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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

仮面のアクトレス

今野緒雪



集英社

Volume 24

Masked Actress

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

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

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

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

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

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

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

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

Mask.

A headgear designed to imitate a face.

In popular entertainment, it's long been used to allow actors to depict someone other than themselves.

At masquerade balls, to not reveal one's identity.

Also, they can be used to protect oneself.

So then, why on earth was she wearing one?

It was an incredibly well-made mask. There was no way to glimpse the expression beneath it.

In the end, I could do nothing.

As the mask was raised.

Yellow Rose, Hardball Fight

Riding a Bicycle

Part 1

The written invitation from Sachiko-sama arrived three days after that eventful Christmas party.

"A New Year's party ... "

I see. Bravo, Sachiko-sama. – That was the initial reaction that I, Shimazu Yoshino, had.

Why? Because I fully understood that this event was being done for Yumi-san's benefit.

On the day of the second-term closing ceremony, we'd had a Christmas party in the student council room, the Rose Mansion. Just as it was finishing up, Yumi-san had chased after Touko-chan as she made her way home and caught up to her outside. Then, in front of the statue of Maria-sama, she had offered her rosary, but it hadn't been accepted. In short, Yumi-san's offer of soeur-hood was rejected by Touko-chan.

Naturally, when I heard of it, I was floored. Because Yumi-san hadn't given any indication before, or even during the party that she'd do this. Well, I knew that something had happened between them in the past, but at the very least it was really sudden. My feelings were something like, "Hey, hey, why didn't you discuss this with me, your friend?"

But I couldn't make such a glib complaint to Yumi-san, already devastated by Touko-chan's rejection.

Well, it was only natural that she was devastated. Yumi-san was often "cautious," or putting it less kindly, "indecisive," so for her to take action it must have been a momentous decision. And yet, the result was a tragic defeat. Tears. Her face downcast.

Despite all this, I had no idea what to say at the time, unable to find a single sensible sentence. Trying to console her would have made it all the more painful. That's why we didn't touch upon that subject on our way home, instead cultivating happier topics to chat about. Even though we cultivated, it was impossible to get anything to bloom brightly like a sunflower. The best we could do was something modest, like the chickweed that grows on the side of the road.

But even so. After about a day or two the agitation in my heart had settled (I wasn't aware of it, but at first it was quite violent) and I started to worry about how Yumi-san was feeling. But it would have seemed unnatural if I called her for no reason (even though I had a reason), and I couldn't come up with an excuse for us to meet. I didn't even know what I'd do if we met. I thought that if I saw her face, I'd know if I should encourage her, or listen to her complaints, or badmouth Touko-chan, or cry with her. But, either way, we'd have to meet.

Then, just as I was about to spring into action, Sachiko-sama's invitation arrived.

It was probably inevitable that Sachiko-sama was also still concerned about Yumi-san. There's no way she'd leave her alone until the third term opening ceremony. And Yumi-san had visited the Ogasawara estate for New Year's this year (although intuitively it feels like last year), so Sachiko-sama may have been planning this all along, but by sending me a written invitation without any advance notice there was no mistaking that this New Year's party was actually a "Cheer up Yumi Party." And since I'd received an invitation, that meant that Rei-chan, and of course Shimako-san and Noriko-chan would probably have received one too.

I reached for the phone straight away. I now had a valid reason for calling her. Like hell I was going to miss this chance.

It rang two or three times. Either way, it wasn't long until I got a response from the other end.

"Hello."

"Ah, Yumi-san?"

Hearing that familiar voice, I completely forgot the proper protocol for calling someone's house.

"Huh?"

Hearing this response, it suddenly dawned on me. There were plenty of children that sounded identical to their parents. When I called Yumi-san's house last time, what had her mother sounded like? – I didn't have time to think about that, I had to keep going for now.

"... Uh, this is the Fukuzawa household, right?"

"That's right. And you must be Shimazu-san, no?"

From that response, there was no doubting that it was Yumi-san on the other end of the line.

"Wha~at."

I was relieved to hear she was surprisingly cheerful. Although obviously I hadn't expected she would have spent the whole three days crying.

When Yumi-san said she was planning on attending, I declared that I'd be going too. If Yumi-san hadn't been going, I probably would have held off too. Since it was a "Cheer up Yumi Party," it probably wouldn't happen if the person we were cheering up wasn't there. Of course, it was called a "New Year's Party" so it shouldn't have mattered to me whether or not Yumi-san was there, but I didn't really want to be fooling around in Sachiko-sama's house without her petit soeur there, and Sachiko-sama surely would have felt the same.

But since Yumi-san was going to be there, I was starting to get excited too. I was currently minding the house by myself so I hadn't heard directly from Rei-chan, but I made up my mind that if she said she wasn't going then I'd lasso a rope around her neck and drag her along.

After letting Yumi-san know that I'd call her again to work out some minor details, I hung up. Still holding the telephone handset, I punched in a number while looking at the contacts page in my student notebook. There was one more close friend that I really wanted to share this with. I felt that such thoughts were quite natural.

"Is this the Toudou-san residence? My name is Shimazu Yoshino and I'm a second-year high school student at Lillian's Girls Academy. If Shimako-san's there, could you – "

I did a quick rehearsal before placing the call. Making a slip-up like I had in the earlier conversation was not fitting for a student of Lillian's after all.

However.

"Beep beep beep."

Instead of hearing the phone ring, I got the busy tone.

"Aww."

I'd only been a little bit excited, but the feeling of it all coming to naught surged through me.

"For crying out loud. Who the heck is Shimako-san having such a long phone call with?"

I grumbled, setting the telephone handset down.

I didn't actually know whether or not Shimako-san was the one using the Toudou's home phone, nor whether or not it was a long phone call since I'd only rung one – those were my suppositions. But with my excitement being torn to shreds, I just wanted to complain.

I found out soon after that it was actually Shimako-san using the phone at that point, so my instincts weren't too shabby.

"But it was only about three minutes. Is that a long phone call?"

Shimako-san asked, her tone serious. She'd called the Fukuzawa household, ie. Yumi-san, before she called me.

When she received the invitation from Sachiko-sama, she'd also instinctively reached out for the phone.

The same pattern of behavior as me.

– That made me kinda happy.

Part 2

Rei-chan returned home about an hour later. The local bookstore hadn't had the reference book she wanted, so she'd had to go K station.

"Here, look at this."

Waiting motionlessly in the house was frustrating so I'd been going in and out of the entrance, and when I eventually spotted Rei-chan's bike coming up to our house, or the Hasekura house, either way, onto the property, I rushed over and handed her the red envelope that I'd already retrieved from the letterbox. The one addressed to Rei-chan.

"At that?"

Rei-chan parked her beloved bike in the bike shed and looked at what I had in my hand.

"Yeah. There's a New Year's party at Sachiko-sama's house. On the second of January. An overnight stay. Sounds fun, doesn't it? Hey, we'll go, right? Let's go, yeah?"

"... And I suppose that's what's written in this letter."

Rei-chan took the envelope from me and I waited, excited and expectant, as she used her bike key in place of a letter opener to open the envelope and then read the printed invitation in silence. And what was Rei-chan's conclusion after doing all this?

"I see."

After she finished reading, Rei-chan put the card back into the envelope and smiled.

"We'll go. We have to cheer up Yumi-chan."

"Yeah."

As expected. Rei-chan understood. And it was pretty impressive of me to understand that too.

"So then."

Rei-chan said.

"I suppose it'll be the fourth or fifth of January."

"What will?"

The tension gone, I said the first thing that came to mind. Rei-chan had suddenly said the fourth or fifth, and I didn't immediately realize what she was talking about.

"What will? When Nana-chan's going to visit."

"Nana's visit ... ?"

As I said this, I thought, "Dammit."

"For the bout. We said we'd have it during the winter break, remember? She'll probably be busy preparing for the end of year, so it'll be better to have it in the new year. I can't believe you forgot, Yoshino."

"Uh, no way. I didn't forget."

Actually, the truth was "unbelievable." But that was because that conversation had taken place right in the middle of the Christmas Party, and after that there had been Rei-chan's announcement that she was going to take entrance exams to other universities and Yumi-san had been rejected by Touko-chan. So that topic had slipped my mind. No, with all those other major things going on, I may have intentionally chosen not to think about it, deciding it was fine to let it remain hazy.

But, what was up with that? Rei-chan had clearly remembered it. Like, all those other things were going on, but that was that and this was this. She hadn't even been distracted by the invitation to the New Year's party.

"I'll ask Nana. Whether the fourth or the fifth are good for her."

If Rei-chan was concerned about her promise to Nana, then I didn't have much choice. I accepted my fate.

"Okay. She told me her phone number, so I could call her – "

"No, I'll do it."

"Alright. I'll leave it to you then."

Nana and Rei-chan were going to cross blades. Why was my heart beating so hard?

It wasn't apprehension. Nor was it exhilaration.

It's a bit of a grandiose simile, but it was like I was facing the end days. Like Jesus had appeared to perform the Last Judgment, or the Maitreya Buddha had finally arrived after 5.67 billion years, that sort of thing.

It didn't change that I'd run out of time to do what I should do. But that day was undoubtedly closing in. I wasn't worried about what would befall me – whether I'd be saved or damned – but the practice, or fight, between Nana and Rei-chan would turn my world upside down. That was the hunch I had.

I'd watched Rei-chan's matches countless times before. So what was so different about this one?

Because her opponent was Nana.

I had no idea about her true strength. No, it'd be the same even if I knew Nana's approximate skill level.

Her opponent was Nana. Therefore –

"Yoshino?"

"Uh ... how will get to Sachiko-sama's house?"

"How? We'll get a bus to the station, then catch a train, then walk the rest of the way. Ah – I think Sachiko might have said something about a bus between their house and the station. But I'm not really sure, I never asked her about it."

Rei-chan said, scratching her head.

"Sounds like a long trip."

"Yeah, I guess. Although it's not that far in a straight line."

"You rode your bike there last time, right?"

This was followed by a brief silence. Rei-chan broke the silence by suddenly lowering her head.

"I'm sorry, Yoshino."

"Huh, why?"

"I should have got my license, like Sei-sama. Then I could drive you – " I had to consider what to say next.

"That wasn't what I was thinking."

Rei-chan was so busy with student council and club activities that there was no way she'd be able to find the time to go to driver training. On top of that, she was also currently studying for university entrance exams. With that said, Sei-sama had done it at some point last year. But she wasn't in any clubs, so she probably went to a driver training school during the holidays and got her license through that.

"Then what the heck were you thinking about during that silence, Yoshino?"

"Bike."

"Huh? But, Yoshino – "

"Ah, don't worry. My dad'll buy me a bike."

In truth, I hadn't had my own bike for many years.

"No, it's not that. Well, there's that too. What I'm trying to say is."

"I know. So, you'll help me, right?"

"..."

Rei-chan's face clearly showed that she thought this was going to be a pain.

"You're serious?"

"Totally serious. And it'll be way quicker than you getting your license."

Instead of responding, Rei-chan let out a sigh.

Which wasn't surprising.

It had probably been about ten years since I last rode a bike – and that had been a kid's bike with training wheels.

Part 3

The following day, we went to a fairly spacious public park near our house so I could practice riding a bike.

We walked there together, Rei-chan pushing her bike. In my usual green-light-go-go-go manner, I'd actually wanted to do this yesterday after making my declaration but Rei-chan put a stop to that and I reluctantly gave up.

Rei-chan's two conditions for helping me were that I get permission from both my parents and that I practice in a wide-open space in the middle of the day, when it's sunny.

Since I didn't have the slightest idea how long I'd need to practice riding, it was better to start in the morning, plus I wouldn't be able to get permission from my parents until dad got home. As a result, it was pushed back to today. It was annoying, but I had to admit that I wouldn't be able to do this without Rei-chan's help.

The houses I saw from the street were all in interesting states. Some looked to be in the middle of a big cleanup, with all the furniture in the entry of one, and the father cleaning the glass windows detached from all over the house in the garden of another. There were some houses that looked like they'd finished their cleaning, with bright green New Year's decorations hanging from their entrance ways, and others where I could still see a Christmas tree through their windows, apparently forgotten during the cleanup.

I wonder how long that festival-stall-sized hut that's selling New Year's decorations has been there? I suppose it'll be dismantled on New Year's day. No, it'll probably stay there until January 7, selling the herb set for the Festival of Seven Herbs.

A girl that looked to be in about grade two rode past us on a bike and stopped at the postbox up ahead. She took a bundle of New Year's postcards from her bike's front basket. Her parents had probably asked her to do this.

There were too many for just one child – about a hundred, judging by the thickness.

After mailing the postcards, the girl spun her bike around and took off again. She picked up speed and drew close to us. Slicing through the air, it was like I could already hear the "whoosh."

In no time at all, she was past us. She took no notice of us. To her, we were probably just another obstacle, like a telephone pole. It was surprisingly refreshing.

"Rei-chan."

Without thinking, I called out Rei-chan's name.

"Mm?"

Still holding the bike's handle, Rei-chan turned to look at me. Calling her name was fine, but I didn't really know what I wanted to tell her.

"Nothing."

Was all I said.

"Really?"

Rei-chan didn't pepper me with questions. Instead, she said:

"You'll be able to ride like that too, Yoshino."

"... Huh?"

"Carefree."



Just for a moment, I must have had a pretty stupid look on my face. Because Rei-chan's comment was too accurate.

That's right, Rei-chan. If only I could ride a bike like that forever.

Because whenever Rei-chan would go out without me, and I'd watch her put her feet on those bike pedals and zip off like a flowing stream, I'd always get annoyed.

Because Rei-chan was always so beautiful.

Because of my congenital heart defect, I'd given up on ever being able to ride a bicycle without training wheels. It was a lot more dangerous if I had an attack while riding a bike, compared to walking, and even before that there was all the practice I'd need – that sort of thing was unimaginable to my pre-surgery self.

So I was envious of Rei-chan for so easily doing something that I couldn't.

It annoyed me that I'd never be able to do what Rei-chan did, no matter how much I tried.

And because I loved Rei-chan so much, it made it all the more annoying.

It was pathetic that Rei-chan had to come down to my level and walk, or catch the bus, when we went out together.

I wanted to go on long bike rides with Rei-chan.

I wonder why it was that I'd forgotten about this. After my surgery, right up until now, I'd never made a start towards riding a bike.

There'd never been any impetus, that was true. Since I'd never got in the habit of riding a bike over to the next suburb, or a bit further to the train station, I'd just sort of kept on catching the bus.

My surgery was done, I'd fully recovered, and every day since had been spent in a hectic blur, so I must have been subconsciously putting it off. At any rate, certain preparations were necessary before I went riding. I was well aware that riding a bike wasn't so easy that I'd be able to do it the

moment I wanted to. I could still remember Rei-chan going out with her father, over ten years ago, and coming back with numerous scrapes and cuts on her knees and the palms of her hand. I heard later that she'd been learning to ride without training wheels. Even Rei-chan had repeatedly fallen off. There's no way I'd breeze through it.

But still. I thought going to Sachiko-sama's would be a good incentive. In general, having a time limit serves as a good motivator for people.

I wasn't going to let that get away. I would ride. And show them my victory over the bicycle.

Looking at Rei-chan's face in profile, with the bike interposed between us as we walked side by side, I made this strong declaration in my heart.

Part 4

"Because I really don't want you to let go."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

We were in the park and I was learning to ride a bike. It's called a park but there isn't any playground equipment, so it's more of a place to take a stroll surrounded by greenery.

The area where we were practicing was in between some big trees. It was a bit small, but there was nothing that could be done about that. Bikes, and dogs, were forbidden on the grass.

"Why don't you let go? Normally, you're supposed to let go even when you're told not to, right?"

"Huh?"

Diving into the water when told not to, eating the oden when told not to – what am I, a joker?

"Alright. I'll let go, okay?"

So this time, Rei-chan let go when it was really still way too early. As a result, the bike fell over. But since I wasn't going fast, I was able to put my feet down on the ground.

"No, not yet."

"But, Yoshino, you told me to let go."

"I did, but."

Yes, I'd definitely told her to let go. But in my mind I mumbled that I wasn't ready, so it'd be a problem if she really let go.

"Let's try something different this time. You should be able to tell by watching. From the speed, or how it's wobbling."

"That's too difficult, Yoshino."

My precarious balance was apparently impossible for someone who could propel their bike forward as they stood up off the saddle, like Rei-chan, to understand.

"Look, now, now, let go now."

"Then don't beat around the bush when saying that, just tell me to let go straight away."

"Then that won't work at all. The proper way of training is for you to let go when I'm saying don't let go."

"Who decided on that?"

On and on in this manner, Rei-chan failed to masterfully assist me time and time again. Just as I was starting to resign myself to the possibility that there was no wonderful time for her to let go, after an exquisite distance the bike and I were riding on the wind.

"Awesome, Rei-chan, awesome."

I quickly said, "Let go," and the bike still hadn't fallen over or come to a stop, instead smoothly gliding over the ground and fallen leaves.

(Huh? It hasn't fallen over or stopped?)

I was holding the handles, sitting on the seat, turning the pedals. I was, undoubtedly, riding a bike. But what should I do now? I could pedal but I didn't know how to stop.

"Rei-chan ... "

The moment I turned around, I heard Rei-chan shout.

"Yoshino, look out, in front of you!"

"Huh? In front?"

I quickly turned to face forwards and a telephone pole was coming up right in front of me. I couldn't rely on Rei-chan, that much was certain. Because when I'd turned to look back, she'd been unbelievably far behind me.

Ah, so I'd ridden that far on my own. That sort of self-admiration was of no use whatsoever in the face of this impending crisis. Then, like I was thinking that it was something I had to do, my gaze focused on it, the handlebar remained straight and unwavering, as I single-mindedly plunged on towards that goal.

The end result was that I rammed straight into the telephone pole. More accurately, the bike I was riding did. Then, as a result of that crash, I fell off the bike and thumped into the ground.

"Yoshino!"

As I watched Rei-chan come running over, concerned, I idly thought, "I did it even though it's something I shouldn't have. Isn't that the typical joker's pattern?"

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah ... Oww."

I'd landed hands-first, so my palms were covered in damp earth. And then it looked like some part of the bike had hit my knee, or the inside of my calf. There was no blood on either to confirm this but they really hurt. Maybe I'd get a bruise.

"Why didn't you stop?"

"I don't know how to."

"You should have used the brakes. I told you that at the beginning. That you grip this here, on the handlebar."

Rei-chan said as she picked up the bike.

"But, you know."

I said.

"If I'd hit the brakes quickly, I would have stopped quickly."

"Well ... "

"And if I'd stopped quickly, I still would have fallen off even if I hadn't hit the pole."

"You could have put your feet down."

"My feet? How could I have done that without getting off the seat?"

"One leg would have been fine."

Then Rei-chan gave me a practical demonstration – one foot on the ground, with the bike on an angle.

"I already know that, you don't have to show me."

"Ah – "

Rei-chan put her hands to her head.

"Teaching is hard."

Oh my. What was she saying? Hadn't she been relentlessly coaching her juniors in the kendo club up until now? For someone who wanted to become a PE teacher, could she really afford to be this timid?

But if I'd said any of this, Rei-chan would have undoubtedly laughed and said, "There's not many students as difficult as you, Yoshino."

After that, I fell off a few more times in the park, then after I'd more or less learned to ride I ran into someone's fence on the way home, then got the tire stuck in a storm-water drainage grate and came off, so not only did I get good at riding, I also got quite good at falling.

But with all the crashes, Rei-chan's beloved bike turned into a bit of a clunker.

Despite this, when we came to our house, Rei-chan said she'd take her bike to the bike shop tomorrow and somehow or other they'd repair all the damage.

But then right at the last moment I ran full force into the gate to Rei-chan's house and the bike made a sound like a death-rattle. I don't know a lot about bicycle construction, but it looked like something was broken, or had otherwise come apart.

Despite all this, Rei-chan still thought she'd get it repaired and ride it again, but the bike store owner who'd been servicing it for all these years finally said, "You should buy a replacement." He said that even if he fixed it this time, it'd just break again soon, and that the repairs would be expensive and take quite a long time, so Rei-chan tearfully gave up on the idea. No matter what, she had to have a bike by January 2.

Waiting alongside my bike was a new bike for Rei-chan.

Since there was no disputing that I had broken her previous bike, my dad bought two new ones.

That night, I gave Nana a call.

With that, Rei-chan's bout with Nana was set for the 4th of January.

The Bout

Part 1

The day after returning home from the women-only New Year's sleepover party at Sachiko-sama's house was the fourth of January.

