

COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

未来の白地図

今野緒雪

集英社

Volume 22

Blank Map of the Future

Prologue

In middle school, during social studies class, each student would receive their own blank map.

When I was given my new blank map, I tasted a happiness I could not even express.

It was a Japan with only its outline drawn.

We had only to draw in fine lines demarking the prefectures, and showing the rivers.

From here I added mountains to my blank map.

I created cities.

I added in all the prefectural offices to the prefectures, and even added climate details.

But nothing had yet been added on top of my map.

From here I created a world above my blank map, almost as if I was doing what god would do.

With this, I would create such a beautiful world that no-one in the class could exceed.

I can do this.

And when the page was filled, I added things to the map that had not been printed in the first page.

My new blank map was shining brilliantly, and I began adding things I believed would appear in the future.

An Unexpected Visitor

Part 1.

Mi, miru fiiyu.

Yu, Yumi.

Mi, miru fiiyu.

Yu, Yumi.

Aah, I should stop, she whispered to herself.

Returning from the Ogasawara family's house in Kashiwagisan's car, she began her personal, endless shiritori. If the shiritori itself were to continue in such a meaningless manner, there would be no problems for it. The problem was really Yumi's state of mind as the shiritori game was progressing.

When she stopped to consider it, there were several unpleasant things that Yumi was thinking about. In order to drive them out of her head, she had engaged in this mindless endless shiritori. This way, she would become swayed by the rhythm, and her sewing needle would start moving around wildly, and even if the thread slid out, she would not notice and keep stitching onward, almost as if she were falling into a trap. How many repetitions had she made by now?

No, stop. She did it again.

At least she was in her own room, where no one would disturb her. She would add in a sigh at the most important times, and then let it go and continue sewing. If someone saw what she was doing, it would seem like some sort of a performance.

"Ahhh."

Yumi let the sewing needle out of her sewing hole, and set down the first stage of her sewing. The thread, which curled like the instant ramen that she had made, fell from her knees onto the floor. She wouldn't move an inch from her current position, though she could easily pick it up if she wanted to.

“...I’m thinking too much about it.” It had been several days since then, and yet...

Even though she had relinquished the mille-feuille that Sayako Obaa-sama had given her as a gift to her family long ago, maybe it wasn’t really about time. No it wasn’t. Even though time had passed, she had the feeling that she had become swept up into it.

Those meaningful words Kashiwagi-san had spoken. His words the fleeting Yumi could not simply cry “How idiotic” and let go.

The feeling of defeat she felt from comparing how well Kashiwagi-san understood Sachiko-sama or how effectively Sachiko-sama could rely on him was a bit different from what she felt now--not only was the matter a bit different at its core, but it weighed on her heart more.

Kashiwagi-san understood. That was probably the essence of it. Yumi worked hard to seek out a relationship with Sachiko-sama, but there were things that she still didn’t know about her. That’s what was painful. When Kashiwagi-san had hinted that this was a thing in which he could not be defeated, she’d felt she’d lost to a point where she could not hope to win. When Yumi had been given a handicap from the person she had thought was her rival, she was beyond receiving compassion.

Yumi sighed several times, rolled her ramen-like wool into a ball, and then looked up.

Her sense of time was distorted, but it was probably around evening. The inside of her room had become dark.

“Well.”

Yumi put down her sewing work and stood up to turn on the lights. Her eye catching on nothing specific, Yumi glanced outside her window.

What could have happened? She didn’t know. It had felt as if someone had called Yumi. *From outside...?*

She tried to concentrate on the outside from her second floor window, but the surrounding houses' roofs, the trees, and the dim light made her unable to distinguish any figures outside.

"Mom." Yumi dashed down the stairs, and poked her face into the kitchen. "Mom, you..."

"Huh?" Her mother pressed the mute button on the cordless phone, and looked up. "...didn't call me. I see. **Sorry for bothering you.**" "It's fine."

Yumi finished the exchange of formalities. Yumi's mother once again turned back toward the phone and began talking. In the last few days, her mother had been trying to collect recipes she had been seeing on TV. She was becoming just like the person she was on the phone with, Taeko Oba-chan.

'If Mom hadn't called me, then... She twisted her head around and went out of the kitchen. Yūki? Yumi bounded up the stairs and knocked on Yūki's room.

"Yū..." As soon as she had begun speaking, she remembered. Yūki would be out today with Kobayashi-kun.

It really was her imagination then, wasn't it? She went back to the stairs and sat down.

"It really felt like someone was calling me though." She stuck her face between her knees, and finally let out a groan. Mishearing something wasn't really supposed to hurt this much. *But.*

Maybe Dad had come home. Rather than giving up, Yumi went down the stairs again, and went up to the front door. His shoes weren't there, which meant that he was still in the office.

Just to make sure, Yumi went outside and up to the front gate. She had come out just as the newspaper boy was giving out the evening paper, so she went up to him and said "**Thanks for your hard work,**" and took it directly from him.

The land had become completely dark. The sky was dark and clear. She looked up into the night sky, and could see a small star intermittently blinking. She searched for the moon but could not find it. Whether she just couldn't see the moon at this time of the month or whether it was covered in clouds, Yumi did not know.

Riiing.

She walked into the house to the sound of the phone hurriedly screeching. Belatedly, Yumi realized that not enough time had passed for her mother to have finished the previous call and have left. So even though someone was calling, her mom's last call must have finished.

"Hello." Yumi's mom returned to the living room, and as usual stood one step in front of the phone and spoke into it.

"Yes... Yes. Aah, thank you for taking care of us. No no, of course not. You really helped me out."

As she was talking, Mom's gaze immediately flung to her daughter. Yumi thought that perhaps the conversation was about Yumi, so she came closer to the phone and heard, "So what? You've been a big help taking care of my son". Not "my daughter" but "my son". Whoever it was, he seemed to be a friend of Yūki's.

"Yūki hasn't come home yet," Yumi whispered, while making large mouth movements to let her mother know. Then her mother said, "Sure, just hold on" and gave the phone to Yumi.

"...But, I'm Yumi." Hey, hey, Mom. Had she reached the age where she was confusing her son for her daughter? Although, in her seventeen-year-long life, she had often been mistaken for her brother.

Without taking the phone back, her mother quickly said, "Of course I know that. It's for Yumi-chan."

"Huh?" Her mother spoke as Yumi clutched the phone in her hand.

"It's Kashiwagi-san!"

“...!” She was so surprised that her heart pounded, and she felt as if she would drop the receiver. What timing! It was he who had been sending her into random fits of melancholy for so long.

Anyway, Yumi’s mother could not even fathom why a call from Kashiwagi-san unnerved Yumi so. Whatever the reason was, he really didn’t have any self-control.

“Hello.”

“Ah, Yumi-chan, sorry.” Kashiwagi-san’s always cheery voice started with an apology. “I don’t really call you, so you might be surprised but--”

“Uh.” Well she was surprised. But because Kashiwagi-san annoyed her, she would not reveal that. She cultivated a “I’m always cool and collected” attitude. Right. This was one of those situations where she had to act as distant as possible.

“Did something happen?”

“Ah, well...”

Some time passed, and it felt like Kashiwagi-san was searching for the right words. Like someone who can’t find a good way of conveying bad news.

“Nothing’s happened at Sachiko-sama’s house, has it?!” Yumi turned into the phone and shouted. Kashiwagi-san was Sachiko-sama’s cousin. If something were to happen to Sachiko-sama or her family, it would be expected for Kashiwagi-san to call and tell her the news.

No. It’s not that. The Ogasawara household is fine.”

“Oh really? Great!” She felt some initial relief then wondered, Then what is it...? Kashiwagi-san did not seem like the type of person who would tie up the phone with small talk.

“It’s actually about Tōko.”

“Tōko-chan?” She wasn’t expecting that but, when she thought about it, Kashiwagi-san was Tōko-chan’s cousin too. That’s why, if one was to put Kashiwagi-san between them, then Sachiko-sama and Tōko-chan were **in the same place.**

“If that’s your reaction then, she hasn’t shown up?”

“Shown up? To my house? No, she hasn’t but... Why would she?”

“No. It’s better that she stays away. Things just flew out of control. She’s late coming home, so her parents are worried.”

“But it’s just six.” She could be preparing for the school festival and having to stay late. It was pretty common for a girl like her to not come home by this time.

“Yeah, well when Tōko-chan had come home she had gotten into a fight with her parents. It seems she had an outburst of anger, and she left the house. That’s why we want to know.”

“She got into a fight then left?” Just what had happened?

“Tōko seems like that kind of person... Well she kind of looks like a girl who gets into reckless trouble. She hasn’t left the house before. Her parents are also worried about her, and came to me crying about what to do. Of course, she could just turn up back at home but, whatever she does, she set out to do what she felt she had to do.”

“I see.” And Fukuzawa Yumi seemed tied quite strongly to this “whatever she does” business. “What about Sachiko-sama’s house?” Yumi asked.

“Well, I’m calling from the Ogasawara house.”

“Oh.”

If Kashiwagi-san wanted to think of the person that Tōko-chan would rely on, he would first think of Sachiko-sama. If she wasn’t where Kashiwagi-san was, then...

“I didn’t want the Matsudaira family to make it a big thing, so I decided to come here directly. And Tōko wasn’t here.”

“Did you tell Sachiko-sama?”

“I thought Sacchan was the only person who I could tell what happened to, but at the last minute, her friends came over and I couldn’t see her. And if I go and say that I want to talk to Sachiko-sama, then Sayako Oba-sama would wonder what had happened.”

“Well, do you think Tōko was one of those friends...?” Tōko-chan was a Lillian Girls Academy student, and if you stretched it, she really was Sachiko-sama’s friend.

“No. One of those friends was Hasekura-san.”

“Hasekura... Ah.” It was Rei-sama. Rei-sama and Sachiko-sama were friends, so coming over to each other’s houses was not odd at all. Ahhh. Those two were meeting over Exam Holiday.

“I’m sorry if I’m being too much trouble but, could you give me Nijō Noriko-san’s house number? I’ve heard the name before, and I haven’t had a chance to tell Sacchan about this so...”

“Then I’ll call her. If I find anything, I’ll let you know Kashiwagi-san.”

“Ah, that would be a big help. If she were to suddenly get a call from a young man, then Noriko-san’s parents would get worried.”

“Yeah.” Noriko-chan was staying at her great aunt’s house, so you couldn’t really say parents, but Yumi replied to Kashiwagi-san quickly without making any corrections.

“What about Yoshino-san or Shimako-san?”

“That’s right.” She started thinking next to the phone and let out a soft groan. “Do you think Tōko-chan would go there? I don’t really know who Tōko’s friends are, so I don’t know.”

“I don’t really know either.”

“Then it’s best we don’t.”

If this became too big of a thing, then when Tōko-chan returned, things wouldn’t go well, is what Kashiwagi-san was trying to say. That’s right. She wasn’t classified into the “ran away from home” stage yet. She was still at “hasn’t returned yet”. Whatever that meant.

“Ah.” Suddenly the image of a girl appeared in Yumi’s mind.

“Huh?”

“What about Kanako-chan?”

“Kanako-chan?”

“A classmate of Tōko-chan’s, like Noriko-chan.” She was a person who seemed to talk with Tōko-chan a lot more than Shimako-san or Yoshino-san would.

“I haven’t heard of her. What does she look like?”

“She has long hair, and she’s tall.”

“Oh I see. The girl who appeared at the school play? She played the... Chief Councilor I think?”

“Yep.”

“Really... She’s a good friend of Tōko’s?”

“Well I’ve heard that they’re natural enemies, but...”

“But?”

“But recently I’ve been seeing them together.”

“I see. If two people oppose each other, and something happens, they can quickly come together. I get it. So can you ask this Kanako-chan also?”

“I’ll try as hard as I can, but I won’t make into a big thing.”

“Thanks a lot Yumi. Ah, let me give you my cell phone number.”

“Sure, sure.” Yumi jotted down the numbers Kashiwagi gave onto a memo pad next to the phone, and then cut the call.

“What happened? A friend ran away from home?” the moment Yumi put the phone down, her mother asked. It seemed that she had been listening to Yumi during the entire duration of the call.

“Yup, well I don’t know. She’s just late in coming home, and her parents seem worried.”

“Hm. I see. She’s their wonderful daughter after all.”

While she commiserated with Tōko-chan’s parents, the reason Yumi-chan’s mother still didn’t have a worried look on her face was because it was still not seven o’clock. If it were ten or eleven o’clock at night, she would have reacted quite differently.

“Kashiwagi-san was the one who dropped Yumi-chan and Yūki off with his car, right? Maybe he’ll become our son-in-law?”

“Stop!” Yumi immediately whispered.

“Come on Yumi-chan. Isn’t your reaction supposed to be different? A normal girl your age is supposed to say, ‘Aiiee! Mom, what are you saying?! Please stop this!’ and blush and run straight into her room.”

“...” Only if you’ve watched too many dramas.

“Then she’ll be tossing and turning in bed, imagining her wedding.” That depends on the person.

Whether Kashiwagi-san was still with Sachiko-sama, or whether they were ex-es was not known, and to contemplate marriage? He’s gay. If she told her mother the truth, then she wouldn’t be acting so interested in him.

No, even though he was gay, lately he’d been becoming more suspicious.

“Well anyway, feel free to call him to your heart’s content.”

Yumi took the note on which Kashiwagi-san’s phone number was written, and the phone receiver and went up the stairs. Noriko-chan’s house number and Kanako-chan’s house number were written in her student notebook, which was in her room.

“It’s almost dinner time, so when you’re done calling, please come down.”

“Suuure.”

When she had put her hand on the doorknob of her room, she could hear the sound of the front door opening downstairs.

Maybe it’s Dad? Or Yūki?

She was a bit interested in who had come home, but she wanted to take care of the matter of Tōko-chan first, so she entered her room. Before Yumi could even open the student notebook, her mother called.

“Yumi-chaaan.”

“...What now, Mom?” She didn’t care when Yumi had finished her phone call, but she kept endlessly calling “Yumi-chaan,” and would not let her concentrate.

“Excuse me, Yumi-chan.”

She peeked her face outside of the door, and her mother was calling from underneath the stairs. She would come down after she finished the phone call, so she decided to go back.

“Could you please come down?”

“Huh?” *Could you please come down??*

Well one thing she was sure of was that this wasn’t ‘Come down for dinner.’ Maybe she should at least see her mom downstairs.

Dad or Yūki had probably brought home some large thing, and her mother wanted her to see it quickly, or something like that. She had no idea what that could be, but it was one of those things that happened in the Fukuzawa family.

“Look, Yumi-chan, it’s a really huge watermelon!” was the kind of thing she was thinking. It was winter, so of course no one would bring back a really huge watermelon, but...

“Yumi-chan, hurry, hurry.”

Her mother was waiting in the corridor. She greeted Yumi with her always-happy tone of voice, and lead her to the entrance.

“Wow.” Just as she thought, Yūki had come home, and was standing there.

And next to him was...

“Good day, Yumi-sama.” The shrilly-laughing, roll coiled hair girl.

“T... Tō...!” Yūki had brought back something even bigger than a huge watermelon in the midst of winter.

Part 2.

“I found her at the corner near Kakino-san’s house. So I came home, and she tagged along.”

First Yūki had to explain how he could get into such a situation, so he talked quickly then stood up as he finished. Yumi and her mother had received a phone call from Kashiwagi-san earlier, so there was no misunderstanding, but if one looked at this without knowing the situation, it seemed as if Yūki had brought home a girlfriend.

“W, Well just give her to me,” Yumi told him.

Tōko said, “Please excuse my intrusion at night.” Tōko turned toward Yumi’s mother, bowed her head politely and said, “I’m sorry for being a burden.” She raised her head, and then walked toward the window frame.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. In my house, guests are always welcome. Yūki’s friends always come over. I’m happy when Yumi’s friends come. Dinner is almost done, so please join us. It’s just simple home cooking though, so please don’t mind.”

“No. I’ll be leaving soon.”

“Kids can have as much as they want. Why don’t you stay with Yumi in her room as long as you can?”

She didn’t know if Tōko-chan had already introduced herself while Yumi had been coming down the stairs, but her mother seemed to have realized that this girl was the “Run-away-from-home girl” that Kashiwagi-san had been talking about. Anyway, the best thing that Yumi could do would be to encourage Tōko and try to keep her there for as long as she could. Though of course, her parents’ statement of “We love guests” was no lie.

After Tōko-chan took off her shoes and went inside, Yūki made a face that made it look as if he had just finished lifting a heavy suitcase. Yumi used her lips to mouth a “Thank you” to her brother.

“Ah, my room is on the second floor.”

Yumi turned around and called, as she climbed the stairs. Tōko-chan obediently followed.

“Yoshino-sama and Shimako-san too--”

“Huh?”

“They’ve been up here?”

“No...” Yumi shook her head. “The Yamayurikai members haven’t come to my house.” Yumi had never given much thought to it, but now that she looked back, she found it was true. She had gone to Yoshino-san’s house before, but never the other way around. Shimako had never come to Yumi’s house, and she had not been to her’s. She met Shimako-san every day at school, so they’d never ended up trying to arrange plans to meet at someone’s house after school.

“Tōko-chan is the first person to visit since she I started going to high school.”

Tōko-chan stopped walking up the stairs. “Huh? But Sachiko Onee-sama?”

“She’s come in front of my house before, but...” But she never came inside. Tōko-chan had a conflicted look on her face.

“Not even Sachiko Onee-sama? Then I can’t go in.” Tōko-chan made an angry face. She about-faced and started going back down the stairs.

“W-Wait! Why?” Yumi grasped Tōko-chan’s hand, and stopped her. At first she thought it was some kind of joke, but it seemed like Tōko-chan was really leaving.

“How could I go up there if I went before you’ve even let your Onee-sama or your close friends go? What else can I do but refuse?” she asked.

“It’s not a line you know.”

“But...”

“But what?”

Tōko-chan fell silent. These were things that Yumi would not have even realized Tōko-chan would be watching out for, let alone tirelessly, and she even understood that there was no point in doing so. Tōko-chan was strict at the oddest times.

“It’s not like I didn’t let Sachiko-sama or Yoshino-sama inside, you know. It’s just never happened. Really.”

“Well...,” Tōko-chan whispered.

“Plus you already took your shoes off right?” Even if she turned back now, she had come up the stairs.

“That was a mistake.” Normally, one would confirm such things and then not take off one’s shoes.

“Or is it just that you’re worried that no one’s come to my room before you?”

“...No.”

“Then, it’s fine, right? Come, come.” Tōko-chan might not have accepted the idea, but at least she took Yumi’s hand without a fuss and went up the stairs.

“Here you are.” Yumi opened the door to her room, and ushered Tōko-chan in. She hadn’t been planning to call over any guests, so parts of her room were messy, but she couldn’t do anything about it. Well, it was being her plain-old self at least.

“Please find a seat anywhere you like.” Yumi took the sewing materials and the thing she was sewing off the bed, put them in order, and placed them in a box which she put in a corner of the room.

“Okay,” Tōko-chan answered and then did not sit. She walked around the room, looking around. It was her form of manners. “What a great room,” she said. After that, Tōko-chan’s eyes fell on Yumi’s desk. There she had carelessly placed the phone, and the student notebook open to a page of phone numbers. “Did you already call Noriko-san?”

“Nope,” Yumi answered truthfully. There was no need to hide things. “I haven’t told anyone yet.”

Tōko-chan was very perceptible. When she found the student notebook and the phone together, she knew it was like a sickle closing in on her. Tōko-chan had only to look at Yumi, who wore her thoughts on her face, to understand most of the situation.

“I was going to, but then Yūki came back.”

“I see. Great.” She’d meant it in a that-way-Noriko-chan-will-not-get-worried sort of way. Tōko-chan seemed to let out a sigh and laughed.

“Was it Suguru Onii-sama who told you? Or Sachiko-sama?”

“Kashiwagi-san. Sachiko-sama had guests over, so she hadn’t been told yet.” Tōko-chan nodded to Yumi’s explanation, and sat on top of a cushion on Yumi’s floor.

Tōko-chan wasn’t wearing her coat. On top of a traditional red one piece, she was only wearing a white mohair cardigan. It was just as Kashiwagi-san had said, she had just suddenly decided to leave the house.

“Wasn’t it cold?”

“Yeah. Because I was walking.”

“Really?” Yumi sat slightly diagonally in front of Tōko-chan.

“Really. At first I ran but, I got tired. After that... Yeah, really.”

“You walked here?”

“Yep.”

“I see.” Of course. She didn’t even have the time to put on her coat. When she’d left, she obviously had had no time to think of her travel expenses. She had said that she hadn’t felt cold but, when Yumi held onto Tōko-chan’s arm on the stairs, her cardigan had felt cool. When she held Tōko-chan’s hand it felt very cold. It must have been hard.

She didn’t know if something had happened at home or if something had made her leave her house. But even though Tōko-chan had gone through so much, she walked all the way through the cold to get here. It really must have been hard.



“Were you coming to my house?” Tōko-chan shook her head several times.

“I was thinking about something, and just walking randomly. Eventually I turned up here. I looked at the district number on a power line pole and saw that I was close to Yumi-sama’s house. I wondered where it was and ended up walking into this area. But it’d grown dark, so dark that I couldn’t see the name plates. I went around here and there calling your name, but then I gave up. Just as I was going back, I met Yūki-san.”

“I see.” In the end, she wound up coming here. Now she just wanted to stay here silently and warm her cold self. She wanted to rest her tired heart. “Tō...”

As soon as she heard her mother’s “Dinner!” she hastily retracted the hand she had placed out for Tōko-chan. “It’s done. Let’s go.” Yumi stood up and spoke clearly. Tōko-chan nodded and stood up. She opened the door and could smell something from up on the stairs.

Yumi ploddingly descended the stairs, and thought. *What should I have done?* If Yumi’s mother not called out just then... She would have pulled Tōko-chan close to her and hugged her, probably.

Part 3.

The menu was exactly what it smelled like: curry and salad. The meal had been cooking from before Kashiwagi-san had called Yumi, so it was a surprisingly tasty spread.

The Fukuzawa home's curry was made in huge quantities, so if one or two extra people would join them it would be fine. Yumi's mother also enjoyed cooking such huge quantities. Yumi's mother had been expecting Yūki's friends to come over, so there was a very strong possibility that curry and stew would be common this winter. Steak and fish need to be prepared one-at-a-time, and if there aren't enough it's problematic to cook them in large quantities, as they would often run out.

Shortly before Tōko-chan and Yumi came downstairs, Yumi's father had returned. Now the full Fukuzawa family and Tōko-chan added up to five people and would surround the dinner table.

Tōko-chan sat in the seat next to Yumi, where Yūki would normally sit. Yūki sat in their mother's seat. Their mother would sit at the narrow part of the table, and so on. It wasn't the normal seating arrangement, so it took a bit of shuffling to get seated.

“Could you pass me the Meat and Curry Dumplings?”

Yumi was tense because her father really loved Meat and Curry Dumplings. But in front of his daughter's friend, he seemed not to act like he normally did.

“The salad dressing recipe was one I saw being made on TV. What do you guys think of it?”

Both Yumi's mother and father were being excellent hosts.

“Everything is great, Mrs. Fukuzawa. You must be good at cooking.”

Tōko-chan seemed to really find the food tasty. She asked about the type of cheese used in the meat dumplings, and asked for the amount of the secret ingredient, balsamic vinegar, in the dressing.

