

NOVEL

CLASSROOM
OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2

9


STORY: SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU





CLASSROOM **OF THE ELITE** **YEAR 2**

NOVEL 9

A detailed illustration of Ayanokouji Kiyoharu, a character from the anime 'The Idolmaster'. She is depicted from the waist up, leaning forward with a warm, smiling expression. Her long, vibrant pink hair flows around her, and her striking blue eyes are looking directly at the viewer. She is dressed in a white ribbed turtleneck sweater under a brown, textured cardigan. Her right hand is raised in a friendly wave, while her left hand holds the handle of a closed umbrella. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with sunlight filtering through, creating a warm and pleasant atmosphere.

*When I arrived slightly ahead of
the time we'd planned to meet, I
found Ichinose already waiting
for me, an umbrella in one hand.*

G-Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!

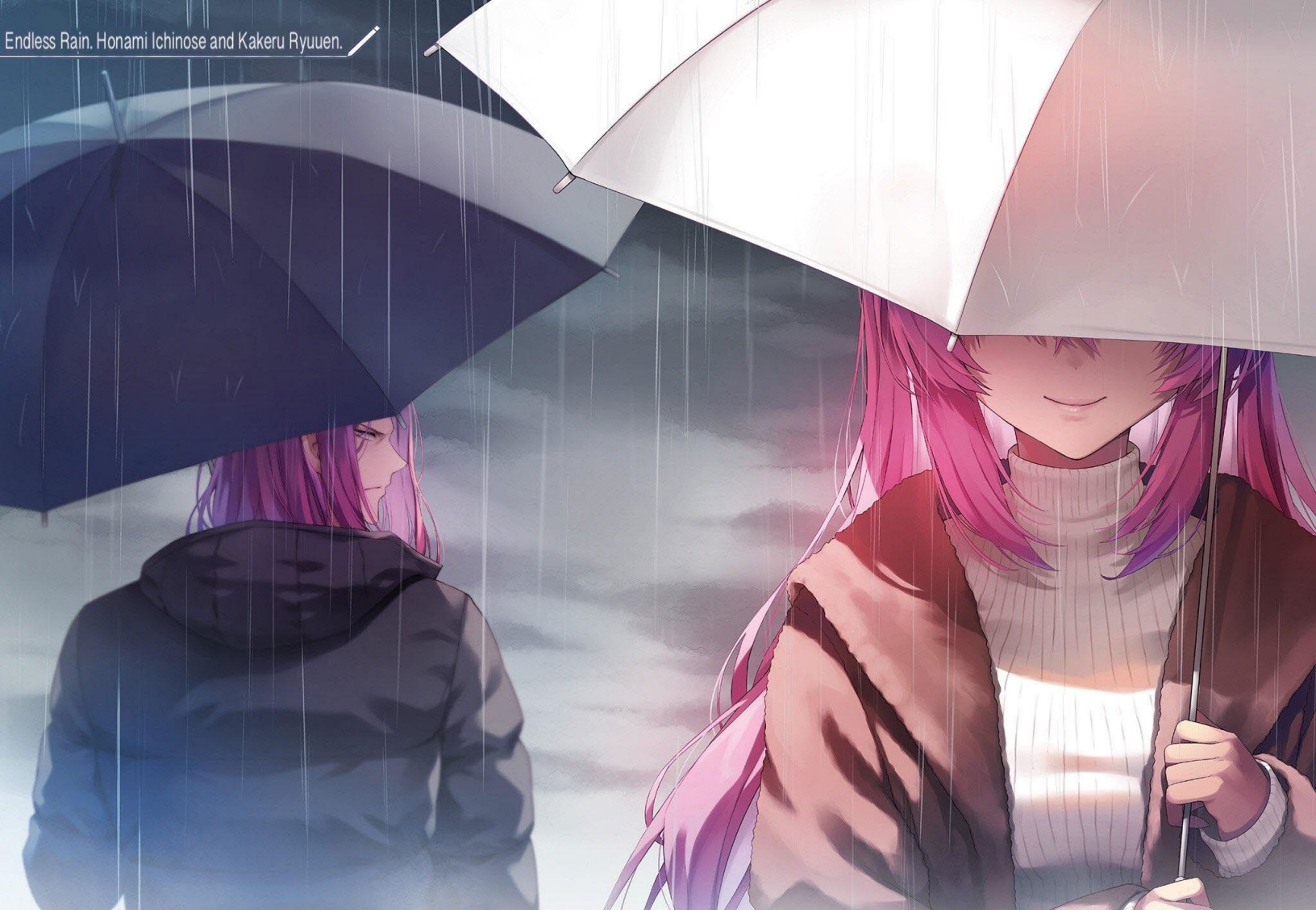


Hey...Is it okay if I touch your face?

You won't get a prize even if you touch it, you know?

After I said that joke-like line, Ichinose laughed gently before nodding. And then she extended her right hand and touched my cheek.

Endless Rain. Honami Ichinose and Kakeru Ryuen.



9



WELCOME TO CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



CLASSROOM  **2**
OF THE ELITE YEAR

NOVEL 9

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



**CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2 VOLUME 9**

SYOUGO KINUGASA

ROYALMTLS

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



C O N T E N T S

MIYABI NAGUMO'S MONOLOGUE

1. SIGNS OF MOMENTUM

2. NEW STUDENT COUNCIL MEMBER

3. HOW TO SPEND TIME WITH ICHINOSE'S CLASSMATES

4. HOW TO SPEND THE DAYS OFF

5. APPROACHING SPECIAL EXAMINATION

6. THE EXPECTED AND THE UNEXPECTED

E. A TOUCH OF ANXIETY

POSTSCRIPT



Nagumo Miyabi's Monologue

BEFORE I KNEW IT, I was the best in both academics and sports.

I noticed that there were people around me who tried to take advantage of me.

I didn't put in any particular effort.

I was taught the same things in the same amount of time, but my ability to learn was better than anyone else.

It was... like an unexpected prerequisite to becoming popular.

Popularity is a gift.

From an early age, I had the talent to be popular.

Of course, I knew that not everyone liked me.

Especially the ones who were rivalrous.

But it didn't matter.

Right or wrong, as long as people saw me as popular, that was all that mattered.

My life as a popular kid remained the same throughout elementary school and junior high—a dazzling road.

Still, I haven't been able to get rid of the mysterious, small discomfort that I sometimes feel.

An unanswerable feeling of discomfort.

It was the only thing that kept smoldering in the back of my mind all through my flawless life.

Even though I was accepted and followed by many people, I still felt a sense of unease that would never go away.

But I decided not to care.

It's alright as long as I can remain the best and most popular, regardless of whether I feel uncomfortable or not.

That was the plan.

But that all changed when I entered high school.

I couldn't help but feel a strong sense of discomfort rising to the surface.

Horikita Manabu.

The man who was a year older than me was someone who was subject to the respect of many.

He was much more dazzling and intelligent than I was, and he had a conviction that was anything but frivolous.

And then there was another guy one year below me who was different from Horikita Manabu, but he had a special talent.

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka... was totally different. He had a cocky attitude, but his ability was undeniably real.

What I accomplished was no less than those two.

With an unquenchable feeling of discomfort, I sometimes wonder.

Am I truly good?

Or was I just an unlucky king who never had a good opponent?

I can't help thinking about it.

That is the true nature of my discomfort.

So I have to settle for making that feeling of discomfort go away.

I must defeat Ayanokōji and achieve real power.

Otherwise...

Chapter 1: Signs of Momentum

THE END OF the second semester was finally in sight.

The school trip passed like a fleeting dream, but winter vacation was just around the corner for the second-year students. Winter was the season that reminded us of the end of the year and the parting of ways.

It's quite cold today, perhaps due to the fact that the lowest temperature is one degree Celsius.

Other students ran past me on their way to school, breathing out white clouds while talking about how cold it was. Every day, I stared at the casual scenery of daily life and carved it into my memory.

Those who live only for the moment may wonder what the point of staring at such a scene is. But what if you knew that the scene was only available to be seen for a limited period of time?

What if you knew that you could only see this world for one more year? Perhaps this everyday world would seem like a dazzling jewel.

While gazing at such an everyday scenery until the person I was waiting for arrived, I received a message.

[Come to the student council room after school today.]

Nagumo's message was so compelling that I had no choice but to accept it.

“The student council room, huh?”

I'm not very keen on this invitation, but I can't easily refuse it considering the future. Besides, he cooperated with him at the festival, even if there was a conflict of interest.

I replied briefly and turned off the screen.

As I looked at the other students and the scenery again, I saw Kushida walking alone to school. As I turned away without saying hello to her, she waved to me with a smile. I raised my hand in response, but just before we passed each other, she gave me a glaring look.

“What the...? This early in the morning...?”

She said hello to me, so I said hello to her, so why should she glare at me?

I think she did that because she was sure that no one would see her face, but I don't remember doing anything in particular to garner that.

I guess it's simply because Kushida doesn't like me...

I felt like I had been attacked with a hit-and-run.

“Sorry, Kiyotaka!”

At that moment, an out-of-breath Kei called out from the dormitory's direction and came running toward me.

“Don't worry so much. You're only a few minutes late.”

“Yes, but... I mean, wasn't it cold waiting outside?”

I gave her a curious look since we had originally met in the lobby of the dorm.

“I'm fine. You still have a little bit of bedhead.”

She must've been in a hurry considering I was able to find an uncharacteristic mistake and pointed it out to her.

“No, no!”

Kei held her head down in embarrassment and hurriedly tried to straighten her bedhead with a hand comb. But no matter how many times she tried, it always bounced back a little.

“Oh my God, what am I going to do...!”

“Why are you worried about that? Hondō and Ike have worse sleeping habits.”

“Don't put me in the same category with those boys! Ugh, I'm going to go to the bathroom when I get to school...”

Kei walked away, covering the part of her bed hair with her hand in embarrassment. Well, it wasn't a bad thing to pay attention to one's fashion and appearance.

1

I arrived at the classroom by myself and took my seat.

“Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun.”

“Oh, good morning.”

Yōsuke, who was surrounded by girls, spotted me and called out. I was happy to be greeted, but the girls, ‘give me back my Hirata-kun’ stares are painful.

“This may be none of my business, but if there’s anything I can do to help you, please let me know.”

I wondered what he was going to say, but he made the same offer again.

“Haven’t you been saying the same thing to me every day lately?”

Yōsuke was concerned about a three-person group who was a little conscious of him in the distance.

Since I used to be a member of this group, I guess he was worried about my departure.

I was sure that Yōsuke had been uneasy to see me both before and after the school trip.

There was also the issue that Yōsuke was the type of person to care about things even if he says he doesn’t.

“If something happens, I’ll tell you. Thank you. If possible, I’d appreciate it if you could watch over me quietly.”

I told him again firmly that I understood his goodwill. Yōsuke will probably continue to call out to me on a regular basis until my relationship with the group’s back on track.

“That’s no good. I can’t stand it when I see instability in the class...”

Yōsuke seemed to be disgusted with himself for expressing his uncontrollable feelings in words. He had a troublesome guilt over him even though he had done nothing wrong.

“Anyway, the girls are waiting for you. I’m more worried about that.”

Their jealous gazes grew more intense with time as they wondered how long Yōsuke would be kept from them.

Soon after, Kei came into the classroom and Yōsuke got back to the girls. The chime rang and Chabashira-sensei arrived in the classroom, starting another new school day.

“It should come as no surprise to you that you didn’t have any warning, but before winter break, you’ll have to take the last special exam of the second semester.”

The students, who had grown to tolerate the special exams so far, were slightly more upset than usual, as they had expected winter break to come as it is.

“Oops. It seems you were a little surprised this time.”

It was because of the school festival, school trip, and other big events that had been going on.

For this school, that was the way it is, and a special exam is a special exam, I guess.

However, even if the special exam is held, there was only a little more than two weeks left in the second semester.

I don't think it's something that requires long-term preparation or measures, but I wonder what kind of content it will have.

“I understand your concerns, but there's no need to panic so much. It isn't the most feared kind of special exam that will cause students to drop out.”

The important factor, expulsion, will be kept to a minimum in this special exam.

“However, of course, class points will inevitably fluctuate depending on who wins or loses. However, you won't be in a position to afford losing as you will be in hot pursuit of Class A from now on.”

Winning one or two matches isn't enough to catch up and overtake them.

You have to be willing to win all the battles ahead of you.

“In this special exam, there are no complicated rules that have to be drilled into your heads. You'll compete with other classes in a one-on-one academic competition.”

Academic competition. As a general student, and particularly as a student of this school, this wasn't surprising.

Rather, it was as standard as it gets.

Even regular midterms and finals are competitive.

But since it was called a special exam, it went without saying that there'll be some special rules that will greatly affect the outcome.

“The winner will receive 50 class points from the loser. If you win, you get 50 class points, and if you lose, you lose 50 class points.”

Not a very large number. Rather, it was a low fluctuation in class points.

“So, if it's a class-based academic competition, then it's simply not a good idea to fight against Class A!”

“You can be happy about that, Ike, because it's exactly Class A against which you Class B students will have to fight.”

The opponent had already been decided, and Chabashira-sensei confronted us with a cruel reality.

“It's a simple system in which the class with the highest average scores in the recently held final exams happens to be pitted against the class with the second highest average, and the third highest is competing against the fourth highest scores. Even with some special rules, a significant gap in basic academic ability

between the lower classes and Class A, which has high academic ability, can greatly affect the outcome.”

As of the beginning of December, class points were 1250 for Sakayanagi’s Class A and 985 for Horikita’s Class B.

If we win the head-to-head matchup, we’d close the gap to 165 points with the difference of 100 class points.

Furthermore, we’ll be on track to surpass the 1,000 class points mark for the first time since enrollment.

On the other hand, Ryūen’s Class C had 684 points and Ichinose’s Class D had 655 points. If Ichinose wins, they’ll be back in Class C, but if they lose, the gap between them and Class A will be doubled. This was a tough situation.

This wouldn’t be an easy fight, and in terms of academic ability, we had never once won. While the difference between first and second place may seem slim, the overall academic gap wasn’t insignificant.

“The questions are on all the regular subjects that are given in the midterms and final exams. The questions will range from relatively easy to extremely difficult, and will be as difficult as, if not more difficult than, the regular written exams.”

Although this class had shown a remarkable rate of growth, it was unlikely that they’ll be able to turn it around, even if the class studies hard for the upcoming two weeks.

“Now I’m going to tell you all something. Even you all have a good chance of winning.”

The details of the special exam, as it was called, were revealed on the monitor.

[Special exam at the end of the second semester. A cooperative comprehensive written test in which the whole class will solve a total of 100 questions.]

[Outline of Special Exam]

RULES:

- *Students solve the problems one by one in a predetermined order.*
- *A student may solve no more than five problems, but students must solve at least two, regardless of whether they are correct or incorrect.*
- *Each student will be given a maximum of ten minutes, including the time to enter and leave the room.*
- *All students except those challenging the exam must wait in a separate room.*
- *Only students who are waiting for their turn should wait in front of the entrance.*
- *If the time limit is exceeded, the student will be disqualified and will not receive any points.*
- *Leaving a written or verbal clue or answer to a question is a violation of the rules.*
- *If a student is found to be in violation, the exam will be terminated and the student will receive zero points.*

SPECIAL BONUSES ACCORDING TO TIME REMAINING:

- *10 points will be given for each additional hour of time remaining.*
- *If more than 30 minutes are left... 5 points*
- *If more than 10 minutes are left... 2 points*

- *All problems are scored according to the solver's ability (see below), regardless of the question's difficulty level.*
- *(The solver's ability is based on the OAA academic ability as of December 1.)*

Academic Ability A - 1 point

Academic Ability B - 2 points

Academic Ability C - 3 points

Academic Ability D - 4 points

Academic Ability E - 5 points

A test in which the number of points obtained increases or decreases according to the student's ability to solve the problems, regardless of the question's difficulty level.

This is a very unique rule that isn't usually thought of. It's truly worthy of being called special. There are also +/- ratings in the OAA, but since there seem to be five classifications, students with + may have a slight advantage.

"This is a special rule for the written test. Class A, which has a large number of students with high academic ability, seems to have a simple advantage, but the percentage of Class A students with academic ability B or higher in OAA is high. This means that the total number of points obtained will inevitably be less even if they solve the problems. You see what I mean?"

While there were many students in Horikita's class who had made remarkable academic progress, there were still a number of students who ranked towards the lower end of their grade, such as Kei, Satō, Ike, and Shinohara.

Although the percentage of correct test answers is low for these students, they would still be able to receive four or five points for each question in this special exam as long as they can derive the correct answer. Certainly, this wasn't simply a test of academic ability, and we couldn't assume that we were at a disadvantage against Class A. The match was rather unpredictable, and the outcome was beyond our imagination.

The time remaining in the game is a bonus, but I'm not sure if this is realistic or not.

The timer would start when you put your hand on the door of the classroom and open it. The number of students in Horikita's class is 38. It'd be impossible to make it to the end of the hour without leaving nearly two minutes for each student to clear the timer. Students with lower academic ability tend to make more careless mistakes, and the risk of losing points because of distraction caused by the timer is higher.

The time remaining bonus might've been more of a consideration for the students that had higher academic ability in the OAA. No, it would still be dangerous to focus on reducing the time loss.

"So we have a good chance of winning—it's that kind of special exam, isn't it?"

Soon, Horikita seemed to have grasped the possibility of winning from the rules.

"That's right. Of course, the students in Class A score well in terms of academic ability from the top to the bottom of the class. They will score well. Even though we have a lot of students around academic level D with the potential for high scores, if they don't answer correctly, they will get zero points."

Still, it was much better than going head-to-head.

“I would also like to add something about cheating, which is clearly stated in the rules. It’s forbidden to talk with a student who’s finished testing while waiting for another student to take over. Students will always be present in their respective classrooms, but they aren’t allowed to engage in unnecessary conversation.”

Everyone was probably aware of the area’s strong surveillance.

“What happens if a student is absent on the day of the class?”

“If one student is absent, two questions will be unanswerable, and if two students are absent, four questions will be unanswerable, resulting in zero points.”

This would be the same as getting disqualified for running out of time. The number of unanswerable questions would be decided at random before the exam starts. Also, although it was unlikely, there won’t be a change in class points in the event of a tie with an opponent.

The strategy of intentionally letting someone be absent won’t work, and will only put you at a disadvantage.

Classes with a large number of students, such as Ichinose’s and Ryūen’s classes, would have an advantage because they’ll be given more time to solve problems, but it doesn’t affect the number of points earned by solving them.

The effect the class population has on the score would be minimal since it would be more efficient and ideal for the students with low OAA ratings, who are the central pieces of the class and can act as an ambush, to solve the five questions.

However, the coincidence of having the same number of students in the same class against each other makes this idea itself meaningless.

“We need to discuss and think about how we can possibly beat Class A.”

Like a mother watching over her children, Chabashira-sensei spoke.

“We’ve set a date for the special exam, but we’ve decided to allow time for it until just before the winter break. The scope of the test is huge, so we decided that we’d need that much time. It’s a lot of work, but if we win, it will put us even closer to the A level. That’s all.”

The extent of the test will be announced tomorrow, and that was the end of the discussion here.

Schedule

December 22... Special exam day

December 23... Announcement of special exam Results, End of 2nd Semester Ceremony

It was just before the end of the second semester, just in time.
Still, there were only three weeks left until the test.

While the more academically advanced students usually had a different attitude towards their studies and require minimal preparation time, the key to victory lay with the students whose academic abilities were below average.

“I looked at each of the other classes in the OAA to see how they’re doing. The maximum score our Class B can get is naturally higher than that of Class A’s since we have more students with D and E academic ratings. This means that if we play an ideal game, we can win 100% of the time.”

Since the classes that have more students with lower academic ability in the OAA can score more points, there was an upper limit to the number of points that Class A students could get, no matter how hard they try.

We would win even if we exceeded the opponent’s maximum score by even one point.

And, well, this was just an empty theory. We were talking about a paper-thin probability.

With nearly 40 students participating, it was next to impossible to get a perfect score. Taking into account what Chabashira-sensei said and the rules of the special exam, we could expect that the percentage of difficult questions wasn’t very low.

If the problems could easily be solved by students with E or D academic abilities, it’d be rather unbalanced.

It would be an unreasonable special exam that was disadvantageous to classes with high academic ability.

A study group was a must, but it was doubtful whether or not it would be enough to lead us to victory.

“It’s also important to consider who solves how many problems and who they’ll pass the baton to next.”

Yōsuke, in a calm tone, asked Horikita as if to confirm his answer.

“Yes. If we think of it simply, it’s easy to understand that the students with low academic ability should be brought to the front and asked to solve as many problems as they can...”

The time limit was 10 minutes. The ability to read the questions also depends greatly on the ability of the students.

It may be a challenge just to find easy questions out of the 100 on the test.

If the more advanced students could solve the more difficult questions first, it would take less time for the less advanced students to find the right questions and they’d be able to concentrate on them more calmly.

Who can and can’t solve which kinds of problems?

Knowing this and taking command of the situation is also a way to win.

There may have been several other methods. In the end, it was important to decide early on which strategy to adopt and start the class working toward it.

“Chabashira-sensei said there’s a chance to win, but... a disadvantage is a disadvantage.”

“If they score well, we probably won't win. The opponent is Class A after all.”

Some of my classmates began to voice such opinions.

Class A had never been below the other classes in the purely written exams’ total scores. Even with the special rules, they remained a formidable opponent.

“This time, we’re up against Class A, but in reality, we’re up against ourselves. We don't care what strategies our opponents come up with, and we don't need to be particularly preoccupied with the fact that Sakayanagi-san is our opponent.”

She emphasized the reality of our difficult opponents, but it wasn’t what was on the outside but what was on the inside that we must face.

“I’ll think about a strategy as much as I can. In the meantime, I need you guys to study as much as you can.”

Until now, or more precisely, until a few weeks ago, the class had been studying for their final exams. Even though it was a student's duty to study, they were tired of having to study again in such a short period of time.

Still, not a single student expressed any complaints.

“We will back you all up as much as we can.”

Yōsuke answered in response to Horikita, as one of the students who taught at the study sessions, alongside Keisei and Mii-chan.

“Hey! I'm getting motivated! Personally, I'm a little bit conflicted because my OAA has gone up, but I'm going to make my contribution.”

Sudō, who had received an E rating for academic achievement, had now improved to a C+ rating.

The points he could score were lower than before, but he made a big leap forward in his ability.

If he hadn’t been able to do so, he would’ve had a hard time even solving the problems.

2

After school, I slipped out of the class where we had started discussing and arrived at my destination almost exactly on time. I thought I would knock on the door immediately, but I could hear loud voices from within the room as if people were arguing a little inside. However, since we were separated by a thick door, I couldn't hear what exactly they were saying to each other.

If I kept my ears open for a while, I might've been able to hear them clearly, but the time of the appointment was approaching, so I quickly discarded the option of eavesdropping.

"...Thanks."

It seemed that two male students were already sitting in the student council room, and one of them immediately stood up.

"I'm sorry for calling you out, Ayanokōji."

"It's fine, but it makes me a little nervous when the student council president and vice president are so poised."

I said something that a typical student might've said.

"I'm sorry, but you don't look nervous to me."

Nagumo, still seated, crossed his legs and bent his index finger to signal the other to close the distance between them.

Kiriyama stood slightly behind Nagumo and moved into a position where he could be easily seen.

At that moment, he looked at the screen of the cell phone he took out of his pocket.

However, in less than a second, he turned off the screen light and put it back to where it came from.

The next person to open his mouth was not Nagumo, the student council president, but Kiriyama, the vice president.

"After this, we've also called up student council members Horikita and Ichinose," he said.

"Horikita and Ichinose?"

It's either a coincidence, or they intentionally brought up the names of the two second-year students in the student council.

"There's no need to be so hasty, Kiriyama... Ayanokōji might want to have a little chat with you too..."

"I'm sorry, but it doesn't look that way to me."

I felt gratitude in my heart for Vice President Kiriyama's sound judgment.

"Besides, I have some things I want to do to prepare for the next special exam."

“Special exam? There will be no more special exams during the second semester for us third-year students. Besides, isn't this none of your business since I've already decided who'll win?”

Nagumo looked at Kiriyama quizzically, not understanding why.

“Still. You always want to be prepared for the unexpected. More third-year students than you think are eagerly waiting for their ticket to the top. What if one of them tries to take your head off?”

“Those idiots have already fallen. There's no one left to fight.”

“I hope so.”

The third-year students didn't have much time left.

With Nagumo holding all the power, they must somehow get the ticket to 20 million points, and they were still fighting that battle.

It was no wonder that Nagumo was optimistic that he had no enemies. Since he had all the necessary tickets, it was impossible for anyone to go against him, including Kiriyama, who risked being deprived of his ticket to victory if he didn't follow Nagumo's orders.



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In other words, those who hadn't been given a ticket weren't bound by the same restrictions.

It'd be a bit of an exaggeration to say that they can expel Nagumo from the school and accumulate private points from there... No. Even if that were the case, I'm not sure that's worth it.

If Nagumo was expelled from school, his huge sum of private points would probably go to the school's safe. Nagumo couldn't protect himself without such a contract.

Except for Nagumo's private points, the number of private points collected in just the third semester would only be enough to save one or two people at most.

“Do you have any idea what you're talking about, Kiriya? Kiriya... you've been poking me all morning, haven't you?”

“I'm not going to stop now, no matter what you say, because I'm keeping my stance on this matter.”

Nagumo seemed to have smiled and nodded at the confirmation that had such pressure in his voice.

“I'm sorry, Kiriya, but this is a personal decision I have to make while I'm still in school.”

“Then I hope you can understand my desire to get this over with.”

There was a bit of arguing going on in the student council room before I entered.

Nagumo's comment about Kiriya being on his case since this morning certainly indicated that this encounter wasn't something that Kiriya welcomed. No, perhaps it's the same for me.

“Okay, okay. I'll keep the chit-chat to a minimum. Is that okay?”

Nagumo confirmed with Kiriya that there was no choice but to keep the conversation moving.

“I've got one more case regarding the student council to attend to after this, so just give me a minute.”

“You said you had something to tell me. All right, let's make this quick.”

In the end, Kiriya agreed, and Nagumo began what he considered necessary chit-chat.

“You second-years seem to be in an unusually tight race, don't you?”

“It seems so.”

“In our generation and Horikita-senpai's generation, Class A stood as the sole winner by the middle of the second year. I'm a little envious that you can enjoy the battle all this time.”

In the past, it was said that the class battles were usually settled by the end of the freshman year to the middle of the sophomore year, with a large difference in class points.

The class that started the year in Class A graduated ahead of those in Class B and below.

There were some rare cases like Student Council President Nagumo and others, where Class B switched to Class A, but in any case, by the middle of the sophomore year, Class A was in a commanding position. On the other hand, there remains a point difference that allows for a comeback even for class D in our year.

“It looks like there's a chance for each of the four classes, but that'll probably only remain until the final exam,” he said.

“That's what I'm thinking too. Two or, at most, three classes will be competing for Class A seats.”

Nagumo and Kiriyama both made the judgment without hesitation.

“The final exam for the second-year students will be such a fierce battle.”

“Yeah. The exams are completely different, of course, but the results are almost always disastrous. Last year, I was in control of the second-years at the time of the finals and had control over the exams. I tried to keep the wounds to a minimum, but three students still dropped out.”

He said that despite his efforts to prevent it, there were unavoidable casualties.

“There was a way to prevent any expulsions, but we had to weigh the loss of class points and private points against the gain.”

This story may be true, but it may or may not be helpful.

It was unlikely that the end-of-year exams we'd take would be the same as those that Nagumo and the older generations experienced. However, the scale will be roughly the same. This was something that we could naturally see through our experience with our school life so far.

“That's enough of this idle talk. It's time to get down to business, Nagumo.”

Kiriyama urged him calmly, and Nagumo shrugged his shoulders and showed his white teeth.

“It's time for me to finish my role as the student council president. But before that, we need to decide who'll be the next president.”

“In terms of office length, you've already been in office longer than the previous presidents, haven't you?”

Manabu Horikita to Nagumo Miyabi. The student council president's baton should be passed a little earlier this time. Although I also remembered that Nagumo himself said that he would extend his office's term.

“We were going to have the term extended, but ended up being approached several times by the school. They said that if we put it off too long, we'd be denying the juniors the opportunity to get some experience. Well, they have a point.”

“All the third-year students have already completed their roles in the student council, except for me and Nagumo, and all the procedures have been completed.”

So all that was left was to decide who would be the next student council president and then these two would be out of office.

I see. So Nagumo has decided to give up his position as the student council president.

That would explain why he was calling both of the names mentioned earlier. Horikita or Ichinose. They had to decide who was more suitable to be the next student council president.

“You have the authority to appoint the student council president, Nagumo, don't you?”

“Yes. I have that right.”

“Then shouldn't you be talking to Horikita and Ichinose instead of me?”

I told him the obvious, but he seemed to be well aware of it since he didn't seem surprised by my response.

“It would be a waste of time to make a decision like that, wouldn't it?”

“Considering I was invited here... Well, I can guess.”

“You and I are going to decide who's going to be the next student council president.”

“It's going to be more than just cheering them on, isn't it?”

“I've been thinking about various ways to compete with you, but this should work. Horikita and Ichinose have been here for two years, like you. I'm sure you have as much information as we do.”

It was understandable that Nagumo, who didn't have much time left, would like to see the fight settled as soon as possible.

Nagumo didn't believe that this was the ideal way to fight.

Still, he must've decided that it was better than no showdown at all.

“There's still a way to postpone it. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a special exam like last year's mixed training camp, where students are paired with and compete against other grades.”

“Well, when the time comes, we can call this a preliminary encounter.”

Not one to put things off, Nagumo tried to keep Ichinose and Horikita in a tight circle so they couldn't get away.

“I agreed to compete in the match, but I didn't agree to compete more than once.”