It seemed kind of sudden, since we'd ticked over into the New Year, but on reflection it had only been about a week away when Rei-chan had said, "The fourth or fifth." A trick of the calendar.

As for Rei-chan, she had neither forgotten about nor been blindsided by the agreed upon day, and she'd even received permission from her father to use the dojo during the day.

Feeling nervous, I peeked into the dojo about half an hour before their 2pm meeting time and Rei-chan was already there.

Already dressed in her kendo clothes (sans armor), she was kneeling, eyes closed. Like she was meditating or focusing her mind. The air in the dojo was bitingly cold, the wooden floorboards shone a deep black, and a fresh-cut sprig of the sakaki tree had been offered up at the household shrine.

I sat down next to Rei-chan, still dressed in my sweater and skirt. I thought about whether or not I should have worn my kendo clothes.

First of all, just what was my position?

Referee? Witness? Announcer? Onlooker?

Nana had said she wanted a bout with Rei-chan. There was no mention of me. But still, what if I showed up in my kendo clothes? Like we were having some kind of group training?

I didn't want to be left out, but that said I didn't want to stick to them like glue either. So, I wanted to come across as though I'd just come to take a look at their bout.

"Yoshino."

Rei-chan opened her eyes and spoke.

"You must not interfere, in words or deed."

"Huh?"

"If you can't promise me that, you'll have to leave the dojo."

"But, I."

Wasn't I bringing Nana along? Well, we aren't yet soeurs, so I suppose Rei-chan doesn't need my permission to cross blades with Nana. But, but, hadn't I introduced Nana as someone I was interested in? Didn't I arrange today's bout –

"I don't really know what you had in mind when you introduced me to Nana-chan. But if we are to cross blades, then this is a kendo match."

A kendo match.

"But."

One was a middle-school student and the other a high-school student. Was it okay to have such a massive difference? – But more than this, what I wanted to do was pin down my own conspicuously neglected feelings that led me to want to blurt this out.

Rei-chan reiterated:

"The shinai is a sword."

Long ago, people who set themselves upon the path of the sword did so literally, not with bamboo shinai, using real swords to test their skill. Losing was death. Therefore, third-parties could not interfere.

"Alright."

I didn't need Rei-chan to tell me that the sword fraternity was strict. It wasn't like I'd read all those swordsman novels just for show.

"I'll just watch. So I can stay, right?"

I asked for confirmation and Rei-chan gave me permission with a, "Yeah."

Taking advantage of this opportunity, I said, "Okay then," and stood up.

"I'll go and get Nana."

I'd sent Nana a map showing the route we usually took home from school, but since they were in the same business she probably had access to more detailed information (like a map showing how to get from the Arima dojo to the Hasekura dojo, or a photo of the street frontage) so I wasn't really worried about her getting lost.

But, for no reason in particular.

It might have been hard to stay with Rei-chan, her "game face" already on, just the two of us waiting in silence in that huge dojo for the appointed time when Nana would arrive.

I love Rei-chan.

But, more than love, occasionally I get scared.

Scared of what?

For the moment, I was scared of the unknown.

Part 2

I met Nana about a third of the way from our house to school along the normal route.

"Gokigenyou, Yoshino-sama."

After greeting me, Nana put the rough map I'd faxed her into her coat pocket.

"Gokigenyou. That's quite a bag you've got."

Little wonder. She'd have a full set of kendo clothes, armor and shinai.

It may have been obvious, but Nana was wearing regular clothes. Since she had to use normal public transport to get here, wearing her kendo gear was out of the question.

Daughter of the Arima dojo, youngest of the four Tanaka sisters. I know we'd talked about it, but seeing her with that bag made me realize again that she really had come here for kendo. She'd been at the inter-school kendo tournament, and both my uncle and kendo aficionado grandfather in Yanaka knew of her, but I'd never actually seen her holding a shinai.

We walked together and not long after Nana asked:

"What happened there?"

"There? ... Ah."

She was pointing at the gap between my miniskirt and knee-high socks, where some skin was exposed. Overall the skin was whitish, but there were patches of purple or black, like a spotted cat. She was probably asking about what caused them.

"Ah, I had a bit of a fall."

The remains of my end-of-year bike training. Even so, most of them had faded so skirts were no longer forbidden, but that Nana sure had sharp eyes.

"Yoshino-sama."

"What?"

"You sure fall down a lot."

"... Well, excuse me."

I was a bit annoyed. I didn't fall down often enough that you'd point it out.

It seemed like Nana had been nearby when I fell down all those times recently. Despite how I looked now, I never used to fall down in the past. Because I'd always walked slowly, to take care of my heart. Naturally, running was completely unthinkable.

(Is that it?)

Since I've got better, I've stopped paying attention to walking and running. As a result, I've been falling down.

"Nana."

"Yes?"

"Why did you want to have a match with Rei-chan?"

I asked. I wanted to know what her goal was.

"Why indeed?"

She responded with a smile and a small gesture of confusion.

"Are you dodging the question? Is it something you can't speak about?"

"Does it look like that?"

"I don't know, that's why I asked."

I was a little annoyed. Just a little. And only annoyed, really. But sensing that, Nana made a follow-up remark.

"I'm sorry. Did my choice of words offend you? But even I don't know. So no matter how you ask me, I can't give you an answer."

"You don't know?"

"Yeah. I just thought I wanted to have a bout with her so I said it. I'm not yet able to analyze why I wanted the match."

By saying "not yet" it implied that there would come a day when she would be able to perform that analysis. Either that, or perhaps she expected to get that answer today, the instant she crossed blades with Rei-chan.

"Are you strong, Nana?"

I asked. I didn't know what her skill level was. Since she wanted to have a match against Rei-chan, the only reasonable conclusion was that she was comparatively talented.

"No."

Nana answered immediately. It didn't seem like she was being humble. It was as though she was just stating a plain fact. Like answering the question "1+1" with "2." So even if the truth was that she was crazy strong, at least she didn't think of herself that way.

"But you're ranked, right?"

"No, I don't have a rank."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Is that so strange?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have a rank, Yoshino-sama?"

"No, I don't, but."

But that was because I was a newbie, who'd only been practicing kendo for less than a year.

"But you're a daughter of the Arima dojo."

"When I was born, I was a daughter of an office worker."

"But your grandfather's the head of a dojo."

"And your uncle's the head of a dojo."

The uncle she referred to was, obviously, Rei-chan's father and he was unquestionably the head of the Hasekura dojo.

"My older sisters, all of them, have ranks. To each their own."

To each their own – but they all did the same thing.

I'd only seen the second and third Tanaka sisters at the inter-school tournament and, regardless of the match outcomes, they were both unquestionably skilled. The oldest sister, who'd participated the year before, was a rank above Rei-chan, so the Tanaka family was a strong

group. It didn't seem like Nana, the fourth daughter and the only one to be taken in by her dojo leading grandfather, would be weak.

To each their own. Rank was certainly a measure of skill, but there would be people out there that were skilled and unranked, so it wasn't a complete measure.

Part 3

"Come in."

I opened the dojo entrance gate and motioned Nana in.

For the Hasekura residence, this would be considered the back gate, but for the dojo the front. They both went to the same place so it didn't really matter but since Nana hadn't come to visit Rei-chan's house it seemed only proper to use the dojo entrance. But it did make it seem kind of like a showdown.

"Rei-chan."

I called inside, informing her of her visitor's arrival.

"Welcome."

Before long Rei-chan appeared and greeted Nana with a smile. Making it hard to believe the tense atmosphere that had been there earlier.

"Gokigenyou, Rosa Foetida. Thank-you for granting my request today."

"Not at all, I've been looking forward to it too. Come in."

Nana responded with, "Okay," and took off her shoes and stepped over the threshold. Rei-chan watched this for a little while before gently informing me:

"Yoshino. Show Nana-chan to the changing room. Then when you're done, wait in the dojo."

"And you?"

I asked, to see where Rei-chan was going. Because if Nana was going to wait in the dojo, it meant that Rei-chan was going somewhere else in the meantime.

"I'm going back to my room to get something I forgot."

"What did you forget?"

"I'm counting on you."

She left me with that then walked off quickly, so even though I was curious I couldn't ask her anything more. If I'd been by myself I would have stubbornly stuck to her asking questions, but since she left me with Nana I

couldn't do that. I thought maybe she needed to use the toilet, but in that case there was no need to say it was for something she forgot, or to explicitly mention her room. Besides, she didn't have to go back to the main house for that, there was a toilet in the dojo building.

"You can change clothes in here. Put your belongings in one of the lockers. You can use whichever one you want."

"Well then."

Nana opened locker number seven. A lucky number, huh?

"I'll be in the hall."

Nana set about getting changed, taking her coat off, so I reached for the door. We were both girls but it probably wouldn't be okay to watch her get changed.

"I don't mind. But."

"But?"

I turned around without thinking, right as Nana was taking off her sweater.

"You're not getting changed, Yoshino-sama?"

"Me?"

It was a bit late to be asking this now. Hadn't Nana said she wanted a match with Rei-chan? She hadn't been thinking of me in the slightest when she'd said this.

"I've been told that I can't interfere in words or deed."

In this matter, I would be "hands-off." Therefore I wouldn't be changing into my kendo clothes, nor would I be holding a shinai.

"Did Rei-sama tell you that?"

"Yes."

After nodding my head, this time I left Nana behind and went out into the hallway.

"Is that so?"

As I went to close the door, I faintly heard Nana say this, as though she was talking to herself.

Part 4

Rei-chan had still not returned by the time Nana had changed and entered the dojo.

Nana properly faced the front and bowed before stepping into the dojo, then she did a slow 360 degree turn to take it all in.

"It's not quite as impressive as your family's dojo, though ... "

Previously, I'd wanted to know more about Nana, so I'd investigated the Arima dojo. That's how I knew. The Arima dojo was a large one – not only was it physically bigger than the Hasekura dojo, they also had far more pupils.

But Nana responded with a serious look on her face.

"It's a fine dojo. Really good. The spirit of martial arts is here."

Hearing this praise for my uncle's dojo I was a bit pleased, like she was praising me. The spirit of martial arts, that sounds good. For me, Rei-chan's house was like half of my house. I've always thought that the dojo had a good feel to it despite its small size.

Nana put her armor and shinai in a corner of the room and started stretching.

"Do you want me to help you?"

Usually when we warmed up at kendo club, we did so in groups of two. For whatever reason, be it school year or kendo proficiency or height, I often ended up with Tanuma Chisato but –

"It's fine."

Nana completely, definitively refused. Then she completed her stretches and was starting on practice swings when Rei-chan finally returned.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting. Ah, keep going."

Nana stopped her swings when she noticed Rei-chan, and Rei-chan indicated that she should proceed.

"..."

My eyes followed Rei-chan to where she was doing her own practice swings, a short distance away from Nana.

By comparing the current Rei-chan to the one that had left to go back to her house, I could find out what had been added, and that would be the forgotten item.

Indeed, Rei-chan was holding the forgotten item. But it was incomprehensible.

It was a single shinai.

It wasn't unusual that she'd appear at the dojo carrying a shinai. In fact it was the opposite, entirely ordinary.

What I couldn't comprehend wasn't that the shinai was the item. It was the fact that Rei-chan had two shinai.

The shinai that Rei-chan usually used was in a corner of the dojo, alongside her armor, and had been there since before I went to get Nana. So why had she needed another one?

I had no idea. But Rei-chan had gone all the way back to her room to get it. That alone was certain.

Currently, Rei-chan was swinging top to bottom. With the "forgotten" shinai.

But for some reason something seemed slightly off. Probably because she was using something other than her regular shinai. Well, I'm not talking about some minor difference or characteristic – I'm not that knowledgeable about shinai.

"Rei-sama."

Nana said, stopping her practice swings.

"I'm terribly sorry for prying, but – "

"About my shinai?"

Rei-chan asked, stopping her swings. Nana nodded, "Yes." Annoyingly, it looked like Nana was going to be the first to clear up what I found "incomprehensible."

"Don't worry about it, Nana-chan. I want the terms to be completely even, but that's impossible. This is the least I can do."

The terms to be completely even? With that, I suddenly realized.

The shinai Rei-chan was holding was shorter than her usual one.

That was probably why it seemed slightly off. Because the balance between her height and shinai length were different to normal.

Then my gaze shifted to Nana's shinai. As I thought, it was also a short shinai.

(Ah, so that's it.)

Nana was still in middle-school, so she used a short shinai. But Rei-chan was in high-school, and above average height, so she used a slightly longer shinai. Rei-chan must have realized that when Nana was shown in. Then she'd quickly returned to her room, got the shinai she used to use, inspected it, got it ready and brought it over.

There wasn't that much difference between an adult and child shinai. Probably about three centimetres. But Rei-chan had decided that those three centimetres were not fair. It was impossible to make everything completely equal – for instance their age, or height and weight, or that this was the dojo that Rei-chan had grown up in.

Rei-chan practiced her strikes over and over again in order to get a feel for the shinai she hadn't used for quite some time. After running through all the fundamental moves, she at last seemed satisfied and came to a halt, then turned to face Nana. Nana seemed to have run through all her moves too, as she lowered her shinai and looked straight at Rei-chan.

"Now then, what should we do?"

Rei-chan asked Nana. Inquiring if she'd be satisfied with them just sparring with each other, or if she wanted to make it as close to a tournament bout as possible.

"If it's possible, I'd like to do peer sparring."

"Peer sparring?"

Hearing Nana's request, Rei-chan made an, "Oh?" expression.

"I know it's presumptuous of me. Please."

Peer sparring was when two equally matched partners freely exchanged blows. The reason Nana thought it was presumptuous of her was probably because she was saying that she didn't need any handicap applied, even though she was unranked and facing a ranked opponent.

"Alright. Let's put on our armor then."

"Okay."

The negotiations were concluded. They both went to their corners, knelt down and started getting ready.

Wrapping a hand-towel around their heads, then putting on their armor. I sat equidistant between them and watched the events unfold.

I had a vague expectation that Nana had come to avenge her sisters, or to experience the true strength of the person who had defeated her sisters. As a result, she'd stipulate a bout – basically, she'd want to fight Rei-chan in a situation as similar to her sisters' as possible.

But that was wrong. Nana wasn't fixated on that.

What was this all about?

If I took a few steps I'd be close enough to ask Nana. But I didn't move. Because it looked like their match would soon begin. I was not permitted to speak or act.

At any rate, if she said she wanted as close to an official match as possible, then that itself would be problematic. First of all, there's no referee. It would have been a different story if my uncle was here, but unfortunately he was away from home today. I mean, if push came to shove, I'd have to do it. But, frankly, I thought that was impossible. Obviously as a referee I wouldn't even be approaching their level of skill, but even more than that, I didn't think I could make an impartial judgment between those two combatants. It wasn't a question of favoring one of them, but my heart was so agitated that I couldn't watch them properly.

While I was contemplating this, they had both finished putting on their chest armor and face guard. As a result, from my vantage point, I couldn't see their expressions.

After putting on her arm guard, Rei-chan glanced in my direction. Almost as though she was reminding me not to interfere.

"Please."

After the ritual standing bow and crouch, the peer sparring session. Rei-chan's familiar strong alto was overlaid with Nana's high-pitched voice.

Normally her voice wasn't that powerful and, if I had to say, it was like tasteless and odorless water. But with a shinai in hand, Nana's voice was intense. Like strawberry soda, or a melon float.

(Hehehe ...)

It was called sparring, but it was the same as a practice match. It may have been inconsiderate to be thinking about juice in the middle of all this, but I had to come up with these kind of diversions as it felt like I was being crushed by something.

The attack came from Nana. Moving directly forwards, aiming for Rei-chan's head. But Rei-chan calmly struck the middle of Nana's shinai, lifting it up. Despite being turned away so simply, Nana didn't learn her lesson and attacked again from the front. This time Rei-chan caught it from the left and then swiveled to the left and quickly struck back at Nana's head.

(A point!)

I felt like I could hear the referee's voice in my mind. My hands were still in my lap and I balled them tight into fists.

Rei-chan was far and away on top. The difference in skill was obvious even to me, who'd only just started practicing kendo recently.

Nana would have known this almost immediately. But she didn't let that first hit slow her down, as she attacked relentlessly.

Head, head, head –

From start to finish, Nana swung downwards, aiming for the head. Rei-chan responded to this by blocking and counterattacking, going for the chest, or evading and going for the head.

If this were a three-point match, it would have been decided as soon as two points were scored. But this was peer sparring. There was no time limit. Additionally, there was no faculty adviser or coach to tell them to stop, so the exchange of blows would continue until they decided they'd had enough.

As it went on, I found it harder and harder to watch. Why did the people I loved have to fight, even if it was martial arts?

Even though the outcome had already been determined. It was like Nana wasn't going to give up until she'd scored at least one point. Perhaps Rei-chan knew this as she met Nana's attacks.

But Nana had reached her limit. Her movements were getting duller. Her feet got tangled numerous times, putting her at risk of falling over.

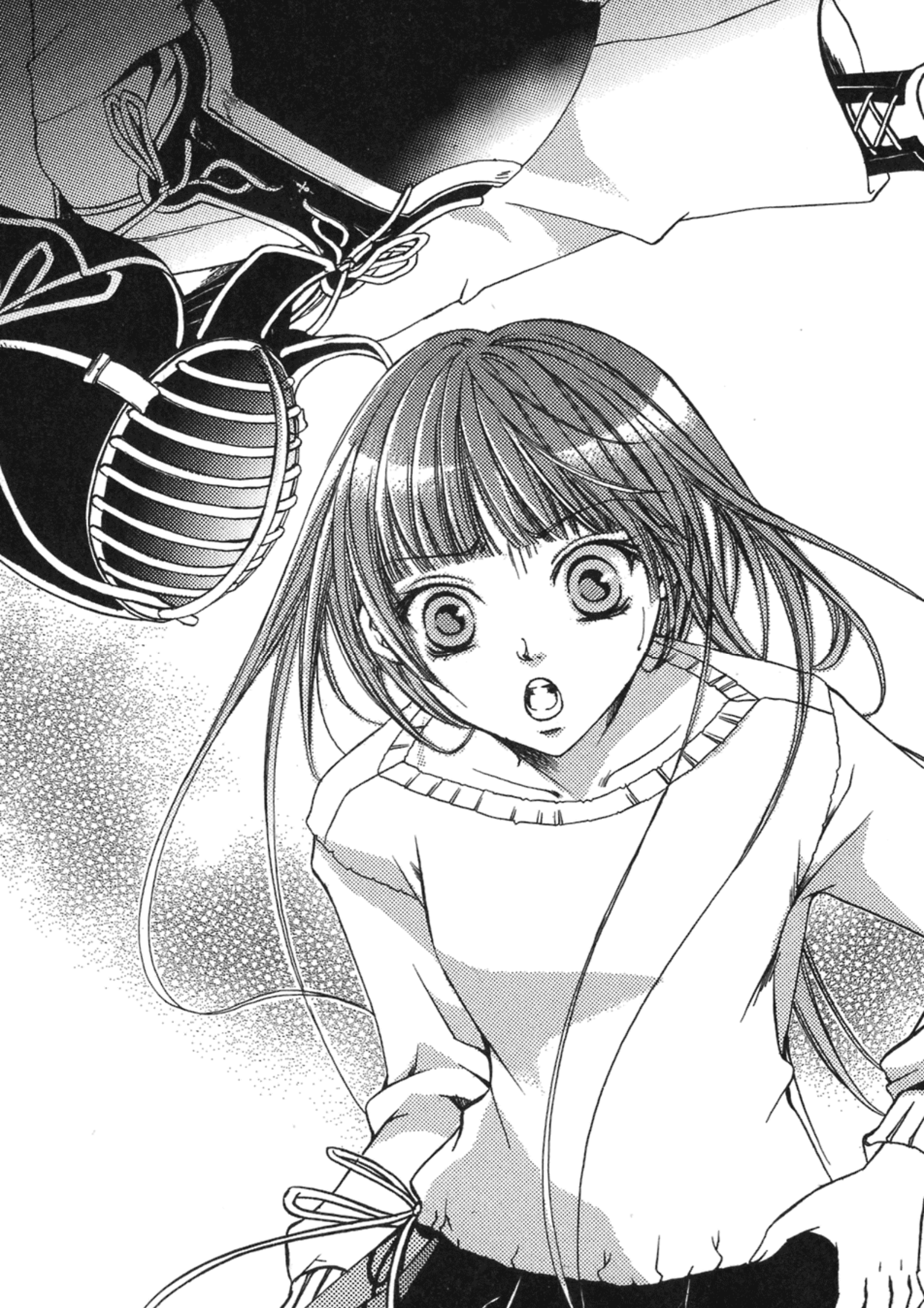
Countless times I started to open my mouth to say, "That's enough." But I'd remember my promise to Rei-chan and desperately endure it. If I opened my mouth, I'd have to leave.