She asked it all without flattery. Yumi did not know whether Tōko-chan planned on really going back home and trying out some of these recipes. Nevertheless, her mother was very happy when Tōko-chan did not simply say the food was tasty, but also asked how the food was made and what ingredients went into it.

“Is this rice... White rice?”

“It’s a medley of brown rice, barley, and white rice. I prepare it with the curry.”

Yumi’s mother would change the ratio of one rice to the other in each batch, so she told Tōko-chan that she couldn’t give a definite number. Yumi didn’t know anyone who’d ask a question about the ratio. Obviously her mother would know that brown rice and barley went into the mix, but how much of each she doubted that her mother kept track.

Yumi’s mother was very happy to talk to Tōko-chan about such things. She was talking much more than she normally would.

“Oh, speaking of white rice. When Yumi and her friends went to her Onee-sama’s summer house, the rice I had sent gave Yumi the nickname Princess Koshihikari. Did you know that, Tōko-chan?” Well she hadn’t been expecting that subject to come up, but it was too late.

It wasn’t as if Tōko-chan had been the instigator that came up with the name, so Yumi thought it probably would not bother her excessively. If Tōko-chan wasn’t the “person who made the name” but rather the “person who eventually laughed at the name” she was not to blame.

As expected, Tōko-chan became obviously dejected, and whispered, “...There are some bad people out there in this world.”

“Tōko-chan, you’re being too hard on yourself.” Yumi’s mother laughed warmly.

Yumi explained to Tōko-chan, “Mom really liked the name.”

“Princess Koshihikari?” Unable to fathom this, Tōko-chan knit her eyebrows together.

“Yeah. Don’t you think it has a much better ring to it than Princess Sasanishiki or Princess Hitomebore? I’m glad I sent Koshihikari. But you know, Princess Unwashed-Rice sounds more story-like, much more story-like.” Wasn’t Princess Koshihikari more than enough? Yet, as Yumi’s mother was glowingly smiling, she let the irritation go, and even Tōko-chan let out a small laugh.

“Yumi-sama’s family talks about almost everything.”

At which point, Yumi’s father laughed to himself. “Nope. There are a lot of things we don’t talk about at home. Because there are a lot of things we don’t understand.” Like a bride’s father, Yumi’s father talked solemnly, and Yumi’s mother suddenly caught on.

“Honey, why did you suddenly get so serious? That’s what friends are for. Tōko-chan, please engage Yumi in some good conversation.”

“I, well...”

“Don’t hold back. I think Tōko-chan is a great conversationalist.” When Yumi heard her mother’s words, conversely she wondered if she could become a good conversation partner for Tōko-chan.

Had Tōko-chan not been picked up by Yūki, she wouldn’t have come to this house. Just why had she left home? That was one topic that they could not discuss. But why? What had happened? Maybe if she just asked once. Even though she hadn’t come here looking for Yumi’s help, if she asked the question after she let Tōko-chan in the house, Tōko-chan would hesitate. Then she would grow fearful. *This is none of Yumi-sama’s business.* She’d be denied. When she thought of the denial, she felt too scared to ask.

Part 4.

The Fukuzawa family dinner ended in an aura of calm.

Tōko-chan laughed abundantly, talked profusely, and happily ate all the food on her place. As a guest, one could not get more hospitable or perfect.

Even though they told her not to, after she finished eating, Tōko-chan picked up the tableware and placed it in the sink. Then she said, “Could I please use your phone?”

“Eh?” She said it so quickly, Yumi had to ask for clarification. “Why?”

“I don’t want to impose. I bothered all of you so suddenly, and I’m very sorry.”

“You’ll go back? But to where?”

“Home. My mind feels a lot cooler. If I don’t go back, then my parents would start shortening their lives in worry.” Tōko-chan was serious. Yumi understood that Tōko-chan thought highly of her parents, and that Tōko-chan’s parents were raising her with a lot of care.

“Do you want to call home?” Since he was the closest to the phone receiver, Yūki brought it over and asked.

“No. I left the house after a small argument, so I’d rather not talk to them on the phone and instead meet them in person, I think.”

“Then who will you call?” Was Yūki not going to give her the receiver until he found out who? Yūki held on to the receiver, and was not letting it go.

“I thought I’d call a taxi. Even if my parents left to look for me, I’m pretty sure somebody would be at home.” That was when Yumi remembered: Tōko-chan had walked here. Rather than going to the bus station and taking a train, it would be faster to get into a car and go directly to the Matsudaira home. But she didn’t have the money to return by train, so this was probably the real reason why she wanted to call a taxi.

“Why don’t we take you. Where do you live?” Yumi’s father put on his jacket, and took the keys for the car. “Yumi should come too. Her parents might be worried, so if you go together and say hello it would ease them.”

“Ah, sure,” Yumi answered and wondered, *What does this situation remind me of?* Now she remembered: When she was a child, Yumi had forgotten why but, her friend had been scolded by her parents. Yumi had let her friend come home with her, and later they had both gone to her parents and apologized. Her friend’s parents held back from scolding her badly in front of a friend. Even after Yumi left though, her friend had gotten scared at least a second or a third time, but neither time was as bad as the scare she had gotten from the first time (that had prompted her to come home with Yumi).

Yet, it seemed that wasn’t why Yumi’s father wanted Yumi to come along. If they confirm that Tōko-chan had been staying at her “school sempai’s” house until such a late hour, then it would put Tōko-chan’s parents at ease.

“I won’t let her come.” Tōko-chan held back. She didn’t want to put the Fukuzawa family through any more trouble. Tōko-chan also didn’t want to ask for travel expenses.

“Don’t worry about us Tōko-chan. But if you get into a taxi alone to go home at this hour, then we’d be bound to worry.”

There was no reason to doubt the Fukuzawa family, but Tōko-chan, who had run away from home, had to decide whether or not she would go home by herself. Young maidens can, after all, suddenly change their mind halfway through a decision. Someone must keep an eye on these maidens, because they seem **sensitive to smoke.**

“I think I’ll go home by myself,” Tōko-chan declined politely. However, Yumi’s father would not give up. And then...

“Um... Can I say something?”

“What, Yūki?”

“You have to compromise. And I’m the one who’ll decide this,” Yūki said, as he picked up the receiver and pressed one button. It seemed like he had forgotten to press the other numbers. Soon, sounds could be heard coming from the receiver. Someone was on the other line. “Ah, hello? Please take care of it,” was all Yūki said before he cut the line.

“Who did you call?” He hadn’t called a taxi company, that was certain. He hadn’t dropped any hints from names, but by saying “Please take care of it”, it was obvious that a car was on its way.

“You’ll find out soon.”

“You’ll find out soon.” Right after Yūki finished talking, within ten seconds, the Fukuzawa home’s intercom rang. Yūki opened the door without bothering to find out who it was. Wondering what was going on, Tōko-chan tagged along with Yūki and Yumi, and they met an unexpected person.

“I’m sorry for calling so late at night.” The visitor came up from behind the kids, walked up to the parents, and bowed his head slightly. “I’m sorry that Tōko took so much of your time.”

Hearing his apology and his deference, Tōko-chan suddenly made a deflated face. “Suguru Onii-sama.” That was how she called him, the man known as Kashiwagi Suguru-san. He finished talking with the Fukuzawa parents, and then came over gently to Tōko-chan. “I came to pick you up. Let’s go.”

Tōko-chan nodded slightly.

Part 5.

Yumi had first learned about Tōko-chan running away from home from Kashiwagi-san's phone call. So when Kashiwagi-san came to pick up Tōko-chan out of worry, he really wasn't so "unexpected". Before they had eaten, while Yumi and Tōko-chan were in Yumi's room, either out of worry or because he thought it would be a nice thing to do, Yūki had called Kashiwagi-san.

So as to not surprise or aggravate Tōko-chan, Kashiwagi-san decided to wait in front of the house until Tōko-chan came out. However...

"I've been a burden. I'd like to apologize once again."

While watching Kashiwagi-san stick his face out the car window and laugh, Yumi thought: to come so quickly, and to meet in such a place, he really was an unexpected person.

"Thanks for the food!" Tōko-chan said as she entered the passenger's seat. She had wanted to go along with Tōko-chan to her home, but she didn't want to hear a "Thanks but no" from Kashiwagi-san. She understood that it had to be done, but she didn't like it. Although Kashiwagi-san would have waited and given Sachiko-sama the benefit of staying as late as she wanted, he just takes Tōko-chan when it works for him, without offering her a choice.

"Come over some time!" It seemed that Yumi's parents both found Tōko-chan and Kashiwagi-san interesting. When Kashiwagi-san's red car turned the corner past Kakinoki-san's house, they continued to wave their hands. Closing the house gate, Yumi's mother sighed as if a large event had just finished, and whispered, "Tōko-chan is a nice kid."

So? Yumi wondered why her voice sounded slightly high pitched. She couldn't answer it. Her mother's voice was bothering her own train of thought.

“She seems a bit difficult, but if you lay a firm hand on her, she does okay. That girl would be a good fit to become Yumi-chan’s petite sœur.”

“Mom, what are you saying? Just stop teasing me.”

Yumi realized that her cheeks had become hot, and walked passed her mother. She took off her shoes, and hurriedly put on her slippers. She wondered what her mother would think if she could see Yumi’s bright red face.

But, what should she do? If she were to go into the living room like this, then she would be spotted by her father and Yūki, who had already gone inside. She walked inside while keeping her eyes on the walls, and tried to make herself invisible. That way, her sadness ---

“What’s wrong, Yumi?” Yumi’s mother asked, after coldly observing her daughter. “Your reaction was completely different from when I mentioned Kashiwagi-san.”

“Eh?!” She unexpectedly turned her head at this serious inquiry.

Then her mother said, “Yumi-chan. You have a bad poker face.” And her mother laughed, with a look of pity.

Part 6.

During the afternoon of the next day, Kashiwagi-san came to the Fukuzawa residence to quickly offer his thanks again.

Yumi's father was working, and her mother was out shopping. Yūki was at home, but he had locked himself in his second floor bedroom. So inadvertently, it was Yumi who answered the intercom and came to the door.

"Hello." Kashiwagi-san was alone. "I've come as a representative for the Matsudaira family."

She watched Kashiwagi-san take out a huge box in a purple cover, much like a Japanese pastry chef of an old shop, and realized that Kashiwagi-san was more worried than usual. He didn't greet her with the usual "Hey", and he had come wearing a dark gray suit and a tie. She couldn't make out if the tie was navy, or just a very dark green. Last night, after all, he'd just been wearing a sweater. She understood that being someone's representative was hard work.

"Tōko's parents wanted to come here to offer their thanks, but it seems like Aunt... Tōko's mother is still a bit shocked. When she saw Tōko come in, she sighed and fell asleep right where she was. So I was asked to come and represent them."

"Oh."

"They're very relieved. They would have wanted to come and offer their thanks in person but, after all that's happened my aunt's not feeling very well. After the incident with Tōko, it seems like the house won't quiet down."

"Um, don't worry about it."

"Sure, but I did undertake this job, didn't I? I've become an actor in a situation where I shouldn't be acting."

Kashiwagi-san checked inside the high-quality Japanese sweets box, and confirming that he had actually given her the box, turned to Yumi and said, "Thank you."

"..." That was that.

He was a person to be used. He had no purpose if he did not fulfill the responsibility given to him. If Kashiwagi-san had been worried about what to do, then he had had the choice of not accepting the job in the first place, but that wouldn't have been very mature. He would not forgive her if she, in the absence of her parents, were to decline this gift. She had played around with the idea for a mere moment, and then rejected it.

Was it right to accept it when her parents were not there? If this was a delivery, then she would sign and accept the package immediately. But what if just a regular person were dropping the package off? She had received Lantern Festival Gifts and Seibo Gifts, but it had always been by businessmen.

“What should I do?” Kashiwagi-san spoke when it seemed as if Yumi would not accept.

“Right now, my parents aren't here.”

“So? You told me this before.”

“I'm wondering whether I should accept it.”

Voicing her concern to the person who had come to deliver the gift seemed like some sort of joke. But Kashiwagi-san gave a serious reply.

“It's fine. It's not some sort of trap. It's not something that you accept, and have no choice but to give some equivalent gift back. This is simply a gift showing the thanks of the Matsudaira family for the time that Tōko stayed here. If Yumi-chan's mother were here, what would she do?”

“I think she'd take it.” She would be afraid though.

“Then?” Kashiwagi-san smiled. “Well, why don't you take it for now. When is your mom coming back?”

“By evening,” Yumi answered. Her mother had gone out to buy groceries for dinner. She probably was not coming back until she was ready to start preparing dinner.

Kashiwagi-san took the box back lightly, and quickly looked at his watch.

“Then, five o’clock.”

“Five o’clock?”

“I won’t tell the Matsudaira family anything until five o’clock. If your mom comes and really denies the gift, then I’ll call them on the cell phone. I hope she comes quickly. I’ve been told that my job ends by five o’clock if I do not contact them.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I am. Do you want to accept it?” She nodded. Kashiwagi-san placed the box of pastries onto Yumi’s hands. It was extremely heavy. It felt more like a wooden box than just a box.

Only a man could lift something so heavy so easily, and talk peacefully while doing it.

Kashiwagi-san had said that she could not win if she defeated him, and as Yumi tried to find ways in which she was sharper than Kashiwagi-san, her jealousy came back. Maybe this time she would buy some dumbbells and try to lift some weights.

“Oh yeah. Even if Mom doesn’t come back by five, she will call.”

Kashiwagi-san did not know that Yumi had been thinking about dumbbells, and Yumi thought of herself in a towel after coming out of the shower and bowed her head down.

“Won’t you come inside, Kashiwagi-san?”

Yumi asked, mimicking her mother’s pushiness. She wondered if having Kashiwagi-san wait inside would be the honorable thing to do.

“Ha-ha-ha. There’s no way I can come inside while your parents are out.”

“But Yūki is here.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Should I call him?”

“She turned away from the front door, but then Kashiwagi-san called out, “There’s no need for that” and stopped her.

“I have come here only as a Matsudaira family representative.”

Kashiwagi-san began walking to the street where his red car was parked, and Yumi accompanied him. She didn’t want him to go home like this. Her sentiment, however, was wholly different from the feeling a young girl would feel when her lover is leaving and her feelings are a flutter. Yumi simply had something to ask Kashiwagi-san.

“Kashiwagi-san.”

“Yeah?”

“Why did Tōko-chan run away from home? Do you know?” Yumi asked pointedly, as Kashiwagi-san removed the key from his car door. And his normally bubbling smile faded a slight bit.

“...And what if I know?” Kashiwagi-san asked as if he was searching for something. Which meant that he probably did know. He wouldn’t have done anything had he not known.

“You just can’t tell me?” He knew, and so he was presented with the choice of either telling her or not telling her. Whichever one he chose she knew her life would be at least a bit changed afterward. To say “I know but I will not tell you” is different from saying “I do not know, so I cannot tell you.”

“Tōko-chan...”

“I’ve heard nothing about her,” Yumi confessed honestly. It was something she might have heard, but it wasn’t something that people often talked about.

“But in spite of all I’ve said, you still want to know?” For a second, it almost felt as if he was saying “This is a boring thing, you know” or “I’m telling you this, but I’m gonna get made fun of”, or “It’s just a romantic fancy”, or something like that. But it wasn’t. She wanted to label it one of those, and even though his choice of words and his previous mood made it feel like one of those, she knew instinctively that this was an incorrect assumption.

She had come to be interested in Tōko-chan. If she wanted to know what was going on, and if she could accept being offered such dark words, then she should know.

“That’s because you’re putting your interests ahead of others,” Kashiwagi-san whispered.

“Mine?”

“This isn’t a simple matter. This isn’t just some random gossip about some person. But if it’s Yumi-chan I’m telling, I can tell you, can’t I? I can just tell whomever I want.”

“...Huh?” Kashiwagi-san had grown deadly serious.

“Are you sure it’s okay? If I tell you, then you’ll know Tōko’s secret. And you’ll know it without Tōko knowing that you do. You should think about what that means.”

“What that... Means?”

“Can you just listen and hold on to the secret?”

“Ah.” It suddenly felt as if she had been tossed against something, and her face flattened.

“I...” She hadn’t given the matter enough thought. She hadn’t been planning to simply ask in such a manner. It seemed like a topic that needed a great deal of courage to discuss, and she hadn’t thought it did.

“For your sake, and Tōko-chan’s sake, think it over some more. You can ask me about the situation. If you do, I will answer.” Kashiwagi-san left the words hanging in the air, and left.

Yumi’s mother returned home shortly. She brought over the pastries, but she couldn’t pass on all the information to her parents. That she still talked with him even though she hadn’t taken the pastries, and that she had been rude by not letting him in, and that it had been bad of her to let Kashiwagi-san wait until five o’clock, all those things she couldn’t say.

Eventually, she got a call from Yūki. “Kashiwagi-sempai came over, and I didn’t know. Why didn’t you call me?” Even though it had felt like he was in his room and did not want to be disturbed, Yūki was making a fuss as soon as Kashiwagi-san had left.

“I was going to but Kashiwagi-san said that he had been sent over by the Matsudaira family, and said it was fine.”

“...He had only come to deliver the pastries?”

“Yep. I can give you the phone Yūki, but can you make the call?” Yumi tested Yūki by handing him the phone receiver. He took the receiver and quickly punched in Kashiwagi-san’s number.

“Ah, Sempai? Whassup?” Yumi heard Yūki’s voice and sighed. She still hadn’t found the courage she needed to. She hadn’t decided whether she could find the courage or not. And until she decided, she did not want to hear Kashiwagi-san’s voice.

A Little Bit Of Something

Part 1.

The closing ceremony that greeted the end of exams was being held this year on the last day of school. It was to be Christmas Eve.

Yumi had forgotten that last year, so she had not had a present ready for her Onee-sama. This year was different. As soon as the School Festival had finished, she had started thinking about what to do. She had splurged on the materials before final exams, and during exam week had hurriedly prepared it.

Ta-da! This year's present was the world's one and only hand-knitting! She had spent last night perfectly wrapping the gift, and had even added a card. She'd overlooked nothing. As soon as she had finished, she wanted nothing more than to show Onee-sama her feelings (though it was just a weird fancy). Visiting Onee-sama's room this early in the morning, knocking on her door, and handing over the present. It would be far from a sobering experience.

Visiting her during the school day when there would be a large group of people around wouldn't work. That's why, this year, she would disguise the present as a package for her Onee-sama and deliver it. If Onee-sama then felt that she had something else to do, she would go to her and say, "Wait a second, let me get you something," and leave her smartly.

Part 2.

“What?!”

It was 8 PM. Rose Mansion. Second Floor.

The school closing ceremony and mass had finished, and everyone was busily preparing for the party. Yumi gave a sudden outburst to one of Yoshino’s passing statements.

“Shh. You’re too loud.”

Yoshino grimaced, as she brought her index finger in front of Yumi-san’s mouth. Luckily, they were a bit far from Shimako-san and Noriko-chan, and they were absorbed in their own conversation. So Yumi’s surprise was not heard.

The third-years had not come.

The party preparations worked in an order. As soon as mass would finish, everyone would come to the Rose Mansion. They would busily decorate it, then bake the place full of pastries and cakes, and finally prepare tea. So this was the most basic step in the ladder of party preparation.

They had to clean a room that had been left alone for almost a week, they had to bring a whole bunch of food and place it in the fridge, and they had to bring up chairs from the first floor up to the second to make up for the chairs that they did not have. This kept them occupied.

Yumi toned down her volume, and asked Yoshino-san.

“Well, I called Tanaka, no Arima Nana...”

Yoshino-san said, a bit louder than she should have.

Why? Last week, on the last day of exams, Yoshino-san had said nothing about this.

But even had she suspected something, her mind had been so filled with planning for the amusement park date with Sachiko-sama that she had not noticed a thing.

Yoshino-san continued talking.

“That’s why I’m asking you to help me.”

“Help me?”

Arima Nana, whose name Yumi had only recently heard off, whose very mention sounded like some slip of paper from a surprise box, was flying knowingly off Yoshino-san’s lips.

Yoshino had previously introduced Nana as her “soon to be sœur” to Torii Eriko-sama.

Yoshino wanted to make Nana her sœur if she could not find anyone by her third year.

But this time, Yoshino wanted to invite her to a casual party. It felt like a hop, a step, or maybe even a jump up.

“Well anyway.”

Yoshino-san said.

“Yumi-san, you had said that you had wanted to invite Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan for the Christmas party, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t.”

Of course, Yumi-san knew that she wouldn’t explicitly say that she wanted to invite them. She wouldn’t say she didn’t want them invited either.

“Hey, listen to everything I’m trying to say. You wanted to call them, so I thought I could call my friends too. So that’s why I thought that they should come.”

“...What?”

Yoshino-san was just pushing words into Yumi’s mouth.

Well, whatever. She didn’t understand this thing at all. Arima Nana-san was a middle school student, and had never even seen the Yamayurikai once before. To offer a direct, personal invitation to such a person took real **guts**. She wanted to invite people who everyone knew very well so that Nana-san wouldn’t stick out.

“Plus won’t the turnout feel a little lonely this year? Last year we had eight Yamayurikai members? Plus Tsutako-san. But this year there are six members. And then with Tsutako-san, it’ll be seven? Sachiko-sama said we should invite more people, when Rei-chan had asked.”

So Yoshino-san heard Rei-sama and Onee-san talking about the party, and so she comes to “hey Yumi-san” her?

“So if we add three, maybe even four people, it’ll be like the voices of a large crowd echoing in the room. They said we could even invite first or second years.”

“Ugh.”

Now Yumi had to quickly go to Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan, invite them, and try to surreptitiously hint to them that she would like it if they came. Or at least, that’s what Yoshino-san was hinting at Yumi to do.

“When the new year starts, the third years will get busy, and we’ll have the Student Council Elections, and then everyone will stop coming so regularly to the meetings. So.”

So this was a good opportunity to call a lot of people, Yoshino-san was implying. Of course, Nana-san should also be one of these people.

But wait. Yumi had to ask something.

“Um, Yoshino-san. I need to ask you something. Did you promise Arima Nana-san that you would make her your sœur or something?”

“Not yet.”

“But you’re still bringing her here?”

Isn’t she being a bit overeager?

“Yeah... I wanted to introduce her to Rei-chan.”

“Wow... That’s impulsive.”

When Yoshino-san said that she wanted to introduce Nana-san to her Onee-sama, to a normal person, it would sound like she wanted to introduce her boyfriend. Sort of like “I want to meet his parents.”

“Not very. I just want to quickly introduce her myself and let her get to know Rei-chan.”

Yoshino-san said, slightly distastefully. Kind of like, continuing with the previous analogy, the boyfriend’s father not finding her up to snuff.

“Well... Are you sure?”

“For now at least.”

Yoshino-san seemed to feel as if she were outnumbered, but she obviously had no intention of losing. As her close friend, what would be the best thing to do now?

“Alright, I see. Then let’s get it all organized.”

Yumi-chan clapped her hands together, and called out to the White Rose Sisters.

“Shimako-san, Noriko-chan, are you guys done?”

They had some things to talk about.

It was about ten minutes from the drop-dead time to go back to class, so for now, the four sat down.

“It’s about the Christmas Party. It was feeling a bit lonely, so we decided to invite a few new people. Yoshino-san seems to have one person in mind. We still need another two or three people. Do you guys have anyone you’d like to call?”

“How about Tsutako-san...”

Shimako-san let the name out into the open. The Photography Club’s Ace had been invited to the party last year, and at the end of it had said “Next year for sure!” Shimako-san seemed to remember this.