I had a certain interest in the Nagumo in front of me, but I couldn't spend all my time on him.

I had some things I wanted to do in the future.

“You think you have veto power?”

“I don't want you to challenge me to a match just for the fun of it. If you want to have this battle with me to decide the student council president, you'll have to be prepared to have a real fight here.”

“I'll do that, but it's a fight you're likely to lose. You know that, right?”

“Since the current students will be allowed to vote, all votes cast by third-year students will be at your discretion, the student council president. So one-third of the votes have already been cast, is that what you're saying?”

“Yes. If you assemble the entire second year together, we'd barely be even. Well, that's not going to happen either.”

As the opponent is Ichinose from the same year, the second-year vote would inevitably split.

“If you could do me one favor, I think it would be a good match.”

“Interesting. Say it.”

“The voting will be anonymous, that's all. If only the school knows who voted for which candidate, I think we'd be evenly matched.”

“I don't get it. So the third-years won't vote for the candidate I'm supporting?”

“You can imagine how the chances of that happening would increase, can't you?”

If anonymity was ensured, there was no need to follow the rules.

Even if he promised some kind of reward such as private points, it was impossible to prove unless Nagumo's side got close to zero votes.

“Even if that were the case, how do you expect half of the third-years to be on your side? That's impossible.”

“You won't know until you try.”

Kiriyama watched silently as Nagumo and I argued.

“So, you're willing to play as long as I add that condition, is that it?”

“Yes, it'd be no problem.”

“You're still showing a strange kind of confidence, but that's all right. If you're confident that you can compete with us on that basis, then I have no complaints. But before we finalize the matter, let me just say that I would like to see some stakes in the game.”

I guess if there was nothing to bet on, it wouldn't hurt or itch to lose.

For Nagumo, avoiding being outdone by me was an absolute must.

It was inevitable that Nagumo would make a bet that there were no alternate possibilities other than his victory.

“Can you bet on anything, Ayanokōji?”

“Can I repeat those words back to you exactly as they are? Even if it means getting expelled.”

“I'd like to say yes, but it's a difficult question.”

“I'm sure you're right. No one would accept the risk of expulsion at a place like this. I'm willing to bet on expulsion, but in that case, let me demand a commensurate quid pro quo.”

“Quid pro quo?”

“If I win, I want to get some private points from you. Preferably enough money to buy a ticket to move to the next class. Even under the rules of special exams, you need that many private points to prevent expulsion. It's not too much to ask.”

“Well, it's worth it to risk expulsion, isn't it?”

Since both parties' interests were aligned, a consensus on the direction of the game can be reached.

However, Kiriyama, who was listening to the conversation, put a stop to it.

“I was told in advance that you were going to play with Ayanokōji, but I don't agree with the terms of the bet, and I can't let you bet such a large sum of money on a game you've never played before.”

“Wait a minute Kiriyama... You think I'm going to lose under these rules? Ayanokōji said we'd be even by being anonymous, but he's wrong.”

“I don't think you'll lose, but it's still not a zero percent chance. The probability changes depending on whether you choose Horikita or Ichinose. Above all, 20 million points is too large. If you're fine with paying Ayanokōji, then use the money to save one of the third-year students instead.”

It was no wonder Kiriyama strongly discouraged him from doing so, but Nagumo showed no signs of backing down.

“I'm free to do whatever I want with the money I've obtained through my real power. It always has been and always will be.”

“...You insist?”

“By all means. I'm going to win this war and kick Ayanokōji out of school.”

“Let's just leave the second year alone. I don't agree with that approach.”

Kiriyama retorted, but Nagumo wasn't going to listen to him any longer.

“I'll grant your wish, Ayanokōji. If you beat me, you'll be in Class A.”

“Thank you, President.”

“Are you sure about this? If the bet was small, all you'd have to do is get down on your knees, but with 20 million, I'll have to ask you to keep your promise regarding the expulsion from school, even if you don't want to. If you want to lower the weight of your offer, now's the time to do so.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Ha. I thought you'd be a little freaked out if I threatened you like that, but you didn't seem upset.”

“I've already accepted the risk that comes from procuring a lot of money from you from the very beginning.”

“I’ll get you the contract. It’s one of two things: expulsion or 20 million.”

All that was left was for both parties to decide which they would support, and then the match setup was complete.

“I know we’re going to play, but I don’t know whether it will work or not.”

Just as Kiriyama was about to make his last stand to stop the game, in which a huge amount of points would be at stake, a knock on the student council room’s door was heard.

“Nagumo-senpai, this is Ichinose.”

A clear voice. It seemed that both candidates had arrived.

“...Nagumo, if you can, don’t tell them about the match. And of course, don’t talk about the bet.”

Kiriyama had a good point, and it wasn’t something we should be telling Horikita and Ichinose. No doubt they wouldn’t feel good if they knew that they were the target of a game or a bet.

“You have no objections to this proposal, Ayanokōji?”

“No, I don’t have a problem with that.”

“But... Are you sure about this? If we bring those two in here, the game’s basically begun.”

Kiriyama looked at me and stopped me, saying that this was the only point I could turn back.

“You don’t have to risk your expulsion to play along with Nagumo’s game.”

“But it’s not easy to get a Class A ticket, isn’t it? Then, isn’t it natural to take a reasonable risk?”

“It seems that you’re no longer hiding your true nature.”

Kiriyama was beyond angry and looked at the cell phone screen again.

“All right. Do what you want... Come on in, both of you.”

Kiriyama urged as he approached the entrance and opened the door.

Nagumo’s position as president was likely to cause him a lot of trouble since he always acted as he pleased as an individual. In that sense, it wasn’t a bad idea to bring forward the switch of student council president.

The two students noticed my presence as soon as they entered the room. It was obvious that I was an outsider who wasn’t a member of the student council, so there was no need to make a special mention of it.

“Come sit next to Ayanokōji.”

“Excuse me.”

Horikita sat down next to me and Ichinose next to Horikita.

For a moment, Horikita’s sideways glance expressed, ‘Are you involved in something strange again?’

The conversation resumed again when everyone except Kiriyama, who had returned behind Nagumo, sat down in their chairs.

“I’m asking you two to hold an election to decide who will be the next student council president.”

“Election?”

“Isn’t that a common practice in junior highs? I’ll give a speech and let the students decide which of you is best suited to be student council president and cast their votes. The student who acquires the most votes is the next student council president.”

“I see. But I don’t recall any such election last year.”

“Yes. In past years, the seated student council president, which would be me, decided who would be the next student council president. As long as the person who I passed the baton to agrees, they’ll be the next student council president. Of course, I won’t nominate anyone other than those who have achieved results that satisfy the people around them.”

The student council president wasn’t decided at random but based on a sound basis. Nagumo added that he wouldn’t forget this point.

“However, the situation is a little different for you second-year students. Only Honami served on the student council last year, and Suzune, who joined in during her second year, hasn’t been a member for a year.”

“I understand that there were no other students who joined the student council at the same time. I believe that Ichinose-san would be a good choice for student council president. I don’t think she has any faults.”

Although she was giving the student council president position to her opponent, Ichinose, Horikita had no hesitation in her decision. She didn’t originally join the student council because she wanted to be the student council president.

“Do you not feel like becoming the student council president?”

“No, not at all. I feel positive about following in my brother’s footsteps. I’m willing to run for election if that’s what the current students want, but at the same time, I’m perfectly fine with it being Ichinose-san.”

“Certainly, Honami has no shortcomings. It would be the expected choice. But there’s something else that makes me uneasy.”

Ichinose reacted with a slight tremor in her shoulders.

“At this point, Honami’s chances of graduating in Class A has dropped dramatically. This is a problem. All of the student council presidents in the past have graduated within Class A. This isn’t an official tradition, but an unspoken one. Of course, I will be one of them.”

Indeed, Ichinose’s position was in jeopardy depending on whether or not she will graduate in Class A was taken out of the equation. Horikita, on the other hand, was in the chase for Class A as a Class B student, so she was probably close to that tacit assumption.

“There’s Honami, who has a perfect track record, and Suzune, who doesn’t have a solid track record but is close to Class A. After taking various factors into consideration, I decided that you two are almost evenly matched at this point in time. That’s why we decided to hold an election campaign.”

Since Nagumo has the authority to decide the student council president, we have no choice but to accept the decision if clear evidence is presented, albeit to a different degree.

All that remained was for the students themselves to decide whether or not to accept the position.

“I understand. If that’s the case, I’ll run for the office.”

Then it was decided.

This meant that Horikita and Ichinose would be competing against each other for the position of student council president. All that remained was for Nagumo and me to decide which of the two we’d support.

“Ayanokōji, I’ll let you choose which one you want to back up.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll at least give you that much.”

“Horikita or Ichinose. To be honest, for me, it doesn’t make a difference which one I back... If you’re going to give me the right to make a decision, I might as well choose the one that will be more beneficial in the future.”

But Horikita stood up faster than I could name names.

“Wait a minute, President. Ayanokōji-kun is here because...”

“I’m going to have a contest to see between you and Honami who will be elected student council president.”

He wasn’t supposed to talk about that in front of them.

Kiriyama seemed to be holding his forehead, but there was no way Nagumo would’ve listened to Kiriyama.

“...You’re also...”

“No, I didn’t bring this up, okay?”

“Even so, there must’ve been a problem with the course of the conversation that led up to it.”

That was right. I couldn’t deny that. Nagumo had a conscience and didn’t mention the bet.

“Come on, choose whoever you like better.”

“Then—”

I was about to mention the name that I settled on when again I was interrupted by a voice saying, “Wait. This is an unprecedented endeavor. I should probably add a few more things.”

Kiriyama, who had been listening, interrupted at this point.

“What? Are you still dissatisfied with the flow of the conversation?”

“This is a student council election. I want to make sure that they really want to run and that they have the right qualifications.”

“You've made sure enough.”

“No, it's not enough. I've heard back from Horikita, but not from Ichinose.”

“You don't have to ask her that.”

“I disagree.”

Kiriyama turned to look at Ichinose, and without warning, the door to the student council room opened forcefully.

“Let me interrupt you, Nagumo.”

As if she was visiting a friend's room, Kiryūin, a student in the third year Class B, entered the room without permission. It was the first time I had seen her in such close proximity since the summer, but she didn't have her usual easygoing smile on her face and seemed to be in a rather bad mood.

“You're an unexpected guest. Can't you think of knocking at least once?”

The student council election was about to be discussed, and Nagumo wouldn't have welcomed this guest.

“I'm busy right now. You can come back later.”

Nagumo tried to get rid of her, but Kiryūin wouldn't listen.

“I had asked Kiriyama to make time for me in advance, and you put me off?”

“I'm sorry, but I didn't hear anything about you.”

Nagumo looked annoyed at Kiryūin's appearance and glanced at Kiriyama for confirmation.

“I'm sorry Nagumo, but what Kiryūin is saying is technically correct. It was my fault for the time accommodation.”

“It was a careless mistake on your part.”

“I can't explain myself. She's involved in another matter that I was hoping you could help me resolve today.”

I didn't know the details of what they were talking about, but such an exchange took place between Nagumo and Kiriyama.

“That's what I was talking about. Do you mind listening to what I have to say, Nagumo?”

“I understand the situation, but I'm having an important discussion with these guys about the student council.”

“I can see that you're busy, but I don't have much free time either. I have made an appointment at this time, so you're going to have to deal with it.”

Certainly, Kiryūin had no reason to back down. It was Kiriyama's fault for making a mistake in arranging the time of the appointment.

“For now, my priority is to talk with Suzune and Honami. If you insist on coming early, just sit there and wait in silence.”

Nagumo tried to explain that Kiryūin's appointment was only known to Kiriyama at this point. Nagumo tried to make a pass at Kiryūin, but she seemed a little different and didn't hide her irritation.

"I refuse."

Kiryūin replied with a slightly stern tone and put her foot on one of the empty seats in the student council room.

"What are you imitating?"

"First of all, I'm going to ask you a question right now. Depending on your answer, you will be sacrificing this chair."

Will she kick it away or destroy it?

It seemed certain that the fate of the chair on which Kiryūin had placed her foot was at stake.

Kiriyama looked at Kiryūin, who showed no sign of leaving and again apologized to Nagumo.

"If it's Kiryūin, it may be counterproductive to turn her away. It would be safer to let the second-years wait temporarily and listen to what she has to say."

Even though Horikita and Ichinose have priority, if Nagumo asked them to wait, they would. On the other hand, it was clear here that Kiryūin, who seemed to be in a bad mood, wouldn't do so.

If you couldn't turn someone away or make them wait, it'd be quicker to ask them first.

"Never mind about us, let's talk about Kiryūin-senpai first. Is that alright with you, Horikita-san?"

"Yes, that would be better."

Since both parties came to this conclusion without waiting for direct confirmation, it seemed that Nagumo had no choice but to take on Kiryūin's issue.

"Oh dear... All right, let me ask you. What is it that you came here for?"

"You didn't tell Nagumo that either, did you, Kiriyama? That really isn't a good arrangement."

"I understand your desire to blame me, but I'm in the middle of a lot of things. Besides, we decided that it would be better for you to tell him about your messed up story as it is."

He had deliberately left the reason for her visit unannounced.

Kiryūin looked at Kiriyama with cold eyes, but she had to let it go.

"Now, let me cut to the chase. I don't want to be so judgmental yet. So, I dare to ask you this. Who's the one who's decided to harass me in such a malicious manner?"

"Harassment? That doesn't tell the whole story."

“Then let's be more specific. Did you orchestrate a despicable and malicious act, trying to frame me as a shoplifter and forcing your friends to carry out the plan?”

A word too unexpected popped up— shoplifting.

It was Ichinose who reacted to it before anyone else.

Although she tried to keep her composure, it was obvious that she must've been nervous inside. It wasn't a surprising reaction when one had a history of criminal behavior, even if it was for the sake of their family.

“Shoplifting? I'm missing the point more and more.”

“Kiryūin was almost accused of shoplifting at the Keyaki Mall after school the other day. While shopping at a cosmetics store, Yamanaka, a third-year Class D student, approached Kiryūin from behind and tried to slip lipstick into her bag. When Kiryūin noticed this and confronted Yamanaka, she told her that you had ordered her to do it, Nagumo.”

Kiriyama made Kiryūin's words of condemnation easy to understand.

“I see. So that's why you came to me so boldly.”

“The reason I didn't tell you directly what I was talking about was because I knew you'd never order someone to do such a thing. Am I right?”

Kiriyama implied that he trusted Nagumo on this point.

Nagumo responded to both Kiryūin's and Kiriyama's questions with a noncommittal attitude.

“Can you say for sure you're not involved?”

Obviously, Kiryūin suspected that Nagumo was involved.

“I don't know. At least you seem to think it was my order.”

“Yamanaka, the perpetrator, testified as much. Is that not enough?”

“She might've just used me to get away with it, right?”

To Nagumo's reply, Kiryūin shook her head lightly.

“If she mentioned your name, Yamanaka wouldn't be able to get away with this. It would be less trouble for Yamanaka if she puts the blame on someone else. Am I wrong?”

Kiryūin's point of view certainly made sense.

Nagumo has almost complete control over the entirety of the third-years. It didn't matter if you had a ticket or not. I couldn't immediately think of any advantage to lying about being ordered by Nagumo like this. If she fell out of Nagumo's favor because of this incident, it would be a major stumbling block for the student Yamanaka. That's why it wasn't unreasonable to suspect that Nagumo was the real culprit since his name came up.

Even if I went through the same thing, Nagumo would still be the first person I would suspect.

“Even so, you seem to be very angry over a single shoplifting incident. It's not like you.”

“You don't understand me well enough to say ‘it's not like me.’ Unfortunately, I have a great dislike for acts like shoplifting. If I don't get caught, it's not a big deal, but I hate to see people hurting others just for their own sake.”

From the way Kiryūin spoke, it seemed as if she was unaware of Ichinose's past. While Kiryūin was openly expressing her dislike, Ichinose's expression darkened. Nagumo noticed this change in attitude and interrupted her, perhaps because he was aware of the situation.

Nagumo seemed to have tried to treat the shoplifting act lightly in front of Ichinose, but it seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Do you admit it? You tried to frame me for it.”

“That's another matter, isn't it?”

When Nagumo refused to acknowledge this, Kiryūin added, as if sensing.

“You can rest assured. If I can hear an apology from you, I promise you that this matter will be put to rest.”

If Nagumo gave the order, he was the instigator.

In a case like this, he would obviously receive a heavier punishment than the perpetrator.

Even if Nagumo was a representative of the third-years, Kiryūin seemed to be against trying to avoid making a big deal out of this scandal.

“On the other hand, what if I don't apologize? Will you be satisfied with breaking the chair?”

“I don't think I'll get an apology.”

“I see. Well, then...”

Nagumo broke off from Kiryūin and turned to us.

“I'm done talking with you, Kiryūin.”

Nagumo didn't apologize, didn't admit it, didn't even acknowledge it, and simply let the conversation drift away.

“This is something I never thought I'd see coming.”

Nagumo coldly told Kiryūin, who was stunned.

“You said you forced the truth out of Yamanaka, but how much credibility do you have in that statement when you got it out of her with threats? Even if you skip the student council and report it to the school, do you really think they'll take it seriously?”

“At the very least, Yamanaka's attempt to frame me for shoplifting is likely to have been caught on camera in the store. It's not a problem that can be ignored.”

“Then pull up the footage first. But that's it. If you don't come up with something that directly links me to Yamanaka, it's a meaningless story.”

Yamanaka was the only one who would be punished. There would never be any evidence of Nagumo's involvement.

He exuded such confidence.

The school would do its utmost to investigate Kiryūin's complaint, but there would be limits.

Yamanaka's lie was targeting Nagumo's downfall, the student council president and the leader of the third-year students.

Unless definite evidence was found, such an outcome was obvious.

"I'm sorry for interrupting, but I want to talk about what you said earlier. Are you sure you don't disagree with me about the election?"

Nagumo started to get the final confirmation as if he really wanted to ignore Kiryūin.

"Yes, President. I'm fine."

Horikita agreed, although she was concerned about Kiryūin's legs still on the chair.

I thought she was about to kick the chair out of the way, but Kiryūin continued to observe as if trying to see into Nagumo's mind.

Soon after, Nagumo moved on to Ichinose's response.

If everything went smoothly, she should give an immediate response but...

The expression on Ichinose's face still wasn't clear, as if Kiryūin's shoplifter words were still in her mind.

"Honami, you're going to run for election too, right?"

"...Well, about that... May I have a word with you, Nagumo-senpai?"

"What?"

"I'm—not going to run for the student council this time."

At this point, Ichinose made a statement that I hadn't expected to hear.

"You don't want to be the student council president?"

"No, I think it's not so much that I don't want to be the student council president, I believe it's a problem that goes beyond that. I have always believed that belonging to the student council and becoming the student council president was for my own good and for the good of those around me. But now I realize that it was just my own conceitedness. As you've mentioned, Nagumo-senpai, the fact that my class is far away from Class A is also proof of this."

So she was declining the award in light of her undeserving class standing.

"Besides, a person like me can't be the student council president. A criminal, that's why..."

Kiryūin's unintentional words had casted a large shadow over Ichinose.

"Criminal?"

Kiryūin, who didn't know what was going on, muttered curiously, but I couldn't explain the reason at this moment.

“That's a different story. It has nothing to do with you right now.”

“I don't believe so. No matter how much time passes, the sins of the past will not disappear.”

After answering, Ichinose continued before Nagumo as if she still had something on her mind.

“Before the election, I would like to resign from the student council today.”

“Wait, Ichinose-san. I think that's too hasty a decision. You haven't...”

“No, it's nothing to do with today. It's something I've been thinking about since a little before the trip.”

Ichinose smiled and confessed that she hadn't made her decision in the moment.

“You know as well as I do that service in the student council isn't just a burden for the students. There are some tedious chores, but basically, it can only be a positive thing in this school. You've benefited from it, too, even if it's not as visible as you'd like.”

Nagumo was right, being a member of the student council wasn't a bad thing. If you've been in this school for any length of time, you'd know that being a member of the student council contributes to your class points, even if only a little.

For Ichinose's class, being in the tight spot it was in, it was like throwing away one of their weapons.

“I'm sorry, but I'm not going to change my mind.”

Not only did she not want to run for student council president, she also wanted to resign from the student council.

Kiriyama seemed surprised by such a statement.

“You seem to be serious about this, Ichinose.”

“You've helped me a lot... I'm sorry I couldn't help you until the end.”

“No, of course it's the person's decision whether or not to continue. I have no right to stop you...”

Kiryūin seemed to have guessed this to some extent, but it would be more unreasonable not to connect Ichinose with the shoplifting issue. I could only resent my bad luck that the subject came up coincidentally and in a timely manner. No, even without the shoplifting incident, Ichinose's will to quit was firm.

“I apologize for not being able to live up to your expectations.”

Ichinose got up and bowed deeply to Nagumo and Kiriyama.

“I'm sure you'll be a wonderful student council president, Horikita-san. I'll be rooting for you.”

“Ichinose-san...”

Ichinose, who was supposed to be her rival in the election, smiled and gave her a pep talk.

“I'm feeling a little under the weather, so I'll leave you here now. If there are any forms that need to be filled out, please give me them later. See you later, Ayanokōji-kun.”

With a small wave of her hand, Ichinose left the student council office without hesitation.

The shoplifting incident may have definitely caused some emotional scars, but she showed no signs of changing her mind about quitting until the very end, nor did she seem to have any lingering regrets.

It was probably something she was really thinking about, not something she just sprouted from her mouth.

Nagumo and I weren't the only ones who felt that this was an unexpected turn of events.

Horikita, who announced her candidacy for student council president, felt the same.

“Ichinose-san has left the student council, what should I do?”

Ichinose leaving the student council seemed to have automatically ended the match that I had been carrying out up until now.

But now that this happened, there was nothing even Nagumo could do about it.

“It was impossible to replace Honami now.”

I didn't know about other schools' rules, but at least in this school, a student who wasn't in the student council may not be qualified to be the student council president.

“I don't like the way this is going, but you're going to be the student council president, Suzune.”

The most important thing to avoid would be the absence of the student council president. It would be too much of a stretch to suddenly appoint a second-year student with no experience as student council president.

“I'm a bit distracted because I thought it was going to be an election, but... I understand.”

With her unopposed victory, Horikita would be elected student council president in no time at all.

“Before that, I have a job for you.”

“What is it?”

“Fill in the vacancy left by Ichinose as soon as possible. Bring in at least one new student council member from the second-years.”

Indeed, Ichinose's departure left only Horikita as a second-year.

If something unforeseen happened, the student council may become dysfunctional.

“Are there any conditions for recruitment?”

“There is only one thing—whether or not people around you think you’re worthy of being a member of the student council.”

“I see, that makes perfect sense.”

Although it may be inappropriate to bring up, it was likely that the discussion was about how someone with a reputation like Ryūen’s couldn’t be allowed to join the student council.

It seemed to me that there were no restrictions on the number of students from one’s own class or another. . .

“So anyone can move to join the student council as long as they meet these conditions?”

“Plain and simple. You’re free to bring in anyone from your own class. Even your predecessor, Horikita-senpai, had a member of the student council from the same class, didn’t he?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“And one more thing. . . Appoint a member of the student council from the first year as well. Yagami unexpectedly dropped out of school and we have a vacancy.”

Nagumo gave what seemed to be a very difficult order, and Horikita’s expression hardened.

“It makes no difference whether I need to recruit one or two people. I’ll do my best.”

There was no way she could refuse, so she answered honestly.

“It looks like we’ve come to an agreement.”

Kiryūin, who had been watching over the meeting, called out to Nagumo again.

Maybe they were thinking that they couldn’t tell the truth in the presence of second-year students.

Horikita, who had been given a new assignment, read the room and stood up.

“I’ll leave you to it. I will report back to you as soon as I have two new members.”

“Yes. At that time, I will officially hand over the position of student council president to you.”

Bowing to Kiryūin, who was watching the situation, Horikita left the student council room.

With the student council elections out of the way, the battle between Nagumo and me should’ve naturally drifted away.

This would be the best time to leave.

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to leave now.”

“Wait a minute, Ayanokōji, I’m not finished talking with you yet.”

Nagumo stopped me with a biting look as if he wasn't going to let me go so easily.

"Don't hold up the matter any longer. The conversation with Ayanokōji ended with Ichinose's refusal. I think it's best to back off and get the Kiryūin thing out of the way as soon as possible."

Kiryūin agreed with Kiriyama that the problem couldn't be left unaddressed.

"You are full of faults, but I appreciate what you said. I hope you'll make a wise decision, Nagumo."

"Damn it..."

Nagumo clicked his tongue in frustration, but the circumstances forced him to admit it. However, he added this at the very end, probably because he didn't want to let me go.

"You're a student in Suzune's class. Please help me gather members for the student council."

"Me, huh?"

"In the second year, there are no other student council members. Besides, the student council president will be unconditionally elected from Class 2-B. I can't let them without any work to do."

I think you could say that to any of our classmates... Besides, that has nothing to do with whether or not I'll help him.

It seemed to me that he was just taking it out on me, but I didn't think it was worth it to argue with you here.

"Well, I don't know how much help I can be, but I'll do my best. Maybe."

Nagumo didn't let me off the hook for leaving for an escape route.

"I'll make sure to let Suzune know that you'll help her after this. Don't skip work, okay?"

I was considering not going along with him, but he beat me to the punch.

"Okay, I'll help you. Are you satisfied with that?"

At this point, Nagumo finally understood, and his resistance to letting me go disappeared.

"That's right. Here's a souvenir for you from after our trip."

I took out a few extra souvenirs I bought in Hokkaido and handed them to Nagumo, bag by bag.

"You're very disciplined in a strange way, aren't you?"

"I'm meeting the president of the student council, after all. I thought it would be a good idea to at least bring a souvenir."

I didn't know when to give him this kind of gift, and it was a mistake to do so at the last minute.

"I don't get one?"

“I didn't expect you to be here, Kiryūin-senpai. If you want it, please ask Student Council President Nagumo to share it with you.”

Nagumo gave a souvenir to the close Kiriyama and muttered something as if he just remembered it.

“Speaking of after the school trip... it's about time the next special exam is announced, isn't it?”

He was still talking to me as if he didn't feel comfortable talking with Kiryūin.

“It was announced just today.”

“I heard that it's customary for a special exam to be held after the school trip. So that would mean that the opponent would be Sakayanagi from Class A.”

“I didn't know that much could be predicted.”

From the way Nagumo's speaking, I wonder if it's an annual event and if the matchups between the top and the bottom teams are also decided.

“Last year, did you, the student council president, and Kiriyama, the vice president, fight each other?”

“I guess so.”

“What was the result?”

“I think it was your class that won, Kiriyama.”

“...Yeah.”

Kiriyama answered without any particular pleasure.

Kiryūin, who was also in Class B, didn't seem to have any particular thoughts on the matter, and quietly let it pass.

“It's tough to win against Class A normally, but I think you have a good chance, don't you?”

“I guess it depends on how you look at it.”

“I think that the special exams held at this time of the year are designed to give an advantage to the lower classes in order to make all the classes more competitive. It also means that the lower the starting class is, the easier it is to win.”

Certainly, the main-players of this special exam are Horikita and Ryūen's classes.

Both of which were originally lower-ranked classes.

This meant that Nagumo also allowed Kiriyama and the other Class B students to win.

“I thought Nagumo, the student body president, would win under any circumstances.”

“Don't say that. I can't even take it seriously if it doesn't affect the outcome, regardless of who wins.”

Nagumo's class was already in a position to run alone and wasn't concerned with trivial victories.

"In Horikita-senpai's time, as was the custom, Class A ran alone from the start and rushed away with the victory. I was in Class B, but I moved up to Class A early and ran alone. As a result, the gap between A and below was huge during this period. Class A's definitely in the lead, but it's not in an absolute safe zone like it has been in the past."

Certainly, Horikita's class's motivation was high right now because they could clearly see Class A's back. I wonder what would've happened if the difference between Class A and Class B had been closer to 1000 points at this point in time. Even if we won, we couldn't catch up to Class A's back.

"Do your best."

"Yes. We'll be in touch."

After saying so, I was finally allowed to leave the student council room.

"I was finally released."

With Ichinose's withdrawal, the student council election was canceled and the 20 million point contract was also lost, but that was fine with me since it wouldn't interfere with my plans.

Such relief was short-lived, however, as a person who had been watching from a distance approached.

"You didn't get released right away, did you?"

"You were waiting for me..."

"It was a discussion with a lot of things on my mind. Did they give you any orders?"

"No, he said he's done with me."

"They seemed to have been talking for a long time though."

"I was giving him souvenirs from the school trip and doing other unrelated things."

I wasn't going to mention now that I was asked to help.

The idea was to get away with it until Nagumo actually passed the message on to Horikita, that he want me to help.

"For you, Horikita, it's just a part of his job to make you the student council president."

"I never thought that Ichinose-san would resign or even leave the student council."

"I agree. I thought she'd be a member of the student council until the end, regardless of whether I won or lost the competition for the student council president's position."

It wasn't in my mind that she'd give up her position voluntarily.

One of the reasons for the tears she showed during the school trip may've been related to this incident.

“Is Kiryūin-senpai going to stay behind and continue the discussion with Student Council President Nagumo after all?”

“You could tell she was pretty pissed off, couldn't you?”

“Yes. I don't know much about her, but it would be troublesome to make enemies with her. I got the impression that Student Council President Nagumo was having a hard time.”

From the student council members' point of view, they usually only saw Nagumo always in a dominant position, so it was understandable that they would have such an impression.

“Student Council President Nagumo instructing a fellow third-year student to frame Kiryūin-senpai for shoplifting—how much of it do you think is true?”

“I don't know. But it's at least true that Yamanaka tried to frame Kiryūin for the crime.”

It remained unclear whether another third party was involved.

“Nagumo or not, I don't see any reason or purpose for trapping Kiryūin.”