If I left, I might have felt more at ease as they finished their bout out of sight. But that was the one thing I wouldn't allow. I had to see this for myself.

It was like I'd fallen into the trap of thinking they were fighting over me.

"Ah."

Nana's body flew backwards from the impact of Rei-chan's thrust.



"Nana!"

I ran over to her in a daze. She was wearing her armor and knew how to handle that sort of situation, so she shouldn't be too badly injured by landing on her back. But I thought this was a sign from God that it was over.

Despite this.

"I'm fine. Let me go, please."

Nana brushed off my hand and stood up shakily.

"Rei-chan."

I pleaded to Rei-chan, who was still holding her shinai.

Stop, already. I know, already.

"Yoshino. You promised."

Not to speak or act. But, but –

"Do you want to stop?"

Instead of ordering me out of the dojo, Rei-chan turned to Nana and asked her this.

"No."

Even though she was staggering, Nana raised her shinai.

"... Nana."

My muttering had no place to go and was sucked up into the dojo ceiling. Nana didn't turn away. Rei-chan didn't say anything more.

Their heavy breathing from their furious exchange of blows affected their voices, so I couldn't get a read on their emotions.

It was only at times like this that I detested the kendo face guard. If only this were judo. Karate or aikido would be fine too. The only thing stopping me from understanding their current feelings were their face guards.

Right now, the only thing that Nana was looking at through the screen of her face guard was Rei-chan. And Rei-chan was only looking at Nana.

Even if I tried to intervene or call out, my words or actions would not reach them. Feeling like I was about to cry, I returned to my previous spot and sat down.

"Please."

Nana's voice signaled the resumption of the practice session.

I prayed, not to any god in particular. I didn't know what I wished for, but I couldn't do anything else, so for now all I could do was pray.

"..."

Was I imagining things? Even though Nana should barely be able to stand, she looked to be moving better than before she'd been knocked down.

Even though she'd taken a hit soon after they began, her blade was now locked with Rei-chan's.

Just then.

Nana took a big step backwards and raised her shinai high.

(Headshot ... !)

Rei-chan noticed it too. As a result, she moved quickly to avoid it.

The tip of Nana's shinai barely brushed Rei-chan's head. At that moment.

"Well done."

Rei-chan said.

"That's enough, don't you think?"

Rei-chan's voice was the signal, and they performed the ritual of crouching and tapping their shinai together. After taking a few steps backwards and bowing, Nana collapsed with a thud.

"Nana."

I ran over and held her in my arms. I looked at her face through the visor, and her eyes were wide open. She hadn't fainted. She was just so exhausted she couldn't stand up.

"I guess I can't compete with Hasekura Rei after all."

Nana said, so quietly that only I could hear, as she leaned against me like we were embracing.

"She's a great person."

Then she raised her body and removed her face guard.

"A great person ... "

I turned around to look at Rei-chan. She'd already taken her face guard off and was heading for the dojo exit.

"Rei-chan."

I called out to her. But Rei-chan kept walking away, not turning around.

I finally caught up to Rei-chan in the hallway. She was filling a cup with water from the tap near the dojo entrance.

Sweat running down her neck, her throat burning, Rei-chan gulped down the water.

"Take some to her too."

Rei-chan said, refilling the cup she'd used and handing it to me.

"More importantly."

I snatched the cup from her.

"More importantly?"

Rei-chan asked.

"More importantly – "

What was I going to say?

An objection to the training session that was more like a hazing?

Or to ask what her true motives were to saying, "Well done," to a strike that would never have been judged a hit in an actual match?

Or maybe to compliment her, like, "Rei-chan you're really strong?"

While I was silent, Rei-chan spoke.

"Compared to her older sisters, her technique and strength are very much lacking. But of the four sisters, I like Nana's kendo the best."

"Rei-chan ... "

Rei-chan was smiling as she spoke.

Rei-chan liked her kendo the best. I was overjoyed to hear her praise Nana like this. I was proud, almost like she was complimenting me.

"More importantly."

Rei-chan said, looking straight at me as I soared with happiness.

"You were rooting for Nana-chan, Yoshino."

Her face serious.

"Um ... "

At that moment, I couldn't think of how to smooth things over.

Smooth things over?

The moment I thought this was the same moment I accepted what Rei-chan was saying.

"Rei-cha – "

"It's fine."

Leaving me with that, Rei-chan walked off towards her house.

Left behind, I was frozen to the spot, still holding the cup of cold water.

Even though I'd been saying, "Don't let go."

Rei-chan had been supporting the bike with her hand, then she let go with such exquisite timing.

Masked Actress

The Opening Ceremony's Spoiled Child

Part 1

The auditorium was probably cold and silent first thing in the morning, but it had warmed up by the time the first-years and half of the second-year classes had filed in. The girls' whispered voices and occasional laughs probably helped to soften the atmosphere.

Sitting with the rest of her class, Yumi relaxed just a little bit.

Winter vacation was over.

It was a new school term.

Even when something earth-shattering happens on the last day of the second term, there are very few students for whom the first day of the third term does not eventually arrive.

The reason for that was because time kept on flowing impartially. Well, there were some exceptions, though.

But Yumi hadn't suffered some massive injury that required long-term hospitalization. Nor had her family circumstances required her to change schools, and obviously she hadn't done something wrong and been expelled. So of course the day of the third term opening ceremony would eventually come. Although, on reflection, while she thought of it as "earth-shattering," perhaps it wasn't actually all that big a deal.

That's right. It was just a rejection by a first-year she wanted to make her petit soeur. Looking at in totality, it was probably a minor event. Yumi breathed a little sigh.

The third-years were making their entrance.

As always, when she turned her gaze to the line of third-year pine class students, she quickly found her onee-sama.

It may just have been habit, but Sachiko-sama noticed her petit soeur's gaze and looked at her. At times like this it was typically with a scolding

expression, as though to say, "Stop looking around," or, "Hey, don't do that." But even so, Yumi couldn't bring herself to stop.

Yumi wondered how many more opportunities she'd have to do that.

Because once her onee-sama graduated, she wouldn't be able to do it no matter how much she may want to. Her cautioning look when Yumi couldn't calm down, her astonished look when Yumi was being obtuse – Yumi wanted to savor all of these expressions as much as she could.

Perhaps Yumi's intentions had been conveyed, because this time Sachiko-sama favored her with a smile, saying, "You irrepressible child."

(Hehehe.)

This alone was enough to make Yumi feel satisfied, like a baby given its bottle. And, as usual, she thought, "How simple am I, if my onee-sama can change my mood with just one look?"

"..."

Next Yumi twisted her body towards the first-year camellia class. She couldn't stop herself from looking, even if it meant her good mood would wither like a deflating balloon.

Touko-chan was there.

As usual, she had ringlets hanging past both her ears. Her gaze was fixed to the front, her mouth a straight line. All around her, her classmates were chatting but she didn't join in at all, she just sat in silence.

Despite the long distance separating them, Yumi could see Touko-chan clearly.

Yumi's mood didn't wither. Quite the opposite, it swelled. Yumi didn't know why, but seeing Touko-chan moved her in a way she couldn't put into words.

Just what was it?

Still unable to come up with an answer, she returned her gaze to the front. The opening ceremony was beginning.

The change in the lineup of the choir, the lower percentage of third-years in attendance, all of these little things were mixed in with graduation, leaving a lonely feeling.

She'd already experienced a high-school graduation ceremony last year.

It was something she'd just have to get used to.

Part 2

After the opening ceremony they returned to their class for homeroom, which had just finished.

"Yumi-san, are you going to the Rose Mansion?"

"Yes. Gokigenyou."

Yumi cheerfully responded to her classmate, picked up her bag, and left the classroom.

"Happy new year, Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

"Make this year another good one, Yumi-sama."

The words people spoke to her as she walked through the corridor were a bit different to normal, but that was typical for the day of the third-term opening ceremony.

It was the first school day of the calendar year, so throughout the school grounds there were groups of students hanging around, chatting about what they got up to over the winter break, and so on.

Amidst all that.

"Yumi-san."

A voice called to her from behind. Shimako-san had noticed Yumi walking down the corridor and trotted over to her.

"Ah, Gokigenyou Shimako-san."

"Gokigenyou."

This wasn't their first time meeting this year, so they greeted each other normally. They'd said, "Happy new year," on the second of January, at the new year's party at the Ogasawara estate.

"Oh, you're by yourself, Yumi-san?"

Shimako-san looked puzzled, noticing Yoshino-san wasn't with her, even though they were both in the same class.

"Yeah. There's a kendo club meeting. She said it wouldn't take long, so I should go to the Rose Mansion without her."

"A kendo club meeting?"

"Yeah. It's not an official club practice, so they won't be using their shinai. From what I'm told, they're just meeting in the martial arts building to say, "Happy new year.""

"I see."

They chatted about their absent friend as they walked, saying things like, "It must be tough for Yoshino-san to balance everything," and, "But Rei-sama managed it, so it's just something she'll have to do."

"That reminds me."

Shimako-san said.

"What?"

Yumi asked, as a chuckle escaped from Shimako-san while she reminisced.

"A year ago, I think it was after the opening ceremony. It was right around here that I heard some gossip from the second-years."

"A year ago, after the opening ceremony ... ?"

Hearing this, Yumi felt like she remembered something. On that day, Shimako-san had been delayed by some committee work, so she'd been late to arrive at the Rose Mansion and, unusually for her, she'd run up the flight of stairs, opened the door and then said something before even greeting them.

(Has anyone heard of –)

"Rosa Canina!"

"Exactly."

At that time, the people in the Rose Mansion had no idea whatsoever, but when Rei-sama showed up a bit later they learned that "Rosa Canina" was a person and then it didn't take long to tie her to the second-year student that nominated herself in the student council elections.

"Although a year ago I was so anxious, I couldn't imagine I'd be able to look back on it and laugh like this."

Shimako-san said, smiling. It seemed like she'd warped back to a year ago, just for a little while.

Yumi's memories came flooding back too. About how she got depressed because she wanted to help with her onee-sama's election campaign but wasn't able to do anything.

"Who would have thought that we'd become friends with Rosa Canina, Kanina Shizuka-sama."

"That's for sure."

Shizuka-sama had gone to Italy, but she came to see them when Yumi's grade went over there for their school trip. It turned out Shimako-san had become pen-friends with her at some point.

"I wonder what I'll do this year."

Shimako-san mumbled.

"For the student council election?"

Yumi asked and Shimako-san nodded in response.

"What are you talking about? It's your second time so it should be easier for you, right?"

Shimako-san was in the same grade as Yumi but had taken part in last year's election. Shimako-san's onee-sama, the previous Rosa Gigantea, was two years older than her, so after her graduation Shimako-san was expected to step up and continue her legacy. With the result being that Shimako-san was elected comfortably and, as such, was presently called Rosa Gigantea.

"Oh, I don't think it's going to be easy."

Shimako-san laughed. She was being modest, but the laugh itself showed how relaxed she was. Veterans were strong.

"But, you'll run, right? In the election."

"I plan to, but – "

"But? That sort of feels like a halfhearted response."

The way she'd said it, it felt like there should have been more to that sentence. Yumi put herself on guard.

"Let's see."

Shimako-san said.

"Hypothetically speaking, if there was a student who desperately wanted to be on the student council, I'd have to think about it."

"Huh!?"

"I've already experienced it once."

The elections were held every year, but traditionally the boutons became the next Roses, so maybe this was posing a problem to Shimako-san. So if some student nominated themselves, like Shizuka-sama had last year, she was resolved to hand over her seat. That sort of thing.

Come to think of it, it had been like this last year as well. She'd delayed lodging her candidacy application until right before the deadline. It was a single careless remark from Shizuka-sama that firmed her resolve.

"I plan on accepting you as my petit soeur."

That had lit a fire in Shimako-san. She'd fought to protect her and her onee-sama's pride.

Shimako-san was not attached to the position of Rosa Gigantea. Not before, not now – that much had remained consistent.

"Wha, no way. I want to be a Rose with you, Shimako-san. I don't want you to leave the Rose Mansion."

"Oh, I'll have to stop going to the Rose Mansion if I'm not a Rose?"

Shimako-san asked, as though she'd only just realized this.

"That's right. Are you okay with that?"

Yumi answered, taking Shimako-san by the hand.

"Maybe you're right. I want to be with you and the others, Yumi-san. That's why it was a hypothetical. I'm sure I said that. Don't worry. If someone else runs in the election, I'm sure it'll be as turbulent as last year."

Indeed. If there was someone planning that, news about it would probably start trickling in sooner or later.

There was no way to put a lock on people's mouths. Indeed, prefacing it with, "This is a secret, but," would only make the rumors spread faster, as long as it wasn't just badmouthing someone or related to some tragedy.

"I'd hate it if you weren't there."

Yumi said, entwining their fingers.

"Alright, alright. I understand."

While they playfully flirted as they walked, Touko-chan appeared from the other direction.

Touko-chan was by herself.

She might have been on her way home, as she was wearing her school coat, and when she noticed them she stopped just for a moment before continuing on and eventually arriving in front of them.

"Gokigenyou, Rosa Gigantea."

Touko-chan started by greeting Shimako-san.

"Gokigenyou."

Shimako-san replied, smiling as tenderly as ever. Yumi's heart pounded as she watched them.

What would Touko-chan do next? Would she greet Yumi as she had Shimako-san, or would she ignore her and leave?

Either way, Yumi had no faith in her own ability to respond appropriately. In truth, she wanted to run away. But since she'd done nothing wrong, it would be odd for her to flee. Reflecting on this, Yumi somehow managed to resist the temptation.

Wouldn't it have been better if, a few minutes earlier, Touko-chan had noticed them coming up the corridor and changed course? But she couldn't turn back time, nor could she freely change other people's actions.

"Gokigenyou, Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

Touko-chan didn't run away either. Her big eyes looked straight at Yumi and she smiled cutely.

Was this a brave front she was putting up? Or was that incident truly of no importance to Touko-chan, and she'd forgotten it already?

Yumi didn't know. There was no answer she could derive from Touko-chan's expression.

"Gokigenyou, Touko-chan."

Yumi just barely managed to get that out. But if that was all she could say, it didn't seem commensurate with the effort it took.

"We're heading to the Rose Mansion so we'll see you later."

She was saved by Shimako-san saying this and walking off. Using Shimako-san's entwined fingers as a support she was somehow able to make it through, but if she'd stayed there a minute longer she might have had to crouch down into a ball. That's how much her legs were shaking.

Yumi had been beaten by Touko-chan. She hadn't done anything wrong, but her position was entirely weak.

"I've thought this before, but."

When they arrived at the Rose Mansion, Shimako-san gently slipped her hand from Yumi's and faced her.

"It feels like Touko-chan is hiding her emotions more and more."

"Uh ... "

"It would be good if she could open her heart a little more."

Shimako-san's words penetrated deeply.

The short span of open air between the school building and the Rose Mansion provided a preview of the cold days to come.

Part 3

Even in the new year, the Rose Mansion staircase was as creaky as ever as it ushered students in. It couldn't be oiled, like a gear chain, so there wasn't much maintenance that could be done to it.

"I wonder if it'll fall down one day."

Yumi muttered and Shimako-san smiled.

"My onee-sama said it was like this when she was a first-year."

"Really?"

"Although it may have changed a little bit. But over time you get used to it, and the feeling of unease goes away."

So that was it. She'd been going up and down it every day without giving it a second thought, but after a two week break she was thinking about the sound and the swaying. So if they brought Shimako-san's onee-sama, Satou Sei-sama, here to confirm it right now, she might say, "It's swaying a lot more than when I was a first-year."

"Gokigenyou, Yumi-sama. Gokigenyou, onee-sama."

Nijou Noriko-chan had arrived at the Rose Manion ahead of them, already completed a brief tidy up and was currently preparing tea.

"Ah, sorry. I'll help."

Yumi rolled up her sleeves and went over to assist, but all the preparations were done. She was just waiting for the water in the electric kettle to boil.

"Would you two please take a seat. It's almost done."

Yumi whispered to Shimako-san:

"Your petit soeur is as admirable as ever."

"Why thank-you."

Just as they were exchanging smiles, the water boiled.

"Touko."

Noriko-chan said, abruptly.

"Came to school today. Looking as though nothing happened at the Christmas party."

It had seemed abrupt, but Noriko-chan may have planned on saying it at this point. Standing by the sink as she poured the tea, from Yumi's vantage point all she could see was her back.

"Yeah. That's how she appeared."

Noriko-chan turned around in surprise when Yumi agreed with her.

"You knew?"

"We ran into her a little while ago in the hallway ... right?"

Yumi responded, looking straight at Shimako-san.

"And ... then what?"

"That's all. We just exchanged greetings then went our separate ways."

"Is that so?"

Noriko-chan's expression showed a mixture of disappointment and relief. Given the choice, she wouldn't want to be caught between her friend and her seniors. But that was how it had to be, probably.

"Well, let's end this conversation here. Noriko-chan, the tea will go bitter."

"Ah, oh no."

It was only then that Noriko-chan finally remembered the tea. There was currently only the three of them present, but Noriko-chan poured four cups and, perhaps worried about the taste after all, took a sip of hers before saying, "Okay." With that, Sachiko-sama finally arrived.

"Gokigenyou, onee-sama."

Yumi hurried over to greet her onee-sama, who frowned and said:

"You're just as excitable this year too, aren't you?"

"Ah ... I'm sorry."

It looked as though her onee-sama's fault-finding was in good health this year too.

"Where's Rei and Yoshino-chan? Haven't they arrived yet?"

"No. Um, the kendo club's – "

"I know that. But I thought they would be here by now."

The way she said it made it sound like she'd come here to see Rei-sama and Yoshino-san.

"Um, onee-sama?"

It did neither of them any good to remain gloomy like this, so Yumi boldly asked her about it. Thereupon:

"That's right."

Sachiko-sama answered calmly.

"I knew Rei and Yoshino-chan would be late, so I took my time getting here. Since today's meeting won't start until we're all here. It would be a waste of time to hurry here, just to drink tea and wait. So I tidied something up."

"What did you tidy up?"

"I returned a book I borrowed over the winter vacation, why do you ask?"

"But the library isn't open today ... "

"That's why I put it in the book return slot."

"The book return ... "

It might have been better if Yumi dropped the subject politely at this point, but she couldn't do that. Because if she dropped it now, she'd have to accept that earlier "waste of time" remark. That was why she deliberately said one thing too many.

"If you were just using the book return, couldn't you have stopped in on your way home?"

"Huh?"

It wasn't just Sachiko-sama that looked at Yumi with a startled expression – Shimako-san and Noriko-chan did so too. But since she'd started, she couldn't stop now.

"Waste of time though it may be, I'd be happy just to drink tea and chat with my friends. Do you disagree, onee-sama?"

"That's not what I said, though?"

Sachiko-sama's voice was a little tight, apparently not amused at being criticized.

"Why are you trying to start an argument today?"

Even if she was asked this.

"I don't know myself."

The White Rose soeurs had tried to intervene a couple of times so eventually they turned their backs on them. As though to declare, "Don't worry about us."

"Come with me."

Sachiko-sama took Yumi by the hand and left the room. In the hallway, she closed the door and asked once more:

"What's the matter?"

This time in a soft voice.

"I don't know."

Why was she acting rebellious towards her onee-sama? What had started it, was there a problem with her state of mind? Even if she had been able to think about it calmly, she was currently too strung-out for it to work well.

"You should know that there's days like this."

Suddenly, a voice came from the stairway. Rei-sama had just climbed up to the second floor.

"Way back when, Sachiko would get hysterical and lash out at Youko-sama. When your emotions are unstable, you can be set off by the slightest thing. Right, Yumi-chan?"

"Is that it, Yumi?"

Yumi nodded slightly.

"It's cold, isn't it? Let's go inside."

Rei-sama smiled and put her arm around Yumi's shoulder.

"I suppose."

Behind Sachiko-sama, Yoshino-san entered the scene, rattling the staircase.

"Ooh, it's cold. Geez, you just kept getting further ahead of me Rei-chan ... hey, why are we stopped here?"

"I just ran into Sachiko doting on Yumi-chan. Had to butt in."

"Oh."