“Ah, she was in the list of names to begin with. Along with the Onee-samas.”

We had thanked her tremendously for taking so many pictures last year, and Tsutako-san was much obliged to attend again this year.

“Then I can’t think of anyone else. How about you, Noriko?”

“Even I can’t really...”

Noriko-chan fell silent. She looked as if she were holding something back. But she also looked as if she wasn’t really troubling herself much about it.

“Then how about Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan?”

Yumi blurted out, and Yoshino-san exclaimed perhaps a bit too loudly “That would be great!” Then she softened her tone, and asked Noriko-chan “Right?”

“...Yeah.”

Noriko-chan seemed sunk deep in her thoughts. Yumi asked her a question.

“Could you please invite them?”

Part of it was that today was a holiday, but more importantly, she had not seen Tōko-chan’s face since the day when she had unexpectedly appeared at the Fukuzawa residence.

Yumi was still scared by what Kashiwagi-san had told her, and was still a bit afraid of meeting Tōko-chan. That’s why Yumi thought it best if Noriko-chan, a girl from Tōko-chan’s own class, were to go and invite her.

But being scared to talk to Tōko-chan, and not wanting to meet her were two different things. Actually, she wanted to look upon a Tōko-chan laughing along with her classmates in happiness.

But.

“I cannot.”

Noriko-chan replied.

“Huh?”

Responses other than “Sure” or “I’ll do it” were responses Yumi could not even fathom.

“Now, why...”

“I said that I can’t do it.”

Noriko-chan cut Yumi off clearly. So then, she hadn’t mistook a “sure” with an “I cannot”. She had been clearly turned down.

“Noriko-chan! How dare you talk to your Sempai like that?”

Yoshino-san exclaimed, as she stood straight up.

But Yumi liked the fact that, even though Yumi was her sempai, Noriko had still been able to clearly say what she had wanted to say.

Yoshino, who still seemed as if she had a much longer diatribe to fulfill, let the matter go -- at least, she sat down and let Yumi take over.

She had been deeply shaken by Noriko-chan's reaction. But Yumi wanted to know why Noriko had denied, and so had let herself embrace stillness.

“Why? Have Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan fought again?”

“No.”

Noriko-chan shook her head.

“Then why don't you want to call her to the party?”

“I'm not saying that I don't want them called to the party. If Tōko or Kanako-san come to the party, it doesn't matter much to me.”

“...Huh?”

They hadn't fought. She didn't mind if the two would come to the party. Then why?

“I cannot invite them. It was Yumi-sama who suggested inviting them, was it not? Then shouldn't it be Yumi-sama's duty to invite them?”

“Duty...”

Yumi hadn't even thought of that.

“Well.”

Yumi had thought that, because Noriko-chan was in the same class as the two, she could easily be able to invite them. But in Noriko-chan's world, it seemed like her concept of “duty” entailed some important obligation that Yumi had irrevocably shrugged.

“Basically, I can't do what you're asking me to.”

When Yumi saw the determination on Noriko-chan's face, she knew that no matter what, Noriko-chan would not change her mind. Then.

“Understood.”

Someone who seemed to also have understood this, suddenly rose from her seat. It was Shimako-san, who had been quiet until now.

“I’ll be the one to do it.”

“Huh?”

“The bell will soon ring. So if we want to invite them, we would like to do it as quickly as possible, right?”

“Shimako-sa... Onee-sama!”

Noriko-chan hurriedly chased after Shimako-san, who had already begun walking.

“Onee-sama shouldn’t have to go! Yumi-sama and I were just...!”

“It doesn’t matter who invites them.”

Shimako-san turned, and smiled.

“But!”

“Noriko. When you refused, it was your whim. That doesn’t mean that you can control what *I* do. No matter what, if it’s something Yumi-san wishes me to do, then that’s reason enough. Isn’t that another tenet of the ‘duty’ that you follow?”

“...”

Noriko-chan didn’t speak. She then looked at Shimako-san with a sad, painful look on her face, and teared up a little.

She seemed a lot like the crybaby in Yumi. She didn’t know about Shimako-san, but Yumi had never seen Noriko-chan like this.

Noriko-chan had always been one to stand up against anything and face it. She was a kid who, even though she may cry, seemed as if the passion of justice would burn in her heart. But now, Noriko seemed completely weak. She had no retort to Shimako-san’s remark, and simply stood there.

“I’m sorry Shimako-san. I’ll go.”

Yumi, who couldn’t stand doing nothing for so long, spoke.

“Then, shall we go together?”

Shimako-san smiled as she always did.

She was smiling so even when she had turned to Noriko-chan. Shimako-san's words had warmth. That's why they were words that echoed inside one's heart, rather than words shouted in hysteria.

After giving the two some distance, followed behind, with Yoshino-san holding the rear.

This way, the first year Camellia class Noriko-chan, had no choice but to return back to her classroom, even if she didn't want to.

Or maybe Yoshino-san had come simply to see what the fuss had been all about.

"But, why did you want to be the one to go, Shimako-san?"

Yumi asked, as she walked along the school's corridors.

"Why not?"

"Well, and maybe I'm wrong in this but, it doesn't seem like it's very important to Shimako-san whether Tōko-chan or Kanako-chan are called to the party. Even if we were to call someone else, Shimako-san would greet them the same way, and talk to them the same way, right? Even if we only end up bringing along Yoshino-san's friend and Tsutako-san, the party wouldn't be affected, right?"

"I see."

Shimako-san nodded, then spoke.

"But, no matter what amount of guests Yoshino-san ends up bringing, it wouldn't be right. Tsutako-san would be fully occupied by taking pictures, rather than actually socializing at the party, right? Truth is, I'd feel a bit awkward if we were having only one guest."

"But then."

Instead of going against Noriko-chan's wishes and calling Tōko-chan or Kanako-chan, we could've called any old underclassman. Shimako-san clarified.

"I followed my heart."

"Huh?"

"Somehow, I felt that it would be best to invite Tōko-chan."

"Somehow?"

Yumi asked, and Shimako rather than respond back, seemed to whisper something to herself.

It seems like something very important was hidden within that 'somehow'.

Part 3.

Why had this even happened?

Noriko thought to herself, as she plodded along the hallways.

Noriko herself had been the cause, she realized.

But she just couldn't get herself to accept that.

Archetypically bad things were simply bad. Even letting Shimako-san scold her would be better than saying empty words to Tōko.

So she should have accepted the outcome as it was.

She understood this, but still could not so simply dispel the doubt from her heart.

In spite of turning Yumi down, she ended up being whisked into a more fundamental conflict. Noriko's show of emotion had sprung Shimako-san into action.

Shimako-san and Yumi-sama were walking about one classroom in front of Noriko. The two were talking, not even turning their heads once.

Did Noriko really want Shimako-san to turn around and look at her, or was she better off if Shimako-san didn't, Noriko pondered, as she walked along.

Bum-Bum-Bum-Bum.

Noriko had tried to present her just argument to Shimako, but had teared up. (Noriko felt depressed.)

Those tears weren't the tears of being talked into defeat, or tears of disappointment while being scolded. Rather, rather... They were tears that came out from self-pity.

Had Shimako-san understood, maybe she wouldn't have been so harsh in her rejection of Noriko's reasoning. Nobody had really understood, and so she had lost against Yumi-sama.

Shimako-san had reacted the way she did to punish Noriko. It made Noriko hang her head down in defeat.

The plodding sound her footsteps made down the corridor seemed to perfect words to describe herself now.

Bum-Bum-Bum-Bum

“I’m sorry.”

The words being whispered within her heart seemed to be echoed in the air.

Noriko did not react, plodded one step forward, then stopped.

“Sorry?”

She realized that she had forgotten what was going on around her. Next to her, Shimazu Yoshino-sama stood with a serious expression on her face.

“That this... Um... Happened between Noriko-chan and Shimako-san... Well I was thinking maybe it was my fault. I thought I should at least, um, apologize or something.”

Yoshino-sama had a soft, meek expression on her face, and bent her head down. It was unbelievable that this was the same Shimazu Yoshino who only minutes ago had zealously exclaimed “How dare you talk to your Sempai like that?” Still, the highs and lows of the passion did indeed fit Yoshino-sama’s personality.

“I’m afraid I don’t really know what you are apologizing for, Yoshino-sama.”

Noriko-chan admittedly candidly.

This is what had started it all, Noriko had kept pondering from the beginning, and so she had rationalized that it had all come from within her. So where Yoshino-sama’s apology came from, she couldn’t begin to guess.

“Well, I’m the one who wanted to invite Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan in the first place...”

Yoshino-sama said.

“Huh?”

“Yumi-san was just trying to do what I had asked her to.”

“I... Don’t really understand where you’re going with this, Yoshino-sama.”

“Because I had asked her to bring some underclassmen to the party.”

“Right.”

She had heard the whole thing. She didn't really feel like this was helping in any way, but she felt that she should listen to what Yoshino-sama was saying.

“So, you know...”

“Ah.”

Noriko-chan suddenly understood. Yoshino-sama had found a person whom she wanted to claim as *sœur*, but bar that, she had thought that she would introduce the girl to everyone. For her, Yoshino-sama had wanted to call other guests, so the girl's presence would not stick out so markedly.

“Well... Congratulations... Is that what you're looking for here?”

Whether this allusion to the *sœur* oath was in fact a curse for Yoshino-sama or not, she did not know. When Noriko had accepted Shimako-san's rosary, many people had congratulated her, so Noriko felt that was an accurate response.

“Not yet, not yet. We're not going up those stairs yet.”

Yoshino-sama laughed slightly and shook her head.

Obviously. Yoshino-sama's face was only filled with thirty percent happiness. The remaining seventy percent showed a face that hinted at a world of trouble yet to come.

“Anyway... That's why when you had said that it was Yumi-sama's duty to invite Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan, really it should have been my duty. But Shimako-san had stood up before I could say so, so I felt that the misunderstanding was my fault.”

“No, it wasn't your fault...”

But with that, Noriko began reassessing her thoughts and actions. It would have been impolite to have said this to Yoshino-sama.

And then, Yoshino-sama began matter-of-factly discussing words that seemed to be answers to a deep secret.

“But when I heard Yumi-san speak up at you, she didn’t seem very surprised.”

These unexpected words stunned Noriko.

Noriko was so surprised, that she hadn’t even realized that she had stopped walking.

Yoshino-sama turned her head around to look at Noriko.

“I think I sort of understand. If I had asked Noriko-chan to invite Tōko-chan, then you would have done it, wouldn’t you?”

“...”

“But because Yumi-chan had asked, you didn’t want to, did you?”

Noriko thoughtfully nodded. Yoshino-sama wasn’t simply toying with Noriko’s heart by guessing at her motives. For some reason, in spite of everything, Yoshino-sama actually understood how Noriko had felt.

“I see. Well then, Noriko-chan, you would be feeling fed up with everything then, right?”

Yoshino-sama was spot on.

“That’s why you’re acting like that.”

“Hahaha, I see.”

Noriko laughed heartily, and Yoshino-sama stretched languidly.

“So then why don’t we just drop the matter?”

“Huh?”

“Things just turn out the way they’ll turn out. That’s the way human relationships work. Or maybe, things turn out the way they should is a better way to paraphrase it.”

“I know what you mean, but...”

“Well, there’s nothing else we can do. They’re our friends. Even if they’re not asking anything of us, we still need to give them the benefit of the doubt.”

Yoshino-sama spoke, as if she were talking about her own matter.

Actually, Yoshino-sama was probably explaining half of it to herself. In other words, as Yumi-sama's close friend, Yoshino-sama herself had been in a similar position. That's why Noriko-chan was just sharing sentiments with Yoshino-sama.

As the two continued walking and talking, they came up to none other than the First Year Camellia class. Yoshino-sama stopped in front of the back door.

“When I think about it, I guess we just aren't there yet.”

“We?”

“Yumi-san and I. Up against Shimako-san.”

Yumi-sama and Shimako-san were in front of the door, just walking out the door having called Tōko and Kanako-san to step outside with them.

“I felt it, you know. Right then, Shimako-san had acted like a true Onee-sama.”

“Yes. She really is an Onee-sama.”

Yoshino-sama patted Noriko and whispered “Just for you”. An affectionate without any second meaning.

“But Yoshino-sama will soon get there.”

If Yoshino-sama actually found herself a *petite sœur*, then she'd have no choice but to become a *grande sœur* herself. Truth be told, Shimako-san at first had been a bit billowy. It's not as if Noriko had given Shimako-san some special power. Their time as *sœurs* together had simply made them so. So if the girl that Yoshino-san was going to bring to the party was actually going to become her *sœur*, then all her complaints of “not yet, not yet” would have little choice but to stop.

Noriko's remark had meant to cheer Yoshino-sama on, but Yoshino-sama's expression had clouded.

“That's true but... I'm sorry.”

“Huh?”

“Even if she may become my sœur, I feel like I put too much of a burden on Noriko-chan. That’s why I had apologized earlier.”

“Again, I’m very sorry Yoshino-sama... I don’t really know why you are apologizing...”

That the mystery would solve itself by this evening, Noriko could not know.

Part 4.

The tall girl, with flawless straight hair, and the not-so-tall girl with her hair done up into coils were standing together, with bewildered expressions on their faces.

“It’s... Today?”

It was the most predictable reaction possible. The Christmas Party she was inviting them to was but a few hours away. There could not be two people in existence who could say yes to such a quickly posed invitation (with last year’s inclusion of Tsutako-san being an exception).

“Can you come just for a bit?”

“I have a few things to do this evening, so...”

Kanako-chan said. What could she do? It was the start of the semester holiday, and it was Christmas Eve. It was a time when most people had plans. Yumi knew this.

“How about Tōko-chan?”

Shimako-san asked. And her answer was.

“Well, I...”

Perhaps she felt awkward after meeting Yumi during the exam holidays, but her eyes would not meet Yumi’s. She was facing Shimako-san.

And when Shimako-san and Yumi began exchanging looks that neither of them would be coming to the party, Kanako-chan quickly spoke up.

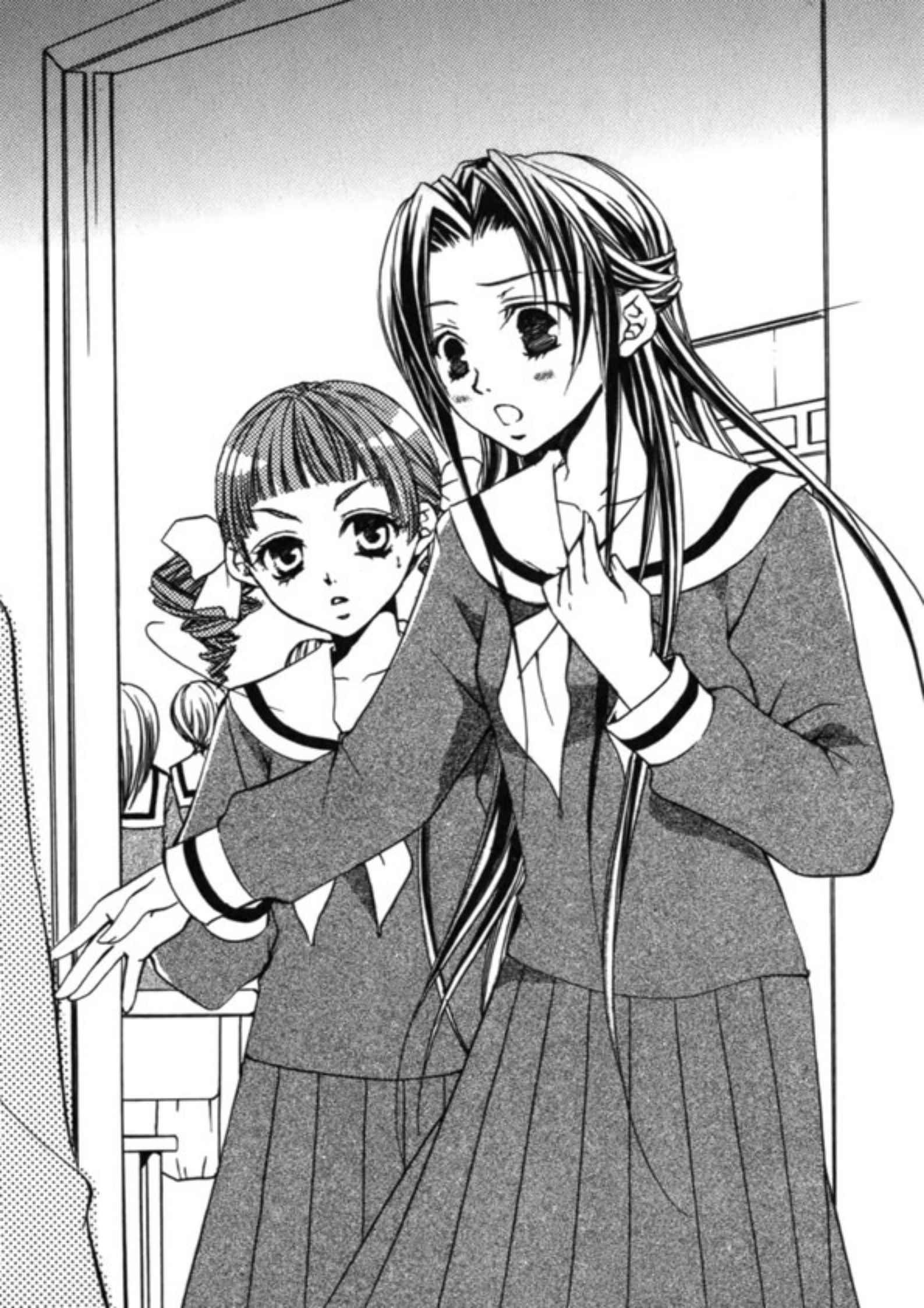
“Ah, but, if you pardon me the rudeness of leaving halfway through the party... Then I’d definitely want to come. Right, Tōko-san?”

“Um.”

Tōko-chan, who had just rejected the invitation, did not know how best to react to Kanako-chan’s announcement.

“It’ll be held at the Rose Mansion after the mass, right? I see. Wow, it’s coming up very soon.”

“Ah, um...”



It sounded much like a bike carrying a heavy load would when the rider would sit carelessly upon it, or if someone sped off with a bike then chose an awkward time to stop. The relentless acceleration of Kanako-chan, and Tōko-chan's careless drag down. As if she had given up resisting, and simply sighing and nodding.

Kanako-chan refused to decrease her speech.

“Should I bring something to the party?”

“Nope. Just yourself is enough. We already brought most of what was necessary during the morning. Though we may ask you to help us out with the party shortly before it begins.”

“Of course. If there's anything we can do for you, then just ask.”

Kanako-chan grasped Tōko-chan's hand in a move of affirmation as she said “we”. Just when had the two become such good friends.

“Well, we'll see you later then.”

The bell rang, and Yumi and Shimako-san walked back together down the corridor.

They saw Noriko-chan enter the first-year Camellia classroom through the back door. Perhaps even Kanako-chan and Tōko-chan had seen her go in. Next to the door, obviously, was Yoshino-san, and she greeted them with a “Good Job”.

As the three were walking back toward the second-years' classrooms, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san said at the same time.

“Tōko-chan...”

To make matters worse, they were trying to say the same thing.

“She's made good friends, hasn't she?”

Noriko-chan and Kanako-chan she meant.

Yumi didn't know whether Tōko-chan herself knew they were her friends.

No, she probably did. But there was no way she could actually realize what she was feeling. Yumi hadn't thought about that earlier.

As Yumi and the others began walking back to their classrooms, Tōko-chan dipped her head down.

If one looked at her for a while, that's all one would see. For one unfamiliar with what was going on, only a strangely vague gesture would be seen. But Yumi obviously understood all of this.

“Thanks for the other day.”

Tōko-chan felt that she expressed all the words that she couldn't before in that one phrase.

About some things Tōko-chan was incredibly stubborn, but about other things oddly delicate.

Which is why Tōko-chan always padded her heart with extra layers. So despite her overt actions, the inside of herself would be able to take certain blows.

Yumi thought this much through, and suddenly paused.

(Why am I...)

She had spent so much time thinking about Tōko-chan that she finally understood.

Such things were nothing but an annoyance to Tōko-chan.

But then, what should she do?

If she kept approaching Tōko-chan the way she was, they would only grow farther apart.

(Resolve?)

Kashiwagi-san's words echoed pointedly in her mind.

Part 5.

Yumi had given Sachiko a semester-vacation present for good grades before the vacation herself, and had told Sachiko-sama that she didn't have to return it. That Yumi had been able to give such a present made her happy.

Of course, if Sachiko-sama's grades had not been good, she wouldn't have told Sachiko-sama to give her back the amusement park date (not that any such thing was possible in the first place). Even though it had been more than a semester ago, she still couldn't leave behind the prickling of her conscience. It made her sleep shallow, or at least she didn't feel refreshed.

"Yumi."

For the last few days, Sachiko-sama had been looking very happy. She hadn't just been happy, but even more beautiful than she usually was.

At noon, on the end of the semester-end holiday preceding the second semester, an intimate Christmas mass was taking place.

"Gokigenyou, Onee-sama."

Yumi walked behind Sachiko-sama as she walked into the church, and took her place in the seat next to her Onee-sama.

The mass was voluntary, so there were no lines according to grade levels, or classes. Sachiko-sama had brought a chair over for Yumi, but even if she had not, the chair next to Sachiko-sama would have been considered Yumi's, and it would have been left empty for her. Next to Rei-sama too, Yoshino-san's chair awaited.

"I'm sorry about the amusement park."

After the incident, they had talked with each other on the phone and everything was fine, but Sachiko-sama had to offer an honorable apology to Yumi.

"No, I'm the one who should be. Sayako Obaa-sama's Mille-Feuille was delicious."

Just as Yumi had during the phone call, she talked about how delicious the cake was, after Sachiko-sama had apologized for what had happened at the amusement park. In fact, the sort of conversation Yumi and Onee-sama were having made Yumi remember Sayako Obaa-sama's idle gossiping, but maybe that kind of gossip was better left to adults.

"I think your mom also called to thank us for the cake, Yumi. I believe she sounded very thankful for it."

"It looked beautiful, so at first my mom had thought that it was a cake from the bakery."

"Please stop talking so well about my mother's cooking. If she hears all these compliments, she'll again make a huge batch of cake. This time it'll be Yumi's job to eat all the cake!"

"I'd love to eat it all!"

-- How wonderful.

Even in the few moments leading up to the mass, the two giggled in light conversation. It was the majesty of simply being around one another.

Yumi was very happy that Sachiko-sama was her Onee-sama. She was very happy that she was Sachiko-sama's petite sœur. After the two giggled some more, Sachiko-sama asked.

"What did you do during break?"

"Umm..."

If someone other than Sachiko-sama had asked that question, then she would have immediately replied "I went to the amusement park with my Onee-sama!" But that would have been redundant when said to the Onee-sama in question, now wouldn't it.

"Well, I'll wrote some New Year's cards, and worked on my knitting."

Yumi wondered what she'd say if Sachiko-sama asked what she was knitting. If she did ask, Yumi would probably just give it to her right now. She had obviously brought Sachiko-sama's present in her bag.

But Sachiko-sama thankfully diverted the conversation into another direction.

“Ah, New Year’s Cards?”

“Well, I thought it better if I didn’t send Onee-sama any.”

This past summer, Sachiko-sama’s maternal grandmother had passed away.

