transfer of the rosary.

Even though she could see how Rei-sama and Yoshino-san's good relationship had continued unaffected by the rosary exchange.

It wasn't the words that kept her from going ahead. Nor was the rosary at fault. It was, undoubtedly, a question of her own inner feelings.

"Shimako."

Sachiko-sama glanced her way.

"If you don't object, how about asking Noriko-chan to help out from time to time?"

"Don't worry. Even if you do that, you don't have to make her your petit soeur if you don't want to."

Rei-sama smiled at her too.

"..."

Shimako had no immediate reply.

Having Noriko, nobody's petit soeur, coming and going from the Rose Mansion.

It was like tracing over the tracks she had taken one year previously with Satou Sei-sama.

Part 2.

After school, a single White Rose blossomed in front of the first-year camellia classroom.

Some time had elapsed since the completion of cleaning duties so there were only a few students in the corridors.

Even so, the motionless figure caught the attention of those who happened to walk past the first-year camellia classroom, and they sighed either nonchalantly or openly as they observed her. – After all, it was undiluted *Rosa Gigantea*.

Shimako was unaware of these glances, as she was looking out the hallway window to the scenery beyond. Day by day, the greenery on the trees was increasing.

Perhaps the clouds had darkened a bit. Maybe a shower was coming.

Rain wouldn't be out of place during this season. Shimako had a folding umbrella inside her school bag.

"Shimako-san?"

Hearing her name called, she turned around and there was the person she'd been waiting for.

Underneath the evenly cut bangs reminiscent of traditional Japanese dolls, Noriko's eyes looked somewhat surprised.

"What's the matter?"

"There's nothing wrong. I just thought we might go home together, if that's okay with you, Noriko."

However, when Shimako had arrived at the first-year camellia class, she discovered that she'd just missed Noriko. Upon learning that Noriko's bag was still in the classroom, Shimako decided to wait out in the hallway until she returned.

"Sure, I'll go. Oooh, I'm so happy."

Hearing this unrestrained delight, Shimako smiled slightly.

"And your errand? Have you finished it?"

"Huh? Errand?"

Noriko stopped for a moment, as though in thought, and then:

"No, it's nothing. Touko's just been stubbornly forcing me to run from one place to another."

Noriko said, waving her hand as she returned to her classroom.

"Take your time."

Remaining in the corridor, Shimako called out to the retreating figure of the bob-haired girl. Seeing Noriko so full of energy always put her in a good mood.

Shimako had initially been a bit worried, but it looked like Noriko had adapted well to life at Lillian's.

Indeed. Unlike herself a year ago, Noriko was building her own bridges. By finding a friend that she could openly communicate with, she seemed to be opening herself up to the world at large.

Shimako was honestly relieved for that.

Nonetheless, as she was breathing a sigh of relief, there remained a speck of loneliness in a corner of her heart. A feeling both sweet and cold, like holding a peppermint candy in her mouth, swept through her body.

"... She said 'Touko.'"

Shimako said unintentionally, talking to herself.

"You called?"

A voice responded, and Shimako instinctively clutched her chest.

"Gokigenyou, Rosa Gigantea. Oh, my, I seem to have startled you."

Sure enough, when Shimako turned around, the owner of that name, Touko-chan, was standing there smiling, her trademark hair rolls bouncing.

"I'm sorry, I was just thinking about something ... Gokigenyou, Touko-chan."

Shimako quickly recovered from her slight disturbance and returned the greeting. Matsudaira Touko was Noriko's classmate, and a distant relative of Sachiko-sama's, so she was a proper young lady.

Even as she faced Touko-chan, Shimako found it strange that she didn't really feel anything negative towards her. Despite the pain Shimako had felt

when she heard Noriko speak Touko-chan's name, it didn't seem to have given rise to any feelings of jealousy.

Unaware that Shimako was thinking these thoughts, Touko-chan continued on.

"Listen to me, Rosa Gigantea. Noriko-san's being absolutely awful. No matter how much I encourage her, she absolutely refuses to come and watch our club activities. Whenever I offer to take her, she just runs off somewhere. Could you please say something to her to get her to stop this behavior, Rosa Gigantea."

"Your club?"

Just as Shimako said this:

"Who's the one being absolutely awful?"

Noriko asked, having returned from her classroom with her bag.

"Quit it, Touko. Getting Shimako-san involved in this, really?"

As she made this comment, Noriko gently pushed Touko-chan's head out of the way. Watching this unfold, Shimako's chest tightened slightly.

Again. Again, that peppermint wind was blowing somewhere inside her.

"Noriko, have you joined a club?"

Shimako asked, and Noriko shook her head in rejection of the idea.

"I have no intention of that at all. I've only been invited, is all. I think it's just that everyone's so eager to see me integrate into this school. Although I don't really mind. How can I put this, there's people who make a hobby out of meddling everywhere."

Then without a moments delay, the chief meddler Touko-chan butted in with:

"Touko invited her to the drama club, but then the literature club, the tennis club, and the bible scripture club all asked Noriko-san to join too."

"The bible scripture club?"

Unintentionally, laughter leaked out of Shimako. It would take an incredible classmate to capture the Buddhist sculpture loving Noriko and get her to recite bible verses.

"I know, right."

Noriko too laughed as she shrugged her shoulders.

A devout Catholic daughter of a Buddhist priest, and a Buddhist statue loving reluctant attendant at Lillian's.

They were like complete opposites of each other. At first glance they appeared to be far apart, but they were actually tightly joined at a deeper level.

Just what was their connection? Shimako had thought about it from time to time. While it seemed to be separate from the connection that she shared with her onee-sama, Satou Sei-sama, there were also many places where it felt like it overlapped too.

"While high-school may seem long, it's actually quite short. Don't you think it's a good idea to devote yourself to something other than studying? And yet Noriko-san won't hear a word of it, saying that it would be a huge bother or something. It doesn't even have to be the drama club, she could join the koto music club, or the table tennis club, or the calligraphy club, or the handicraft club, any one she wants, it doesn't matter."

Touko-chan balled her hand into a fist as she made this fervent speech.

"Wouldn't you agree, Rosa Gigantea?"

The conversation having turned to her, Shimako smiled wanly.

"Since I'm not a member of any clubs, my words wouldn't be very persuasive."

"Oh, but I'm sure you're busy with the Yamayurikai, Rosa Gigantea. On top of that, you have your committee work as well."

Touko-chan linked her fingers in front of her chest, then cocked her head to the side, as though doubtful about something.

"Or is it, perhaps, that you're passing on these clubs because you've reserved your time for some other planned activities, Noriko-san?"

"Huh – "

Shimako and Noriko were left speechless by Touko-chan's words. For a moment, their eyes met. But then they looked away, as though seeing

something they didn't want to see, and decided to not hear the words that were falling upon their ears. – Silently closing the lid on the Pandora's box that had just been opened.

Whether she was aware of the situation or not, Touko-chan lifted her arms up, still with her fingers linked, as though stretching her back vigorously.

"Well then, it must be time for Touko to go to her club activities~. If I don't hurry, I'll miss the vocal training~."

Having willfully disrupted the atmosphere in that location, the self-styled actress left the stage alone. Shimako and Noriko were left standing there, without a comeback.

"Shall we go home?"

"Yeah."

In that uncomfortable atmosphere, all they could do was head towards the exit in silence.

First they had to escape the gallery that watched on with bated breath from the hallway and the classrooms.

Part 3.

This silence, when did it last happen?

Right. It was like the atmosphere that surrounded them when Shimako had walked Noriko to the bus stop, after her visit to the Shouguu temple. It wasn't the result of eliminating all superfluous words, instead it was a heavy, painful silence since they were both hiding the words that needed to be said.

The lid of Pandora's box may have been closed, but some smoke had leaked out.

It would be nigh on impossible to catch this drifting smoke and return things to how they were. Even though it was just smoke, it had tenaciously lodged itself around them, and in time would grow so suffocating that they would no longer be able to avoid it.

"Umm."

Unable to bear the gloomy atmosphere any longer, both of them spoke at roughly the same time.

"You go first, Shimako-san."

"No, after you, Noriko."

Shimako urged Noriko to speak first. While there was indeed something she wanted to say, she hadn't yet found the right words to use. In addition to what Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama had said, Touko-chan's flippant remark was also circling uncontrollably around her head.

"Okay, I'll start."

Noriko gave a small cough to clear her throat before starting. Putting a hand on the lid of Pandora's box.

"Well then. Despite Touko's bizarre suspicions, you shouldn't be too concerned. I'm not avoiding joining a club because I have some kind of ulterior motive like she was talking about."

"... Ulterior motive?"

"Touko's got the wrong impression, kind of like a persecution complex. Basically, she thinks I'm keeping myself free because I'm going to be doing Yamayurikai work in the near future."

Doing Yamayurikai work. It was, needless to say, directly related to becoming Shimako's petit soeur.

"Noriko."

"So, don't be mistaken. I just haven't found a club I want to join. So, at some point, there might be a club I could join, like some 'Buddhist Statue Viewing Club,' you know?"

"... I see."

"But then I was thinking that maybe I'd just concentrate on my school work for the three years of high-school. It looks like it will be pretty hard to study for an external university's entrance exam while at Lillian's."

Noriko's words picked up pace as she spoke. Shimako smiled, waited for a pause, then asked quietly:

"Noriko. Do you want my rosary?"

The smile disappeared from Noriko's face and she shook her head.

"Didn't you say that the time wasn't right?"

"That's what I thought, but."

If you want the rosary – Shimako thought those words, but didn't speak them. It was something that she herself was still not confident about the answer to. Since Shimako didn't know, she thought she'd try entrusting the decision to Noriko.

"Shimako-san. Has somebody said something to you? About me?"

"Huh?"

Shimako asked, without thinking. Noriko was very perceptive. Or maybe it was just that what she had been thinking had shown through on her face.

"I've felt it a bit too."

Noriko said.

"I'm not your petit soeur, but sill I've darted in close to you. I've been a nuisance to you. Even though I knew it would turn out like it did – I'm such an idiot."

"That's not true at all, Noriko."

Although the topic of conversation had drifted somewhat, Shimako quickly corrected her. Since it was only the two of them, if one of them ran off recklessly they could end up in an unfortunate position unless the other restrained them. However, Noriko's fast talking did not stop.

"It's okay, I don't mind. Even at the best of times, I'm a bit of an oddball at this school, so I guess I stand out in a weird way."

"Noriko."

"Ah, right, I don't think you've ever looked at me like that, Shimako-san. But thinking about it objectively, it does look like I've become overly familiar with one of the school's beloved student council leaders."

"Noriko!"

Shimako called out her name again, putting a bit of force into it. Noriko's shoulders flinched, as though surprised, then eventually she responded with, "Yes," and closed her mouth. Things settled nicely, as though Shimako had just administered the cure for hiccups.

Noriko was waiting to hear her words, so Shimako informed her:

"If you know that I haven't ever looked at you like that, then you should also know that the reason I'm with you is because that is what I want."

"... Shimako-san."

"You disagree?"

"I don't. But."

Noriko expanded her objection.

"But the world isn't organized just for the two of us."

"That's true."

What Noriko had said was correct.

Noriko was an adult. And in comparison, she herself – such were Shimako's thoughts. She understood the theory well enough. However, it was unthinkable to Shimako to maintain her distance from Noriko just to avoid public scrutiny, and equally unthinkable to make Noriko her *petit soeur* just because of what other people were saying.

"Shimako-san? Is there something troubling you?"

Noriko asked, when they resumed walking after praying in front of the statue of Maria-sama. Apparently she was worried that something had happened. So Shimako set her own emotions aside and informed Noriko of what had occurred earlier in the day in as businesslike a manner as possible.

"Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida were both at the Rose Mansion. They're extending an invitation to you, Noriko."

"Huh?"

Noriko made a face of obvious displeasure. Perhaps the Yamayurikai leadership had not left a good impression, having taken on the villain's role for the events of the Maria ceremony. Remaining wary that this clumsy approach was just another opportunity to deceive her was probably the right way to feel.

"If you're willing, they'd like you to help out with various things."

"... You mean, as a volunteer?"

"Ah, yeah. Like a volunteer."

Shimako smiled. Noriko apparently thought she'd been scouted as 'someone with too much free time.'

"But, are you okay with that, Shimako-san?"

Shimako's doubt had probably shown through on her face after all. Noriko's request for confirmation had come immediately. Shimako smiled wryly as she answered.

"If I was opposed to it, I would have refused the job of asking you."

"I guess ... no, you're right. Okay, I'll think about it."

Maria-sama watched the pair walk away.

As though melancholic from the many difficulties that lay ahead of them.

Those were the events of the Friday of the first week in June.

Part 4.

At that moment, all Shimako could do was sigh inwardly and watch over her.

"I'm Nijou Noriko."

"Gokigenyou. Welcome to the Rose Mansion."

Three days after their conversation in front of Maria-sama, after school on Monday, Noriko accepted the invitation to the Rose Mansion.

Since they knew Noriko was going to be there, it wasn't just Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama in attendance; Yumi-san and Yoshino-san were there too. The Rose families had all assembled to greet their visitor.

Shimako knew that Rei-sama had taken a day off from her club activities to be there, and that Yoshino-san and Yumi-san had carefully cleaned the room during their lunch break.

Everyone wanted to give Noriko a warm, welcome feeling. But just having them express this left Shimako with mixed feelings. She still didn't know whether she should bind herself to Noriko as soeur. Noriko had only been brought to the Rose Mansion because a loose end had slipped out and been discovered as she went around in circles on this issue.

Perhaps she should proceed if Noriko fit in with the rest of the group, much the same way that Yumi-san had blended in after her sudden appearance during the autumn of the previous year. That seemed to be the expectation, more or less.

Both sides seemed more awkward than usual, but the opening of the biscuit door and the exchange of greetings had passed without incident.

"Noriko-chan, why don't you sit here? Would you be fine with tea to drink?"

Sachiko-sama put on her best smile and beckoned to Noriko.

"No, it's okay. I came to help out."

Watching Noriko bluntly deny the offer, Shimako felt dizzy.

There was no hidden meaning behind Noriko's statement, she was simply putting her thoughts in to words, but it might come across as a display of defiance to people who weren't familiar with her.

"Well ... "

Just as Shimako had expected, Sachiko-sama had a slightly surprised expression on her face. But then Rei-sama intervened, her cheerful voice an apparent rejection of the current atmosphere.

"That won't do at all. After all, just for today, you're our guest here, Noriko-chan."

She guided Noriko from her position by the door over to the table, and, in a preemptive strike, had her sit beside Sachiko-sama. Such consummate skill.

"Over time you'll learn all the everyday chores, but for today we'd like to chat with you. Ah, Yumi-chan, can you make some of the good tea?"

After raising her hand towards Yumi-san, who'd been waiting nearby, Rei-sama took her own seat. It looked like Noriko was stuck between *Rosa Chinensis* and *Rosa Foetida*.

"Okay."

Yumi cheerfully responded. Yoshino-san too moved to support her, and before long tea was being poured into six cups.

It was completely different to the makeshift tea-bag tea of three days prior. Rather than mixing it one cup at a time, the tea leaves were allowed to dance within the teapot, rewarding them with an elegant scent. On account of their guest, they were using the finest tea.

"Shimako, why are you still standing? Have a seat."

"Ah, right."

Having been cautioned by Sachiko-sama, Shimako hurriedly sat down. Since Yoshino-san had already sat down beside Sachiko-sama, and Yumi-san had sat down beside Rei-sama, Shimako sat down opposite Noriko. In other words, she was the furthest away.

"Noriko-chan, sugar or milk?"

Yumi-san held out the basket with sticks of sugar and creamer to Noriko.

"Noriko, how do you like your tea? With sugar and milk? Or without?"

It's not as though anyone would have misinterpreted Yumi-san's words. Even so, Shimako couldn't stop herself from acting as interpreter for Noriko.

"Ah, I'm fine."

Naturally, Noriko bypassed Shimako and responded directly to Yumi-san.

"It tastes good."

Noriko drank her tea straight. Yumi-san added a stick of sugar and a stick of creamer, while Yoshino-san added two sticks of creamer and waited until her tea turned beige before bringing it to her lips.

Shimako too brought her cup to her lips. For whatever reason, she barely noticed the taste. Instead, she found herself excessively thirsty.

However, that thirst would not be abated if she were to down the entire cup of tea, nor would the warming of her stomach after the liquid had passed down her esophagus bring satisfaction to her.

That cool, sweet wind was whistling around her chest. Who else was there that would understand this sensation?

"Oh, is that true?"

Shimako was brought back to her senses by the sound of laughter.

The conversation had flowed around her. Although it did seem that it had mainly been Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama asking questions, with Noriko answering them.

Have you become accustomed to school life at Lillian's?



What are your favorite subjects?

Are you having any problems at school? – etc, etc.

The Rose Mansion was indisputably the Rose's territory. There was no avoiding the fact that the newcomer would be the focus of their questions.

"What about your family, Noriko-chan?"

Sachiko-sama inquired.

"What does your father do, for instance?"

Perhaps having run out of questions related to school life, the questions now turned to her private life.

"My family?"

Just for a moment, Noriko had a puzzled look on her face. So, without thinking, Shimako answered for her.

"Ah, at the moment, Noriko's living with her great-aunt. Since her family lives in Chiba, and it's a long commute."

"... Why are you answering for her?"

When this was pointed out by Rei-sama, Shimako felt a bit dejected. What was she in such a hurry for? In comparison, Noriko was composed.

"My father's a public servant and my mother's a teacher. I have one younger sister."

As for the contents of the question, there was nothing too troubling about the answer. It was the sort of response you'd find in a textbook on the Japanese language.

"It must be lonely living away from your parents."

"Yeah. But my great-aunt's a Lillian's graduate too, so she tells me stories about the old days, which is fun. Even though we're far apart in age, our relationship is more like friends."

"Wow, friends! That's incredible."

"Amazing."

As she watched the girls smiling elegantly, Shimako felt the blood draining from her head. – What on earth was going on?

Smiling face piled up on top of smiling face, to the point where it looked like they were trying to manufacture something where there was nothing.

Thinking about it calmly, it seemed implausible that the instigators of the "Maria Ceremony Inquisition," ie. Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida, were only now discovering this personal information about Noriko. They surely knew all about her family and her living arrangements, and yet they were still asking the questions, so, on reflection, it must be deliberate.

In that case, this was a process.

Process – ? To what possible ends?

What possible direction were they heading in?

"Ah, although it's more characteristic of the Asuka or Hakuhou periods."

Now that Noriko had bled for them, they'd moved on to questions about Buddhist statues.

"I've seen Buddhist statues like that before but never understood the meaning. I've learned something."

The smiles kept piling up, like they were made of papier mache.

It seemed to Shimako as though they were trying to coat her with so many of those smiles that she wouldn't be able to move.

Raindrop

Part 1.

"What's the matter, Shimako-san?"

When she came to her senses, Shimako was in the courtyard.

"... Ahh, Tsutako-san."

The one who brought her back to Earth was her first-year classmate.

"Am I interrupting?"

"No."

Shimako shook her head, gladly welcoming Tsutako-san.

It was Wednesday morning.

Since she'd arrived at school earlier than usual, Shimako had made her way over to the courtyard and had been spacing out.

It was always like that when she thought deeply about something. She didn't have any spare capacity to pay attention to the world around her as she withdrew into her own inner world. It wasn't her intention to build a wall around her, but the result seemed to be an atmosphere that made it difficult for others to approach her.

"Those were some deep sighs."

"Really?"

"Your expression isn't too bad, but – "

As she spoke, Tsutako-san set the camera's flash off.

The girl from the photography club always carried a camera with her and would press the shutter like that whenever the mood struck her.

"It's more fun to look at Shimako-san when she's like this."

Tsutako-san pulled a bundle of photographs out of her side skirt pocket, selected one of them and held it out to Shimako.

"It was such a joyous expression that I took the photo on instinct. If you don't mind, I'd like you to have this."

It was a picture of Shimako's face that she had never seen until now. It was an unguarded shot of her laughing heartily and, as Tsutako-san had said, it was definitely a 'joyous expression.'

"Thank-you."

She certainly hadn't been laughing so wholeheartedly in recent times. Shimako looked up into the sky. It felt strange to be reminiscing about her earlier self when it had only been 10 or 15 days since the event.

"The girl with her back to the camera, the bob-haired first-year ... umm."

"Noriko?"

"Right, Noriko-chan. She's good, this girl."

Tsutako-san trained her camera on Shimako.

"As a subject?"

Click.

"She's good as that too, but I meant her value as a light reflector."

"A light reflector?"

Click, click. Since Shimako hadn't objected, Tsutako-san was taking photos as fast as she could.

The lovely courtyard with its colorful flowers was popular in early summer and, despite the cloudy weather, a number of students could be seen enjoying a stroll along the paths by the flowerbeds. When they noticed the hastily convened Rosa Gigantea photo shoot, they would occasionally stop and look her way, before returning to the flowers once more.

"See, at a photo shoot, they'll have these boards that reflect light, like a mirror, you know? One of those."

Tsutako-san said, removing the camera from her face.

"What I meant was, she shines the light on Toudou Shimako."

"The light – "

Shimako was touched, for it seemed like such an apt expression. Noriko was the light. Her existence illuminated Shimako, warmed her, and made her sparkle.

"But now you're cloudy. Much like today's weather ... Did something happen?"

"Something, hmm."

As Shimako struggled to find the words, Tsutako-san smiled as though she'd just been struck by an idea.

"I see. If it was something you'd discuss with me, Yumi-san and Yoshino-san would be here too."

"Not at all. I consider you one of my trusted confidants, Tsutako-san."

Shimako quickly shook her head.