“Could it be revenge for a dispute she previously had with her?”

“Of course, there's a possibility. It's not unusual for a person to be disliked by an unspecified person.”

But there was no point in us thinking about it.

“Shouldn't you be focusing on the student council instead?”

“If you could be a member of the student council, that would solve half the problem, wouldn't it? I'm sure you would fulfill all the requirements that President Nagumo wants.”

“I'm not so sure about that. At least, I'm not Nagumo's favorite.”

“It's not a matter of like or dislike.”

“It must be unpleasant for Nagumo.”

“It's just that you don't want to join the student council.”

“That's what I mean.”

If you join the student council, you'll have much less free time. That's what I wanted to avoid.

“Then, at least you can help me find people. I trust you won't turn me down, since you're responsible for bringing me into the student council in the first place.”

She said this quickly as if to block my escape route.

“No, I'm not really into that kind of thing. Sorry, but I'll pass. Student council matters are for you to solve since you're involved in the student council.”

Horikita sighed and withdrew as if she was used to me being uncooperative.

“I'd like to bring in one of our classmates, after all. As the student council president himself said, joining is a positive thing for the class.”

“I'm sure Yōsuke would be willing to help with most things at a time like this.”

“I agree, but it would be a shame to take club activities away from him.”

Yōsuke was a member of the soccer club and had achieved a certain amount of success in it. There wasn't much benefit to be gained by taking his club activities away from him.

“I'm leaving.”

I tried to get out of there, but before I could do so, Horikita turned around and blocked my way.

“Ayanokōji-kun, about the special exam...”

“I'm sorry, but there's nothing you can do to make me take the initiative either.”

“‘The student council's problem is the student council's responsibility to solve,’ is what you're saying. But the special exam is a class issue. Shouldn't classmates cooperate with each other here?”

“There are other people to turn to. There are almost 40 classmates.”

You don't have to target me.

“Not at all. You don't want to help me, after all.”

“I'm not going to change things drastically if I cooperate.”

“I think you're being too modest. I'm glad you're helping us. The enemy is Sakayanagi-san. If you lend me a hand right from the planning stage, we have a better chance of outwitting them like in the Sports Festival.”

If we lose, the gap with Class A would increase by 100. We couldn't lose. But even if we did, we could still make up for it.

“I don't have any advice to give. However, as a classmate, I will follow your instructions. If you order me to answer a difficult question correctly, I will do so.”

I wouldn't lend a hand in strategizing at the preliminary stage, but I would say that I'd cooperate with the exam.

“...You mean that you'll solve any problem, regardless of subject or difficulty level?”

“Yes. My rating is B on the OAA as of December. I can't get a high score, but I can certainly answer correctly if I want to, whether it's the lower limit of two questions or the upper limit of five questions required to clear the exam.”

This would be an important score for Horikita. I could assure that.

“You don't mind being relied on as an individual, but you can't lend a hand in the preliminary stage. That's what you mean, right?”

“That's right.”

“What's the possibility of you being wrong?”

“It's as close to zero as possible.”

Unless there was some trivia that had nothing to do with the basic subject matter, there wouldn't be a problem.

“So you say, but I was told that the only thing you're really good at is math.”

“I don't remember that.”

I don't remember. She mumbled something like that, then nodded back at me as if accepting my proposal.

“I'll take care of it. The burden will definitely be reduced if a student with an OAA academic rating of B is able to answer five questions correctly, especially if they're high difficulty.”

This was one of the most important experiences for Horikita as a leader.

I hope she'll learn something more important than winning or losing in this special exam.

“I sympathize with you. You've been appointed student council president at a very difficult time.”

It was a problem you would've preferred solving at a less busy time of the year.

“It can't be helped. When you decide to join the student council, this kind of thing is bound to happen.”

If you traced it back to its origins, it was because someone like me, (not actually me) influenced the student council's path.

Although there were some concerns, Horikita, walking next to me, seemed relatively positive.

“There's no use thinking about it in a negative way. Let's take a positive view. If I become the student council president, the school will give me a higher evaluation than what I have now, and I'll be given some authority. I'm not going to abuse my authority, but I'm willing to go as far as doing gray area things that may be close to abusing it.”

She was determined to do whatever it took to get to Class A.

In Horikita's case, it might be better to be more greedy.

“You can help me too, you know? With the new student council member selection.”

“Don't repeat yourself so many times.”

“I thought you might've forgotten.”

“I'll keep my distance.”

I hope you can make a selection before realizing that Nagumo asked for my help.

3

Although it was a seed that I sowed myself, I got involved in something I had nothing to do with.

I would've liked having a student council election or something to settle the value of my relationship with Nagumo, but since no one could've predicted Ichinose's resignation, I guess it was inevitable.

I decided to call and report to Kei, who was waiting in the dormitory.

"She's not home yet?"

As soon as the call started, Kei's frustrated voice was the first thing that came out of her mouth.

"I just left the student council room. I'll be back in about 15 minutes."

I still thought she'd be angry at me, but she seemed to be happy that I gave a clear time.

"Okay. I waited without urging you, aren't I great."

She suddenly changed her tone to a softer one and asked me that.

"Great, great!"

Girls like Kei are good with cell phones. So she's probably quite adept at sending a message every few seconds.

"Heh heh heh."

I didn't know if it was a compliment or not, but she seemed to be happy about seeing me.

[I'll be waiting for you.]

After such a short exchange, I put my cell phone away in my pocket.

The romance phase progressed, and I realized that a relationship had been established without lengthy conversational exchanges. Only family members can detect the slightest difference in each other, and not just because they are smart or sharp. It meant that they were able to notice changes that can only be obtained by spending a long time together. It wasn't a matter of thinking and reading each other's thoughts, but of feeling each other's skin.

A momentary rancor could turn into a momentary softness.

Two sides of a coin.

This was true for many things other than just this scenario.

The remaining pages of the textbook were decreasing every minute.

But the last pages of the textbook became more difficult and took more time than the first.

Now... the next task...

Chapter 2: New Student Council Member

WITH THE LAST special exam of the second semester coming up, Horikita had an immediate problem to solve.

That is, to take over the position from Nagumo as student council president.

The day after she was appointed as the new student council president, she decided to take action immediately after school.

As expected, I was called and waited for Horikita's arrival in the hallway outside the classroom.

She was currently in a small meeting with the students gathered in the class. The student council had some business to take care of, but we couldn't neglect our preparations for the upcoming special exam.

If I left without telling her, I'd have to prepare for the double payback that she would deliver later. I didn't want to do that.

After about ten minutes of thinking about this unfortunate possibility, she showed up without an apology.

“Well, let's get straight to the point, shall we?”

“Are you done with the strategy meeting?”

“I had a thorough discussion with Hirata-kun and the others yesterday. I was just listening to the progress report today. Fortunately, most of our classmates are very motivated. They're positive about their studies even though they normally don't like them. There are many signs pointing to the fact that everything is moving in the right direction. For example, Sudō-kun's rise despite being the bottom of the class last year, the mental pressure from Sakura-san's withdrawal, the point difference between Class A and us being in range, and our direct confrontation with them as well.” At the mention of Airi's name, Horikita briefly glanced at me.

“Are you still concerned?”

“I'm not so insensitive that I can just ignore it, but that's the reality.”

“I disagree. You're perfectly capable of holding your head up high.”

“As time goes on, you should be able to more fully process and come to terms with what happens, Horikita.”

As I started to walk away, Horikita followed, looking somewhat flustered.

“Nagumo-senpai told me that you're willing to cooperate with me, which is honestly reassuring.”

“It sounds like you've only heard the good parts. I just want you to know that, personally, I'm not enthusiastic about it at all.”

It wouldn't be easy later on when there are misunderstandings and miscommunications on the issue of motivation.

"Well, there's no need for me to say that explicitly. You probably already understand it well."

"I guess. It seems that you were silent on purpose when I asked you to help me. You were going to ignore Nagumo-senpai's order if I hadn't spoken to you, right?"

She said she knew and purposely spoke those inciting words.

"If you really cared about me, you could've overlooked it."

"No."

The immediate answer crushed my plans to find a way out of the situation. Recently, the way she's been treating me has been somewhat refined, although I couldn't tell if it was in a good way, or bad.

"But don't worry. I'm not going to spend days and days trying to gather the members for the student council. I picked up some candidates yesterday, and I'd like to decide today. The student council's important, but we have a special exam coming up that I need to focus more on."

I was relieved to hear that she was willing to make a decision that benefited us in the short term.

"There was one second-year and one first-year, right?"

"Yes, and when I met with the student council again, they were a little more specific about what they wanted... They said the minimum requirement is that the student must have a B or higher in the OAA's academic achievements rating."

"Well, if you're going to be in the student council, it isn't surprising that there's a minimum academic requirement to join."

It seemed that social contribution wasn't emphasized, so a wide range of candidates was possible.

"Speaking of which, a little birdie told me that someone, somewhere had improved his academic ability to a B. I wonder who it was?"

"Suddenly, I have a stomachache. I think I'll go home."

"Can't you take a joke?"

"Not really, because you most likely mean it."

"I'm going to start filling in the second-year position that Ichinose-san left. I won't choose you, though."

"That's obvious. So you said you've already decided on a candidate?"

"Yes. The only requirements to being a student council member are not being in a club and having a B rating or higher in academic achievement. The rest is up to the student council president at their own discretion and judgment."

As long as the criteria was met, Horikita was free to choose whoever she wanted to be in the student council.

“The student council will run more smoothly if its members are skilled in a variety of abilities.”

If the members were randomly selected and unmotivated, the student council activities would surely be in jeopardy.

“I'm still going to do this aggressively. I don't want to bring in anyone from a strong rival class, like Class A, since we get a few extra points just for being a member of the student council.”

It seemed that she wanted to secure as many advantages as possible, no matter how small.

“So... the ideal student would be a student enrolled in our class.”

“That's right. Appointing someone from the same class may reveal ulterior motives, but it doesn't violate the rules.”

I think I might've found the answer to why we had been waiting here instead of walking out.

“What do you want to talk to me about, Horikita-san?”

One of my classmates, Kushida, came out of the classroom and approached us.

Horikita briefly signaled me with her eyes, as if asking, 'What do you think?'

Kushida was certainly a student with a very high reputation outside of class, including her visual appearance. Her academic ability was certainly above a B, and her specifications were comparable to that of the student council members.

However, this was only the case from an outsider's point of view. In reality, Horikita and Kushida were like oil and water.

“Actually, I have a favor to ask of you.”

The question asked was akin to the dangerous act of pouring a lot of water into a pot of oil.

“Off the record, it's been decided that Ichinose-san will be leaving the student council.”

“What...? I see. Was there a problem?”

“It was due to personal reasons.”

Kushida was still trying to figure things out, and the oil was starting to heat up.

However, it wasn't at a high temperature yet.

“There's now a vacancy, due to the decrease in the number of members in the student council, and I was wondering if you could fill it.”

That decisive phrase conveyed the message, didn't it?

The oil, which was getting hotter and hotter, began to make a buzzing sound as if it's repelling water.

“Is Nagumo still going to be the student council president?”

“No, and as I'm the only remaining member of the student council in the second year, I'm automatically being promoted.”

“That means... Horikita-san will be the student council president.”

“That's the plan if there's no trouble after this.”

Kushida seemed a little surprised at the next student council president's sudden selection, but that wasn't the important point. It was a given that either Ichinose or Horikita would be the student council president.

“That's why I decided to select the members personally. At the very least, you have the qualifications to be a member of the student council, and I'm sure you'll do just fine.”

A lot of water and oil had already begun splattering around the pot—enough to cause burns if you stayed near it.

“So, if I join the student council... will I be your secretary or something?”

Kushida asked the question, expressing her concern about that particular point.

“I haven't decided on your position yet, but I will.”

“Hahaha, that's a funny joke.”

Despite the fact that Kushida was saying these things with a natural smile, we could sense the heavy atmosphere of intimidation and the strong sense of, 'who would work for you, you idiot?'

“Depending on your motivation, you may be elected vice president immediately.”

“Um, you know that's not what this is about, right?”

While subtle, it's clear she's trying to indicate that this conversation and our futile proposition are a waste of time.

“I wonder if I'm the right person for the student council.”

Because we're located in the corridors, where students passed by, the only excuse she could give for refusing was her own lack of ability.

“You have a good reputation according to the OAA and you're well-liked by many of the second years and first years. You can also easily get along with the incoming first years next year. We're choosing you because of your ability.”

She emphasized that she wasn't trying to manipulate Kushida in any way, but that she was genuinely interested in her innate skills.

For Kushida, however, it made no difference.

‘Working for Horikita’—this arrangement was unacceptable.

“I'm glad to hear that, but I'm not sure it'll be easy. I have no experience in student council...”

Horikita had been persistent so far, but it wasn't going to be easy. Kushida had a hard time accepting the idea of working under Horikita.

“You joining us will give the class an advantage, even if it's small. The bonus of having a classmate serving on the student council should be a weapon in our quest to reach Class A.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean, but... it's still impossible. Sorry.”

Horikita's intention of targeting her as the students were leaving was probably to let them watch in order to force Kushida to stay under her façade.

If this were an empty dorm room, she'd have refused her offer in a single blow.

“I need your help.”

With a remark of great force, Horikita reached her hand towards Kushida in a dramatic appeal.

The students who were passing by glanced over, wondering what was going on.

“...”

Kushida continued to feign surprise and confusion.

She was having a hard time rejecting Horikita's request for help.

At this point, I turned my gaze ahead for a moment.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Horikita, who noticed my reaction, seemed to be concerned and asked me about it, but I didn't want to interrupt her by saying anything irrelevant.

There was a slight pause, but Horikita continued to speak to the now silent Kushida.

“I'm not asking you to work for me. I just want you to help me get up to Class A.”

“But... it could be someone other than me. I don't know about this.”

“You're the one who most benefits from taking on this project.”

She didn't want to join the student council, which would be run by Horikita. However, Kushida would indeed benefit the most by taking it on.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

Kushida couldn't quite follow the logic and asked back.

“If you join the student council, Kushida-senpai, even if there are people who dislike you, they won't be able to get their hands on you~”

The answer wasn't given by Kushida herself, nor Horikita, but by a third female student—Amasawa Ichika.

She'd been secretly getting closer to us since a few minutes ago, but I didn't expect her to suddenly get involved.

“...Why's Amasawa-san here with the second-years?”

Kushida was being pushed further and further into a corner by her sudden enemy.

“I can join where the senpais are, can't I?”

“I'm kind of busy right now. Who do you need?”

“No one in particular... If I had to choose... I'd say Kushida-senpai.”

“Me...? Oh, I see. What kind of business is it?”

With a vein nearly popping out of her temple, it was clear that she was angry.

“Huh? What is it? What do you think I want?”

“I have no idea what you're thinking.”

I have no idea what she's thinking, either. I wonder if Horikita does?

“I'm having an important discussion with Horikita-san and the others right now.”

“No. I'm sure you're just scared of being alone with me, Kushida-senpai.”

Obviously, Amasawa said this openly to provoke Kushida.

Seeing the dynamic between the two, Horikita surely understood everything, even the undertones. Of course, it was possible she already knew about their rivalry beforehand.

But did she come all the way here to see Kushida? I looked at Amasawa, hoping to decipher her true intentions with just my eyes.

“I actually came here to see Ayanokōji-senpai, but I found him talking to Horikita-senpai and Kushida-senpai. That's why I was secretly listening to you.”

Without any apology, she confessed that she'd been listening to the conversation.

“How long have you been listening to our conversation?”

“I started listening just a little while ago. Around the time when Horikita-senpai said, 'It's not like I'm asking you to work for me or anything~.' I swear it's the truth!”

Although Amasawa was being honest, she was clearly suspicious to Kushida and Horikita, perhaps because they didn't trust her.

“It's true. No more, no less. I saw Amasawa approaching me.”

“I see. So that's why you looked away for a moment.”

“See what I mean? I only tell the truth, don't I?”

“But where did the lie about coming to see Kushida-san go? And we don't even know if it's true that you came to see Ayanokōji-kun in the first place.”

When you start doubting one thing, everything else starts to look suspicious.

“Well, well, don't worry about the details. Please continue with the recruitment efforts.”

Amasawa said this as she took a step back and appealed that she wouldn't interfere anymore.

“...Well. Let's put aside the matter of Amasawa for now. Can we get an answer?”

In order to turn the bad situation around, Horikita ignored Amasawa for the moment to continue persuading Kushida.

“I think I already gave you an answer. I can't accept it.”

“You can't?”

“I'm sorry, I can't live up to your expectations. The student council isn't for me...”

“Why don't you just join the student council instead of saying that?”

As soon as she said she wouldn't interfere, Amasawa, who had broken her promise less than ten seconds later, opened her mouth.

On the contrary, Amasawa was getting carried away with Kushida, convinced that she couldn't directly counter her.

She began touching Kushida and playing with her—poking her on the cheek with her index finger.

“You're a pretty girl with a good figure, Kushida-senpai. You're smart too, aren't you?”

She kept whispering like a devil, trying to persuade her... or even agitate her. However, none of them were expressions of honest praise.

“You know... If we're going to keep talking, can we change the location, please?”

Even if she continued to refuse, Kushida seemed to be under a lot of stress while in front of the public. She must've felt that it would be difficult continuing the conversation any longer. Normally, it would've been acceptable to end the conversation and run away, but Kushida wasn't able to do so.

“Ayanokōji-kun, why don't you talk with Amasawa-san for a while?”

“Eh~? Are you trying to exclude me and be a cold senpai?”

“That's why I'm trying to lend you Ayanokōji-kun.”

Horikita crossed her arms and told her that she should be thankful that she didn't try to turn her away by herself.

“I want to be with not just Ayanokōji-senpai, but also with both of you now, too.”

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I'm sure she simply found our conversation interesting.

“Plus, if you force me away, I might expose some bad secrets.”

By making threats, even if they were empty, we couldn't forcibly remove her.

“Shall we just change the location as Kushida-san requested?”

Horikita tried surrounding us with a large number of people, but that allowed us to be confronted with Amasawa's merciless words and actions and had only worsened the situation.

She decided to change the location of the meeting due to Amasawa's threat.

1

Horikita took Kushida up the stairs to the special wing, which was probably empty.

“This area should be private for now.”

“For the time being, this area shouldn’t attract any attention,” she said, seeking Kushida's approval.

“Well, you know.”

Kushida sighed, probably not even wanting to follow her.

“It's a safe place. If anyone comes near, you'll know right away, right?”

“You really follow me everywhere, Amasawa-san.”

“I'm curious if you'll join the student council or not.”

She probably wouldn't leave until she knew how it concluded.

“Horikita's annoying, but you're three times more annoying.”

Kushida, who was now out of the public eye and no longer needed to remain reserved, seemed to be insufferable. Without warning, she began showing her true colors.

It was quite a feat to be called three times more annoying than Horikita, who was the most aware of just how much Kushida hated her.

Kushida, without hesitation, targeted her cold eyes at Amasawa. Meanwhile, Amasawa smiled the most she had all day.

“I love seeing that look on your face~”

Instead of being timid, Amasawa clapped her hands together in joy, as if it was finally time to have some fun.

“I'm happy for you~ Now that you have more people you can expose your true self to, like Ayanokōji-senpai and Horikita-senpai, you aren't afraid of me anymore!”

“I don't know if you're trying to mess with my state of mind or what, but why don't you stop wasting your time?”

“I won't stop. If you want, I can cause trouble for you again.”

Amasawa made the decision to stay in school. I wonder if she was going to find pleasure in making fun of Kushida.

Was she really looking for Kushida when she visited the second-year students?

“Are you the type that's convinced you'll never drop out of school?”

“What~? Who could expel me? I'd like to see if there is-.”

“Stop it already! Amasawa-san, your teasing is too much,” Horikita said.

It's true that Amasawa was being unusually obnoxious today, provoking Kushida to engage in hostility.

I didn't want to be involved in the student council member selection for too much longer.

“If you continue, Horikita will be in trouble. Please stop doing this.”

“If you say so~, Ayanokōji-senpai. I'll be a good girl,” she said, holding up her hands to indicate that she really won't make fun of Kushida anymore.

“Kushida-san, let's forget about her for a moment... Will you reconsider joining the student council?”

“No.”

“Not even if I insist?”

“I just don't want to. Can I go now?”

Seeing Kushida trying to get out of this situation, I decided to move a little.

“I think we should give Kushida a more straightforward incentive, don't you think?”

“...A straightforward incentive?”

“It's true that Kushida-san would benefit from joining the student council. But at the same time, you'll similarly benefit. It's inevitable that the person who's invited to join the student council may be a little dissatisfied with it.”

“Well, you know...”

Kushida looked at me and glared, but somewhat brusquely let her gaze wander away.

“I think it's naive to ask for a free favor.”

Kushida threw such words to Horikita as if taking advantage of my guidance.

“If I make you an offer, would you consider it? Obviously, I'm not going to withdraw from school. So don't request it like last time.”

Kushida might've been considering it, but of course, there were realistic limitations to the conditions. What kind of offer would make Kushida agree to join the student council?

“If you really want my help, prostrate yourself and ask for it.”

“...Prostrate myself?”

“Yes. If you show me a ‘please, Kushida-san’ attitude, I will consider it... No, I will definitely join the student council!”

Instead of giving Horikita an evasive answer, she assured her that she'd join the student council.

Of course, this was a statement made under the assumption that there was no way Horikita would prostrate herself in the first place.

Horikita, however, wasn't as prideful as Kushida.

Kushida would never prostrate herself in this situation, even for the sake of the class.

“Yes, prostrating... That's your condition. I understand.”

Horikita muttered and sat down on the cold floor of the hallway.

“What? You're bluffing, aren't you?”

“If I do this, you'll join the student council. You promised me just now, didn't you? Ayanokōji-kun and Amasawa-san are both witnesses. It's now or never if you want to take it back...”

It was as if she was actually going to do it to get Kushida to join.

Horikita was giving off such a serious vibe that Kushida, who was supposed to have the upper hand, was at a loss for words.

“...You're bluffing, aren't you? You'd never do that for me.”

“I don't know why you think so, but I don't hate you as much as you think I do. If me prostrating is beneficial for the class, then it's worth it.”

Horikita replied earnestly—her eyes sharp from a low position.

Having promised that she wouldn't interfere, Amasawa quietly watched the situation and seemed to be enjoying it.

“No, you can't do that! You can't!”

The conclusion that Kushida came to, despite her hesitation, was, ‘You won't do it.’

“So... just prostrate myself and ask you to join the student council?”

Saying this, Horikita slowly began to stretch out her hands as if she was going to put them on the floor.

But before she could touch it, the movement stopped.

And after a few seconds, she didn't move beyond that point.

“What's the matter, Horikita-san?” Kushida called out happily. She thought Horikita had stopped moving because she couldn't bear the humiliation any longer.

“May I go one step further? Are you satisfied with me prostrating myself in such a trivial manner?”

“Huh?”

“You'd be working for me just for doing this. I'm the one who benefits from this, not you.”

If this happened, it would be possible to burn the momentary image of Horikita prostrating into one's eyes.

But at the same time, Kushida would pay the price by supporting Horikita, who would lead and manage the student council above her. It wasn't a cheap exchange.

“I know you don't like me. I understand that you want me to get down on my knees. But I think the real joy and pleasure will come when you make me feel obligated to bow to you, not when you force me to do so. Am I wrong?”

This was Horikita's tactic.

Horikita definitely didn't want to prostrate herself for Kushida.

In other words, Kushida's reading was correct. However, Horikita was putting on an exquisite air and didn't seem to be afraid to do so right here.

"I don't understand. If you're okay with prostrating yourself, why don't you just do it quickly? Forget about pleasure or enjoyment, just lower yourself and I'll join."

Evidently, Kushida wasn't easily convinced. She wouldn't have joined the student council in the first place without a condition in exchange, so it was only natural for her to emphasize that point.

"If there's any resistance to me prostrating myself, it's because you're sure to regret it. If I bow down to you here and now, you'll join the student council even if you don't want to. I don't want you becoming a member with such low motivation."

If she was going to join the student council, Horikita would want to make full use of Kushida Kikyō's abilities. That meant her joining couldn't be realized unless she genuinely wanted to join.

"It's hard to make me bow down to you if you keep your distance from me in your personal life. But if you join the student council, you'll have more time to interact with me, and you'll have more opportunities to show your competence. When that happens, I'll have the opportunity to rely on you. If that happens, I may have to bow down to you more than once or twice."

Instead of Kushida forcing Horikita to prostrate herself, she could create a situation where she herself would feel obligated to bow down to Kushida.

Such a provocative remark seemed to have stung Kushida more than she expected.

"I'm still going to work for you, right?"

"You seem to think that you'd work under the student council president, but you're wrong. It's not the position that determines one's true standing, but rather the relationships between people. It's just a matter of building a relationship where the vice president has more real power and influence than the student council president."

Horikita continued to box Kushida in from a lower position.

"A new member suddenly becomes vice president and has the ability to make me, the student council president, her plaything—I'm sure that's a great image to satisfy your need for approval."

Since we had already dissected Kushida, we knew what she was looking for and what she wanted.

From that point of view, it was clear once again that Kushida was the right person for the student council.

"I don't like it."

"It's okay if you don't like it now. It's a trivial matter."

Kushida turned away from Horikita, who was ready to prostrate herself at any moment, with a grim look on her face.

“My position will be higher if I join the student council. That wouldn't be such a bad thing.”

“Yes, that's right. It isn't an amusing idea to impose conditions.”

“I hate being swayed by sweet talk, but you're suggesting that I'd be able to use you the same way you'd use me?”

“Yes...”

Horikita smiled thinly and tried to withdraw her outstretched hands, but...

“But you know, Horikita-san, I'd still like to see you prostrate yourself here!”
Kushida replied as she turned around with a full-bodied smile.

“...That wouldn't be me doing so out of obligation, would it?”

“Don't worry. I'll accomplish that some other time. Prostrate yourself now.”

Horikita's plan was going at a steady pace up until this point, but her calculations went awry at the very last minute.

Kushida, now more resolute, had turned the tables on Horikita, revealing more of her bad-natured personality.

“What are you going to do? Refuse? Then I won't join the student council.”

When Kushida saw that she had the upper hand, she proceeded to push the game forward at once.

It was a disadvantageous situation for Horikita to try to get Kushida, who was originally in conflict with her, into the student council for free.

If she avoided prostrating herself, Kushida may throw away the offer.

Maybe the game was lost from the start.

“Ayanokōji-kun and Amasawa-san...”

“Yes?”

“I'm sorry, but could you excuse us for a moment?”

Horikita, who was clearly in a bad mood, asked us to leave.

She didn't want more than one person seeing this humiliating display.

I took Amasawa with me as we left the scene.

Horikita had succeeded in her goal of getting Kushida to join the student council without coercion.

But at a cost.

2

“Oh~ How I wish I could’ve seen it—Horikita-senpai prostrating herself to Kushida-senpai.”

“Don’t mention it again. It was a fatal mistake.”

Holding her head, Horikita shook with anger as she remembered what happened a few minutes ago.

“Kushida took advantage of you, even though you brought it on yourself.”

“I underestimated her need for approval.”

Amasawa and I saw how happy Kushida’s face looked when she left.

“I was forced to prostrate myself.”

“...Still, in the end, Kushida-san said yes, and it was her decision. She has the self-discipline to say no if she really didn’t want to. You know that, don’t you?”

“It was impressive that she saw that far ahead, though.”

On the outside, she’d smile at everyone, but on the inside, as Horikita said, Kushida’s actions were based on her own interests.

That situation was a perfect opportunity for Kushida to show her true side, and there was no need for her to be shy. Kushida could’ve rejected the offer after seeing Horikita get down on her knees, but she ultimately decided to accept it only because it was actually beneficial for her to join the student council.

“I know she’ll hate working for me with all her heart, but that’s not what’s important. Joining the student council will definitely increase her cohesive power. It’ll also be a great stepping stone for her to regain her position in the class, considering she was previously backed into a corner and isolated.”

“You intend to use Kushida to the fullest.”

“Of course. I made the choice to keep her. We have to show enough results to convince everyone in the class. She even made me prostrate myself.”

It seemed that the act of prostrating herself still lingered in her mind. Yet, it couldn’t be helped, as it was a mistake created by her own strategy.

If Horikita hadn’t prostrated herself in that situation, Kushida wouldn’t have joined her.

“You should’ve found another way to fight rather than prostrating.”

“Don’t mention it again. I’ll make the most of it going forward...”

The damage was done, but it was a start. Not everyone could be a student council member.

By making Kushida serve on the student council, we could make her feel like she was needed in the class and keep her from feeling like she was cut off. She knew this as well.

However, she didn't like the fact that Horikita was leading her into a situation where she would end under her administration. Her childish feelings were getting in the way.

"Now your class will dominate the student council for two years. That's a definite advantage."

"As long as Student Council President Nagumo approves."

"He said it himself. 'You're free to bring anyone from your own class.'"

"Yeah, but that definitely included the nuance of, 'If you've got the guts to, then go for it.'"

"Then you'll just have to show him you've got the guts."

"You make it sound so easy."

Horikita may have worn a wary expression, but what she said and what she did were the exact opposite.

She didn't hesitate to bring Kushida into her ranks in order to get as close to Class A as possible, and she even prostrated herself to do so. What else would you call this but guts?

"I think it was probably the best way to recruit Kushida."

"I think it was the best way to recruit her as well."

Amasawa showed interest by overreacting and nodding behind us.

"...Are you still going to follow me? The freak show's over."

"I'm interested to see who you'll recruit from the first years, Horikita-senpai."

"You and I aren't the kind of people who'd chat casually with each other, are we?"

"Why not? We've had a few conflicts, but only during the special exams. Aside from that, shouldn't senpais and kouhais get along better?"

Horikita raised her eyebrows slightly, but gave in, perhaps because she couldn't force her away.

"How about putting Amasawa on the student council? Her ratings in the OAA are also perfect."