"I told them to continue it when it was just the two of them. Now, let's go inside already."

She was unstable, got set off, and was doted on. Rei-sama's analysis was probably on the right track. What had started it was a trivial matter.

But if her state of mind was such that a trivial matter could affect her like this, wasn't there a bit of a problem? She felt like she shouldn't just dismiss it as "there's days like this."

When they opened the door, the White Rose soeurs greeted them with relieved expressions.

Part 4

The Yamayurikai executive's first meeting of the new year was a simple matter, with an exchange of, "Let's make this year another good one," followed by a review of their schedule for the first three months of the year.

All six members had been at the Ogasawara's women-only new year's party, so they'd already exchanged their personal new year's greetings, but that was that and this was this. The student council leaders and their petit soeurs all gathered in the Rose Mansion on the first school day of the new year and officially exchanged new year's greetings.

"On to the plans for the next few months. First, during January, the election for the next student council leaders will be held."

Shimako-san said, looking at the schedule.

"Traditionally, the elections are held on the last Saturday of January with the candidate speeches taking place three days earlier on Wednesday, and I think it should follow that format again this year. The Electoral Committee are holding an information session tomorrow after school where they will announce the details."

"The second-years should attend this meeting, regardless of whether or not they intend to run in the election."

Sachiko-sama said, looking around the room from person to person.

The second-years should attend whether or not they were going to run. – It echoed in Yumi's heart more than if she'd been told she had to become one of the next Roses.

A year ago, she'd seen the previous Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama, say to Shimako-san, "This is your decision," after she'd chosen to run in the election, so she thought she understood the departing senior's position. But still, it echoed in her heart.

In the next school year, if the day did come when she was called a Rose, she wouldn't have her onee-sama with her then. Yumi wouldn't be

able to rely on her or pass responsibility onto her, so for the sake of her future self, she knew she had to build her own independence.

Even so, it was hard because it felt like she was letting go of the hand that joined her to her onee-sama. Maybe she really was unstable today.

"Ah, you can attend too, Noriko-chan. You don't have to nominate just because you're there."

Sachiko-sama was saying that it was only an information session. They could decide whether or not they'd nominate after hearing the details. And they could nominate even if they missed the information session.

"Ah, no."

Noriko-chan declined immediately.

"Oh, are first-years allowed to nominate?"

"Absolutely. Like Shimako-san last year."

As neither candidates nor voters, the third-years were quite relaxed.

"Are we going to have a White Rose soeur battle? That would be kind of incredible."

Yoshino-san was also engaging in this frivolous chatter, even though she should have been in the same spot as Yumi.

"Well then, Yoshino-san, Yumi-san and I shall meet tomorrow after school at the Electoral Committee's office, next to the staff room."

Since the off-topic chatter seemed to be increasing, Shimako-san softly cleared her throat and concluded the discussion.

"Onto February ... last year there was the treasure hunt on the 14th to coincide with Valentine's Day. This year – "

"Ah, the newspaper club were sounding me out about that."

Sachiko-sama said.

"They were ... sounding you out?"

"Yes. It was at the second-term closing ceremony, no, maybe it was on the last day of exams. The club president, Yamaguchi Mami-san, called out

to me saying they were counting on us again this year. I'm sorry, I forgot to inform you because of the holidays."

"So how did you answer her, onee-sama?"

Yumi asked.

"I told her I'd respond after discussing it with the boutons in the Rose Mansion."

Discussing it with the boutons. She'd already promoted her juniors into the leading role. But even as she was saying they'd discuss it, her face showed she agreed with the plan.

And that Mami-san. They were in the same class, so there would have been plenty of opportunities for her to discuss it with Yumi or Yoshino-san. She was using the same ploy as last year, when the previous head of the newspaper club, Tsukiyama Minako-sama, had won over the previous Roses in order to make the event happen.

"Let's leave this discussion until after the election. Depending on the outcome, there's a chance the newspaper club may cancel their plans."

Was that remark made out of concern that one, or all, of the second-years might fail to be elected?

Indeed, while they were called boutons now, if they didn't become the next student council leaders then they'd go back to being normal students. While Noriko-chan wasn't planning on contending the election, in the one-in-a-million chance that Shimako-san lost the election, she wouldn't be called a bouton.

"Well then, we'll put the Valentine's Day event on hold for now. In March, the Yamayurikai will be organizing the "Third-Years' Farewell Party.""

When it came to this topic, Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama didn't have anything to say. When all was said and done, they were part of the group being farewellled.

No matter what, they wouldn't be on the side organizing it.

Yumi could feel that message contained in their silence.

"Ah. Since I'm taking entrance exams, I probably won't be able to make it to many meetings from here on, so take care everyone."

Rei-sama's remark, added in at the end of the meeting, felt like a death blow.

Part 5

On the way home.

Sachiko-sama was the same as ever.

When Yumi had been washing the cups, when she'd been idly chatting with Rei-sama, when they'd left the Rose Mansion and were walking through the school corridor, when they temporarily split up to change their shoes and then when they reunited at the entrance, when they all walked together along the tree lined path, she neither forced herself to be near Yumi nor avoided her, but with exquisite positioning she was able to chat about the weather and interject into the second-years' conversation.

Usually, after a souring of someone's relationship with their petit soeur, they'd be conscious of it and unable to act normally, wouldn't they?

At the very least, that's what Yumi thought. Even as she listened along to Yoshino-san's chattering, she occasionally glanced over at Sachiko-sama.

What was her onee-sama thinking? That's what Yumi was wondering.

But Sachiko-sama wasn't acting like that at all. So their eyes didn't meet. That said, Sachiko-sama wasn't ignoring her, so she looked at Yumi a couple of times and their eyes met then. When that happened, Sachiko-sama smiled at her with an expression that said, "Hmm?" But it wasn't like Yumi had anything specific for her, so Yumi was the first to look away and Sachiko-sama didn't ask anything more.

Sachiko-sama didn't glance at the book return slot when they passed the library, so perhaps she'd already forgotten that incident.

Her onee-sama was an adult, who wouldn't be disturbed by that sort of thing.

In front of the statue of Maria-sama, at the fork in the road, Yumi prayed.

(That I may grow stronger.)

That she may become a strong person who could stand tall and walk on even when her onee-sama wasn't with her.

But, in direct opposition to her prayer, she didn't really want to become the sort of person who was totally fine without her onee-sama.

She had to grow stronger.

But she felt it would be nice to remain the spoiled baby she was forever, always smiling beside her onee-sama.

Information Session and Clandestine Meeting

Part 1

"There will be an information session regarding the student council elections starting at 3:45pm today. Would all first and second-year students who are considering running in the elections please come to the Electoral Committee's office, next to the staff room, at that time. Also, please understand that we will not be accepting nominations to run in the election today. I repeat, there will be – "

The same announcement was repeated a couple of times over the school PA system all throughout the time allotted for cleaning, immediately following homeroom.

There were some students who were surprised by this sudden announcement, but there had been a notice about it in the bumper end-of-year special edition of the student newspaper, the Lillian Kawaraban. Going back even further, the Electoral Committee had placed a notice on the committee bulletin board on the first of December, after the School Festival Committee had disbanded on the last day of November and relinquished their space on the board, so it wasn't really all that sudden.

Even so, there were some students who heard the announcement and, thinking there were others who didn't yet know, had kindly gone looking for Yumi and the others to inform them.

In truth, while they had left the school buildings to dispose of the rubbish, they could still faintly hear the announcement, and a copy of the notice on the bulletin board had been delivered to the Rose Mansion the previous year, and the editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban was a classmate, so Yumi had been informed of this many times already, but still

she gratefully accepted their kindness. Because the message they all wanted to convey was, "You're running, right? Give it your best."

When cleaning was over Yumi met up with Yoshino-san and they visited the second-year wisteria class to get Shimako-san before heading towards the Electoral Committee's office. It was just after 3:30 so they were a bit early, but even if they went to the Rose Mansion they wouldn't be able to do anything in five minutes, and it was much better than being late.

Their meeting place, the Electoral Committee's office, was next to the staff room. In case someone had missed it during the announcement, or read the notice but completely forgot the location, there was a huge sign on the door saying "Electoral Committee," so anyone that walked past it was unlikely to forget.

There was a group of students in the hallway, gathered around the door. Initially, Yumi had been surprised by how many people were intending to run, but that wasn't the case.

"Ah, Rosa Gigantea."

One of the girls called out, noticing Shimako-san. Then all the gathered students turned to face them.

"Rosa Foetida en bouton, Rosa Chinensis en bouton ... !"

The group of students left the door and surrounded the trio. Two, four, six ... almost twenty in all. The wave of humanity that surged past the staff room door would surely have surprised any teacher that opened it to head home.

"Good luck in the election, Rosa Gigantea and the two boutons. We're cheering for you."

"Ah, thank-you."

The group of students had gathered to see the candidates who would attend the information session. They were all first and second-years. The third-years weren't allowed to vote, so even if they were interested they

wouldn't be quite as worked up about it just now. Plus they had to think about what they would do after graduation.

In the crowd was a face she knew.

"Look this way please. Just once."

The photography club's ace, Takeshima Tsutako-san, called out, holding her camera. When they all instinctively turned in her direction, she clicked the shutter and got them good.

Beside her was Yamaguchi Mami-san, from the newspaper club. She was probably going to write an article about the student council elections for the Lillian Kowaraban. The image of a huge headline reading, "Rosa Gigantea and the Red and Yellow Boutons Attend Information Session Together" floated into Yumi's mind.

"... Noriko."

Shimako-san said softly. Yumi hadn't noticed and neither had Yoshino-san from the looks of things. But Noriko-chan was indeed there, standing a short distance away from the throng of girls.

Everyone noticed Noriko-chan and she stepped forward almost like she was pushed.

"Will you attend the information session?"

Yumi asked.

"Don't be absurd."

Noriko-chan stepped back, waving both hands. But she was obstructed by the crowd, so there was nowhere for her to step back to.

"You don't have to run. You could attend as Shimako-san's assistant."

"No. I just came to see her, because I was a bit nervous. So that's enough for me."

This time Yoshino-san put her arm around Shimako-san's shoulder and dragged her over to right in front of Noriko-chan.

"Then look to your heart's content. Come on, come on."

Squeals came from the onlookers, but not from Noriko-chan or Shimako-san. The pair in question kept smiling and spoke to each other.

"I'll be waiting in the Rose Mansion."

"Okay. I'll see you there."

"Take care, onee-sama."

It was kind of incredible. Yumi thought that if she was in the same situation, she'd be blushing and fidgeting and jumping around. Honestly, Yoshino-san had probably been expecting that too.

Still, it was just like the White Rose soeurs to be that composed. The spectacle was so beautiful that Tsutako-san snapped some photos without asking for permission.

"People who are attending the information session, please come inside."

A member of the Electoral Committee opened the door.

"Okay."

The trio responded and went inside. No-one else followed them. They were free to come in and listen, but they were probably afraid of being mistaken for someone that was going to run. The second-years probably remembered the uproar that Kanina Shizuka-sama's nomination had caused, while the first-years would have heard rumors about it.

Inside, on what would be the teacher's platform in a classroom, there were five desks lined up, and in the students area there were five rows of three desks facing them.

"Those attending, please take a seat in this section, starting from the front."

They were pointed to the 5x3 block of seats and sat down alongside each other. Nobody else had arrived to announce their candidacy just yet.

"Really, we didn't need fifteen desks. But we sort of had to make it look good."

One of the Electoral Committee members joked, taking her seat on the platform. Yumi recalled that this was Hanae-san. They'd been in the same class once during primary school. Since she took the seat in the middle, that must make her the head of the Electoral Committee for this year.

"Typically, there's three candidates. At most, there'd be five or six, don't you think?"

It wasn't yet 3:45pm, so they were just chatting. It may have been out of consideration for the candidates, so they didn't get bored.

"It looks like there'll be more committee members than candidates again at this year's information session."

There were five desks in front of them, and there were five students other than Yumi's group in the room, so it looked like there were five committee members attending the information session today. Incidentally, there were two Electoral Committee members from each first and second-year class. A meeting with all the members wouldn't fit in here, so they probably held those in some other room.

"Usually it's ... laid out more like an office, I guess."

One of the committee members said, noticing Yumi looking around the room.

Hanae-san looked at her watch. Yumi followed suit, looking at her own left wrist.

There was still about three minutes to go.

(Ah.)

After checking the time, Yumi noticed there was a clock on the wall right in front of her. For Hanae-san, it was behind her back, so she'd probably decided against turning around to look at it.

As usual, her thoughts showed plainly on her face, and in front of her Hanae-san trembled with suppressed laughter. Seeing Hanae-san like this, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san looked confused.

Well, of course. In the middle of their conversation she'd looked at her watch and then suddenly started laughing, so they'd be wondering what was so funny.

"I suppose we should get started."

Hanae-san announced, finally getting her laughter under control, and the four other members that had been standing and sorting documents took their seats.

"The information session for the election of the next student council executive will now begin. I look forward to working with everyone here."

Yumi wasn't sure whether it was proper protocol or not, but they started with everyone standing and bowing, which seemed to fit the mood in the room.

"First, we'll distribute a print-out to everybody. This isn't just for attendees of this information session, anyone that comes to the Electoral Committee's office can ask for a copy. So if you're aware of anyone that intends to run in the election but was unable to attend today, please let them know. We'll be handing them out from today up until the deadline for nomination in the election."

The trio nodded, looking at the print-outs they'd been given.

"We'll start by going over what's written there, as well as a couple of supplemental items, then we'll answer any questions you may have. Alright then."

Hanae-san was about to start reading the first point when there was a sudden commotion outside the room. They stopped for a moment and everyone looked towards the door.

"That's a bit concerning."

Hanae-san said, and the first-year on her left stood up and went to have a look.

Actually, Yumi had thought she'd heard voices talking outside since around the time they stood and bowed, but it was the hallway out there.

Since it was after school, there was usually a fair amount of student traffic, so she'd accepted that a certain amount of conversation would carry into the information session.

But the volume had steadily increased, to the point where she could no longer say that it was just that. Basically, it was becoming a hindrance to the information session.

How to explain it? It felt like there was a heated argument going on, with a certain amount of belligerence. It may even have made it to the level of a quarrel.

The first-year committee member opened the door. With that, the volume grew louder then suddenly dropped. As expected, the fiery conversation was interrupted by someone emerging from the room.

After questioning the ringleader in the disturbance, the first-year committee member returned and whispered into Hanae-san's ear.

"The information session is open to all. They can come in."

This was the first thing Hanae-san said after hearing the report.

It sounded like someone had shown up late, tried to enter and then got into a dispute with the students waiting outside.

Anyone could attend the information session. So was the reason for the dispute just because that student wanted to enter the room? At any rate, Hanae-san decided that understanding the circumstances was the highest priority, so she asked her junior about the details.

"What the heck are they doing anyway? Why do they think they have the right to get in the way of another student?"

"Well, it looks like at first they thought she was just going to be an observer. And since everyone else was holding back, they thought it'd be unfair for one person to go in, that sort of thing."

"An observer...?"

"And there's not enough space in here for everyone that's out in the hallway."

The group of students outside straining to hear what was going on inside probably wouldn't allow a solitary student to pompously sit in on the information session. Although they probably would have allowed Noriko-chan, since she was Shimako-san's petit soeur.

"I see. So then that girl said she wasn't just going to observe?"

Hanae-san asked the younger girl, and at this point Yumi and her friends who had been silently listening all exchanged glances. Hold on, time-out.

She wanted to attend the information session and not just to observe. That meant that she had to be planning on running in the election.

Which would fundamentally change the nature of the election. The nominations weren't closed yet, but if there were four or more people participating then it would be an actual election. With three people, it was merely a vote of confidence.

"That's right, she said she was thinking about running. At which point they told her that it was too late already. Then they started arguing about whether she could go in or not."

"I see. And once they started arguing, neither side wanted to back down. What a troublesome bunch."

Hanae-san sighed in exasperation. Such a bother it had become.

"Ah, um."

Yumi instinctively jumped into their conversation, even though a potential candidate that had come to listen to the information session may not have had standing to address this matter. Beside her, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san both looked at her with expressions that said, "What are you planning on saying, Yumi-san?"

"What is it?"

Hanae-san allowed Yumi to voice her opinion.

"You have to let her in, right? Even if she is late, I heard voices out there arguing before the information session began, so if she hadn't been blocked by the other students she would have made it here just in time."

They could run in the election even if they didn't attend the information session. But if they were going to run, obviously it would be better for them if they could attend the information session.

The new candidate may be a rival, but she was also a compatriot, doing her best to achieve the same goal. She already had enough of a handicap going up against an incumbent and the petit soeurs of the two other incumbents.

Yumi thought it would be unfortunate if that girl were to get off to a late start because of this. It wasn't like Yumi was trying to be a goody-two-shoes, it's just that it felt wrong.

"Of course. No-one said anything about barring entry. The announcement, the notice on the committee bulletin board, the article in the Lillian Kawaraban, none of these mentioned preventing people from entering who showed up a minute late."

"So then – "

Hanae-san nodded.

"Let her in. Ah, it's okay. I'll do it."

Hanae-san stood up. Indeed, it would be easier for the second-year head of the Electoral Committee to convince the girls to stop blocking the door.

Hanae-san left the room then returned not long after, and looked at Yumi with a conflicted expression. Then she said, "Come in," and motioned to the girl behind her.

When she saw who it was, Yumi was lost for words.

Not just Yumi. Shimako-san, Yoshino-san, and the other Electoral Committee members also had their mouths wide open in shock.

"Gokigenyou. Pardon the intrusion."

Standing there was Touko-chan.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, her ringlets bouncing like electric drills.

Part 2

Noriko was walking down the school hallway.

She was heading towards the location of the information session because she wanted to look at Shimako-san's face.

Since she was only going for a look, it wouldn't take long. She thought she'd have plenty of time to return to the Rose Mansion, prepare some tea and wait idly.

In truth, she hadn't been planning on going until a few minutes ago. After classroom cleaning, she'd gone to the Rose Mansion and performed a basic tidy-up, boiled some water in the electric kettle and was wondering what she should do next when she looked at the clock and saw it was 3:35pm.

She knew when the information session would start.

It was ten minutes until 3:45pm. Would Shimako-san have gone to the information session already? Noriko was alone on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion when she thought this.

Knowing Shimako-san, she would get there with plenty of time to spare. But, if she had to take care of the cleaning journal, for instance, then there was a chance she would be doing that about now. The instant she thought this, Noriko stood up from her chair and started walking towards the school building.

She wanted to meet Shimako-san, just for a moment. No, even getting a glimpse of Shimako-san going in to the information session would be enough. And if she'd already gone in, Noriko thought she'd just walk up to the door and then head back. Even that would be better than staying in the Rose Mansion and doing nothing.

She could see Shimako-san any time. They'd been together yesterday, and Shimako-san had said that she'd come to the Rose Mansion after the information session today. So maybe she wasn't really going because she wanted to see Shimako-san.

But it was hard to keep waiting and thinking about Shimako-san in a place without her. Basically, she just couldn't sit still.

There were plenty of people crowded around the staff room.

Attending the information session was a way of declaring one's intent to run in the elections for the student council executive. They'd all probably gathered here to see who the candidates for the next student council executive would be.

From the chatter flying around, she overheard that none of the three had arrived yet. The photography club's ace was there, as was the head of the newspaper club.

Before long, Shimako-san, Yumi-sama and Yoshino-sama arrived. From a distance, Noriko watched the trio get engulfed.

Shimako-san looked particularly at ease, smiling at the students that called out to her. Seeing this, Noriko's nerves were instantly soothed.

It was probably for this reason that she'd come. Noriko understood this about herself.

After exchanging a few words with Shimako-san, they parted and Noriko headed back to the Rose Mansion. She thought she'd have plenty of time to return to the Rose Mansion, prepare some tea and wait idly.

She was walking lightly down the corridor when she spotted Touko coming the other way.

"Touko ... "

Noriko came to a stop. Touko smiled with sickening sweetness when she noticed her.

"Wait."

Noriko grabbed her by the arm, since it looked like Touko was going to just keep walking.

"We have to talk."

"We do?"

"Yes, we do."

Rosa Chinensis had told her not to intervene in Yumi-sama's affairs, but Noriko couldn't just sit and watch in silence. Yumi-sama was one of her compatriots in the Rose Mansion, but Touko was her friend. Didn't she have a right to hear Touko's side of the story?

"Sorry, but can we do it tomorrow?"

Touko said coldly.

"Tomorrow?"