Despite being in the same grade, Tsutako-san was quite mature in some respects, so Shimako had no objection to discussing matters with her. Her attentiveness tended to be overshadowed by her nonchalance. Shimako, at present, was predisposed towards Tsutako-san's style of non-intrusive kindness.

"It's just, I don't really know myself. You're right that I'm cloudy at the moment. But I don't know how to become sunny. Noriko shines the light upon me. In the past, that was good enough, but – "

That was why Shimako couldn't discuss this with Yumi-san or Yoshino-san. She couldn't glitter when she was with Noriko inside the Rose Mansion. There was no way she could say that, as it would seem like a rejection of the other Yamayurikai members.

Shimako thought that inviting Noriko to the Rose Mansion hadn't bridged the divide between them. But her thoughts were still in disarray, so she was just going around in circles trying to figure out what to do.

"Ah."

Tsutako-san smiled warmly.

"Shimako-san, you really are Satou Sei-sama's petit soeur."

"Huh?"

"You're stuck in the same labyrinth."

There was no need to ask what she was talking about. Shimako knew it was definitely that sort of thing.

However, her onee-sama hadn't repeated the same mistake with Shiorisan twice. She held on to Shimako's hand with one hand, while keeping the other free hand held straight out in front of her. Waiting out in front of her were her friends, the public, and the future too.

"I'm probably just clumsy."

"Really?"

"It looks like everyone's going out of their way to help me."

When Shimako told her about the other day's events at the Rose Mansion, Tsutako-san said, "Oh wow," cheerfully agreeing with this sentiment.

"Setting aside your feelings for now, Shimako-san. It's obvious why everyone's playing nice. You're reading too much into it."

"Perhaps you're right."

"One of the most common desires is not to be hated by other people. Don't overdo it, but try to meet them halfway. It's not necessarily a bad thing."

On the other side of her glass lenses, Tsutako-san's eyes narrowed kindly as she smiled.

"What has me more worried though is you, Shimako-san."

"Me?"

"You must be worn out, looking after both sides."

Click.

"Tsutako-san, you see a lot, don't you?"

"Yeah. Because I'm a photographer. When I press the shutter button, I want to capture what's inside my subject's heart."

"Scary."

Although, if a camera really could peek into what was inside a person's heart, people probably wouldn't have the kind of troubles Shimako was experiencing.

Shimako playfully put her right thumb to her left forefinger, and vice-versa, to create a frame, then looked through this at Tsutako-san's face.

However, Tsutako-san quickly hid her face behind her camera, pointed it at Shimako, and pressed down on the shutter button.

"I'll tell you something I don't tell many people, Shimako-san – I don't like having my photo taken."

"Oh, why's that?"

It seemed hard to believe that the self-proclaimed ace of the photography club was camera shy. Although, when Shimako thought about it, it seemed like Tsutako-san would hardly ever be in a photograph since she was always on the other side of the camera.

"I simply want to be the camera that photographs you, and Yumi-san, and Yoshino-san. I only want to look at that world, I don't want to be captured inside it."

Click, click, went the shutter. Shimako turned directly towards it, and spoke to Tsutako-san on the other side of the lens.

"But if you're only watching, the answer will never be forthcoming."

"There's no right answer when dealing with human relationships. But suppose there was one model solution out there somewhere, just following that would be boring, don't you think?"

"... I suppose so."

The bell rang out, signaling that class would begin soon. The two girls joined the stream of students heading towards the school buildings.

"Tsutako-san."

As they approached the point where they would go their separate ways to their own classrooms, Shimako called out to Tsutako-san, who was walking ahead of her.

"Why did you tell me that you didn't like it?"

"I don't like it? Ah, you mean how I don't like having my photo taken?"

Tsutako-san turned around and smiled.

"When I see your face, sometimes words just slip out of my mouth, Shimako-san. Keep it a secret from the others, okay?"

The lenses of her frameless glasses shone like the flash of her camera, and she turned around. Inside her mind, Shimako pressed down on the shutter button.

Tsutako-san would make such a wonderful photography subject.

Part 2.

Thursday lunch.

Shimako was in the hallway walking towards the Rose Mansion when she ran into Yumi-san and Yoshino-san, who were also heading in the same direction.

"Ah."

Both parties exclaimed softly and, without further discussion, they all naturally started walking together. It may have been presumptuous, but that's how things were with friends. Or, rather, that's the sort of relationship that comes with time.

Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Rosa Foetida en bouton and Rosa Gigantea walked down the corridor together, each carrying their own lunchbox.

It was a scene that could be seen fairly regularly in the high-school building.

"Go-gokigenyou, onee-samas."

A first-year student greeted them shyly then ran away. Even though she'd worked up the courage to call out to them, she left before they could return the greeting.

Shimako turned around, following that fluttering white sailor collar with her eyes.

Had that girl been satisfied simply with calling out to them? Watching from a distance, bowing, and then boldly addressing them. It seemed like a rather meager happiness.

And when was it that Shimako found herself no longer satisfied by such a meager happiness?

Just having Noriko by her side still wasn't enough to satisfy her. When Noriko had been introduced to the other members of the Rose Mansion, Shimako had forgotten to feel grateful. If things kept going like they were, it was terrifying to think what kind of arrogant person she would become. Did all human desire simply result in this sort of thing?

"On one, two. Gokigenyou, Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Rosa Foetida en bouton."

It wasn't unusual to see groups of five or six girls lined up waiting outside the first-year classrooms. Emboldened by their numbers, sometimes they would even surround Shimako or the boutons, asking various questions.

While they didn't have the presence of Rosa Chinensis or Rosa Foetida, the boutons made up for it with their youth and friendliness. Generally, people were more likely to cheerfully call out when Shimako was with Yoshino-san or Yumi-san, rather than when she was alone. And, as everyone hoped, they would respond openly, increasing their popularity.

But today was somehow different to usual.

"Gokigenyou everyone."

Yoshino-san and Yumi-san smiled glumly as they passed the proactive first-years. Sensing they weren't in the mood to chat today, the group took a step back and watched them pass with rapt attention.

"Even hiding their sorrow, the boutons are dreamy ... "

The whispered murmurings of their juniors reached Shimako's ears.

"Umm ... what's the matter?"

Shimako asked worriedly, however.

"What do you mean, what's the matter?"

Shimako momentarily faltered when they both asked her, looking serious.

"Well ... you're both so quiet today?"

"Quiet?"

Yumi-san and Yoshino-san looked at each other.

"That's right, you've hardly said a word, Yoshino-san."

"You too, Yumi-san, why are you looking so gloomy?"

As for Shimako, she was normally quiet anyway, so nobody pointed it out.

"Are we being quiet?"

"It's just her imagination, right?"

The pair seemed to be in denial, as they resumed walking in silence.

Shimako liked to see Yumi-san and Yoshino-san when they were in high spirits, frolicking like puppies. When she saw them joking around, it would bring a smile to her lips too. She adored them because they possessed what she did not.

But today, Yumi-san and Yoshino-san were definitely downbeat about something. It wasn't just her imagination – in their mouths and in their stride, something was weighing down on them.

As they entered the courtyard, all three of them sighed simultaneously.

"What?"

Yoshino-san said, fed up, as she stopped walking.

"What do you mean?"

Yumi-san's lips took on a sour look.

"Is there something bothering you two?"

Shimako inquired tentatively. However.

"There's no way you can talk to someone who's sighing, right?"

This was sharply pointed out by Yoshino-san.

"Especially when there's not that many different species of sighs."

Silently nodding her head in agreement, it looked as though Yumi-san and Yoshino-san's sighs were of the same 'species.'

Yoshino-san's were probably about Rei-sama.

Yumi-san's were definitely about Sachiko-sama.

They were deeply important people, so it was only natural that they would think about them.

Out in front of their sighs, the Rose Mansion was waiting for them with an open door.

"Shall we go in?"

"I suppose."

They couldn't dilly-dally in the entrance forever. However, Shimako didn't follow her friends inside.

A dark colored tabby cat ran past her feet.

"Shimako-san?"

"I'm sorry. There's something I have to attend to."

Shimako called out as she turned around.

The reason for her behavior was that, suddenly, one person's face had floated into her mind. Consequently, her legs had started to move of their own accord.

Part 3.

But having said that, she didn't actually have any way to meet her. – Shimako came to a halt at the path lined with ginkgo trees and smiled bitterly to herself.

Before she knew it, she'd come to this spot.

On the other side of the shrubbery she could see yellows and reds going to and fro. A gathering in eye-catching street clothes. One more step along the path and she'd be on the university grounds.

Shimako's heart beat a little faster. Ahead of her were the school buildings of her onee-sama, Satou Sei-sama.

(However.)

She didn't actually have any way to meet her.

As Tsutako-san had pointed out, her onee-sama had probably been lost in the same labyrinth that she herself was in. But even if Shimako was able to confirm this, it wouldn't help her out. Their circumstances were completely different.

Tsutako-san said this too. There's no right answer when it comes to human relationships.

Because there's another person involved, a single pattern doesn't exist.

Shimako looked up at the university buildings ahead of her. They calmly regarded her, as though looking down upon her weak self.

(I should go.)

Even if they were able to meet, in her current state, Shimako would just be an inconvenience. For starters, having spontaneously made up her mind to do this, Shimako didn't know where her onee-sama was at present.

A group of university students emerged from the building's glass side door. Shimako hurriedly turned her back and scurried back to the high-school grounds, putting the pathway between her and the group.

But when the sounds of the seven or eight cheerful voices reached her ears, Shimako couldn't help but think that her onee-sama might be having

that kind of happy university life too. And in that case, there was no room for her.

She'd thought that when the cherry blossom season had ended, that she'd broken though completely. But that wasn't the case at all.

She hadn't even seen her onee-sama in that group of women but her chest had tightened in the same manner as when she'd seen Touko-chan by Noriko's side.

(But.)

The truth was, even if it meant she was completely hopeless, Shimako wanted to see her onee-sama. Even though she would only be causing trouble, Shimako wanted to talk to her.

Her onee-sama would surely answer her. Even though it might not be what was right for Shimako. Nonetheless, she would be satisfied if their thoughts overlapped even a small amount.

Back then, how had she kept running at full pace all the way to the end? Having started it without thinking of the consequences, it wasn't the sort of thing you could rethink and stop midway through. Leaving things half done would be incredibly damaging too.

Shimako smiled ruefully.

If it had been Yoshino-san or Yumi-san, they probably would have openly gone forth to meet her. No, wait. They wouldn't be trapped in this labyrinth to begin with.

Her onee-sama had graduated and Noriko had matriculated. Noriko had lodged herself in an empty corner of Shimako's heart and became a support that propped her up.

But she couldn't talk to Noriko about Noriko. By the same token, nor could she talk to the residents of the Rose Mansion about it.

As she entered the school building, Shimako let out a large sigh. The hallway was dimly lit and the windows closed, as though to keep out the rain, which made the air feel choking and oppressive.

Checking her watch, Shimako saw that there was still a little bit of time left before the afternoon classes commenced.

She felt that she wanted to see someone. To be with someone she was close to, who would call her by her name and not "Rosa Gigantea."

Shimako came to a halt at the place where two hallways intersected. Two paths stretched out ahead of her. One led to the first-year camellia classroom and the other to the Rose Mansion.

However, Shimako didn't walk down either of those paths, she took two, three steps backwards, then turned and headed towards her second-year Wisteria classroom.

Thinking that neither of those would put her at ease.

But that was the personality she'd been born with, and changing it wasn't something she was able to do.

Part 4.

Shimako looked up at the sky through one of the windows on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion.

Even though Friday had arrived, sunny days had still not reached her heart. The clouds gathering inside her heart were still increasing, weighing her down. Like the clouds that covered the skies just before the rainy season, it seemed as though they would remain there forever.

If the clouds were removed, would the sky really be clear and blue like Maria-sama's soul? Even though the sun should still be out, it was so dark it seemed like evening. It felt like rain would come pouring down at any moment.

"Shimako-san."

From behind, Noriko called out her name, as though finding fault with her surreptitious sigh. School was over for the day and Noriko had been asked to help out because Rei-sama and Yoshino-san weren't able to come today.

They had already started preparing for the school festival.

While there was a separate executive committee for the festival, there was still a significant amount of work that the student council had to do.

At the moment they were still doing very preliminary work, like making photocopies and taking surveys, but it was inevitable that the amount of work would steadily increase from here on. So the more people they had helping, the better.

"Yes?"

Shimako asked Noriko, after slowly turning around.

"I've poured some tea, so..."

"Ah, thank-you."

Shimako made her way from the window to where the teacup was placed on the table. The only sounds reverberating through the room were the faint shuffle of her shoes across the floor and the sound of steam whistling out of the kettle.

All was quiet.

Sachiko-sama and Yumi-san, Noriko and then Shimako.

Having reached a natural break in their work, it was so silent it was hard to believe that there were four people in the Rose Mansion.

"Noriko-chan."

Sachiko-sama suddenly spoke while fiddling with her long, black hair.

"Do you think you can do something about your use of 'Shimako-san'?"

"Huh?"

Noriko asked, confused. Shimako immediately became flustered.

"It's customary to use the honorific '-sama' when speaking to an elder. It doesn't matter what you call her outside school, but while at school you should refer to her as Shimako-sama, or Rosa Gigantea."

"Ah, okay."

"I mean, honestly, these are the sort of things that Shimako should be teaching you. The last few generations of Rosa Gigantea may have favored the laissez-faire approach, but it's only going to be Noriko-chan that's embarrassed in the end."

Shimako could not respond to this. What Sachiko-sama was saying was an accurate statement of fact.

Sachiko-sama had probably been bothered by it since the beginning. She must have been watching and waiting for it to be corrected, but then seeing that nothing was changing despite her lengthy wait, she finally became unable to endure it any longer and spoke out.

It had been Shimako's mistake not to address it earlier.

Having been involved in her school's student council during middle-school, Noriko was able to handle the business side practically flawlessly. Perhaps as a result of living apart from her parents, she was very level-headed and able to give this work proper attention. Which was why Shimako had been unprepared. Relieved that Noriko had been able to handle the work easily, Shimako hadn't paid attention to the minor details.

Additionally, she'd been caught up in the troubles of her own heart.

"My apologies."

Shimako bowed her head. With that, she expected the conversation to be settled. However.

"Umm, it's fine that you correct me, but isn't spreading the fire to Shimako-san ... ah, Shimako-sama, a bit strange. After all, it's not as though Shimako-sama's my onee-sama or anything."

Noriko indignantly protested as she stood up from her chair.

"Noriko."

Shimako hurriedly stood up, intending to caution Noriko, but Sachiko-sama held her hand up, with her palm facing Shimako, commanding her to stop.

"Even if you are not soeurs, it is the responsibility of the older students to guide those younger students without an onee-sama. You two are quite close, no? Even though you're not soeur, it would be proper for Shimako to correct you."

Having expected it to end with a simple caution, Noriko's unexpected rebuttal seemed to have fired up Sachiko-sama.

"Noriko-chan."

As though looking to regain her composure, Sachiko-sama elegantly rose and step forward, lightly touching Noriko on the shoulder.

"If you don't want to be corrected by a large number of nameless older students, you should quickly find an onee-sama."

"That's none of your business."

Noriko rolled her shoulders violently, shaking off Sachiko-sama's beautiful, pale fingers.

"None of my business, you say."

With Noriko biting back, Sachiko-sama's pride as an older student meant she couldn't walk away from this. Once again, Noriko had failed to understand the ways of Lillian's, since she'd come from another school. The situation was getting more and more complicated.

Yumi-san was looking flustered too. If there was one person best suited to straightening this out, it would be Rei-sama, but unfortunately she wasn't there at the moment.

"One moment, Shimako. Don't remain silent, you should be reprimanding her too. This clueless first-year."

"Ah."

Shimako froze up when Sachiko-sama unexpectedly turned to her. – She should be reprimanding Noriko?

"As I said before, why are you including Shimako-san in this? Rosa Chinensis."

"Oh, again with the 'Shimako-san.' Noriko-chan."

"In the middle of an argument is not the time to be finding fault with someone."

"This isn't an argument. I'm guiding a younger student. Are you trying to say you're on the same level as a third-year, when you're just a first-year student?"

Sachiko-sama called out hysterically. However, Noriko would not back down.

"Just a first-year? At most, there's only two years difference in our ages."

"A two year difference in school is huge."

"I'm against seniority based on time served!"

Their voices raised as their faces closed in on each other, as though they were about to start snapping at each other.

"Just stop already!"

Unable to watch any longer, Shimako forced herself between them.

"Stop ... ?"

Sachiko-sama slowly shifted her gaze from Noriko to Shimako.

"And suppose we stop, then what? Should we feign friendliness and sit around drinking tea like nothing happened? Since you've intervened, please,

provide some mediation. Shimako, how are you going to resolve this situation around you?"

"That's – "

Shimako was lost for words. She was glad she intervened, but hadn't thought about what would happen next. It was true that just stopping the quarrel hadn't settled anything. It was the role of the person that intervened to bring both parties to an understanding.

But to do that, she would have to mediate fairly and impartially. It went without saying that she couldn't force them to compromise or come to an agreement. Shimako looked to be in no position to handle this difficult task.

So, instead, she bowed her head and said:

" ... I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? Are you saying you're giving up on mediation?"

Shimako shook her head forcefully, indicating that wasn't the case. Well, while it wasn't completely wrong, she was apologizing for a different reason.

"It's because I think I'm in the wrong here. I haven't been acting responsibly. I've caused you and the others anxiety, Sachiko-sama, and I've imposed unreasonably on Noriko."

As Shimako had thought, it had been a mistake to bring Noriko to the Rose Mansion. Her crime was that she had gone along with the flow, despite having a premonition that it would end like this.

Nonetheless, in the beginning, Shimako had held out a hope that it might go well. That despite living in this artificially constructed papier-mache world of feigned friendliness from both sides, as time went by those smiles might become genuine and the eyes shine too.

But, like a hastily constructed papier-mache object, it wasn't unusual that cracks would start to appear over time. Those cracks were probably a sign that it was about to crumble.

"That's true, I suppose."

Sachiko-sama coldly agreed.

"And?"

"And ... what?"

"Right. And? Are you simply admitting your recognition of your own error? What are we supposed to do with that? Simply reflecting on this is insufficient, no? How are you going to act responsibly from here on, how will you avoid worrying us, how will you avoid imposing unreasonably on Noriko-chan, won't you provide clarification on these points?"

" – Clarification."

Sachiko-sama's demand seemed much more difficult than reciting some complicated mathematical formula. What was she going to do to avoid troubling everyone? If she knew the answer to that, she wouldn't be trapped in the current situation.

"There are many ways of handling this, right? As an extreme example, if you cut yourself off from either us or Noriko-chan, that would resolve matters."

"Cut myself off from one of you ... ?"

"Or, to put it another way, you could choose one side."

Her friends in the Yamayurikai, or Noriko – that would indeed settle things once and for all.

If Shimako wasn't Rosa Gigantea, then there would be no pressure to choose a soeur, and she would probably have a comfortable school life with Noriko. That's what it would mean to choose Noriko.

On the other hand, if she chose the Yamayurikai, then things would revert to how they were before Noriko entered the school. The two Roses and two boutons would gently ensconce her as they had thus far.

However.

Shimako looked first at Noriko, then shifted her gaze to Sachiko-sama and Yumi-san.

"What is it, Shimako?"

Shimako knew that choosing one of them would settle the matter. But if she didn't choose one, what was the best thing to do?

"I'm sorry."

Shimako ran away. Without choosing either, she slipped between both of them, and fled straight out the biscuit door.

"Shimako!"

"Shimako-san!"

The voices calling her to stop all mixed together. But her legs didn't stop.

The staircase creaked its complaint. Shimako ignored it as she ran down the stairs, then spilled out the front door.

Here and there, raindrops fell on her forehead and her cheeks. But still her legs didn't stop.

If she stopped running, the problem would catch her.

Shimako didn't want to lose either of them.

Part 5.

The raindrops gently brushed past the new growth on the cherry tree then fell into her hair.

"Tell me what to do."

The raindrops in her hair slid down Shimako's face to her cheeks, where they mixed with her tears. Despite standing under the biggest branch of a large cherry tree, the sparseness of the leaves meant it wasn't very useful as a shelter from the rain.

"You'll catch a cold if you stay out in the rain."

There was the sound of one set of footsteps advancing steadily across the moist ground. Since choosing this place to flee to, Shimako had probably been waiting for this person to arrive.

"I learned something today. Shimako-san, you're greedy. Because of that, you want everyone to like you."

Noriko made her way to Shimako's side, and squatted down next to her. There was still a section of dirt beneath the cherry tree that remained dry, although the raindrops slipping through the branches of the tree were progressively painting it a polka-dot pattern.

"Right."

The pair didn't look at each other, instead focusing on the rain in front of them. The rainfall inside Shimako was different to the rain outside, more like a roof leak, without even the benefit of the branches or their fresh leaves. As though she'd already caught the cold that Noriko had warned her about.

"Since you're greedy, you've tried to live a life free from desire. Because it's tough to let something go once you've held it in your hands."

Perhaps at a loose end, Noriko picked up a nearby twig and started doodling in the damp ground.

"What are you saying?"

Shimako didn't look at Noriko's face, but at the lines she was drawing.

"It's like this, Shimako-san. Back when you were keeping secret the fact that you're a temple daughter, you were determined to leave the school if it ever came out, right? That sort of thing."

"... Ah, I see. Perhaps you're right."

She wanted to be as free as possible. If she knew she might lose something eventually, thinking about that made her lose the courage to reach out for it. If fate meant that she would inevitably have to leave it behind, she couldn't pick it up, let alone actively seek it out.

"But in the end you hesitated, right? You were reluctant to go through with it?"