Sachiko-sama clapped her hands and said “Of course, of course”. She fell silent after clapping her hands, but because the church was filled with the low whispers of all the attendees, the clap didn’t make a very perceptible sound.

“I forgot to tell you Yumi. Even if we didn’t exchange any cards, I wanted a card from you, Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama said as she lowered her voice. But if they didn’t do an actual exchange, wouldn’t it be Sachiko-sama who was supposed to send Yumi the New Year’s card?

“Are you sure I should send you one?”

“It’s fine. We’re still in mourning, but I’m still a kid, and I never actually lived with my grandmother. It’s okay if I don’t participate in mourning with the adults, or so my parents said.”

“Oh.”

“It’ll be my last New Year’s card from high school after all. I thought it would be great, no matter how I managed to get the card. Plus, I should think of my grandmother’s memory, shouldn’t I? Would not exchanging cards make my grandmother happy? And so forth.”

The explanation was forthcoming.

“In her final years, my grandmother only thought of her years as a student. It’s as if she met me, and was transported back into her life as a schoolgirl. She hadn’t even met you Yumi, but still thought of you as a friend...”

So Sachiko-sama wanted to take her New Year’s Card and place it behind the picture of her grandmother. In other words, it was of the utmost importance that Yumi send the card, it had become a great responsibility.

“Oh no...”

Yumi squeaked in shame, and Sachiko-sama began laughing in response. Then she suddenly change the subject “So?”

“Have you been asking Kanako-chan and Tōko-chan to come?”

“Ah?”

“You invited them to the party, didn’t you?”

At first, Yumi wondered why Sachiko would know something like that. Then, when she thought about it, she remembered that Yoshino-san had starting telling Rei-sama about something with “Yumi-san”, so obviously Sachiko-sama would know. In fact, if Sachiko-sama hadn’t have known, she would have been concerned.

“They may have to leave early but, they’ll come.”

“I see.”

Sachiko-sama’s whisper, and the entire conversation, cut off suddenly.

Yumi wondered if Sachiko-sama knew that Tōko-chan had visited her house during the semester holiday. Maybe it would be best if Tōko-chan herself told Sachiko-sama.

They were distant relatives after all, so perhaps Sachiko-sama had learned about it from somewhere. So if Sachiko-sama didn’t mention anything about it, wouldn’t it be better if Yumi acted as if she didn’t know anything was going on?

On the other hand, if Sachiko-sama hadn’t heard anything yet, perhaps it was better if Yumi told Sachiko-sama.

Even Kashiwagi-san had kept quiet about all of this, so she didn’t know what the best thing to do was.

If she told Onee-sama everything with sincerity, Yumi knew that she would hide nothing. But this wasn’t something she was worried about with her own relationships, and Yumi was worried about the answer she’d get.

While Yumi was worrying about such things, the priest entered, and her worries had to come to an end for now.

Not just Yumi, but all the other students in the room quite suddenly stopped their chattering.

Of Strange Things

Part 1.

The mass had ended about an hour ago.

The roses went back to their homeroom classrooms, grabbed their things, and started walking toward the Rose Mansion. Shimako-san and Rei-sama had already arrived at the Rose Mansion's second floor, now converted into a party room.

“What?! Shimako-san is baking a cake?!”

Yoshino-san exclaimed, as she walked through the door that Yumi was holding open.

“What happened to you?!”

Yoshino-san asked Shimako-san.

“I just thought, well, I'd try it out you know...”

“Just... Try it out?”

“And then, maybe Rei-sama can teach me a thing or two.”

“Hmmpfh.”

Yoshino-san whispered coldly, and then swept herself up into her surroundings, and began setting the cups.

Yumi helped too. She was making sure that there was enough black tea to make for toasting, and picking out the correct tea leaves, and such.

“...”

Shimako had said she'd like to just “try it out”, but Yumi knew it had to be more than that. That was why Yoshino-san hmmpfhed, and then disappeared into her work.

After all, next year, none of them would be able to eat Rei-sama's well known “Bûche de Noël prepared with supermarket ingredients”. Shimako-san obviously wanted to be able to keep the recipe going in the Rose family. Yumi couldn't believe how much the forthcoming days hinted at those two dreaded characters: “graduation”.

Table, check. Drinks, check. Cups, check. The cake was progressing according to plan. Then everything seemed fine.

“How should we decorate the place this year?”

Yumi and Yoshino-san looked at each other.

“Hm?”

Last year, the former Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Yōko-sama, had decorated the place in a torrent of cheap decorations. Should they do that again this year? Rei-sama replied “Even if you don’t add any decorations, it’s fine” and turned to look at Yumi and Yoshino-san. Suddenly quick footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs.

“I’m sorry I’m late... *Huff*”

Noriko-chan suddenly appeared in the room, who was struggling to catch her breath.

“I got a little busy, and...”

As Noriko-chan explained why she had gotten late, she came up to Yumi and hung her head low.

“I’m very sorry about this morning...”

“No it’s fine. I’m sorry too.”

Yumi too hung her head low.

Yumi was happy that Noriko-chan had decided to talk with her. The way things had ended between them had just left a bitter taste in Yumi’s mouth. Yumi thought she would try to change things, but Yumi didn’t know what to do with that passionate part Noriko-chan. Yumi had begun brooding about how to deal with it.

“You came alone?”

“Kanao-san and Tōko are on their way. We met up with Rosa Chinensis on the way, and she told only me to go on ahead.”

“Aha.”

The real bother was Tōko-chan and her tepid attitude. She had been acting bleak while coming here, and had probably troubled Noriko-chan and Kanao-chan.

“Well then.”

Noriko-chan slipped outside for a second, and brought in a box that obviously seemed like it had been brought specifically for the party. It was a fifty centimeter thick ball box.

“Rosa Chinensis had told me that there was some package to pick up from the first to the second floor. Is this it?”

The box had written on it in thick writing ‘Christmas Party materials’.

“Ahh...”

How the handwriting brought her back. There was no mistaking it, it was the work of Mizuno Yōko-sama.

Yumi didn’t have to open the box to know what was inside. They were last year’s shelf embellishments and Christmas Party decorations, which had been lying dormant for a year, and they had come back to them.

“O, Oh! This is!”

“Wow, it’s still there is it?”

Rei-sama and Shimako-san, who were on their one hour break, hurriedly came to look inside. They took but one look at the box, and began wondrously calling out.

If Sachiko-sama went out of the way to bring it to Noriko-chan to hand off to the Rosas, then they had no choice but to use it.

Yumi opened the cover of the ball box, and began passing out a cardboard crown, and a chain with hoop-like links.

But to think that it had been treasured for a year. Now that she thought about it, when had the box been dug up?

Sachiko-sama was one to be feared. And of course, the one who had collected these things all together, Yōko-sama.

“What an amazing perception...”

Noriko-chan joined them in putting up the decorations. Rei-sama and Shimako-san went back to their cake making. And Yumi-san.

“Kanao-chan and the rest will be coming soon right? Then, I’ll be right back.”

Yoshino quickly exited the Rose Mansion. She was probably going to greet Arima Nana-san.

Yumi suddenly became busy in the business of people and greetings. But somewhere a bit far from Yumi, someone sighed.

“That Yoshino...”

Rei-sama clasped her hands together underneath the table and once more sighed loudly.

Part 2.

Where Yoshino thought she would go to greet Nana, she instead met Sachiko-sama.

Sachiko-sama was bringing along Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan.

“Gokigenyou, everyone.”

Yoshino was the first to welcome the visitors. Great great, the two of them had finally arrived. Now the conditions for introducing Nana were set.

“Gokigenyou, Rosa Foetida en Bouton.”

“Gokigenyou, Yoshino-sama.”

Kanako-chan greeted her perkily, while Tōko-chan greeted her mildly. Somehow, she had managed to bring a “I was dragged along” attitude in with her. She held hands with Kanako-chan and Noriko-chan, and was simply talking with the two. No, they weren’t holding hands -- at least Kanako-chan’s grip wasn’t. It was to prevent Tōko-chan from running away.

“Where are you headed Yoshino-chan?”

Sachiko-sama asked.

“Just to grab someone.”

Yoshino wasn’t willing to reveal just who she was yet, and Sachiko-sama didn’t ask.

“I see. Thanks for the hard work then. Is everyone there already?”

“My Onee-san is there, and Shimako-san, and Yumi-san, oh and Noriko-chan too. Ahh, but they’ve all been in a group for a while now I guess.”

Sachiko-sama nodded, then spoke as if she suddenly had thought of something.

“Well, if you see Tsutako-san, could you say something to her for me? Tell her that if she doesn’t pick up the pace a bit, the party will start without her.”

“Sure thing.”

Said Yoshino, as she began walking again. Though Yoshino didn't really think she'd meet Tsutako-san anywhere.

Right now, Tsutako-san had probably dragged someone in front of the Maria-sama statue, and had begun taking a flurry of pictures.

The Closing Ceremony, after all, came right before a long vacation, and so many girls would be found about the school falling into the bonds of sisterhood. Especially around this time of the year, with Christmas and the end of the year coming up, it is as if all the girls' bottled feelings would come gushing out.

She knew, because she had seen several such instances since she had come to school.

For that matter, why had Sachiko-sama known that Yoshino wasn't really looking for Tsutako-san?

Yoshino walked inside the middle school building, and found it deserted.

Yoshino-san opened the classroom door, and found Nana sitting there, by herself.

"I'm sorry. Had you been waiting a very long time?"

"I had."

Nana, who had inserted herself into a library book, had brought along a coat and even a handbag, not because she had been ready to get up and go at any time, but because a single step into the classroom made Yoshino realize how cold it was.

The heater had shut off, so it obviously had been a while. The hallways too had been cold, but because Yoshino had been walking quickly, she hadn't noticed. But sitting in a large room, alone, in a chair, obviously made the room feel cold.

"Have you been here since the end of homeroom?"

"No. I went to the mass to kill some time."

"Yoshino-sama didn't notice me."

"Ah..... Um okay."



Even if Yoshino had recognized her, she wouldn't have said anything, and so one couldn't really call Yoshino disinterested. Rei-chan had been sitting right next to her, and so if Yoshino had called out to Nana, then everything would have come to a head right then and there, and Yoshino's big plan of introducing Nana to Rei-chan at the Christmas Party would have been a failure. Plus, Rei-chan had seen Nana at the 'Hotel in the Middle of the Forest'.

"No, you were right, you hadn't seen me. The middle school girls wanted to keep a distance from the high school Onee-samas, and chose to sit quietly behind them."

"Oh, really?"

Yoshino had never been to a mass in middle school. Before she had undergone the heart surgery, Yoshino would have never even dreamed of choosing to stay in a cold place for long periods of time. Of course, she hadn't been able to go to very hot places either. But this past of Yoshino's seemed to her like some time long ago, in a faraway place.

"Shall we go?"

"Sure."

"Nana picked up her bag, and opened her coat."

"Ah, I'm nervous."

It was Yoshino who said it, not Nana.

"Why are you nervous, Yoshino-sama?"

I'm the one who should be in this situation, Nana seemed to say as she inclined her head. These words that Yoshino had just uttered in haste refused to go away.

"Um. Well, uh, you know. I have to take you there with me. I was thinking about how I should introduce you, and that sort of thing."

"Is that sort of stuff really that hard?"

It was an innocent, neutral question, uttered blandly. A question of pure poison, thought Yoshino. The only kind of answer she could give in this situation is one that had no substance to it.

“No, it isn’t, but...”

Yoshino smiled uselessly.

No matter what happened, at least Yoshino had finally found the way she would introduce Nana to Rei-chan.

It would be a competition. She’d tell them to compete. Following the tradition of Rei-chan’s kendo, Rei-chan’s opponent will be this middle school student.

“It’s not something I’m really worrying about. Just a what-should-I-do kind of thing.”

But the rest of the people awaiting their return to the Rose Mansion wasn’t Rei-chan. Plus there was no-one else there who even had an inkling of experience with kendo. Those people would judge for themselves what kind of person they thought Nana to be.

For example, if Yoshino-chan promised to Nana that Nana would be her prospective sœur, then the situation would resolve nicely. It was the easiest way to introduce her to everyone else.

Nana was the middle school girl that Yoshino liked the most. The problem was, Yoshino really couldn’t find any other words to describe their relationship.

The reason she was nervous was because she didn’t know how the others would react.

The reason she was nervous was because she didn’t know why Nana was coming.

“Hm? You’re nervous about a what-should-I-do thing...?”

But a feeling so close to Yoshino’s heart was something Nana had no way of knowing.

“Well, I’m just asking but, why wouldn’t you be feeling nervous?”

It would obviously be weird for Yoshino to be nervous in this situation, but that was because she knew this about herself. And anyway, Yoshino wanted to find out the reason.

“The Rose Mansion is a place where all Middle School students want to come close to. It’s where the high school student council meets, is it not? It’s naturally a place where you have to keep your guard up.”

It seemed as if she was talking about the distinction between Home and Away matches.

“It doesn’t really seem that way though.”

“But it is, so that’s why I wouldn’t be nervous.”

“I see. So it’s just an argument for argument’s sake.”

“Yup.”

Nana said without any pressure. Yoshino both envied and hated Nana for this. Because Nana had no intention to be nervous, she had no other goal but to attend the Rose Mansion’s party.

That was why when Yoshino had called Nana up over vacation and asked her hesitantly whether she wanted to come to the party, she immediately accepted. At the time, Yoshino had thought nothing of it.

For Nana, the party at the Rose Mansion would be nothing but another one of her many parties.

“Let’s go.”

Yoshino said once again.

She said it more to encourage herself, than to tell Nana something.

Ike Ike, Go Go.

And so the starting pistol went off. And later, it would feel as if she had seen the finish line ahead and had begun running too quickly.

Part 3.

“At least, let me take some group pictures.”

Tsutako-san said.

Sachiko-sama had brought the two first-years inside. One side of the party felt very tense, while everyone on the other side was so well mannered that there seemed to be a coldness bordering on rudeness present. Those who milled about in the middle were spending time picking which side they wanted to go to, and as soon as a gap set in within the crowd, the Photography Club’s ace walked in.

“Gokigenyou, everyone. I’m sorry I’m late. Thank you for inviting me again this year. Am I the last one? No, I can’t see Yoshino-san...”

“Yoshino...”

As if reacting to the sound of a needle dropping, Rei’s face scrunched in tension. Right then, the very person in question, Yoshino-san walked in with her guest.

“I’m sorry for leaving everyone waiting... Huh?”

Perhaps it was because the room felt different than what she expected it to look like; Yoshino faltered. The room did not match a single aspect of what she had imagined it to be while coming here.

“Ah... Um?”

When Yoshino realized that she had missed the time for introductions, her mind blanked, and she stood up in desperation.

Fight, Yoshino-san.

Until Yoshino-san smoothed everything over with the others and Nana-san, Nana-san could not do anything of her own.

“...”

That said, even Yumi’s mind was drawing blanks as Yumi tried to think what she could do to get the stale air of the situation to circulate once more.

Perhaps Yumi should instead spend her time trying to properly greet Kanako-chan and Tōko-chan, who seemed to work like an on-off switch.

But then Yumi would be abandoning her friend's middle school girl, Nana, who would be meeting with the Yamayurikai for the first time.

Everyone's attention seemed to be focused on Nana huh? That was weird.

Now that everyone was here, shouldn't they start the group welcomes? But if they were planning to do welcomes, then why hadn't they been done already? If they started the welcomes now, it would seem very sketchy.

While everyone had been chewing over their own thoughts, they watched as a new person entered the room. It was the wrong time to come in, and it had left Yoshino seemingly down.

That was when Tsutako-san said.

"Well then. At least, should we get the group pictures out of the way?"

"Huh?"

Well then? Why now? Yumi looked up at Tsutako-san's face.

"Come on, some people here have to leave early, don't they? Plus I was thinking that this sort of tense picture would be good, especially in a group picture. Also, is there anyone who isn't here yet?"

Two, four, six, eight, in total ten people. No-one was late. Yumi shook her head, and Tsutako-san clapped her hands together and exclaimed "Perfect".

"Could everyone please form there into two lines? The three Roses and Kanako-chan, please line up behind Yumi-sama. Those names I didn't call please line up in front of her."

Tsutako-san dispatched the instructions crisply.

"Uh, could the people in the back line please crouch a little? Great, that's perfect."

Everyone had formed their two lines perfectly. At least, with everyone moving around, perhaps the social emptiness that had opened up would fill up.

The room had been filled with the question “Who is she?” when Nana walked it, but now with all of the filling in empty spaces, and the standing up straight, the room’s atmosphere became conducive to conversation once more.

Tōko-chan was not anymore throwing sour looks everywhere.

Kanako-chan seemed to see this change in Tōko-chan and fell more at ease, relaxing the tight smile she had on, and secretly letting out a sigh of relief.

“Kanako-chan.”

Yumi spoke softly without turning to Kanako-chan, and instead looking toward the camera.

“Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“For everything.”

Thank you for coming despite having previous obligations.

Thank you for pulling Tōko-chan here with you.

“Ah. Is it because I did something a little out of the ordinary for me?”

Kanako-chan turned herself slightly, and whispered absent-mindedly.

“Yeah. It doesn’t seem like something in your character.”

But isn’t that a happy feeling? Yumi groped her hand around behind her, not being able to see because of the shadow being cast by the line behind her, and gripped Kanako-chan’s hand.

“I’ll be taking the pictures now! Everyone, please watch my hand! Ah, it’s time to glitter! Alright, great. Then, click!”

Tsutako-san clicked the shutter twice and said “Thanks for all the hard work” and once more clicked the shutter. It seemed like these tense moments did indeed make good pictures.

Yumi and Kanako-chan took their hands apart and laughed. Kanako-chan’s smile was completely different than the one she had on before, natural but completely majestic.

The structure of people that had sprung up for the picture began to dismantle itself spontaneously. Sachiko-sama said.

“I was thinking we should draw straws now, but what does everyone else want to do?”

And while Sachiko-sama was hearing for input from everyone in the room, the question had really been directed to Yoshino-san.

“Draw straws...”

Yoshino-san looked at Nana-san. Nana-san knew no-one in this entire gathering except Yoshino-san. Perhaps Nana would be better off staying next to Yoshino-san, so Sachiko-sama had asked Yoshino about it.

“I don’t mind.”

Nana-san unexpectedly chirped. She held on hard for a middle school student.

Even Sachiko-sama thought the same thing, but simply stared at the girl, nodded her head satisfactorily, and said “great”.

“Then, after everyone’s seats are decided, we’ll start with the introductions.”

Yumi began placing ten trump cards on the table in succession, one by one. The number of chairs available in this room, after all, was only ten. It was the Ace of Clubs down to the Ten of Clubs.

In the circular area above, Yoshino-san began placing the Hearts from Ace down to Ten within a box. She then placed a handkerchief over the box.

“Please pick one card per person from this box.”

Each person would part the handkerchief, pick up a card, and if her card had the same numerical value as one already on the table, then she would become the owner of that seat.

“Each outcome is equally likely to be drawn. Please line up from that end over there.”

Rei-sama told Nana-san. Yumi wondered if Rei was simply watching out for the guest. If the line was in order of age, then Nana-san would be last. And if the line were to be made from this end, then Nana-san really would be last.

It may have been the lucky draw, but obviously being able to pick your own card felt much more like Kujihiki rather than taking a card by default because it was the last remaining. It was the active, preferred over the passive. That fine distinction was very important. Even though it often made no difference in gatherings such as these.

Yumi stuck cleanly Rei-sama.

“What’s wrong Yuuumi-chan?”

Rei turned behind her, and said. Maybe that was it.

“I thank you for your consideration, but I’m will not be last.”

“Huh?”

“Shah.”

Yoshino-san, who was bringing over the box now, held up her finger.

“There’s no way now for you to take my spot before me.”

“Ahh...”

Yumi nodded deeply in understanding.

Yoshino too had perhaps just understood this, because she made an elevated face. But just as Rei-sama had said earlier, everyone was equally likely to get a seat. Just because Yoshino was picking her card right behind Nana-san had no guarantee that she would be sitting next to her. But Yoshino was probably trying as feverishly as possible to reign in fate.

Yumi drew her card, Rei-sama drew her card, and the last to draw a card was Yoshino-san. Everyone looked at their own card, and the card of their neighbors, and even though they were numerically close together did not mean they sat close to each other in seating order.

As soon everyone had finished looking through the cards, Yumi went back to the table area.

“So then, let’s try to hand out table positions. This seat --”

The table itself was circular, so Yumi could have started handing out table positions from anywhere on the table. She started from a narrower portion of the table, what had been dubbed the “birth seat”. It was the four of Clubs.

“Who holds the Four of Hearts?”

“...Me.”

Yoshino-san raised her hand. She had the irony of being the last to pick and yet being the first to be seated. As Yoshino’s seat was being picked, Yoshino was musing to herself about which seat would be nice to sit in, but now she stopped.

“Next. Who has the three?”

Yumi walked counterclockwise.

“Me...”

Tōko-chan answered as Yoshino-san was rotating left and right. From that instant, Yoshino-san’s right neighbor had been decided. Her left neighbor would be decided by the last cardholder.

“Next.”

As she drew the next card, Yumi looked at it “It’s Five, huh?”. Five was the card that Yumi had drawn. She had no preference about the choice, but selfishly Yumi thought about how Tōko-chan had come to her house a few days ago, and for some reason the two hadn’t met up since then.

But.

“---- The Seven of Clubs.”

It seemed that no-one was getting what they had expected.

The seat that everyone thought would belong to Five instead went to Seven, which was the card that Shimako had drawn.

Next to Shimako-san was Kanako-chan who had drawn a Six, but next to her Sachiko-sama who had drawn a Two sat. And then the next birth seat Eight.

“Me.”

Nana-san sat down.

(Even though she's a Seven she got the seat Eight huh?)

As Yumi continued to smile while chewing over her thoughts, Yoshino-san who sat far away seemed to fall prostrate to the table in her shock.

It wasn't when she was handed the last card, but when she had realized that she wasn't sitting next to Nana-san. And that place was the complete opposite, the farthest possible seat away from Nana's.

Ironically, the seat next to Nana-san's was a Five, Yumi's seat.

(If there was any way to change the seating order, then I would.)

But, if you let people choose their seats, then there's no point in playing Kujihiki. Then they could have simply announced in the beginning “Please sit next to xx-san”.

And now with all that was going on, Yumi had to get back to work. On the other side of Yumi was Rei-sama who had drawn a Nine, and next to her was Noriko-chan who had drawn a Ten. And finally, on the left side of Yoshino-san was Tsutako-san.

(It didn't happen, did it?)

Kujihiki was just that sort of an equalizer. Yumi was referring to Tsutako-san's Ace when she knew that it didn't happen.

Then again, if Tsutako-san had drawn another card, she would have had to ask herself “How could the Photography Club ace draw x?”

Part 4.

When everyone had found their seats, after a toast of black tea, the party began.

“A simple introduction and a few words about what’s going on with you. Those of you for whom something eventful happened before or after the exam holiday, please feel free to talk about it now. Of course, if you don’t want to talk about it, then you don’t have to. Now let’s begin.”

While Sachiko-sama was glancing around wondering whom to start with, Tsutako-san boisterously raised her hand.

“If you want someone, please pick me.”

“Ah, Tsutako-san, you sure are acting forward.”

“My real motive is to get my turn out of the way as soon as possible so I can take pictures at my leisure. Um, do I have to stay seated until all the introductions are done?”