"I'm a bit busy right now."

"Alright. Tomorrow."

Noriko released her arm. It didn't have to be now, and they were in the same class so there would be plenty of opportunities.

"You're not going to have the day off tomorrow, are you?"

"I'll be here. You're so untrusting, Noriko-san."

Touko smirked, then turned her back on Noriko.

When she returned to the Rose Mansion, Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida were there on the second-floor.

"Keep up the good work."

Rosa Foetida said, sipping on a cup of tea they'd prepared.

"It shouldn't be long until they return."

Rosa Chinensis offered Noriko a cup of tea.

"... Thank-you."

It was only a minor thing, but for some reason the two third-years seemed far more mature than usual, and consequently far more distant.

Part 3

"Touko-chan, why are you – "

Yumi managed to squeak out, watching as Touko-chan sat down in the chair the committee member indicated, next to her.

"Attending the information session will be useful for the election."

In other words, she wasn't here to be an observer, she was planning on running in the election.

"But you're a first-year."

"Oh? But then, Shimako-sama was a first-year last year. There's nothing unusual about it."

But that was because there was a two year gap between Shimako-san and the previous Rosa Gigantea. As Rosa Gigantea en bouton, it was only natural that she'd follow in those footsteps and run as a first-year.

(But.)

Thinking about it, wasn't the "tradition" at Lillian's, where the boutons became the next Roses, itself kind of strange?

Of course, in a democracy, the question of whether that "tradition" was okay would be answered by an election. Nonetheless, the boutons were typically promoted to Roses.

Like last year, when the second-year Kanina Shizuaka-sama, Rosa Canina, lost the election.

In Shimako-san's case, she was very level-headed and generally held in high regard, so she may still have been elected even if she wasn't a bouton. But there must have been some that weren't cut out to be student council leaders (or didn't win their elections).

Given that, what about her own situation? Yumi pondered this.

She had attended the information session because she'd been ordered to do so by her onee-sama. But was that enough for her to become one of the next Roses? She'd become close to everyone as a bouton, but wasn't that a measure of the greatness of her onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko?

Yumi believed that she was the only one who could be Sachiko-sama's petit soeur.

But that was different to being a student council leader.

She wouldn't say it was Touko-chan, but couldn't there be someone out there somewhere in high-school that was more fitting than her?

Yumi remained silent as Touko-chan opened her pencil case, took out a mechanical pencil and thumbed down on the end of it.

Click, click, click.

Why was it that Touko-chan was running in the election?

"Well then, let's resume the information session. The print-outs – "

She could hear Hanae-san's voice from somewhere far away.

The words the first-year committee member wrote on the blackboard seemed like cryptic codewords and didn't stick in her mind either.

That said, she wasn't feeling sleepy. Her mind was surprisingly clear. But it wasn't turned outwards.

Why, why, why?

Her thoughts were turned inwards, repeating this question over and over.

She heard soft scratching as someone wrote a note on their print-out. Maybe the topic being discussed was something important.

She heard Shimako-san's voice clearly, her hand raised as she asked her question. But she couldn't understand what she said.

Everyone was standing up, so she stood up and bowed her head too.

"What's the matter? Are you okay?"

Yoshino-san shook Yumi's shoulder.

Touko-chan left the room first. The five committee members had started tidying up, wiping clean the blackboard and moving the desks.

Despite attending the information session, nothing had made its way into her brain.

"Did your mind go blank because of Touko-chan?"

Shimako-san whispered. Indicating that she had been surprised too.

"Oh wow, Yumi-san really is blank."

Yoshino-san laughed, looking at Yumi's print-out.

"No helping it now. You can copy ours later. If there's anything you don't understand, just ask. We're friends, so we've got to help you."

"Yeah. Thanks."

She'd said they were friends, and Yumi really was thankful. From the bottom of her heart. But not really for allowing her to look at the notes she'd forgotten to take herself. Even if they hadn't been able to do anything for her, just that in itself was enough to be thankful for.

And so, as thankful as she was, she was just as apologetic towards someone. That sort of feeling.

Part 4

"Wha ... !"

After arriving at the Rose Mansion, their respective soeurs' surprised voices rang out in unison upon hearing about Touko-chan.

Nobody had expected anything like that to happen.

From there, it was amazing how quickly Noriko-chan's surprise turned to anger. Apparently she'd run into Touko-chan just before the information session.

"So why didn't she say anything? She avoided it, saying she was in a hurry. She could have told me she was going to the information session. Ah, damn it."

No-one cautioned her specifically about her coarse words because they were due to her indignation towards Touko-chan.

"Noriko-chan, calm down. First of all, have a seat."

Sachiko-sama said.

"How can I be calm? Not content with refusing Yumi-sama's offer, now she's running in the election? What is Touko thinking? She's – "

"Indeed. We should calmly consider what Touko-chan's thinking, don't you agree?"

Noriko-chan gradually cooled down under Sachiko-sama's icy glare. Perhaps realizing that this was the correct course of action, she nodded and sat down on the seat she'd shot out of earlier.

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san followed suit, as did Yumi, sitting down next to Sachiko-sama.

On the table, steam rose from the cups of green tea that Noriko-chan had prepared. They'd been poured when Noriko-chan saw the second-years approaching through the second-floor window, in that peaceful time before she knew about Touko-chan's attendance at the information session.

Once everyone was seated, and had sipped their tea, Sachiko-sama began to speak.

"Noriko-chan, why do you think Touko-chan has decided to participate in the student council election?"

"Uh."

Noriko-chan faltered slightly, having been suddenly asked about the heart of the matter. While she had been shouting earlier, that was because she had taken offense at something and not because she'd made a detailed analysis of Touko-chan's actions and was angry about that. On top of that, there's no way she would know what Touko-chan was thinking.

"Any speculation is fine."

"Speculation?"

"You're her friend, aren't you? I want to hear how things look from your point of view."

A year earlier, Kanina Shizuka-sama had entered the student council election in order to make herself known to the previous Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama. But that reason probably didn't hold true for Touko-chan, since everyone was already more than well aware of her existence.

So, why? For what purpose?

They'd already decided it wasn't simply because she wanted to do student council work. Nobody had said it, but everyone in the room was thinking along the same lines.

"Anything at all would be useful."

Sachiko-sama said, looking for information. Hearing this, Noriko-chan looked down, as though in thought. Then Rei-sama asked a question.

"Earlier you said something about her not being satisfied with just turning Yumi-chan down. Did you mean that this was some sort of harassment?"

"Harassment? ... No, not quite. But out of spite, maybe ... although spite may be the wrong word. For some vague reason, I think she's cognizant of Yumi-sama."

"Yumi-chan, huh? I suppose, it stands to reason that Touko-chan wouldn't be running in the election if she had accepted Yumi-chan's offer of soeurship."

Rei-sama folded her arms and leaned back in her seat.

"Because I offered her my rosary ... "

She'd roused Touko-chan's ire. That was probably what it was. The expression that Touko-chan had shown back then. To put it in a single word, it was "displeasure."

"Yumi-san, even if that's true, I don't think you were wrong to offer her your rosary. They're two separate matters."

Shimako-san said.

"Additionally, I don't think Touko-chan running in the election means she doesn't like you."

Then Yoshino-san interjected from the side:

"I don't know about that. In the unlikely event that Touko-chan wins the election, that means that one of us will lose. Shimako-san, could you tolerate something like that?"

"But we're not the arbiters of justice."

"I'm not talking about justice or anything like that. I just don't want to be separated from my dear friends. Yeah, I know what you want to say. You're right, I'm just being selfish. And that's fine. But don't emotional outbursts often contain a lot of important truths? We can't all be like you, Shimako-san, carefully taking into account everyone else's feelings in our remarks."

Yoshino-san slouched back in her chair, having turned on Shimako-san half-way through. Shimako-san stiffened a touch under this machine-gun assault. It would have left an ordinary girl scared and crying, but of course the mature Shimako-san did no such thing. After pulling herself together and smiling, she'd point out the flaw in Yoshino-san's reasoning ... or so they thought.

"... Yoshino-san, I love that part of you."



Her words floated out gently, like a dandelion blossom.

"Huh!?"

It wasn't just Yumi that was surprised. Everyone was stunned, except for Shimako-san who had made the declaration. But out of all of them, Yoshino-san was the most shocked.

"Shi-Shimako-san. Wh-what are you saying?"

Her face was turning bright red with anger. No, it may have looked like anger on the outside, but it was undoubtedly embarrassment on the inside.

Yoshino-san herself had acknowledged that what she was saying was selfish, so naturally she'd been preparing for a rebuttal from Shimako-san. She'd been ready and waiting to see what Shimako-san lobbed back, but what she got was "love." Well, that would drain the fight from her.

"I hope you'll keep expressing your opinion clearly from here on."

Shimako-san clasped both her hands around one of Yoshino-san's, and pumped it like a handshake.

"Uh, ah, okay."

Yoshino-san's momentum came to a crashing halt, like she'd been completely swept away by Shimako-san's presence. Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama exchanged a glance and stifled their laughter.

"While I'm not Yoshino-chan, if the three of you were split up, it would be lonely for whoever was left out and couldn't see the other two."

"That's true."

Rei-sama agreed with Sachiko-sama's statement.

"Shimako and Yoshino are stillness and motion, so they're a good match. The student council won't work if it moves too quickly, or not at all. And Yumi-chan's the cushioning. By all rights, you'll make a splendid Rose trio – "

But there's Touko-chan. Rei-sama left off this last part and once more turned to Noriko-chan.

"Sorry. The conversation got a bit sidetracked. Touko-chan's cognizant of Yumi-chan. Is there anything other than that?"

"I'm terribly sorry. There's nothing else especially ... ah."

Noriko-chan gave a small cry. Like she'd just remembered something.

"What is it?"

"It was a long time ago, something I overheard one of my classmates saying."

"And?"

"She said that Touko had always wanted to be a Rose."

"A Rose ... "

"It was just after the school year started, Touko was talking with some of our classmates who'd also come through Lillian's middle-school. The conversation didn't go into any specifics, like whose petit soeur they'd like to be, it was more of a vague, "some day" type thing ... like she'd always admired them. But I don't think Touko's the only one to have a dream like that."

So did that mean Touko-chan was making a move to turn that dream into a reality? In that case, someone would have to restrain Touko-chan's determination.

No, even if she had an impure motive, no-one had the right to prevent Touko-chan from running in the election. If anyone could, it would be Touko-chan's onee-sama. If she had an onee-sama, they could ask her why she so desperately wanted to be a Rose, and if she couldn't come up with a good answer they could say, "Reconsider your actions."

"Alright, thank-you."

Rei-sama expressed her gratitude, bringing to an end her conversation with Noriko-chan. She'd probably decided she wouldn't be able to get any more information.

"I wonder if we should take a wait-and-see approach for a while."

"There's a chance the election will be over while we're still waiting."

"Either way, all we can do is watch."

"Exactly."

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama exchanged a look and laughed. Even though they'd looked a bit concerned earlier, they were now acting like disinterested onlookers. Come to think of it, the previous Roses had acted the same way last year. They'd considered themselves comfortably retired, and watched on in amusement as their petit soeurs scurried hither and yon.

"A contest between actual opponents is more common than a vote of confidence anyway."

Given that they'd faced off against Shizuka-sama last year, that comment couldn't just be rejected with a, "Like you'd know."

"If she wanted that, she shouldn't have rejected Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san muttered.

"Yoshino."

Rei-sama warned her, but she continued on.

"Because, then she'd be the next in line to be Rosa Chinensis after Yumi-san. Why did she turn her down?"

Yumi was wondering that too.

Touko-chan didn't have an onee-sama. If her dream was to become close to the Roses, she could have just accepted Yumi's rosary, even if she wasn't interested in being soeurs. Previously, when she'd come to the Rose Mansion to help out, she'd done her work properly and got along with everyone there. If she'd stayed the course and become Yumi's petit soeur, she'd only have to live with that for a year.

"Because she so hated the idea of being my petit soeur that she wouldn't have been able to put up with it for a year ... or something."

Yumi hadn't sensed that sort of loathing. Instead, she'd felt a sort of fondness, if only briefly.

But that might just have been Yumi projecting her own hopes, and in truth she really was disliked. It was possible that Touko-chan was always radiating hatred, but Yumi was too thickheaded to notice it.

She loves me.

She loves me not.

She loves me.

She loves me not.

Like using a flower for fortune telling, her mind switched back and forth between these two possibilities – although she didn't have a flower to pull the petals from.

"Touko doesn't hate you, Yumi-sama."

Yumi wanted to believe this, since it was Noriko-chan saying it and not just herself.

"I've got it. While it was regrettable that she rejected Yumi-sama's rosary, we can deduce that if she wins she'll name Yumi-sama as her onee-sama ... or not."

Noriko-chan was trying her hardest to cheer her up, but even she was aware that her deduction was highly implausible.

Despite their discussion, they probably wouldn't get an answer unless they captured Touko-chan and asked her, "Why?"

So, for now.

"Touko-chan probably has her own reasons."

Shimako-san said, and that was all they could think.

Part 5

By the next morning, the story of Touko running in the student council election had spread throughout the high school.

There had been a lot of people gathered around the electoral committee's office the previous evening and they'd all seen Touko force her way into the meeting. As a result, it had spread from there with amazing speed, and even some of the students that had gone home early were informed by evening phone calls from friends that were either being kind or meddlesome, so it had spread in the twinkling of an eye.

"Gokigenyou. Have you heard? About Matsudaira Touko-san from the first-year camellia class?"

That greeting was everywhere during the morning. By lunch, even the teachers had heard about it.

Touko was surrounded by her classmates during recess, but she kept silent, acting as though she didn't hear anything, and as a result they soon left her alone.

So their attention next turned to Noriko. Shimako-san had also attended the information session, and was expected to run in the election, making Noriko the *petit soeur* of one of the people at the middle of the maelstrom. They all approached her nonchalantly, pretending to strike up a friendly chat, while trying to find out a bit about what was happening in the Rose Mansion.

In truth, she wanted to ignore them. But they'd just got that treatment from Touko, so she couldn't really do the same thing. They were classmates, so there wasn't any ill will. But it was a bit sad feigning ignorance to them all one after the other.

"I'm sorry. I don't really know anything either. I was in the Rose Mansion during the information session, and neither the Roses nor the second-years seem to have given much thought to it."

So, for now, she kept repeating this, and resolved to hide in the toilets as much as she could during breaks until the storm had blown over. That sort of running and hiding wasn't like her, but she was Shimako-san's *petit soeur*, so she had to keep in mind that her words and actions reflected not just on herself. If she made some off-the-cuff remark that was misunderstood, it could cause problems for Shimako-san.

She wanted to talk with Touko, but with so many people watching she wasn't able to act freely.

During lunch, she escaped to the Rose Mansion for a breather. The three second-years also seemed completely exhausted, probably in the same situation (or an even worse one). Neither *Rosa Chinensis* nor *Rosa Foetida* were present. The third-years weren't allowed to vote, so the people around them probably weren't as excited.

There wasn't much conversation happening in the Rose Mansion, so after she finished eating her lunch Noriko said, "I've got some business to attend to," and left.

She couldn't see any of the students that had been trying to get a peek at what was going on in the Rose Mansion either. They'd probably decided that no-one would be coming out of the Rose Mansion for a while and had gone off somewhere warm to have lunch.

She walked silently, around the back of the school building. Her goal was the auditorium. The business Noriko had to attend to was behind that.

The air was cold. That may be why there didn't seem to be all that many people around.

At the start and end of lunch break the numbers increased around Milk Hall, with girls coming and going. Still, during warmer months, students could be seen enjoying a stroll around the grounds all throughout the lunch break.

But it was the middle of winter right now. Plus it was right in the middle of the lunch break, so it was unlikely that anyone would think of

going to such an out-of-the-way spot as they shivered from the cold. That's why she'd chosen it. She wondered if that came through.

"Touko."

She was already there.

"You're late. You called me, so you should have got here first and waited."

"I didn't think you'd actually come."

Noriko felt like she'd taken a few steps back and seen how relieved she was.

"When it came time to leave fourth period class, someone dropped a note on my desk like it was rubbish, leaving me no way to refuse. Even if I'd wanted to."

Touko smirked. In her hand she held a scrap of paper. It was the note Noriko had written to Touko. – "In 30 minutes, I'll be waiting behind the auditorium. Noriko."

"But."

If that was the case, she could have ignored it. Let the lunch break pass by, like their classmates were doing. Pretended she didn't see it, smiled and said, "Sorry, I didn't notice," and that would have been that.

But despite that she'd come. In the cold.

"Thank-you."

"We'd agreed to talk today."

It wasn't all that strong, but an extremely cold breeze was blowing through the trees. Their leaves long since fallen, the ginkgo trees and the cherry tree all looked really cold.

"Why?"

Noriko mumbled, looking up at the cloudy sky through the tree branches. She released the word she'd been repeating over and over in her mind on to Touko.

""Why?""

Touko repeated back at her. As though she had no idea what Noriko could be asking her about.

"Why ... "

Why had she rejected Yumi-sama's offer?

Why was she running in the student council election?

Why hadn't she said anything to her?

Why –

Considering each of these questions in turn, her fists clenched tight, Noriko came to a realization.

"Lots of things, but really they're all the same, aren't they?"

There was one answer to her many questions of "why?" The minor details and phrasing may vary, but it felt like there was one reason behind everything.

"Noriko-san, sometimes you say complicated things that Touko can't understand."

Touko smiled, acting coy.

"Don't play dumb."

This was a serious conversation.

If she was saying she didn't understand at this point, was she also still thinking about running away?

No. Touko was smart. She should know that she wouldn't get anywhere with Noriko by acting like a child or playing dumb.

"Alright."

Touko said, switching to a flirtatious smile.

"But you could take what I said about not understanding at face value, and leave saying, "It's pointless talking to you about it.""

It was like she was leaving Noriko a way out. Saying that she shouldn't poke her nose into something troubling. But all she heard was a warning that she'd get hurt if she got too involved.

"I'm not about to do that."

Even if Touko was just an acquaintance, rather than the friend Noriko was proud to proclaim her as, Noriko would rather drag her out of that endless swamp than stay alone in a safe spot.

"Alright, let me ask you something then."

Touko looked her right in the eye.

"Lots of things, but they're really all the same ... Let's suppose what you've said is true. Is that really something that I have to tell you?"

"Huh?"

Noriko was taken aback. She hadn't expected this counterattack.

"Do friends have to tell each other everything?"

It was a sound argument. Noriko had no rebuttal.

"Alright. What you're saying may be true."

She'd get hurt if she got too involved – in a sense, that was correct. She hadn't been able to drag Touko out of that endless swamp. Instead, it had resulted in Noriko being deeply wounded.

"I'm going."

Touko turned around.

"If you understand, there's nothing else to say, right?"

They'd stand out if they went back to the classroom together. Which wouldn't help Noriko. Touko must have factored that in too.

"Touko."

Noriko called out instinctively. Touko slowly turned around.

"I like you, Touko. I thought I'd always be on your side. But in this ... in the election, I can't do that. I'm Toudou Shimako's petit soeur. And it's not just because of my position, I want my onee-sama to be one of the student council leaders with all my heart. So I have to support my onee-sama."

Touko smiled lightly.

"Well, obviously."

"After that."

The tears fell, even though it wasn't something like a final farewell.
Even though we'd be studying in the same classroom during fifth period.

"I'm glad to call you my friend."

"Such a good little girl."

Leaving her with that sarcastic remark, Touko walked off towards the school building.

"Too good for you."

Noriko muttered, watching Touko leave.

Being a friend was tough.

She could faintly hear the chatter of students returning from Milk Hall.

First Year Camellia Class is Normal

Part 1

"Like – I – said."

Yoshino-san said, with a bit of bite.

"Even if you were spacing out during the information session, it's all written on the printout. You'd know if you read the series of events for the election. If you read it. Here!"

Lunch time in the Rose Mansion. Tapping on the document she held in her hand.

"Election Announcement, Candidate Registration ... "

Feeling a bit like she was being pushed, Yumi read aloud the section indicated. She was better off going with the flow here.

"... Candidate Speeches, Election Day ... that's all."

There was a reason that Yoshino-san's attack was focussed on Yumi alone. Shimako-san had answered Yoshino-san's questions properly, plus Yoshino-san already understood exactly what would be happening next. Even Noriko-chan, who wasn't directly involved in the election, seemed to know. Yumi was a potential candidate, so why was she so inattentive?

"Right. And today's the first day of candidate registration. So, let's go."