"Yeah."

"Because you already held your friends in your hands."

Beside her doodle, Noriko wrote 'Yumi' and 'Yoshino.'

"These people are indispensable to you, Shimako-san."

Noriko continued to write the names of the people that Shimako was friends with. 'Sachiko' and 'Rei.' At that point, Shimako looked at Noriko's face for the first time.

"Don't tell me that I should cut myself off from you because of that."

There was no way she could cast aside her irreplaceable friends. But the one she wanted by her side right at that moment was Noriko.

Blame it on her greed, but Noriko was one of the treasures that she had held in her hands. Shimako definitely didn't want to let her go.

"I won't. Because I'm indispensable to you too, Shimako-san. Although saying that might be a bit conceited."

Noriko set aside her twig and turned to face Shimako. Not only turned to face her, but also grinned at her, setting her mind at ease.

"My easily flustered Shimako-san."

Noriko whispered, as she wiped away a drop of water that streamed down Shimako's face. While the rain had mixed with her tears, how did it look to Noriko?

"Rosa Chinensis gave you an extreme example. You don't want to let go, so you won't force yourself to cast aside either of us, right?"

"But, that – "

Shimako grasped her hands together tightly and brought them to her chest. Cast aside neither of them. How could she achieve that result?

"I know one way this could be resolved."

Beneath her even bangs, her eyes shone with a strong will. It shot straight through Shimako.

"Place that rosary around my neck."

"Huh!?"

Noriko was pointing towards Shimako's right wrist. She'd received it from her onee-sama, a memento of their six-month long dream.

That rosary had released Shimako from her isolation. After being welcomed into the Yamayurikai, she'd been able to make some precious friends. Even though her onee-sama had graduated, things had probably turned out how they had because she had that rosary.

"To me, it's just a piece of jewelery. But if that will resolve everything, and everyone accepts it, wouldn't it be better to end it quickly by placing that on me?"

"But, Noriko."

"I think I understand, sort of. The reason you haven't already given me the rosary, that is. It's because you know the weight of it, right? But for all that, it's something that I'd never even notice."

Noriko's guess had been fairly close to Shimako's true feelings. To Shimako, the rosary was, indeed, quite heavy. But it could be said that it was the weight itself that made it valuable.

However, she was reluctant to hand that heavy rosary over to someone else. If it was to someone she cared about, then it was only natural she'd be troubled.

"So having said all that, is there anyone you're going to hand your rosary to, Shimako-san?"

One option was to remain without a petit soeur until graduation, but that would be somewhat difficult given her position as Rosa Gigantea.

"Since I don't know the weight of it, it won't put me out. Think of it as lending it to me, and if you find yourself lighter without the rosary then it's all good, right?"

"Lending it to you?"

Just with that phrase, Shimako found her heart lightening.

"Right, like the juzu."

Perhaps that way she'd be able to relax. Surely everyone must feel more at ease once they became soeurs. If they didn't, Lillian's soeur system would have fallen apart years ago.

"But."

After taking the rosary off her wrist, Shimako reconsidered. Was it really okay to give this to Noriko? Would having Noriko take care of the rosary really resolve matters?

"Why are you hesitating? Is it because I'm a Buddhist, not a Christian?"

"That's not it. It's just ... "

If Noriko became Shimako's petit soeur, she'd also gain the title of Rosa Gigantea en bouton. Would she be able to get along with the other Yamayurikai members, starting with Sachiko-sama? When Shimako put this into words, Noriko looked at her with a blank stare and responded with:

"I think we'll get along fine, don't you?"

"Huh?"

"At the very least, I thought we'd established a good relationship."

Noriko tilted her head in thought, as she asked herself, "I wonder if Rosa Chinensis thinks so too?"

"But what about that fight earlier?"

"Fight? That was an affectionate scolding. I don't hold anything against Rosa Chinensis."

"Oh ... really?"

"Don't worry about it. I think we'll get along fine. You too, Shimako-san, as an onee-sama you should be more strict on my manners. If you tell me to do something, I'll obediently listen. Even Rosa Chinensis would show some restraint towards Rosa Gigantea's petit soeur. So we won't come in to conflict."

Noriko looked up slightly, as though in thought. Here and there the raindrops fell on her face and black hair.

"To liken it to a lunchbox, at the moment there's no compartments so all the dishes are going every which way, making it a mess. Rosa Chinensis doesn't seem to be the kind of person to tolerate getting the rice mixed up with the soup."

"A lunchbox?"

Shimako blurted. Noriko's example was quite peculiar. But she found herself agreeing with it.

"That's why she nudged me out after you."

"Sachiko-sama did?"

"Yeah. I think she's probably already accepted me into the group. That's why she could say what she did."

Ah, that was true. If she wasn't interested in someone, Sachiko-sama was the kind of person to ignore them completely. Their fight was one form of communication to Sachiko-sama.

"You're quite perceptive."

"Yep. Because they're the people you like, Shimako-san."

Shimako sighed as she compared that to her own actions. She'd been in such a rush not to lose anything important, that she lost sight of everything. Even though they'd become so close. Even though she held those things important to her securely in her hands.



"Ahh ... I'm sure you're right."

Even though she hadn't noticed, Noriko had always been holding her hand, lighting her path through the labyrinth.

Therefore Shimako didn't have to walk alone any more. If she wanted to share the burden she carried on her shoulders, it looked like she could rely on Noriko.

Shimako spread the rosary out.

"Is this okay?"

The rosary could become a set of restraints that shackled Noriko. But in front of Shimako was a petit soeur who would not be bothered by that, so there was no need to worry anymore.

The names written in the dirt were slowly being erased by raindrops.

"I'll stay with you until you graduate, Shimako-san, never leaving your side."

Noriko smiled happily. Raindrops fell on the rosary hanging around her neck, sparkling like the beads.

"That's why I'm not cold any more."

They huddled together beneath the cherry tree, watching the rain fall.

Despite the rain falling around them, inside Shimako's heart there was brilliant sunshine.

Yellow Rose Warning

Suspicious Clouds

To a degree, it could have been anticipated that things would turn out how they did.

But even if it were anticipated, a direct refusal would have inflamed the situation. That much was as obvious as a house fire.

Honestly, it wasn't all that serious in the beginning.

The one who sparked things off was Rei-chan.

Honestly, if she wasn't such an idiot.

Part 1.

"What did you just say?"

Rei-chan asked, raising her head. So surprised that her fork stopped moving about ten centimeters above her plate, the piece of baked cheesecake still skewered on it.

"Huh? I told you, now that the school year's ticked over, I thought it was about time I joined a club."

"I heard that. What I wanted you to repeat was what came after that."

"After that?"

Yoshino scooped some sweet broiled chestnuts, and accompanying green tea crepe and vanilla ice-cream, into her spoon and stuffed her mouth full. She'd been intending to savor it to its last, but Rei-chan had closed in looking so serious that either unintentionally, or against her better judgment, Yoshino had impulsively gulped it down. Snapping, even.

Sunday afternoon.

The weather was fine and they'd finished their homework. Thinking that Yumi-san would be getting spoiled by Sachiko-sama at about this time, Yoshino found herself wanting to be close to someone, so she'd invited Rei-chan to come with her on an outing around K station.

Rei-chan was wearing a long sleeved T-shirt and jeans, fairly rough clothing, but with her long, thin legs it looked pretty good. Yoshino was happy because it was her first time wearing her favorite light blue summer sweater and matching cardigan for the year, and she was satisfied with the occasional glimpses she caught of herself in the windows. The coral pendant matched splendidly with the light blue ensemble. Since light blue was the color of the ocean.

Their enjoyable day off changed completely at a cafe they'd entered to rest their weary legs, not long after the food they'd ordered had been placed in front of them. Yoshino had started talking about club activities, and that had set things in motion.

"Joining a club is fine. I'm not against that. Your surgery in autumn was about six months ago, the intervening time's passed smoothly, and you're well enough that you hardly ever have to sit out during PE, Yoshino. But – "

Rei-chan's cheesecake finally succumbed to gravity and slid off her fork. The force of its direct hit on her plate caused the crust to burst apart, sending crumbs as far afield as Yoshino's ice-cream and black tea.

"The kendo club, of all things."

Rei-chan placed her empty fork on her plate, and ran her hand along the side of her head, combing back her short hair. Yoshino had imagined she would be surprised, but hadn't expected she would be this concerned.

"So then, is the problem that the kendo club's a sports club, or that you're a member of the kendo club, Rei-chan?"

Yoshino inquired, to which Rei-chan raised her head and said emphatically:

"It's both."

"Hmm, both, huh."

In other words, if she'd said the tennis club, the shock would have been reduced by half. But if she'd said, for example, the handicrafts club and Rei-chan was a member of that, she wouldn't have liked it either.

"I told you I wanted to try kendo before."

"I know, but."

"Why didn't you oppose me then? Did you think I wasn't being serious?"

"I don't know. It was right after your surgery, it didn't seem real."

"And now you're getting all flustered. Ah, excuse me, can I get some more water?"

Yoshino held up her glass, as the waitress passed by their table.

"... Don't ask for a refill of your water in the middle of a serious conversation."

As she said this, Rei-chan crumpled over, putting her head on an empty space on the table, as though exhausted. The crumbs from before got stuck

in her short hair, making it look quite funny. Yoshino thought, "And this is Mister Lillian?"

"Ah, um, did you want that water?"

Looking in the direction of the voice, Yoshino saw the waitress standing there, holding a silver pitcher. Rei-chan's actions seemed to have put her right on edge.

"Pay no attention to that, I'll have some water, thanks."

After pointing at 'that', ie. Rei-chan, Yoshino took the glass near Rei-chan's head and lined it up alongside her own. After pouring water into the two glasses, the waitress said, "Take your time," bowed shallowly and quickly left their table. If this kind of thing could disturb her, she still had a long way to go to become a pro.

"That?"

When the sound of the waitress' footsteps was no longer audible, Rei-chan raised her head quickly and said unhappily. However, Yoshino felt neither pain nor discomfort seeing that face.

"'That' is perfectly adequate for someone so loose, Rei-chan. Calm down a bit. It's shameful. Here, drink some water."

"Mm."

Still with bits of crust in her hair, Rei-chan downed the entire glass of water in one go.

"... I'm shameful?"

"Yes, shameful. It's incredibly unsightly of you to get so flustered about me."

Inside Yoshino's mind, she whispered, "Rei-chan's fans' illusions are all going up in smoke."

"I see, I'm shameful, huh ... "

"Pretty much."

Even though she was shameful and indecent, she still remained "Yoshino's Rei-chan," so Yoshino's love for her was unchanged. However, the reason for Rei-chan's transition from her usual gallantry to cowardice

was invariably Yoshino herself, so part of Yoshino was pleased and part mortified.

"You want to do kendo?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'm pretty familiar with it – I've been watching ever since I was a kid, so I'd like to give it a try."

Which was why she had mentioned it quite casually. But Rei-chan had treated it as something far more momentous than it was, flying into panic on her own.

"Then, why don't you just practice with my father? You don't have to do it at school."

"With uncle?"

"When the dojo's free, I could spar with you too."

"How's that different to the kendo club?"

It looked like Rei-chan's opposition to Yoshino joining the kendo club wasn't because she didn't want Yoshino doing kendo, or even because she didn't want them doing kendo together.

"They're completely different, our dojo and the school club. Okay? You'll just be an ordinary club member, so I won't be able to protect you, even as your onee-sama and cousin."

Protect? Yoshino got a bit hung up on that phrase.

"I didn't ask you to protect me."

"I'm only saying this because you don't know how tough sports clubs are. The dojo floor has to be mopped after morning training, even in the middle of winter. Can you do that, Yoshino, with your sensitivity to the cold? In a completely barefoot world?"

"Ooh."

Since the weather was so mild, she hadn't even considered winter. Yoshino fell silent, while Rei-chan waxed loquacious, almost arrogantly so.

"From time to time we'll get new club members who naively think they just want to give it a try, and it's always such a bother. If you're staving off

boredom and just want to play around, I'll keep you company at home until you've had enough."

Ka-chink.

Inside Yoshino, something snapped.

"Staving off boredom? Just playing around? You'll keep me company?"

" ... Y-yoshino."

"No, that's enough. The school has a wonderful training hall, so there's no need for me to trouble the kendo second-dan Hasekura Rei-sama."

Danger, danger. As she spoke these cruel words, a warning bell sounded inside Yoshino's heart.

A red light flashed in her mind.

This pattern was extremely bad. If things kept going like this, she would undoubtedly do something unthinkable.

Remember the "Yellow Rose Revolution" of six months earlier. Yoshino had been enraged by Rei-chan's over-protectiveness, handed back the rosary and announced a termination of their relationship. Things had turned out alright in the end, but there was no guarantee that it would be the same the next time, and the uproar would cause trouble for those around them.

Don't do it, don't do it. Bear with it.

But now that those reckless words had made their way out of her mouth, even if Yoshino were to try to swallow them down, they would not settle into her stomach.

"C-calm down, Yoshino."

Rei-chan had noticed too. So while she was saying to "calm down," she was getting worked up herself. Which just served to irritate Yoshino even more.

"If you're always going to be like this, Rei-chan, I'll – "

Ah, it's no good. Her mouth was running in the wrong direction, and Yoshino was backed into a corner in her mind. She had to let go of her anger. Yoshino knew full well that Rei-chan was more precious to her than this. She knew, but – .

"I'll –"

Her mouth kept charging ahead, dragging her body with it. She thumped the table with both hands as she got to her feet.

With things the way they were, she couldn't just sit down again. It wouldn't look good to stay standing forever, so it looked like the only option left was to continue with her rage and leave the cafe.

"The rosary – "

(No, stop!)

Yoshino's mind screamed. Her right arm reached up to her chest. She mustn't do this. If she returned the rosary, it would be a repeat of the 'Yellow Rose Revolution.'

(What should I do?)

There was no obvious path to reconciliation like the heart surgery and kendo match of last time. But there was nothing to stop her right hand now that it had started moving.

Just as Yoshino was thinking it was all over, her right hand grasped something round.

(... Huh?)

It should have been the shape of a cross, the tip of the rosary. For some reason, it felt smooth – .

(Ah!)

That's it. It was her coral pendant.

Since it was the weekend, she wasn't wearing her school uniform and hadn't put the rosary on either. Yoshino's panic was proof that she had only just noticed.

"Yoshino?"

However, it was probably a godsend that she wasn't wearing her rosary. She couldn't return something she didn't have on her.

Yoshino took her hand off her coral pendant. It was something that her parents had bought on their honeymoon long ago, so while throwing it at

Rei-chan might physically hurt her slightly, it wouldn't have much emotional impact.

"I'm going home."

The fight visibly left her. Yoshino grabbed her shoulder-bag and turned towards the exit. Although she hadn't finished eating her green-tea crepe, she had finished the chestnuts, so it was no great loss.

"Ah, Yoshino. Wait."

Yoshino hated it when Rei-chan rushed. Since Yoshino was doing this of her own volition, proceeding in a measured fashion would be fine too.

"Right."

Having suddenly thought of something, Yoshino turned around and returned to the table. Not knowing the reason, Rei-chan smiled happily when she saw Yoshino's face. If she were a dog, her tail would be wagging.

"This should cover me."

Yoshino flung two 1,000 yen notes on the table, then left the store.

She'd wanted to fling the contents of the cup of water, but there was no way she could do that to someone with cheesecake crumbs stuck to them.

Part 2.

Monday.

They went to school without speaking a word to each other.

"Take care at school today."

Rei-chan's mother was taking the garbage out, so they walked alongside each other, as though being friendly, until they turned the corner and were out of sight. Their families were important to both of them, and they were both just thinking that they didn't want to worry their parents.

It took about eight minutes to reach the school gates. Had those eight minutes ever felt as long as today? No, even before the surgery on days when she wasn't feeling well, it hadn't felt as long as today. Even though it actually must have taken at least twice as long.

Why was that?

Yoshino realized why that was. Because Rei-chan would hold her bag and walk alongside her. Rei-chan would talk non-stop to cheer her up, matching her stride.

Yoshino was truly grateful for that. Every day she told herself that she had to co-operate with the unexpectedly delicate Rei-chan so that they could spend their time peacefully. However.

On days like this, when she was forcing herself to walk a few steps ahead, sighing and looking exhausted, those feelings were completely swept away, leaving only hateful thoughts.

Thoughts of, "Why should I have to do anything? Rei-chan has no right to object."

Yoshino walked on, spitting venom at the very short hair in front of her, and eventually the main entrance to Lillian's Girls Academy came into view.

(Oh boy, it's still a long way from here.)

The tree lined with ginkgo trees lazily stretched out from the gate. There was a small garden at a fork in the road, and in there was the statue of Maria-sama. Although they'd walked there in silence, they still lined up beside each other and prayed as usual.

Yoshino didn't ask Maria-sama to help them reconcile. Because beside her, Rei-chan would undoubtedly be pestering Maria-sama for that.

There was still a little time before the morning rush, but the entry was already starting to get crowded. Since this was the point where students coming from the other gates joined into a single stream.

Yoshino went inside immediately and was about to walk away from Rei-chan at the entrance to the shoe-locker room. The reason for that was simply because the second-year and third-year lockers were in different areas, not necessarily because they were fighting.

Most days, they'd meet again after they'd been to their lockers, but today they probably wouldn't be waiting for each other. The reason for that was most definitely because they were fighting.

"Yoshino."

Just as Yoshino was starting to walk away, Rei-chan opened her mouth for the first time since today's "Good Morning." Yoshino was thinking that the reconciliation had come pretty quickly, but that was wrong. Well, it would have been troubling to Yoshino if Rei-chan had apologized so readily anyway.

"I didn't get to tell you this yesterday. After school today, Shimako's going to bring Noriko-chan with her."

"Ohhh ... "

Yoshino raised her eyebrows, so it was finally happening. Time for Shimako-san to take the plunge. Despite being a second-year like Yoshino, Shimako-san was already Rosa Gigantea, so it was high time she took a petit soeur.

"Ah, but after school today – "

Rei-chan was supposed to have kendo club practice.

"Make any necessary arrangements. Sachiko's asking this too."

Rei-chan responded curtly.

"Right."

They both implicitly avoided saying the words 'club activities.' The unnatural way they avoided it still left a gloomy feeling.

Even so, Yoshino found it somewhat pitiable that she had the schedule of someone she was fighting with engraved in her brain.

"Is there anything we should be preparing?"

The Yellow Rose family may be in the midst of a quarrel, but there was still room for them to find joy in the happy topic of the White Rose family.

"Sachiko said we shouldn't do anything special."

"Hmm."

Sachiko this, Sachiko that. Yoshino was irritated – what's your opinion, Rei-chan?

It wasn't something she'd usually notice, but Yoshino was annoyed by Rei-chan's wishy-washy personality, and the way it seemed to fade in and out.

"Well, that's that then."

Having conveyed her message, Rei-chan disappeared into the third-years' area. Hey, are you just going to dump this irritation here and leave?

"What's up with that?"

Yoshino snorted, turning towards the tall retreating figure separated from her by a swarm of students.

"Such a pigheaded person."

They were both pigheaded, but people tend not to notice their own failings.

"I tell you what, she really gets my goat."

Yoshino flung her locker open and threw her indoor shoes on the floor. They hadn't done anything wrong, but she had to let her feelings out. The rubbery tip of the shoes hit the ground and they scattered in different directions.

"Even my shoes are mocking me."

At times like these, Yoshino wasn't the sort of person to reflect on her actions, thinking that such an event might be a warning from Maria-sama.

With the heels of her feet out, but still wearing the leather shoes like slippers, Yoshino sullenly chased after her indoor shoes.

Having picked up her left shoe from where it had rolled in front of a locker from the neighboring second-year peach class, Yoshino spied her right shoe just inside the second-year pine group area and was reaching out to it when –

"What are you doing?"

A voice came from the two legs that had appeared in front of her.

"..."

Of course, the legs themselves weren't speaking. It would be the mouth above those two legs that was making the sound. Yoshino shifted her gaze upwards, taking it all in.

Triple folded socks in leather ballet flats, the hem of the skirt coming before the knees became visible. The materials used in summer were thinner and lighter, but the design of the school uniform didn't change. Frizzy hair split into two bunches spilled across the slightly askew sailor collar.

"Ah, Yumi-san."

"Gokigenyou ... What are you doing?"

Yumi asked again.

"Gokigenyou. Ah, I'm just doing a bit of weather forecasting."

Yoshino impulsively lied. How could she, as a high-school student, tell her classmate that she'd been annoyed by her indoor shoes.

"So, what did they say?"

" – Neither of them were upside down, so it should be sunny, I guess."

"Sunny?"

Yumi-san turned and looked at a window near the ceiling. It was cloudy this morning. The light coming through the window was dim, so the electric lights were on.

"It's definitely going to get sunny."

Yoshino said seriously as she put her indoor shoes on.

"... I don't think it's going to be sunny."

Yumi-san opened her locker, took her indoor shoes out and placed them on the ground.

"Oh, why do you say that?"

Of course, Yoshino had no reason to believe something as unscientific as shoe based fortune telling, but such an outright contradiction caused her sense of competition to bloom.

"Don't tell me it's something as boring as you saw a TV weather report."

To which Yumi-san responded with, "Nope," and a shake of her head. Then she pointed to her trademark hairstyle, tied with ribbons into two bunches.

"Your hair?"

Yoshino asked.

"What's your hair got to do with anything?"

Without more information, Yoshino had absolutely no idea what she meant.

They left the shoe-locker room, freeing up the space for their fellow classmates who kept coming. Thankfully, Yumi-san was in the same class as her. They wouldn't have to finish up their conversation because they were heading to different classrooms.

"My hair isn't listening to what I tell it."