"Amasawa-san isn't suitable for the student council even if she doesn't have any problems in the OAA."

"What? You could at least invite me, couldn't you? I might be open to it."

"I'll pass."

It seemed that Amasawa wasn't part of Horikita's plan for the student council.

Indeed, Amasawa probably isn't suitable for the student council, which would require taking serious actions.

"Since you're rejecting the idea, do you have any others in mind?"

"There are several candidates, but I wonder if... he's still in school."

The fact that the word 'he' was mentioned suggested that the first-year student in question was a male student.

Horikita looked around the first-year school building but didn't seem to find the person she was looking for.

She looked from Class A to Class D then sighed.

"Maybe he's already left."

Horikita complained a little, saying that she spent too much time talking with Kushida and Amasawa.

"But I can't give up right away," she said to us. "I'll ask his classmates directly. Wait here."

With those words, she stepped into the first year's Class A.

Amasawa and I looked at each other and waited for Horikita to come back.

"So, was your purpose to talk to me?"

"Hmm? Oh, are you asking about the reason why I came to the second-year building? Are you curious?"

"You're sticking around, and you're not leaving. I can't say that I don't care."

"To be honest, I came to see how Kushida-senpai was doing. You know, we had a little bit of forced contact at the festival, so I was just wondering how things were going. And Takuya was also a nuisance to me, so..."

"It seemed like you were teasing Kushida a lot, though."

Amasawa stuck out her tongue a little and smiled.

"I'm the only one who can tease Kushida-senpai so blatantly. I wanted to check how mentally strong she is."

"I see. I thought that you were just making strong and aggressive declarations, but I guess you were just doing your homework."

"I think it was a miscalculation on Kushida's part to have the White Room students get involved, but in the end, it helped her come out of her shell. I guess it all worked out for the best."

Amasawa had a cute little smile on her face.

"I have to be at least a little useful."

"Your reason for seeing Kushida makes sense, but it doesn't answer why you're following her around."

"Simple curiosity. Ayanokōji-senpai is concerned about Horikita-senpai. Since she's going to be the student council president, I thought I'd observe her charms up close. She seems to be a serious person, but she's also interesting and a bit unique. I really thought it'd be okay to join the student council for a little bit."

"Then you should've been more serious. Horikita knows that you're a capable person, so she may not have rejected you."

"It's okay, it's okay. There's no point in joining the student council now."

No point in joining now? Even though it was already nearing the end of the second term, Amasawa was still a first-year. With Yagami leaving, there was still enough time for her to serve as a replacement in the student council.

Suddenly, I thought back to the conversation I had with Amasawa before the school trip.

“What are you going to do? You haven’t given up on the idea yet, have you?”

Amasawa's eyes became sharp when I implicated something in a roundabout way.

“As expected of you, Ayanokōji-senpai. You noticed my subtle wording.”

“You said you didn't want to cause any trouble, and that I was the only one you would give special treatment to.”

It wasn’t so difficult to connect the circumstances of Yagami's expulsion to the student council.

“However, you didn't give me any sort of hint when I went after Yagami, did you? That's not your style.”

“You're right. I wanted to see if you truly were someone worth worshiping.”

“It's up to you what you want to do. You’re free to retract your previous statement and turn your vengeance against me.”

“This isn’t just me being generous, but also something born out of a lot of overwhelming emotions.”

Horikita, who had been talking with the first-year students for a while, cut us off with a satisfied look on her face.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's move.”

Horikita started to walk, but her steps were a little faster than usual.

“Who were you going to meet here?”

“I don't think you know him. A student named Ishigami-kun.”

“Ishigami?”

I was sure that it was the Ishigami I pictured in my mind. There were no other first-year students with the same surname.

“Horikita-senpai must be impressive to have an eye for Ishigami-kun, isn't she?”

Amasawa, who was also a first-year student and a classmate, was acquainted with him and naturally recognized him, so she immediately reacted.

“Is he a good student? Is he a leader of the class or something?”

I decided to feign ignorance and asked Horikita and Amasawa about Ishigami.

“He’s different from a leader. He might be more like Class A’s strategist.”

Unlike most of the other students, Amasawa's attitude does not make me feel uncomfortable.

She wasn't making it clear to me whether or not she knew of Ishigami's prior knowledge of my identity. Since she had nothing to hide now, it was possible that she didn't know anything, but it was dangerous to assume.

"What's your connection to him, Horikita?"

I didn't expect Horikita to mention Ishigami's name, so I asked her about it.

"I've known him for a little while... He's academically sound as far as the OAA is concerned, and his classmates seem to trust him a lot. I think he's one of the best. He was in the classroom a few minutes ago, and I think I might be able to catch up with him now."

That was why she was walking so fast. I wondered for a moment if it would be a good idea to follow Horikita to Ishigami, but there was no point in worrying too much.

We don't have any strange connection with each other, but it was possible that one of us would try to make unexpected contact or be assigned to the same group by chance, for example, in some special exam.

Trying to avoid him by force would be an act against the natural order of things. As we reached the hallway leading to the entrance, we noticed a small group of boys chatting in a small circle.

Horikita immediately noticed Ishigami among them and approached him.

"Ishigami-kun."

Ishigami turned around when his name was called and gave Horikita and me a silent stare.

Although this was an unexpected first meeting, Ishigami didn't show any signs of agitation.

On the contrary, it was as if he was oblivious to my presence.

This might not be surprising if you understand that in a small school, it'd be inevitable that we'd run into each other at some point. The other first-year students, though they knew Amasawa, seemed to be a bit nervous about my and Horikita's presence with us both being second-year students.

"Can I help you?"

"I've come to ask you a favor. I'd like to ask you to join the student council if you don't mind."

"..."

Ishigami, silenced by the request, turned to his friends.

"Sorry, go ahead. I'll catch up with you soon."

I wonder if they had plans to hang out together after this.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to take up too much of your time."

"It's fine, Horikita-senpai. But why me?"

Ishigami used honorifics for upperclassmen. He didn't seem to use the same kind of sass he used when he spoke with me.

“I have very little interaction with first-year students. You’re one of the few I’ve spoken with. Additionally, you’re in Class A and excel academically in the OAA. You shouldn’t be surprised that I’ve asked you to join.”

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As Horikita said, he was undoubtedly a person likely to be approached by the student council for their talents.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not interested in joining.”

Without even thinking about the offer, Ishigami refused her without hesitation.

“Would it be bothersome if I asked you to at least consider it?”

“I have no interest in club activities nor in joining the student council. Please look elsewhere.” Saying this, Ishigami turned his back on us and walked away.

For a moment, Horikita seemed to consider stopping him, but she realized that she couldn’t force him to join the student council since he seemed to have no interest in the subject.

“You’re not going to make any progress with him.”

“I thought he was a good candidate, but I guess I’ll have to give up on him.”

“There are a lot of other good students in Class A.”

“I’d like to think so, but I don’t know... I think that motivated students would’ve applied to join the student council at an early stage, like Ichinose-san last year and Yagami-kun this year, right? Basically, students don’t want to be involved in the student council if they haven’t taken any action by this time of year.”

Certainly. He would’ve taken action during Nagumo’s presidency if it was something he was interested in.

“So... what happens next?”

“The only thing left to do is to pull someone from Class 1-D.”

“Class D? That’s an unexpected choice.”

The student council’s usual approach was to select students from classes A and B, which have a high percentage of capable and serious students. But she dared to choose from Class D?

“For Class D, the addition of a student council member would be a morale boost. Certainly, the students of that class would see this as a positive thing. It’s just a matter of making them aware of its advantages.”

“Why don’t you invite someone like Housen-kun? It might be interesting.”

Amasawa recommended making an offer to an outlandish person as if she wanted to cause chaos within the student council.

“I don’t think he’d want to do it. And even if he wanted to, I wouldn’t even consider it with his current record of behavior. He would need to create a good track record over the next six months and a year.”

She rejected the playful proposal, stating that he didn’t meet the minimum requirements.

Returning to Class 1-D, Horikita looked around at the remaining students in the classroom. One of the students immediately noticed us, got up from their chair, and approached us.

“Welcome, Horikita-senpai, Ayanokōji-senpai, and Amasawa-san.”

It was Nanase Tsubasa, who appeared out of place in the first year’s Class D, where there were many poorly behaved students.

“Yoo-hoo!”

“It’s a bit unexpected to see Amasawa-san with the two of you.”

Nanase looked back and forth between me and Amasawa.

“It seems that most of the students have already left.”

“There are fewer of my classmates here than usual. Normally, more of them would be lingering behind.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. One of our classmates has a birthday and we’re going to celebrate it at Keyaki Mall. I’ve been invited to the party afterward... Why are you here in the first-year building?”

That was a sensible question.

“Takuya Yagami-kun has left the school and there’s a vacancy in the student council. I’m here to find someone to fill that vacancy.”

“You’re recruiting members for the student council?”

“I’m going to be the next student council president, and this is my first task.”

Nanase nodded her head in admiration and looked around Class D.

“Can a Class D student even apply for a council position?”

“Of course you can! I’m from Class D to begin with, so there’s no reason for me to refuse.”

“In that case... could you please let me help you?!”

“...You’d like to join, Nanase-san?”

“Yes. If you don’t have any issues with someone like me, I’d be happy to help the student council.”

“I don’t know what kind of decision Student Council President Nagumo will make, though.”

She replied saying that she wouldn’t have the final say.

Horikita may not remember the details of Nanase’s OAA, so I chimed in.

“It’s okay, isn’t it? Nanase has a good academic rating in the OAA and she’s serious, so I think she’s suitable for the student council.”

“Yes, she does seem like a good fit for the position.”

It was also an easy solution given that she’d been turned down by Ishigami.

“Okay, Nanase. Can we count on you to help out with the student council?”

“Of course!”

I had my doubts about Nanase’s true motive, but that’s one thing, and this is another.

If she could contribute to the student council, there was no reason to refuse her.

“So you have no problem with Nanase-chan joining the student council, right?”

“Yes. Unlike you.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“I think highly of your abilities. It's just that your frank attitude, way of thinking, and personality aren't suited for the student council.”

Horikita nodded her head in satisfaction at this most welcome addition to the group.

“Umm, what should I do from tomorrow onwards?”

“I don't think there'll be any problems, but first, I'll talk to Student Council President Nagumo tomorrow. I'll contact you after that's done and you've been accepted into the student council.”

Horikita exchanged contact information with Nanase. Afterward, Nanase smiled happily.

“I'm glad to have more contacts as well!”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, I'm looking forward to hearing from you!”

Nanase sent us off with a smile, and we left Class D.

“We've gathered the members. All we have to do now is wait for an answer from Student Council President Nagumo.”

“Well then, I think I'll go home too. See you later, you two!”

Amasawa came and left like a storm, and we both watched her leave.

“As usual, I can't seem to figure out what's on her mind.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for your hard work.”

“Well, I was with you, but I didn't do anything after all. You made it easy on me.”

“That's not true. At least in Kushida-san's case, your words seemed to have influenced her. I'm happy to report that you did your job.”

I assumed she was referring to the time I convinced Kushida to accept the deal.

“I'm sure I won't get any compliments from Nagumo, but I'm so happy to hear this that it almost brings tears to my eyes.”

“What's that? Oh, by the way, I'm having a study session at a cafe in Keyaki Mall after this. Do you want to come and see? Your girlfriend will be there, too.”

“A study group. Well, I'll just come by for a bit.”

“Eh?”

Horikita seemed surprised by my answer to her invitation.

“What is it?”

“No, I figured that you’d refuse like usual. Is Karuizawa-san’s presence that much of an influence?”

That wasn’t the case, but there was no way of stopping her from seeing it that way.

“I guess so. I’m concerned about whether she’s learning properly or not.” I answered and decided to go to the café with Horikita.

3

We arrived at the study group meeting at the café after school.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Saying this, Horikita naturally joined her classmates.

I was impressed by how much she had improved her socializing skills.

“Oh, Kiyotaka is here too!”

Kei, who was looking at her notebook with a difficult expression on her face, noticed me and smiled.

“I'm sorry, I'm just here for a quick visit.”

“Eh?”

Kei showed a blatantly dissatisfied expression, but she didn't continue complaining. That was largely due to me telling her yesterday that she should actively attend the study sessions and that I wouldn't help her with her studies.

“Oh, sorry, I'm late!”

Not long after we arrived, Sudō showed up at the café with his voice hoarse, tired from running.

“It must be tough to make it here while being a club member.”

“It's no big deal. I do it all the time.”

Sudō's gaze was captivated by Horikita's appearance for a moment, but he soon sat down in an empty seat nearby.

He then placed his bag on his lap and set down a set of study materials. Next, he took out a rectangular case and pulled out a pair of glasses.

“What? Sudō-kun wears glasses?”

“Ah, it's been a while. I've been thinking about trying to wear it when I'm studying. Oh well, the prescription strength isn't that high.”

In general, people with good eyesight rarely use glasses. However, good eyesight doesn't dictate whether you should or shouldn't wear glasses. Unlike basketball, where you have to look over a wide field of view, studying is a close-range battle. Adjusting your focus when looking at an object can be very eye-straining.

Many students, including Kei, were still shaken to see Sudō in such a studious mode. He probably hadn't attended many big study sessions.

“What are you staring at me for?”

“You look pretty different just by wearing glasses. And you've started to study more, haven't you?”

Shinohara poked the side of her boyfriend Ike, who was sitting beside her, with admiration.

“Oh, I'm trying, too!”

“I know that. I know, but there’s still a big gap between Sudō-kun and the two of us.”

“That’s— You know, well, yeah...”

Ike tried to argue with her, but her stinging words made him nod silently.

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I’m not really one to speak, am I? But do you have any tips on how to keep at it for a long time? I want to be at a similar level to you, and I’d like to know if you have any tips that might help. It must be hard to balance basketball and studying at the same time, right?” Some of the students nodded their heads in agreement with Shinohara’s question.

It was true that to the students with low academic ability, students such as Yōsuke, Mii-chan, and Horikita must’ve seemed like naturally-born geniuses.

They may not trust practicing the tips and tricks they’ve learned from such high-level students.

Since they were smart from the beginning, it seemed that they were capable of overcoming any obstacle.

In comparison, Sudō started out with the lowest academic ability in his class. It was natural for them to want to know what led to Sudō’s development.

“Tips...”

Sudō crossed his arms as if somewhat troubled.

Initially, Horikita was the main factor for Sudō’s studying habits.

By becoming smarter, he wanted to become a man worthy of Horikita.

However, Sudō would have difficulty explaining that in this scenario.

“Ah, I guess...”

For a while, Sudō remained silent, but he seemed to begin forming words in his head.

He started to speak, though he still felt awkward.

“Strangely enough, I started to enjoy studying. Then, basketball became more interesting... something like that?”

He began telling them why he was able to do both, and that there were other advantages to studying besides that.

“At first, I didn’t like studying. It made me sleepy quickly, and I couldn’t solve the problems easily. But, the more you learn, the more you realize how useful studying is for school.”

“But Ken, studying is useless in the future, isn’t it? Depending on your occupation, it’s not useful at all.”

Ike asked Sudō the question that everyone must’ve considered at least once.

“I’m going to be a professional basketball player myself, so I thought studying was just a distraction. But what if I don’t make it? What job can I do if I can’t even study? I could probably only do jobs that would hire anyone, right?”

There's no need to name any specific professions, but your options would be more limited than the average person.

"Even if you don't make it as a professional, you'll have more options if you study, right? You can go to a university and study something more specialized. Well, I don't have a concrete plan yet."

You don't have to stick with only one dream.

"Studying is an investment in your future. That's what I think."

Even if Sudō's path to becoming a professional basketball player, which he had been pursuing for many years, was closed off, if Sudō finds another big dream to hold on to, he won't fall behind in life.

This was Sudō's short narrative. His mental maturity had clearly advanced thanks to his continuous study.

While those around him may have laughed at those words in the past, they were instead earnestly listening to every word without making fun of him. This was how much weight and truth had been added to his words, and it proved that a new era had begun. Sudō, sitting back down with a determined look on his face, hurriedly opened his notebook.

"That's enough small talk, right? Let's get on with our studies."

Sudō, who should've been more tired than anyone else due to participating in the hardest club activities, pushed forward without showing any signs of such fatigue. He wasn't the type of person who was good at making speeches, but that was why his words and attitude were filled with a sense of truth that couldn't be hidden behind meaningless lies. This struck a chord in people's hearts.

I'm sure that the students with lower grades, such as Shinohara and Ike, were also strongly moved here.

4

The next day after school, when the new members of the student council had been decided and the study session for the special exam started, Horikita was immediately called by Nagumo and was heading to the student council office. I thought I'd never hear from him again, but...

"I was asked to bring you with me."

She displayed a message from Nagumo and pointed the screen at me as she came to tell me.

"I have a stomach ache like yesterday. I'll have to pass."

"Then it can't be helped. But if you can't come, they'll call you back later, right?"

"Let's meet and get this over with."

It was quite possible that after a long gap of time, I'd be burdened with more tedious tasks again.

She immediately got up, intending to go to the student council office, but she stopped.

"Kushida-san is coming with us too. Let's wait a little."

It seemed that she was going to introduce the new members at the same time.

I looked around for Kushida thinking she was in the class, but she was already gone.

"Maybe we should go ahead and wait for her at the office."

I left the classroom with the exasperated Horikita.

"You don't want to go with her?"

"I know we'll spend more time together once the student council starts its work anyway."

Well, that was why they'd want to spend less time together in unrelated areas, even for just a second.

"It's troublesome when grudges are formed and last without reason, okay?"

"If you were a bit more easy-going, who knows what would've happened."

"Wouldn't that have been worse? It's dangerous to let someone else take control all the time."

She was right that Kushida needed to be reined in and controlled to a certain extent.

When I arrived at the student council room, I saw Kushida and Nanase standing side-by-side in the distance.

Whether they knew each other or not, they seemed to be having a good time because of their natural ability to socialize.

“They seem to be having fun.”

“They do seem to be enjoying themselves.”

Somehow, as I watched the two of them, they never seemed to stop talking. They seemed to be in a calm mood, smiling at each other constantly, and if left alone, they could probably continue chatting forever.

“I think the student council can run well without you, Horikita, don't you agree? I'm sure both of them will be well received by the students.”

“Shut up. Let's go already.”

To prevent further idle chatter, Horikita quickly approached them.

“Good evening, Horikita-senpai.”

Nanase bowed her head in a polite greeting, and Kushida showed an undeniable smile.

“I was relieved earlier when I heard that Nanase-san was also joining the student council. I was so nervous about who else would be joining us.”

Kushida patted her chest in relief while saying something we didn't expect to hear.

The three student council members entered the room first.

I felt a little uncomfortable following them here, but since I'd been invited, I had no choice.

“Student Council President Nagumo, Kushida Kikyō of Class 2-B and Nanase Tsubasa of Class 1-D have been selected as new student council members. We've brought them with us.”

Both Nagumo and Kiriyama greeted Horikita, who explained the situation on behalf of the student council.

“Seriously, you chose one of your own classmates? You're a very brazen woman, Suzune.”

Nagumo started to laugh.

“I chose them from an impartial point of view. Are you dissatisfied with my selection?”

Rather than admitting she wanted the advantage of choosing a classmate, she lied about it.

It was obvious why Horikita chose Kushida, but rather than address it, Nagumo displayed a smile of agreement.

“There's nothing wrong with your choice. I have no complaints.”

Looking at the new student council makeup, the composition looked unfamiliar with the absence of Nagumo, Kiriyama, and Ichinose, as well as Yagami's departure.

“I think this is the first time that the student council gender ratio has been reversed.”

Kiriyama, the student council vice president, also noticed something when he looked at the list of members.

“There’s no problem. In this day and age, men and women are equal. It’s just that the next generation’s best and brightest are disproportionately women. Isn’t that right, Ayanokōji?”

“I don’t really have anything to say.”

The rise of girls wasn’t a bad thing. However, if the ideal ratio of girls to guys is 1:1, then the result of this year’s change in ratio could be said to be a reflection of the guys’ inadequacies.

“Serve as student council president fairly.”

“Yes, President.”

“Well, I guess I’m relieved of my duties as student council president now.”

He patted the president’s chair as if he was reluctant to depart, and stood up from the seat.

“It was both a long and short time. It’s an indescribable feeling.”

“Do you have any regrets?”

Seeing Nagumo’s forlorn expression, Horikita asked.

“I wanted to create an environment where talented students could graduate as Class A students, crossing the class boundaries. But I couldn’t achieve the ideal I had envisioned.”

When Nagumo became the student body president, he strongly emphasized this aspect.

As a result, the current third-year students created a situation similar to that, but it was more a result of the rules Nagumo created than the results he achieved as student council president.

“The student council here has more authority than in a normal high school. But even so, it was impossible to overturn the school’s decisions in any way. I thought I could do more about it.”

“Still, there was definitely some influence from you. Previously, there were no such rules like class transfer tickets or protection points in ANHS.”

“I guess.”

Whether or not those changes would produce good results would be found in the coming generations.

Horikita Manabu served as student council president, upholding Advanced Nurturing High School’s traditions.

Nagumo Miyabi created the OAA and brought a new style of change by placing more emphasis on merit.

What kind of student body president will Horikita Suzune, his successor, be in her first year as president?

The most obvious and difficult goal was...

It must've been to graduate in Class A after starting from Class D.

If she could do that, she'd definitely leave her name in the history books as a student council president.

"We have some paperwork to do now. Ayanokōji, please leave. Everyone else can stay behind."

I received Kiriyama's notice and was simultaneously told that I was in the way.

"Well then, I'll excuse myself."

"See you, Ayanokōji. Our battle isn't over yet."

It seemed that he called me out here just to remind me of that.

"I understand."

Bowing lightly, I left the student council office.

Leaving Horikita and the others behind in the student council room, I took out my cell phone.

It vibrated in my pocket a few times, but it seemed that I had just received some messages.

I thought it was from my girlfriend, Kei, but it wasn't.

It was an invitation from someone unexpected to meet over the holiday.

They said that they'd like to meet and talk with me on Saturday or Sunday if I have the time.

Since I have a date with Kei on Sunday, I replied saying that Saturday would be fine.

By the time I reached the front door, I received a message offering a specific time and place to meet: 2:00 p.m. on Saturday in the Keyaki Mall.

I replied to the message saying that the time worked for me and there'd be no problem.

Although they didn't mention anything about the content of the conversation, it wasn't difficult to guess the direction of the conversation considering who it was that was asking to meet.

As I exited the building, I passed a female student.

"Were you called to the student council office again?"

"Kiryūin-senpai, I see that you have business in the student council office again today. Is this regarding what happened the other day?"

"That's right. After that, the conversation ended up going on a parallel track and it's still unresolved."

"That's troublesome."

From the looks of things at that time, Nagumo probably ended up neither denying nor confirming anything.

"I'm thinking of taking a more aggressive approach today."

“They’re in the middle of making Horikita the new student council president and registering the new student council members.”

While she may still force herself in, I relayed the information just in case.

Perhaps it had an unexpected effect, Kiryūin stopped and began to ponder.

“Then, excuse me.”

My intuition was telling me that I should leave quickly anyway, but it was already too late.

“Can I have a moment of your time, Ayanokōji?”

“...Is this about the unsolved case?”

“If I push Nagumo again, he won't easily spill.”

“Why don't you take the strong-arm approach?”

“We can't traumatize the new student council president or the newcomers, can we?”

It was none of my business, but if she was willing to use violence, she could just wait until Horikita and the others left.

“You simply thought that using me might be a better solution than trying to force your way through.”

“You're really quick-witted.”

She easily praised me, but that was something that anyone would have thought of.

“I’m assuming you're just going to go home from here, right? Could you accompany me for a bit?”

“I plan on having a date with my girlfriend at home.”

“Let her wait. It's her duty as a girlfriend to patiently wait for her man to come back home.”

Kiryūin, who never seemed to wait patiently, wasn't very convincing.

“Can we do it while we walk?”

“Hmm. Well, that would be fine too.”

Kiryūin, who turned back, started walking beside me.

“Did you have a chance to discuss with Yamanaka-senpai again?”

“Nagumo and Kiriyama firmly stopped me. Don't think that you can expect any better results when you say that Nagumo's the main culprit.”

“That's a funny story. How can you be stopped from contacting someone suspected to be the main perpetrator?”

Whether it was Nagumo who gave the order or not, because she claimed it was Nagumo, Kiryūin seemed to have judged that the possibility of any other names coming out was low, even if she threatened him.

“That's true, but I was of the same opinion. When you verbally threaten Yamanaka, you can't expect to get a third party's name. When you first questioned

her, you already threatened her to the maximum extent possible, excluding violence and torture.”

In other words, it seemed that this was the result of forcing her to tell her as much as she could.

“If we take it in order, shouldn't it be Student Council President Nagumo?”

“Of course I have my doubts. That's why I'm trying to get in there. But without proof, we can't corner him any further, can we?”

And after thinking about it, she was planning to seriously threaten Nagumo.

“There's still a possibility that Nagumo isn't the culprit. Do you know what that possibility is?”

“There's a possibility that Yamanaka could've held a grudge against you without your knowledge. I don't know the details of the third-year students' situation, but it seems that there are people who dislike you.”

“You sure know how to say things that hit close to home.”

She nodded her head without denying it, laughing rather than getting angry.

“Nagumo or Yamanaka. Or is there a completely different third-party lurking in the background?”

“How about leaving it alone? If the culprits learned their lesson this time around, maybe they'll sneak off and pretend it never happened before their true identity gets revealed.”

“No. My pride won't allow me to meditate on his attempt to incriminate me.”

From the looks of things, she wasn't going to stop until she caught the culprit.

“I'm going to stand out. That's why I was hoping you could do the digging for me.”

“I don't feel like I have any obligation to cooperate. And I myself have very little interaction with third-year students, except for you and the student council members like Nagumo-senpai”.

I wasn't a suitable person to play the detective role and gather information.

“That's why. You can have a neutral perspective, can't you?”

“It makes sense if you're asking for someone with some communication skills, but...”

“I certainly can't expect you to be good at that part. However, your other abilities are perfect. Especially in terms of fighting sense, I can say that you're unrivaled. There's no one else who's convinced me that I'd be completely defeated in a fight without my direct confrontation with him.”

That may have been a compliment, but I didn't think it made me happy at all.

“There are aggressive people in the third year. You have to be strong-armed.”

“I don't want to get in trouble with the third years before you win or lose your case.”

“Well, don't say that. Cooperate with me. I don't have anyone I can call a friend. I can't act like a detective.”

I sympathized with Kiryūin-senpai being set up, but I thought it was best if I refused.

“I think you owe me one for the incident on the deserted island. Of course, you would've handled it well without me showing up, but I may have to bring it up to the student council to question the merits of it.”

She blocked my escape route with her aggressive tactics, saying that she wouldn't allow me to refuse.

“If you're going to threaten me, it'd be easier and quicker if you had threatened me from the beginning.”

“I didn't want to make a mistake. I avoided this method because I want to always have a friendly relationship with you.”

Kiryūin looked at me with her arms crossed, not seeming to take offense.

“...I understand. I'll investigate, is that okay?”

“I knew you'd say that.”

Kiryūin-senpai, looking satisfied, nodded happily.

I guess you can't just cut corners and do whatever you want.

Kiryūin was a very perceptive person, and depending on how well I did, She might get involved.

Chapter 3: How to Spend Time with Ichinose's Classmates

EARLY DECEMBER. IT was 2:00 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon, the first day of the weekend.

I received a call from Kanzaki two days before and went to the mall as promised. We didn't have a specific meeting place in mind, but as soon as I entered the mall, I was able to find Kanzaki and his group without delay.

Kanzaki, who had been watching the entrance of the mall, immediately noticed me and approached me with his hand raised slightly.

"Sorry for calling you on your day off."

"I tend to take it easy on my days off. I welcome the invitation."

I told him softly that there was no need for him to feel bad.

Himeno, Watanabe, and Amikura were all with Kanzaki.

"I was told it was just Himeno, but there are others."

"Sorry, there are a few reasons for this."

Kanzaki tried to explain the difference in details from the prior communication, but Watanabe and the others spoke first.

"Hey Ayanokōji, it's cold again today."

"Hello, Ayanokōji-kun."

Watanabe and Amikura approached me with smiles in the same manner as they did on the school trip.

In response, I nodded in agreement.

Kanzaki had already explained to me Himeno's presence, the only person who would be accompanying me today.

I had assumed that it would be *that* kind of talk, but the combination of these four was a little surprising, and I couldn't clearly see the purpose or intention of this meeting.

Or were these two the first key players for Kanzaki and Himeno?

However, how could such a coincidence occur with these members who just so happened to be together on a school trip?

"No wonder you look puzzled, Ayanokōji-kun. I myself didn't expect to run into these two either."

Himeno also looked somewhat unsettled and nodded in agreement, albeit slightly.

"What do you mean?"

I was getting more and more doubtful, but Kanzaki seemed to be more concerned about being seen.

I had assumed that the store would be less crowded for a while, but students were coming in one after another.

“Christmas sales have started.”

Amikura pointed out a store while looking at the bustling mall.

The store was indeed already decorated, and the words 'Christmas Sale' hung on the various products' shelves.

“For the time being, I'd like to move to a less conspicuous place if possible. I don't want anyone who has nothing to do with our group to know about its existence... especially those in Sakayanagi's and Ryūen's classes.”

We had no reason to refuse since we could understand the situation without asking for details.

If it was just the three of them, there would've been no problem, but with me in the group, there was no way to avoid the appearance of a mysterious gathering.

Besides, I'd prefer to discuss things in a calm and quiet place rather than in this traffic of people.

“Then why don't we just go for some standard karaoke?”

Amikura suggested karaoke, which was often used for study and strategy meetings. However, that was also one of the few places on the premises where a secret meeting could be held.

The karaoke place was only a three-minute walk from here.

“Let's get moving.”