Tsutako-san had prepared her camera for the event long before. When she saw Tsutako-san’s shutter finger carefully move around the button, even Yumi understood.

But.

“Yes. Please remain seated during the introductions.”

An immediate, cold rejection. Sachiko-sama was strict.

Even still, Tsutako-san had let her name go around first, and so had to begin the introduction.

“I am second-year Pine Class Takeshima Tsutako. A member of the Photography Club. Um, I had come to the Rose Mansion’s Christmas Party last year, so now this makes it my second year of attendance. I offer my humble apologies to Rosa Chinensis, but after my introduction is finished, I will assume the role of cameraman. Ladies, you will hear the clack-clack of the shutter, but please do not let the sound bother you. Without receiving express permission from the subjects within the photograph, I will not release a single photo, so please do not worry. Ah, nothing interesting really happened before or after the exam holiday. That is all.”

“Have you found a petite sœur, or any such gossip?”

Sachiko-sama asked. It felt as if Sachiko-sama was acting as their representative. Because the Roses and their petite sœurs had grown very interested in just what was happening between Naitō Shōko-chan and Tsutako-san.

“I haven’t.”

Tsutako-san cleanly cut the air with her words and sat down. Why not?! Somber sighs were emanating from the room.

Going clockwise, the next was Noriko-chan. Noriko-chan stood.

“I am Rosa Gigantea en Bouton, Nijō Noriko. I’m a fan of admiring Buddhist statues. I had wanted to go on a small Buddhist statue viewing trip after exams ended, but I kept putting it off and it never happened. It made me realize that nothing in life really happens according to plan.”

It was said that Noriko couldn’t go on her fun little Buddhist statue viewing trip. Why the trip kept getting delayed Yumi did not know, but she wondered whether Noriko-chan had plans to go again. Winter vacation was after tomorrow.”

After Noriko-chan went Rei-sama.

“I’m Rosa Foetida, Hasekura Rei. Hm, what should I say. I’m part of Kendo Club. But it seems like I’ve had too many things to do this year. If you open my box, from time to time I’ll move my face, or my mouth, or my swords. Oh, right. Recently I’ve found a weird, younger boyfriend. That’s all.”

“Boy...?!”

Yumi slipped the word out, and looked toward Yoshino-san. Shimako-san, Noriko-chan, Kanako-chan, and Tsutako-san too. Maybe, other than Rei-sama herself, everyone’s gaze had at that moment fixed upon Yoshino-san. The always anxious Yoshino-san.

It seemed as if Yoshino-san had surely known about this, for she made no notable reaction. She only nodded toward the conversation and said something to the effect of “It’s not my affair.”

“How old is he?”

Sachiko-sama asked, and Rei-sama answered. But perhaps the hand Rei-sama outstretched while answering the question was more telling than the answer itself.

“He’s ten I think.”

“...Huh?”

Which meant that Rei-sama had lightheartedly revealed her boyfriend, but for those who hadn’t realized that the entire thing had been a joke, it had been such a shock that they promptly fell silent. So that was the potential lover’s big moment, huh?

“Ten...”

Suddenly, the atmosphere in the room changed to one of incredulity. And then, into a “no wait” moment.

No, wait. He may be ten years old now, but give it ten years, and he’ll be twenty. By then, Rei-sama would be twenty-eight... It really wasn’t a complete-no situation, was it?

But the attitude of the person herself in question was one of complete denial, one which spoke “Never a kid from elementary school” and brushed it off casually. So then it really was a complete-no.

But even still.

It was obvious that Sachiko-sama had already heard this news from Rei-sama. She felt a different sort of jealousy for their relationship. The bond they had was one different from the conventional bond of sisterhood, but Yumi could remember what strong feelings were contained in this bond.

“Next, Yumi-chan.”

As Rei-sama sad down, Yumi pushed herself into an upright pose, pushed one hand into the other, and suddenly stood up.

“Um, I’m second-year Pine Class’s Fukuzawa Yumi. Rosa Chinensis en Bouton. Uhhh...”

Now what to do. Nothing else would come out.

Yumi was the kind of person who found it harder to introduce herself to her good friends than to a crowd of people. So just what should she say now. Suddenly, Rei-sama, from her right-side, whispered a hint.

“What you did over the break.”

“Ah, what I did over the break... Ummm... During break I... I...”

Yumi’s eyes fluttered about as she tried to remember, and they fell on Tōko-chan. But Tōko-chan’s running-away wasn’t the type of thing that should be discussed at these sort of meetings.

“Did you go to the amusement park?”

Shimako-san asked from across the table.

“Ah, I did, yes I did go to the amusement park. And then, when we were coming back, I went to my Onee-sama’s house, and was given a Mille-Feuille cake as a gift. It was handmade by Onee-sama’s mother. It was delicious.”

Yumi felt a bit embarrassed to summarize her summer vacation by calling it “delicious”, but everyone’s look had this warm “If you found it delicious, then good for you” feel to it. Yumi ended her introduction with a “That’s all.”

Oh right, the next introduction was part of the main event, the premiere of Arima Nana-san.

Nana-san understood that she was up next, and immediately stood up.

“I’m Lillian Middle School Third Year, Arima Nana. Thank you for inviting me here.”

Everyone’s reaction to the word “Lillian Middle School” was less profound than Yumi had expected it to be, probably because everyone had seen that Nana-san wore a different school uniform.

“If you’re asking yourself why a middle school student like me should be here, well incredibly enough I had recently become that Shimadzu Yoshino-sama over there’s friend, and I got my invitation from her. When I heard her talking about the party, I implored her to let me come along.”

The fact that she was introducing herself here was in and of itself something “incredibly enough”.

And while Yumi did not know what “incredibly enough” moment had brought Rei-sama close to a boyfriend younger than her, she did know the “incredibly enough” moment that had led to Yoshino-san and Nana-san meeting.

Yoshino-san had boasted to former Rosa Foetida Torii Eriko-sama that she would introduce her sœur, and tried, but could not find one. As Yoshino-san was running away from Eriko-sama, she happened to meet a girl, and passed the girl off to Eriko-sama as her sœur. That was the story behind Nana-san.

But Nana couldn't say that out loud, and instead had said ‘incredibly enough’. ‘Incredibly enough’ was simply a phrase of convenience.

While Yumi was thinking about such things, Nana-san pinched her introduction closed.

“I'm young, and I don't really understand much about high school, so I understand that my presence here may be rude. If so, I offer my humblest apologies, and request your humble guidance.”

The middle school student was more than capable of introducing herself. And while everyone chewed the introduction over, the card hit the floor, she sat down.

Next was Sachiko-sama's introduction.

“I am Rosa Chinensis, Ogasawara Sachiko. Right, the person whom Yumi had spoken to you all earlier about, who had accompanied her to the amusement park, was none other than myself, of course. A small accident also occurred that day, but everything else was a lot of fun. We made a plan to go again, and this time, how about all of you come with us?”

“Definitely.”

Before Sachiko-sama could even finish the question, Tsutako-san answered happily. Sometimes, Tsutako-san was a very transparent person. Tsutako-san's role wasn't to enjoy something with you, but to capture the pictures of you enjoying everything around you.

“Great. But for you Tsutako-san, all film is forbidden.”

“Huuh.”

“You can’t have fun by only snapping pictures.”

Sachiko-sama laughed. Just once, they should all forbid her from bringing a camera. But then, Yumi knew that Tsutako-san would research on how to bring in hidden cameras.

Next was Kanako-chan.

“I’m First Year Tsubaki-class’s Hosokawa Kanako. During the last school festival, I had participated in the Yamayurikai’s play, and have very fond memories of it. Right after that I joined the basketball club, and now I seemed to be followed by balls day and night. I’ve recently been feeling that I’ve once again grown taller, but I’m too scared to actually measure myself.”

People wondered whether this was a comment that people should laugh at. But Kanako-chan herself was smiling, so Yumi held nothing back as she laughed heartily. So, Kanako-chan grew again, huh? But she was too afraid to measure herself? But wouldn’t that be something to be celebrated as a player on the basketball team?

“I’m Rosa Gigantea, Tōdō Shimako. Recently, incredibly enough, I’ve found an interest in baking.”

Yumi at first thought that Shimako-san’s use of “incredibly enough” had been subconscious, but then she wondered just what was “incredibly enough” to build an interest in baking. While she thought about it, Tōko-chan stood up.

“First Year, Camellia Class, Matsudaira Tōko. I’m part of the Drama Club.”

“That’s all?”

While Tōko-chan began to sit, Kanako-chan asked. Rather than punctuating her with a question, Kanako-chan’s tone of voice seemed to have been a form of advice. And then, Tōko-chan.

“No Mr. Priest, I’m fine.”

Suddenly Tōko-chan had changed her facial expression and intonation.

At first Yumi didn't know just what had happened, but finally she realized that Tōko-chan was acting out a scene from a play.

Tōko-chan had cast her eyes down, and seemed to have somehow shrunk her person, as she was relaying her line.

It was winter, and Tōko-chan was cold. She seemed to be holding a shopping cart between her hands.

(Please, buy as much as you want. If I could have had a child as lovely as you are with me this night, this is what I would say)

Those words suddenly sprang up in Yumi's heart. And suddenly, behind Tōko-chan appeared the streets of Europe.

Yumi understood. It was "The Little Princess".

"Well, on Christmas Eve, things must be donated to the poor children? Thank you very much. You are a very great man, Mr. Priest."

Tōko-chan pushed a smile onto her face, pushed her hand out, and seemed to take something. Perhaps it was some coins. The scene was so vivid, one could almost see the satisfied nod on the Priest's face.

Tōko-chan watched happily as the priest inside the carriage rode off.

"I couldn't do anything about it. My clothes are always so dirty, and I'm always so hungry. I was mistaken as some needy child..."

You'd reflexively laugh, then suddenly swallow. What a stunning performance. Ah, what a sad sailor.

But.

"Is this enough, Kanako-chan?"

Hmph.

Tōko-chan seemed to have shut off the TV, and had brought everyone out of the ship's crew, and back to a Japanese high school.

“I don’t have anything interesting to talk about anyway, so this will be the end of my introduction. I hope I didn’t bore too many people.”

She sat down without a smile on her face, and hung her head down dejectedly. When the audience came back to their senses, they began clapping.

Tōko-chan really was a fantastic actress. In just perhaps two minutes, she had entranced the entire room.

“If you set the standard so high Tōko-chan, then the people coming after you will have a hard time.”

Yoshino-san brooded, and then stood.

“I am Shimadzu Yoshino. The ‘Shima’ in my name uses the character for island, found in the word ‘Japanese Islands’. The ‘dzu’ in my name comes from the character in the word ‘Tientsin’, that place famous for water chestnuts. The ‘Yoshi’ uses the character in the word ‘Freedom’, and the ‘No’ uses the Kanji in ‘General Nogi’s name. Not the ‘Yoshino’ from ‘Somei Yoshino’.”

Just why was Yoshino-san explaining the Kanji in her name, Yumi wondered, as she listened to Yoshino-san ramble. But then, Yumi suddenly understood. Yoshino-san was speaking for only one person.

Yoshino-san’s gaze stuck only on the farthest person from her in the room -- Nana-san. And just as Yoshino-san had wanted to happen, something in her explanation made Nana-san break out into actual laughter.

Part 5.

Yoshino thought the same thing last year, but even this year, when she saw Rei-chan and Shimako-san's joint effort, the *Bûche de Noël*, she could not help but find it tasty-looking.

Yoshino couldn't leave her seat while eating, so she had nothing to do but talk to the people around her. She did nothing but spear her cake constantly. The more she speared, the faster her cake would finished, was the logic. If someone saw through her plan, it would be bad.

It was obvious that Yoshino-san wanted to go over and meet Nana-san.

But really, Yoshino-san herself was the only person aware of what she was doing. Everyone else was caught up in peaceful conversation. To her right, Tōko-chan seemed to be deeply involved in a serious conversation with Shimako-san, and didn't seem to want to be disturbed.

Yoshino slid her gaze around the room, until she happened upon Kanako-chan turning toward Sachiko-sama and telling her something. It didn't seem as if they were talking about very serious things, but sadly their seats were far away from hers, and Yoshino was not close enough to understand what they were saying.

Yoshino let it go and turned to her right. There was Tsutako-san, who had quickly finished her cake, and had jumped into preparing her camera. She seemed very happy. Did Tsutako-san know that she was humming?

Next to her, Noriko-chan, Rei-chan, Yumi-san, and even Nana seemed to be caught up in some group conversation.

That Nana.

“Wow, really?”

Really, what?

(Ahhhh.)

Yoshino wasn't happy. How could Nana be alright without her, or something like that.

For that matter, what were they all so excited about?

Now that she thought about it, maybe she should pre-empt Tsutako-san and stick her head into the conversation. It was a bit of a shock for them.

Soon, Yumi-san turned toward her and said "Yoshino-san..."

It wasn't Yumi calling Yoshino over, but rather something in the flow of the conversation, like "Do you know Yoshino-san?" or "You should listen to Yoshino-san too". Basically, Yumi was creating a pretense for Yoshino to join in.

So if Yoshino-san wanted to enter the conversation, this was her only chance.

But what happened next made Yoshino twist around, and let go of the outstretched hand that her friend had given her. Yoshino felt it would have been better had she not tried to enter the conversation in the first place.

A large voice had boomed through the room "Who wants seconds for tea?" or something like that.

In an instant, everyone's conversation died down, and echoes of "I will!" or "Please let me have some" bounced into the air. Hand shot up.

After which, Yoshino expected the happy conversations to start again, but then Nana said "I'll help you", turned toward the sink, and left Yoshino behind. Noriko-chan too had stood up, but when she saw Nana take the job, she sat back down again.

"This party is so much fun."

Yoshino-said, and recognized it as an expression of bitterness. But Nana who seemed not to notice the bitterness, laughed and said "Yeah, a lot of fun".

"Great huh. Is it really a good idea to help out when you're having so much fun?"

Her bitterness dripped and oozed out. It refused to stop. It seemed to Yoshino as if she were playing the role of saboteur.

“But, I wanted to talk, and so I thought this would be a good chance to.”

Nana carelessly said, as she took Yoshino’s cup in her hands.

“Huh?”

“Because, Yoshino-sama had been sitting so far away from me, right?”

“You wanted to... Talk with me?”

When she heard Nana say what she really wanted, Yoshino’s thorns felt caught up in a spider web.

Just what was this exhilarating feeling?

Nana wanted to talk? Yoshino-san had been sitting so far away? That means, Nana had been focusing her attention on Yoshino the whole time.

But suddenly Yoshino stopped. No no, she could not let herself get intoxicated by Nana’s words.

“Mmhmm. I wanted to talk to Yoshino-sama.”

Nana herself didn’t realize, but she was incredibly good at building up someone’s happiness, and then letting it all crash down.

“When do you want to talk to Hasekura Rei-sama about what we were talking about before?”

--- Oh no.

She really had to talk about it, didn’t she?

Yoshino violently put some tea leaves into the teapot.

Part 6.

Without anyone noticing, Kanako-chan had quietly disappeared.

Some time after everyone had finished their cake, the seats all got mixed up, and in the middle of recreation time no-one knew where the other person exactly was. There was no bathroom in the Rose Mansion unless someone decided to go back to the school. So when one or two people had gone to the bathroom, and it had long been time for them to come back, they were nowhere to be found, and no-one said a thing.

After all, Yumi had only noticed her by sheer coincidence.

She lost early on in a big tournament, and had nothing much to do, so she went to get her cup thinking she would wash it and drink some more, when she found that there was one cup that hadn't been put to wash. The cup from seat 6 was there, the person who had sat down first, Kanako-chan.

For that matter, where had Kanako-chan gone? Yumi looked around her, but still could not see Kanako-chan.

The large pile of everyone's belongings that was in the corner seemed oddly enough a little less pronounced. No, the carefully arranged pile of coats and handbags seem to have been purposefully tampered with. That's why it now looked like a landslide.

Perhaps Sachiko-sama had noticed that Yumi was seeking out Kanako-chan, when she came close to Yumi and whispered into her ear "She went home".

"She had things to do at home. She said she was making her mom wait for her. She told me that she had not wanted to disrupt the happy atmosphere of the party, so she just slunk away. Kanako-chan had let me know about all of this from the very beginning. Just when she slipped away even I don't know."

Sachiko-sama quickly rearranged the collapsed pile of belongings. To obscure the fact that Kanako-chan's things were not here anymore, she made it into a small mountain.

“Disrupting the atmosphere...? No, maybe it was because Tōko-chan would have...”

Yumi turned away from Sachiko-sama. Tōko-chan was carefully removing a Jenga piece, and was concentrating so hard that she hardly darted an eyelid toward them.

“Maybe.”

Sachiko-sama nodded.

“If Kanako-chan had let everyone know that she was going home, then Tōko-chan would have wanted to go along with her. Because Kanako-chan forced Tōko-chan to come to the party.”

“Hm.”

Kanako-chan wanted Tōko-chan to stay at the party.

When Tōko-chan had first been invited to the party, she said that she had had other plans, but perhaps Kanako-chan knew that Tōko-chan was just lying to get herself out of the party. So Kanako-chan didn't want Tōko-chan to have to leave the party... Or at least, that's what could have happened.

For that matter, why hadn't Tōko-chan been happy in the first place?

Now Tōko-chan was laughing. The Jenga tower had collapsed, but she was still laughing.

How long had it been since Tōko-chan had stopped scowling?

Actually, when Tōko-chan had been introducing herself, Yumi didn't really think that Tōko-chan had been very happy. While she had been playing the sailor, she had been smiling, but as soon as the part ended, she put a sour look on her face and said “Is this enough?”

So then had it been while they were eating the cake?

The only thing she could remember of Tōko-chan then was that she had been talking with Shimako-san. It had been a very long conversation, that only they were participating in. That was when her mood had changed from one of gravity to levity.

Just what had they been talking about?

“Don’t make such strained faces. It’s a party, right?”

Sachiko-sama lightly patted Yumi’s shoulder, and returned to the game.

“So, let’s have a final round between Noriko-chan and Yoshino-chan then.”

Everyone was excited, because prizes were going to be handed out based on the conclusion of the tournament, and so Yoshino-san and Noriko-chan began their battle.

As soon as the Jenga had fallen apart, a haphazard Twister game had been laid out on the spot. The officiator of the game had four dining hall meal tickets, and was going to hand them out as prizes.

Last school year around March, when the Yamayurikai had been cleaning up the first floor, they had found some things in the shelf of a rarely used desk. Just which sempai had owned it at one time nobody knew, but they had kept it because they felt it may be useful.

Yoshino-san and Noriko-chan grappled heartily, knowing that prizes lay on the line.

Things really were heating up, Yumi thought, when she spotted something a slight distance away from the Twister mat.

“Ah.”

A Jenga piece had fallen from the collapsed tower, and had managed to find itself here. The small wooden piece could easily become lost if someone accidentally kicked it.

Yumi bent down to pick up the piece, and a slipper crossed her view. She looked up and found Shimako-san.

“Going to the bathroom?”

Right in front of Shimako-san was the exit, otherwise known as the Biscuit Door, so Yumi had asked.

“Yup.”

Shimako-san too had lost quite early on.

“Wait. I’ll come too.”

Yumi put the piece on top of the table, brought over her bag. There was no way that Yumi was going to forget who the present was for. But until she actually delivered it to Sachiko-sama, Yumi had promised herself that she would not let go of the bag.

“What’s wrong?”

Shimako-san was waiting on the stairs, and smiled as Yumi darted out of the room. Even though there was no hurry, she was still running.

“...What happened hmm...”

Yumi normally went to the bathroom by herself. Plus, she didn’t really *have* to go right now.

She was just using the situation. Because Shimako-san was the one going to the bathroom.

That’s right. Yumi just wanted to talk with Shimako-san.

“I’m sorry, what is it now?”

But Yumi couldn’t think of juts what to say.

Creak creak. Creak creak. The old wooden stairs let out a sharp creak. Creak creak. Creak creak. While she was looking for what to ask, she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Are you wondering about Tōko-chan?”

Shimako-san asked.

“Huh?”

Yumi seemed surprised, so Shimako-san said.

“Oh, I’m wrong? Sorry.”

Because Yumi had pulled ahead, Shimako-san closed the door behind her. While she was doing that, Yumi suddenly realized what Shimako-san had said.

“No, no. You’re right.”

Shimako-san’s hunch had hit the mark.

From the moment she had heard the word “Tōko-chan”, she had no hesitation in recognizing what she wanted to talk about.

Yumi looked up from the garden to the sky, and found it a pale gray. Was it simply a cloudy sky, or was night quickly falling?

As the two turned toward the school, Yumi asked.

“Earlier, Shimako-san and Tōko-chan had exchanged words over some very serious glances, right? I was just wondering what you guys might have been talking about.”

“Wow, did we really look that serious?”

Shimako-san laughed. If Shimako-herself didn’t feel that the conversation was very serious, then had it really been? But they really didn’t look as if they were enjoying flowers bloom while making light conversation.

“If I’m interfering in something, or it’s some secret between the two of you, you don’t have to tell me, but...”

Yumi didn’t want anyone think as if she were making them confess. But Shimako-san clearly shook her head.

“Tōko-chan simply asked me some questions about myself, and I gave my own personal answers. There was nothing there that could have violated Tōko-chan’s privacy. So I don’t think there’ll be any problem if we talk about it.”

“But, what about Shimako-san’s privacy?”

Shimako-san laughed at Yumi’s question.

“It’s okay. There’s nothing there that I’d really want to hide from you, Yumi-san.”

Shimako-san said, as she entered the school, and sought the walls.

“Tōko-chan had asked whether I was in the family business.”

“Family business?”

“What we do, you know, the temple.”

Shimako-san was the daughter of a priest. Judging by what Noriko-chan said, theirs was a very large, and old temple.

“Well, do you Shimako-san?”

“I answered, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“Yup. And that’s the real truth.”

Shimako-san really didn’t know. It was Shimako-san’s real answer, and she wasn’t running away from anything, but that was the simple truth of the matter. Rather than needlessly trying to come up with an answer and presenting some false, fleeting truth, Shimako-san was being honest.

“After that, Tōko-chan began piling on questions. If I didn’t take over the temple, then what would happen to it, and such.”

“Well... What would happen?”

Yumi really knew nothing about temple matters. Buddhist temples involved patron families, and other difficult things. If Shimako-san didn’t accept the temple, then would a temple which had been passed on for years generation-by-generation have to be given to someone else? Those were the sort of questions that came up in such a decision.

“Hmmm. What should I do.”

“Are you okay being like that?”

At first Yumi had thought Shimako-san’s answer was a truthful one, but now it began feeling like the product of an unsure mind. Shimako-san had made a very conflicted face when Yumi had asked her what would happen. Was everything going alright with Shimako-san?

“It’s something I eventually have to reach a firm decision on, but right now, I haven’t come up with an answer.”

Ah, she felt that she would eventually have to answer the question.

“At least, if I decide to take over the temple, then it isn’t really feasible for me to do other things, is it? I’ll also have to marry into a family that follows the same Buddhist sect that we do. From an objective perspective, it’s a very hard choice to make.”

“And if the wife of the temple’s head monk were to be a Catholic...”

“Right, that’s there too. Just because my parents have been easy with me, they’ve allowed me to stay a Catholic while being the daughter of a Buddhist monk. If the wife of a monk were to believe in something different than he, it would be a bit weird, wouldn’t it?”

“---”

Everyone is free to practice their own religion. But despite this fundamental freedom, that sort of a relationship was a tense one. Anywhere from a little to a lot.”