Yumi-san said, as they walked down the corridor.

"Which means?"

"There's a lot of moisture in the air. Basically, it feels like rain's coming soon."

The basis for Yumi-san's prediction seemed a lot more persuasive than Yoshino's indoor shoe forecast.

Part 3.

Yoshino entered the second-year pine classroom and put her bag down on her desk, then suddenly remembered and rushed over to Yumi-san's desk.

"Hey, about today."

"Today?"

"After school, you know ... about Shimako-san."

Technically, it wasn't about Shimako-san but about Noriko-chan, but Yoshino didn't bother to correct herself since that should be well known.

"What about Shimako-san?"

Yumi-san looked puzzled as she took her notebook out of her bag.

"Alright, it's about Noriko-chan. No need to give me a hard time, geez."

Her patience running out, Yoshino talked even faster. If they got caught up here, they wouldn't finish the conversation before morning prayers.

"I'm sorry, but I really have no idea what you're talking about."

"... Huh?"

Yoshino took another look at Yumi-san's face. Even though it sounded like Yumi-san was just trying to give her a hard time, it didn't look like she was playing dumb. – Which meant that the message hadn't yet been conveyed to Yumi-san.

"Wait, but."

Sachiko-sama must have been aware that Noriko-chan was coming to the Rose Mansion. By the way Rei-chan had been speaking, it had all been settled prior to yesterday. Although, like a certain someone, she could have failed to mention it yesterday too ...

"So, what was it?"

This time it was Yumi-san running out of patience as Yoshino pondered. So, without further ado, Yoshino informed her.

"Noriko-chan's making her debut in the Rose Mansion today."

"Really!?"

As expected, Yumi-san's eyes went wide with surprise. Which meant:

"So then, I guess Sachiko-sama didn't tell you?"

To which, Yumi-san stared at her blankly.

"Well, I haven't seen her this morning."

No, not that.

"What I meant was, you mustn't have talked about it on your date yesterday ... "

As she said this, Yoshino had a bad premonition. Yumi-san's face slowly drooped and, Yoshino may just have been imagining this, but it seemed like her facial expression stiffened.

"Don't tell me."

"Yeah, you got it."

"But you were so excited about it on Saturday, saying, "It's finally happening tomorrow." And yet...?"

"Yesterday morning, she called and canceled."

"Huh? That's awful! What the hell was Sachiko-sama thinking!?"

Yoshino was angry just hearing about it. Unlike Yoshino, who could take Rei-chan out any time she wanted, it had been more of a leap of faith for Yumi-san to ask her onee-sama out, and the invitation had been accepted. Yoshino knew how much Yumi-san had been looking forward to their half-day date yesterday. As her onee-sama, Sachiko-sama should have known this too.

"That's just how it was."

"How many times has that been?"

"..."

Yumi-san was silent. From memory, this was either the second or third time that Sachiko-sama had washed away their plans.

Sachiko-sama was a princess, so it may be hard for her household to understand the common people – but even so, canceling on the morning of an event like she had this time was far, far too cruel.

(Don't make plans if you can't be there!)

Yoshino wanted to scream, but Yumi-san already looked like she was on the verge of tears, so she didn't criticize Sachiko-sama further.

Sachiko-sama was in the wrong, but saying that wouldn't help the victim, Yumi-san.

" – I'm sorry. We can talk about Noriko-chan later."

Yoshino gently patted Yumi-san on the shoulder and returned to her desk. The morning bell was about to ring soon, and the sharp-eared newspaper club member Yamaguchi Mami-san had arrived.

But the number one reason was that Yoshino didn't want to drive Yumi-san away from her with her words.

Yoshino sat down in her seat and took the various items out of her bag. Pencil case, textbook, notebook ... Her hand touched her folding umbrella, but she left it in there and turned to the window. It wasn't raining just yet.

Even between friends, there were places where they could not tread.

Letting her gaze shift from the window, Yoshino snuck a glance at Yumi-san. She was oblivious to Yoshino's gaze, methodically preparing for their first-period class.

Matters between soeurs could only be understood by those people themselves. Perhaps it was better not to get involved until asked to.

After all, Yoshino would be angry if Yumi-san told her that she should be doing this or that about Rei-chan.

Part 4.

Yoshino thought that things were much harder than she'd previously anticipated.

The application form that she'd hastily written despite Rei-chan's objections had seen her go from the third-year plum class to the staff room, from the staff room to the school infirmary.

A certain someone may have said something, although that could have been thinking too simplistically. As a result, after cleaning the Rose Mansion she'd spent the rest of her free time running from place to place, making it a hectic day.

Without exception, all the people that Yoshino spoke to got a "Why do I have to deal with this trouble?" look on their face.

"Let me just check something. Shimazu-san, you want to join the kendo club as a member, not as the manager, right?"

"Yes. I want to wield the shinai and fight hand-to-hand."

How many times had she repeated this conversation?

The kendo club president had doggedly questioned her about it (Just get it the first time), then the club adviser Yamamura-sensei had proudly told her that kendo was a violent sport (I know that much), and, as a homeroom teacher, tried to persuade her that there were many good cultural clubs (But I said I want to do kendo). Her visit to the infirmary was in order to call the school doctor to get permission to participate.

Such a major production just for a student starting club activities. But they all knew the old Yoshino, so it was somewhat understandable that they'd be frightened.

However, Yoshino wasn't the weak little girl of six months prior. Her body had been surgically enhanced, turning her into Super Yoshino.

"It looks like the school doctor's going to consult with your family doctor. Why don't we put this conversation on hold until they come to a decision."

The school nurse, Hoshina Eiko-sensei, hung up the phone and turned to Yoshino.

She was quite pretty, if the way her wavy, shoulder-length hair was gathered tightly in a barrette and the pristine white doctor's coat she always wore were overlooked. While the science teacher wore the same kind of coat, it was indelibly stained with all kinds of chemicals, so the effect was quite different – in other words, there were quite a few students that admired the nurse's beautiful figure. She was apparently in her thirties, although she didn't look it at all. As a graduate of Lillian's she was easy to talk to about school matters, and still viewed as a "wonderful onee-sama." She was friendly with the students and some of them called her "Eiko-chan" or "Eiko-sensei."

"Does Hasekura Rei-san know about this?"

Everyone Yoshino had spoken to so far had asked her the same question, and Hoshina-sensei was no exception.

"She knows. But she's against it."

" – I'll bet."

And, like clockwork, she had the same reaction, angering Yoshino. When she'd first heard this, from the kendo club president, she'd flown into a rage, asking, "Why are you bringing up Rei-chan?" but at this point either her common sense had asserted itself or her usual self-confidence had taken a hit.

"If Hasekura Rei said it was okay, would that lay these concerns to rest?"

"Pretty much."

Hoshina-sensei smiled wryly, then continued.

"Obviously, she's your onee-sama. But, she's also a special person to you in many ways, isn't she?"

"... Perhaps."

It wasn't incorrect, so Yoshino couldn't refute it. And since she couldn't refute it, part of her was thrown into chaos by acknowledging Rei-chan's opposition to her joining the kendo club.

Yoshino still thought that her opinion was correct. However, she knew that Rei-chan wasn't completely wrong either.

And while neither was wrong, for some reason it had still resulted in trouble. Perhaps that was because everyone was an individual, with their own ways of thinking and experiences – .

"Thank-you for your time."

Yoshino bowed her head and left. On the way back from cleaning, she'd found herself near the school infirmary and popped in, but the phone call to the school doctor had taken longer than she'd expected.

"Now then."

She had to hurry. Yoshino quickly made her way towards the courtyard containing the Rose Mansion.

A gathering had been organized in the Rose Mansion after school. The purpose was so that everyone could warmly welcome the girl that may have become Shimako-san's petit soeur, Noriko-chan.

Stepping out of the school building, Yoshino looked up at the sky. It wasn't raining, but it was so overcast that it wouldn't be odd for it to start at any moment.

At the entrance to the Rose Mansion, Yoshino smiled. It was okay, she'd be able to play nice for an hour.

A one hour truce from her fight with Rei-chan.

Yoshino danced up the steps with a smile on her face, then energetically opened the biscuit door.

Part 5.

The Noriko-chan that Shimako-san brought along was one steely-nerved first-year.

"I'm Nijou Noriko."

She must have been nervous, but she was doing the right thing and trying her best not to let it show. In comparison, Shimako-san couldn't calm down, her eyes darting everywhere. While her concern was understandable, it made it hard to tell who was the onee-sama and who was the petit soeur. Still, when they stood next to each other, the juxtaposition between the western doll and the Japanese doll was beautiful.

"Gokigenyou. Welcome to the Rose Mansion."

Sachiko-sama smiled brilliantly as she ushered Noriko-chan in. Yoshino dispassionately thought that anyone favored with that smile would probably find themselves a bit dizzy, even if they weren't one of Sachiko-sama's fans. As for Yumi-san, who in days past had been enchanted by those lips, she wasn't even looking at her distant onee-sama, instead hurriedly preparing to make tea.

Rei-chan hadn't looked at Yoshino for a while either. Even though it may have been completely expected, Yoshino found herself wanting to complain that Rei-chan couldn't set their quarrel aside just for this afternoon.

(Oops. Smile, smile.)

When Yoshino noticed that she'd been frowning, she altered her feelings to better fit the mood. At that point, an unusual scene played out beside her.

(Huh!?)

She turned her head before she'd had time to think about it, but there, wasn't that Rei-chan embracing Noriko-chan around the shoulder? Did she have to go that far, after all, it's not like she's a host from a host club? Even for an escort, that was getting a bit too close.



On top of that.

"Yumi-chan, can you make some of the good tea?"

What's this, why's she talking so sweetly?

(Why did she ask Yumi-san? I'm your petit soeur, and I'm right here, close enough that you don't have to wave to get my attention!)

Was it an intentional snub? If that was the case, Yoshino was disappointed in herself for getting angry just like Rei-chan had expected her to. On the other hand, if Rei-chan hadn't meant anything by it, then that was equally annoying.

"Yumi-san, I'll help you."

Thinking that it had some deeper meaning, Yoshino decided to move to assist Yumi-san. If she was busy working, perhaps she could avoid over-analyzing things. At the very least, she could turn her back on Rei-chan, which would probably help bring some calm to her soul.

Inside the teapot, the tea leaves broke into a dance. It smelled so good she wanted to inhale deeply. When it came time to pour it into teacups, it made a soothing sound. Then, when it was done, it was a vivid crimson color.

As she was watching this, Yoshino found herself starting to relax. She wanted to stay gazing at it forever, however Yumi-san had already placed three teacups on a tray and was carrying them over for Noriko-chan, Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan, so Yoshino hurriedly gathered up the remaining three.

Facing the three occupied chairs were three that were, as yet, unoccupied and Yoshino placed a teacup at each of these. These were for the three second-years.

The largish oval shaped table was designed for eight people, but ten people could be crammed around it if necessary. At the moment there were six chairs at the table, but there were another three in the room, by the windows or the sink, that were moved around as needed. There was probably another ten chairs that could be found in the storehouse room on the first-floor. Naturally, all the chairs had slightly different designs.

Usually, they each had their own chair that they sat in. But when circumstances changed they'd switch around their seating order, either incidentally or deliberately. This was obviously one of those times.

Two of the Roses were seated so it looked like they were sandwiching their guest. The remaining seats were lined up facing them. Now then, who's going to sit where?

Shimako-san probably should have sat next to Noriko-chan to guard her, but since she got off to a slow start neither of the seats beside Noriko-chan were free. Ignoring the lead actresses from the White Rose family, the other colors could have opted for coherency, but both Yoshino and Yumi-san elected not to sit next to their onee-samas. Yoshino didn't want to analyze each and every thing, but she felt like she knew without asking why Yumi-san had made her choice.

Which left Rei-chan sitting next to Yumi-san, and Sachiko-sama next to Yoshino, with Shimako-san sitting in the remaining seat. With that, their 'arranged marriage' tea-party could begin.

Even if it was likened to an arranged marriage, there were four people from the Yellow and Red Rose families, and only one Noriko-chan. When it came down to it, it was closer to an interview. Shimako-san's role was a cross between matchmaker and attendant. She seemed more impatient than the interviewee herself, and just looking at Shimako-san made Yoshino feel pity for her.

Yoshino took two sticks of creamer from the hand-basket and put them in her tea.

It looked like this engagement was sorted. Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan both seemed pleased with Noriko-chan.

Yoshino thought that Noriko-chan had earned a passing grade. At any rate, anyone who could make the usually composed Shimako-san that flustered was no ordinary human.

(Geeze, must be nice.)

Yoshino found herself growing jealous as she thought about how Shimako-san and Noriko-chan's relationship was just beginning. The feeling of everything being unknown and expectantly stumbling forwards into the future. Yoshino and Rei-chan didn't really have that feeling anymore. They were cousins who were brought up like sisters and then became soeurs, so they never really experienced nervousness or suspense, much less the phantom of heart-throbbing anticipation.

(We're like an old married couple.)

That didn't mean Yoshino had applied to the kendo club just to get a reaction. However, she had to be careful because the reaction was so strong that it looked like it might escalate to a crisis resulting in divorce.

(That was a bit poor.)

Although it had been put on hold, applying to the club without talking about it first may have been a bit hasty. After all was said and done, it had been one thing after another.

But Yoshino's personality didn't allow her to stand still. Having decided on something, she ran forward swiftly. As a result, she'd often look back afterward and think, "Darn it."

Now that she was a second-year, she wished she had the composure to calmly survey her circumstances and analyze things objectively. Someday she would find a petit soeur like Shimako-san had, and who would fit an onee-sama that charged around recklessly?

(Alright.)

With Rei-chan in her current state, it didn't look like they'd be able to discuss things calmly today, so Yoshino decided to get a good night's sleep then tell her all about the day's events tomorrow. Because they were so close, if they talked about it they were sure to come to an understanding. Yoshino was even prepared to back down from her position, depending on the circumstances.

(Of course, I'm not just going to roll over.)

As she watched Rei-chan, who still wasn't looking her way, Yoshino drank the rest of her beige-colored tea.

At any rate, Rei-chan sure was smiling a lot.

Signs of Rain

Part 1.

On the Tuesday that Yoshino had unilaterally chosen for reconciliation, Rei-chan was absent from school.

According to Rei-chan's mother, she had a temperature late Monday night and while fever medicine had temporarily cooled her down, her condition worsened in the morning so she was having the day off.

On the trip home yesterday Rei-chan had been silent, like on the way to school, but she hadn't really looked sick. Maybe she'd spent so long in the bath thinking about things that she came down with a cold. How pathetic.

"Ah, maybe it's my fault ... "

The student murmured, gathering her shoulder-length hair in her hands as she stood in front of her classroom.

Before school started, Yoshino made her way to the third-year plum classroom, having been asked by her aunt to tell them that Rei-chan would be having a two or three day break from the kendo club. And, having heard the details, it was club president Nojima's voice that said, "my fault."

"Umm, why would it be your fault?"

Yoshino asked, not understanding. As background, the club president's house was a long way away from Yoshino's, and in the conversation with her aunty neither the words 'club president' nor the name 'Nojima' were mentioned. How she could be connected to Rei-chan's illness was a complete unknown.

"Well, I called Rei-san last night."

As she said this, club president Nojima had a pained expression on her face.

"Ahh."

But even supposing they had talked for a long time, she wouldn't be responsible for the health of the person on the other end of the phone, right?

As a high-school student, surely Rei-chan should be responsible for making sure she was wearing enough clothes that she didn't catch a cold.

"At first I was telling her about what happened during yesterday's club activities."

"Mmm."

Rei-chan had skipped out on those yesterday so that she could welcome Noriko-chan to the Rose Mansion.

"Then the conversation turned to you, Yoshino-chan."

"Huh!?"

"Rei-san knew that you wanted to join the club, but apparently she hadn't heard that you'd handed in an application form. So – "

You put your foot in it, club president.

"I'm sorry. I guess I messed up, right?"

Club president Nojima looked depressed, at a loss for what to do.

"... No."

They hadn't agreed to keep it secret, so Yoshino had no right to get mad at her. It was just unlucky, she thought. Yoshino had planned to come clean with Rei-chan this morning.

"Rei-san seemed to be quite shocked by it."

In that case, it was more like it was Yoshino's fault than the club president's – but, what? Rei-chan came down with a temperature because of shock? How pathetic.

The fire that had been extinguished within Yoshino's heart was once again starting to flare up.

What are you playing at, Rei-chan? – Yoshino balled her hand into a fist and glared in the direction of her house.

"Umm ... Yoshino-chan?"

"Club president."

Yoshino spun around abruptly and faced the club president.

"Yes?"

The club president put herself on guard, as though unsure of what was about to happen. It was the inevitable response from someone who had been watching Yoshino for a while.

"Right or wrong, I'm going to join the kendo club."

"Okay?"

"So, I look forward to working with you."

Yoshino bowed extremely deeply then walked away from the third-year plum classroom, satisfied. With that decided, she had other arrangements she had to make elsewhere.

Left behind, the club president's exhausted muttering echoed down the corridor.

"... What just happened?"

The young lady with pigtails skipped away, then quickly turned a corner in the corridor.

Part 2.

"I'll introduce you to the club member who's going to be guiding you from today."

Yoshino was taken aback when she saw who club president Nojima was introducing her to.

"Welcome aboard, Yoshino-san."

"... Tanuma Chisato."

Yoshino said her full name, without thinking. Of all people, her despised rival for the half-day date with Rei-chan. Also, the person from a somewhat sorrowful memory.

"Well, I'll leave the rest to you, Tanuma-san."

Then the club president left, leaving just the two of them at the edge of the dojo. Inside, the other club members had already started practicing their swings.

Wednesday, after school.

Yoshino's club application had involved the club president, club adviser, school nurse, school doctor and her own family doctor, and had even been raised as a topic for discussion at the staff meeting on Tuesday, but after much wrangling, in the end her application was provisionally accepted.

The relative speed with which it had all been resolved led Yoshino to believe that her "arrangements" had been effective. Although she called them arrangements, they weren't anything particularly grandiose. It just involved Yoshino going around to everyone, telling them about how she had wanted to do kendo ever since she was young, how she was so happy because after her surgery it felt like her dream was finally coming true, and that she promised not to worry anyone by overdoing it. That was all.

It may have been exaggerating things slightly, but it wasn't a lie. It was the results of the high spirits she was in about joining the club while Rei-chan had irresponsibly gone and gotten herself sick.

If someone in authority decided that there was an impediment to Yoshino continuing kendo, then she would abide by their decision. – That

was one of the conditions attached to Yoshino joining the club. In other words, the moment someone said something like, "You're looking tired, so that's enough for today," or, "You don't look so well, take the day off," she had to hand over the shinai.

Yoshino thought it should be fine because her body was in good health, but she was slightly concerned that 'someone in authority' included a person by the name of 'Hasekura Rei.' Rei-chan had been given the power to snuff out her kendo life with a single word.

"Since when have you been in the kendo club?"

Yoshino asked Tanuma Chisato, while sneaking a glance at the ongoing practice.

"I joined at the end of first-year. That makes me your senior, just by a little. So it was quite an honor for me to be chosen as your guide."

At the end of first-year, so that could have been right after that date. Yoshino thought Chisato-san might have come to hate seeing Rei-chan's face, but apparently she was impudent and had a lot of nerve.

She'd boldly cut her shoulder-length hair, although not as short as Rei-chan's, and although it hurt Yoshino to admit this, it looked good on her. Much better than before – really, it was annoying how good she looked.

"Why do I need a guide?"

"You've joined midway through second-year. Not only are you inexperienced with kendo, but you haven't really done any strenuous exercise before, right?"

"Well, excuse me ... So what?"

"Geez, just listen. When someone like that knocks on the door, you can't just give them a shinai straight away and let them have at it. So, first of all, we have to build up your core strength. You understand that much, right?"

The way she spoke rubbed Yoshino the wrong way, but Yoshino had been rude first so she let it slide.

"Build my core strength? Doing what?"

"Stretching, weights, light running, that kind of thing."

So she'd be doing endless warm-up exercises during club practice. It looks like the first-years who'd joined as novices at the start of the year had been following this training regime and had only recently been allowed to wield the shinai.

"So, you mean, I'll have to do that all by myself?"

In the dojo, the practice swings continued. Mixed in amongst the sounds were the artless cries of those who'd apparently only just started kendo.

"That's why I'm with you as your guide. Don't whine, I went through all the same things when I joined without complaint. Now, let's get going."

While she wasn't wearing any kendo armor, she was in her gym clothes, and when someone in a track suit is told, "Let's get going," the only possible response is, "Okay." It was annoying that she was being guided by someone whose career was only a couple of months longer than her own, but Chisato-san wasn't someone she had to fight so it would have been counterproductive to futilely cry about it.

"Yoshino-san. Your body is really stiff. Do some training at home before your bath, okay?"

Chisato-san spoke her mind as she pushed on Yoshino's back. But she wasn't wrong in what she said, so Yoshino couldn't object.

"Chisato-san."

"Yeah?"

"Ah, it's nothing."

Yoshino started to speak, then stopped. Although she'd called out, she didn't really know what she wanted to say.

"What's nothing?"

"Ah, can you go a bit easier on my back?"

"Like this?"

Chisato-san smiled as she pushed harder and harder on Yoshino's back. The back of her knees were stretched taut.

Back when Chisato-san had joined, who had been her guide? Yoshino was a bit bothered by this, but she didn't want Chisato-san to know, so she put all of her concentration into stretching forward.

(Rei-chan never said anything about Chisato-san.)

It wasn't a big deal, but it was bothering her.

After taking into account her suspicions, Yoshino vanquished the unworthy thought that Rei-chan was trying to keep her away from the kendo club because Chisato-san was there.