Kanzaki took the initiative and started walking with me following after him.

“Was this some kind of serious discussion? I'm sorry, I didn't think it was.”

Amikura, who came alongside me, apologized in a whisper.

From the way she spoke, it seemed that she had suddenly decided to join the meeting.

Watanabe, who was standing next to Amikura, explained what had happened.

“It seemed like Kanzaki was going to meet Ayanokōji, so we asked if we could join him.”

“Yeah. Originally we were planning to go shopping at Watanabe-kun's request.”

When Amikura continued the explanation, Watanabe looked a little embarrassed and happy, but also somewhat sad and looked away.

“Are you sure you don't want to go shopping?”

Both of them were empty-handed and didn't appear to have bought anything.

“It's not that big of a deal. We can just go buy something later.”

I turned around as Kanzaki, who was walking in front of me, heard what we were talking about and explained it to me again.

“Originally, I thought it was just me and Himeno who needed to meet Ayanokōji. However, I changed my mind when I was told that you treated them both well during the school trip.”

They were treated well? That's my line.

Watanabe and Amikura helped me a lot in various aspects during the school trip. I am grateful, but I didn't do anything to deserve the praise.

“So you decided that you needed to invite them too?”

When I asked Kanzaki this, he nodded his head with a mysterious look on his face.

“So what is it? What is it that we're going to discuss?”

“I'll tell you the details later.”

I was able to catch a glimpse of Kanzaki's restlessness from the speed at which he was taking his first step forward.

1

After the reception at the karaoke bar, I entered our designated room with the four others. As a guest, I was taken to the back, where Watanabe, Kanzaki, and the girls all took their seats. We all ordered drinks, but nothing else.

“Should we sing a song or something...?”

Watanabe picked up a microphone on the table and jokingly pointed the tip toward Kanzaki as if he were conducting an interview. Kanzaki, who wasn't as good as him at keeping up with such a lighthearted atmosphere, looked annoyed and then lightly brushed the microphone away with his hand.

“Sorry, we'll have to do that later.”

“...Right.”

Watanabe apologized and shrugged, pulling back the microphone.

“First of all... I've told Himeno what we're going to talk about today, but you two haven't been informed yet. I already asked you before Ayanokōji arrived, but can you promise me that everything we say here will be kept strictly confidential?”

It seemed like Kanzaki told them in advance that this was a confidential conversation before he allowed them to accompany us.

“Yeah. That's fine.”

Amikura and the others seemed to take pride in their tight-lippedness. However, Kanzaki seemed wary of them.

“I'm sorry, but I still have my doubts.”

As if to prove my point, Kanzaki laid his honest thoughts bare.

“Hey, hey... What should I do then?”

Watanabe seemed to have some thoughts about being under suspicion despite having promised not to tell anyone. However, Kanzaki was right in what he did, as we would soon come to see.

If we had only met up sooner, Kanzaki could've refused to tell Watanabe and Amikura, who tried to follow him out of curiosity, to leave it for another time.

But that didn't happen, and the fact that he was carefully checking the situation meant that inviting them may have been a gamble.

I was suspicious, but I wanted to trust and rely on these two people.

“Can't I just sign a contract or something? I won't tell anyone.”

“I see. A signed contract. That's not a bad idea. It's also possible to record it with a cell phone.”

Make them swear in front of the camera not to tell anyone, and punish them if they break the contract.

Such an approach would be one way to keep them tight-lipped.

Without hesitation, Kanzaki pulled out his cell phone and placed it on the table as if to show it off.

“Are you serious? I don't know, that might make me a little bit uncomfortable.”

Amikura showed some of her dislike for the proposal, not believing that the suggestion came from a classmate.

“I told you. We'll have an important talk with Ayanokōji today. I believe that if anything we say here is leaked, the repercussions will be immeasurable.”

“It isn't an exaggeration...?”

Kanzaki wasn't the only one looking at Watanabe during this questioning. Himeno was also looking at him with the same intensity.

“Can you promise not to tell anyone?”

Kanzaki placed his hand on the phone and asked again for confirmation, accepting the backlash he'd face because of his methods.

If you don't want to take responsibility, you should leave now.

I think that Kanzaki's determination and spirit deeply permeated both of them.

“I promise. I will never tell anyone.”

“...Me too. It's not cool to leave because I can't keep a secret. I can have my cell phone record it if you want.”

If they break their word and speak out, they were sure to be looked down on, at least by Kanzaki and Himeno.

Although they didn't appear to be close friends, Watanabe and his classmates had a sense of responsibility to protect each other as people.

Convinced, Kanzaki put away his cell phone, took his eyes off the two of them, and turned to me.

“Once again, Watanabe and Amikura will remain present.”

“I have no objection to this. This is a problem regarding Ichinose's class.”

If a foreign entity was mixed in, it was Kanzaki's fault for making an error in judgment.

“I want to ask you one thing before I get into the main topic. Most of the class, including Watanabe and the others, have overheard a rumor that Ichinose's leaving the student council.”

Is it true? They weren't just casually asking. It was an intense question.

Since a replacement hadn't been officially announced yet, Ichinose's statement that she had resigned hadn't been elicited.

However, as the recruiting process proceeded, the rumor spread and Kanzaki and the others heard about it.

“Why did you think I'd know?”

“Because your name was among the rumors.”

I was a little caught up by the implied phrase, but my confusion was resolved by Watanabe's statement immediately afterward.

“There were rumors that you were going to join the student council.”

Rumors are interesting. Someone who saw me interacting with Horikita, the forthcoming student council president, may have thought so and spread the story.

“You’ll soon find out, but it’s true that Ichinose’s resigning from the student council.”

“...I guess it's true then.”

If he asked her directly, Ichinose wouldn’t deny it, but Kanzaki and the others didn’t have the guts to confirm it.

If they asked her why she was about to quit, then many other questions would also arise. If they heard that she had already quit, they might start to bombard her.

If something like that happened, it would cause some discord in the class.

“Ichinose would’ve liked to tell you as soon as possible, but Nagumo ordered her to keep it quiet until a replacement was found. That's why she couldn’t tell you even if she wanted to.”

I'll make sure that point is clear so that they don't misunderstand me.

“It’s up to Ichinose to decide whether to continue being in the student council. I know that I, as her classmate, have no right to say anything about it. However, I can't get rid of this ominous feeling.”

“I guess Ichinose-san has given up on moving up to Class A, after all.”

Unlike Kanzaki, who was using an indirect way of expressing his feelings, Himeno didn’t try to sugarcoat it.

She left the student council at the stage where they were chasing after Class A and competing with the other classes. It was possible for Ichinose to relay this news in a positive way. Just by telling her friends that she was leaving the student council in order to focus on inter-class competition, she could’ve convinced them that she was serious about it.

However, now that they were on the verge of dropping from the class struggle, they saw her departure from the student council in a different light.

This act would be perceived as surrendering their weapons and giving up on their pursuit to Class A.

In fact, Kanzaki and Himeno seemed to think so themselves.

On the other hand...

“That's a bit of a leap, isn't it, Himeno? I don't think Honami-chan will give up on Class A so easily.”

In contrast, Amikura, who continued to believe without any doubts at all, refuted the scenario.

“Then why did Ichinose quit the student council?”

“Maybe she was trying to concentrate on getting into Class A, so she quit the student council to relieve the burden?”

Amikura spoke up, refusing to believe that Ichinose had given up.

Watanabe, who also seemed to agree with Amikura's view, nodded his head repeatedly.

“Then why didn't she explain it to us properly? If she did that, we'd be able to rest easy.”

“The student council president asked her to keep quiet about it, didn't he? Honami-chan wouldn't carelessly break her promise.”

In response to Himeno's rebuttal, Amikura responded reasonably. If she was told to keep quiet, it'd be natural for Ichinose to remain silent until she'd be allowed to reveal it.

“Ichinose hasn't given up on Class A. That's what our current class thinks.”

“So, Kanzaki, you're saying that Ichinose quit the student council because she gave up on reaching Class A?”

“That isn't what I mean. The truth will remain unknown unless we hear it directly from her. However, what I'm trying to say is that you're believing in her too blindly. Why has no one considered the possibility that her decision to leave the student council was made because she gave up on Class A?”

Amikura and the others here have now spoken for themselves, as well as the rest of their class.

“It's obvious... because Honami-chan isn't that kind of girl.”

“I agree with you. And Kanzaki, I think you're the one who assumed that Ichinose has given up on Class A. Otherwise, you wouldn't have said that.”

Hearing Amikura's and Watanabe's comments, which seemed to be the embodiment of blind belief, Kanzaki opened his mouth without hesitation.

“Admittedly, I strongly believe that possibility. However, I believe it's only a 70/30 chance, at best.”

Kanzaki was 70% convinced she had given up, which wasn't a small chance. Rather, it was quite high.

“You're always skeptical, aren't you?”

Unsurprisingly, Watanabe responded with an exasperated tone.

“I doubt it's as much as Kanzaki-kun said, but I think it's at least 50-50.”

“Himeno-san, are you serious?”

“Of course I'm serious. I mean, shouldn't you be a little skeptical?”

“There's nothing to be skeptical about. It's Honami-chan.”

Himeno and Kanzaki exchanged glances. They wanted to believe that there were other classmates sharing the same doubtful thoughts they had.

The reality, however, was that students like Amikura and Watanabe were probably in the majority.

Really, they didn't take into account the possibility that Ichinose's heart may have been broken.

"I feel sorry for Honami-chan... She is being treated so poorly just for quitting the student council."

"But we'll definitely lose the class benefit if she resigns from the student council."

"I don't even know if we should complain given that we haven't ever joined the student council ourselves."

Watanabe's objection had some merit too. No one could blame Ichinose for her actions. No one had the right to do so.

If anyone were to blame Ichinose, they'd be immediately admonished.

If they didn't want to lose the student council benefits, they should run for office and do something about it.

Due to the conflicting opinions being exchanged, the karaoke box went quiet.

We hadn't even gotten to the main topic yet, but the inner workings of Ichinose's class were beginning to emerge.

Kanzaki was by no means incompetent, but he made a few statements that left him vulnerable, making it easy to refute him.

Perhaps this was due to a discrepancy between Kanzaki's thoughts and his ability to articulate them.

His inexperience with speaking out was showing on his face.

"...Let's move the conversation forward a bit. After all, Ayanokōji doesn't really know why Ichinose quit, does he?"

Distressed, Kanzaki broke off the conversation and asked me for confirmation.

It'd be better to offer a light helping hand here.

Why did Ichinose quit? They all wanted to confirm her intentions.

"I'm sorry to say this, but I don't know what Ichinose's thinking right now. I never imagined that she'd resign from the student council."

After saying this, I decided to resume before anyone else's response came back.

If I continued handing over the initiative to Kanzaki, I'd risk the conversation going back and forth.

Although I'm an outsider, I should minimize the risk here.

And it could be used as a test case I could reference later on.

"Wouldn't her classmates, who spend every day in the same class as her, know more about the situation than I would?"

"Uh, that's certain... You hit a sore spot, Ayanokōji."

Both Watanabe and Amikura were willing to trust Ichinose, but they weren't able to see the essence of the situation.

The same went for Kanzaki and Himeno.

It was good that there were multiple skeptical viewpoints within the class, but so far, this only resulted in changing a few perspectives. It didn't fulfill its job—changing the class into its ideal form.

“It's true that it's a problem that we, as classmates, don't know anything about this...”

Amikura had her own thoughts on the matter, which she reflected on.

While waiting for the four of them to answer, the waiter came to serve us the drinks we ordered.

It seemed that the karaoke was crowded since morning and the orders were taking longer than usual. The waiter asked me to order early if I wanted anything else before leaving.

“Kanzaki. Before you start lecturing Watanabe and the others, I think you need to make sure you can confirm the situation with the student council yourself. Don't you think so?”

“But if I take action now...”

“Take action? There's nothing wrong with confirming Ichinose's true intentions. There are many ways to contact her, whether it's early in the morning or late at night, by phone, or in person.”

And it wasn't only Kanzaki, but also Himeno, who had a straight face.

“Are you satisfied with just having a few sympathetic classmates while you're out there not taking any action?”

“But... I mean, I'm not particularly close with Ichinose, and I can't possibly imagine that she would tell me the truth if I asked her.”

The problem with Ichinose's class wasn't limited to their blind worship.

“Then, you should try to get closer to her than anyone else. If you were close enough with Ichinose to the point you two could confide in each other without keeping any secrets, Himeno, there wouldn't have been any doubts or suspicions here.”

All that Himeno needed to do was to extract the information and share it with Kanzaki as soon as possible.

Her expression became rigid and she didn't seem to know how to respond.

“Wait a minute... I understand what Ayanokōji's trying to say, but you're going a little overboard...”

Watanabe, who had been on the receiving end of the blame from Kanzaki and the others up to this point, came to her defense.

“It isn't easy for Ichinose to speak her mind... If it were easy to share your feelings, no one would have a hard time.”

He answered, perhaps sensing the tension becoming heavy in the room. His words showed a high level of awareness when it came to protecting his friends.

Even in the midst of bad news, there were things that came to light through discussions like this.

“I don't know the details of what Ichinose acts like with her classmates. That's why some questions come to mind.”

“Such as?”

“If you can't ask her directly, you can observe her and come to understand her feelings on your own. If there's a student who's not feeling well, anyone would notice and ask, 'Are you okay?' If Ichinose doesn't always have a poker face, looking for changes in her expression can be a useful method.”

One essential aspect of understanding emotions is looking at the other person's facial expressions.

Regardless of whether they knew the details, I wanted to know if there were any noticeable changes in Ichinose's behavior before and after she left the student council.

The four of them were probably thinking hard about their most recent time spent with Ichinose.

I would like to know if there were any gestures, facial expressions, or events before or after the school trip that hinted at something.

Did she make any kind of SOS?

However...

“I don't know, it was the same as usual... right?”

After a period of silence, Watanabe stated that there was nothing unusual going on.

Nervous, he looked at his classmates as if seeking their agreement.

Amikura also expressed her own feelings in response to Watanabe's comment.

“That's right. If it's true that she's resigning from the student council, there might not be any change, regardless of her resignation. Even today, we were discussing the next special exam.”

“...I agree with you.”

Kanzaki, who probably had the most insight into Ichinose's behavior, didn't deny it. Most of Kanzaki's classmates were closed-off in their thinking and didn't share any information.

However, when those four got together and spoke, previously closed doors were bound to open.

“However... this isn’t really recent, but I don’t know what to say, she hasn’t been in good spirits since the end of the deserted island test. The reason is... I don’t think it’s so much about Class A.”

Amikura said hesitantly, casting a casual glance in my direction.

“What? Was she? I didn’t notice that at all... Really?”

Not only Watanabe, but also Kanzaki seemed to be unaware of it as well.

“Indeed, it was odd.”

Himeno chimed in, showing a certain understanding of Amikura’s statement.
I hadn’t noticed it before, but now that I think about it, that might be the case.

The two boys seemed to be clueless, but the two girls seemed to have some idea of what was going on.

“No wonder Honami-chan is so strange...”

“You seem to have an idea about the cause. Care to share, Amikura?”

“Well, um, she wasn’t feeling well, but that isn’t really related to her resignation from the student council, I think...?”

“Why do you assume so? Even if that’s the case, if she isn’t well, I’d like to know the cause as soon as possible. It’s also related to the chain of command in our classroom.”

“I know what you mean, but... Ayanokōji-kun, what should I do?”

She asked for help in a panic, thinking that she may have said something unnecessary.

Unlike Amikura, who was a good friend of Ichinose and knew what was going on, the rest of the group didn’t seem to understand. However, seeing the strange pause and the situation where she asked me for help, Himeno had a sudden realization.

“Oh, you mean *that’s* the cause?”

“That’s what I meant!”

She wasn’t a girl for nothing. Despite being one of the three who were oblivious to the circumstances, she noticed it first and was one step ahead.

“I didn’t know much about it, but... seems to make sense.”

“Tell us, Himeno. What could be the reason for Ichinose’s lack of energy?”

Kanzaki, who had been left out of the loop, asked with an approaching air.

“I don’t mean to say this in front of you, but Ichinose-san’s low energy has something to do with Ayanokōji-kun, doesn’t it?”

Amikura nodded hesitantly at Himeno’s comment.

“What do you mean...?”

Kanzaki was surprised to hear that I was the reason behind Ichinose’s behavior.

If they continued to talk vaguely, Kanzaki and Watanabe would only become more confused.

“Although it concerns Ichinose's private life, it's not a good idea to withhold information under these circumstances, so I'll tell you... During the deserted island exam, I received a confession from Ichinose.”

When I revealed the information I had been keeping to myself, Watanabe was the most shocked of all.

“A confession? Huh? What? Huh? She likes you?”

“That's what it means.”

“For real? That Ichinose? With Ayanokōji?? That's huge news!”

“No way...!? I didn't know that either...”

Amikura was so shocked that she covered her mouth with both hands and couldn't speak.

“What?! Then what was Amikura talking about?!”

Panic fell in the karaoke box as each person had different information.

“I knew Honami-chan liked Ayanokōji-kun, but I was shocked to find out that Karuizawa-san had already become his girlfriend.”

I didn't think Ichinose's best friend, Amikura, knew that she had expressed her feelings for me.

“It was about the same time that I found out about Kei. It's no different.”

Watanabe seemed puzzled by this.

“Shibata would cry if he found out about this... No, it wouldn't just stop with Shibata...”

“Love affairs... I see...”

Kanzaki shook his head several times while holding his forehead, as if the topic was giving him a headache.

“No, but that certainly doesn't sound like much of a relation, even if she wasn't in good spirits...”

The three of them tried to separate the student council from the matter, but...

“But we don't know, do we? I don't know how long Ichinose-san has been in love with Ayanokōji-kun, but a broken heart is a troublesome matter. Maybe she's dragging it on and losing her cool.”

She thinks I had something to do with her quitting the student council?

I was going to deny it, but I couldn't prove that it was 100% wrong with the current information.

“If Ayanokōji breaks up with Karuizawa and goes out with Ichinose right now, is there a chance she'll snap out of it...?”

Kanzaki muttered to himself, hoping to somehow improve the class.

“That's ridiculous, isn't it...?”

“That's an outrageous suggestion, isn't it?” While saying that, Amikura's tone seemed to imply, “What do you think?”

“I'm sorry, but I can't accept such a proposal from an unrelated party,”

“...You’re absolutely right.”

Love and class warfare must be separated, even if they affect each other indirectly.

“I’ve shared this information with you, but now we should cut in from a different direction.”

“Why are you so calm, Ayanokōji? I mean, you’re pretty lucky to be liked by Ichinose! Have some appreciation for that!”

I didn't like him talking about such things so passionately.

Anyway, the first thing to do now was to change the four of them, who had become flippant, in their thinking.

We narrowed down our search to find out why Ichinose quit the student council.

“Is there any indication that she was feeling down about fighting against Ryūen’s Class?”

Nobody answered as if their minds hadn’t switched over yet.

After a short pause, while taking a drink, Amikura raised her hand in a small gesture.

“So far, I guess things are really the same as usual. Like, trying to win in a good way?”

“I agree. It's like we're trying to do the same thing we've always done.”

“Yeah. I've heard some specific ways to fight.”

Kanzaki was the only one who didn’t speak up, perhaps because he was in agreement with the three of them.

However, it seemed like he was thinking about what would come next.

“That's why it can be seen as the flip side of pushing yourself too hard. Even though she's been cornered enough to quit the student council, she's putting on a front so as not to burden us, her classmates...”

Once you start thinking about it, unless you break the chain, you’ll be stuck in an endless swamp of thoughts.

But Kanzaki and the others need to think about it carefully.

They must delve deeper and expand their thoughts more widely.

By giving each individual the power to think, they could revitalize the class.

“I know you want to know why Ichinose quit the student council. I understand that Kanzaki and the others are also struggling with multiple choices. But what’s the real intention behind it? Do you not want Ichinose to push herself too hard, or do you want her to work even harder for the class if she’s quitting the student council? I want to know more about the details of that.”

I told them what I wanted to know and took a sip of oolong tea.

All of them seemed to be struggling with their answers as they remained motionless, exchanging only glances with each other.

I could tell just by looking at them.

Predictions of what Ichinose's classmates who weren't here would be thinking.

Many of them would be worried about Ichinose's mental state.

They would be genuinely worried about Ichinose as their classmate before worrying about whether their leader falls down or not.

However, that wasn't all for Kanzaki and Himeno.

“Let me speak first. Naturally, I expect Ichinose to be a leader. The student council isn't really important, and if she feels that the student council is a burden, she should quit without hesitation. What's important is whether or not Ichinose has the will to rebuild the current class and reach Class A. If she's lost that will, then we're in trouble.”

“I think Ichinose still has that will. But if she gave up on Class A, then it's not something the outsiders can say anything about, right? In rare circumstances, it's a matter of personal freedom to aim for it or not.”

It is no wonder that Watanabe, who showed a side of him that cares about his friends, cannot be forced to comply with him.

“Yeah... we can't force her, right?”

Amikura felt the same and expressed her willingness to accept the decision to give up.

When someone gives up, it's definitely not a good idea to force them to aim for a goal like Class A.

“However, as a leader, it's not acceptable behavior. She should relay these feelings to the class as soon as possible.”

At the very least, they hoped she wouldn't drag her feet. In that respect, they didn't have to worry about Ichinose, someone who wouldn't want to trouble her fellow classmates. It was easy to imagine that she'd at least contribute to the best of her abilities for the sake of her friends.

“If she's going to give up, she'll make it clear at an early stage, because she wouldn't get good results if she continued to force herself into the leader position without intending to aim for Class A.”

“So it's okay. In fact, Ichinose hasn't said anything, has she?”

“What I fear is Ichinose's inherent goodwill as a person. I said something similar earlier, but what if she's hiding the truth of giving up as a bluff and pretending to be strong? There's nothing more difficult for the class than that.”

Because of her concern for her friends, she kept her feelings of giving up to herself. But if Ichinose truly had a broken heart, it wouldn't be surprising if she was pretending to be strong while secretly feeling defeated.

“I kind of understand what you mean, but... is it necessary to cooperate with Himeno-san to prevent that?”

“Not only that. We need to gather people who can offer opinions to Ichinose, to provide her with another perspective. It's important to have a second option instead of solely relying on the leader.”

“Somehow, that seems a bit like a betrayal, doesn't it?”

The class led by Ichinose must've always been a united one. No, it should be. From Amikura's perspective, who held such a view, it was inevitable that Kanzaki and the others' potential actions may seem like defection.

“We need to act now before it's too late. We need to prepare for that.”

“That's what I'm saying. As Ayanokōji pointed out, there are still some things to be done...”

Watanabe and Amikura, who had been slow at first, now understood the situation. However, the conversation was still vague and disjointed.

Kanzaki seemed to be acutely aware of this, and the awkward atmosphere didn't dissipate.

I guess this is the end of us trying to find Ichinose's reasons for quitting the student council.

Even if we persisted further, we probably wouldn't be able to get any closer to the truth with the amount of information we had. It was pointless to continue spending time on a discussion that had no answer.

“Kanzaki... it's about time you told me what you wanted to say.”

“Hmm? Ahh.”

Kanzaki looked at his cell phone to check the time as if he had just recalled something.

“The main reason for calling you out here today was to introduce a new associate. He had other business to attend to in the morning, so he's arriving late, but he should be here any moment now.”

For the next 20 minutes or so, we chatted casually, without talking about anything noteworthy. We waited for a bit, talking about what happened on the school trip.

“Sorry to bother you.”

“You're here, Hamaguchi.”

Hamaguchi? When I turned my gaze, Tetsuya Hamaguchi from Ichinose's class showed up.

“Hamaguchi-kun really...? No way, That's surprising...”

Watanabe and Amikura exchanged glances, and Amikura's expression revealed that Hamaguchi was not someone they were expecting to see.

“Hey, Ayanokōji-kun. I wonder if we've met face to face like this since the deserted island test.”

“Maybe. I was indebted to you for all you did for me then.”

It was still fresh in my memory that they politely welcomed me, a stranger, in the midst of the need to conserve food.

“I didn't do much. Where should I sit?”

“For the time being... Hamaguchi, please sit here.”

Kanzaki got up from his seat and led Hamaguchi to the other side of the room.

“Was it Hamaguchi who was supposed to join us later?”

“Yeah. I guess you could say it's just Hamaguchi for now.”

In other words, except for Watanabe and Amikura, who unexpectedly decided to jump in, there were three of us.

“I've already talked to Hamaguchi about helping us on this matter.”

“That means he is officially the third member of the team.”

Kanzaki and Himeno had come up with someone who could change Ichinose. Of course, Watanabe and his classmates didn't understand the situation.

However, it was Kanzaki's will that allowed these two to be present at the meeting, even if it was by chance. If he felt they were an obstacle, he could have rescheduled the meeting and held it on another day.

“We've come to the point where we have to start moving forward.”

Himeno nodded silently at Kanzaki's determination, which had increased by one gear.

“Wait, Hamaguchi-kun. I heard from Kanzaki-kun, but do you know what you're going to do?”

“Ichinose-san's mental state is in a precarious condition. It's not a good idea to leave it as it is. I've been thinking about this since becoming a second-year student, not because Kanzaki-kun pointed it out to me.”

Apparently, Hamaguchi had already detected Ichinose's anxiety.

“Really? You had never shown any such indication before.”

“That's true. The class didn't like that kind of atmosphere. No one would follow me if I tried to take action on my own, because we've all seen how Kanzaki-kun has been suffering from it for so long.”

The details here were unknown to me, a member of another class, but the truth and weight of it were evident in the gestures and expressions of the classmates here.

“I don't want Ichinose-san to be removed as a leader. I want her to be able to support her classmates in times of trouble. Kanzaki-kun's invitation came at the right time.”

“Even when I was left isolated during the unanimous special exam, Hamaguchi kept checking on me when no one was around. I could tell from his behavior and tone that he understood how I was feeling.”

By observing his actions and demeanor, it's clear that Hamaguchi is both dependable and trustworthy.

It may be similar to Yōsuke's role and potential in Horikita's class.

“Was it really okay to tell me and Amikura such a secret?”

“It's a gamble. It's important to proceed slowly under the radar, but with Ichinose's departure from the student council, we've decided that it's no longer a scenario we can afford to take our time with. If we can't bring in Watanabe and Amikura, we'll soon be at a standstill.”

From the chance contact, it seemed that Kanzaki saw the light and chose to move forward. Amikura's comments were more pro-Ichinose, but she also had her own ideas.

“I don't mind being trusted, but...”

“Well, I promised not to tell anyone, didn't I?”

Both parties seemed to be confused, but they didn't seem to be betraying each other.

“I'm not asking you to take our side immediately. I just hope that you'll change your mind, even if it takes a while. So far, you've been too keen on leaving the decision up to Ichinose.”

“It'd be a different story if you're planning on doing something bad, but I understand that you're acting for the good of the class. I'll think about it, though I won't make up my mind immediately.”

Watanabe, who showed a certain understanding, replied with a slight smile stretching from his cheeks.

“I may not be able to say anything yet. But as Watanabe said, I won't tell Honami-chan about this. That's all I can say now...”

“That's enough.”

I don't think they'll respond to Kanzaki's expectations if they forcefully ask them, here and now, to do more than that.

“By the way, what exactly do you and Kanzaki plan to do from now on?”

“Specifically? The first step is to save the class...”

As Kanzaki was about to continue with his statement, he suddenly looked at the door, which was opened with a bang.

“Ooooooh! I'll get out of your way~!”

Both Ishizaki and Komiya entered the karaoke box without permission.

Did someone here call them? I thought, but it didn't look like it.

Clearly, the atmosphere was different from what it had been just now.

“What're you doing here on your day off? Please include me in the conversation.”

Ishizaki's eyes turned to me for the first time, not knowing that I was there.

“Why's Ayanokōji here in this gathering?”

“Why are you here, Ishizaki and Komiya?”

“Why, well, there are a lot of reasons. You know?”

Ishizaki looks somewhat annoyed and lets his gaze wander off towards Komiya.

“Oh, oh. We were both at karaoke and I saw you guys. I thought it would be more fun to have a bunch of people singing than just two guys singing in solitude.”

He replied by touching the glass door of the karaoke room with a bang.

“We don't get along at all, do we?”

Amikura cut right into Ishizaki and the others.

“That's... that's... you see. That's why? We're trying to get to know each other through singing.”

Obviously, they were making up some lame excuses.

Not wanting to let the charade continue, Kanzaki revealed the purpose of the two.

“Since the day the special exam was announced, we've been getting outrageous contact from Ryūen's class day after day.”

“Again?”

Amikura crossed her arms in disgust, though she didn't seem to be angry.

“What's so outrageous about it?”

“You're barging into another group's box without permission, no?”

“We just came to check on our fellow second-years. We just wanted to see what you were singing. You seemed to be having a good time so we were wondering if we could join you.”

Ishizaki was putting up a string of painful excuses to match Komiya's, but no one believed him.

“I'm sorry, but this isn't a study group meeting today.”

“It seems like...”

Ishizaki noticed that there were no study materials on the table and scratched his head.

Ryūen's class was pitted against Ichinose's class. Amikura's “again” suggested that this had been happening repeatedly since they made the decision to go up against each other.

“So can you leave?”

Unless they were studying, there was no merit for Ishizaki and Komiya staying since they seemed to be just a group that enjoyed karaoke.

“Tsk. Let's move on to the next one.”

Finally, Ishizaki and his classmate left the room, clicking their tongues in blunt admission.

“They're a bunch of idiots. No, it's all Ryūen giving them orders.”

“That’s right. They should study seriously, but all they think about is dragging us down.”

“It’s just like last year’s final exam.”

At that time, Ryūen was also involved in quite dangerous behaviors because he was trying to win. I doubted that Ryūen would overdo it this time, but I didn’t know what kind of measures he’d take.

“Are you under any pressure to sign an unreasonable contract?”