“It would have been so much easier had my brother inherited. He hated the burden so much that he ran away.”

“Huh?! Shimako-san has a brother?!”

Yumi’s eyes bulged, and Shimako-san laughed.

“I didn’t tell you either, Yumi-chan? When I told Noriko about it yesterday, she was also surprised.”

“...I didn’t know. I thought you were an only child all along.”

“He’s not at home most of the time, so I don’t really talk about him. But he’s there, and he’s the only one. Tōko-chan seemed a bit deflated when I told her. I wasn’t an only child, so she couldn’t ask me for advice.”

Advice, huh. For that matter, just what would make Tōko-chan try to find someone and place herself in their shoes?

“Did something happen to Tōko-chan at home?”

“Maybe. But I didn’t ask her.”

Because Shimako-san didn’t fall into the sample set of only children, she was crossed off the advice-giver list.

“I see. Then I obviously can’t ask about what’s going on.”

Yumi had a younger brother, and her dad’s custom home business wasn’t so big that it involved big shots.

If Tōko-chan were instead sitting next to Rei-chan, she would undoubtedly have asked Rei-sama whether she would continue the dojo or not. Then again, it was obvious that Rei-sama was going to, so maybe Tōko-chan wouldn’t ask Rei-chan that.

Yoshino-sama was also an only child, but her parents didn't do anything that needed to be passed down.

Sachiko-sama is a relative of Tōko-chan, and so she is too close to fall into the appropriate sample set to ask questions. But even if she were to cross Sachiko-sama off the list at first glance, Tōko-chan could easily pull another Ogasawara family member in her place -- Kashiwagi-san.

"She might not be able to ask you for advice, but maybe she would just talk to you about it? Especially since you're Yumi-san."

Shimako-san said.

"What should I do..."

Did Yumi really want to talk to Tōko-chan about it though? Also, was there a simple way to only talk about it and not offer advice?

"You shouldn't rush such things, Yumi-san."

"You're right."

Yumi nodded to Shimako-san's statement, and walked out.

The corridor extended in wan darkness, without sunlight or artificial light.

As she was walking, Yumi felt as if something in the darkness breathed deeply.

After the two finished their bathroom session and returned, Yumi and Shimako-san found the Rose Mansion in uproar.

They opened the second floor's biscuit-like door, when.

"How could I be the only one who didn't know something that important about Rei-chan?!"

Yoshino-san's wailing voice carried onto the stairs.

Even Though It's Christmas

Part 1.

Twister was a way to gauge a person's athletic ability, their decisive ability, their endurance, and their body's flexibility.

(Yoshino had a bit of the first, but she knew she had close to none of the others.)

When Yoshino had learned that the final round of the tournament was going to be Twister, she knew that there was a 97% chance that she would lose.

It wasn't quite that Yoshino lacked confidence, but that until the winter of her Freshman year of high school, Yoshino had never done anything resembling a sport. Yoshino knew that the only physical ability she had, had been slowly accumulated over the past year after she had become healthy. Her flexibility had developed much the same.

(And cool, composed Noriko-chan had a lot of the first.)

And it was obvious to everyone that Noriko-chan's physical ability and flexibility had developed as a natural part of education standards leading up to middle school. Without taking any natural athletic ability into consideration, Yoshino knew that Noriko-chan would be better than Yoshino's awkward self.

And Noriko was athleticism itself. She had sculpted herself as if she were a gift from the gods, and her fame preceded her.

(Please Heavenly Mother Maria-sama, lend me your strength.)

And then, what was the prize of this grand struggle? A free meal ticket in the noodle cafeteria.

But Yoshino wanted to win at all costs, and not because ramen was Yoshino-san's favorite food. She simply hated to lose.

The hastily made imitation Twister that they played had card suits on the mat, instead of the conventional colored circles. The four suits: Hearts, Diamonds, Clovers, and Spades.

This wasn't roulette, so as soon as a single card was drawn from a deck, one was bound by the rules to place one's hands or one's feet on the marking which corresponded to the card drawn. Odd numbers corresponded to the left, even numbers corresponded to the right. Ace through six meant that the hands had to move, and seven through King meant that the legs had to move. So if one draws a four of Hearts, then one must place one's right hand on the Heart marking on the mat.

"So Yoshino, how many cards from the top should I draw the next card?"

Rather than using their twisted arms and legs to draw cards, Sachiko-sama the exhibitioner would draw cards.

"The t... Tenth."

"One, two, three, four... The tenth card is the Five of Spades. Please place your left hand on the Spade."

"Ah, but that's."

If she were to move to the nearest Spade, then she would have to move her right hand to reach the spade.

Yoshino puffed out her chest, and pushed her left hand to land onto the left Spade. But Yoshino was pushing against her limit.

"Five from the top, please."

Noriko-chan intoned confidently. Would this girl ever tire? Or was this what being young actually meant?

"The Eight of Hearts. Noriko-chan, please place your right leg on the Heart."

"Sure."

Noriko-chan wriggled her right leg, as Yoshino jealously watched. Suddenly, Yoshino screamed uselessly, and her shoulders began buckling.

(This is the end for me.)

As Yoshino fell to the ground, she could hear an "Ah" and a tired thud next to her.

“No way...”

Yoshino-san saw Noriko-chan’s body greeting the floor.

Because Noriko had so suddenly given way, Yoshino originally thought that Noriko-chan had lost on purpose. But this wasn’t the sort of game that one let one’s Sempai win on purpose, and Noriko-chan had a very bitter look on her face, so Yoshino knew that wasn’t it.

When Noriko-chan noticed Yoshino’s searching glance, she huffed a bit and turned her body such that Yoshino wouldn’t be able to see Noriko-chan’s face.

(I see.)

Noriko-chan hates showing weakness, so until the very end she parades an image of calm.

“Both of you fell at the same time. It’ll be hard to choose a winner.”

The onlookers to the event, Sachiko-sama, Rei-chan, Tsutako-san, Tōko-chan, and Nana, formed a circle and began talking. They looked like professional Sumo wrestlers.

Eventually, the group seemed to come to a conclusion, and Sachiko-sama came to notify the two of it.

“A rematch is necessary.”

“No way!”

Yoshino-chan chimed, as Noriko-chan raised her hand. To repeat such a backbreaking experience just for some ramen is unthinkable.

“-- Which is what we knew your reactions would be. So we’ve decided that the two of you would be declared champions.”

Two ramen meal tickets would be handed out to the winners.

Noriko-chan and Yoshino wished each other the sportsman’s “good game”, and shook stiff hands. Yoshino hadn’t lost, so her spirits were high.

Yoshino quickly set the whole thing aside, and suddenly switched to “Nana and Rei-chan need to be introduced to each other” mode.

“Rei-chan, Rei-chan”.

Yoshino gripped Nana’s hand as she walked toward Rei-chan.

“Nana-chan wants to, you know, face off with you some day.”

Rei-chan turned toward them and replied curiously quickly.

“That’s fine. In Kendo?”

How did she know?

Just as she did when she talked about knitting, baking cakes, or reading Cosmos stories, Rei-chan was explaining, not answering questions.

“You can come to my house any time this winter. We have a dojo, though it is a bit small.”

Why was Rei-chan being so hospitable to a girl she had just met?

“Uh, um, Rei-chan? You don’t have to be that open...”

Yoshino had said “some day”, and she had meant “some day” Rei-chan. Even if she hadn’t been so strict with her definition of “some day”, she still didn’t want it to go that quickly.

“Nana gets really busy around New Year’s, so there’s no way you can come, right Nana? When the new year starts, the club work becomes very hectic though.”

“But even though we want a private match, we can still use the school’s martial arts equipment.”

This year was Rei-chan’s last year as President of the Kendo club. And Nana hadn’t even become a member yet.

That was why Rei-chan called it a private match. Rei-chan didn’t have to be so strict with her words. But then, that was Rei-chan.

“Then, how about during spring, after Nana enters high school? Like, Rei-chan could come in her free time from college to check up on her high school kōhai!”

Yoshino really thought it was a good idea. That way Rei-chan and Nana could just meet briefly and then fade off in each other’s lives.

One spring came around, Nana would probably be Yoshino's sœur. From there, Rei-chan and Nana's relationship would have to be a slow work-in-progress.

But.

"Check up on Kōhai? After graduating... No, I don't intend to do anything like that."

Rei-chan declared bluntly.

"Why? Are you mad?"

"No, I'm not mad. The real problem is, there's no way I could do that. I might be able to, if I end up going to a school near Lillian, like Lillian University."

".....What?"

Yoshino didn't understand what Rei-chan was saying. Why would a person going to Lillian Girls' University say "like Lillian University"?

"But Rei-chan, you've always..."

She had always planned to go to Lillian Girls' University. That way, she could be near Yoshino. That's what she had always been saying.

Thump. Thump. Yoshino could hear her heart beat in her ears.

"I didn't fill out the **escalator application.**"

"W, Wait!"

What was going on? Yoshino couldn't get the thoughts in her own head straight.

Yoshino had to calm down. If she calmed down, she knew she'd be able to pick out the right words.

(R... Rei-chan said she didn't fill out the escalator application?)

But that's... But that's... Why didn't she?

"I won't be going to Lillian University."

Rei-chan spelled out, slowly but seriously.

"No!"

"Yes."

If she looked at the situation objectively, every word that Rei-chan was saying made perfect, logical sense.

But only if she used her third-level logic faculties.

To be considered for preferential admission into Lillian Girl's University, one had to fill out the escalator application. That Rei-chan didn't fill out the escalator application meant that she had no intention of going to Lillian University.

"Hey, wait."

But this was a matter for Rei-chan to decide. If Yoshino looked objectively at the whole thing, Yoshino had no right to decide such things for Rei-chan.

"Sachiko-sama! Rei-chan's...!"

Yoshino ran over to Sachiko-sama, and clung to her. Rei-chan was saying weird things. If she didn't have some sort of external anchor, Yoshino knew she'd think she was going crazy.

"Yoshino-chan, calm down."

"Calm down, how can I..."

There was no way Yoshino could do that, not in the state she was in. But Sachiko-sama was calm.

No! NO!

"Sachiko-sama, you *knew*!"

"Yes, I did."

With a cool facade mixed with pity, Sachiko-sama nodded.

Yoshino stepped away from Sachiko-sama. Just what was going on here. Yoshino didn't know.

It's as if the world had broken.

Words weren't coming out of her mouth. Had Rei-chan and Sachiko-sama been taken over by aliens?

There was no other explanation Yoshino could think of.

How could Sachiko-sama know something that I didn't?

Something about Rei-chan!

Something about Rei-chan!

“Yoshino-sama, you...”

Yoshino heard Nana’s voice from behind.

“You didn’t know?”

“...*What*?”

Yoshino slowly turned around to face Nana. This couldn’t be happening. Nana, too, had been taken over by aliens.

“Well.”

Now Noriko-chan turned to look at Yoshino. So, Noriko-chan had known about it too?

The look in Noriko-chan’s face confirmed it. Yoshino’s surprise jumped into anger.

How could this happen?

“What the heck is...”

Yoshino yelled.

“How could I be the only one who didn’t know something that important about Rei-chan?!”

Part 2.

When Yumi and Shimako returned to the Rose Mansion, they found it in uproar.

“How could I be the only one who didn’t know something that important about Rei-chan?!”

“...”

Or at least, Yoshino-san was the one in uproar.

What had caused this? Yumi had barely picked up a few snatches of the previous conversation from Yoshino’s charged voice. Words such as “University” and “Rei-chan” gave Yumi a good idea what the commotion was about.

“Yumi-san, Shimako-san.”

Yoshino, looking as if she were a demon, pounced upon Shimako-san and Yumi as they entered the room.

“Did you know?”

Yumi nodded, and Shimako-san shook her head. Shimako-san though didn’t even know the situation that Yoshino-san was questioning her about.

Based on Yumi’s answer to the question, Yoshino-san turned her head now toward Yumi.

“Since when?”

So she wanted to know how long Yumi had known for? Yumi replied succinctly “earlier”.

Yumi suspected that Yoshino-san was asking “Did you know?” and “since when?” because she hadn’t known that Rei-sama would be going to a different university. Yumi could see the more difficult question “Then why didn’t you tell me?” contained within Yoshino-san.

“Earlier. When we were eating cake. It was Rei-sama herself who told me.”

Rei-sama herself was sitting in a chair right next to them, but Yumi had no choice but to talk about Rei-sama.

“I hadn’t known whether Yoshino-san knew about Rei-sama’s decision or not, but the reason I didn’t come and talk to you about it immediately is because I had naively assumed that there was no way that Yoshino-san wouldn’t know. For that... I’m sorry.”

Yoshino-san squeaked an “Ah” softly.

“I see. So that’s what you guys were talking about. Yumi-san, you remember seeing me there, right?”

“I had?”

I don’t remember. I’m sorry.

“Yep. You saw me. For sure. I think I may have even called you, Yumi-san. So... While you were eating the cake, huh? Well, I can’t say anything then, Yumi-san. You did nothing wrong. I wondered what you guys were talking about then, but I didn’t come and ask. If anything, it’s my fault then.”

Yoshino-san’s anger visibly decreased.

“But Rei-chan, you’re the real person at fault here!”

After she finished her friends’ direct examinations, Yoshino-san decided to acquit them, and now turned her anger once more toward Rei-sama. She held onto Rei-chan and began hitting her shoulder.

“Why, why was I the last to know?!”

“...”

Well, Shimako-san hadn’t known either, so Yoshino-san technically was not the last to know, but to her, being last or second last was the same thing.

“Why didn’t you let me know?!”

Rei-sama had fallen silent, and let Yoshino-san continue to hit her. And when Yoshino-san finally became tired of hitting Rei-sama, she answered.

“You hadn’t asked.”

The people around them who were watching over the scene suddenly felt the air charge with tension. “‘You hadn’t asked?’” Yoshino-san hadn’t said anything, was that really a reason?

Yoshino-san couldn't even understand such a train of thought.

"Why would I even dream of asking you, Rei-chan? You had always been telling me that you would be going to Lillian Girls' University."

"That's right, isn't it. I'm sorry."

"No, no more."

Yoshino-san dropped her tightly coiled fist. No matter how many times she hit Rei-sama, Rei-sama wouldn't change her mind. It might be to just hear her out.

"Why did you want to go to another school?"

"I wanted to study something that Lillian Girls' University didn't offer."

"And what would that be?"

"I wanted to learn Kinesiology."

"...Kinesiology?"

Rei-sama wanted to learn about Kinesiology. Everyone felt like nodding, it was a decision that seemed very Rei-sama-ish. But then again, had Rei-sama taken Home Economics, that too would have felt very Rei-sama-ish.

"Whether I'll actually continue on with the family dojo I don't know, but I wanted to do something at least related to it. I can help out kids, and teach them about their physical development, and now my knowledge about how the body works won't go to waste. I really want to study kinesiology."

"Even more than Lillian's Home Economics?"

"I just do those things as hobbies. They've just been things I do idly."

"...I see."

Yoshino-san finally smiled. And Yumi suddenly turned her gaze toward Rei-sama.

"I would have wanted to have talked about this a long time ago, just the two of us. If we had talked thoroughly about it, then I wouldn't have minded at all."

“I’m sorry.”

Rei-sama began stroking Yoshino-san’s head.

It didn’t matter to them that there were people around them. Everyone around them became a bit embarrassed, but Yoshino-san and Rei-sama had retreated into their own special world.

“Well at least you could have told me before you told anyone else. But I really wanted to be the first to know.”

“I’m sorry.”

Rei-sama continued to whisper “I’m sorry” repeatedly. She seemed to be a parrot who knew no other phrases.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m Sorry.

Witnessing the whole scene made Yumi want to cry. Yoshino-san had her forehead resting on Rei-sama’s shoulder and maybe was crying. And maybe the occasional snorting noises by Rei-sama had nothing to do with tears.

But this whole Yellow Rose event wasn’t completely unrelated Yumi.

Like Yoshino-san, Yumi too had an Onee-sama who was leaving in the Spring. Rei-sama, Sachiko-sama, and yes probably second years through time immemorial have had to watch their grande sœurs leave them.

But that big event in their grande sœurs life, that thing called graduation, would probably happen to all of them. And the real trouble after their grande sœur’s graduation wouldn’t be as much a curiosity with what their grande sœur was doing, but simply the burden of having to live without a grande sœur.

Suddenly, Yumi cried out.

“Onee-sama!”

“...What?”

Sachiko-sama turned back suspiciously. It felt like the flip of a switch had turned the focus from the Yellow Rose family to the Red Rose family.

But Yumi couldn't stop herself.

"Onee-sama, where are you going after graduation?"

"Me?"

"You haven't told me yet. I haven't really asked you, and it wasn't because I was like Yoshino-san and thought 'you must be going to University A', and I had no idea where you wanted to go, and so I was too scared to ask, and..."

"Yumi."

"But it's a good time to ask. So please, tell me Onee-sama. After you graduate, where will you be going?"

No matter how far from Lillian she decides to go, I won't react, Yumi told her heart. If she prepared herself correctly, she knew her shock would be much less than Yoshino-san's.

"...I wanted to talk about such things in a much quieter place, between the two of us."

Sachiko-san sighed and said, sounding much like Yoshino-san did earlier.

"I'm sorry."

"But no, you're right Yumi. It is a good time to talk about future plans. I'll..."

Before Yumi could finish stilling her heart of doubt, Sachiko-sama began her answer.

"I'll be going to Lillian University."

"...Oh."

Lillian University...!

"Really?!"

"O, Onee-sama! You took the escalator exam?!"

"What's wrong Yumi? You look shocked. I'll be in the same area as Lillian High, so what's wrong?"

"N... N... No, nothing's wrong."

“Unlike Rei, I had no inclination to take my studies anywhere but along the same path I’ve been walking on. There won’t be any new surprises for me at Lillian Girls University.”

“I see. Congratulations!”

“Yumi, you know better. I’ve applied, but I haven’t gotten the results back yet.”

“I know!”

But whether or not Sachiko-sama announced the decision, she was sure to get in. Universities always allowed higher ranked students in, so all universities were a sure shot for Sachiko-sama.

“Since I never wanted to go anywhere but Lillian University, I wouldn’t want to apply anywhere else. Good luck to everyone else once the new year starts.”

“Okay!”

How many times had Yumi shouted?

Yumi wondered whether the Red Rose sisters too had created their own little world, and had alienated everyone else around them, though she knew that the truth wasn’t so romantic. Yumi came back to her surroundings and took the chance to look around.

But it seemed like they couldn’t have been in this special world for too long, because everyone seemed to be whispering “good for them, good for them” and quickly moving onto other topics.

“The Twister board seems pretty worn out, what should we do with it?”

“It is pretty bad, isn’t it? Can we tape the back of it up with some craft tape?”

“Huh, you really think we can use this again?”

“There’s just a bit of tea left. Do you want to heat it up again?”

“Let’s collect all the empty cups.”

“Let’s see how hot the Green Tea is”

“How much do the exams cost?”

The conversations just piled up on top of each other.

This was the time after the tournament, right before the next event, which they had purposefully scheduled nothing in. And at regular intervals, Tsutako-san's camera shutter blanketed the room like background music.

A room full of conversation.

Everyone moved around aimlessly, absorbed in their conversations. The whole room seemed like a crucible of conversation. Much like the school entrance, full of students talking as they walked to school.

The Christmas Party picture frame seemed to be filled up, with everyone in their place.

So Yumi was happy. She just gazed wondrously at the scene, and kept herself out of it. It seemed like some piece of beautiful, shining abstract art wrapping paper.

But within it all, one person seemed to not blend into the picture frame.

She slowly began throwing off the chains of belonging.

It seemed like Tōko-chan was leaving the room, alone.

Part 3.

“...Tōko-chan.”

Yumi tagged behind the hastily-leaving Tōko-chan, and herself hastily left the room.

Even though Tōko-chan had left in a hurry, there was no point in hurrying down the stairs. That way she could walk down the stairs without making any noise, and could properly follow Tōko-chan outside of the Rose Mansion.

If her footsteps were too loud, or she made jarring door opening and closing noises, then someone was bound to notice. But Tōko-chan had left, without even turning back.

“Wait.”

Yumi called out to Tōko-chan.

Tōko-chan stopped walking. She turned back to look at Yumi, but her face betrayed no emotion, almost as if she had known that Yumi had been following her all along.

“Are you leaving?”

She was wearing her coat, and she had all of her stuff. No matter how you looked at it, the question was a completely idiotic one to ask to a student who was obviously going home.

“Yeah.”

Tōko-chan nodded and once again began walking.

“Well I just wanted to know whether you were really going home halfway through the party.”

“It seems like I am.”

Yumi walked forward quickly and caught up to Tōko-chan.

“Kanakano-san seems to have left long ago.”

Tōko-chan’s whispered words dripped venom. She really wanted to talk as little as possible.

“Yeah, she did. But Tōko-chan doesn’t have to be as punctual.”

“I had mentioned that I had somewhere to be, had I not?”

“You did, I think.”

They walked on in silence for a while, but Tōko-chan finally broke the silence.

“Why are you walking with me? Or are you going home too, Yumi-sama? Surely you didn’t come to school on a day like this with just a small handbag, Yumi-sama?”

“Haha, no way.”

She hadn’t brought her coat, her muffler, or her other handbag.

“I just wanted to walk with Tōko-chan for a while.”

“Do you always pay such little attention to what others want, Yumi-sama?”

“Am I bothering you then?”

“...No.”

Not bad, right? Yumi walked along happily.

“But I’m not exactly inviting you either.”

“Obviously.”

Tōko-chan was, as always, cold.

Yumi walked with Tōko-chan down the cold, dark school corridor as she walked up to the first year shoe box, where she collected her school shoes. Yumi then walked with Tōko-chan to the entrance.

Tōko-chan kept her school shoes in her bag so she could take them home with her, as she would do any other day. But tomorrow, Yumi remembered, was the start of winter vacation.

“You really just wanted to walk with me then, Yumi-sama.”

“Tōko-chan whispered.”

“Huh?”

“I was just wondering if you wanted to talk with me about anything.”

They had walked down together. And now Tōko-chan wanted Yumi to continue. Tōko-chan didn’t want to leave school alone.

She wanted someone to be there with her.

She didn’t want to just leave like this.

Yumi had no choice but to walk with Tōko-chan, to not alienate her. So Yumi said “Fine, let’s walk a bit more.”

“Ah, so you want to talk huh. Sure, let’s talk.”

Yumi wasn’t mortally bound to talk. But then, that didn’t mean that Yumi didn’t want to talk to Tōko-chan either.

But Tōko-chan was with her, now. To Yumi, her presence itself had much worth.

When Yumi thought of Tōko-chan, her heart would feel squeezed if Tōko-chan were not there.

Perhaps that was because of the new experiences she had with Tōko-chan, or her lonely faces, or the feeling of her cold hands.

But in spite of it all.

Every time she wanted to ask a question like “Did anything happen?” or “Is there anything I can help you out with?”, she just couldn’t get it out. Every time she thought along those lines, she knew that Tōko-chan’s response would be “No, you can’t do anything”, and Yumi would feel depressed.

But Yumi was very happy to have the real Tōko-chan in front of her. This Tōko-chan not only had a face, but was also wearing her coat. There was no mistaking her for a figment of Yumi’s imagination.

“But wow, Rei-sama really surprised me.”

Yumi searched for words and landed upon the hassle-free topic of what had just coincidentally occurred.