As if that would happen.

At the foundation of their relationship was trust.

The sound of the club president leading the younger girls reached her ears. It seemed incredibly strange to Yoshino that Rei-chan wasn't there.

Part 3.

Thursday lunch.

They'd been called to the Rose Mansion, so Yoshino left the classroom carrying her lunch. Her classmate Yumi-san was with her.

"How's the kendo club?"

"Hm, so-so."

At the moment, it felt more like a "Stretching / marathon / weight training association." She'd only been there for one day, but already her legs felt tired and sore.

"Hang in there."

"... Thanks."

Yoshino responded with an equally insipid expression of gratitude to the listless encouragement from her friend. They were both pretty exhausted.

Even though they were exhausted, they still had to do their Yamayurikai duties at lunch. Work had already started for the school festival in autumn.

After school, the remaining members would gather and work on things individually, but the work just kept on coming, so they didn't have any free time. Rei-chan was down, and Sachiko-sama would go home early to deal with family matters or something, so with the main people out it was only natural that it would end up like this.

"Ah."

Yoshino spotted Shimako-san ahead of them in the hallway. Rosa Gigantea was always so beautiful that she grabbed people's attention, but the sight of her keeping her melancholy (perhaps caused by the sudden disappearance of the sun's rays) to herself made her look kind of seductive.

The three girls exchanged smiles but omitted saying "Gokigenyou," then continued walking alongside each other.

"Is Noriko-chan coming?"

"No."

Shimako-san shook her head, as though the answer should have been obvious. Which probably meant that they still hadn't officially become soeurs. Talk about indecisive.

Yoshino had no idea why Shimako-san was hesitating. She should just give her the rosary and become soeurs. They both knew that, and due to Nijou Noriko's nature, no-one would oppose them.

Although, come to think of it, things were kind of like this during Shimako-san and Satou Sei-sama's time. The two involved seemed to be bothered by something, but Yoshino had no idea what. This time around, there were probably some things they had to work through, but why was it taking so long?

If she likes her, give her the rosary. If not, send her away. – It was such a simple thing, that should cover it.

"Gokigenyou."

A group of first-years had been lying in wait in the hallway that ran past the first-year classrooms and called out warmly to Yoshino's group.

"Gokigenyou everyone."

Beset by exhaustion, Yoshino couldn't conjure up her usual smile.

Besides, it would be a pain if they were stopped here, and by walking on looking downcast it made it hard for the first-years to follow after them.

Phrases like, "hiding their sorrow," itched at Yoshino's ears from behind, but going back and correcting the first-years would be foolish, so she continued on.

There was no need to shatter those girls' illusions. Deliberately, she walked slowly.

"What's the matter?"

Shimako-san asked, when the first-years had disappeared from view.

"What do you mean, what's the matter?"

Yoshino and Yumi-san called out in harmony, although they hadn't rehearsed beforehand.

"Well ... "

Shimako-san said that they were being unusually quiet.

"Quiet?"

Yumi-san pointed out that Yoshino had hardly said a word, prompting Yoshino to highlight Yumi-san's gloomy face. Apparently things weren't going well with Sachiko-sama, or so Yoshino thought.

"It's just her imagination, right?"

After this denial, they resumed walking. But, in truth, Yoshino had noticed it too. The reason she hadn't said a word wasn't just because she was tired from club activities. The gloomy faces she was seeing weren't just because of the poor weather.

Just as they stepped out into the courtyard, all three of them sighed simultaneously.

"What?"

Blind to her own shortcomings, Yoshino attacked the other two. Not knowing how to handle her own emotions, she was getting more and more depressed by those around her.

"What do you mean?"

Yumi-san responded honestly, pushing out her lips in a pout. And then.

"Is there something bothering you two?"

Shimako-san asked, sounding concerned.

"There's no way you can talk to someone who's sighing, right?"

Yoshino bluntly responded. That was probably an outburst of anger. Looking at lovable Shimako-san's face, it had just come blurring out.

"Especially when there's not that many different species of sighs."

Yoshino felt like she had to follow that up, but the words that came out of her mouth weren't much of a follow-up. Instead, it sounded more like something she wanted to tell herself.

As they were entering the Rose Mansion, Shimako-san said there was something she had to attend to and headed back towards the school building. Yoshino was a bit worried by that.

"I guess I hurt her feelings."

Yoshino said, seeking confirmation from Yumi-san, but she simply refuted it with, "I don't think that's it." Even so, Yoshino was bothered by it, and she grabbed Yumi-san's hand to stop her climbing further up the stairs and asked:

"You know, sometimes I'll get carried away and not pay attention to things around me. Do I, unknowingly, make things worse for other people?"

"Huh?"

Yumi-san asked with a puzzled look on her face.

"I've probably done it to you, Yumi-san."

"I've never really – "

"Sure."

Even though the burden on club-less Yumi-san must have increased when Yoshino started her club activities.

Noriko-chan coming to assist had helped out a bit, but the three second-years were all without petit soeurs, so they'd constantly been short-handed since the start of the school year.

It would have been better if she hadn't started club activities – such were Yoshino's thoughts when she considered it calmly. Even if Yumi-san didn't think that, there were probably plenty of people who did.

"I guess I should get a petit soeur."

Yoshino mumbled as she climbed the creaky stairs.

"...Why do you say that?"

"I've been thinking about it for a while. Two boutons isn't enough to support the Roses."

"You'd take a petit soeur just for the manpower?"

Yumi-san stopped climbing the staircase and looked at Yoshino in amazement.

"Someone like Shimako-san might be opposed to it, but that kind of clear contract is one option, right?"

"Yeah ... but ... "

She couldn't bring herself to agree.

"At any rate, I need to spread my emotions."

Yoshino finished climbing the stairs and let out a huge sigh.

If she kept thinking only about Rei-chan, her brains would boil and scorch her skull.

Part 4.

On Friday, Rei-chan finally came to school.

"Morning."

"Morning."

It was awkward, but they exchanged greetings and then went out the gate. It had only been three days since they'd seen each other, but Rei-chan looked noticeably worn out. She wasn't staggering or anything, but as they walked alongside each other Yoshino found herself wanting to ask Rei-chan if she was alright, out of concern.

But it would surely hurt Rei-chan's pride to have Yoshino support her, or carry her school bag for her, so Yoshino didn't make the offer.

Really, it was shocking, but that was all she knew.

"Yoshino."

Rei-chan looked straight ahead as she spoke to Yoshino walking beside her.

"I hear you've officially joined the kendo club."

"... Yeah."

Feeling a bit guilty, Yoshino replied without making direct eye-contact either.

Who it was was unknown, but someone had apparently informed Rei-chan of what happened during her absence. Well, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that everyone in the kendo club was on Rei-chan's side, so it was only natural that someone would have told her.

"Well, even though I've joined, all I'm doing is warm-up exercises."

It had been a while since they'd last talked, so Yoshino was getting a bit excited. As Yoshino soared, she tried her hardest to convey her thoughts. While she had been the one to start the fight, she was trying to encourage a friendly conversation so that they could naturally make up.

But Rei-chan coolly said, "I see," and nodded her head.

"Your life is your own, Yoshino. I have no right to stop you."

"Rei-chan ... ?"

Yoshino didn't understand what Rei-chan wanted to say. Was it an acceptance of her club activities, or a rejection, or even an inability to decide? Yoshino didn't know how to respond.

"While I was in bed, I thought about a lot of things."

"Thought ... about what?"

"About kendo, and about soeurs, and about other things."

In other words, she thought about Yoshino. She should have just said that straight out.

"Which led to something that needs contemplation. Because it goes to the heart of how soeurs are supposed to be."

"Huh?"

"Our relationship is different to normal soeurs. Which is why we always have these kinds of fights."

"Hmm ... well, that may be true."

Yoshino agreed vaguely, unsure of where the conversation was going. It may have just been because she was worn out, but Rei-chan's face looked unusually serious, and Yoshino's heart whispered that it was times like these when extreme care was needed.

"You know, Yoshino, as your onee-sama, I could admonish you to stop club activities."

"Admonish? Implore, right?"

"Implore, maybe ... But, you probably wouldn't go along with it."

"If you were right, I would. But your reasons for objecting aren't very persuasive."

Who would give up on joining the club just because they were told about morning practices, or that it was a barefoot world, or that it was strict? If Yoshino was repelled by that, then it seemed like no-one would ever join the kendo club.

"It's always puzzled me why it always comes to this."

"Isn't it tied up with how we're different to other soeurs?"

"Maybe it was a mistake for us to become soeurs in the first place."

"_"

Rei-chan spoke very calmly as she said something that was very close to a break-up line.

"What are you trying to say?"

"If you're going to do what you want, then I have to rethink things too."

Rei-chan stopped walking and turned to Yoshino, a serious look on her face as she spoke deliberately and clearly.

"I've had enough of being blown off by you."

Part 5.

Rei-chan made an appearance at the kendo club not long after returning to school.

The club president wasn't at practice because she had an evening dentist appointment, so Rei-chan took over leading the younger students.

Which was why Yoshino too headed to the martial arts building after school. She was a bit worried about the Yamayurikai work, but Yumi-san had said it was okay, so she was taking advantage of that. Rei-chan was many times more important.

Additionally, Yoshino was worried because she hadn't felt all that good in the morning. Taking a break from the club would be like losing to Rei-chan, which would also leave a bad feeling. But what she was most concerned about were Rei-chan's profound words.

(Contemplating the heart of how soeurs are supposed to be, wasn't it?)

Yoshino thought as she did her warm-up exercises. Contemplating something, that's thinking about how it can be improved, right?

"Don't just move with the upper half of your body. See, you're legs aren't moving at all."

Rei-chan's voice reverberated around the dojo.

"You're wide open from the side."

The kendo club was the only club using the martial arts building today, so they were using the entire dojo. Rei-chan was standing right in the middle, leading the younger students. With the sounds of practice as background music, Yoshino was off to the side doing her core strength training. She knew what to do, since she'd been doing this since Wednesday, so Chisato-san had returned to her own training. It would have been a waste to keep her around indefinitely.

"Don't stare at where you're going to attack. Your opponent will read your movement."

That charming voice. Rei-chan always looks coolest when she's doing kendo. It seemed completely unbelievable that she'd been absent due to illness up until today.

It had always been that way. With a shinai in her hand, Rei-chan looked sharp. And no-one looked more at home than her in gym clothes.

(One ... two ... three ... four)

Yoshino discreetly watched Rei-chan's face in profile as she did her squats. For a while now, Rei-chan hadn't even glanced her way.

When they'd walked to school together, Rei-chan had said that she had to rethink things. Yoshino wondered if that meant she was going to be ignored during club activities.

(And what was up with, "It was a mistake for cousins to become soeurs?")

Who knows. Yoshino's thighs and calves screamed in pain, and her butt thumped into the floor. She wasn't thinking properly and on top of that her body was exhausted.

Rei-chan noticed and glanced her way. Yoshino quickly flashed her the peace sign and she turned away again.

(Oh, what's with that?)

Nothing more than bad vibes. Idiot, bringing their personal lives into the club activities.

As she cursed in her head, Yoshino wiped away her sweat with her towel, then used it to dry the floor so she wouldn't slip.

(Seriously, what the hell.)

Yoshino thought she was the idiot. Even if she hadn't known how to react, why had she held up those two fingers? Especially to someone she was fighting with.

She would have been better off holding up one finger, her middle finger. – Although that was completely unthinkable behavior for a student of Lillian's Girls Academy.

"Yoshino-san, time to finish up."

Chisato-san called out as she mopped the floor, having finished her practice.

"Yeah, just a little bit more."

The training regime made by the club adviser and president was, to Yoshino, a Herculean task for her to finish in time.

It would probably be a piece of cake for a regular second-year high-school student, but since Yoshino couldn't even do three push-ups in a row, there was a lot of time spent resting.

Time and again, Yoshino really felt her lack of core strength. This was what she got for having flat-out missed all PE classes during compulsory schooling.

The advice that she should build up her physical strength before touching a shinai felt right.

"Don't overdo it. The training regime's just a rough guide."

Chisato-san squatted as she flapped the cleaning cloth. At least Chisato-san treated Yoshino like a regular club member.

At the best of times, someone joining during second-year would be considered harebrained, but Yoshino was Hasekura Rei's petit soeur.

The first-years, understandably, kept their distance from someone who was in a lower position than them in the club, but still their senior, and with the pompous title *Rosa Foetida en bouton* to boot.

A lot of the second-years had joined the club aiming for Rei-chan, and most of them weren't amused by Yoshino stepping into what they regarded as their territory.

With the exception of Rei-chan and the club president, most of the third-years would only show up occasionally, half-way through the transition to being members on paper only.

"You can go home too, Chisato-san. I'll take care of the floor here before I go."

Except for a roughly two metre square area around Yoshino, Chisato-san had finished mopping the floor. The other club members had already departed one by one after finishing their cleaning tasks. Yoshino realized it was just her and Chisato-san left in the dojo. Rei-chan wasn't anywhere to be seen either.

"I'll help out, then we can go home together."

Chisato-san's words were achingly kind. But Yoshino shook her head.

"It's okay. I can do it myself."

She dug her heels in. No matter how long it took, Yoshino wouldn't be going home until she'd finished the task set before her.

"But it looks like it's going to rain."

"Yeah."

Perhaps washing her hands of Yoshino's stubbornness, Chisato-san let out a sigh and put the wash cloth down.

"... Take it easy, okay."

"Thanks."

The sounds of her footsteps gradually faded into the distance. Yoshino silently continued her stretching. Now that she was alone, the dojo suddenly felt vast and cold.

Yoshino was fine even if no-one else was there. On the contrary, it was better for her concentration.

Even though no-one was watching, Yoshino didn't even think about taking short-cuts. It wasn't really because she believed the sisters' favorite saying, "Maria-sama is always watching you." It was because she didn't want to lose.

(Lose? Who on earth to?)

To herself, perhaps. Either that, or to Rei-chan.

It felt like both, and neither. Or, rather, inside Yoshino's heart dwelt a vague form that was "Myself and Rei-chan," with no well defined boundary.

Having finished her entire training regime, as she started to mop the floor, Yoshino heard footsteps from someone entering the dojo. Even

without seeing their face, she knew who it was. Yoshino's conscience, Rei-chan.

"Didn't you go home?"

"I was about to, but I couldn't."

"Hmm."

Even though it looked like she'd just suddenly appeared, Rei-chan had probably been lurking somewhere within the martial arts building, keeping track of what was going on in the dojo. Despite a fair amount of time having passed, she was still in her gym clothes.

Yoshino washed the cloth in the bucket then squeezed it tightly.

"I'm not going to quit."

"Yeah. I know you're determined. You're working hard."

It made Yoshino really glad to hear Rei-chan say she was working hard. But it would have been annoying to show that on her face, so she scrubbed the floor.

"Even so, you're not happy with it, Rei-chan."

"It's not that I'm not happy. It's that I'm troubled."

Rei-chan squatted down and let out a sigh.

"Troubled?"

"Yeah. It's too much for me to handle."

Perhaps at a loose end, Rei-chan reached into the bucket and took out the cloth, but Yoshino quickly snatched it back. This was Yoshino's job. There was no reason for Rei-chan to help.

"Probably."

Rei-chan smiled bitterly and stood up, stepping back from the bucket.

"I thought that maybe I was protecting my territory."

"Your territory? The kendo club?"

"Yeah. Or, rather, my place in the kendo club. How do I look to you when I'm doing club activities?"

"You look totally cool. The way you lead the younger students."

Rei-chan then put what Yoshino was thinking into words.

"Yeah, I really like that side of myself."

How brazen, just coming out and saying that.

"Okay. Then, wouldn't this be a good thing?"

By Yoshino joining the kendo club, Rei-chan was blessed with a golden opportunity to show her cool side to her cute petit soeur.

"... It's not."

Rei-chan sluggishly sat back down on the floor. She looked like she was close to tears as she ran her fingers through her short hair.

"I'm hopeless with you here, Yoshino."

"Hopeless?"

"I lose my composure. I was desperately trying to keep it together today."

So that was why Rei-chan had been ignoring her.

"Has Yoshino been hit? Is she hurt? – It's pathetic, but that's all I can think about. At heart, I don't have a lot of mental strength. But I hide that, pretend to be strong, and that's how I can proudly lead the younger students."

"Yeah."

Yoshino nodded. She'd known that from the start.

"But this lame person? There's no way she can guide the other students and Yoshino. The juniors are precious, but you're special. The moment I think that I have to treat you impartially, there's already a distinction within me."

"..."

It was just high-school club activities, but she was thinking about it so seriously. Well, that was one of Rei-chan's good points too.

"In other words, you're scared that you might go easy on me."

"Or I'll think I can't go easy on you, and be overly strict."

"That so?"

Compared to the other reasons she'd given so far, this was much easier to understand. Rei-chan's honestly conveyed feelings left Yoshino instinctively agreeing with her.

"Go ahead and laugh at me. I said I was opposed to it because I was worried about your body, and I thought that was true, but I was wrong. Really, it's about me."

"I'm not going to laugh."

Yoshino dropped the washcloth and wrapped her arms around Rei-chan's neck. The emotions, "I'm sorry," "My sympathies," and "I love you," were all mixed together in her tight embrace.

Rei-chan's troubles were born from Yoshino. Therefore, she wouldn't laugh.

"I've turned into something I hate. Incredible, right? You should just give up on me, Yoshino."

"Rei-chan..."

As her trembling voice escaped her body, tears made their way down Rei-chan's cheeks. And, as though chasing them, rain started to pepper the martial arts building's glass windows.

Spitter spatter. Spitter spatter. The martial arts building was filled with the sounds of rain.

"Are you telling me to return the rosary?"

Despite Yoshino's question, Rei-chan didn't deny it. By not saying anything, she was accepting it. Although she wasn't actively affirming it either.

Rei-chan's words from that morning were connected to this. Yoshino hadn't realized. No, the thought, "Perhaps," had crossed her mind numerous times, but it had always been vanquished with an, "As if."

"Maybe you're right. That way, you won't be blown off by me any more."

As she said this, Yoshino tried to put a smile on her face, but it didn't work all that well. Yoshino had thought about returning the rosary to Rei-chan, but she'd never considered being asked to give it back. No matter what

Yoshino did, Rei-chan would never abandon her. In that way, she'd sometimes take her for granted.

"Is that okay? Do you want nothing to do with me, Rei-chan?"

Yoshino grasped Rei-chan's shoulders and held her close.

Now, confronted by this inconceivable situation, she was incredibly disturbed. Why did she have to lose Rei-chan, just because she joined the kendo club?

If asked to pick between Rei-chan and kendo, Yoshino would unhesitatingly choose Rei-chan. Rei-chan was so much more important that it would be impossible to even try to weigh them on the same set of scales. So Yoshino was confused as to why it had come to this.

"It wouldn't mean I'd have nothing to do with you, Yoshino."

Rei-chan very clearly corrected her.

"My feelings for you haven't lessened by even a milligram."

"Okay. In that case, it's fine."

The disturbance in Yoshino's heart suddenly stopped completely. Rei-chan hadn't come to hate her. As long as she held on to this, it would be alright.

"Rei-chan. I'll do everything I can for you."

"Yoshino..."

Those were her true feelings. No way in the world did she want victory over Rei-chan's existence. Yoshino loved Rei-chan more than she loved herself. So the thing that made her happiest, was for Rei-chan to love her back.

"If you say I absolutely have to, I'll quit the kendo club. But, you know."



Yoshino offered, although she didn't think that that would be the end of it.

"If I quit, I think you'll get even weaker, Rei-chan. The memory of running away from something difficult will stay with you, and you'll feel indebted to me."

Yoshino was thinking as she spoke, so to stop Rei-chan from interrupting she talked faster as she went on and on.

"That's why, right now, I don't want to quit. Either the kendo club, or as your petit soeur. I'll work as hard as I can so that I don't have to quit either. – That's all."

Yoshino stopped and took a breath. She'd said all she wanted to say.

Rei-chan, who'd listened to Yoshino's spiel in something of a daze, snapped back to reality at Yoshino's, "That's all."

"... How are you going to work hard?"

"Until you're okay with me being in the dojo, I'll stay in the kendo club. This way, your mental strength will grow."

"My mental strength..."

Rei-chan was probably still doubting that such a thing would happen as Yoshino let go of her and resumed mopping the floor. It was sort of cheery. Like the feeling of seeing a beam of sunlight coming through the gaps in the clouds after a sudden and violent passing shower.

"It'll grow. In the Yamayurikai, you're able to do your work properly even though I'm by your side, right? That kind of acclimatization."

"Acclimatization ... ?"

"Grow, grow, acclimatize, acclimatize."

Yoshino repeated these words like a magical spell as she mopped and, as though the words had worked their magic, Rei-chan went back to smiling and said, "Maybe you're right." Really, she was quite simple. But Yoshino loved that part of her too.

What she loved most was that she loved Yoshino.

After tidying up the bucket and cloth, then changing out of their gym clothes in the locker room, the rain outside still hadn't stopped.

"Rei-chan. Should we run to the school building?"

Yoshino had a spare umbrella she kept in her locker, if they made it to the classroom.

"Ah, that's right."

Like she was performing a magic trick, Rei-chan reached behind the martial arts building's shoe rack and pulled out a plastic umbrella.

"This was left here a long time ago, so let's borrow it."

There was no-one else left in the martial arts building, and they'd be able to return it tomorrow morning.

"When it stops raining, people forget about their umbrellas."

"Thanks to that, we won't get wet."

Rei-chan locked the door and opened the dusty umbrella.

One of the spokes was bent, giving the umbrella a crushed shape, but there was just enough room if they huddled close together.

"Rei-chan."