“It’s okay, we’ve already taken a firm countermeasure. Of course, we can’t say that there won’t be any trouble in the future, so we’ll remain vigilant.”

Kanzaki stood up and returned to his seat after making sure Ishizaki and Komiya really left.

“I’m going to get back to the main topic now. The first step to save the class is to quickly ascertain what state of mind Ichinose is in. If we don’t get her back to normal, we won’t be able to move forward or backward.”

Indeed. Now was the time when no one knew Ichinose’s true state of mind.

“I wish there was some way to get a complete picture of what’s going on...”

“I guess the only way is for us to be there for Honami-chan.”

“What difference does it make?”

“What? I’m at a loss to say what’s different...”

“It’s because we’ve continued to stand still like this that we’re where we are today.”

“Hey, Kanzaki, don’t be so quarrelsome. We’re allowed to speak freely in this conversation, aren’t we?”

Watanabe interrupted Kanzaki’s lecture with a slightly angry tone and continued.

“We need the courage to put forward ideas, but if they get suppressed and crushed like that, it would be harder for the next opinion to come out, won’t it?”

“...But...”

“No, I agree with Watanabe-san’s opinion. I refrained from speaking out myself so far, but Ichinose-san isn’t the only one who has a big problem.”

In Watanabe’s defense, Hamaguchi calmly expressed to Kanzaki his complaint.

“I appreciate what you’re doing for the class, but what’s the point if it’s just spinning out of control?”

Although it was still a small group, individual members had more will than I thought. While most of the members were blindly believing in Ichinose, there were some who had doubts.

However, Hamaguchi and Watanabe weren’t necessarily able to stand out in such a serious situation.

That was why they could speak freely under Kanzaki's presence, who took the initiative in coming forward.

"I don't think it's a bad idea to be there for her. I don't think Ichinose-san would easily answer if we ask her forcibly, and I think it's important to observe and assess naturally."

"You want me to take my time? In this situation where there's no more time left? It would take too long."

"No, I think it depends on how you approach it. We only know Ichinose-san as a leader, but Amikura-san is different. I think she has a lot of chances to hang out with her friends on her days off. That should open up more opportunities for us."

Amikura nodded emphatically in agreement.

"Having more opportunities is a benefit. However... there may also be downsides. Because Amikura-san and the others are regularly around Ichinose-san, they may also be more easily guarded against and unable to get close to her."

Even among close friends, there was still etiquette to be observed. Amikura couldn't just ask anything without discretion.

Himeno, who I expected to be the least likely to speak, raised a light hand before anyone else.

"Let me hear it."

"How about having Ayanokōji-kun check on Ichinose-san during the break? Then, he can ask her about things. Students in other classes usually don't trust each other, but if they're with someone they like, they'll loosen up, won't they?"

"That could work. Even Ichinose-san wouldn't mind being asked by someone she likes, and as Himeno suggested, her guard may be lowered..."

Hamaguchi seemed to know that Ichinose was in love with me.

"But as I said, Ayanokōji's from another class. That's probably my biggest concern."

"But you trust him, right? You've invited him to such an important discussion."

Himeno's sharp comeback made Kanzaki stop mid-sentence.

"Let's see what our classmates don't see."

"I understand what you mean, but Ayanokōji has a girlfriend, doesn't he? You know, Karuizawa... That's a problem in many ways, isn't it?"

"Honami-chan stands out. If she's meeting with a boy alone, rumors might start. At the very least, he needs to get permission from Karuizawa-san and prove that it's not a date... but since Honami-chan likes Ayanokōji-kun, it's not a matter of permission..."

The others started getting excited and brought up my name without my permission.

“In the first place, is it okay to proceed like this without Honami-chan? I know it's for the sake of the class, but it's kind of... I don't like it because it's like I'm trying to take advantage of her feelings.”

It wasn't surprising that Amikura, who seemed to be in a particularly close relationship with Honami-chan, would complain about this.

Class D had been centered around Ichinose in both good and bad times.

“We're not taking this initiative solely for the special exam. This is something we're doing for Ichinose's sake. It'd be absurd to tell her that we're worried about her mental condition.”

Kanzaki tried to convince Amikura, but she didn't seem to be easily convinced.

“I know that you wanted to change the class during the unanimous special exam. I don't mean to say that this is a bad thing, but I don't think what you're doing behind the scenes, such as secretly consulting Ayanokōji-kun and entertaining Himeno-san, is praiseworthy.”

It was a natural thought for a student from Ichinose's class, who was supposed to value transparency.

“It's clear that if you act openly, you'll get opposition. That's why, instead of acting alone, Himeno and Hamaguchi have cooperated with me. This gives strength to my opposition.”

It was true that more than half of the attendees here were on Kanzaki's side.

If it were Kanzaki alone, he'd have to fight one against four, but now it was practically three against two.

With allies on his side, he could expect help from reinforcements.

“I guess setting up a date with Ayanokōji-kun is the way to go.”

Himeno tried to conclude so, but Amikura still had a hard expression, and she didn't change her position.

“You don't seem to have any hesitations. Are you that dissatisfied with Honami-chan's way of doing things?”

“I am...”

“Kanzaki understands, right? He was always giving his opinions by Honami's side, and sometimes he strongly advocated for his own opinions. But I've never heard Himeno do anything like that.”

“Himeno-chan...”

Kanzaki tried to argue on her behalf, but Hamaguchi stopped him with his hand.

“I think it's meaningless if you don't speak up about important things like this.”

Hamaguchi's ability to look at the bigger picture and judge things objectively and correctly was a great new asset.

“I don't like the stance where 'everyone holds hands and gets along with each other.' It's not a recent thing. It's been like that since before I entered this school. I don't really like socializing with friends, and if anything, I feel more comfortable being alone.”

Until now, Amikura would've never known that Himeno had been thinking that.

“But I'm not good at expressing my opinion, and I thought it was easier to just go along with whatever everyone else was doing and stay quiet. So whenever I was invited to do something with the group, I'd just go along quietly, thinking that it was easier to follow along if everyone else was going to follow Ichinose-san. That's all it was.”

Himeno had never expressed her own opinions and was content to be influenced by those around her.

“But I always thought that I could never make it to Class A with only Ichinose-san's methods. Though, it can't be helped. If everyone else is going to follow without saying a word, then I have no choice but to follow.”

Himeno, who probably still had a hard time making eye contact with others, continued to talk while staring at the monitor where the screen continued to play.

“But I learned that Kanzaki-kun was serious about changing the class. I learned that he didn't want to give up on graduating in Class A. So... I decided to take a chance on it.”

“So it's like choosing between going along comfortably and ending up in Class B or lower or striving hard and graduating from Class A, even if it's difficult. That's what it comes down to.”

Watanabe muttered after hearing Himeno's thoughts, which he never heard before.

“I see. I understand how Himeno-san feels. I didn't understand anything before.”

“It's no wonder. We never really talked about it.”

But in other words, the same could be said of Ichinose. It was difficult to know how much of what she was saying was true unless she told so herself.

While expressing some dissatisfaction with the approach, Amikura also showed a certain level of understanding.

“I'll ask as a representative of the class. I want to know how Ichinose feels about resigning from the student council and her future plans. Does she still think we can succeed? I want to hear her true feelings.”

Having reached a conclusion, Kanzaki said this and bowed his head to me.

“I have no particular reason to refuse...”

I said so, and Kanzaki, who usually didn't smile much, bowed his head in gratitude with a happy expression.

“But what are you going to do about the Karuizawa problem?”

“I'm not going to do anything about it. I'm just going to explain the situation to her and make her understand.”

“The situation is about other classes, you know. I wonder if Karuizawa-san will honestly accept you admitting to helping us. I mean, won't she get suspicious?”

“Don't worry about that.”

Although it was a sudden request, it was a good opportunity for them to try out what they wanted to try.

2

Amikura suggested that we enjoy a little karaoke, but I had to go to the bathroom before that. Although the meeting took an unexpected turn, Kanzaki and the others showed signs of growth during the discussion, which was a big plus.

The only thing left to do was to invite Ichinose out to talk about the circumstances of her leaving the student council.

It'd be preferable if Kanzaki and the others could handle this, but I didn't recommend Kanzaki and the others to do so, as it may only cause chaos in the class.

I'd like them to stay friends with Ichinose.

I didn't regret taking on the task itself, but the difficult part was getting Ichinose to accept the invitation. It was unavoidable that she'd become suspicious if I invited her out during a time when two major events occurred in a row—that being the reveal of a major special exam and her leaving the student council.

Should I just straightforwardly ask her and confirm the reason?

No, it was probably better to check on Ichinose's mental state first before deciding what to do.

If asking her bluntly would lead to negative consequences, it would be pointless.

“Hey, Ayanokōji.”

Watanabe followed me in a hurry to the men's restroom.

I thought he urgently wanted to do something, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

“You know... You're meeting with Ichinose next time, right? I have a favor to ask you on another matter...”

“A favor? I hope it's something simple.”

I finished using the restroom, washed my hands, and returned to the hallway.

“It's probably simple, but I'm not sure... Um...”

Watanabe, who usually spoke clearly, became very brusque.

However, he thought it wasn't good to be absent from the group for too long, and he started to talk.

“Well, what is it?”

“Um... it's about Amikura.”

“Amikura? Is something worrying you?”

I was sure that Amikura was the most upset by our earlier discussion.

She didn't seem to be in need of care after that, but Watanabe may have sensed something.

“No, that's not it. Well, it's a concern, but it's not that.”

His words were incoherent, but I let it slide.

“I was wondering whether or not there's a guy she likes right now. I thought Ichinose might know. If you're willing to, can you ask her...?”

“I see.”

I was slowly beginning to understand the circumstances, feelings, and actions of love.

I could understand the meaning behind Watanabe's words as he told me this in a stilted manner.

“You have a crush on Amikura.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Don't be so blunt here!”

“It's okay. There's no one here right now.”

The only thing leaking out into the hallway was the background music playing inside the restaurant and the singing from the karaoke rooms.

Rather, Watanabe's loud voice and panicking would be the problem.

“Even if that's true!”

But you never know. I didn't realize that Watanabe liked Amikura.

“I was cool even when we were in the same group. Especially during the school trip.”

“You're not an elementary school student, you shouldn't show your feelings in such an obvious way.”

Come to think of it, didn't he say that he was shopping with Amikura today?

It was interesting to find out that fact, and a connection began to emerge.

“Did you ask her out on a date today by any chance?”

If that were the case, then Watanabe would be quite a capable person in his own right.

“What? Ah... Well, I was aiming for something close to that. I woke up early and got ready. And then we met up in the lobby of the dorm. I was so nervous.”

Looking back on their encounter, Watanabe spoke with a bitter look on his face.

“But when we started walking together, we couldn't talk at all. Usually, when I'm with a lot of people, we can talk well together, but suddenly the words just didn't come out. It was kinda hell until we got to Keyaki Mall.”

It was good until he asked her out, but after that, it didn't go well.

“You didn't like being alone with her?”

“I don't mind. But I got irritated with myself for not being able to talk well, and I thought bad things like, 'Amikura must not be happy to spend time with me.' Then I heard Kanzaki and Himeno talking about meeting you as they walked by.”

This may have been a thread of salvation for Watanabe, who was in a difficult situation.

“We were in the same group during the school trip, so I asked if I could go with her.”

It may have been a decision to run away from the situation without retreating completely.

“I see, so that's how it was.”

It would've been a shame to lose the two of them alone, but there was nothing worse than a date that didn't turn out well. No, I don't think Amikura even considered it a date.

“I was a little scared. I didn't think we were going to start talking about something important, but... I'm glad I found out in the end. I think I understand what Kanzaki and Himeno are thinking.”

With what I had seen of Watanabe's character so far, if Kanzaki and the others had moved earlier, they may have been able to get him on their side quicker, just like Hamaguchi.

Perhaps, such students were lying idle in Ichinose's class.

“So... Can you please probe about Amikura?”

“Me?”

“You're meeting with Ichinose next, right? I'd like you to casually ask her about it.”

“I don't know if I can ask Ichinose since there's no guarantee she knows about Amikura's love life in the first place.”

“No, she would know. If Amikura liked someone or was dating someone, Ichinose would definitely know.”

Watanabe answered with considerable confidence, although I didn't know where it came from.

“Is Ichinose some kind of girl's information network?”

“I don't think Amikura is the type of person who goes out with a guy without consulting someone about her love life. If Ichinose knows about it at all, that would give me a chance.”

“I see. So it's been confirmed that Amikura doesn't have a specific guy she likes?”

Watanabe nodded with a grin.

“Well... Actually, what I really want is for my name to come up somehow, but there's been no sign of that at all. I guess I'll just have to keep pushing forward since I don't have any rivals right now.”

He analyzed the scenario and concluded that he didn't have a lead on the situation. Watanabe couldn't really grasp his own feelings when it came to romance, so he couldn't be sure of anything. However, he felt indebted to Amikura for taking care of him during the school trip.

It would be difficult to ask classmates to help with this kind of thing.

I was glad to know that Watanabe had a positive attitude.

“I’ll try to find out casually, but don’t get your hopes up too much. If I push too hard and make her wary, it’ll be disadvantageous for both of us.”

“Oh, that’s totally fine.”

Watanabe looked embarrassed, but at the same time, he looked happy and pleased.

3

It was past 4:00 p.m., and I was sitting alone on a bench on the second floor of Keyaki Mall when the meeting broke up after I had finished my role as a silent listener at the karaoke session.

I had decided to stay behind regardless of whether the meeting broke up early or not.

Since I had no particular purpose in mind, I decided to browse the Internet on my cell phone for a while, but before I knew it, Kei had sent me a message and a picture.

I could see at a glance that she and Satō were enjoying themselves, cuddling with each other while making a peace sign.

It seemed that they were planning to gather in the girls' room until this evening to chat in the dormitory.

Kei was also with some others. Satō, Mori, Ishikura, and Maezono seemed to be there.

Her ability to easily get together with her friends like this, even if she couldn't spend time with me, was one of Kei's strengths.

I was asked when I would come back, so after a little pondering, I replied that it would be after 8:00 p.m.

If I told her that I'd be back early, there was a chance that Kei would leave her friends behind and call it a day.

It was better to let them enjoy the day without being distracted.

“Well...”

There was no one else in the vicinity at the moment, and there didn't seem to be a risk of the phone being overheard.

I picked up my cell phone and called Ichinose, occasionally observing the students in the distance.

I'd like to make the appointment tomorrow if I could since there was no point in putting it off.

The call rang in my ear for a while, but Ichinose didn't answer.

Either she was spending time with someone and didn't notice, or she was taking a nap.

Alternatively, she may have been aware of the call and intentionally avoided answering it.

Did my contact with Ichinose the night before the end of the school trip change the result? As I was looking at my call history with various thoughts in my mind, I received a call back.

“Hello? I'm sorry, I couldn't get to the phone.”

The recipient's first words sounded nervous.

There was no sign of reluctance as far as I could hear from her voice.

“Are you busy?”

“Uh, no. I was just getting ready for dinner.”

I realized that it might've been true.

I could hardly remember calling Ichinose during these private hours.

I heard what sounded like a faint conversation on the other end of the phone.

I thought it was someone else, but upon closer listening, it turned out to be the sound of the TV.

“This is a bit of a short notice, but if you're free tomorrow, can we meet?”

As to get straight to the point, I immediately told her what I wanted to do.

“What...? With me?”

“Does it sound like I'm inviting anyone but you?”

“Well, no, I don't, but... But... Two people, um, just us two...?”

“Just the two of us, if possible.”

There was no need for any roundabout way of saying it, so I conveyed my message directly.

Ichinose didn't reply, and a rather heavy silence followed for a few seconds.

“I don't have any plans... What can I do for you?”

What could she do? Depending on what it was, Ichinose might be willing to meet with me. If it was a consultation or some kind of problem, then it would be easier for Ichinose to accept. However, I couldn't reveal that I had been asked by Kanzaki and the others to investigate without arousing suspicion.

They've asked me to find out without Ichinose's knowledge.

“If there's no particular matter, would you still be willing to meet? Just the two of us?”

“It's not like that... But, um, being alone with you...”

“I want to meet with you.”

“...!?”

“But if it's mentally straining for you, it might be better to not meet.”

I took a risk and tried to back off a little bit.

I tried to get a feel for where Ichinose's emotions lay.

“...Wait. No... it's okay”

I'm not saying I wasn't cautious, but it didn't sound like there were any feelings that I wanted to avoid.

“Are you sure you want to do this? I don't want to force you.”

“I'm not forcing myself... I want to meet you too...”

“Okay. Then let's meet in front of Keyaki Mall tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.”

I didn't know how much time it would take, so it was preferable to have the maximum amount of time possible.

“10:00, right?”

“Yes, see you then. If this isn’t convenient for you, call me anytime.”

We could've had a longer conversation, but it was better to avoid that.

“I'll see you tomorrow, okay?”

With those words, the conversation ended somewhat awkwardly.

With this, I was able to set up a meeting with Ichinose for now.

All that remained was to find out more about Ichinose's mental state tomorrow.

It would be ideal if I could learn what she was thinking while I was at it.

I thought I'd stop by a bookstore afterward.

I still had a lot of time left to spend alone that day.

It was different from the time I spent alone when I didn't have any friends.

This was also a blissful time that I noticed now that I had a different point of view.

4

After enjoying myself until the evening, I stopped by the supermarket to buy a late dinner, told Kei I was going home, and left Keyaki Mall. The temperature had dropped considerably, and I had been in a heated environment for a long time, so the temperature difference was quite bearable.

The cell phone in my pocket vibrated. When I read the message, Kei told me that she was with her friend for dinner and they just separated. I sent her a message back that I was glad she had a good day and walked alone down the street to my dormitory.

On the way back, I saw the back of a female student standing still.

She didn't seem to be walking, and her eyes were fixed on the sky.

It was dark, so it was unclear who she was. However, as I approached her, thinking that she looked vaguely familiar, I immediately recognized her. There were no other students around, and I was alone.

"I'm surprised. I thought you had gone home."

Himeno turned around when she heard my comment.

"What? I thought you were the one who went home."

"I thought I said I was going shopping and back home."

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“I see, I thought you said something like that, but... it's too late for that, isn't it?”

Apparently, she had been listening to the conversation half-heartedly.

However, it had been almost four hours since we separated, so I couldn't help but wonder.

“So you're on your way home now?”

Himeno asked when she saw the plastic bags from the supermarket, and I nodded my head in affirmation.

“What were you doing up until this late?”

“Hmm... I've been in a daze. I went to the grocery store and went to the movie theater for no reason?”

She seemed to be like me.

“Maybe you were enjoying your time alone.”

She was a little surprised by this proposal, which wasn't like Himeno, but she couldn't think of any reason to deny it.

“It's still cold at night, isn't it?”

She shivered as if she hadn't noticed.

“Actually, after we left, Kanzaki-kun and the others asked me if I wanted to hang out with them some more.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I thought it was important to have a chance to talk with classmates alone. But I said no.”

“Why?”

“To be honest, I kinda didn't like the environment and wanted to avoid it. Oh, it's not that I wanted to leave the group or anything. I just didn't like the idea of going in a group.”

Although Himeno was learning to get along with others, she might still be struggling to get along with a large number of people.

“I was thinking, 'I'm comfortable alone,' and then it was night.”

“So that's how it is.”

“But the more time I spend alone, the more I think about it. Especially what you said to me. It really hit me. I thought you hit me right where it hurts.”

It seemed that she was concerned about the struggles she had shown at the karaoke meeting.

“I realized that I hadn't accomplished anything compared to what I had imagined. I had baseless confidence that I was doing something special by teaming up with Kanzaki-kun, and that I was kind of amazing for realizing that Ichinose-san was in trouble when no one else did. It felt like someone had broken my nose.”

“I'm sorry about that.”

“You don't have to apologize for that. In fact, you're right.”

Exhaling a white breath, Himeno turned to me and smiled bitterly.

“I thought it would be easier to do good things, but it's hard to act...”

“That’s true for everyone. It must be hard for you to take action.”

It wasn’t my intention to comfort her, but I didn't want her worrying too much, so I just told her so.

“I'm trying to find a way forward, but I'm not sure if I can improve by taking action with Kanzaki-kun and Hamaguchi-kun.”

“It's not wrong to be confused. It isn’t a problem that can be solved by standing idle.”

“I know, but... I thought I was starting to save the class, but the invisible gears are starting to go haywire little by little. I can't help feeling that way.”

The invisible gears are starting to go haywire...?

When you tried to do something that had never been done before, anxiety would peek out.

“I don't doubt that. Still, when asked if the gears have been turning well so far, you can't honestly say yes, can you?”

“Well... that's true.”

There had been sound class management, but there had been no results.

That meant that the gears weren’t functioning properly.

“It’s a fact that a change is now coming to your class.”

I still didn't know the answer to where they’d end up, fortunately or not.

It wasn’t only Kanzaki and the others’ presence, but also Ichinose's resignation from the student council.

I wasn’t in control of many things, and the future was uncertain and unclear.

But there were two outcomes. Life or death. Ichinose’s class would either be saved or they wouldn’t be saved.

The course of that process, however, was beginning to be shrouded in a thick fog that no one could foresee.

March, the end of the second year, would soon arrive.

By then, Himeno's eyes would be able to see the results.

“Ayanokōji-kun, do you think there’s still a chance for us to reach Class A if our class changes?”

“Do you want an objective opinion?”

“Yes. If possible.”

“If I could answer that question, I would say yes... conditionally.”

“Heh... I thought you’d say it's impossible. But conditionally?”

“The battle of the second years isn’t so easy that you can get into Class A just by changing their mindset. In fact, the gap between Ichinose’s class and Class A is getting serious. In order to make up for the difference, it’ll take a lot of pain

and determination. If the entire class doesn't have the resolve, you won't be able to reach it.”

“Pain and determination...? What exactly does that mean?”

“I'm sorry, I can't answer that right now.”

“You can't answer that, huh? I didn't expect such a response. I thought you'd say that you didn't think about it at all or that you just said it randomly or something like that.”

“That's what people usually think.”

“Because it's about another class's problems—their suffering. The more we suffer, the more your class will relatively benefit. Isn't that right?”

“Right.”

“And yet, you're so accommodating and supportive. Why's that?”

“Because I'm eager to see what happens to Ichinose's class before they become a friend or foe.”

“What do you want to see...? You sound like you can look into the future.”

No one could foresee the future, but we could predict and prepare for it.

“So for the time being, I'm going to lend a hand in times of trouble. If it's okay with you.”

“I'm sure Kanzaki-kun will be pleased. I feel very reassured.”

Himeno, who saw it favorably, made a small victory pose with both arms.

“I hope you'll be able to openly show that kind of confidence one day.”

“What? Oh, I suddenly feel embarrassed...”

Saying this, she let her hands reach into her pockets and her eyes turned away with them.

5

When I was walking back to the dormitory with Himeno, I found Kei sitting on a bench holding her cell phone.

“See you later.”

Himeno, reading the mood of the moment, left my side and started to walk quickly.

She lightly bowed to Kei as she walked back to the dormitory.

“What are you doing here? I thought you went back to your room.”

“What am I doing? What does it look like I'm doing?”

“Waiting for someone.”

“Correct. Then, who am I waiting for? One, Ike-kun; two, Minami-kun; three, Kiyotaka.”

With each option, she raised a finger and quizzed me sarcastically.

“That’s an extremely difficult question. One seems to be the most likely answer...”

“If you get it wrong, there’ll be a punishment game.”

“Before I answer, let's hear what the punishment game is.”

“I guess. I'm going to write 'Love from Kei-chan' on your forehead with a magic marker, and then we'll go to school.”

“Alright, let’s go with number three.”

“What? You don't want to be punished that badly?”

A little angry, she got up from the bench and lined up next to me.

“So? The girl I just saw was Himeno-san, right? Why was she walking with you?”

She had a smile on her face, but there was a strong pressure behind her demand for an explanation.

“I told you that I was meeting with Kanzaki, and Himeno was one of the people in the group.”

“Himeno was one of the people in the group? But Kanzaki-kun and the others weren't with you.”

“We separated at once. And I just happened to meet Himeno on my way back and we had a small chat.”

“Hmm? Hmm? Well, since I'm your girlfriend, I'll believe your explanation for now, okay?”

Although she said so, she didn't seem to have any doubt at all.

“You seemed to be getting along well.”

“I doubt you could tell that much in the dark.”

“Um... yes, that's true, but... I just felt something! I don't care!”

She wrapped her arm around mine as if marking the seat next to her as mine.
“Let's talk about something fun.”

“I agree.”

“Let's go to Keyaki Mall together tomorrow. Christmas is coming soon.”

She invited me to go with her and smiled at me. ‘You know what I mean, right?’ That was what the expression on her face told me.

“Since Sudō's confession didn't go so well, it's only fair that he gets a Christmas present, right?”

“That's right. A surprise present isn't a bad idea, but going shopping with your boyfriend for what you want isn't a bad idea either.”

I was sure she'd be more pleased than if I'd thought of it on my own, so that was a big help to me.

“I'd love to fulfill your expectations, but I can't do it tomorrow. Can we do it next week, please?”

“What? Did you make another appointment?”

Kei had been informed that I would meet Kanzaki and the others in advance. Since Kei wasn't connected to Kanzaki and the others and was unfamiliar with my relationship with them, she was curious but didn't pay any attention to it...

“That's right.”

“Can't you spare even a little time? What do you have going on tomorrow anyway?”

Spending time with Ichinose. It was easy to avoid telling her and deceive her. However, the disadvantage of keeping it a secret was as great as the disadvantage of telling about Kanzaki and the others.

Ichinose's presence alone was conspicuous, and if I was next to her, there would be disturbing rumors.

Besides, Kei had a lot of friends, and those students would be her eyes and ears.

“Meeting Ichinose.”

“...Meeting Ichinose-san?”

Kei stopped in her tracks with a distinctly different reaction than when she was told Kanzaki was meeting with me.

“Who else is there? Kanzaki-kun or Himeno-san?”

“There's no one else so far, just Ichinose.”

“It's just Ichinose. I'm a little confused. Are you alone with a girl on your day off?”

I could see that her mood had clearly turned sour, but I suppose that was understandable.

In the opposite situation, a normal boy would've reacted in the same way.

“Well, yeah.”

I watched Kei's reaction carefully and met her glare with my own.

“So?”

“So what?”

“Usually, you should explain the reasons and all, like, 'we're meeting, but don't misunderstand, it's not that kind of situation.' It's no good to make your girlfriend anxious, right?”

“There are several reasons to meet with Ichinose. One of which is that Kanzaki and the others asked me to.”

“...Kanzaki-kun and the others asked you? Is that correct?”

She was a little relieved to hear Kanzaki's name mentioned here.

“It's not public yet, but Ichinose has resigned from the student council. There's a lot of confusion about that right now.”

“Wait a minute. Is that so? I don't understand what's going on.”

“You're wondering, right? Kanzaki and the others want to know the truth. Belonging to the student council has a positive effect on the class in its own way, so it's understandable that their classmates would be upset if she were to leave the student council instead of gaining as many points as possible now that they've dropped to Class D.”

Even with this explanation, Kei couldn't understand the anxiety Kanzaki and his classmates felt.

“But Kanzaki and the others are afraid to ask Ichinose directly why because they can't bear to hear from their leader that she's given up on the idea of aiming for Class A.”

“So... You're going to ask her why instead?”

“That's what I'm going to do.”

“I understand the situation, but... why are you involved in Ichinose-san's class? Why don't you just leave them be? If you help them out, they might become rivals again.”

It was natural to wonder why I was involved in Ichinose-san's class. This wasn't something Horikita and others could hear.

“There are reasons to send salt to the enemy. But I can't tell you why either.”

“You can't tell me...? You think I might tell someone?”

“No, I don't. I know you're very tight-lipped. I just don't think I'm ready to tell anyone about what I'm trying to do at this point.”

Kei's expression tightened a little at my stern and dismissive tone.

But Kei was Kei, and it was only natural that she couldn't take it in stride.

For a moment, she tried to hold back, but then her thoughts came pouring in.

“I know you have a lot on your mind. I know that you're helping the class without my knowledge and that you're trying to find out from Ichinose-san what's going on for Kanzaki-kun and the others. But, you know... it's not nice to... meet

with a girl alone on a break, isn't it? At least there are other ways to do it, like at school or just during lunch break.”

Kei's lips pouted and she turned her head in the opposite direction as if she was sulking.

It would be easier if I told her I was sorry and that she was the only one who mattered.

I had already learned that it was important in a relationship to tell someone not to worry.

Then, what if it was the other way around? Even if you had an idea of the answer, you couldn't say that you understood it unless you actually tried figuring it out.

“Then, do you want to interrupt me? You can just barge in on me while I'm meeting with Ichinose on my day off.”

“That's...”

“You wouldn't, would you? There's no merit in doing so. Then we're done here. We'll go shopping for Christmas presents together next week, and there should be no problem.”

The atmosphere could change so heavily in an instant just by not speaking kind words.

The happy Kei who had been waiting for me under the cold weather had disappeared.

“You have your own ideas. I have no right to say anything about it.”

Not only the expression on her face, but even her emotions were distant from her.

“I'm going to stop by the convenience store. You go home first.”

With those words, she ran toward the convenience store without looking at me.

However, Kei's stride seemed both fast and slow as she left, and I could see from her back that she was expecting me to come after her.

All I had to do was to immediately run after her and tell her that I was sorry and that I would think of another way to meet up with Ichinose.

That would put her back in the mood she was in just before.

But I decided to break my gaze from her back and go back to the dormitory.

This would only deepen the rift between us. I wondered how Kei would react, what kind of attitude she would show, and how I would feel and act in response. It would be a good opportunity to experience all of that.

Chapter 4: How to Spend the Days Off

IT WAS SUNDAY, the day after the meeting with Kanzaki and there was still some slight friction with Kei.

It was time to meet with Ichinose, whom I had promised to meet with the day before.