Yoshino-san had been on her feet the moment she put her lunch box back in the carry bag that Rei-sama had made for her.

"Go? Where?"

"What are you asking? To the Electoral Committee Office. Now you're going to ask me where that is, aren't you?"

" ... It's next to the staff room."

"Wonderful. And what are we going to do there?"

"... Register as candidates?"

"Why was there a question mark at the end of that sentence? It's a statement about yourself. Yumi-san, you need to be more self-aware."

The printout was brought down on her head a couple of times. Yumi thought that in the past Yoshino-san would have held back more, but recently she'd been showing no restraint, like when she faced off against Rei-sama. But it was 3 pieces of A4 paper so it didn't hurt.

"But, you know."

Yumi said, fending off the printout.

"We don't have to register on the first day."

"Wha~t."

Yoshino-san opened her eyes wide with feigned surprise.

"Well, like, last year, Shimako-san cut it really really close, leaving it to the last hour."

Their gaze turned to Shimako-san, who smiled and said, "That's also an option." But she didn't seem to be doing that this year. She was getting ready to stand up and go with Yoshino-san to the Electoral Committee's office.

"Back then, Shimako-san hesitated because she had all sorts of doubts. So then, if I have some doubts – "

Shimako-san's doubts were due to her being a first-year, and wondering whether the second-year Rosa Canina would be more fitting, and other such internal conflicts. At the time, she was also keeping secret the fact that her family ran a temple.

"Well then, Yumi-san, can you tell us these doubts of yours that rival Shimako-san's?"

Yoshino-san pressed her for an answer, saying, "Come on, come on."

"Uh."

"Is the current Rosa Chinensis en bouton and second-year Yumi-san less fitting as a Rose than the mere first-year Touko-chan?"

"That's not what I said."

"Are you nervous because you're going to be leaving Lillian's in the near future?"

"No, that's not it either."

Yumi recoiled as she answered, then Yoshino-san grinned like she was pulling out her trump card.

"In the past you told me, Yumi-san, that we should be Roses. Have you forgotten that promise?"

"Huh? Wasn't it that we should be good friends, like the Roses?"

"Same thing."

Yumi thought that there was a little, no, a huge difference between being a Rose, and being a good friend like the Roses.

"Speaking of which, didn't you say that we'd be friends regardless of my title, Yoshino-san?"

"Did I say that?"

She had. It was during the rainy season, when Yumi's relationship with Sachiko-sama was strained and she was keeping her distance from the Rose Mansion.

But Yoshino-san was playing dumb because it was inconvenient to her. In truth, she should remember it.

"So, what? You're saying you're not interested in being a Rose, Yumi-san?"

Before Yumi could respond to this direct question, an answer came from the side.

"That's not true, Yoshino-san."

Shimako-san said decisively, having remained silent until now.

"Some time ago, Yumi-san told me that she wanted to lead the Yamayurikai with me as a third-year, and that she wanted to be a Rose."

The sole statement of a taciturn person held more persuasive power than the words of a chatterbox.

"Right?"

Yumi nodded without thinking, and when she said, "Let's go then," Yumi allowed her hand to be taken and to be led out.

Was "bewildering" the right word to use to describe this situation?
Watching them leave from the doorway, Noriko-chan mumbled,
"Incredible, Shimako-san."

Part 2

"What's weighing you down like that?"

During cleaning, as she was wiping the blackboard with a cloth, Tsutako-san called out to her from behind.

"You can tell?"

"I can. I've been watching you since first-year, Yumi-san. Do you really think you can fool my eyes?"

They were in the same cleaning group and Tsutako-san had come over to help – apparently finished moving the desks and chairs back to their original position from where they'd been stacked off to the side. That said, Yumi was pretty much finished too.

"I was told off by Yoshino-san."

Yumi rinsed her cleaning cloth in the bucket and wrung it tightly. A quick check of the other cleaning cloths showed they had all been rinsed, so she picked up the bucket of dirty water.

"Oh, why was that?"

Tsutako-san walked with her. It would have been dangerous to have two people carry a bucket full of water, so she'd declined Tsutako-san's offer of help, but Tsutako-san followed her anyway. Perhaps at a loose end, Tsutako-san pulled a miniature camera out of her pocket and held it in one hand, occasionally pointing it at Yumi.

"At lunch time, we went to register as candidates in the election, but we were a bit slow to get going and Touko-chan got in first."

"I see."

"She said it was my fault we got a late start."

And looked incredibly angry when she said it too.

"My goodness. But the order in which you register doesn't determine the order you finish in the election."

Tsutako-san cackled.

"That's what Shimako-san said too."

For the record, Shimako-san was second, Yoshino-san third, and Yumi fourth to register.

"Hmm. I wonder if Yoshino-san is a bit flustered."

"Flustered?"

"Most students fully expect the three second-years to be elected. But you can't say for certain. There could be an upset, with Touko-chan elected. In that case, one of you three would lose, right?"

"And that's Yoshino-san?"

"She might think so, don't you think? It goes without saying that Shimako-san's an incumbent, and you're popular with the first-years, right?"

"That's not going to happen."

Having arrived at the drain, she tipped the bucket over and poured the water out.

"Yeah, it's not going to happen, but she might still be worried about it."

The silver faucet was shining. The students responsible for cleaning this area had done a good job.

"But, well, it's Yoshino-san, so she'll get over it soon enough. Something else will catch her attention and she'll forget something as trivial as this."

Tsutako-san said.

"I suppose."

Yumi picked up the bucket and walked back the way they'd come.

They walked in silence for a while and when they arrived at the classroom entrance Tsutako-san mumbled under her breath.

"So then it isn't about Yoshino-san."

"Huh?"

They'd already concluded that Yoshino-san's anger would sort itself out. But despite that, Yumi was still weighed down.

"Is Touko-chan the cause of it?"

"Uh."

Tsutako-san laughed, before Yumi could even ask, "How did you know?"

"Well, that much seemed obvious."

Tsutako-san had attended last year's Christmas party in the Rose Mansion. She wasn't a member of a Rose family, but she obviously knew the details about what happened between Yumi and Touko-chan.

"I don't understand Touko-chan at all."

Yumi spoke frankly as she put the bucket away with the rest of the cleaning equipment.

She'd been thinking about it constantly. Where had it gone wrong?

If there was something wrong with the proposal, was it the wording, or the timing, or the situation, or was it a problem with Touko-chan? If some of these changed, would she get another chance to ask, or not?

"You say you don't understand Touko-chan. Naturally, since she's her own person."

Tsutako-san said, as though it were obvious.

"But you understand all sort of things, Tsutako-san. Like how Yoshino-san's anger will pass quickly, or that I'm feeling down because of Touko-chan."

For a while now, Yumi had thought that Tsutako-san was an adult. She knew all sorts of information and could understand why things happened. Like some kind of superwoman, who could answer any question she was asked.

"Well, that's because Yoshino-san's behavioral pattern is easy to understand, and all your thoughts show clearly on your face, right?"

Tsutako-san walked around, checking that the windows were locked. It sounded like Tsutako-san wasn't able to figure out what everyone was thinking, it's just that her targets were easy to figure out.

"Then what about Touko-chan?"

"I don't really know about her. Because most of the time it feels like she's wearing a mask, don't you think?"

"A mask ... "

"You've never got that impression?"

"I have."

Quite strongly.

Touko-chan was an actress, right to her core. But, sometimes, even when she wasn't standing on a stage it felt like she was playing some other character.

"As for me, I think one of your good points is the way you're always showing your open and honest feelings, Yumi-san. Forcing yourself to smile when you feel like crying, even if you think you're doing a good job, just makes you look even more pitiful to me. I hate to say it, but you're not a good actor."

"..."

Even so, it felt better to hear her say this directly, rather than beating around the bush. Although if she'd said it a bit earlier, say before the school festival, Yumi may not have accepted the lead role in the Yamayurikai play.

"But I like that. So I think you look great when you're not acting. But when an amateur gets on the same stage as a professional actress, do you think she can win?"

"So, you're saying that even if I understand Touko-chan, it's impossible?"

"For how things are now. She's just too far ahead of you."

Tsutako-san finished her check of the windows, and gave the "OK" signal to their classmate at the podium, writing in the cleaning log. To show her understanding, that girl made the "OK" sign back.

"Your opponent's wearing a mask, but you're going at her with your honest feelings. There's no way you can win. Ah, I'm not talking about the election here."

"Yeah."

Yumi nodded. It was about whether she could do something for Touko-chan, and what she should do. Yumi decided to think about it some more.

"Thanks for the advice."

Yumi thought that Tsutako-san was definitely an adult. Even though she said she didn't know anything, she was still able to say something pertinent. A hint. But Yumi had to come up with the answer herself.

"I'll take your smiling face over words of thanks."

Just as Tsutako-san was steadying her camera, Yoshino-san raced into the classroom, back from where her group had been cleaning.

"Yumi-san, Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san grabbed her by the arm. Just as the light from the flash and the sound of the shutter went off, so it must have ended up as a weird photo of the two of them.

"Come with me."

Yumi and Tsutako-san exchanged glances and smiled.

"Come on."

Yoshino-san's mood had changed quickly, like the weather.

Part 3

Yoshino-san dragged Yumi to a rather delicate position – the hallway next to the first-year camellia classroom.

"Got it? We'll walk past slowly, having a friendly chat, so get a good look at what's going on inside that classroom."

"Um."

Slowly, friendly, good. Overly complicated orders would just result in confusion. So if she dropped the adverbs and just focused on the verbs, then, basically, they were going to walk and chat and look in to that classroom. "That classroom" was obviously the first-year camellia classroom.

"Because of what's going on, you haven't had a chance to check it out, have you Yumi-san?"

"No, not really."

Yumi didn't know how she'd react if she saw Touko-chan. So for the last couple of days she'd been avoiding the first-year classrooms as much as she could. The hallway alongside Touko-chan's classroom was right in the danger zone.

"I figured as much. So I thought we should do this."

But even so, Yoshino-san herself had obviously checked things out. Like last year, when she started investigating Rosa Canina as soon as she heard about the new contender.

"At any rate, take a look. We'll talk about it after."

Yoshino-san grabbed Yumi by the arm and started walking off.

Walking slowly and having a friendly chat by itself wasn't that bad, but adding on "getting a good look at what's going on in the classroom" made it a bit more difficult.

Because, wouldn't it look unnatural if she was walking along, apparently engrossed in conversation, but staring into the classroom instead of looking at who she was talking to?

Luckily, the first-year camellia class looked like they were still in the middle of cleaning, with the front and back doors wide open despite it being the middle of winter, allowing for a good view into the room. But on the flip side, it allowed those inside to get a good view of them too, so they may have looked like a rather suspicious duo. To the trained eye, they may have looked like they were scoping out the enemy's positions.

"Well?"

Yoshino-san said, after they'd hidden themselves around a corner – since it would have looked strange if they stopped walking just past the first-year camellia classroom.

"Nothing much. What was strange about it?"

Yumi tilted her head to the side in confusion. Wondering if she'd overlooked something.

Yumi expected Yoshino-san to get angry, saying, "Have a better look," but instead she cracked her knuckles and said, "That's it."

"What's it?"

"It's normal. Nothing's changed in first-year camellia class. Don't you think that's odd?"

Nothing had changed in first-year camellia class.

"It's odd that it hasn't changed?"

"Think back to last year, and second-year wisteria class."

"... Ah."

With that, Yumi suddenly understood too.

"Right?"

Last year, Kanina Shizuka-sama, Rosa Canina, was in second-year wisteria class. In a sense, she had been in the same position that Touko-chan was in now, despite their difference in grades.

"That is indeed strange."

Last year's second-year wisteria class and this year's first-year camellia class were noticeably different.

"We should ask Noriko-chan."

Yumi turned back. She was probably in the classroom. Either that or she'd gone to the Rose Mansion. Either way, she wouldn't be where they were.

Then a voice called out to her from behind.

"Ask me what?"

Yumi turned around and there she was.

"N-Noriko-chan!"

"Gokigenyou ... Oh, what's the matter?"

Noriko-chan was on outdoor cleaning duty this week, and had been returning to her classroom when she spotted the two boutons from behind.

Noriko-chan wanted to return to her classroom and get her belongings before heading to the Rose Mansion, so they accompanied her back through the hallway. This time they had a proper conversation, unlike before, so there was no need to worry about appearing unnatural, and there were no orders to get a good look at the classroom either, which made it a lot easier.

"Our class is normal?"

Noriko-chan asked. Apparently not immediately understanding what they were saying. The class was normal. Indeed, there was nothing unusual about that by itself.

"Well, one of your classmates is running in the election, right? And she's taking on the favorites – the current council and their successors. So why is your class acting like it's business as usual? Shouldn't they be getting all fired up?"

Yoshino-san went on and on. Caught on the back foot a bit, Noriko-chan instead posed a question.

"So, you're saying the second-year pine class is – "

"We're about as fired up as normal."

Like many other classes, they had a handmade board showing "X days until the election." They also had a "Certain Victory" prayer doll, although it

was made of drawing paper, not a proper one. On the back blackboard there were messages of support – "Good Luck Yumi-san, Good Luck Yoshino-san," and they had light pink and cream (presumably meant to be red and yellow) origami flowers adorning their lockers. There were rules against doing anything in the hallway or other places, but their classmates were still getting into the spirit and showing their support by decorating their classroom.

That's the level of support there was for the favorites (to borrow Yoshino-san's phrase). The show of support for their classmate Touko-chan should have been relatively larger, to make up for her lack of name recognition.

"Even if you say that."

Noriko-chan muttered.

"There's not a lot of support for Touko."

Noriko-chan had only entered into Lillian's at the start of high-school, so, naturally enough, she didn't know anything about Rosa Canina. Consequently, she may have been under the impression that it was like this every year.

"But Touko's at fault here too. In the beginning, our classmates would ask her questions about the election, but she ignored them or ran away. It's hard to support someone that acts like that."

They'd just arrived at the first-year camellia classroom and Noriko-chan looked at the door and let out a sigh.

Was Touko-chan feeling isolated inside her classroom?

"I wonder if she's okay."

Yumi said, also staring at the closed door.

She knew there was nothing she could do to help in that class, no matter what she wanted.

Part 4

– I wonder if she's okay.

Yumi-sama's words rang in her ears.

So when she took another look at her class, a couple of things caught her attention.

Touko ate her lunch alone.

She was alone during breaks too.

After school, when she didn't have club activities, she'd sit in her seat and work on her poster, but not a single classmate approached her. Even if they didn't help, they could at least have taken a look.

Touko was isolated.

Like a single drop of oil in water. She didn't mix with anyone in class.

"Ah, I asked her if she wanted any help once, but she turned me down."

Kanako-san said. Noriko had called out to her during a break and they were talking in the hallway.

As for why she was talking to Kanako-san, that was because she alone possessed an aura that was different to everyone else.

"You called out to her?"

Kanako-san immediately answered, "Pretty much."

"But it was only once. I'm not a fan of high-pressure sales tactics, where you keep going after you've been turned down. Plus I've been busy with my club activities. Of course, I'd still help out if she asked me to."

"Thank-you."

This elicited a smile from Kanako-san.

"I haven't done anything to earn your thanks, Noriko-san."

Still, thank-you. Noriko bowed her head in Touko's stead. In her position, she couldn't help Touko even if she wanted to, which made her all the more grateful.

"And I told you she turned down my offer ... besides."

Kanako-san had a somewhat serious expression.

"What?"

"I don't think she'll ask for help."

"Yeah."

Noriko felt she might be right too.

"Hey."

Suddenly, Noriko wanted to hear Kanako-san's opinion.

"Why do you think Touko's acting like that?"

"I'm not sure but ... faith? That's not quite right. But I get a vague feeling it's something like that."

Vague though it may be, Noriko thought Kanako-san's reasoning was on the right track.

"She doesn't want to be a bother to anyone, wouldn't you say? That's why I decided to leave her be."

Indeed. Maybe that was all she could do for now.

The strained relationship between Touko and her classmates was brought into the open through a trivial incident one day during recess.

"Does Touko-san really hate Yumi-sama that much?"

Touko had continued to pointedly ignore the election chatter, but this new approach caused her to unthinkingly raise her head.

"Now, I'll admit that Yumi-sama doesn't have the sort of good looks that make Ogasawara Sachiko-sama so hard to approach, nor does she exude intelligence or dignity. We probably shouldn't expect her to gain these any time soon either. But she more than makes up for that with her likeability and warmth. I'd like that kind of Rose. I think the future Roses should look for more people like that too."

This girl was a fan of Yumi-sama's.

"You can't accept Yumi-sama so you're pulling this crazy stunt of running in the election. Do you think you're any better?"

As a passionate fan, with her blood rushing to her head, she could only see what was on the surface.

What did she think she was going to achieve by telling Touko about Yumi-sama's appeal at this point. It had already progressed well past the stage for such an elementary argument. Touko wasn't that simple.

"Say something."

Yumi-sama's fan was getting more and more enraged as Touko sat there staring at her and not saying a thing.

The way Touko hadn't talked to her classmates, or offered any excuses, or done anything except sit alone and silently work on her campaign materials had obviously stuck in this girl's craw, leading to her current explosion.

She couldn't tolerate that Yumi-sama's rival was one of her classmates. Her friends tried to get her to stop but she shook them off and kept going.

"You were the one responsible for the temporary falling out between Rosa Chinensis and Yumi-sama at the start of summer, weren't you, Touko-san? But despite that, you pretended not to know and acted in the Yamayurikai's play for the school festival. You cozied up to Yumi-sama because you wanted to be a Rose, but now you're turning your knife against her?"

Ah, so that was it. Noriko understood now. She was envious. Of the deep connection Touko had to the Red Rose family. This impromptu protest was because she didn't know how to handle the envy she felt for the way Touko flitted about inside the Yamayurikai at will (or appeared to).

Did she understand her classmate's feelings or not? Either way, Touko laughed scornfully and spat out a single sentence.

"So, what?"

This antagonized not only the classmate that had been complaining to Touko, but also the other students around her.

Noriko watched all this unfold from a distance, judging that the situation would only deteriorate further if she tried to intervene, but even she could see that Touko was acting like a fool.

– I wonder if she's okay.

Yumi-sama's words echoed in her ears once more.

Part 5

Monday of the last week of January, two days out from the candidates' speeches.

At lunch, before heading to the Rose Mansion, Yumi timidly approached the library.

For no real reason. Maybe she was reminded of what happened last year. Looking behind the counter for Shizuka-sama, who obviously wasn't there.

If Shizuka-sama was still enrolled at Lillian's, Yumi would have been able to ask her all about what transpired back then. Maybe it would have explained some things about Touko-chan, who was, in a way, in the same position.

(That's probably it.)

She didn't even consider discussing it with her soon-to-be-graduated onee-sama. Since it had to do with Yumi's relationship to Touko-chan, she had to somehow stumble upon a solution herself, even if she didn't know what it was just now.

Why was Touko-chan running in the election? Was it because she wanted to be a Rose?

If Yumi continued on and graduated without a petit soeur, then the seat of Rosa Chinensis would automatically open up. At that point there would be no problem with her running in the election.

Why couldn't she wait a year?

Or did she want to beat Shimako-san and the two boutons in order to become a Rose?

Maybe she was dissatisfied with the current student council? But then, two of the three were changing, so it was bound to change too.

So then, was the problem the boutons? Yumi, or Yoshino-san. Had she nominated herself to show that she wouldn't recognize one of them as a student council leader?

"A fresh breeze for the Yamayurikai."

That slogan was written on Touko-chan's poster.

If Touko-chan thought she wanted to be a student council president for all the right reasons, shouldn't Yumi admire that determination?

(Even though in the one-in-a-million chance that Touko-chan wins, one of us will lose.)

Yoshino-san's scary face stole into her mind.

Following in the footsteps of her onee-sama.

Continuing to do her best to support the Yamayurikai with her friends, like she had up to now.

How was that for a motive?

(While that may be true, what can you do, Yumi-san?)

This time the gentle face of Shimako-san floated by. Yumi was one person, she didn't have hundreds of ballots to cast.

That was exactly right. Even if Yumi voted for Touko-chan, it was very rare that an election was decided by just one ballot. But, even if that one vote was the difference between victory and defeat, they wouldn't know who it was that lost and was left behind until the votes were tallied.

Speculate however she may.

(Hold on, Yumi-san. What are you thinking?)

The phantoms of her two dear friends seemed to overlap each other.

(If you do that, I'll never forgive you.)

But there was still time, even now.