As they walked along, Yoshino looked up at Rei-chan's face and asked:

"Even now, do you still think you want me to quit the kendo club?"

Rei-chan answered, looking embarrassed as Yoshino stared straight at her.

"I've decided to be blown off by you for a while longer."

Rain fell, the ground hardened.

Although, as they walked through the courtyard at the rear of the high-school, the slushy ground squelched beneath them.

Rainy Blue

The umbrella was gone.

My long umbrella that I left in the convenience store's umbrella stand had unexpectedly disappeared while I was doing the shopping. I only took my eyes off it for a couple of minutes.

The shopping was one tub of butter.

The part-time store employee said, in a business-like manner, that somebody probably took it because it started to rain, as he held out paper and a ball-point pen.

He said that it probably wouldn't be returned, but just in case, I should leave my name and telephone number.

I reverently filled out the form with my contact details, like a prayer.

It had been bought for me by my late grandfather.

The light blue floral pattern made it seem like being beneath a hydrangea bush, making me happy. It was already quite worn, but I loved that umbrella.

Salt-free butter or regular butter – if I hadn't hesitated over this would I have been in time?

Or would it have been better if I'd taken out some small coins, so I didn't have to get change?

As I thought these things, the tears started to flow, so I flew out of there after I finished writing the note.

The shop assistant offered to lend me a plastic umbrella, but it was wrong that it wasn't my umbrella. There was no way I could return home with some other umbrella in place of my umbrella, so I ran back, crying in the rain.

I didn't want to think about it being stolen from me.

I didn't want to believe that there were people in this world who could steal an umbrella on a rainy day.

If they thought about the owner returning home sopping wet from rain, there's no way they could so nonchalantly reach out and take it.

But despite that, how – .

How could Maria-sama overlook such an event, I just couldn't comprehend it.

I'd only gone to buy butter from the convenience store, I couldn't understand why the rain was falling like some kind of divine punishment.

After I returned home, soaked to the bone, my mother used the butter I'd bought to bake me a pound cake, to cheer me up. But it felt like it was a bit saltier than usual.

It wasn't because the butter was salty. It was because I was crying as I ate it.

To me, that umbrella was special.

An irreplaceable existence.

Premonition

Part 1.

"I'm sorry."

The day after the Maria ceremony, quite unusually, Sachiko-sama bowed her head in apology.

"Okay?"

Yumi looked up at the sky, her onee-sama was apologizing – was it snowing?

The weather was fine.

It must be the early summer fine weather before the rainy season started. The sky as seen from the courtyard sandwiched between two school buildings sparkled clear and blue and wide, with only a few wispy clouds. Just like Maria-sama's soul.

And yet, despite this, Sachiko-sama's face. Call it gloomy, or boarded up, either way it was like a cloudy sky.

When, after they'd finished eating lunch in the Rose Mansion, Sachiko-sama had said, "Yumi, a moment," Yumi had happily thought that they were going for an after-meal walk or something. The weather was good, and the Rose Mansion's courtyard had plenty of grass, the perfect place for an afternoon nap.

But, thinking about it, she had so far never received such a wonderful invitation. Thinking logically, it was probably to say something she didn't want to say in front of other people, that much Yumi understood. In the room on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion, the usual members, Rei-sama, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san, were relaxing.

"To tell you the truth."

"Ah, yes."

Gulping down her saliva, Yumi put herself on guard. Since she had absolutely no idea what Sachiko-sama was going to say, and how it was related to her being sorry, Yumi was on edge as she waited for those words.

"It's about our trip to the amusement park, it'd be a great help to me if we could push that back until next week, if that's possible."

"Huh? Ah?"

They were going on a trip to the amusement park together.

The cherry-blossom season and the Maria ceremony were overlapping and flowing together, that was the plan for their half-day date that Yumi had requested instead of White Day or birthday presents. With the condition that they didn't go on the roller-coaster.

"What do you think?"

"Ah, yes. I don't mind. If you'd like."

Yumi had thought it would be something more monumental. They'd only made the plans yesterday evening. Sachiko-sama had probably gone home and asked, then found out she had other plans for that day.

"You're fine with it? Ahh, that's such a relief."

Sachiko-sama put her hand to her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. Seeing her expression, Yumi was relieved too. She was glad it wasn't a serious conversation.

While it was true the date had slipped by a week, that was no reason to get mad. Having a cloudy expression for something like that, onee-sama.

It was a postponement, not a suspension, so there was no reason whatsoever to be bothered by it.

The mid-term tests were coming up soon, so Yumi thought that maybe that was just perfect.

Sachiko-sama never studied for exams so it wouldn't matter to her, but Yumi had to study hard just to maintain her average grades and it would be a real help to spend that precious day before the exams preparing for them. By having their date the following week, the tests would be over and she'd be able to relax and enjoy their time together.

"It really helps that you're such an accommodating petit soeur, Yumi."

Sachiko-sama smiled as she adjusted Yumi's tie, like always.

The daisies in the small flowerbed beside the grass rustled, as though they were laughing.

Part 2.

However.

The amusement park date didn't take place the following Sunday either.

As expected, the cancellation came from Sachiko-sama's end, on the Friday two days before the event.

It was the last day of the mid-term exams, so all the grades were scheduled to tidy up and go home after their morning third-period classes.

"Yumi-san, there's no meeting in the Rose Mansion today."

Yoshino-san called out to Yumi, who had grabbed her school bag and was flying out of the classroom.

"Yeah, I know."

As a general rule, club and committee activities were put on hold for the duration of the examination period. Since it was the last day, it would be overlooked as long as they didn't make a ruckus, but the Yamayurikai didn't have any urgent matters to attend to, so they weren't meeting today.

" – But, why did you think I was going to the Rose Mansion?"

Yumi stopped and asked.

"It's easy to tell, just from your behavior."

Yoshino-san laughed, looking to shock her.

"So happy, so excited. The very picture of "Yumi-chan going to meet Sachiko-sama.""

"Really!?"

Yumi hadn't noticed. Apparently she'd become happy and excited at some point. Certainly, it felt like she had a spring in her step.

"That slack-jawed expression is just awful. If you don't change that before you go, Sachiko-sama will scold you. "Yumi, sharpen up.""

"Ah, yes."

Yumi instinctively stood up straight, at attention.

"Oh wow, that was just like Sachiko-sama."

They both burst into laughter at the same time.

"I take it that the reason you can't keep yourself from smiling is because you're thinking about Sunday?"

"Of course. It's our first date in nearly three months. I'm happy, but I'm also nervous. I can't seem to calm down."

She felt excited, nervous and fidgety.

"Oh my."

"But, you know, it's just a small detail, but I'd calm down a bit if we sorted out when and where we were going to meet on Sunday, that kind of thing."

Which was why Yumi was going to visit Sachiko-sama's classroom. That was the excuse anyway, the real reason was she wanted to see Sachiko-sama. And if she was lucky, they could go home together, at least as far as the train station.

"Well, in that case, I'm sorry I've kept you here."

"No, not at all."

At that moment, a camera flash went off.

"Excuse me, Fukuzawa Yumi-san and Shimazu Yoshino-san, this is Lillian's Weekly, a picture please."

Takeshima Tsutako-san smiled as she aimed her camera.

"Such a bother."

Yumi replied, hiding her face behind her school bag. It was all in good fun, she'd instinctively slipped into Tsutako-san's narrative.

"You'll have to go through our agents."

Yoshino-san was in a good mood too. Since the mid-term exams were over, more or less everyone was on a high.

Click, click.

The sound of the shutter felt good. Like they really were stars.

"Hmm."

Tsutako-san lowered her camera, apparently satisfied.

"Thanks for your co-operation. If any of them come out well, I'll give them to you."

In such a hurry she skipped the farewell, "Camera-chan" walked out into the hallway, the sound of film being wound back into its spool coming from her camera.

"Tsutako-san, there's no club activities today."

Yoshino-san used her hands as megaphone as she called after Tsutako-san.

"Roger that."

Tsutako-san said, although it was obvious that she was heading straight to the club house, to develop her photos in the photography club's darkroom.

"I had some film remaining and I thought it would be a shame to waste it."

"Is that so."

Yumi and Yoshino-san looked at each other and shrugged.

But, having said that, it looked like Tsutako-san was in a good mood now that her tests were over too.

"Look, you'd better hurry or you'll miss Sachiko-sama."

Yoshino-san tapped Yumi on the shoulder.

"Ah, you're right."

That had been an unexpected delay. Would she make it to the classroom in time? Maybe she should head straight to the foot-locker room or the entrance to try and meet Sachiko-sama.

"Yumi-san."

As they were parting, Yoshino asked:

"You're really happy right now, yeah?"

"Of course."

Yumi replied immediately. Because on Sunday she'd spend some time with her beloved onee-sama, just the two of them. And for now, she was overjoyed to be counting down the time until then.

"I'm glad."

"Yeah."

That feeling was a treasure bestowed only to Yumi.

Sachiko-sama's leather shoes were neatly arranged in the small locker.
(Which means ...)

Her onee-sama was still in the school building.

Yumi buoyantly headed towards Sachiko-sama's classroom. As she approached, she spotted Sachiko-sama in front of the third-year pine classroom.

Her right shoulder was leaning against the door and she looked to be talking to someone. Even though Yumi only saw her from behind, there was no mistaking it. That long, black, glossy hair. Her exceptional proportions, obvious even from a distance.

"Onee..."

Yumi started to call out, but then withdrew. Because the student standing beside Sachiko-sama had come into view.

The self-proclaimed actress with vertical hair rolls on each side of her head, Matsudaira Touko-chan. Her overindulged voice carried the short distance to Yumi.

"So, is that okay? I won't intrude on you, Sachiko onee-sama."

"No. It's not a pleasure trip."

Yumi wasn't sure what it was about, but Sachiko-sama was rejecting Touko-chan's proposal.

"Touko would be happy just to go on a drive with you."

"It's a bother."

"I'll be a good girl."

Like a spoiled brat, she'd taken hold of Sachiko-sama's hand and was swinging it back and forth. Such outrageous behavior. Even as Sachiko-sama's petit soeur, Yumi wouldn't dare to act like that.

"Be reasonable, Touko-chan."

Sachiko-sama sighed, perplexed. Even so, Touko-chan hung on.

"Please, onee-sama."

Yumi thought it was kind of sad that she had to witness this scene, but was unable to move away. On the other hand, she couldn't jump in there and pull them apart either.

"Ah, Yumi-sama."

Of all things, Touko-chan approached her.

"Yes ... ?"

Sachiko-sama turned around to follow Touko-chan's gaze, and when she saw Yumi, just for a split-second she had a sour expression on her face.

(Wh ... what!?)

Seeing that look on Sachiko-sama's face was a far, far bigger shock to Yumi than seeing her talking to Touko-chan like a close friend.

Touko-chan was fine. She could act audaciously and by her words disregard the soeur system, but that could be clearly explained as the actions of a third-party. Yumi considered it to be on a different level to matters regarding herself and Sachiko-sama.

However, Sachiko-sama was different.

Sachiko-sama's every action was not just a way to divine her will, but even a small variation in her expression could send Yumi into anxiety or bliss.

"What's the matter?"

Sachiko-sama smiled as she asked the question, and while it may just have been her being overly considerate, it seemed like she was trying to smooth things over.

"... Nothing."

Yumi glanced at Touko-chan. She was reluctant to discuss their fun Sunday in front of someone else.

"Well then Rosa Chinensis, I'll leave you here. Take your time, Yumi-sama."

Touko-chan made the smart move and deftly ceded the spot to Yumi.

Yumi felt awkward, like she'd driven her out, but there was no avoiding it. In her mind, Yumi repeated over and over that there was no way she was

going to run away, that she was Sachiko-sama's petit soeur, and that she'd come here on a proper errand, as she somehow managed to hold her ground.

"What was the matter with Touko-chan?"

As the vertical hair rolls turned a corner, Yumi indirectly inquired.

"Touko-chan? Ah, it's the same as always."

Yumi wanted to ask, "So what is this thing that's the same as always?" but she firmly resisted. It would seem like jealousy, and that wasn't good.

"But enough about that, you were here for something, Yumi."

"Ah, well – "

Yumi started to speak, but then:

"I wonder if it's to talk about our amusement park date?"

Sachiko-sama was first to broach the subject.

"Yes."

Yumi's response was short and cheerful. But, in complete contrast to Yumi's effervescence, Sachiko-sama's eyes drooped and she seemed to hang her head.

"Indeed, I did say next weekend."

"Yeah..."

Yumi had a bad feeling about this. The way Sachiko-sama exhaled, it was almost like a sigh.

"Is it, perhaps, inconvenient for you, or something?"

"Well, yes. But it's not something that I absolutely have to do no matter what."

"_"

So, even if Sachiko-sama said that Sunday was okay, having heard that, Yumi would have to respond with something like, "Your commitments should take precedence." That was the standpoint of the "accommodating petit soeur."

"Onee-sama, don't worry about me."

Despite her disappointment, Yumi smiled as hard as she could when she said this.

Even if they went out, Sachiko-sama was bound to think about her other duties and, therefore, not enjoy herself to the fullest, and it wasn't fun for Yumi to be with a distracted Sachiko-sama.

It really was a shame, but that's how it was, and she wasn't going to push her luck. She wasn't going to act spoiled like Touko-chan, and say, "Please onee-samaaa." That wasn't her personality.

"Really?"

Sachiko-sama asked, her face showing how much of a relief this was to her. Yumi had thought that she would show restraint by refusing at first and accepting the second time, but Sachiko-sama accepted as soon as Yumi offered.

"We'll definitely go the weekend after."

"Understood. Thank-you."

Looking at a relieved Sachiko-sama, Yumi thought, "Well, that's okay." Her onee-sama had been looking for a petit soeur that would put her at ease. Yumi took it as Sachiko-sama's way of saying, "I can relax when I'm by Yumi's side."

Yumi had been thinking that it would be nice to go home with her onee-sama, but the reality wasn't quite as enjoyable. With the postponement of their date once more, Yumi's energy was suddenly sapped.

The walked in silence out the entry, then along the path beside the library to the path lined with ginkgo trees. Sachiko-sama looked like she was deep in thought the entire way, keeping her head down. Yumi was worried, because it looked like it didn't matter to Sachiko-sama whether she was there or not. She wasn't someone who would habitually search for something to say.

Which was why Yumi spoke up, wanting Sachiko-sama to remember that she was there. Even if she wouldn't shift her gaze from the blooming hydrangeas.

"Umm, onee-sama. This thing you have to do, is it related to your father's work ... ?"

"No."

Sachiko-sama shook her head.

"Then, is it your family ... ?"

"Well, if I had to say, that's probably it. There's a lot of things ... "

Although it did sort of feel like she was avoiding answering the question, if it was about her family then it wasn't something that Yumi could keep pestering her about.

But now she was intrigued by what was more important to Sachiko-sama than their promise.

"Speaking of your family, is Sayako-obasama well?"

"Yes, thanks be to God."

"Your father too?"

"My father and grandfather are both fine too ... But, why do you ask?"

Sachiko-sama turned her head. Apparently suspicious because Yumi had raised a topic she'd never inquired about before.

"Ah, no reason."

Yumi hurriedly tried to allay Sachiko-sama's doubts.

"I just thought I'd ask."

But, having asked, Yumi was slightly relieved. Even if it was some family problem, it didn't sound like anyone was sick or anything. But, in that case, just what was it then?

Was it the same thing as the previous week? Or had something unexpected come up two weeks in a row? Would it be okay to ask her straight out, or not?

It was troubling.

"Touko-chan."

Suddenly, Sachiko-sama called out the wrong name.

"Huh?"

No, that wasn't it. She wasn't looking at Yumi, but further ahead. And there was, indeed, Touko-chan.

"Ah, Sachiko onee-sama."

Touko-chan had been leaning against the small iron gate that led to Maria-sama's garden and when she saw them she stood up straight and waved.

"Did you finish your conversation? Touko's waited here because hers was still on-going."

"..."

Sachiko-sama seemed to think for a moment before looking at Yumi.

"So, you see, Yumi. I'm sorry."

No sooner had she said this, then Sachiko-sama darted across the five yard gap to Touko-chan, and they walked off together. It happened in the blink of an eye. – Before Yumi had a chance to say anything.

Yumi was dumbfounded about having been left behind, but before long she prayed at the statue of Maria-sama, then out of necessity turned towards the main gate and started walking down the tree-lined path.

She wanted to keep a certain amount of distance between herself and those two walking ahead. With the current gap, Yumi thought she'd get the next bus after them, which was fine.

Touko-chan had gone home together with them before. But, until now, she'd never once snatched Sachiko-sama away from Yumi.

(Is it something they don't want to tell me about... ?)

Perhaps Sachiko-sama and Touko-chan were sharing a secret.

Supposing that was the case, why did it feel like she'd been backed into a corner?

Was she happy?

These were the questions Yumi asked herself.

She should be happy that she'd become the petit soeur of her beloved Sachiko-sama.

But then why did it feel so lonely?

Why did it sound hollow when her mind whispered that she was happy?

Smile, Smile

Part 1.

June arrived.

They switched to summer uniforms.

The design didn't change but the material was thinner, making it lighter overall. Which somehow made her want to twirl around.

"... Why are you spinning?"

Her younger brother Yuuki asked, as he poked his head through the open door with a stunned expression on his face. Without the winter button-up jacket, the white shirt of the Hanadera Academy uniform was dazzling.

"Hehehe."

Because, she was in a good mood. Yumi spun around once more. Lightly. Her skirt flared.

The weather currently was so-so. According to the weather report, there was no chance of rain this weekend. It would be cheerful weather.

"You're really that happy to be going on a date with Sachiko-san?"

Yuuki asked, taking a couple of steps into her room. His objective wasn't his beautiful older sister, but the mirror on the door of his sister's closet.

"You bet I'm happy."

Yumi answered as she tied her hair ribbons. Because it was such a good morning, she'd chosen bright blue ribbons with a lace fringe.

"Even though you see her every day?"

"Of course."

It was a trip with just the two of them. Sachiko-sama's time was reserved solely for Yumi, with no-one to interrupt them. Completely different to school.

"That's a relief."

"What is?"

"Well, recently you haven't been all that happy, right? That sort of thing."

Yuuki stood beside Yumi and checked his hair in the mirror. Until a year ago, they'd been about the same height, but he'd shot up. Guys. But not only that, the way he'd matured as a person was annoying too.

"Thanks for your concern. But I'm totally happy now. You know, Sachiko-sama's been talking with me about all kinds of things related to our amusement park date."

Like saying that she felt reassured Yumi was with her. Or saying she'd treat Yumi to ice-cream. Or suggesting that they should both wear jeans.

Under those circumstances, it looked like they'd have a wonderful date this Sunday.

"Not only that, but Sachiko-sama's been a lot more gentle recently. It was stupid of me to sulk about minor things."

"Hmm."

Yuuki had a conflicted expression on his face as he re-buttoned his cuffs.

"You know, your school life seems to revolve around Sachiko-san."

"Yep. Because we're soeurs. ... Why?"

"It sounds like dependence, or something. It's a bit worrying, you know."

"Worrying?"

Perhaps seeing the change in his older sister's expression, Yuuki quickly backpedaled.

"Ah, no, it's probably just me worrying needlessly... How to put it, ah, I'm a worry-wart, you know. Pay no attention to me."

" – Alright."

Yumi nodded. She'd intended to smile broadly, but her cheek cramped and it ended up looking weird.

" ... Sorry, I'll be leaving ahead of you."

Seemingly unable to endure being there any longer, Yuuki fled downstairs. Perhaps because he was in such a hurry, he slipped on the last step and landed on his butt.

"Don't worry about it."

Yumi closed her closet door and picked up her school-bag.

There was nothing to worry about.

Indeed, compared to her, Yuuki was quite sensitive.

Part 2.

But, see, look how kind Sachiko-sama is. – Yumi gazed raptly at her onee-sama.

"You didn't have to run."

Yumi's fourth period class had been outdoors and when she showed up late to their lunchtime meeting, Sachiko-sama discretely offered her her handkerchief. To wipe away her sweat.

"Ah, it's okay."

Yumi couldn't bring herself to contaminate that pretty handkerchief with her sweat, so she took out her own handkerchief and used it to wipe her forehead.

It wasn't dependence. And even if that had just been an example, it was okay. They worked well together.

Recently, the cause of Yumi's jealousy, Touko-chan, hadn't been coming to the Rose Mansion, so Yumi could spend her time there at ease.

But, what was that? Something felt different to usual.

Sachiko-sama was kind. That should have been a good thing, but something was strange.

It wasn't because she'd become too accustomed to being scolded by Sachiko-sama. She'd been touched by her onee-sama's kindness plenty of times thus far. But this time something felt slightly different, although she couldn't really explain what.

"Wait."

Sachiko-sama gently retied Yumi's hair ribbon.

"That's a lovely ribbon."

"Ah, thank-you."

Yumi raised her head after bowing to Sachiko-sama, and saw that Sachiko-sama's eyes weren't looking at her at all.

She'd retaken her seat and was already talking to Shimako-san.

Part 3.

"Yumi-san, Yumi-san."

As Yumi was leaving on Saturday, someone called out to her in the hallway.

When she turned around, there was no-one there. She started to walk again, looking puzzled, and the voice came again.

"Over here, over here."

It was in her blind-spot, so Yumi couldn't see where the caller was, but the voice seemed to be coming from further along the corridor, near the staircase.

"... What are you up to, Minako-sama?"

The way she was lurking down the stairs with only her voice coming through to the corridor was more like a female ninja than the head of the newspaper club. From time to time, she'd do odd things like this.

"Shh!"

"But that's even more conspicuous."

There were still a lot of other students making their way home, in both the corridor and the stairwell.