I went down to the lobby a little early, but I didn't see Ichinose in the area.

I thought there was a possibility that we would've bumped into each other by chance, but that didn't seem to be the case.

I turned around and looked at the elevator, but it didn't seem to be moving.

It's unlikely that Kei will follow her.

Kei, who was worried about me meeting Ichinose, wouldn't take such an action.

No, it was too early to say that she won't do anything. She could be on her way to Ichinose by now, or she could already be there ahead of Ichinose.

Or she may boldly join us while we were meeting. If I analyzed her past behavior patterns, there was a possibility.

If that happens, we'll just have to wait and see...

But I doubt that she'll take any reckless actions, given the way she behaved yesterday. It takes courage to see something you don't want to see.

I left the dormitory. The sky was clear so far, but unfortunately, it was predicted to rain in the afternoon, so I brought an umbrella.

I wondered how Ichinose felt this morning.

What she wants, what she desires. Whatever it was, it was clear that there was more than one thing. To be a great leader, to be in a successful relationship, to have a strong spirit. We have more desires than fingers we can count on one or even both hands.

That night during the school trip wasn't enough to cause any concrete change in our relationship. I had to see Ichinose in person to know what she was thinking, as she was currently still unstable.

I arrived a bit before the scheduled time and saw that Ichinose was already waiting for me with an umbrella in her hand.

She noticed me before I called out to her and slowly raised her hand.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun.”

I didn't sense a tense atmosphere. If anything, it felt fresh and innocent. Unlike the night of surprise on the trip, Ichinose has also come prepared with her outward emotions.

At first, she made eye contact with me, but when I continued to look into her eyes to find out her true intentions, she quickly turned her gaze away from me. I could tell that she had dropped her eyes to my mouth, nose, and neck to avoid being noticed.

“I'm sorry I had to ask you to free some time for this meeting.”

“It's no big deal. I didn't have any plans originally.”

If I was the one who invited others, I'd appreciate it if they said so, even if it was just a formality. There was still some time left before Keyaki Mall opened, and since we weren't allowed to go inside yet, we stood in a line by the entrance.

We were standing next to each other, but not too close or too far apart. To an uninformed third party, it'd be difficult to determine whether we were waiting together or separately for the mall to open.

“It's not often that I come here before opening, but surprisingly there's no one here yet.”

“It's especially cold today. I guess everyone is still relaxing in their rooms.”

That's for sure. Unless it's a special sale day, there's no need to wait in line for the mall to open early in the morning.

“It's really cold,” Ichinose muttered to herself, repeating the same words over and over again.

The conversation stopped there, as I had expected to wait until we were inside the mall to talk.

My daily routine consisted of spending more and more time with Kei, my girlfriend, which was not always full of conversation.

We would share the same time, but sometimes the silence lasted for 10 or 20 minutes. At first, I had the same awkward feeling as now, but it disappeared and I even began to feel comfortable with the silence.

This is not a matter of getting used to it, but rather a matter of feeling that the slightest moment of silence feels strangely heavy with a person with whom you are not yet close enough with.

It wasn't that I couldn't stand the silence, but rather, I wondered if I should approach the subject since I had invited her.

Maybe Ichinose was thinking the same thing. But neither of us could speak properly, and neither of us could take the first step.

A common topic... Once you start a common topic, you can contribute to the discussion two or three times.

When I thought about it, a boy came to my mind.

“I was in the same group with Watanabe on the school trip the other day.”

“I see.”

“I didn't know him before because we didn't have any contact, but Watanabe was friendly and easy to talk to. He's a good guy.”

When I honestly told her what I thought, Ichinose was pleased as if he were her own family.

“Yes, he’s liked by his classmates, both male and female.”

He wasn’t as bossy as Ike, nor as sociable as Yōsuke, but he can read the situation reasonably well.

I only saw a part of Watanabe, but I was sure he would be the same in his class as well.

“I’ve been studying at the same place for almost two years, and with different classes. There’s still so much I don’t know.”

“It’s the same for me. I don’t know much about other classes, even though it seems like I do. It’s totally different from elementary school or junior high school... I think that’s what happens when you really compete with each other”.

In normal friendships, people show each other their weaknesses and help each other out.

However, this school was a place where this concept of normality didn’t apply. This is the common belief that Ichinose and other students had.

“Socializing is difficult. I can’t say that I’m getting along with my classmates yet. In comparison, Ichinose, who was able to make friends with everyone at an early stage, is amazing.”

“Eh? I’m really not that great.”

Rather than being modest, she didn’t seem to realize how skilled she was.

“So, do you have any tips on how to get along with everyone?”

Friendship building, no matter how much we do it, there is still more to learn.

I haven’t acquired the skills of people like Ichinose and Kushida, yet.

I already know what I need to do.

I know what to say, I know the words.

Still, I can’t be like them. The slightest difference in what I have accumulated, in my tone and in my body language can make a big difference in the outcome.

“I wonder if there’s such a thing. If there is, I don’t know.”

It isn’t possible to break it down and talk about it theoretically because it’s an innate skill. Therefore, even if you were to watch and learn, you cannot easily understand, absorb, and use it. The conversation somehow continued.

Soon after, at the stroke of 10:00 a.m., the closed automatic door had opened.

“Shall we go in?”

“Right.”

Thus, we were the first to enter the Keyaki Mall and were enveloped by the warmth of the heated mall.

“How late are you able to stay today?”

“Any time is fine. I don't have any plans after this.”

This is a good opportunity as I wanted to ask Ichinose some questions today. If you have a time limit, then you would have to converse within that time limit. It's especially important to know more about her reasons for leaving the student council, as it's an important issue raised by Kanzaki and the others.

It is very convenient that we have time to fulfill Kanzaki's wishes but... on the other hand, there was something disturbing about the situation.

Putting the love aspect aside for the moment, Ichinose is not an insensitive person.

Even if she doesn't always have good deduction skills, she is more perceptive than the average student.

She wasn't the type of person who was insensitive, because otherwise, she wouldn't be able to become a leader. It's highly likely that she knows how her classmates perceived her, from their words, and from their feelings, even in her current state of mind.

If this is the case, it's not a good idea to assume that you have been blessed with this opportunity by chance.

She may have at least guessed the intention of my invitation. Depending on the conditions, she may also be aware that her classmates are lurking behind my intentions.

I'd better go about my day with that in mind.

“What do you want to do now?”

The purpose of this meeting was to get information out of her, but the apparent purpose of the meeting had not yet been established. I'd been thinking about how to spend time with Ichinose today, and this was the conclusion I'd come to.

“I didn't have anything to do in mind but.. I suppose I could ask you to tell me how you spend your days off.”

“How do I spend my days off?”

“Yes, I'd like to find out what kind of daily life I should lead to get along with everyone.”

“What? Is that something you can just figure out?”

“I'm just saying what comes to mind..., is that okay?”

When she didn't respond immediately, I thought about asking a different question, but Ichinose nodded her head without any displeasure.

“I don't know if I can help you, but if that's what you wanted, why don't we try it?”

She seemed to think positively and readily agreed.

It seems that the first topic of conversation was successful.

“So..., can we really do what I do on my days off?”

“Of course. Shopping, movies, cafes, etc., I'll go with you.”

“I might not be able to meet your expectations. Is that okay?”

Ichinose smiled, as if none of the above applied to her.

She had looked somewhat awkward since joining me in the morning, but I saw a natural smile on her face.

“Well, let's get going.”

Ichinose said and started walking as she headed for the second floor by the escalator, without hesitation.

1

There are various commercial facilities in the Keyaki Mall, most of which I've visited before. However, there are still a few facilities that I have yet to experience.

One of them is the gym on the second floor.

"I try to come here only on weekends and holidays. I'm a bit of an athlete, so I'm hoping to improve a little bit."

We arrived at the front of the gym and Ichinose took out her student ID card.

"Ayanokōji-kun, you haven't been to the gym before, have you?"

"Yeah. I've never been in one."

"Then it's a good thing."

"I'm surprised that you've been going to the gym. How long has it been?"

"I did a free trial in the middle of September and became a full member at the beginning of October, I think."

"So you've been going to the gym for more than two months now. I had no idea. Did you start by yourself? I'm not great at being involved in these places..."

I guess I wouldn't mind it if I joined and started going, but the first time or two would be a hurdle.

"Me too. That's why I started with my friends... because if I'm not brave enough alone, I can be pretty bold with two people. You're going to work out with me today, right?"

I nodded my head and let Ichinose lead me into the facility.

Ichinose greeted a friendly female staff member who was standing at the reception desk and presented her student ID card. She explained to her what we were doing while I stood behind her.

"Do you have your student ID card?"

"Yeah"

Apparently, if you present your student ID card, you can easily get a free trial without having to fill out any forms.

"See you in a bit, Ayanokōji-kun. You'll have to let the staff explain it to you from here."

After that, a male trainer guided me to the locker room, and I was asked to change my clothes after a brief explanation of how to use the lockers, change rooms, and shower rooms.

It seemed that the gym was designed so that you can go in empty-handed without bringing your belongings.

I took off my clothes, stored them in a locker, put on the rental training wear, and headed to the training room at the back of the gym.

Ichinose hadn't finished changing yet, and no one was in sight. It had just opened, so I guess that was natural.

But it was a bit awkward for me to be the first one since I was only here for a free trial.

A male trainer seemed to be willing to teach me a few things, but I declined his offer. I thought it would be better to learn from Ichinose. Not knowing how to behave, I looked around at the equipment at random.

However, I was familiar with the training equipment itself, so I felt comfortable with it.

When I was in the White Room, we had all the latest equipment for physical training. Even if the make and year of the equipment are a little different, they all seemed safe to use. Surprisingly, while I was having these thoughts, members of the gym started to enter one after another.

I thought the gym would be quite empty, but it seemed to be quite popular.

“Oh, it looks like some of the boys have already started.”

I was a little surprised at Ichinose's outfit as she came out in her training wear, but I didn't speak on it.

“There were a couple of people in the women's locker room, too.”

“I've seen adults in the locker rooms, so I guess non-students can use them too.”

I knew that not all the movie theaters and supermarkets were exclusively for students, and this gym seemed to be no exception.

“I often see Mashima-sensei here as well.”

I see. Teachers were also no exception. For those of us who live on the school grounds, a place to work out was important.

I had long shied away from such facilities, but if there were familiar students like Ichinose, I might be willing to join them.

As I was beginning to think about this, Ichinose began to carefully explain the equipment.

She explained how to use it with a bit of hands-on practice. I didn't want to ask any questions that didn't need explanations, and I just sat quietly and listened to the explanation, pretending to know nothing.

Ichinose had acquired a fair amount of knowledge, but she seemed to have little practical use of the equipment, probably because she had only been going to the gym for a short period of time.

After about 10 minutes of being taught how to use the equipment, the number of people coming to the gym gradually increased, and about seven men and women, excluding myself, began to work out.

It's time for us to do something, too...

“Oh, Mako-chan, good morning!”

Just as we were about to start working out, Ichinose saw a familiar face and called out to her.

“Ah, Honami-chan!”

It was Amikura, who had just come out of the locker room after changing. She seemed genuinely surprised to see Ichinose, as she had known that I and Ichinose were going out today.

“W-what are you doing at the gym?”

Her thoughts probably leaked out of her mouth as she was visibly unsettled.

“Remember how you started going to the gym on your days off? I thought I'd introduce Ayanokōji-kun to it a little.”

Ichinose replied with a casual expression.

“Oh, I see.”

Amikura couldn't have imagined the two of us being at the gym together and Ichinose couldn't have understood her feelings at all, so she simply brushed it off with a nonchalant face.

“Well, I won't get in your way.”

“...It's not like you're getting in the way or anything...”

Amikura gave me a sharp look in the eye that seemed to say, ‘Don't say something unnecessary.’

By 'something unnecessary', I assumed she meant what she said to me the other day at the karaoke bar. Of course, I wouldn't do that. I didn't know how well she would understand, but I communicated to her with my eyes.

“Ayanokōji-kun and the gym are very different from each other.”

“Is that so?”

“I can't think of myself doing this kind of thing. I don't like places where people gather.”

I would like to say that this is just prejudice, but it was correct. I felt hesitant about working out in front of regular students. Moreover, I had an image that this kind of gym was not for working out in silence but with friends, so it was difficult for me to come here. I had to admit that I kept myself away from it for that reason.

“...I mean, come here, Honami-chan.”

Amikura noticed something and pulled Ichinose's arm away from me. She then whispered something. Both of their eyes were on me for some reason.

“...?”

Ichinose jumped up in surprise and ducked down behind Amikura for some reason.

“I didn't notice that, Honami-chan...”

Amikura, who answered in this way, also seemed to be somewhat embarrassed.

“What is it...?”

“Oh, no, I mean... Well, you know, it's a little embarrassing to dress like this in front of others. Right?”

I received a look that felt like it was saying, ‘Read the mood. Understand?’

“I see.”

It seemed that she was embarrassed to be seen by boys in her gym clothes. However, the gym was a place where one had to restrict their clothes in order to have ease of movement and absorption of sweat. It's often best to avoid introducing the notion of embarrassment, whether by mentioning it explicitly or by avoiding it altogether.

Ichinose had not noticed this fact, but Amikura had made her aware of it. Amikura's expression suggested that she had made a mistake by being so blunt about it.

As a member of the opposite sex, it may be understandable to be concerned at her age, but this is a gym. It was best to just let it go and not worry about it.

“In times like this, it's best to work up a sweat, isn't it? Tell me how to do it, I'd like to try it.”

I said this to get her to think about something else, because she loses her mind when she starts worrying about what the opposite sex thinks of her. Ichinose seemed to have made up her mind after hearing what I just said.

“I think you're right. Let's see, what should we do, Mako-chan?”

“Why are you asking me?”

Apparently still in a state of panic, she asked Amikura for help.

The two girls talked to each other as they were whispering in each other's ears, and they nodded their heads almost simultaneously to show that they were communicating.

“We're still new to this, so can we start on the treadmill, which is what we're used to?”

“Of course.”

The two girls got on the treadmill, which seemed to be a staple in fitness clubs, and started running in the mode that suited them best. The machines were naturally from different manufacturers, but I had used these repeatedly when I was a child, so I was not at a loss on what to do.

It was a standard cardio machine that was indispensable for indoor training.

Ichinose and Amikura had similar settings, so I'll leave this one at about the same level as well.

“This is your first time in a gym, right? Take it easy, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Amikura said so as if she was concerned about me, and I lightly answered with my hand that I was fine.

After that, we started training silently on the treadmill for a while.

At first, Ichinose seemed to be nervous and embarrassed, but the feeling gradually faded away, and after about 30 minutes, she seemed to have gotten used to the treadmill to some extent.

After the set 30 minutes had passed and the treadmill stopped, Ichinose looked up.

“Phew! I'm so tired!”

She seemed to be more exhausted than Amikura, perhaps because she said she wasn't good at exercising. She exhaled deeply and moved her shoulders up and down.



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“I'm going to go rehydrate.”

Ichinose said and left the area after waving goodbye to us.

As I recalled, there was a station to fill water bottles next to the locker room. Since Amikura and I were the only ones left, we decided to talk for a while.

“You've been coming here for a while, you look good.”

“Ayanokōji-kun, you're not tired at all even though we did the same routine.”

“I'm a boy, so I have more base physical strength than girls.”

“I see. But I was surprised. I had imagined there could be a chance that we could meet at the Keyaki Mall, but I didn't think we would run into each other in the gym this early in the morning.”

Apparently, running into each other at this place was not something that even Amikura had expected to happen.

“So, how did it go? Did you get anything out of... Honami-chan?”

“Nothing yet. We headed to the gym right after we met, joined you, and here we are.”

“I see. But Honami-chan seems to be having a lot of fun, so that's good.”

Wiping the sweat off her face with a towel, Amikura's eyes narrowed in delight.

“You know that kind of thing when you're best friends with them, huh?”

“You sure do. I typically smile a lot already, but today I feel like I'm bursting with happiness.”

Now that Ichinose had left the conversation and we were alone, I tried to casually elicit information from Mako-chan in order to fulfill my promise with Watanabe.

“It's almost Christmas, isn't it?”

“Indeed. You're spending Christmas with Karuizawa-san, right?”

Before I could get any more details, I was asked a question in return.

“Hmm? Well, that's the plan.”

“Well... let me ask you frankly... What are you going to do about Honami-chan?”

“What do you mean?”

“Because you know how she feels, don't you? So, you know, right?”

Amikura tried to convey her feelings in a muddled manner, as if she hesitated to express them straightly.

“What kind of person do you think she should be with?”

“What? You're asking me that?”

“You have at least an idea that she has a special interest in you, don't you?”

She looked troubled and lightly wiped her forehead with the towel around her neck, as if she was starting to sweat.

“I... would love nothing more than for Honami-chan to smile, as her friend. But Ayanokōji-kun has Karuizawa-san now. And it's a little different considering you shouldn't break up with her. I think the best thing would be for Honami-chan to fall in love with someone else and be happy with that person.”

She comes to her own conclusions while thinking and speaking about her own ideals.

As Amikura said, the current situation in which Ichinose is showing affection to me is rather troublesome. So, if the affection is directed to an unrelated third party, then this situation could've been resolved with no problem.

“I agree. I don't know a lot of boys either, but Watanabe is easy to get along with and would be a good fit for Ichinose.”

I threw Watanabe's name into the conversation as if I was trying to get in on Amikura's conversation.

Depending on her response, I may be able to find out what Amikura's impression of Watanabe is. Amikura appreciates Watanabe enough to accompany him when he's shopping on his days off.

This might be enough to explore the possibility.

“Watanabe-kun, right? He's the one in our class.”

“Yes. We had a lot of chances to talk to each other during the school trip.”

“Hmmm ... I guess so...”

She appeared to be thinking for a moment.

The vague gap between positive and negative is difficult to discern.

“As for me... I think Honami-chan can aim a little higher.”

“I see. Watanabe is not good enough.”

“I'm not saying anything bad about Watanabe-kun, okay? I think a normal girl would be good enough.”

“I see. By the way, how about you?”

Since I wasn't sure, I decided to ask with a bit of force. If I took too long, Ichinose would come back.

“Me?”

“You seem to know a lot about love.”

“Not at all. I already have a crush on someone.”

“Ah. Someone you like, huh?”

“Well, of course, there's someone I like. I'm in high school.”

Who was it? It would be best if I could find out.

“I've had a crush on him for almost 5 years now. When will I go on to my next love?”

She mumbled to herself. Five years. That means the love had been going on since before she entered this school.

It seemed that there was no need to go any further, but I wonder if this would be good news for Watanabe. At least he doesn't have any rivals at the same school...

I was about to ask Amikura what type of guy he was, but Ichinose came back after she had finished rehydrating herself. Amikura hurriedly moved away from me, not wanting to let Ichinose know that I had been talking about her love life without her permission.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No, not at all. Are you okay now?”

If I persist more about Ichinose's situation, it will only make her suspicious of me.

I will ask her later if she can go into a little more depth.

2

For another hour or so, I continued my gym experience with Ichinose and Amikura.

While we were working out, Amikura said she would stay behind for a bit, perhaps to keep up with the gym mood, so Ichinose and I went ahead and changed our clothes. We would meet up with each other at the reception desk.

While waiting for Ichinose, I got a pamphlet for the gym so that I could consider joining officially. It's a pain to spend a few thousand more points every month, but it's not a bad idea to work up a sweat once in a while.

I was reminded again that my body had declined to the point where I couldn't even compare it to when I first entered the school, since I'd hardly done any exercise voluntarily for the past two years. I'd come to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to raise the level of my physical abilities to some extent, if not to restore them to their previous state.

After changing, Ichinose and I left the gym and headed back to the mall.

“Did you get a brochure?”

“Yes, I've been considering going to the gym more seriously.”

“Oh, well, maybe we'll see each other more often then...”

“Yeah.”

“I see...”

“What should we do now?”

The meeting shouldn't end at the gym alone, so I asked her what happens after that.

“I often go to bookstores. I also tend to shop at grocery stores. But I'm a little more tired than usual today, so I might want to take a break. Can we sit down on a bench or something?”

Even from the usual workout routine, the environment you are in may affect your physical exhaustion. It's important to choose when to take a rest instead of forcing yourself to follow a routine.

“Are you sure you don't want to go to a café?”

“Yeah. You know, it kind of stands out.”

It seems she made the suggestion with me in mind.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but don't worry about it. We could go to a café.”

“Yeah? If... You are fine with it, I'm fine with it.”

If you try to avoid being seen, it only makes you look more suspicious. Having a cup of tea with the opposite sex in a café is just a common part of everyday life. It is only because you are conscious of it that it may seem special.

We went to the café, trying to blend with the environment. We chose a small café on the second floor instead of a café on the first floor, where people tend to gather.

We both bought a drink of our choice and took our seats at a table.

“May I ask you a question?”

“A question? Ask me anything.”

“...Does the reason why you invited me here today have anything to do with my resignation from the student council?”

Ichinose asked me hesitantly, but she seemed to be sure of it.

I guess she knew that when I suddenly asked her out on a holiday.

“I'd be lying if I said it had nothing to do with it.”

“Right. I'm glad you answered honestly.”

Ichinose's mouth relaxed as she said this, though her gaze was still averted from me.

“I was surprised that you resigned from the student council. I thought there was a good chance you would win the student council election against Horikita.”

Ichinose's personality and ability contributed to the student council early in the first year. Horikita, on the other hand, entered the student council one term later than Ichinose. With her older brother as the previous student council president and her current momentum in Class B, I thought the two would've been evenly matched.

“If there had been a student council election, who would Ayanokōji-kun have supported? ...Sorry, that was a foolish question.”

Like it or not, Horikita was currently my classmate. For the betterment of the class, it would be more beneficial to have one of my classmates as the student council president.

“I don't feel the need to support Horikita just because we are classmates. If Nagumo said he would support Horikita, I still would have supported you.”

This was also an honest response, but Ichinose must have taken it as flattery. She seemed to be more apologetic than happy.

“But if I had... I wouldn't have won. I'm no match for Horikita-san.”

It seemed that Ichinose didn't feel she could win against Horikita even before the fight. But that was because she was defeated not only in ability but also in spirit.

“It's probably a good thing that I quit after all, because it saved me from being humiliated.”

“You don't know the outcome until you actually try.”

“I'm glad you said that. Thank you.”

“But you decided to quit the student council before that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it possible that that incident on the school trip had something to do with it? If that's the case...”

“That's not true.”

Ichinose interrupted my words and denied them with a strong tone of voice. The paper cup in her hand was bent with so much force that it seemed to crumble.

“I was already thinking of quitting before that. I'm not suited for the student council. I'm not good enough, I'm not talented, and above all... I have a past that I can't erase.”

Ichinose's profile reminded me of that night on the school trip for a moment, but she didn't start crying like that time. She had no intention of continuing to be weak.

“But you know..., I haven't given up on everything. I know some people in the class are worried that I might have given up on getting into Class A, but that's not true.”

“So you're going to keep trying to get to Class A?”

“You told me, 'If you don't have the courage to take the first step, I can lend you a hand.' Hearing those words, I was able to make up my mind on that night of the school trip.”

Ichinose, who had made eye contact with me, laughed.

“I can still fight. But I thought that it was not a battle I could win with the way I am now. I thought that continuing to be a member of the student council would be either a luxury or be an unnecessary burden.”

Is that the reason why you quit the student council?

“Oh... but then the reason I quit the student council might be because of the incident on the school trip after all. I guess that's what I'm saying.”

Ichinose chuckled with a light joke and squinted her eyes.

“I'm going to tell everyone in my class at the beginning of next week what I just told you, Ayanokōji-kun. Regarding what I was thinking before I quit the student council. It's not good if it's misunderstood.”

“That's good.”

If her peers continue to probe her without knowing her true intentions, it will make fighting with Ryūen's class more difficult. Everything Ichinose has said here can be regarded as her true feelings.

It was a great advantage that Ichinose was able to resolve herself over time from the unstable stage leading up to the school trip. Although she lost her position in the student council, which was one of her weapons, what she gained was greater than that.

I think it was safe to say that she had temporarily gotten out of the situation that I had feared. I will now be able to give a good report to Kanzaki.

“Yes. This is totally unrelated, but I have a question. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

I'd like to do a little more investigating for Watanabe's sake.

“Do you know what type of guy Amikura likes?”

“What?”

Ichinose, who had brought the cup to her mouth, froze. Her eyes, which had been avoiding mine just a few minutes ago, now stared directly into them and didn't let go. If anything, I was more struck by a feeling of wanting to run away.

“Why'd you ask me that?”

Her voice was the same. She didn't seem to be angry. But I don't know why. The atmosphere surrounding Ichinose, which was supposed to be the same as before, was now different compared to a few seconds ago.

“Well... I don't know what to say when you ask me why, I'm just somewhat curious about it.”

“Somewhat? Why do you want to know Mako-chan's type? It's not like you in any way.”

If she said so, then that's all there is to it, but the heavy air was getting heavier and heavier.

I didn't know what to say. However, I couldn't easily hint at Watanabe's existence here.

“I thought that Amikura was cute and quite popular.”

“Yes, I know Mako-chan is cute. So? Is she your type?”

“I don't think so.”

“This isn't like you, Ayanokōji-kun?”

It seems I'm not the type to ask such a question, or so I was told. She also didn't seem to look away at all.

“No..., well, maybe...”

Where had the calm atmosphere I had experienced gone? Ichinose, with the cup still in her mouth, was staring me down with the same tense expression.

“Why do you want to know Mako-chan's type?”

“No particular reason...”

“No reason?”

“Of course not. I'm asking you this because...”

I gave up on making eye contact with her and tried to talk about the café clerk instead.

“Oh, it looks like they just got an order or they're making a drink with chocolate.”

“Did you meet Mako-chan somewhere else before you met me?”

Ichinose's pursuit continued without regard to the fact that my gaze had wandered off.

“What do you mean by...?”

“When you ran into each other at the gym today, your gazes met in a strange way. Isn't it called conversing with your eyes?”

When she was this convinced, denial would only make things worse.

“You noticed.”

“I did. Because I'm... always watching and thinking about you, all the time...”

At this point, Ichinose finally broke her gaze. She must have realized that she had said an embarrassing line without hesitation.

“Here's my guess. Mako-chan and the rest of the class must have been worried when they heard the rumor that I was quitting the student council. That's why they asked you for advice. Did they ask you to check on me if you could?”

As if to prove that she had recovered mentally, Ichinose showed that she had a good grasp of the situation. She was aware of her surroundings.

“You're right.”

I'd like to applaud her, but I'll refrain from doing so.

“But I don't get it... why did you want to know what Mako-chan's type is?”

Even if we can deduce that I had a discussion with Amikura some time ago, it's unreasonable to assume that it led to me asking what type of the opposite sex she liked.

“Why do you think that is?”

I'll ask her if she can think and guess. Rather, this was the only way left to conceal Watanabe's existence. It would be better to work backward from Ichinose's intuition and make up a suitable answer.

“It's not because you're interested in Mako-chan, is it? Yeah, I don't like the sound of that, so I won't think about it.”

She had made it an option but stopped as if she was cutting herself off from both sides of the issue.

I mean... that's a very bold thing to say, even in a private place.

She still liked me, and she didn't even try to hide her intention.

Or is she not thinking deeply about this kind of thing and is mumbling unconsciously?

I couldn't see Ichinose's true intention even though I observed her.

“If it's other than that, it could be that there is a boy who likes... Mako-chan, and he asked you to find out. Yeah, that would be a good fit. I guess he thought that I would know.”

When she connects the dots on so many things, it gets a little scary.

“I mean, a man who knows the relationship between Mako-chan and I. And a student in my class who has contact with you...”

“Okay. I'll be honest with you.”

I'm sorry, Watanabe. I don't think your little deception is going to work on someone as sharp as Ichinose. Even if I hadn't stopped her here, she would have given me the name in a second.

“I was asked to find out if there was someone who Amikura liked. But I can't tell you who that boy is. I thought it was a bit one-sided”.

I wasn't saying that indirectly finding out who the opposite sex likes is a bad thing. However, whether it's a good thing or not from Amikura's point of view is a different question.

“I'm sorry. Let's forget about this.”

“No. It's natural that everyone wants to know about the person they like and I know how much courage it takes to ask directly. Mako-chan is a very nice girl. I honestly don't know what her type is. I've never asked her. But from what I've heard from her, I don't think she likes anyone at this school.”

The 'at' part implies that her type was not at this school.

This was related to what Amikura said earlier.

“Seems she had a classmate she liked in middle school. I don't think she was dating him, but she had been thinking about it for a long time. I don't think she has fallen in love with anyone else yet.”

This is a situation that Watanabe probably never envisioned from Amikura's love life. It may be a surprisingly high hurdle to earn the affection of a person who has had an unrequited love ever since middle school.

Still, it doesn't mean that it's impossible. If you can establish a close relationship now or in the next year, you may still have a good chance.

“This is all I can tell you, but was it useful?”

“That was plenty. Thank you, Ichinose.”

“Ayanokōji-kun, Watanabe-kun has come to depend on you a lot, hasn't he?”

“I never said anything about Watanabe.”

“Oh, I see. Sorry, sorry.”

The biggest reason for my defeat was that I had too few social relations other than him, rather than the fact that I mentioned his name in the morning.

3

After that, we spent a while enjoying Keyaki Mall.

As Ichinose said, we just browsed around aimlessly rather than shopping.

We spent half the day together while she showed me her routine.

Then, we left the mall when it was time for lunch.

“Is it already raining?”

I wouldn't say it was raining heavily, but it looked like it had been raining for a while.

“It looks like it.”

Since both of us had brought our umbrellas, we put them up and started walking.

“I'm sorry for accompanying you today while keeping my true intentions hidden.”

“It's okay. Now I know that there are people who still care about me.”

Everything I did today was to get information from Ichinose. I couldn't blame Ichinose for being angry, given her current position.