The deadline for candidate registration had already passed. There were four candidates. If one dropped out, that would leave the requisite three. Those three would become the next Roses through a vote of confidence.

She could continue to fight Touko-chan, or she could withdraw her candidacy and cede the position of Rosa Chinensis.

She'd gone over this countless times in her mind.

"Haa .. "

In the end, she couldn't come up with an answer just by changing her location. Yumi sat in the reading room for about ten minutes before leaving the library. The number of students who'd come to the library during lunch to study or research something had increased. If she was just going to sit around sighing, she didn't have to do it there.

As she was walking back towards the school building, she noticed a middle-aged lady walking back and forth in front of the visitor's entrance.

"Um ... ?"

Upon hearing her voice, the lady's shoulders jumped in surprise and she turned around.

"My apologies. I could guide you to your destination, if you'd like."

"Oh my."

She was probably a student's mother, or maybe an alumni. She was a little bit plump, wearing a fine looking tailored coat, and smiled elegantly.

"Thank-you, that would be a great help. I brought something my daughter left at home, but I wasn't sure how best to go about it. I set out when I noticed she'd left it behind, so I haven't been in touch with her. To be honest, I was thinking about just going home. I've been here for school festivals and sports festivals, but it's somehow hard to approach the school building on a regular day, don't you think?"

"I see. Ah, here, use these."

Yumi led the lady to the entrance and laid out a pair of blue slippers for her.

"Thank-you."

After putting on the slippers, the lady unbuttoned her coat. After sliding her coat back past her collar, she stood there for a little while. Yumi looked at her, unsure what she was doing, and eventually the lady blushed and said, "Ah."

"Oh no. Silly me."

It looked as though typically someone else would remove her coat for her. As befitting the daughter, no, wife of a high-class family.

"Which class is your daughter in?"

Yumi asked, pulling herself together.

"First-year – no, could you perhaps guide me to the high-school staff room?"

"Okay?"

Yumi asked, and the lady said:

"I don't think you'd like it if your mother brought something you'd forgotten to your classroom, right?"

In front of her friends.

"That ... might be true."

Yumi tried replacing the lady in front of her eyes with her own mother.

(Thank-you for always looking after Yumi. I've brought something she left at home today. Ah, Yumi-chan, look, here. You left it in the entrance. Honestly, you're so absent-minded.)

Imagining it, it was indeed painful.

"I don't want to embarrass my daughter, so it would be better to leave it with her homeroom teacher. Don't you think so?"

In addition to her handbag, the lady held a simple brown paper bag, which probably contained the thing her daughter had left behind – so it didn't look like it required any special care.

"I understand completely."

In full agreement, Yumi obediently headed towards the staff room. She tried to imagine what the forgotten item could be. Typically, it'd be something like a forgotten lunchbox. In that case, the sooner it was delivered the better. Even though Yumi's lunch still sat untouched in her bag.

The lady looked around restlessly as she walked, apparently finding the school on a weekday an unusual sight.

"Student council election ... ah."

The lady said, reading from a poster in the hallway.

"You've heard about it?"

It wasn't a candidate's poster, just an informational one about the election. Stating when the candidates' speeches would be held, as well as the election day and other such things.

"Yes, my daughter told me all about it. She said that, this year, the current Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Chinensis en bouton and Rosa Foetida en bouton were running. It sounds like my daughter's supporting them all too. She said they're all lovely onee-samas, so they'll surely be elected. Isn't that wonderful?"

She probably couldn't imagine that the girl in front of her was Rosa Chinensis en bouton. And since the praise had been made unknowingly, it wouldn't be appropriate for Yumi to respond humbly with, "Oh, you're too kind." That said, they weren't close enough that she'd introduce herself formally either, so Yumi simply smiled vaguely as they arrived at the staff room.

"Thank-you very much. You've been a great help."

The lady said, implying that she'd be able to handle it from here, having seen the teacher's seating chart posted near the doorway.

"I'm sorry for prying, but you still have your lunch left in your bag, don't you? I'd feel terrible if lunch ended before you finished eating, so don't worry about me."

So that meant it probably wasn't her daughter's lunch in the bag. Yumi excused herself, and thought she'd head to the Rose Mansion to eat. As she was leaving, the lady said:

"Say, have we met somewhere before?"

"No?"

Yumi looked uncertain, having no memory of any such meeting. Even if they had met, it hadn't been anything monumental enough for her to remember.

"I see. Maybe all the young ladies in the same school uniform look similar ... but I don't think you were wearing your school uniform."

"The sports uniform, maybe?"

Yumi said, remembering the lady's earlier comment about the sports festival.

"Ah, maybe that was it. Or at one of the stalls at the cultural festival."

"I wore a happi coat at one of the food stalls."

She may have been one of the customers, but Yumi couldn't remember. Or maybe they'd just passed each other in the street.

"Ah, I've detained you again. Please, go ahead."

"Okay. I'll leave you here then."

"Gokigenyou."

She was probably a graduate of Lillian's. The farewell, "Gokigenyou," had flowed naturally from her mouth.

Part 6

At the same time.

Having already finished eating her lunch, Noriko realized she had to do something and stood up.

"Pardon me. I have to head out for a little while."

For now, everything that needed cleaning had been cleaned, so she picked up her empty lunch box and left the room. Rosa Chinensis, Shimako-san and Yoshino-sama were all on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion, but they simply said, "Take care," and didn't question her as to where she was going or what she was going to do. Although Noriko had bolted out of there, so they didn't get much of a chance to ask.

At the entrance to the Rose Mansion she ran into Yumi-sama, who had arrived later than usual.

"I went to the library for a little bit. Then something else came up, which kept me until now. How about you, Noriko-chan?"

"I'm off to my classroom for a little bit ... no, maybe Milk Hall. I'm not sure if I'll be back."

Noriko glanced back at the second-floor room as she said this, which prompted Yumi-sama to say:

"You can take your time. There's nothing more to assist Shimako-san with."

She'd already done everything she had to – made a "candidate" sash, designed her poster, and written her speech.

But even so, Noriko wanted to be at Shimako-san's side whenever she had the time. Even if she couldn't do anything, she wanted to be close. As her soeur, wasn't it only natural she felt that way?

Even Rosa Chinensis, who seemed cold at first glance, surely felt the same way. That was why she was showing up at the Rose Mansion so frequently, even though she'd never offered to assist her petit soeur with her election preparation. Rosa Foetida was studying for exams so she

hadn't been to the Rose Mansion that much, but those soeurs lived next door to each other, and were cousins, so she was probably supporting Yoshino-sama outside of school.

"Take care."

Seen off by Yumi-sama, Noriko returned to the school building. She wasn't quite sure where to go, so decided to start with the closest location. Which was the first-year camellia class.

Inside the classroom, lunch time was pretty much over, with students either playing cards over some desks that had been drawn together, or had put their desks back in their original positions and were getting ready for the next class.

"Not here."

She went over to where Touko usually ate alone, but there was no-one there. She tried touching the cushion and felt a faint warmth. After doing so, she realized this was the sort of thing they did on police dramas, and felt a bit embarrassed.

Maybe she'd gone to the toilet.

Noriko left her lunchbox at her own desk. Anyway, if they were going to talk, it would be better to do it away from the classroom. She decided to head out in search of Touko.

"Ah, Noriko-san."

As she was leaving the classroom, one of her classmates called out to her.

"Are you perhaps looking for Touko-san?"

"Huh? ... Yeah."

Well, if she'd been seen going to Touko's desk and touching her chair, that seemed like a reasonable deduction.

"Do you know where she is?"

Noriko asked, thinking her classmate might know since she called out to her, but the response was, "No, I don't."

"If you see Touko-san, can you tell her to go to the staff room? I was walking in the hallway when our teacher asked me to relay that message to Touko-san, but I haven't seen her. If you find her, can you tell her?"

She must have thought it was a safer option to wait in the classroom until Touko returned, but then Noriko had shown up and was apparently looking for Touko, so she took the opportunity to ask. Her face clearly showed that she didn't want to head out into the cold to find a classmate that she wasn't too friendly with..

"Alright. The staff room. If I see her, I'll tell her."

Noriko said and left the classroom. Not without due consideration. She'd come to the conclusion that it probably wouldn't matter if she didn't find Touko, since if it had been urgent they would have used the school-wide PA system.

She started walking in the direction of the toilet and, sure enough, ran into Touko coming the other way.

"... Touko?"

Noriko waved and rushed over, but something about Touko felt out of place today.

"Have you got a moment?"

"What could this be about?"

As they walked together, Noriko's uneasiness steadily increased.

Something about Touko's stride felt unnatural. Clap clap, clap clap. When she walked, it made a strange sound. Noriko looked at Touko's feet. And then she called out:

"What happened there?"

Touko was wearing visitor's slippers. Ivory and blue, although closer to ivory. In other words, the color was close enough to the white indoor shoes that it didn't stand out that much. But even so, slippers were slippers. That's why her appearance had seemed strange – she wasn't wearing her indoor shoes.

Since this was the first time Noriko had noticed, it probably meant she hadn't seen Touko walking around today before now. After sitting down, she wouldn't have noticed her shoes.

"... Did somebody hide yours?"

That thought instantly crossed Noriko's mind. She didn't want to think it was the case, but the hypothesis that Touko was being harassed by her classmates wasn't one that she could dismiss out of hand, although nor was it a foregone conclusion.

"Not at all. I left my indoor shoes at home."

Touko smiled.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She answered directly, looking straight into Noriko's eyes. So she probably did leave them at home. But even if she accepted that, it just gave birth to another question.

"So, why did you take them home?"

Normally, she wouldn't take them home during the term, right? It had only been about a month since the start of the third term. Or maybe Touko took them home to wash every weekend, and Noriko simply hadn't noticed.

"That's Noriko-san for you."

Touko said, lowering her voice a little.

"It's true that I left them at home. The reason I took them home was because they got so dirty they had to be cleaned."

"What happened?"

"It's no big deal. It was kind of noticeable, but it came out easily in water. I could have washed them at school, but it'd take a while for them to dry in this weather. And I didn't want to leave a wet pair of indoor shoes in my shoe locker. But after going to the effort of cleaning them, I blew it all by leaving them at home."

"Who did it?"

"Who knows?"

She said that her shoes were on the ground and looked like they'd been crudely trampled on when she returned from PE class on Saturday.

If the culprit was one of their classmates, they either left after Touko did or returned before she did, but who could remember that sort of thing? Plus there was no reason to limit it to just their classmates. At the very least, Noriko hadn't seen anything.

"That's horrible."

Even so, someone had definitely done it. There was no reason why her shoes would fall out of her shoe locker of their own accord.

"But, I've done that sort of thing in the past."

"Huh?"

Noriko asked in surprise, to which Touko said:

"Did you forget? I did it to you. The method they chose, it's somewhat like divine retribution, don't you think?"

It was kind of the same, but also kind of different. But enough of that. It was true that Noriko had received a similar method of harassment prior to the new students' welcome party.

"Putting a hair-clip in your shoes, hiding your shoes, writing graffiti on your desk, taking the juzu from your bag."

Touko counted off the items on her fingers, one by one.

Noriko couldn't stand it and told her to stop.

"Why are you smiling?"

"I'm not smiling."

"You are. It's like you're enjoying this."

"How could I possibly be enjoying it? You're reading too much into it, Noriko-san."

In truth, Touko's mouth wasn't smiling. But Noriko wasn't fooled by what she saw in front of her eyes. Touko was acting as a "person that isn't smiling."

"Well, whatever."

Noriko looked at her watch. There was about five minutes until the end of lunch.

"Let's go to the staff room. I'll come with you."

"The staff room? Why? To tell the teacher what happened to my indoor shoes?"

Touko looked confused.

"Not that. Our teacher called for you."

"For me?"

Touko changed course, saying that in that case she had no choice but to go. Noriko walked with her, since she hadn't been told not to come.

Clap clap, clap clap. The slippers echoed each step Touko took.

"I wonder if I've rubbed them the wrong way."

Clap clap, clap clap.

"... Who knows."

That was something Noriko didn't know.

Naturally, the summons had nothing to do with payback from their teacher or anything of the sort.

"Here."

At the staff room, their homeroom teacher handed Touko a brown paper bag.

"Your mother brought it for you."

"My mom did?"

Touko took the bag and looked inside. What she saw was a pair of clean indoor shoes.

"Ah."

Noriko too called out without thinking.

"She said you left them in the entrance and she spotted them just before noon."

Their homeroom teacher smiled fondly.

"She seems like a nice mother."

"Yes."

Touko agreed, hugging the paper bag and shoes tightly.

"She really is."

That was the only time when Touko wasn't acting.

At least, that's how it looked to Noriko.

Beneath the Mask

Part 1

Wednesday.

For better or worse, the day of the candidates' speeches had arrived.

There were no classes in the afternoon. The first- and second-year students gathered in the auditorium to listen to the candidates give their speeches.

"At any rate, I'm relieved. I was all on edge thinking you were going to withdraw your candidacy, Yumi-san. It looks like I shouldn't have been concerned at all."

Shimako-san had finished eating her lunch first, and was refilling Yumi's cup with Japanese tea as she said this.

"Actually, I was thinking about it for a lo~ng time."

Yumi answered as she ate her lunch. Whether it was better to finish eating quickly and get some more practice for the speech, or to eat slowly and aid her digestion, that was the question.

"Oh, you were really considering it?"

Shimako-san asked, surprised. Sachiko-sama was also in the room, but she didn't have much of a reaction – only raising one eyebrow.

"Yeah."

"May I ask why you decided not to?"

Shimako-san sat down beside her, still holding the teapot, so Yumi nodded and started to tell her story.

"A few days ago I had the chance to talk to the mother of a student at school."

"Go on."

"She told me that her daughter was cheering for us. So you see."

Yumi closed her lunch box lid.

"Even though I'm worried about Touko-chan, I can't forget about all the other students who are supporting us. Since I've already nominated, I shouldn't drop out midway through. If I did that, I'd be letting everyone down. If Touko-chan was the best person for the student council, then she'd win even without any tricks from me. On top of that, regardless of how I felt, if I withdrew then Touko-chan would probably feel humiliated by having the win handed to her. And arriving at that conclusion, I've prepared to face today. End of story."

Clap, clap, clap.

Applause was coming from somewhere. Shimako-san was still holding the teapot, so she couldn't be the one clapping her hands. That left –

... Clap.

Surprisingly, the sound of applause was coming from Sachiko-sama's hands.

"You should give your speech just like that. Your expression, your manner of speaking, it was all wonderful."

"Onee-sama."

Sachiko-sama hadn't offered any advice up until now, even when she'd been shown the draft scripts or listened to Yumi rehearse. To hear her suddenly talk like that, it made Yumi feel like she was about to cry.

Shimako-san put her hand on Yumi's shoulder and gave it a soft shake. Come on, pull yourself together. That sort of thing.

"Is Rei-chan here!?"

Just then, Yoshino-san burst into the room.

"... Not yet."

"I went to the third-year chrysanthemum classroom, but they said she hadn't arrived yet. So I thought she might have come straight here – "

So that was it. Yoshino-san had taken a detour over there which was why she was so late in getting to the Rose Mansion.

"I told her she had to be at school before lunch. It's such a critical time when her cute little petit soeur's about to take on the speech meeting, and she's off wandering around like some hobo ... "

Letting her anger run its course, Yoshino-san's words got a bit confused.

"Now, now. You'll feel better if you eat your lunch. You're probably irritated due to low blood sugar."

"Uh – "

"Come on, have a seat."

Yoshino-san was motioned to sit down and poured a cup of tea. Yumi knew the truth. Yoshino-san's irritation wasn't due to "Rei-chan" or low blood sugar, it was due to nerves about the speech assembly that was just around the corner. But because Yoshino-san didn't want to admit that, she put the blame on "Rei-chan."

"You might be right. I'm kinda hungry ... I think."

Just when Yoshino-san had regained a little of her composure, Noriko-chan finally arrived.

"Sorry I'm late."

"What happened?"

Shimako-san asked.

Noriko-chan typically came straight here at lunch and after school. The question was about whether something had come up that she had to do, or if her fourth-period class had been in one of the specialist classrooms. It wasn't a cross-examination, more of a conversation opener.

"Lunch in the classroom."

"I see. And?"

"Mustard and taramasalata sandwich."

"..."

There was silence for a little while. Who did what?

"Ah."

Noriko-chan put her hand to her mouth and Shimako-san smiled.

"It's okay. You were with Touko-chan, right?"

"Yeah. I was kind of worried about her."

She was a bit worried about Touko-chan, so she didn't want to leave the classroom, so she ate her lunch there. But from the sounds of it, it wasn't as though they ate their lunch together, she just watched Touko-chan from within the same classroom.

"So, tell us, how did she look?"

Yoshino-san asked, waving around the wiener she was holding in her chopsticks. Looking like a superior officer receiving a report from a subordinate they'd sent out scouting.

"She was calm. She didn't look at all like someone who was about to give a speech in less than an hour."

"Hmm."

Yoshino-san muttered, sounding bored. She probably wouldn't have been satisfied unless she heard Touko-chan was shaking in her boots.

But a shaking Touko-chan would have felt fake. She was calm. That sounded a lot more realistic.

"How about that."

Yumi absent-mindedly muttered as she adjusted her candidate's sash.

"A mustard and taramasalata sandwich."

That was a bit unexpected.

Part 2

Before long, the group of five headed to the auditorium.

There was still fifteen minutes until it started, but even so there were quite a few students heading to the auditorium already.

Come to think of it, it had been like that last year too. Some of the students who were excited by the election had forgone their lunch break and headed to the auditorium as soon as fourth period was over to reserve some seats. The disinterested students probably arrived at the last minute, while those who were only somewhat interested arrived in dribs and drabs after they'd finished eating.

Rei-sama was waiting in the backstage area.

"Rei-chan!"

The moment she saw Rei-sama, Yoshino-san cried out and rushed over to her.

"I didn't think you were coming!"

Puffing up her cheeks like a blowfish.

"Huh, but I promised you, didn't I? I got delayed and was running a bit late so I thought I'd change plans and come here directly. Hm? What's the matter? You were going to pieces because your Rei-chan wasn't here?"

Rei-sama the hobo poked her cute little petit soeur's puffed up cheeks.

"You idiot."

Yoshino-san laughed and the mood completely dissolved. Resting her head on Rei-sama's shoulder, she said, "You idiot," once more.

The strange thing was, that "You idiot" sounded like "Thank-you."

A short distance away, Noriko-chan was holding Shimako-san's hands and speaking like she was chanting a spell.

"Do your best, onee-sama. I'm cheering for you. You're going to be fine. I believe in you."

The words of encouragement that she hadn't received from her onee-sama last year came raining down on Shimako-san from her petit soeur a year later.

"Also ... um, fight!"

It was like she was trying to make up for last year, although Noriko-chan wouldn't have known about that.

"Noriko."

Shimako-san looked really happy.

Even if Sei-sama's words about, "If you're elected, you have to see it through to the end," had been the ultimate encouragement to Shimako-san, there was no way Noriko-chan would have been able to reproduce that.

Their position as onee-sama and petit soeur were different, as was Shimako-san's relationship with each of them, as well as their personalities. But more than that, Shimako-san herself was different to the person she was a year ago.

As a result, Noriko-chan telling her to fight was probably the ultimate encouragement to Shimako-san now. With Noriko-chan cheering her on like that, how could she not?

As Yumi fondly watched the Yellow and White Rose soeurs, Sachiko-sama took her by the hand and said, "Come here."

"You're shaking. I was like that too."

Her onee-sama squeezed her hand tightly, like Yumi had done last year.

"Alright? It's only natural that you're nervous. You shouldn't worry about whether you can step up or not. You've already stepped up magnificently."

"Really?"

Yumi asked, a little bit surprised.

"Yes. There's absolutely no need for you to show anything other than your self. But don't you think it would be a shame if you kept hiding what it

is you already possess? That's why I want you go out there and let those students in the auditorium get a good look at the real you. If you can do that, you'll be a huge hit."

Sachiko-sama looked her straight in the eyes and said, "I believe in you."

"Onee-sama."

"Wha~t?"

"Please."

"Yes?"

"Please hug me."

Then, without any hesitation, Yumi was softly enveloped.

"Like this?"

"Like that."

The onee-sama embraces and protects. That phrase echoed in her mind.

"Sorry. Just a little bit longer."

Even though it should have been enough, she wanted just a little bit more. As though her appetite for her onee-sama's affection was insatiable.

Looking over Sachiko-sama's shoulder, Yumi saw that Touko-chan had finally arrived.

The petit soeur supports.