“Well isn’t Yumi-sama happy that Sachiko-sama will be staying in Lillian?”

Was it Yumi’s imagination or were Tōko-chan’s words a bit pointed? No, it wasn’t just some hapless musing on Yumi’s part.

But this wasn’t the first time Tōko-chan was acting so coldly. She wasn’t any other meek girl, so she found offense even at Yumi’s words.

Yumi pushed herself back together, and continued talking.

“You mean, aren’t I happy that a third year chose her future path the way I had wanted her to... Right?”

How about that for an answer? Tōko-chan couldn't criticize her logic for being too simple. But.

"The world isn't full of people who can follow the path they wanted to."

Tōko-chan said.

"...Huh?"

"Someone might want to be something, but find out that there's a large gap between reality and expectation."

"T... Tōko-chan?"

This wasn't some sort of simple criticism. Tōko-chan's face didn't have a rebellious or strained face showing some strong emotion. Instead it was a face carefully crafted by some internal will.

Perhaps Tōko-chan wanted to just say something meaningful to someone. Yumi was facing Tōko-chan's deep-seated reflections.

"A gap?"

Yumi reflect the conversation back to Tōko-chan. She wanted Tōko-chan to talk more about what she had just said.

"In an elementary school social studies class, once we had to work with a blank map."

"When I was given my blank map, I was extremely happy."

Tōko-chan smiled broadly. What was causing the smile? Was she remembering what she was feeling at the time, or was she just smiling by putting herself back in that memory? Yumi didn't know.

"It was a blank map of Japan with only an outline. The map only had prefecture borders and rivers drawn in. I wanted to take this map and draw mountains in it. I wanted to draw cities. I wanted to show the prefecture office of each prefecture, on that page I could even control the weather. In front of that page, I was God. I could make the map anything I wanted it to be. Why? Because nothing had been drawn in."

Tōko-chan suddenly grew heavy as she spoke. Yumi was clueless. This blank map had something to do with Tōko-chan's hidden feelings.

“But as the class went on, and I filled the page bit by bit, I noticed something. The map hadn't turned out as good as I thought it would. I had wanted to make a map to beat all other maps, and yet the fruit of my hard labor was nothing at all the way I had imagined it to be. I wanted to make a map as good as the printed maps you see around you. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't escape the limits of being an elementary school student.”

Tōko-chan's face clouded.

“The map should have been shining. And yet, its brilliance had faded. There was no going back. And it was because I was the one who had made it.”

Yumi couldn't laugh the whole thing off as normal. To Tōko-chan's elementary school self, it must have been a depressing blow. But what was underlying Tōko-chan's explanation was something about the blank map itself.

There was always a day as a kid when one realized that one couldn't do what one wanted to, or one couldn't have things go the way one wanted them to. But this was --

“Life is like that blank map. It doesn't go the way you want it to. That's what I was trying to show.”

The two stood before the statue of Maria-sama. When the sun was up in the sky, it was surrounded by the mingling of students, the pauses of couples exchanging presents, and of sœurs exchanging rosaries. But at this hour, there was no-one left.

“If I can't make the perfect map, then why can't I just smear it with pink, white, black, or maybe even polka-dots?”

Tōko-chan hissed to herself.

Pink? Polka dots? They were going back to these blank maps and all this symbology?

“The teacher had seen the problems in my map and had taken points off for them. I didn’t care. I wanted my map to be as beautiful as possible. But it would never be.”

Tōko-chan suddenly veered off into some direction that Yumi couldn’t follow. But Yumi did understand what Tōko-chan was talking about. Tōko-chan was worrying about her future. This experience from her past had somehow combined with what was happening to her in the present, and created this situation.

Yumi searched for something to say. Just what could she say to something like this? Yumi needed someone to tell her. How could she help Tōko-chan?

“Tōko-chan.”

Tōko-chan saw the glitter in Yumi’s eyes and quickly turned and began walking away.

“That was all just nonsense. Forget about it.”

Almost as if Tōko-chan had woken up from some dream. As if everything Tōko-chan had said up till now had been some sort of mistake.

But there was no use in pretending that it was. There was no way Tōko could un-say what she had just said.

Tōko-chan began moving further away from Yumi.

What could Yumi do?

There was some way that Yumi could do something for Tōko-chan. Tōko-chan and the heavy heart she carried was moving further away.

How could Yumi bridge the gap?

How...

“Tōko-chan!”

Yumi shouted.

Tōko-chan turned around.

Maria-sama seemed to have juxtaposed herself between the two, as they turned toward each other.

“Would you become my sœur?”

Those were the only words Yumi could think of.

“...What?”

Tōko-chan finally responded, five seconds later.

“So, I’m not good enough, huh?”

Yumi shouted back in answer.

“Yumi-sama...”

Yumi walked up to the immobile figure of Tōko-chan. Tōko-chan just stood there and watched Yumi, wide-eyed.

Yumi suddenly remembered that she had her rosary, and so she removed it from her neck. It was the same dear rosary that had been given to her by Sachiko-sama one year and two months ago.

Tōko-chan’s lips parted slightly.

“I thank you for your kind contribution. Yumi-sama, you are a very great friend.”

“Huh?”

“How would you feel if I had responded that way?”

Yumi couldn’t move as she held the rosary’s circular figure out in her hands.

Tōko-chan’s face was laughing. But the real Tōko-chan wasn’t. Tōko-chan wasn’t saying anything. The strong feelings of despair within Tōko-chan were mixing together and to stop them from exploding out, she had created this cover of a smile.

The blood was draining from Tōko-chan’s face. Her whole body had frozen.

“My deepest apologies Yumi-sama, but I’m not such a good school girl. If you want to perform some **holy charity**, please, practice it elsewhere.”

“Tōko-cha...”

Charity? Yumi hadn’t meant for it to seem like charity at all. But Tōko-chan didn’t want to listen to Yumi.



“I apologize if my indirect wording caused you consternation, Yumi-sama. At any rate, I can’t accept that rosary. Please, take it back.”

Yumi said only what she had to.

“I’m sorry.”

Tōko-chan once again began walking. But this time, Yumi couldn’t follow her. She couldn’t call out to Tōko-chan to stop.

Tōko-chan plodded onward, moving farther from Yumi.

Tōko-chan crossed the rows of Gingko Trees, crossed the school gate, and left the school premises altogether.

But Yumi couldn’t see all of that. It was dark outside, and Yumi couldn’t see Tōko-chan.

Yumi shivered as she put the rejected rosary back onto her neck. Even though she had only taken it off for a short while, its warmth seemed to have fled completely.

Yumi would find it very hard to simply go back to the party and enjoy with the others as she had been. But there was no use standing alone outside like this.

She had come out without even wearing a coat. As the sun left, the day tended to get progressively colder. Now, it was so cold outside that Yumi was sure to catch a cold.

And she had left the Rose Mansion without saying a word. If she didn’t return for a long time, everyone would be worried about her.

Yumi turned toward the school buildings and began walking back.

Yumi didn’t consciously make the effort to walk, rather she just endlessly repeated a motion which placed one foot in front of the other. As Yumi aimlessly ambled on, she lost track of time.

“Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama was standing in front of the door to the Rose Mansion.

“If I waited here, I thought maybe we could meet alone.”

Sachiko-sama too had not brought her coat. Like Yumi, Sachiko-sama had simply brought a purse which dangled around her elbow.

“If you waited...?”

Yumi answered. Just how long had Onee-sama waited for her? Had Sachiko-sama known that Yumi had gone out pursuing Tōko-chan?

“Here.”

“Ah.”

Yumi quickly realized that what Sachiko-sama was taking out of her purse was her Christmas present to Yumi. Without opening the present, Yumi knew what it was. The gift-wrapped flat small box was the same present Sachiko-sama had given last year.

“It’s a handkerchief, right?”

“It wouldn’t have been a new present if it was the same. So this year, I thought I would add a personal touch.”

Yumi removed the wrapping paper to try and open the present. She could see it from the outside, a white handkerchief.

It had been bordered by a gorgeous, embroidered lace. Just like last year. But where the ‘S’ had been embroidered on before, above that a pink ‘Y’ had been stitched on. Rather than obscuring the ‘S’, no matter where you looked at it from, they seemed to pair together. It almost seemed like some company logo.

And next to the letters was.

“It’s a rose... A red rose.”

Using a Bullion Stitch, Sachiko-sama had embroidered numerous red roses on the handkerchief. Each individual rose had been individually stitched by her Onee-sama.

“Thank you so much.”

Yumi squeezed the handkerchief. Yum had gotten such a special gift for her Christmas Present? Yumi felt so... Fortunate.

“Oh yeah, I also have something.”

Yumi suddenly remembered about her present, and began searching her purse. She handed the gift-wrapped present that she pulled out from the middle of her bag. Sachiko-sama made some unintelligible noise like “Ara”. Maybe she had been expecting a ribbon because Yumi had given one last year.

“It isn’t very good, but I tried as hard as I could. I know you read a lot of books, Onee-sama, so...”

It was a hand-knit woolen book bag. She had made it large so that it could even fit big, bulky hardcover books. Yumi had stitched a crimson pattern on a base color which resembled the dark green of the tea used in formal tea ceremonies. It was something that one could stitch in one shape, unlike something larger like a sweater. And bigger items had sleeves and collars to worry about, so the room for error was endless. And making one with two colors would have been very difficult.

“This is... The red rose color, right? Haha, we thought about the same thing when making our presents!”

Sachiko-sama laughed.

“Thank you. You can use it through the winter, and in summer too.”

“It would be a bit hot in the summer...”

What could you do, it was made with wool after all. Yumi laughed. But Sachiko-sama could pull it off. When Yumi imagined a Sachiko-sama panting and sweating while carrying around her dark, woolen book bag, Yumi became a bit happier. But for some reason, as Yumi was laughing, her eyesight became cloudy.

“What’s wrong?”

Sachiko-sama asked, even as she seemed to float in the middle of a watery mirror to Yumi.

“Onee-sama, I...”

It was a bit weird to suddenly start crying after one had been laughing. She had tried to steady herself as much as possible so she wouldn't cry.

But Sachiko-sama didn't seem to care a bit about the tears, and asked but one sensitive question that cut to the heart of the matter.

“Did something happen between you and Tōko-chan?”

Yumi too cut out all the frills in her story, and cut to the chase.

“She... Rejected my rosary.”

“I see.”

Sachiko-sama simply nodded.

“Why? What did I do wrong? I didn't mean to show any pity to her.”

Yumi really believed that Tōko-chan had wanted to be her *sœur* then.

Why had Yumi thought that? Just what had set her on about Tōko-chan? She couldn't really say. But there was no mistaking what she had felt.

To quote Shimako-san, it was... “Just a something”.

Just something had made Tōko-chan feel like her *sœur* right then.

But there was no way Yumi could show someone that.

Yumi had no choice but to keep it to herself.

The feeling wasn't anything but some selfish conclusion of Yumi's.

Tōko-chan had slowly disappeared from in front of Yumi.

Life never went the way you wanted it to. The burden Tōko-chan represented only now began to color the feelings in Yumi's heart.

“Tōko-chan isn't the only first-year out there.”

Sachiko-sama squeezed Yumi's shoulder.

“But.”

“I know. If you were thinking of others, then you wouldn't have handed her the rosary.”

Exactly. If Yumi was willing to accept any old first-year as her sœur, oh how easy it could be. But now that she had realized that Tōko-chan was the one, there was no going back.

There were probably dozens of girls much nicer than Tōko-chan. Much brighter, happier girls. Much more calm girls. Much gentler girls. Much more interesting girls, and much purer girls.

But Tōko-chan was the one.

Because every girl but Tōko-chan had a list of great qualities that Tōko-chan didn't have.

“Then it's okay to keep trying.”

Sachiko-sama said.

“When Shimako-san had rejected my offer, I felt that there were others who could take her place.”

“Huh?”

“But it was different when you had rejected me Yumi. I really felt that I wanted you to have my rosary.”

Sachiko-sama gently stroked Yumi's hair.

“I tried my best. And that's why you're here next to me now, right Yumi?”

“...Ah.”

(I remember. “I **will** make you my sœur.” You had said.)

Sachiko had declared to Yumi after following her through the Gingko Trees. Yumi had just rejected Sachiko-sama. So this is what Sachiko-sama must have been feeling like, back then.

“Being rejected once doesn't make a big difference.”

“I see.”

“Just puff out your chest. Being rejected shouldn't be embarrassing.”

“I see.”

Yumi answered, while she idly wondered why she could see water dropping from Sachiko-sama's eyes.

“But, it is sad.”

Sachiko-sama wiped her eyes off with her hand and said. “So Yumi shouldn’t give up hope.”

“I see. Um, Onee-sama, is it okay if I cry a little now?”

“Sure.”

Sachiko-sama opened her hands out wide, and tucked Yumi up against her chest.

“Waaaaah”

Yumi clung to her Onee-sama and cried out.

Was she feeling sad? Or did she feel hurt? Maybe she felt like she had lost something dear to her. Or maybe she was just mad. Or maybe she was annoyed. Yumi didn’t honestly know. She didn’t know. So Yumi cried and cried, letting out all of her mixed feelings.

The second floor of the Rose Mansion was still lit. But Yumi didn’t care who heard her. She didn’t have enough room left in her to care. Yumi just wanted to cry it all out.

Merry Christmas.

From somewhere far away a bell rang.

Santa Claus wasn’t bringing her a petite sœur this year, but she already had an Onee-sama who helped her deal with the sadness in her life. She had an Onee-sama whom she could cry with. And that was what slowed down Yumi’s tears.

Merry Christmas.

The outside air was cold.

Yumi felt on her cheeks something that couldn’t have been tears.

Snow.

Perhaps life never went the way you wanted it to. Or maybe it was just that life only sometimes went the way you wanted it to.

Merry Christmas.

Even though it was the time to celebrate Jesus’ birthday, Yumi’s tears would not stop.

Merry Christmas.

What should she do?

She’d have to use her Onee-sama’s gift so early.

Rose Dialogue

Part 1.

Her house is just as huge as ever, Rei thought as she looked up to the tall gate.

Not just huge, but totally huge.

To use the proper Japanese she learned in Lillian, the house would not just be large, but very large. But “totally huge” just had some connotation in it that “very large” didn’t. At least when applied to the Ogasawara Premises.

Rei felt very special to be considered a friend of the princess that lived in this sort of a place as she seared for the intercom. And to think that a visitor to such a majestic mansion came in a lady’s bike was simply absurd.

The tall gate seemed more appropriate to welcome the cars of high officials or the best of domestic cars. The design hadn’t even considered bicycles, so, sadly, her ride probably scored her a Double-Zero on the scoring chart for these things. (Ah, got it, got it.)

Rei pushed the intercom button.

“What business do you have at the Ogasawara Residence?”

The female voice that called out through the intercom wasn’t Sachiko’s or Sayako Obaa-sama’s. Probably a helper.

“I’m Hasekura.”

Maybe she had been too curt, but Sachiko-sama piped in.

“Ah, it’s Rei. She’s already here huh.”

Sachiko said to her helper. Then she began speaking to Rei.

“Rei, the gate will open now. Come in.”

Rei waited in front of the intercom for the gate to open, and suddenly it began opening automatically.

“I apologize for intruding.”

Rei said as she biked into the premises.

(It’s a forest, as always.)

There was still quite a ways until she hit the first building. Once she left the gate safely out of sight, she leaned forward into the bike and began pedaling faster.

(It's a park, like it always is. And wait, here comes the castle.)

Since this was all custom-made, they probably had to pay enormous taxes on it. What kind of thoughts for someone to have riding into such a place on such a bike.

She drove her beloved car into the parking structure to the right, stuffed the key into her jeans pocket, and left. Then she took out the plastic bag from her bike's carry basket and placed it on top of the bike seat. Rei began walking toward the house.

Rei walked up to the front of the house. Before Rei could ring the doorbell, Sachiko came out.

"Welcome."

The smiling princess enters the stage. The princess wears a crimson colored sweater with a long white-red checked skirt. On top of her shoulders, the princess sported a lovely gray-brown shawl.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Rei asked because Sachiko was acting more perky than usual.

"Ah, I'm fine now. I just that it would be great to see you outside. The day before you called Rei, I was really busy and I had collapsed, so I was told for the rest of the vacation I couldn't leave the house. I've been really bored, so I'm happy you came to see me."

"Your parents won't let you go outside?"

"My parents were fine. My grandfather's the problem."

"Sachiko, you really are overprotected."

"Way too much."

Sachiko opened the door and beckoned Rei inside. Rei called out "I'm sorry for intruding", and put her feet inside.

"You should call Yumi-chan over if you're bored."

Rei entered the house and began to sweat, so she took her jacket off. Perhaps she had biked too quickly while coming here.



“I can’t call her. I collapsed while I was out with her at the amusement park.”

“She’s worried, huh.”

Sachiko was with Yumi-chan when she started feeling bad, then something happened and they weren’t letting Sachiko go outside. It wasn’t Yumi-chan’s fault obviously, but she felt guilty about it.

“That’s why I’m keeping this a secret.”

“I see.”

After Rei finished taking her sneakers off and putting on her indoor slippers, Sachiko’s mother, Sayako Obaa-sama, met them.

“Rei-san, so nice to see you. It’s been a while.”

“It has, auntie.”

Maybe Rei shouldn’t be surprised at Sayako Obaa-sama either. She too was like a princess, young-looking, beautiful, and seemed to be the beauty who looked over and guided Sachiko. It may be rude to think this, but Rei didn’t think Sayako Obaa-sama looked as if she had a high-school going daughter at all.

“You’ve heard that Sachiko has been bored right? Please, stay as long as you’d like.”

“Sure. Thanks for the offer.”

“How about lunch?”

“I just had some.”

Soon it would be three o’clock. If she had said “Sure” then some amazing lunch would find itself in front of Rei. And it wouldn’t be some normal amount of food either. Earlier when she had eaten some food here, she had been dumbfounded by the sheer amount of food she was given. After that day, Rei decided to never come here during a mealtime.

“Rei-san, how’d you come here?”

Unlike other mothers who were fine with just greeting their daughter’s children and leaving, Sayako Obaa-sama had to engage her daughter’s guests in conversation.

“I came by bike. It’s not very far from my house. If I took a bus or the train, then I’d just spend time going in circles or going past all the stops, and get late.”

She had marked out the shortest path on the map, but along the way she accidentally took a turn onto the hilly road and wasn’t sure where to go. But today was a beautiful day, and Rei had a great time finding her way from some unknown back road on such a nice day.

“Rei-chan must look stunning on a bike!”

“...It’s a ladies bike...”

“Ladies bike?”

“It’s not one of those sporty ones. It’s one of those that all mothers use bring back groceries from the store. The ones with the carry baskets in the front and the place in the back to keep stuff.”

“Even that must look great!”

Sayako Obaa-sama’s sense of fun was a bit off. She seemed to love everything that normal people did.

“No more mom. Rei, come to my room.”

“Ah, wait. It’s not much but, I baked a bit this morning.”

Rei handed a paper bag to Sayako Obaa-sama. Then suddenly the two Ogasawara women looked at each other and exchanged odd glances.

“Um?”

Rei asked, worried that she had said something rude. Sachiko answered questioningly.

“That’s not... Mille-feuille... Is it?”

Mille-feuille? Why would they think it’s Mille-feuille?

“No, it’s a pound cake made of dried fruits...”

“Oh thank god. Thanks a lot. Rei-san go along with Sachiko. I’ll bring the tea and cake later.”

Sayako Obaa-sama seemed to jog off to the kitchen with the pound cake in hand.

Rei wasn't sure what had just happened so she asked Sachiko as they were going up the stairs.

“If anyone hears the words ‘Mille-feuille’ in my house, their stomach wretches.”

Part 2.

Sachiko-sama's room was a room fit for a princess. A huge, beautiful room.

But that didn't mean that the walls were lined with pink flowers or that the room was filled with teddy bears or other such girly things. It was a room of ivory walls and curtains of a brick-like crimson. The room was a work of art.

The curtains were different than the ones she had seen last time. Perhaps Sachiko changed the color for the season.

Rei considered herself a child, but even to her untrained eye, she could easily spot the furniture made of quality, old wood.

“...”

Just what didn't this room have? There was a four-poster bed, a desk, a grand piano, and a table set all fit into one room. Plus Sachiko even had her own bathroom.

“Please, sit.”

Sachiko said, as she picked up a circular object from her table.

“Embroidery?”

With a single glance, she knew it was. To Rei who had a hobby with such crafts, there was no mistaking it.

“Yeah, just a bit.”

“Show me.”

“No, I'm not as good as you are, Rei.”

Sachiko hesitated, but then showed Rei the work.

“I don't really stitch that often.”

Rei took the stitching in her hand and set her cheeks in place. In the middle of a white handkerchief, a red rose was blooming. This had to be a Bullion Stitch.

“It looks fine by me.”

“Really?”

Sachiko smiled at the praise. Rei was a lucky girl to get a princess to smile at her like this.

“For Yumi?”

“You can tell?”

“Well you know...”

Sachiko always daydreamed about Yumi. She didn't show it but she thought of Yumi as the cutest thing ever. Rei and Sachiko were good friends so Rei knew these things.

It was not quite love.

The two had a relationship that could be best summarized by something Sachiko's previous Onee-sama Mizuno Yōko had said. “Ever since you made Yumi your sœur, you've started to make these great faces.”

Yumi-chan was pushing Sachiko in a good direction.

“Let's eat.”

“Even though we're still waiting on your cake Rei?”

“Even then.”

The two laughed and suddenly a knock came from the door. Sayako Obaa-sama had brought tea.

“Thanks for waiting.”

Sayako Obaa-sama said as she placed heated slices of Rei's pound cake on their plates.

“Ah, sorry.”

“I tasted your cake already Rei-san. It was unbelievably delicious.”

“Thank you. I put a lot of hard work into it.”

Rei's response was simply flattery but it seemed to make Sayako Obaa-sama happy.

“What did you use to make it? Please show me some time.”

“Oh, I'll write down the recipe and send it to you. As soon as I...”

Rei stuttered as she spoke. Sachiko's composed face seemed to be giving Rei a message.

“Well not right now you know. Soon though.”

“Oh yeah sure. Please don't forget.”

“Y, yeah.”

Sachiko waited until Sayako Obaa-sama left for the room before she shrugged.

“Ah, thanks for holding back on the recipe. If you hadn’t, the family’s stomachs would wretch at the sound of pound cake too.”

It seems like recently Obaa-sama had cooked a fairly large amount of Mille-feuille, and had been causing trouble for her family and friends. If that’s all it was then Rei would have no problems holding off on the recipe from Obaa-sama.

“So?”

Sachiko changed the subject as she sipped her tea.

“You wanted to talk about something right?”

“Huh?”

Rei wondered whether she had revealed too much already, and finally admitted that she did want to talk. After all, she had something she wanted to talk with Sachiko about.

“You knew all along.”

“I did. Just meeting without a reason isn’t your style Rei. Though I would be happy if you just wanted to meet Rei.”

“...I’m sorry about that.”

“So am I. Plus I’m glad that you wanted to come and talk with me.”

Sachiko went back to eating a bite of her pound cake and exclaimed “It’s delicious”.

“It’s made of raisins, apricots, plums, and pineapples.”

Rei began to count out individually the fruits that she had put into the home cooked pound cake.

“Is that all?”

“And figs.”

“Ah, figs. Now that you mention it, it makes sense.”