"Even if we do stand out a little bit, it's fine as long as we're not seen by the people we don't want to be seen by."

"I see."

The person that Tsukiyama Minako-sama was trying to avoid was probably her petit soeur, Yamaguchi Mami-san. Either that, or the subject of her next article for the "Lillian Kawaraban."

"So, what did you want with me?"

Yumi had decided that she probably wasn't the planned sacrificial lamb for the next gossip column, since Minako-sama had clandestinely called out to her.

"Chat with me for a bit."

Like an old neighborhood lady inviting her along for a gossip, Minako-sama took Yumi by the hand and led her down the stairs.

"Huh?"

She'd only said it was going to be a chat.

"It's fine, it's fine."

If they were only going downstairs then that was okay, but still, it didn't feel all that nice to be taken somewhere without knowing where you were going.

"Umm ... ?"

The place that she was dragged to was the hallway leading to the third-year classrooms. A place where they had a clear view of that oh-so familiar door to the third-year pine group classroom.

"There, see."

What Minako-sama was pointing at was Touko-chan and Sachiko-sama. It was the same scene that Yumi had seen before, the two of them talking standing by the door. What was troubling was that they seemed to be even closer this time.

"That girl, she's the one from the Maria ceremony, right?"

Minako-sama whispered. As expected, the image of Touko-chan at the first-years' welcome party on the day of the Maria ceremony had been burnt into her mind.

"What's this all about, Yumi-san?"

"Don't ask me."

Yumi's heart murmured that she was the one who wanted to ask that. Why was Touko-chan here? No, even if she wasn't up to no-good, the way she was acting so intimate when Yumi wasn't around was bound to displease the petit soeur.

"Just who is she?"

"Matsudaira Touko-chan. A first-year."

After giving this answer, Yumi thought for a bit then added, "Apparently they're related."

That may have been said more to convince herself than to protect Sachiko-sama's honor.

It was because Touko-chan was a relative. It wasn't strange that they'd be that close.

"Relatives? Even so, don't you think they're a bit close? Every day, she comes here to see Sachiko-san."

"E-every day?"

The sound jumped out before she could think. Touko-chan had stopped showing up at the Rose Mansion, and instead they'd been meeting here.

"I didn't think you knew about it."

"... I knew."

Yumi answered, bluffing with all her might. This couldn't be written up as Sachiko-sama sneaking around with Touko-chan. She most definitely didn't want to be made out to be the pathetic, oblivious petit soeur.

"You shouldn't do this, Minako-sama."

Yumi tried smiling. This time around she thought it went well, perhaps thanks to the earlier rehearsal with her brother.

"Even if you try to get a rise out of me, nothing's going to happen. Did you think that I'd jealously confront Touko-chan, with tears streaming down my face, and then you could write an article about the "Red Rose Revolution?""

"That's not what I was expecting at all."

Although it had been intended as a joke, Minako-sama wasn't smiling at all. Instead, she looked a bit angry.

"Don't you get it? I don't want to see your relationship with Sachiko-san fall apart. That's why I brought you here, so you could strike quickly."

"Strike?"

"Right, strike."

Minako-sama turned her back on the third-year classroom and started walking. Since she didn't want to look at the image of Sachiko-sama and Touko-chan any longer, Yumi followed.

"It brings back memories, when I see you Yumi-san."

Minako-sama murmured as she looked straight ahead.

"What of?"

Yumi asked, following behind her.

"My friend."

"Your friend?"

"Yeah. It reminds me of how she was hurt by her onee-sama."

As she chased after the girl with the pony-tail walking ahead of her, Yumi wondered where Minako-sama was leading her. And not just with her feet, she had no idea where the story Minako-sama was telling was going either.

"That girl, her onee-sama cheated on her. While my friend was officially the petit soeur, having performed the rosary ceremony, her onee-sama went behind her back and saw another girl. They'd go out together, buy each other presents, things like that. Anyway, it was different to the usual relationship between a girl in an higher grade and one in a lower grade. To the point where it seemed like the older girl didn't have a petit soeur."

"..."

"As for my friend, she knew about this, but she pretended that she didn't. I think by doing that, she believed that one day her onee-sama would return to her. Like a wife enduring her husband's extra-marital affair. There was probably a bit of stubbornness too. "I'm the petit soeur," that kind of thing. From that point of view, all she could do was cling on."

Minako-sama came to a halt as she spoke. Apparently she didn't have any particular destination. They were in the middle of the corridor.

"What happened to her?"

Yumi turned and looked over her shoulder. The third-year pine classroom couldn't be seen, they were that far away.

"Nothing much. Things stayed like that."

Minako-sama sighed and leaned against the wall.

"Her onee-sama was kind to her, because she felt indebted, but this was always painful to my friend. If she hadn't wanted to be that girl's petit soeur, then she could have just returned the rosary, and the wounds would have

been a lot shallower. She spent about half her time at school depressed. But in the end her anger erupted, and when her onee-sama graduated she threw the rosary at her. The end."

"... The end."

Perhaps noticing Yumi's cloudy expression, Minako-sama suddenly smiled and said, "But that was different."

"I'm not saying that Sachiko-sama's having an affair, or that you should throw your rosary at her. But I don't think you should just try and endure it. My friend would have been better off if she pressed the question earlier. Even if it meant returning the rosary... Something like the 'Yellow Rose Revolution.'"

Hearing the words 'Yellow Rose Revolution,' Yumi instinctively smiled too. That was something that her classmate Yoshino-san had set in motion. The end result was a shock that ran throughout the high-school.

"It doesn't matter if you don't believe me, but I have no intention of writing about this for the 'Lillian Kawaraban.' It's about time I retired anyway."

"You're retiring?"

Minako-sama was a third-year like Sachiko-sama, so she had to be looking towards life after school, and preparing for that.

"So, if things go well between you two, let's see, please give a full report to Mami. Unlike me, she'll write a good article."

"My apologies for worrying you."

"It's okay, this is just me meddling. I just don't want to see you walking around with a fake smile, Yumi-san."

Minako-sama waved goodbye, then turned towards the club house and started walking. As she watched her go, Yumi softly muttered to herself.

"A fake smile, huh?"

Since Minako-sama had apparently seen straight through her, it looked like Yumi still had a lot to learn.

Sweets

Part 1.

Sunday, 7:50 am. A call from Sachiko-sama arrived at the Fukuzawa house.

She had something of a premonition when the phone rang out, so despite being the closest to the phone she didn't reach for the handset.

If she didn't answer the phone, she wouldn't know who was calling. She wanted to get out of the house not knowing. She wanted to wipe away the reality of the phone call, like wiping clean a blackboard.

However, while she was living with her family, she was unable to have everything her own way. Her mother clattered out of the kitchen and cheerfully picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Fukuzawa residence."

While listening to the person on the other end, Yumi's mother glanced at her. She had a bad feeling about this.

"Yumi-chan, it's Ogasawara-san."

Yumi's mother held out the handset to her. Obviously she'd completely forgotten that Ogasawara was Sachiko-sama's last name, because usually when she had an opportunity to talk to Sachiko-sama she'd go to great lengths to ensure she greeted her properly, but this time she simply passed the call along, as though it was from one of Yumi's classmates.

Yumi thought about getting the second handset, but last night Yuuki had taken it to his room and he hadn't woken up yet. Besides, she felt it would be somehow better if someone else was nearby, so she accepted the receiver.

"Hello, this is Yumi."

"It's Sachiko."

By the tone of her voice, without hearing any more, Yumi could predict how this conversation would go. "I'm sorry, Yumi," was probably going to be the follow up.

"I'm sorry, Yumi."

Yumi found herself wanting to laugh, since it was exactly like she'd predicted. But in truth it was no laughing matter. Even so, the shock hadn't fully hit her yet. It would come later, bit by bit. Which made it even worse.

"Today – "

"You can't make it?"

Yumi said, anticipating. As a way of saying, "That's what I thought." To show that it wasn't such a shock. She wanted to put on a show of courage.

"Yes, something came up suddenly."

It was strange that some urgent business would come up on the day of the event itself that made her ring and cancel.

"Even though I kept today open because I've been putting off our arrangement time and again."

Sachiko-sama's apologetic voice came through the receiver. But, not knowing how to reply, Yumi listened in silence.

"I was looking forward to it too."

That's so cruel, onee-sama. Do you know how many times it is now? What are you going to do now that you've called off our date? Who are you going to see? Who is this person you have to prioritize over me? – There were plenty of things Yumi wanted to say. Saying them might have brought her comfort. However, Yumi swallowed them all, and instead spat out the following:

"I understand."

– That's all.

"I'm sorry ... Well then."

There was no lingering aftertaste. The telephone call was ended quite abruptly.

"Yumi-chan?"

Her mother asked, worried, as she took the receiver from Yumi.

"We're not going out today."

As she said this, she felt like she was going to cry, so she ran up the stairs. Halfway up she crashed into Yuuki, who'd woken up and was coming downstairs, but she didn't want him to see her tear-stained face so she silently fled into her bedroom.

"Yumi? Onee-chan? Hey, what's the matter?"

She answered the sound of the knocking with, "It's nothing." Even though, in truth, it probably wasn't nothing.

However, there was nothing that her brother could do for her.

Yumi cried, on her bed, muffling her voice.

She wasn't annoyed about not going to the amusement park. It was her onee-sama herself that was making Yumi sad.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it."

It was nothing. Nothing to do with her family.

Because the tears were aimed squarely at her onee-sama.

There was nothing that anyone other than her onee-sama could do for her.

Part 2.

The rain was closing in.

Monday.

She was still feeling depressed from the day before, plus her frizzy hair wasn't doing what it was supposed to which put her in a terrible mood right from the start of the day.

Heading into school, she saw Yoshino-san attacking her indoor shoes. Yumi didn't know what happened, but maybe it would be better if she could release her anger in small amounts like that. But, if such a thing were possible, no-one would ever have any problems.

During lunchtime, the girl with the familiar vertical hair rolls appeared at the entrance to the Rose Mansion.

"Gokigenyou, Yumi-sama."

"... Gokigenyou. If you have some business in the Rose Mansion, why don't you come inside?"

In comparison to the amicable, smiling Touko-chan, Yumi's words were perhaps a bit standoffish. Although, the only one who noticed this was probably Yumi herself.

"That's okay. I'm going to have lunch with my classmates in the courtyard, but before that I thought I might meet her here."

Touko-chan omitted who it was that she was going to meet, but Yumi didn't need to ask. Both the speaker and the listener understood that it was Sachiko-sama, so the sentence was properly formed.



Whether for good or for bad, the person herself arrived at that point.

"Oh, Touko-chan?"

Well, that answered the question of who she was going to greet first. For today especially, those sorts of small gestures were on Yumi's mind.

"Rosa Chinensis. Here."

Touko-chan took a step forward and held something out to her.

"Ah, you came all the way here just to give me this? Thank-you."

"I paid a visit to your classroom during the break, but you weren't there."

"I would have been at my elective class."

Sachiko-sama plucked the golden object from Touko-chan's hand and wrapped it around her left wrist. It was the watch that she usually wore.

(How did onee-sama's watch end up in Touko-chan's hands –)

Yumi had definitely seen that watch on Sachiko-sama's wrist on Saturday morning.

So then, as they were leaving school, had Sachiko-sama loaned it to Touko-chan for some reason?

(But, in that case, why would she say, "You came all the way here?")

That was the sort of thing you said when someone brought you something you'd left behind.

Left behind.

What, when, where – ? An excess of thoughts floated through Yumi's mind and disappeared.

Then Touko-chan too disappeared from that place. She returned to the group of girls spreading out plastic sheets on the grass.

When Touko-chan left, Sachiko-sama finally addressed Yumi.

"Yumi, I'm sorry about yesterday."

"... Yeah."

Sachiko-sama was surely the one in the wrong, but Yumi looked away first. At that point Yoshino-san arrived, late, and they all went inside together leaving matters as they were.

The Rose Mansion was unusually quiet that day. Yoshino-san and Reisa-sama were silent, apparently fighting, and Yumi seemed to be in the same boat.

If the usually quiet Shimako-san had been there, then she would have stirred some conversation, but she was nowhere to be seen, perhaps off seeing Noriko-chan. Everything was stretched to the limit.

Yumi and Yoshino-san started to do some light cleaning once they'd finished their lunches. After school, Noriko-chan was going to accompany Shimako-san to the Rose Mansion.

Since they were going to meet once all the classes had done their allocated cleaning after homeroom, it didn't look like they'd have time to clean the Rose Mansion before greeting their guest.

The two Roses were looking over some paperwork for the school festival that was spread out on the table.

From time to time, Yumi felt Sachiko-sama's gaze upon her, but she ignored it, pretending to be caught up in cleaning.

Perhaps she'd meant it as payback for yesterday. At any rate, Sachiko-sama's kind words were starting to feel heartrending to Yumi.

When she thought about it further, Sachiko-sama's words recently hadn't been kind, but sweet. Like putting a sugar coated pastry in her mouth, they left her with a bit of a good feeling. And imagining what was inside made her happy.

But, that was all. Nothing appeared from within, no chocolate, nuts, or splash of liqueur. Sachiko-sama's words were hollow, as empty as their promise was large. And because she understood that, if possible, Yumi wanted to avoid putting them in her mouth. Such were her true feelings.

She wanted words with more substance to them, even if they were spicy or bitter. But that may just have been selfish thinking on her part.

The tragedy of spending time with her onee-sama.

(It's tough, Minako-sama.)

Even though she'd been advised to not just silently endure it.

The inept petit soeur couldn't return the rosary, but in order to avoid being hated, she couldn't do anything other than silently endure it either.

Part 3.

"Do you know the other names for hydrangea?"

The teacher asked, in the middle of their classical literature class.

They'd read through to a good place to stop for the day, but there was still some time left until the bell rang. At times like these, the teacher would start to chat. One of her classmates had brought along some freshly cut hydrangea from home, and their pale blue colored a section of the classroom.

"I'm sure you all know that the hydrangea flower changes color. As a result, it's been given a lot of nicknames. One of the major ones is 'Quick change kabuki dance.' Like a ninja, right?"

The elegant lecturer, who must have been getting into her sixties, then spent the next ten minutes until the end of class talking about the conditions that brought about the change in the hydrangea's color, the color change itself, and other such topics.

When she summed it up by explaining hydrangea in the language of flowers, it struck a chord in Yumi's heart.

– Fickleness.

Yumi thought as she looked at the hydrangea flower. It was so pretty when it was blue. Why would it change its color?

Fickleness.

Perhaps Sachiko-sama's heart had changed too.

Part 4.

Time itself may flow at a fixed rate, but it can seem fast or slow depending on one's state of mind.

It dawdled excessively during class in the lead-up to recess, while it was gone in the blink of an eye during the recess spent waiting for someone who didn't come to visit.

Yumi thought that it would have been nice if Sachiko-sama had come to visit her. She didn't want to just meet up with Sachiko-sama in the Rose Mansion, she wanted Sachiko-sama to actively come and see her.

And then, she wanted to be told all about Touko-chan. If Sachiko-sama had canceled their amusement park date to go and see Touko-chan, Yumi wanted to be given an explanation that she could accept.

However, there was no follow through.

Sachiko-sama didn't come to see her, and Yumi didn't want to bump into Touko-chan, so she didn't go visiting Sachiko-sama either.

There was still the chance that there might be some action after school, although Sachiko-sama was heading home quite early these days.

Maybe she was avoiding things, and once that would have been worrying, but after seeing all these things it felt like it was better to think nothing of it, but that just made her feel even worse.

And so, Friday.

For the first time in a while, Sachiko-sama was in the Rose Mansion after school, doing some Yamayurikai paperwork. Shimako-san and the newly admitted Noriko-chan were there too. Yoshino-san and Rei-sama were at club practice, so not present.

The time spent working was pleasant enough.

Not only was Sachiko-sama there, but she wasn't off seeing someone else either, so Yumi could relax. By avoiding idle chatter and quietly working

away, she could probably avoid having her doubts about her onee-sama's actions exposed.

However, when they reached a natural break in their work, Yumi suddenly felt the second-floor of the Rose Mansion become quite uncomfortable.

Sachiko-sama was right there in front of her eyes. She wasn't doing anything, just sitting on her chair.

(Yumi.)

Any time now, that voice would reach her over the distance, but the sound didn't come.

No matter the subject, Yumi would have welcomed the chat. But, in opposition to that thought, she was scared of Sachiko-sama's words.

Yumi thought she might be able to get a breather by pouring some tea, but their newest member Noriko-chan was on-the-ball and had already started preparing some.

Shimako-san was looking out the window. It looked like it was still raining, as she was looking up at the sky and sighing.

It was at that point that Sachiko-sama spoke.

"Noriko-chan. Do you think you can do something about your use of 'Shimako-san'?"

Noriko-chan was a first-year. Shimako-san was a second-year. The tradition at Lillian's Girls Academy was for junior students to use the honorific '-sama' when addressing their seniors.

But for some reason, Noriko-chan had always used 'Shimako-san' when referring to Shimako-san. This had seemed strange to Yumi at first, but over time she'd become used to it, to the point where it didn't bother her anymore. However, it seemed Sachiko-sama didn't feel the same.

"These are the sort of things that Shimako should be teaching you."

The harsh scolding went as far as including Shimako-san's responsibility. When that happened, Noriko-chan couldn't remain silent.

Those who remembered the Maria ceremony would understand that she wasn't one to back down even when her opponent was a third-year.

Noriko-chan objected with, "That's none of your business," and "I'm against seniority based on time served." So much so that it made Sachiko-sama's beautiful face contort.

Yumi felt sorry for Shimako-san, caught between the Yamayurikai and Noriko-chan. Urged to make a choice between the two of them, things reached a point where she couldn't stand the pressure any more and finally fled.

"Shimako!"

"Shimako-san!"

Sachiko-sama and Noriko-chan's voices were in lovely harmony. However, they didn't bring Shimako-san back from beyond the biscuit door. Usually Shimako-san would go up or down the stairs quietly, but this time they creaked and groaned as she ran down them.

"... I wonder if I overdid it."

Sachiko-sama muttered as she swept her long, black hair.

"Now it's your turn, Noriko-chan."

"Huh?"

Noriko-chan asked, returning to her senses from a shocked daze.

"Look after Shimako-san. You can do it."

"Ah."

"Please."

Sachiko-sama turned Noriko-chan towards the door and gently pushed her forwards. Noriko-chan looked back over her shoulder and nodded.

"Leave it to me."

Rain fell, covering the sound of her running down the stairs. This situation would probably be cleaned up quite skillfully.

But despite the likely happy ending, there was still something left that Yumi wasn't quite satisfied with. It was disheartening that her onee-sama

could be so concerned about the matters of other soeurs while neglecting her own petit soeur.

"Onee-sama, it's surprising that you're meddling so."

Yumi said, as she closed the windows.

"Meddling?"

Sachiko-sama asked in return.

"Just before. You manufactured an excuse for Shimako-san to make Noriko-chan her petit soeur, right?"

"Well, who can tell."

Sachiko-sama said curtly as she started preparing to leave. Apparently she'd decided that that was enough for today, since they'd reached a break in their work and Shimako-san and Noriko-chan weren't there anymore.

"A moment please, onee-sama."

It was only the two of them in the room. If there was anything Yumi wanted to tell her onee-sama, now was the chance.

"Please arrange another time."

"Another time?"

"For us to go to the amusement park together, is what I'm talking about."

"I can't promise anything. There's a chance I'd have to cancel again."

"Even so."

Yumi pleaded.

"If you set a date, I'll have peace of mind until then."

Yumi didn't know what she was saying. That wasn't what she'd wanted to say. But perhaps the words that spring forth impulsively are the truth after all.

"Even if it comes to nothing. If you make an arrangement, until that day, I'll – "

"Yumi..."

Sachiko-sama looked at Yumi with an expression of surprise. How long had it been since she'd last looked at her so directly?

Surrounded by the sound of the rain, now much louder, the silence between the two of them spun out.

As they both waited for the other to speak, they heard the sound of footsteps ascending the staircase. If that was Noriko-chan, then she'd returned awfully quickly.

"Sachiko onee-sama!"

Touko-chan entered without knocking. She ran straight over to Sachiko-sama and whispered something in her ear.

Sachiko-sama nodded her head a number of times, then finally said, "I understand." The contents of the message hadn't reached Yumi's ears, but she could see that Sachiko-sama and Touko-chan were going to go home together.

"Onee-sama. We're still in the middle of our conversation."

Impulsively, Yumi called her to a halt. One way or another, she wanted an obstruction. At the very least, she wanted anyone but Touko-chan to accompany Sachiko-sama at that point in time.

"Yumi..."

Sachiko-sama told Touko-chan to wait downstairs, then turned to Yumi and said:

"At the moment, I can't make any plans, so I can't make a promise to you."

The sound of Touko-chan's footsteps faded.

"Then, when will you be able to?"

"I don't know the answer to that."

Sachiko-sama muttered, looking down.

"Onee-sama."

Like, summer or autumn. Even that kind of vague promise would be okay. Because with that, Yumi would know that she had a place in Sachiko-sama's heart.

"Please understand."

Sachiko-sama picked up her school bag and turned to leave.

"Don't go, onee-sama."

Even begging was no good. Her onee-sama started walking, unconcerned.

The burdensome, insufferable, tantrum-throwing petit soeur. – Surely, this must be how she was thought of.

"Rosa Chinensis – "

Touko-chan's voice came from downstairs, urging her to hurry. As Sachiko-sama put her hand to the door, Yumi cried out in desperation:

"You're choosing Touko-chan over me!"

Sachiko-sama stopped immediately. She turned around slowly, with a face that was more frightening than Yumi had ever seen it before.