Regardless of what Touko-chan's feelings were, there was a stone weight in Yumi's heart called Touko-chan.

Her onee-sama's presence was warm.

Touko-chan's nomination and their competition in this election had not changed Yumi's attitude towards her one bit.

* * *

At one o'clock, the head of the electoral committee started the speech meeting.

After the welcoming address from Hanae-san, the committee chair, the candidates were called onto stage, wearing the sashes with their names on them.

"Matsudaira Touko-san, Toudou Shimako-san, Shimazu Yoshino-san, Fukuzawa Yumi-san, please go out in that order."

The four candidates followed the whispered directions from the committee member stationed backstage, and stepped out onto the stage.

Dazzling lights. Thunderous applause. She felt like she was being swallowed up by this atmosphere that was different again to their school festival play.

In the center of the stage, the mic was set up on an imposing podium. As well as that, there was a pitcher of water and a glass – although Yumi wasn't sure whether it was for them to actually drink or just for show.

The four candidates sat down on folding chairs that were located behind and to the right of the podium, from the audience's point-of-view. On the other side, to the left of the podium, a committee member sat at a desk with a stopwatch and a bell, to time their speeches. She'd ring the bell to let them know if they were going over their allotted time.

They were going in the order they registered, so the first one to stride to the center of the stage was Touko-chan.

Touko-chan started by questioning the hereditary manner in which the student council leaders were typically chosen and then emphasized her own freshness and youth.

Maybe it was because she was used to acting on stage, but she spoke fluently, seemingly without effort.

"I have no complaints with the current Yamayurikai. But why don't we let a fresh breeze blow through there? Let's open wide the windows of the Rose Mansion!"

Yumi instinctively applauded, forgetting that Touko-chan was labeled as a rival or enemy. Yoshino-san quietly said, "You idiot," and Yumi returned her hands to her lap. There was no other meaning to Yoshino-san's, "You idiot," it was, purely and simply, "You idiot." Telling Yumi to remember her own position.

The next to take the stage was Shimako-san.

Shimako-san spoke candidly about working as part of the current student council, presenting their current achievements, and describing the benefits of having someone as a Rose for two consecutive years. Additionally, she promised closer co-operation with the various committees, emphasizing the importance of proactive participation.

"I've learnt a lot from the two third-year Roses this year. I believe it's my duty to put that experience to good use, and to help the Yamayurikai develop even further."

Shimako-san's face shone with more confidence than usual. Presence. The difference to last year was probably because she had the track record to back it up now.

If Shimako-san was for the committees, Yoshino-san was for the clubs.

"Prior to my surgery during autumn of my first-year in high-school, my body was always weak and I was never able to take part in club activities. But when I started second-year, I joined the kendo club, and for the first time I knew what club activities were like from the inside. From that, I got to see up close what was missing and what was superfluous with the clubs. Even though the Yamayurikai is small, we're here to help everyone have a happy school life. Let's start by improving that through club activities. Even if I'm elected, I won't resign from the kendo club. I'll keep trying my best along with everyone else."

If she was following her rehearsed speech she would have stopped there, but Yoshino-san kept going.

"Earlier, one of the candidates made some remarks about a hereditary lineage, but we're here holding an election, so that surely doesn't apply to us. And I certainly don't think there's anything wrong with following in the footsteps of your onee-sama. When you're talking about a massive project that takes many years to accomplish, don't you think the petit soeur that has been carefully guided might have an advantage?"

She'd obviously been annoyed by Touko-chan's speech and wanted to briefly rebut it, but now that she'd started it didn't look like she could stop. The speech she'd written had been refined down so that it was logically organized and easy to understand, but as she kept on saying things that popped in to her mind it was only natural that she'd go off track.

The bell rang out, ring, ring.

"Shimazu-san, please finish your speech."

She'd hit the time limit.

"What's wrong with tradition?"

Ending with that question, Yoshino-san stepped down from the podium. After returning to her empty folding chair, it looked like there was still more she wanted to say as she muttered, "I wonder if there's something wrong with that stopwatch."

Unfortunately for Yoshino-san, its timing was correct. Compared to Touko-chan and Shimako-san, who had both finished within the time limit, Yoshino-san's speech was noticeably longer.

Following her was the final candidate, Yumi.

Yumi was neither a committee member nor a club member. She couldn't appeal to either of those. Instead, she talked about what she saw as the ideal shape of the Yamayurikai.

"The first-years in the audience probably won't know her, but my onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, had a wonderful onee-sama called Mizuno Youko-sama. Youko-sama had – "

Yumi wanted to make Youko-sama's dream, of a Rose Mansion that ordinary students weren't afraid to enter, a reality. This year they had tried various things, like hosting a tea party and inviting first-years in as assistants, but it still wasn't enough. It would take time, as step by step these sorts of achievements piled up, and even if she was elected as one of the next Roses that didn't mean it would happen all at once.

She concluded her speech with an appeal to keep advancing, like tomorrow follows today, followed by the day after, and to not stagnate or regress.

From Youko-sama to Sachiko-sama, and then to Yumi. It could even be called a lineage. The contents of her speech were in direct conflict with Touko-chan's fresh breeze, but Yumi was satisfied with it.

Touko-chan should walk the path that she believes in.

Even now Yumi wanted Touko-chan as her petit soeur, but she had no intention of forcing her own opinion on Touko-chan. And if she turned away from her principles, she would never become Touko-chan's onee-sama.

Let them see who you really are.

Being elected and becoming soeurs were, in some ways, alike.

Illuminated by the dazzling lights, Yumi thought this as she bowed to the large audience.

Part 3

Thursday and Friday passed by a lot quicker and easier than expected. And then it was Saturday.

Voting for the student council executive took place in each and every first and second-year classroom during the afternoon homeroom.

Every student had to write the name of a person they wanted as a Yamayurikai member on the ballot papers distributed by the electoral committee.

The electoral committee members would then gathered the ballots into an envelope, seal it tightly, and take it back to the electoral committee's office, which was being used as a counting room. There the counting would begin, with the results to be announced later that day.

In the area of the ballot form used to write the name of the person she was voting for, Yumi wrote the words "Fukuzawa Yumi" in bold letters.

Since nobody could possibly follow a student council leader who didn't believe they were suitable for the job.

Part 4

The results were expected to be announced at 2pm.

Even if they waited at the bulletin board in front of the auditorium, it wouldn't make the results come any quicker, so they decided to eat their lunch in the Rose Mansion and wait, for now.

"I suppose I am a bit worried, after all."

Sachiko-sama sighed, pushing her side dishes around with her chopsticks. She seemed to have lost her appetite, just like last year, even though it wasn't her election.

"Really? I'm starving. Itadakima~su."

Yumi opened her lunchbox and started eating immediately. Ooh, today's lunch was victory cutlets. Her mom was superstitious.

Crunch crunch, munch munch.

Everyone else had their lunchboxes open, but for some reason only the sound of Yumi eating echoed around the room.

"..."

"What is it?"

Noticing everyone's gaze she looked to her onee-sama. Although in truth her mouth was stuffed full of food, so it was closer to "Wha hi hi?" than "What is it?"

Sachiko-sama seemed amazed as she asked:

"When did you become so bold?"

"Bold?"

"Yes. It's incredible."

"... That doesn't sound like a compliment though."

"It is. And some admiration too."

Sachiko-sama picked up a large piece of her lunch and popped it into her mouth, simply because she didn't want to lose.

Then the Yellow Rose and White Rose soeurs joined in too, and the Roes Mansion was transformed into a "Hearty Eating Party."

She hadn't become bold.

She'd simply done what she had to do. And she'd realized that, at this point, whether she sat around worrying or not, it wasn't going to change the results.

Part 5

They left the Rose Mansion at 1:40pm and headed to the auditorium.

When they arrived at the bulletin board, they found a group of impatient students already anxiously waiting for the results.

At the head of the group was Touko-chan.

"Yumi-sama, this way."

Upon noticing the candidates, the other students made way so their group could move to the front.

"No, it's alright."

"No, you've got to have your photo taken for the Lillian Kawaraban when the results are revealed."

Yumi spotted Tsutako-san squatting in front of the bulletin board. She looked to be on standby, ready to get a photo of the candidates when the results were put up.

Yumi stood next to Touko-chan, although still maintaining a suitable distance. Shimako-san and Yoshino-san stood next to her too. Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama and Noriko-chan lined up behind them.

"Here they come."

Mami-san came running from the direction of the school building, like a messenger. Behind her, the Electoral Committee members could be seen walking towards them with an air of composure. The leader of the group, Hanae-san, was holding what looked like a rolled up poster. The results were probably written on that.

They couldn't tell who had won based on the expression of the approaching committee members. Obviously, they weren't about to say anything until the paper had been unfurled either, and they were all expressionless, like they'd been ordered to put on a poker face.

The electoral committee members arrived in front of the auditorium at 1:50pm.

Without a word being spoken, the crowd split apart to form a path, and the committee members proceeded to the bulletin board.

Hanae-san unrolled the poster. It looked to be two sheets of paper, with a blank white one on top, so that the results wouldn't leak out while they were putting it up.

"We will now reveal the results of the election for the next student council leaders."

After the results had been put up on the bulletin board, the covering sheet of paper was removed.

"_"

Yumi followed the lettering with her eyes.

Over and over, she was lit up by a camera's flash.

The cheering of the crowd rang in her ears.

"Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san hugged her around the neck.

She had to catch up.

Her five senses, or her brain that had to analyze their input, were overcome by the situation. Or rather, they seemed to be leading her somewhere with incredible speed.

Around and around, she started feeling dizzy.

"Congratulations Yumi."

Hearing Sachiko-sama's voice, she came to her senses.

"I ... "

"What's the matter? You should be happy, you won."

She followed Sachiko-sama's pointing finger to where her name was written on the sheet of paper, with a red flower seal attached beside it.

– Fukuzawa Yumi.



The red seal was used to denote the election winners. There was one next to Yoshino-san and Shimako-san's names too.

There was nothing next to Touko-chan's name.

"..."

Yumi looked beside her.

Touko-chan's gaze had just dropped from the bulletin board, and she looked to be about to quietly leave from the throng of people excited about the formation of the next student council.

"_"

Yumi raised her hand and was just about to call out to Touko-chan to stop when she looked around for just an instant.

Touko-chan's eyes met Yumi's and she bowed her head. Then she turned and left.

Having taken a single step forward, Yumi stopped and couldn't move any further.

It was at that moment that Yumi realized. Something was definitely off. She hadn't understood anything about Touko-chan.

Touko-chan hadn't run in the election to harass them, or anything like that.

Nor was it because she simply wanted to be a Rose.

It wasn't because she couldn't accept Shimako-san or one of the boutons either, and it wasn't even close to being because she thought she'd beat Yumi and reverse nominate her as soeur.

"Yumi-sama."

Noriko-chan said, taking the directionless Yumi by the hand.

"I was watching Touko's face the moment the results were revealed. And then ... and then I finally understood."

Noriko-chan's face was pale. Yumi's expression was probably the same as hers too.

"Touko wasn't looking to win."

Yumi thought, "Ah, I knew it."

If Noriko-chan was thinking that too, and it wasn't just Yumi, then they were probably right.

A Moment of Honesty

"Oh, you're by yourself?"

The short-haired, tall and slender young lady opened the door and stepped inside.

"Noriko-chan was here until a little while ago, though – "

Sachiko answered, stopping her hand that had been reaching out for the tea leaves.

"She left in a bit of a hurry. I don't think she noticed me on the ground floor."

The second-floor of the Rose Mansion.

Only the two third-years were present, which was something of a rarity of late.

"I see. I suppose she was heading to the room beside the staff room."

"Presumably."

About now, the information session for the election of the next student council was taking place at the aforementioned location. Noriko-chan wasn't planning on nominating herself, but her onee-sama, Shimako, was scheduled to attend the meeting. So it was probably weighing on her mind a little, and she decided to take a look.

Right, just a little. Only intending to be gone about as long as it takes for the kettle to boil.

"The room's been cleaned."

"It looks like Noriko-chan did that."

Sachiko answered, as she prepared the tea for the first time in a while. She set out two cups, then deliberated for a little while, and got another one. The water had boiled, so she should be back soon.

"That girl was a good buy."

Rei said, taking a reference book out of her bag.

"A good buy ... yes, I suppose. But while she obviously has her talents, she's also been brought up well."

"What are you saying?"

"It's easier to master the skills with good role models close by."

A pleasant aroma came floating out of the rose-petal black-tea leaves as the hot water was poured over them. It was like being in a flower garden. Sachiko inhaled deeply.

"I see. The current second-years are all hard workers."

All three of them were happy to help. How important was that? More than quick wits, more than a smooth tongue, more than good grades, it was a talent that was vitally important to this place.

"Of course, that's the result of your brilliant leadership, Rei."

To which Rei laughed.

"I think you mean yours, Sachiko."

"I'm no good."

Sachiko denied it.

"No good?"

"At leadership, or helping others, or teaching ... those sorts of things."

As she said this, she offered the cup of tea she poured. Rei accepted the cup, and raised her hand slightly, to indicate thanks, as she closed the reference book she'd been looking at.

"You think so? But considering all that, Yumi-chan has grown up straight and true."

"That's due to her nature, wouldn't you say? Even without any effort on my part, she's kept growing and growing. The best I could do was not stifle her."

Which was why, from time to time, she was at a loss for what to do.

"Sachiko ... are you by any chance worried about what happened yesterday."

"Huh?"

Yesterday.

Yumi had snapped over something trivial. Normally Sachiko would have ignored having her own words thrown back at her, but she'd been quite flustered by how tenacious Yumi was.

"It's not only that."

Sachiko felt down, wondering why it was that every time something happened to Yumi, she wasn't able to calmly take care of her petit soeur like Mizuno Youko-sama had. It wasn't limited to just yesterday.

"That was Yumi-chan's infantile regression."

"Infantile regression?"

"You know, when a much younger sibling comes along and suddenly the older child starts acting spoiled, or wanting breast milk even though they were weaned long ago, or wetting themselves, that sort of thing."

"I had no idea. I'm an only child."

As she said this, she realized that Rei was also an only child. So was this considered common knowledge to Rei, or was it something she'd learned recently because she had to know it for a test?

"But it's not as though Yumi has a little sister."

"Having a sibling is just one cause. It's the sense of danger, of having their mother taken away, that causes the infantile regression. If they go back to being a baby, they'll be taken care of. Their position is threatened if they can't attract their mother's attention. Although, in Yumi-chan's case."

"Yeah."

"In April, you'll no longer be here, Sachiko. Don't you think that feeling of isolation could give rise to that sort of insecurity?"

– Graduation.

The onee-sama that she had relied on until the day before would suddenly be gone.

"But that's – "

Not something that was unique to Yumi.

"I'm going to graduate too, but Yoshino will have Nana-chan as her petit soeur, right? And Shimako already has Noriko-chan."

"... Yeah."

Indeed.

Even if she had her precious friends, they weren't soeurs. The soeur relationship at Lillian's Girls Academy was unique.

"But I'm sure Yumi-chan understands all this herself. So, I think the reason her anxiety is coming to the surface now is because she was rejected by Touko-chan. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, definitely."

Having finally found a petit soeur, she was refused. It would seem unlikely that she would be able to quickly produce a new petit soeur. On top of that, she had her onee-sama's graduation. It wouldn't be unusual for her to be dispirited.

"You can't spoil her. Thinking about the future, the purest form of love may be to push her away, so that she can stand on her own."

"... That could be difficult."

"It's not difficult at all."

Rei explained it clearly. That skinship was okay, even though the petit soeur longed for the warm bosom of her onee-sama.

"I'm not talking about that. At the moment, I find myself struggling as hard as I can to become independent of Yumi."

"Huh."

Sachiko confessed to her surprised friend.

"I've been able to mature through being strict on Yumi, or having to help her. If I was good enough to have Yumi in the palm of my hands, I'd be able to do anything. But if I do this poorly, I'll be the first to crack. Then we'll both fall together."

"So that's how it is ... At any rate, your acting's been top-notch."

Pretending to be unconcerned, pretending not to notice Yumi's gaze, that sort of thing.

"Although I'm getting desperate. Ever since I was young, I've been accustomed to not showing my emotions, but that's quite difficult to do with Yumi."

"It's tough being an onee-sama."

Rei took a deep breath.

Sachiko nodded – it really was.

"Rei ... you look like you've got it tough too."

Like how she chose to sit entrance exams to separate from Yoshino-chan, and with Nana-chan, who was still in middle-school.

"Ah, not too much."

Even though Rei had said "not too much," she'd still been worried about her petit soeur who'd gone to attend the election information session, so she'd come to the Rose Mansion to wait and see. – Sachiko smiled, watching the face of her friend enjoying the scent of the tea.

Noticing her gaze, Rei looked up.

"You know, earlier."

"Yes?"

"You said something about Yumi growing up straight all on her own. I don't think that's quite right. You're like the water, or the sunlight, or the nutrients. Without you, there'd be something missing and she'd wilt."



Hearing this impassioned speech, Sachiko asked, "Is that so?" to which the reassuring response was, "It is."

"Thank-you."

Her mind was eased a little just by being able to agree with someone. Then, like a couple of old tea-drinking companions, they faced each other, occasionally letting their gazes entwine as they admired each other's distance.

A brief, lazy time.

An afternoon without petit soeurs.

"It's good to have tea mask-free like this from time to time."

Rei said.

"Mask-free?"

"It's from kendo, when you don't wear the face guard."

"Hmm."

It was the first time she'd heard this phrase.

"Mask-free, huh. I've learned something new today."

Sachiko smiled and sipped her tea.

Thinking that she'd like to remain mask-free for just a little while longer.

Just a little while longer.

Just until the stairs creaked and Noriko-chan returned.

Afterword

You know, there's definitely moments where it feels as though inanimate objects have a soul.

Hello, it's Konno.

The day I finished "Yellow Rose, Hardball Fight," our bike returned home after going missing for about seven months.

I wrote that it had gone missing, but sis had locked it up properly in the bike parking lot, so I can only think that someone had silently made off with it.

When I found out about this, I thought of Yumi's blue umbrella.

I wrote about that episode in "Rainy Blue," and I've also experienced it first-hand. It happened before I became a writer – I wasn't even in the convenience store for five minutes, but my umbrella disappeared from the umbrella stand.

It had started to rain. What shocked me more than the loss of the umbrella was the thought that there were people like that out there. In the end, I never got that umbrella back. But as a substitute, I decided to return Yumi's umbrella to its rightful owner.

In that story, Miffy-chan (Aota-sensei) says, "Perhaps your umbrella would like to know how those ten days were for you too." It didn't feel so much like the umbrella returning was as a result of my desire to have it return to Yumi. It was the umbrella's feelings that made Aota-sensei's daughter's eyes stop on it in Fukushima station.

Which brings us back to the original story about the bike.

One day in May, there was a phone call. A bike that had been abandoned in the neighborhood for a couple of days "belongs to your family, doesn't it?" The person who placed the call was the owner of a bike store we used to use. Apparently, someone in the neighborhood had noticed the abandoned bike, seen the sticker for the store on it, and got in touch with them.

I accompanied the bike store owner's wife to the location and, although it was a bit more worn, rusted and abandoned, it was definitely our bike. It had a lock on it that sis's key opened. We took it like that to its hometown – the bike shop – to get the store owner to have a look at it. Initially it looked in no condition to ride (which would be why it was abandoned) but with the noted doctor's (shopkeeper's) surgery, it recovered.

I couldn't help but feel grateful to the person who, prior to abandoning it, had thought, "I'll leave it here." Since it was just a stone's throw away from the store, it was able to eventually return home. It felt like that was the bike's fervent hope. Then it would thank this unknown kind person, tell the bike store owner about itself, and thus make its way home. Thinking about that, I started to cry.

– Well, doesn't it make you feel as though inanimate objects have a soul?

By the way, bicycles make an appearance in "Yellow Rose, Hardball Fight." It feels like its related, since our bike made its appearance the day I finished writing that manuscript.

Looking at the bike that our bike store owner had fixed in the twinkling of an eye, I couldn't help but wonder, "Would Rei's bike have been saved if it had been taken to him?" No, no, the official supplier of bicycles to the Hasekura household would have to be suitably skilled. Instead, my curiosity was piqued as to just how much damage would have to be done to render it unfixable.

The wonderfully restored bike had another lock added to it and once again sis is riding it. But, after it had gone missing and not been seen for a couple of months, the inconvenience was unbearable, so we'd already bought a new one – making us a family of four with five bikes.

Konno Oyuki.