Sachiko seemed to feel more satisfied as she took a not very thin piece of cake, jabbed her fork through, and brought the fork into her mouth. Rei asked as she saw Sachiko eating.

“I’ve been thinking about a lot of things.”

“Mmhmm.”

Sachiko’s answer was ambivalent.

Did Rei really want to go through with this? The thing was, she was only having trouble with finding her resolve at the end of the very end of the last part. And the only reason she could go back on her decision was because she was still in a position where she could fall back on something but what she chose. Once Rei began talking about it, she couldn’t take the words back.

“Would you listen to something I want to say? Are you up for that, Sachiko?”

“Not a problem with me.”

Sachiko responded.

“Just keep your thoughts to yourself until the end, okay Sachiko?”

Rei desperately pleaded with Sachiko. This was the reason she had come.

“Yoshino...”

How should she start this whole thing? But Sachiko was only going to listen and not offer any conclusions of her own, so hopefully she wouldn’t press too hard on the topic Rei was going to open with.

“Has become close friends with an underclassman.”

“...Okay...”

“Middle school, third year, a girl named Arima Nana.”

“Has Yoshino introduced her yet?”

Rei shook her head and said “No.”

“I was doing some things, where I saw them together.”

“What things?”

Rei was just relaying the story to Sachiko but maybe she was leaving too many of the finer details out of the picture.

“Oh, I was on an O-miai. That’s when I saw Yoshino.”

“An O-miai?”

Sachiko suddenly straightened, and narrowed her eyes. Oh yeah. Rei hadn't said anything about that before the vacation.

But it had been a long time since that O-miai. Then finals came up and then the winter vacation, and she never found the time to tell anyone about it.

"Well, um, we'll talk about the O-miai some other time. I just met some cousin I knew. Someone told me that he was going to get the same surgery that Yoshino had gotten so I wanted to cheer him on..."

Sachiko smiled as she asked her next question.

"How old was he?"

"Ten."

Rei answered.

"I thought so."

Sachiko thought and laughed dryly.

How had Sachiko known? How did she know it was a kid the moment she heard that he was going to have the same surgery that Yoshino had. Well Rei hadn't really given much import to the O-miai. If it had been a real O-miai then she would have probably made a much bigger fuss to Sachiko about it.

Now Rei was going back to her original point.

"So what does this Nana-san have to do with your O-miai?"

Sachiko asked.

"Yoshino just dropped in unannounced to the hotel, and she had brought that Nana girl with her."

"I see."

"My dad and the dad of the boy who I had an O-miai with knew about Nana so I decided to do some research."

"More things I'd never expect you to do Rei."

Sachiko let out a bored sigh. Even Rei understood that these rash decisions weren't things she normally did.

"It's because Yoshino didn't tell me anything about her."

Sachiko noticed that whenever Yoshino came into the picture, Rei would suddenly start acting differently and her judgment abilities would become impaired.

“So? What’s wrong other than her name?”

Sachiko leaned forward in anticipation.

“Arima Nana used to be Tanaka Nana.”

Rei answered as Sachiko swallowed a piece of the pound cake. It felt like there had been a very large chunk of apricot. The fruit chunk must have missed the slice of the knife by a centimeter, because the whole point of the cutting was to decrease the clumps of fruit.

Why was this the only piece that had escaped the knife, though? It had also been missed when Rei had dumped the fruits into the batter, and even when she had been mixing the fruits through the batter.

“Wait a second. Who is this Tanaka Nana?”

Sachiko asked.

“The youngest daughter of the Tanaka sisters.”

“Ah, like that Oonaka girl you faced off against in last year’s and this year’s kendo matches. Those Tanaka sisters?”

“Yeah, those. I was a bit surprised when I found out.”

The man who owned the Arima Doujo was their son in law. It was a fairly well known story in the kendo world and so Rei’s father and grandfather had known about it, but those lower in the Hasekura family hadn’t.

And so Rei hadn’t known. Rei didn’t think Yoshino had known this either when she became friends with Nana.

“How do you think they met?”

“Who knows.”

Rei didn’t know that much. She had investigated all she could about Nana’s life, but she hadn’t asked either how they had met. They were all on the same Lillian Girls’ School premises, so there was at least one place she could have talked to either.

“But it’s a very recent thing.”

This had to be Rei’s sœur intuition. But Yoshino hadn’t seemed to be close with Nana before the school festival. And during the Sœur Audition Tea Party, Yoshino hadn’t even been sure about the ‘p’ in petite sœur. Even though Yoshino had been so aggressive about it then.

“Rei.”

“Whenever or wherever they met I don’t care a bit about. But why couldn’t she tell me?”

Rei stabbed the cake with her fork in her anger.

“Rei!”

“I know, I know I’m asking too much of her. I’ll be graduating soon and Yoshino needs to find a sœur. But at least, tell...”

“Stop!”

Sachiko lightly tapped Rei on the forehead.

“You’ve become feverish.”

Sachiko’s touch had felt cool to Rei. And yet for some reason, the palm of Sachiko’s hand had cooled Rei down.

“I’ll hear all your complaints in a second. But first just calm down a bit.”

Sachiko said and stood up. Rei looked at Sachiko, wondering what she was about to do. Sachiko turned toward the room door.

“You can’t finish this piece of cake, right? So I’ll just go downstairs and grab a spoon.”

Sachiko pointed to the cake then left the room. Rei’s eyes fell on top of the cake on her plate and there she found a piece that Rei judged too thin to be eatable with a fork.

Part 3.

As Sachiko waited for Rei to finish her cake with the spoon, she began playing the piano.

“Any requests?”

Sachiko turned to Rei and asked after she had finished skimming through her practice book.

“Für Elise’ please.”

Rei answered as she spun the spoon around in her hand.

“When I meant piano, I was looking for a recital piece.”

“Well I can’t remember any others! Oh, I also know the Minute Waltz.”

It would be great if Rei could have said something like Chopin’s “Nocturne A” or Mozart’s “March B”, but Rei had lived most of her music untouched by classical music and thus was completely oblivious about these things.

“Fine, I’ll do Für Elise.”

Sachiko looked for the song in her book and stood the pages of sheet music up on the piano stand. Was it organized by numbers, or in alphabetical order by an author’s last name, or were the piece names themselves in alphabetical order? All Rei knew was that Sachiko had simply taken the book of music out and thumbed quickly to the page, so she knew the book well.

Could Sachiko play every song in that book? If she could, then wow.

“And now, to fulfill the guest’s request.”

The familiar melody wafted over Rei. So that’s why Sachiko had wanted a recital piece. She wanted something that sounded nice at a distance. The music was very soothing to Rei’s ears.

To Rei it felt as if she were hearing some age-old recording from a CD. The song put Rei at ease.

Rei knew that the next moment she thought about Yoshino, the blood would rush into her face. But right now it was necessary for her to calm down. If she did then her thought process wouldn't feel so one-sided.

Every note that Sachiko pressed seemed to be hit at the right time, just the right way.

Could Rei call that a perfect session on Sachiko's part? And then could she attribute a quality of flawless beauty to it? Even the lulls were punctuated by the perfect notes or lack thereof. It was almost as if the music on the sheet was coming to life. Even without saying such grandiose words, Rei felt that she could convey the beauty of the performance to Sachiko with a simple expression of thanks.

This isn't how Shimako would look at the playing though. She too might consider that all the correct notes had been hit, but maybe she would have called the middle section too soft. Or maybe rather than commenting on how loud Sachiko had played, she might have thought that the song's sound felt too distant.

To a person that played music, it sounded different. If Rei could play like Sachiko, what would her performance have sounded like? Maybe she too would be considering the qualities of the music.

When Sachiko finished playing, she placed her hands on her knees. Sachiko finally got up when she decided that Rei's mood had cooled down significantly. Sachiko closed her book of sheet music and put the cover of the piano down. Had Sachiko been looking at Rei for an encore, Rei would have urged Sachiko to play two or three more times.

Sadly, Rei hadn't come for a concert. Rei let the music go.

When Sachiko sat back down next to Rei, Rei began talking once more.

"I won't be going to Lillian Girls' University."

"Huh?"

“I don’t know if I can make it in time, but I’m applying for other schools.”

“But didn’t you fill out the escalator application?”

The day for filling out escalator applications had long passed. That day too Rei had been on the fence about where to go. So Rei had given the application just in case.

“On the last day of school, I’ll tell the teachers that I won’t be attending.”

“I see.”

Sachiko nodded slowly. She recognized that this was the real thing that Rei had come to talk about.

“Yoshino-chan...”

Did she know? Sachiko’s eyes continued the question. But as soon as she could even think of the question, the question answered itself in Sachiko’s mind. Yoshino knew, obviously.

There was no way Yoshino wouldn’t know.

Yoshino always wanted to be the first to know anything about Rei. But Rei shook her head.

“I haven’t told Yoshino yet.”

“Why?”

For years now, Rei had been telling everyone that she would be going to Lillian for college. So obviously Yoshino thought that Rei would be going to Lillian Girls’ University.

“I’m afraid of her.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes, afraid.”

Rei answered so honestly that Sachiko laughed.

“Aren’t you getting too worked up about this?”

It was a good thing that they were such good friends. Sachiko understood all of these things.

“Maybe I am. But I know Yoshino would look me straight in the eye and ask me “why”. Then my resolve would break.”

“What good is a resolve that isn’t resolved?”

“I think I’m right about what would happen. Yoshino is important enough to me that if she really wanted me to change my mind, I would.”

“I see.”

“That’s why before I tell Yoshino, I need to make sure my thoughts translate into actions. I want Yoshino to have no power over me when I tell her.”

So she would tell Yoshino after she told everyone else.

“So you won’t tell her that you submitted the escalator application either?”

Rei could not afford to show Yoshino that she was wavering. Rei had decided on a concrete path for her future life. And if they didn’t have chances to talk with each other, then it would take longer for Yoshino to find out. That’s how Rei wanted to keep Yoshino out of it.

“But does Yoshino have any right to get involved into which university you go to?”

Sachiko looked searchingly toward Rei’s face as she asked.

“Maybe she does.”

Rei said. Then suddenly she remembered something and said “No”.

“I’ll make sure Yoshino can’t get involved with this.”

Rei was definitely going to inform Yoshino some day of this. And everything Rei had done until now to keep Yoshino out of the way to plan what she would do with her life she had never done before. She had never kept Yoshino out of her life like this.

Plans for the future.

Rei remembered, and grimaced at the memories.

“You know. When I was a kid, I had thought that I’d become a nurse.”

Rei had never told Sachiko about this before so she was certain that Sachiko would laugh. But Sachiko didn't.

"For Yoshino-chan?"

"Yeah."

For the little Yoshino who had to keep going back and forth to the hospital. She would even have to stay there a few times. When she saw Yoshino in pain, Rei was so touched that she wanted to become a nurse. Rei had felt that this was a message telling her what to do with her life. If she became a nurse, then she could be with Yoshino and be her strength. It felt weird but to Rei, Yoshino was the only real patient.

"The next thing I wanted to be was a doctor. I wanted to come up with some cure for Yoshino that didn't involve surgery. Because Yoshino had always been afraid of surgery."

"When I found out that Lillian University didn't teach Medicine, I was shocked. It was right before I entered high school. But if I had to go to a medical school instead of Lillian University, then I couldn't be with Yoshino, could I? So after two days of worrying, I finally decided. My first priority was to be close to Yoshino, and that after college I might go to med school."

Sachiko who had been quiet all the while smiled lightly. Rei too smiled. She continued talking.

"I was so sure of everything, right? I felt that if I kept my resolve strong toward this future, then all of it would be possible, even though I know that life wasn't all that predictable. But I had decided that the most important thing to me was to be with Yoshino. But."

Yoshino underwent the surgery on a whim, and then became fine. And then Rei didn't have to protect her anymore.

"Even though I was the one who had dedicated my life to being with Yoshino, I was the one left behind."

As Rei spoke her chest tightened.

Right. The pain from having realized that Yoshino had left her behind still hurt.

“I had grown up watching over her, and so when Yoshino didn’t need me anymore I didn’t know what to do. For me feeling needed was the most important feeling in my life. I had grown dependent on Yoshino. So I decided that I needed to slowly distance myself from her.”

“That’s why you wanted to go to some other school?”

Rei nodded.

“Yoshino and I are cousins. We live right next to each other. It’s not that easy to shake her off. We even go to the same school.”

“That might be, but still. Was Yoshino-chan the only reason you decided to go somewhere else?”

“It was. But I’m not running away. I’m looking ahead, not turning from what’s behind. I’ll be studying something that I couldn’t here at Lillian.”

“And what would that be?”

“Kinesiology.”

With her upbringing from Kindergarten in the Lillian school system, she’d be going on to studying to teach kindergarteners kendo. Wasn’t that an interesting take to life? Still she knew her choice was one she was making because she had been raised in the closed world of Lillian. Once she left Yoshino and her life here behind, she knew she’d be able to see a much wider world.

She felt at ease with Yoshino. But she was so overwhelmed by this feeling of ease that she was essentially becoming an actor in Yoshino’s life, not hers.

Rei had spent the whole year thinking about her choice.

“But I’m weak and my resolve is never strong enough. I kept going back and forth between my choices until I finally chose to leave Lillian. I knew that if I went on this way, I’d lose to Yoshino. I felt like my eyes had been opened.”

“Lose? To Yoshino-chan?”

“Yes.”

Yoshino was planning to bring Nana along to the Rose Mansion for the Christmas party. Rei didn't know what sort of introduction Yoshino and Nana had planned, but Rei had no doubt that Yoshino was planning to introduce Nana formally to Rei.

“If I try to grow up after Yoshino leaves me behind, it would be even harder.”

“...Rei.”

Sachiko walked up to Rei.

“I think you've made a great decision.”

Sachiko grabbed Rei's shoulders from behind.

“I'll think of you completely differently from now on Rei.”

“So will I.”

Rei began laughing. Suddenly, the doorbell rang indicating a visitor to the Ogasawara residence.

A sound that resembled Rei's alarm back at home, beckoning her to wake up.

Part 4.

The wintry night finally came upon them.

From the window, the outside looked completely dark.

“Oh wow, it’s already time to go huh.”

As they were walking down the stairs, Sayako Obaa-sama came to meet them quickly.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Rei-san?”

“No, not today, I’m sorry. I’ve already stayed for too long.”

As Rei was leaving, Sayako Obaa-sama looked pointedly toward Rei.

“I won’t be cooking tonight so you won’t have to eat any new experiment.”

Sayako Obaa-sama seemed to think that Rei was running away from Obaa-sama’s cooking. Obaa-sama seemed to have realized that she always prepared insane amounts of food and she’d put too much time into the whole thing.

“No, it’s not the cooking.”

“Then what is it?”

“Um, well.”

While Rei was wondering how to politely decline the dinner offer, Sachiko came in from the side in a rescue boat.

“Mom. Rei came on a bike. It’s already dark, and it’s not good for her to be out so late.”

“...I see.”

Sachiko’s persuasive reasoning stopped Obaa-sama’s insisting. A woman with a daughter wouldn’t still insist on a guest staying after all.

“Lately all the guests have been leaving by evening and it’s becoming boring at night. Rei-san next time come and stay over at our house.”

“Sure.”

Obaa-sama didn't look like she would let Rei come in the house next time without staying over. Next time she came she'd have to bring a pack of pajamas.

"Guests, right..."

Sachiko whispered as Rei put on her shoes.

"Who was here earlier?"

"What do you mean?"

Sachiko's mother asked Sachiko.

"You know, twenty minutes ago or so. I heard the doorbell ring."

"Ah, it was Suguru-san."

Sachiko's mother laughed. He wasn't a guest.

"It was Suguru-san?"

When Rei heard the name "Suguru", she decided to stay away from the conversation. But as she heard the Ogasawara women talk about him, she began remembering him.

Kashiwagi Suguru. Sachiko's cousin.

"What did he come here to ask?"

"Hmm. I wonder what it was."

When Sachiko's mother remembered, Rei was putting on her sneakers and Sachiko was putting on her shoes.

"Right right. He had come to return the **Furoshiki** from the Mille-feuille wrapper."

"That's all he came to do?"

Sachiko could make no sense of the answer and so she asked again.

"That's it. Even though he could have returned it whenever he wanted."

"Like when he borrowed the umbrella a year ago and came back to return it? But why?"

"I honestly don't know."

Sayako Obaa-sama shook her head. The two Ogasawara women folded their arms together and wondered why he had come. They looked like reflections of each other.

“Was the Furoshiki a very special one? Or was the umbrella made of vinyl or something?”

Rei tried to join in but the two shot down her line of thought with a simple “No that’s not it”.

“The Furoshiki was one of those you use to wrap snapper or sekihan, not something you should return because it is used to wrap wedding gifts!”

Obaa-sama walked over to a table next to the door. On the table was a vase, and next to it was the furoshiki. “Look”, Obaa-sama showed it around. Just as Obaa-sama had said, this wasn’t some special handmade furoshiki. It was one designed to be used and then thrown.

“The borrowed umbrella had been a women’s umbrella and had been bought in Italy. Kashiwagi-san being a guy couldn’t use that umbrella, unless it was raining very badly outside.

“...I see.”

It was a real mystery. If Rei wanted to figure it out, she too would have to cross her arms and think.

“Well if you come back next week you can help us unravel the mystery.”

Sachiko’s mother laughed. They’d continue this conversation next time.

Tooru Oji-sama and Sachiko’s grandfather hadn’t returned yet.

Rei looked down at her watch. It was six fifty-five. She had come a bit late to avoid lunch but she was going back late enough for dinner so she had made up for it.

Rei’s bike had been parked in the parking lot. Even though the parking lot was covered the seat was still wet, perhaps with dew.

Rei cleaned the seat with a handkerchief and took out her keys.

“Can I ride?”

Sachiko said as she pointed toward the bike. Rei didn’t want Sachiko to walk along as she rode.

“You can ride a bike, right Sachiko? Or can’t you?”

“Come on. I can at least ride a bike. Let me on, please.”

Sachiko’s long heavy skirt extended past her knees when she finally managed to push herself onto the bike. The handle got in the way of Sachiko’s shawl so she placed it in the bike’s basket in front of her.

At first Sachiko simply spun the tire around a few times. Then finally, she pushed the bike off smoothly and rode with it. Rei followed.

Rei ran down the road which cut through the middle of the forest-like park in the chill night air.

Sachiko hit the brake, then spoke.

“Let’s ride together.”

“Huh?”

“It’s fine. This is private grounds so no-one can fine us.”

“I see. Okay, then let’s go.”

Rei’s body was hot and she felt a bit light-headed. Maybe because she had run.

“Rei, you’re warm.”

Sachiko let Rei hold the handle and she sat behind Rei on the rear cargo box.

“Let’s go!”

Rei pushed the pedals down as hard as she could. Sachiko was holding on tightly to Rei’s waist.

The wind rushed by them as the bike sped down the path.

The lamps spaced around the path seemed to shine like stars.

Rei and Sachiko began to laugh as they rode.

They felt like a shooting star, zooming through the galaxy.

Could they ride this path forever, into eternity?

Could they reach out with their hands and touch the stars?

With the wind rushing around her and her friend’s warmth surrounding her, Rei had no doubt that they could.



Part 5.

The seemingly endless path eventually stopped. The looming gate in front of their eyes brought them back into reality.

Sachiko got off the bike and opened the door. Rei pedaled the bike forward one step at a time.

Sachiko and Rei once again met where the gate separated the outside world from the inside.

Rei pushed her body against the bike and began pedaling again when Sachiko called out from behind “Rei”.

“What?”

Rei suddenly turned to look back. Sachiko’s breath froze white in the air as she panted.

“I’ll be going to LillianU.”

“Hm.”

“I was thinking of going to some other school, learning economics, and helping out my father and my grandfather with the family business but then I realized that I have a lot of time yet. I want to take it slow, and stay in Lillian for a little while longer.”

“I see.”

“I want to stay in the same Lillian as Yumi.”

“I know.”

“That’s all.”

When Sachiko finished, she looked relieved.

So Rei then happily waved back to Sachiko and began once more riding onward.

She started pedaling faster. The lampposts illuminated small chunks of the road in front of her.

So.

Sachiko was staying.

Rei had suspected for a while, but hearing it from Sachiko’s own mouth made the decision hit home.

So.

In Yumi's Lillian.

Rei's chest suddenly tightened, and she felt a heat within her.

This was Sachiko's decision. What Sachiko had thought about, and worried about. A decision she had come to on her own. Rei could do nothing but wish her the best.

At the crossing, Rei stopped her bike one more time. The road she had been biking on was narrow. The road she would bike onto was a wide one, one meant for cars.

As Rei looked down from the top of the hill, the road she was about to turn onto shined outward like the Milky Way.

Rei then biked onward, onto the new wide road, not even once looking back.

Afterword

Blank Map of the Future?

It seems like the title of the last book in a series.

Hi there. Konno here.

And that was something my editor said when we were talking about the subtitle over the phone.

It really sounded like the end, he had said. And when I thought about it, I realized he was right.

“After this book each of the girls would go on to follow their own paths in life.”

So, it was The End then. That’s what the title made you think.

Well first look at the word “Future”. We could have said “Tomorrow” instead. Future is just one of those words that sounds like it wraps things up.

And then “blank”. We could have used “blue” but that felt a bit suspicious. There are more suspicious colors out there though. But if you had used colors like red, or yellow then they wouldn’t have made it sound like the series was ending. At least that’s what I think.

And then finally we come to “map”. Do we even need to talk about this one?

But this isn’t the last book.

For those of you who’ve been following the series since the beginning, you’ll be thinking “No way, it’s still not done?!” No it hasn’t ended yet. The problem is that there’s still a lot of stuff left to cover. To sort through it all will take some time.

Also this was the first time I talked about a stitch.

The stitch I talked about is one used often on those green caterpillars. When I was growing up, it was all over those frocks and blouses. It’s the stitch that you look at and say “this is what a rose should be”, and then you try to think of the name of the stitch and you just can’t. I looked through my Embroidery Book at home and finally found it. “Oh oh, I finally found it. It’s the Baiorin

Stitch”. So I added Baiorin to the draft of the book. So then when I thought I should try to confirm the stitch, I tried looking up the stitch on the internet and I got no hits. Then was it a **Violin** Stitch? So I tried changing the Ba to a Va but still nothing. Could this be some weird custom name that my book gave to the stitch? So I went to the local bookstore and I tried looking in another book of stitches. “I found it!” I thought when I checked the index under “Rose” and found “Barion Rose”. And then I thought “Wait, what?” That’s when it dawned upon me.

It wasn’t **Baiorin! It was Barion!!!!**

All the search results I was getting were based on Baiorin.

I was as angry as I could get. If I hadn’t searched the internet, the book may have been written with Bairon instead of Barion.

Also I want to talk about a little misunderstanding we had regarding Maria-sama ga Miteru.

-- Begin Snip --

-- End Snip --

And while we’re talking about misunderstandings, I’ll mention another one. Recently I received a letter from a male fan saying “Please thank your Onee-sama editor”. Of course, my real editor would be more like a “Onii-sama”. I had mentioned this in an Afterword for another book I had written, but that was a book called “Slippy Shoes”, so I thought there would be people who wouldn’t know. Or maybe he came to one of my book signings where the Shueisha Onee-samas were standing next to me and just fell in love with one of them so he thought that she just had to be my editor.

But then again, if a male fan would write “Please thank your Onii-sama editor” it would make you feel a bit uneasy wouldn’t it?

Well, that’s all I have this time.

-- Konno Oyuki