"... I'm angry."

Sachiko-sama left, leaving her with those words. She walked down the stairs to where Touko-chan was waiting.

"Ohhh – you're angry."

Left alone in the room, Yumi had a brief laugh. If you want to be angry, then be angry. It was much better than the gentle smile and sweet words Sachiko-sama had used when she felt indebted.

So, somewhere inside, Yumi was glad that she'd seen that scary face. Because it meant that she could make Sachiko-sama that angry. Whether it was the anger or something else, there was value in communicating her emotions so directly.

Yumi thought about how she'd twist that around to affection. Badgering her about a promise, choosing words designed to provoke an angry reaction.

Her heart thrashed around. Yumi watched the rain falling against the glass window.

This rain.

Surely it was because of the weather.

Which would mean her feelings wouldn't brighten either.

Part 5.

After watching raindrops flow down the glass window for a while, Yumi washed the tea cups and left the Rose Mansion. Since they'd left their bags there, eventually Shimako-san and Noriko-chan would return, but she didn't wait for them.

She opened her blue umbrella and walked with her eyes to the ground. She chose a different route to usual because she didn't want to go past the place where the hydrangea were blooming.

If the flowers had changed color since this morning, she didn't think she'd be able to get back on her feet.

"Yumi-chan."

As she walked along the path lined with ginkgo trees, someone unexpectedly called out to her. When she turned around to confirm who it was, that person rushed over to her.

"Let me share your umbrella."

"Sei-sama!?"

It was Shimako-san's onee-sama, Satou Sei-sama. Apparently she'd been taking shelter from the rain near the university's side entrance, waiting for some unsuspecting prey to wander by. And Yumi was the one that she captured.

"I'll bet you have plenty of friends that would share their umbrella with you."

As she gasped in amazement, Yumi held her umbrella out to cover Sei-sama.

After quickly wiping her wet blouse with a handkerchief, Sei-sama suddenly laughed and snatched the umbrella's handle.

"But it only started raining just recently. It wasn't raining when my friends went home."

"So did you stay back for some reason, Sei-sama?"

"Mmm. Well, it's no big deal, but – "

After taking a quick look back at the high-school buildings, Sei-sama asked:

"There's nothing happening with Shimako, is there?"

"Shimako-san?"

Yumi looked puzzled, wondering why she was asking. Sei-sama, who had previously said, "I've graduated so you shouldn't rely on me," had stayed around because she was worried about her petit soeur.

"Yesterday at lunch, someone who looked like Shimako was seen around here. I skipped out on classes yesterday, so I only heard about it this morning. She's not the sort of girl to just go aimlessly wandering around by the university section. So I was thinking maybe she wanted to see me about something."

So Sei-sama had apparently decided to wait around and ambush Shimako-san. Yumi didn't know how long it had been since Sei-sama's classes had ended, but she'd been waiting since before it started raining. She'd chosen a place where she could keep an eye on the high-school students heading home, and would head home once she'd taken a look at her petit soeur.

Yumi thought that Shimako-san was quite fortunate. She had a kind onee-sama who, despite having graduated, still cared for her. Yumi was jealous, and it felt like she was going to cry, so she hurriedly looked away. If she suddenly burst into tears, Sei-sama would think she was weird.

"If you're after Shimako-san, she's probably sheltering from the rain somewhere with Noriko-chan..."

"— Then that's okay. I'll go home with you, Yumi-chan. Just to the train station, anyway."

Yumi nodded, and they walked together. Apologies to Shimako-san, but she'd decided to borrow Sei-sama for a little while. Just by having Sei-sama with her, Yumi felt like she could return to the normal 'Yumi-chan.'

She'd been helped by Sei-sama in the past too. It was just before Valentine's Day and there had been some minor altercation with Sachiko-sama. Yumi had hidden in the old greenhouse and Sei-sama came to see her.

Back then, what was it that Sei-sama had said to her? How could she bring it to the surface? Yumi couldn't remember what it was. It was a memory of the distant past.

" – What?"

Sei-sama said, after they'd made it to the front gate.

"Huh?"

She said, "What?" Yumi hadn't said anything immediately prior to that, so she answered with a question. Then Sei-sama said something quite unexpected.

"You can tell me what's on your mind, just let it all out. I'll listen as thanks for letting me share your umbrella."

Yumi hadn't been aware that she'd let anything show on her face since they'd met. But this person obviously knew. Even if she didn't know exactly what was happening with Sachiko-sama, she would figure it out easily enough.

While she was still working out how to respond, Yumi silently looked up at Sei-sama's face.

"Are your present troubles caused by the girl with the hair rolls?"

"... How did you know?"

"Sachiko came by a little while ago. Although she didn't notice me."

As Yumi had suspected, Touko-chan was with Sachiko-sama. Since they hadn't noticed Sei-sama, they were probably happily chatting away.

"They weren't sharing an umbrella."

"That's not – "

"Yeah, it is."

Even so, Yumi was a bit relieved to hear that they hadn't been sharing an umbrella. Even though she herself was sharing an umbrella with Sei-sama. It was quite self-centered of her.

Even at the bus stop, while waiting for the bus, Yumi couldn't 'let it all out.' If she talked about it with Sei-sama, maybe she'd feel better. However, by talking about it, Yumi felt like she'd fall into self-loathing.

This was something that she should solve on her own. She couldn't rely on someone who'd graduated forever.

Sei-sama didn't ask if anything had happened either. She'd merely said a single sentence, while smiling with profound benevolence, like Maria-sama.

"Yumi-chan, don't abandon Sachiko."

I'm the one that's being abandoned – As Yumi swallowed those words.

The lights of the bus illuminated them in the rain, as they saw it making its way towards them.

Blue Umbrella, Red Umbrella

Part 1.

On Saturday, she didn't see Sachiko-sama.

This was because Sachiko-sama was absent from school. Given the way they parted, Yumi thought she hadn't wanted to see Sachiko-sama anyway, but it was lonely knowing that her onee-sama wasn't on campus.

"Sachiko-sama isn't here either. Rei-chan said to go home and not stay back today."

Yoshino-san had made up with Rei-chan at some point. Even Shimako-san looked uncharacteristically happy when Yumi ran into her in the shoe-locker room that morning, probably because of Noriko-chan. Yellow and white were in a good mood.

During recess, Yumi saw Touko-chan's figure in the first-year camellia group classroom. She returned to class, relieved that Touko-chan wasn't absent too, but on the other hand she felt disappointed in herself for being so suspicious, and resentful of Sachiko-sama for making her act that way.

She was still feeling depressed when she got home, so she decided to go for a stroll to relax. It looked like it was going to rain, so she got her umbrella from the umbrella stand, and that was when her mother asked her to pick up some things from the shop.

A tub of butter from the convenience store. – Then, the umbrella was gone.

She returned home soaking wet and crying, and broke down sobbing in the entrance.

"Yumi-chan!?"

Hearing her sobs, Yumi's mother, father and Yuuki all gathered from where they were around the house. Using the loss of her umbrella as a defense, she didn't hide her tears from her family.

"Don't just take something that doesn't belong to you."

Crouched down on the concrete floor in the entry, Yumi pounded her fist on the wooden door frame over and over.

"Don't take my precious things away from me!"

To Yumi, her missing umbrella was just like Sachiko-sama.

Part 2.

Sunday evening.

Yumi made a telephone call to the Ogasawara residence.

There wasn't the same sense of anticipation that she used to have.

Maybe she shouldn't have. Sachiko-sama was sure to be out somewhere with Touko-chan. – Feeling like she was checking out an alibi, Yumi dialed the number.

Cold water was flowing somewhere deep within her heart.

Supposing, then.

She thought that it would be okay if she called to apologize for Friday. Yumi didn't think she was completely in the wrong, but she did acknowledge that she went too far.

If she found out that Sachiko-sama wasn't out with Touko-chan, she'd be able to meekly apologize to her heart's content. And when they met tomorrow, if some of the awkwardness between them had dissipated, then the telephone call would have served its purpose.

"Ogasawara residence."

A middle-aged lady's voice came from the telephone receiver. It wasn't Sayako-obasama, so Yumi thought it was probably a maid.

Yumi gave her name and asked if Sachiko-sama was available. The maid seemed to think for a while, before saying, "Please wait one moment," and putting her on hold.

"... So onee-sama's there then."

If she wasn't, the maid probably would have said so and hung up the phone. As she listened to the sounds in the background, Yumi felt her heart fluttering, just a little. However.

"Hello, Yumi-chan?"

The call had been picked up by a young man.

"Huh?"

"It's Kashiwagi. It's been a while, hey."

Her head was spinning. She'd definitely called the Ogasawara residence, so why had Kashiwagi-san answered? The crucial piece of information that she was missing was that Kashiwagi-san and Sachiko-sama were cousins.

"Umm ... ?"

"Sacchan's at home, but she can't come to the phone right now."

The thought that she was in the bath floated into Yumi's mind, but that wasn't something they'd go to all the trouble of getting Kashiwagi-san as a substitute to avoid saying. Oddly, Kashiwagi-san apparently read too much into her silence and quickly followed up with:

"She's resting after getting a bit under the weather in the car."

"In the car – "

"Let me be clear, so you don't misunderstand. It wasn't just me and Sacchan going for a drive together. Touko was with us too, so you can relax."

"Touko-chan was there?"

Kashiwagi-san obviously had no idea that Yumi was more worried about Touko-chan being there.

"Yeah, even now Touko's looking after her. She's more level-headed than she looks, so you shouldn't be too worried. They're not even allowing me in the room."

Kashiwagi-san's clear laugh came through the receiver.

"... Is that so?"

Despite the nonchalant response, Yumi's heart was anything but calm.

Touko would be happy just to go on a drive, on a drive, on a drive. – The words that Touko-chan had spoken echoed through her mind.

"Why were you calling? I could take a message for you. Ah, would you prefer I got Touko?"

"No need. It's not urgent. I'll tell her when we meet at school."

"Really? Sorry about this."

Although Kashiwagi-san had offered to take a message, Yumi thought it was better to refuse that offer. It would have been okay if Sachiko-sama had been by herself, but knowing Touko-chan was by her side soured things.

After hanging up the phone, all her strength suddenly left her.

While saying that she couldn't promise another time for their date, Sachiko-sama was faithfully going out with Touko-chan.

It wasn't a date between the two of them. Kashiwagi-san was there too. However, while that may have been true, it was small comfort indeed.

When they parted on Friday, Yumi had questioned whether Sachiko-sama was choosing Touko-chan over her. She knew that, now, that answer had been found.

Sachiko-sama had chosen Touko-chan, that's how it was. If she accepted that, there was nothing else to do. Although it was incredibly painful, it happened because peoples' hearts change.

Yumi took off the rosary that hung around her neck.

Even when she wasn't wearing her school uniform, she'd instinctively put on the rosary that she received nearly eight months ago from Sachiko-sama, as though it were an extension of her body.

(Alright, that's enough.)

If she took off the rosary and was no longer Sachiko-sama's petit soeur, then the feelings of her onee-sama that she had witnessed could no longer wear away at her either.

Yumi was already so tired.

From living her life doubting the person she loved.

Part 3.

Consequently, she decided not to go to the Rose Mansion, starting that Monday.

It hurt to look at Sachiko-sama's face, and since she'd firmed her resolve to stand down as her *petit soeur*, Yumi, as *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*, had no reason to involve herself in the Yamayurikai work. The timing was fortunate, since Noriko-chan had officially become *Rosa Gigantea en bouton*, she should be able to fill the hole Yumi left.

"What on earth's going on?"

Yoshino-san questioned her, when she hadn't been to the Rose Mansion at lunch or after school.

"Sachiko-sama's worried about you."

"As if."

Yumi snorted.

"It's true."

She was probably worried about her dignity as *Rosa Chinensis*. At this busy time, her *petit soeur* was the only one who wasn't showing up, impugning the honor of the *grand soeur*.

"Anyway, why don't we go there together right now?"

As Yumi was about to leave, Yoshino-san grabbed her by the arm and started walking.

"I'm not going."

Yumi shook herself free and turned towards the shoe locker room. Thereupon, Yoshino-san followed after her, saying:

"I don't know what's going on, but I'm sure it's Sachiko-sama's fault. So I'll protest alongside you. If you keep silent when you're angry, you'll never be able to make up."

"It's already gone beyond that point."

She rejected the unsightly clinging that would have resulted. And what reconciliation? Sachiko-sama had found a junior that she prioritized over

her own petit soeur, there was no way to return things back to the way they were before.

"Thank-you for your concern. I'm sorry."

"Yumi-san..."

By now Yumi had changed shoes and Yoshino-san no longer tried to stop her leaving. At the same time that Yumi was exiting the shoe locker room, Yoshino was turning around and heading back.

Yumi realized it was raining as she was making her way to the main entrance. The door that was usually open before and after school was closed, and rain was falling heavily on the other side of the glass pane.

It was all becoming such a bother that she thought she'd rather just get wet on the way home, but that would be too conspicuous and someone would call out to her, so Yumi opened her bag and took out her red folding umbrella.

She stepped outside, irritated that it wasn't opening properly, and someone standing there looked her way.

"– Yumi."

"Onee-sama..."

Suddenly, she didn't know what to say. She had the rosary in her pocket, so that she could return it whenever they happened to meet. But now that the time had arrived, she couldn't jump into action. Her umbrella was in her right hand, her school bag in her left. There was no hand free to give back the rosary.

"I had a feeling we'd meet."

Sachiko-sama smiled. Although she was standing under the roof's overhang, she had her school bag and umbrella, so it was obvious she intended to go home. If Yumi had let Yoshino-san drag her along to the Rose Mansion, they probably wouldn't have met here.

"There's something I have to talk to you about."

Yumi stiffened where she stood, and Sachiko-sama took a step towards her. Yumi started to panic, and took a thoughtless step backwards.

In just that short amount of time, contradictory feelings had stirred within her heart.

Like, Sachiko-sama was waiting here just so she could talk to me.

The talk's going to be about returning the rosary.

No, she's going to confess that it's all been a trick played by the drama club member Touko-chan.

As if it's going to be such a convenient explanation.

"Yumi."

Sachiko-sama took another step forwards and gently straightened Yumi's collar. Hearing her name called like that, all the strength left Yumi's body and she melted.

Her beloved onee-sama. Yumi's feelings hadn't changed one bit.

"Onee-sama."

How many times had they called each other that? As she thought about this, they silently locked eyes.

Just then.

A student emerged from the main entrance and made her way to Yumi's side.

"Sachiko onee-sama. Sorry I kept you waiting."

It was Touko-chan.

Yumi watched Sachiko-sama and Touko-chan regard each other. However, there was no possible explanation other than that they had arranged to meet here.

"... So that's how it is, then?"

Yumi's melted heart froze in an instant. Sachiko-sama hadn't been waiting here for her. Yumi had just happened to come along while she had been waiting for Touko-chan.

Staying would be too miserable, so Yumi turned her back.

"Wait, Yumi-sama."

Surprisingly it was Touko-chan who called her to stop.

"You were still in the middle of your conversation, right? We're in a bit of a hurry, so we can't just stand around chatting though. Why don't you continue your conversation as we walk?"

"Huh?"

While Yumi was still surprised, Touko-chan turned to Sachiko-sama and almost pleaded.

"Please, Rosa Chinensis, why don't we do that?"

" – You're right. Yumi, why don't we walk home together?"

Sachiko-sama had made the offer, but Yumi rejected it.

"No."

How wretched, to have to intrude on this harmonious pair as they go home.

Yumi didn't know what the excessively composed girl was planning, and if it was just spite or not, but she hated Touko-chan's amiable expression and resented the way Sachiko-sama just went along with what she said.

"That's enough already."

Yumi dashed off, leaving things as they were.

"Ah, Yumi-sama!?"

Touko-chan's voice chased her from behind. And yet, Sachiko-sama's voice did not come.

The rain soaked her face. Soaked her hair. Soaked her uniform, steady and heavy.

Yumi ran on, thinking that she must have looked unsightly as she did so. The wounded heroine from a TV drama would look more dashing as she ran.

But when it came to her, what happened? Her school bag thumped against her side, and her umbrella turned inside out, like she was in a comedy.

Continuing to look unsightly, she recklessly raced past the library, flew past Maria-sama's garden, and thundered down the path lined with ginkgo

trees until her legs finally stopped when she was within sight of the front gate.

Because there was someone she knew in the group of university students about ten metres in front of her.

Mixed among the many brightly colored umbrellas was a black, men's umbrella.

Even from this distance and from behind Yumi knew. It was the back of someone she trusted, who had helped her out countless times.

"... Sei-sama."

Despite how weakly she called out, the black umbrella slowly turned around.

The pink floral umbrella, yellow polka-dot umbrella and navy blue checked umbrella that she was with continued on towards the main gate as though they didn't notice that the black umbrella had stopped.

"What's the matter, Yumi-chan!?"

Sei-sama called out. Most people would be surprised to see one of their juniors soaked to the bone despite holding an umbrella.

"Sei-samaaa."

Yumi threw down her umbrella and school bag, and leapt straight at Sei-sama's chest.

"What on earth happened?"

Yumi just kept sobbing, and while this had rattled Sei-sama, she wasn't in a position to calmly explain why she was crying. But earlier, Sei-sama had said that she should let it all out. Yumi's thoughts had grown so painful that she could no longer carry them by herself, and she wanted to tell them to someone.

"Ahh, there, there."

Sei-sama gently rubbed Yumi's back as she heaved with sobs. Letting her stay like that, without thinking. To surrender herself to a higher power and let her exhausted body rest.

Eventually Sei-sama's hand stopped moving, and she muttered.

"... Sachiko."

By that, Yumi knew that Sachiko-sama had made an appearance. But she didn't draw away from Sei-sama. She renewed her effort and clung to her. Conveying without words that she didn't want to face Sachiko-sama.

Sei-sama and Sachiko-sama were facing each other, but neither of them spoke, so Yumi couldn't tell what was going on around her. All she could hear were Sachiko-sama's footsteps slowly approaching.

"Yumi."

Softly, she called out her name. However, Yumi didn't respond. In Sei-sama's arms, she shook her head back and forth, not looking up.

Eventually, she heard the sound of Sachiko-sama sighing.

"Sorry for troubling you with her."

Those words seemed to be directed at Sei-sama. The head directly above Yumi's nodded slightly.

"Yumi-chan."



Sei-sama whispered, accompanied by the sound of receding footsteps.

"Is this okay? Sachiko's going, you know."

"It's fine."

Yumi quietly raised her head. – And saw that Sei-sama was holding another umbrella in addition to her open black one.

"What's this?"

"Sachiko-sama picked it up and gave it to me."

It was Yumi's red folding umbrella. On closer inspection, Sei-sama was holding her schoolbag too.

"... Sachiko-sama."

Yumi grabbed her closed red umbrella and held on to it tightly.

She thought, "This is me. A wretched umbrella fallen to the ground and dirtied by muddy water. Sachiko-sama picked it up and handed it off to Sei-sama."

She became so disheartened by the thought that she was no longer needed that she flew from the black umbrella.

Sachiko-sama was just beyond the school gates. She was seated alongside Touko-chan in the rear of a black car that had apparently come to pick her up, her face peeking out the window.

"Onee-sama!!"

Yumi tried yelling at the receding car, but her voice didn't carry. Sachiko-sama didn't even look her way once and the car kept picking up speed.

Surely it was because of the rain.

The strengthening rain masked both her voice and her appearance.

Eventually the car Sachiko-sama was in became blurred by the rain, and she lost sight of it.

The driving rain was pulling them apart.

"Onee-sama..."

Even when she cried out, the sound of the rain nullified it. Even when she chased, the rain obscured her, making her figure invisible.

The rain fell.

The rain fell.

Even though it wasn't supposed to be like this.

Yumi continued to cry together with the rain.

She had her umbrella, and she clung to it and got drenched as she cried out to her onee-sama, knowing her voice wouldn't carry.

Afterword

I offer my heartfelt apologies to all the readers and staff for whom I have caused trouble and anxiety this time around.

Hello, this is Konno.

I'm sure there's a lot of you who'll know what I mean by that first sentence.

Of course, I think there will be plenty who read that and go, "What's she talking about?" too.

And it will probably be completely incomprehensible to those who've picked up the book long after its release.

So I'll just include all these together and say, I'm sorry everyone!

The release of this book was delayed a month. And while I'm confessing, a magazine article was dropped too. Actually, my health deteriorated at the beginning of the year, to the point where I was hospitalized in the middle of January.

At first it was a common cold. It started with a sore throat, then a fever, then, before I knew it, my face was all swollen and it turned into something frightful.

My attending doctor's diagnosis was 'mumps.' The slang phrase for an epidemic of mumps is 'old woman's cold,' but I already caught it back when I was in kindergarten. Apparently there's a small number of people who can get it twice, so despite having the antibodies they just don't have enough of them, although it shouldn't be possible for it to become an acute illness. At any rate, the further away you are from school age, the worse the illness tends to be.

My face swelled up like a boxer who has taken hits to the face for a full 9 rounds, and that's not a metaphor. My cheeks looked like they were stuffed completely full of cotton and my eyes looked exactly like a clay figurine's (they were so swollen I couldn't open them properly). My face was so bad

that a doctor acquaintance of mine was lost for words when they saw it. I had a fever too. Ah, the memories of calling the editorial department after I'd taken fever medicine to keep my temperature down ...

Well, rest assured that I'm completely recovered now. This book has been released, albeit delayed a month, and I'm back working as per usual. I have a real appreciation for the saying, "Your health's the most important thing."

Oops. The afterword's two pages this time. I've filled all the space just writing about my illness. I'm sorry for not touching on the contents of the novel in this afterword.

– Ahh, from beginning to end it's all apologies.