“Thank you Ayanokōji-kun.”

But she didn't mind at all, rather she was being thankful.

“No need to thank me. I'm sorry, I should've asked you more upfront instead of going around and about.”

“Don't be like that. You made a detour so I was able to spend time with... you.”

Ichinose muttered with a shy blush on her cheeks.

“Are you sure Karuizawa-san won't be angry? We've talked about that today, haven't we? Whatever the circumstances are, I'm sure she felt bad about her boyfriend spending the day alone with another girl.”

Ichinose was worried about Kei, who was in a position contrary to her own feelings. Was this her true intention, or was it just a pretext?

“Maybe.”

On the way home, puddles began to form, and water splashed on the ground as we walked.

The silence came unexpectedly. However, unlike this morning, the uneasy feeling of the silence had lessened.

“Can I ask you something? Did you confess? Or was it Karuizawa-san who confessed?”

Her eyes peered at me.

I couldn't give her the answer she wanted.

“I confessed.”

“I see. You were the one that liked her, Ayanokōji-kun. I’m jealous...”

In the past, I never thought that I would have this kind of talk with Ichinose. However, Ichinose, who was walking next to me, was rather reserved, or at least she was ready to accept it. Usually, this kind of situation happens when the person has already given up their feelings for the other.

However... Ichinose's love for me was still strong.

Then, what is Ichinose's current psychological state?

Is it just stubbornness? Or was she on the verge of giving up?

No matter which of the two I assumed, I couldn't come to a conclusion that made sense in my head. Strangely enough, Ichinose's eyes seemed to have more sparkle in them right after she heard about Kei.

“Did you cause any unnecessary misunderstandings with Karuizawa-san?”

“It didn't go so smoothly. I tried explaining it to her, but I think I offended her a little.”

“I see. If you want, then I can tell her what happened today, okay?”

“It's not something you should worry about. It's my fault for not explaining it well enough in advance.”

“But...”

Another moment of silence returned, and it lasted until the end.

We eventually arrived at the lobby of the dormitory, and we both got into the elevator that came down.

“I had a great time today. Thanks, Ayanokōji-kun.”

When we reached the fourth floor and I got off, she waved goodbye to me.

“See you later, Ichinose.”

Ichinose and I kept eye contact for a few seconds until the door closed.

Eventually, Ichinose disappeared from sight.

When I returned to my room, I contacted Kanzaki via a chat application and reported the incident.

[Ichinose has not given up hope for A class. The reason for resigning from the student council is so that she can concentrate more on fighting. A statement of her resignation will be known to the public tomorrow or Monday.]

I received a message from Kanzaki afterward, asking if I meant those things.

At least, as far as I could see, there was no false impression.

Above all, I was able to catch a glimpse of an unusual aggressiveness that Ichinose had never shown before.

Whether this would be a good thing or a bad thing remained to be seen, but I had a feeling that we would see a different side of Ichinose.

I told Ichinose that I would watch over her and support her, and that she should have more people with whom she can express her opinions.

Kanzaki sent me a message of deep gratitude, perhaps with a sense of relief.

“No word from Kei?”

I could have told her that it was over, but I would meet her at school tomorrow either way.

If I were to put forward an explanation then, that should be more than plenty.

So I decided to leave it as it is without any contact today.

Chapter 5: The Approaching Special Exam

A FEW DAYS HAD passed since Kanzaki's and Ichinose's student council issue came to an end.

The second-year students had been studying and studying day after day for the upcoming special exam.

This time, the students with lower academic abilities had to bear a heavier responsibility, which had certainly produced a big change from the previous written exams.

As soon as the lunch break started, it was a daily routine for many to go to the school cafeteria, but more than half of the students left the class and took out the lunches they brought or convenience store lunches.

And on their desks, there was a bizarre scene of tablets, books, notebooks, etc. spread out.

“Ugh... I need a good night's sleep...”

“I want to play, I want to play, I want to play, I want to play...”

“Isn't the hallway noisy? It's disturbing my concentration. Can someone make it quiet?”

Various desires filled the classroom, and more and more people hummed what they wanted. In particular, many students seemed to be lacking sleep, and Sonoda was one of them.

“I want to sleep...”

She held her head in her hands and shook it, desperately trying to make the sleepiness go away.

“Let's try a little harder. After we've done this much, we'll take a break!”

Mii-chan, who was teaching Sonoda, gave her a soft pep talk.

On the other hand, some students showed surprising progress.

“Satsuki, you've finished already?”

“I'm suddenly motivated now, and I'm riding the wave. I'm in a good mood.”

A couple, Ike and Shinohara, were studying together in chairs.

Shinohara seemed to be having a reaction she had never felt before.

“You've been attending study groups for the past few days, haven't you?”

“It's been tough, I feel like I'm paying for all the time I've been slacking off...”

Shinohara yawned sleepily but seemed positive.

“I feel like I'm getting better at it little by little.”

“Oh, I'm still not there at all...”

“Well, let's work together.”

“You're so reliable. That's my girlfriend!”

When Ike cried out and tried to hug her, Shinohara's textbook rained down on his head.

“I'll see you later when you're done.”

“Ugh...”

“We can't keep repeating stupid things over and over again. Come on, face the problem and deal with it.”

“Shinohara-san, you seem to be very motivated.”

Yōsuke, who was watching the situation nearby, called out to Shinohara.

“The special exam this time is a chance to make use of the students in class that have been nothing but burdens. We have to contribute to the class at least a little. Besides, I don't want to be expelled.”

The reality was, if you didn't improve your abilities, you'd lose your place in the class. It had been proven in the previous case that when the time came, it would come back to you for not trying hard enough.

“You seem to be working hard too, Ike. But be careful not to push yourself too hard. It won't mean anything if you collapse before the actual exam.”

“Oh.”

Yōsuke complimented Ike and advised him to be careful.

Such was the conversation. Naturally, students who weren't motivated to study in the first place didn't want to waste their time studying. However, it was important to be able to make an effort in such a situation.

It didn't matter if it was for their boyfriend or girlfriend. Finding a reason that suited them would make putting in the effort easier. Sudō was also motivated by Horikita.

Until now, it had been difficult for many students to make that effort, but now that the class as a whole was coming together, it was steadily becoming a reality.

“But still... the hallways are noisy.”

During the time when students wanted to concentrate on their studies, there were many people passing by in the hallways, or there were constant talking and running footsteps.

At a time when they were trying to concentrate, this noise was like an uninvited guest.

“I'm going to check on things. I know there are a lot of students who are concerned.”

Even if I couldn't stop the disturbance, I could at least find out the cause. Finding out what was going on should have some stabilizing effect on the restless students.

“I agree. Can you do that for me?”

It'd be best if I went and checked on the students so that they didn't disturb those that were studying.

1

When I stepped out into the hallway, students from Ichinose's class ran past in a panic. Some of the students from Ryūen's class were heading in the same direction. It didn't take long for me to discover the source of the commotion: a crowd had gathered in front of a classroom.

Ishizaki and Albert were forcing their way through the crowd, shouting at Ichinose to come out because Ryūen had arrived. But Shibata, who had already stepped into the hallway, stopped them.

“What's with you guys barging in like this? We're in the middle of something right now.”

“Middle of something? I don't know anything about that. Just hurry up and bring out Ichinose!”

Ryūen was standing behind them, with a smug smile on his face, giving orders to Ishizaki. However, it wouldn't be wise to make such an obvious siege. It would be easy for the school to detect their problematic behavior in the crowded hallway during lunchtime, with so many surveillance cameras around.

Could it be that those who had sensed Ryūen's actions were hiding Ichinose in the classroom?

The situation, which seemed to be frozen for a while, quickly changed. The classroom door opened and Ichinose appeared, accompanied by several girls who seemed to be advising her to stop. Furthermore, important students like Kanzaki and Hamaguchi also appeared.

“Well, well, well. Finally, you've come out. The foolish leader who quit the student council.”

Ryūen said in his usual manner.

The announcement of the new student council structure had just been released that day. The resignation of Ichinose wasn't a surprise in itself, as it was well known to everyone.

The reason for her resignation was ostensibly to concentrate on her studies, but whether or not this was true or false was none of Ryūen's business. He came to shake her as soon as possible, thinking that he could use this situation as a weakness.

It seemed that the timing of the meeting was deliberate. They decided that it would be more effective if they could get people's attention. In fact, there were many students from other classes who heard the commotion and came to see what was going on.

Hashimoto from Class A, made eye contact with me in an obvious manner and quickly blended into the crowd of other students.

“It's getting pretty noisy, isn't it?”

Ishizaki commented on the commotion he was causing.

“Well, of course. She infiltrated the student council early on to earn good grades. It's only natural for the crowd to want to hear about the feeling of not being able to maintain even that. Don't you think so?”

“Uh-huh,” answered Ishizaki, spreading his arms lightly in response to Ryūen's voice.

“I told them I was going to concentrate on my studies.”

Ichinose, who looked a little troubled, once again explained the reason why she left the student council.

However, Ryūen didn't care what the answer was.

“You were actually kicked out, weren't you? Or maybe you were told that an incompetent person can't serve in the student council.”

“If that's the way you see it, then maybe it is.”

Ichinose, realizing that it was pointless to respond seriously, matched Ryūen's words.

“Kukuku. Or maybe your past sins are now being called into question? It wouldn't look good if the student council president was a shoplifter. I can understand the feeling of wanting to run away.”

The verbal pressure from Ryūen, who had no intention from the start to settle for sympathy, continued.

While the mention of ‘shoplifting’ might have stirred some thoughts in their minds, Ichinose seemed to have already developed a resistance to such discussions after the events with the student council. She didn't show any signs of being shaken by Ryūen's words.

“I don't know what to say, but it's not good to cause trouble for other people.”

“Not really. A lot of people want to know, don't you think? The truth about why you quit the student council.”

Not wanting to sit idly by as a fellow classmate, Kanzaki intervened between the two.

“Cut it out, Ryūen. The reason for Ichinose's withdrawal from the student council is as announced by the student council.”

“I don't care about the ostensible reason. You must already have a lot on your mind since you quit the student council! If you lose to me in the next special exam, you're going to fall off a cliff.”

This was a typical statement made by Ryūen, who was confident that he wouldn't lose to Ichinose.

Ichinose's class, which was on the decline, had no chance to rise to the top.

Furthermore, the gap between Ichinose and Class A would be doubled, which would make them more desperate than ever.

Ichinose's classmates, who didn't feel threatened now, would start to realize this fact.

"It's too much of a hassle to bother with every single exam, so we suggest that your class forfeits."

"Let's not make any more joking remarks. We're not going to give up on Class A. And we're working hard to make sure we don't lose this special exam too."

"Working hard? It's true that the only thing you guys have going for you is your stupid seriousness. No wonder you can't give up hope for this special exam, which you could win if you talk with your textbooks."

There was absolutely no way that Ichinose's class would abandon the test just because of this altercation.

If we can just shake them up a little more, that should be enough.

According to Kanzaki and the others, a lot of sabotage against their studies had already started.

Ichinose remained silent since Kanzaki's appearance, who interrupted.

It seemed as if he had nothing to say, but his expression didn't show any sign of gloom.

"Ryūen-kun... have you not had enough?"

Seeing his unchanged demeanor, Ichinose smiled at Kanzaki, quieting his tense mood.

"You can say whatever you want to me, but I don't want you to interfere with the hardworking students. And think about the students who are going out to eat now."

She warned Ryūen and the others who were standing spaciously blocking the corridor.

Whether to regard this situation as mere bluff or not was a delicate line, but Ryūen decided that it had been effective enough in increasing the interest and suspicion of those around her for leaving the student council, and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly.

"I'm getting hungry too."

It was only for a few minutes, but it was amazing how Ryūen's mere appearance could cause a commotion.

Notoriety was also reputation, and its power was undeniably demonstrated among the second-year students.

When Ryūen and the others left, two-thirds of the students who had gathered scattered in one fell swoop.

Hashimoto was no longer there, and the usual calm lunch break returned. Horikita's class should now be able to eat and study in a more relaxed atmosphere.

“Oh. Ayanokōji-kun!”

Ichinose, who noticed me after the people had scattered, approached with a smile on her face.

“I'm sorry. It was my fault, wasn't it?”

“It wasn't your fault. It's just that Ryūen made a scene. Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. It's rather convenient for us.”

“That blatant provocation?”

“Ryūen-kun will continue to sabotage us until the special exam starts. That's because the advantages outweigh the disadvantages for us.”

She didn't mind if he interfered with their studies. In fact, they seemed to want his class to interrupt them.

“Ichinose, I think it's time...”

While keeping an eye on the situation, Kanzaki spoke up with an air of reluctance, saying that he didn't have time for a long conversation.

They were probably having a lot of discussions and studying for the special exam, just like how it was in Horikita's class.

“See you later, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Saying this, Ichinose returned to the classroom normally without any sign of agitation.

“...See you later?”

I was a little concerned about her words, but I guess the first thing to do was to return to the classroom and explain the situation to Horikita.

2

After witnessing the commotion, Hashimoto quickly walked through the hallway to the cafeteria.

He made contact with a group of three people who were already seated and having lunch.

“Hey, Princess. Are you sure we don't have to do anything this time? I don't think it's a good idea to go head-to-head like this.”

“You seem to be very concerned about Class B, Hashimoto-kun.”

Putting down the chopsticks in her hand, Sakayanagi looked at Hashimoto.

“Even though they were formerly Class D, they're up to Class B now. And the gap between us isn't so big that we can laugh at it. If we lose this time, the gap will be less than 200 points. One big special exam could turn the whole thing around.”

Sakayanagi didn't seem to be bothered at all, but Kamuro, sitting in front of her, was a little different.

If anything, Hashimoto's idea was easier to understand and agree with.

“Is there any connection between that story and what happened earlier when you left in a hurry?”

“I was following his example, Ryūen is making new moves one after another to corner Ichinose's class.”

“New moves? I don't think so. It's the same shape, just a different color.”

“Even so. I'm a little envious, to be honest.”

Hashimoto expressed his true feelings, including criticism of Sakayanagi.

However, Sakayanagi didn't seem to be bothered by Hashimoto's true thoughts and responded with a smile.

“In a special exam like this one, what we can do is extremely limited. There is not much you can do externally, all you can do is sit at your desk, stare at your textbook, and face yourself.”

“I know that, but it doesn't mean that there aren't any other options available to you.”

“Our classes are full of students who are not afraid of studying, who work on their own initiative and who work in teams. There is no need for me to tell them what to do, don't you think? Trying to cram more than you can handle is counterproductive.”

Hashimoto bit his lip slightly and responded with an attitude that said otherwise.

“It seems that you’re quite dissatisfied that we aren’t doing anything. So, do you want to be like Ryūen-kun, watching 24/7, putting pressure on your opponent, and sabotaging him? I don't think that’s efficient.”

Hashimoto let out an imperceptible sigh and replied to Sakayanagi.

“Indeed, it may not be efficient. And considering that it's a copy of Ryūen's strategy, the probability of the princess adopting it is low... But isn't it many times better than doing nothing? It's a nuisance to be interrupted in our studying, which requires concentration.”

Hashimoto affirmed the action as if it was one way to imitate Ryūen's strategy.

“It may make sense on the surface, but in the end, if Ichinose and the others are bothered by interruptions, won't they stay in their dormitories? What's the point of changing the place to study?”

Kamuro asked curiously, tearing a piece of bread.

“You can see the root of the reason why we study and work outside. Studying in front of the public makes it easier for me to concentrate because I can't skip class, and I can relax a little more. Isn't that right?”

“Certainly, studying is not always about confining yourself. Especially for those who are not used to studying regularly, studying in a place where people can help you can make it easier to learn.”

“So Ichinose and others continue to study even though they know they’re in a place where they’ll be interfered with.”

Kamuro nodded her head in agreement as she spread jam and put a piece of bread in her mouth.

“But you forgot the important thing, Hashimoto-kun.”

“The important thing?”

“It takes a lot of manpower to sabotage. Besides, sabotaging in front of the public doesn’t give a good impression.”

“... That's...”

At the very least, it looked far from the behavior of Class A champions.

“Furthermore, you’ll lose a lot of learning time if you use that strategy. You won't be able to reduce the opponent's score catastrophically, and you’ll lose the opportunity to score as many points. The next idea that comes to mind is to hire first-year or third-year students and ask them to interfere, but there’s no guarantee that they’ll do a good job for the price, and you’ll need more people to monitor their work. In this case, it's inefficient because there won't be a significant change in class points this time.”

Hashimoto, who remained in denial, continued to think about what he could do, avoiding thoughts about giving up.

“Then there's no problem if I operate alone, is there?”

“I don't recommend it. His way of doing things is a strategy that fits the phrase, 'putting the cart before the horse' very well.”

He continued to sabotage with unknown effectiveness by reducing the number of people and time to study.

“Moreover, it's the same for one person or ten people. If your harassment of the other class becomes known, it's not only your fault, but it degrades the dignity of Class A. Don't you think so?”

Even if Hashimoto claimed that he acted alone, how many people would believe him?

The more effective it was, the more likely it would be judged that Sakayanagi was giving orders behind the scenes.

“When you put it that way, it's like saying that Ryūen's strategy is also unnecessary, right?”

“That's not exactly true. Even if it's a useless strategy for us, Ryūen-kun's class adopts the strategy of obstruction, which is very significant, unlike ours. They are the least motivated and the least skilled students among the second year's four classes. Even if they start studying seriously at their desks now, they won't come close to the Ichinose-san's class's academic abilities. That's why they're betting on making their opponents fall instead of improving themselves.”

While Hashimoto continued to insist that something should be done, Sakayanagi offered a solid theoretical explanation.

“So we can win as it is, right?”

“If all goes well, we'll win this special exam. However, according to the rules, our opponent has the upper hand in determining the outcome. It seems that the rule was set so that lower classes can also fight against higher classes, but unlike us, who are in the higher ranks, the lower classes have the right to the highest score. We cannot guarantee that we will be able to compete in this format.”

Even if Sakayanagi's class achieved a perfect score, it couldn't match Horikita's class's perfect score due to the rules.

“Defeat is alright as well, though unlikely. If Horikita-san's class's score exceeds ours and wins, it would be an opportunity to collect information.”

“...Information-gathering?”

“Among the low-level students, there may emerge students who have potential. If we can determine this, we can improve the accuracy of our priorities—who has to be eliminated. In this sense, Ryūen-kun's strategy is still a foolish one since it blurs the picture.”

The results of the special exam were to be announced to the opposing class in detail.

If there was a student who performed remarkably well, it was inevitable that they'd be noticed.

“You still don't seem happy about it.”

Kitō, who had been silent so far, threw a firm remark against Hashimoto.

“No, I understand what you're saying, Princess. However... I'm wary of Class B. It's not a bad thing to think that they might catch up to us if we're not careful, is it?”

Hashimoto didn't say anything else, but the first candidate was undoubtedly Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.

And they couldn't ignore potential opponents such as Kōenji, whose potential was first-rate.

“It'd be fine if we just lose this special exam. But the end-of-year exam would be against Ryūen. The fluctuation of class points would be bigger than ever before, so we can trust that we won't lose that one, right?”

“The end-of-year exam requires a certain amount of strategy. There's no way I can lose unless there's a special condition like this that gives the lead to a certain class. Of course, Ryūen-kun would respond in the same way.”

Neither of us had any doubt about our chances of defeat when it came to the real thing. But at the end of the school year, one of the leaders would surely be defeated, and that would have a great impact on the Class A competition.

“I'm sorry, I overstepped the mark a bit. I'll go cool off.”

Hashimoto replied, apologized to Sakayanagi, and left.

He then took off his jacket, put on his shoes, and walked out the front door toward the dormitory.

A male student approached Hashimoto.

Neither of them called out to the other, and they began to walk side by side.

“It seems that you had been struggling a lot.”

The man who answered in an amused tone understood the situation because he had been watching the cafeteria through the glass.

“I'm a realist, but I'm also a romantic.”

“Those have opposite meanings. What do you mean by that?”

“A realist is a pragmatist. If you think about it normally, you wouldn't think that Sakayanagi would fall behind Ryūen. We'll win by getting rid of Ryūen's tricks. Well, it's predictable that it will show off Class A's dignity in a straightforward way.”

“Yes, that's probably what most people think.”

“However, in the world of manga, novels, and dramas, it wouldn't happen that way, would it?”

“You mean Sakayanagi will lose?”

“It's not realistic for Class A, who's in the lead, to keep winning. It wouldn't make a good story. It'd be more exciting if they were brought down to the same level during the end-of-year exams. Then in the third year, it would be a three-way

battle between Ryūen's, Horikita's, and Sakayanagi's classes. And ultimately, one of the classes would lose and be dragged down from the top spot, leading to the ending..."

For the students in Class A, such a fantasy was extremely unacceptable.

"I see, you're indeed a romantic."

"We have to be ready for either Horikita or Ryūen."

"That's a very Hashimoto-esque idea."

Fortunately, Hashimoto was in a position to have some information on Class A.

"However, I need to be careful not only behind but also in front and to the side. I can't trust you for free either, can I? Kaneda."

Kaneda smiled wryly and put his finger on the rim of his glasses when his name was called.

"It's perfectly natural to suspect you of being Ryūen's puppet. You have been and will continue to be so. I'm not sure if I'm right or wrong in my calculations."

"I work for myself, and you work for yourself. That's the best relationship."

Kaneda showed Hashimoto the words he had typed on his cell phone, and when Hashimoto nodded his head, he erased all the words. Kaneda stopped moving forward and naturally moved away from Hashimoto.

"I wonder if I should follow Sakayanagi, Ryūen, or Horikita's class? It's time to make a decision."

Looking ahead to the end of the school year and beyond that, to the third year.

Hashimoto continued to think about what he could do for himself.

3

After school on the day when Ryūen and Ichinose, opponents in the upcoming battle, had a small altercation, Horikita invited me to a study group as usual, but naturally, I declined.

Kei had been paying attention to me while avoiding talking to me since this morning, and I had no plans for the rest of the day.

That was why I could devote my time to solving the troublesome problems that had been thrust upon me.

The word 'shoplifting' had been thrown around a lot lately, and this was the case that started it all.

Why was Kiryūin Fūka almost accused of stealing?

It was probably true that she claimed not to have any friends, judging from her words and actions.

Of course, there was the fact that she was disliked, not only by her classmates, but also by the entire third-year students because of her personality.

However, it wasn't easy to think of incriminating her.

If Kiryūin had been recognized as an obstacle to competing in the Class A competition during her first year, it might've been considered a strategy without regard to right and wrong, but now that the game was already decided, what was the point of taking such a risk?

The most likely scenario that had emerged was that Nagumo would harass the participants by giving them indirect instructions.

Nagumo, who was hungry for a heated competition, was trying to harass Kiryūin in order to make her take it seriously.

However, judging from the way he brushed off Kiryūin at the student council meeting the other day, we couldn't be absolutely sure of this. It might've been a good time to reveal his intentions and challenge Kiryūin.

That was why Kiryūin wasn't sure of her exact decision.

There were several options available to me as I proceeded with my investigation.

One was to confront Nagumo, the leading candidate, about this case, and the other was to talk to Yamanaka, the person who tried to plant the goods in Kiryūin's bag. The last was to seek information from a trusted third party to better understand the situation of the third-year students.

The third-year students didn't have much interaction with each other.

The only people I had the contact information of were former student council members such as Nagumo and Kiriyama.

So, I had no choice but to walk to the school and get information directly.

Of course, I didn't intend to waste my time in the dark, but I had my own reasons for doing so.

The person who seemed to have the most useful information for me right now, and who wasn't likely to have any connection with the people who framed Kiryūin.

I found some third-year students who were working alone and tried to gather information.

From the information I gathered, I learned that the person I was looking for had gone to the gymnasium, so I headed there immediately.

However, I didn't spot them on the way and arrived at the gym.

It seemed that the club activities had already started, and I could see my classmate Sudō practicing the basics carefully while shouting louder than the others.

"They're not here."

As the club members started to gather one after another in the gymnasium, I decided to leave so as not to disturb them.

I asked the students who were going to the gym, but couldn't get any new information.

I couldn't see them after all, but when I went back to the entrance and checked their shoes, I found that they were still in the school.

They disappeared, but they might still be inside the school?

It was almost 5:00 p.m., and there weren't many students left in the school other than club members.

At the risk of being conspicuous, I decided to go to the area where the third-year classrooms were located.

I looked around all four classes, but there was still no sign of them.

It might've been wiser to stay at the entrance and ambush them.

At that time, I overheard a report that the person I was searching for had gone to the staff room.

I finally arrived at the staff room and succeeded in finding the person I was looking for talking with the teacher in the corridor.

Since teachers often came and went at this time after school, I decided to wait for them to come out from a little distance away so that they wouldn't notice me.

After about ten minutes, the student I was looking for finally emerged from the staff room.

I always thought of them as a cheerful person, but today their expression was rather dark, and they walked with a downcast look on their face. They crossed the hallway without noticing my presence as I watched over the staff room.

After a little hesitation, I decided to follow the student from a distance. I called out to them as they were putting on their shoes at the entrance.

However, the person didn't head for the entrance immediately and went up to the stairs toward the rooftop.

I wondered if the person was meeting someone since there was no way for them to go up to the roof.

As I was thinking this, the person stopped and I heard a faint sobbing voice. It seemed that this wasn't a place to meet someone, but a place to avoid people.

The school building was strangely silent. The sound of crying was strangely noticeable, even if they tried to hold it in.

If someone who didn't know what was going on came here, they might've thought that I had made the person cry.

I could've walked away without being noticed, but I had my own business to attend to.

“Umm.”

I tried to speak to them briefly and as unsurprisingly as possible.

However, they probably had no idea that there was a person nearby, and their excessive alarm was visible.

“Huh!? E-eh, Ayanokōji-kun!?”

“I'm sorry for surprising you.”

“Sorry, sorry. Wait, wait a minute!”

“It's not necessary to apologize...”

The person in question was still surprised, but hid their face too late and hurriedly wiped away the tears running down their cheeks.

“I'll come back later if the timing's bad, but...”

“It's okay, it's okay. It's all right!”

She tugged at my sleeve to keep me from leaving. I didn't expect that kind of reaction.

Maybe she instinctively sensed the risk of me leaving and then telling others that she was crying, which was why she tried to keep me here.

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Then we waited quietly for a few minutes until Asahina regained her composure.

“... Yeah. I'm fine now.”

Asahina answered, coughing once and muttering shyly.

“I'm sorry.”

“Again, don't apologize. It was my fault for startling you.”

“That's not what I meant. I showed you how bad I look.”

I didn't pursue the reason for the tears because I didn't want to go into something irrelevant. However, perhaps this bothered her. Asahina started to talk about the reason herself.

“This morning it was Succhii— Rather, Moeka who quit school. Suchi Moeka from Class C.”^[2]

(TL Note : Succhii is spelled with Katakana (スツチー), which implies that this is a nickname)^[2]

“Is she dropping out at this time of year? It's not a penalty for a special exam, is it? Did she withdraw voluntarily?”

There should've been no special exam among third-year students in the past two days.

However, Asahina shook her head in denial.

“The reason, she said, was that she had committed a serious offense. She said she was being punished for her disruptive behavior. I wanted to know the details, so I asked the teacher, but she insisted that she couldn't tell me.”

So that's why she was visiting the staff room.

As for Asahina, who was in Class A, it didn't matter to her if someone from Class C was expelled from school. However, it was needless to say that they were friends beyond the boundaries of their classes, judging from the way she was talking.

“You didn't get to speak with her?”

“Moeka withdrew yesterday, and by the time I was notified this morning, she was no longer in the dormitory. There has been no contact from her... I've been asking around since then to see if any of the Class C students knew anything, but in the end, I didn't learn anything.”

Either no one knows the reason why Suchi left, or someone knows and is hiding it.

Horikita Manabu's generation, Nagumo's generation, Horikita Suzune's generation, and first-year students like Nanase and Amasawa.

I only knew a little about each of the years, but it was obvious that Nagumo's generation seemed to be the most likely to have people dropping out of school.

Still, it was a little worrisome to see students dropping out for reasons unrelated to the special exam. The school was withholding details, probably

because they considered it such a serious violation that it could have negative repercussions.

“I'm just guessing here, and I have no idea what kind of rule she broke, but I have a feeling I know why she did it. All the students in Class B and below are constantly thinking of ways to sneak into Class A every day. I'm sure Moeka did something she shouldn't have done among them.”

“In your generation, Asahina-senpai. Isn't it Nagumo-senpai who's in charge of everything?”

If Nagumo recognized them, they were in Class A. If not, they'd be eliminated.

That was the way for the third-year students to survive, as it had been shown so far.

However, Asahina's cloudy face suggested that there was something else.

“So there's another way that would allow the third years to move up to Class A?”

“...I'd say it's more like a loophole. How's your relationship with Nagumo... Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What do you mean by 'how'? It's usually not good, and it hasn't changed.”

“This is something that the other students in the year don't know about...”

“Oh, I see. I won't tell anyone or anything like that.”

When I told her this to reassure her, she was relieved and started to talk about the reality of her third year. She was probably feeling the need to vent because her friend had been expelled from the school.

“Last year, when Nagumo became the student council president, it was said that Class A was sure to win, and there was no hope for Class B and below. That's why everyone was happy when Nagumo made a promise that he'd bring them up to Class A if they were successful and had the ability.”

However, it wasn't such a sweet deal. In this school system, very few students could move to another class even if they collected enough class points.

In the middle of the conversation, Asahina exhaled and shook her body slightly at the same time.

She had hoped to graduate together with Moeka in Class A.

That dream didn't come true and she quit school before graduation.

“What did Nagumo-senpai say about Suchi's withdrawal?”

“Nothing. In fact, he might not even care. There was an announcement from the teacher, but there's a possibility that he didn't even notice.”

So, he doesn't pay attention to the small fries that are leaving.

I didn't dislike Nagumo's way of thinking.

“If you don't mind, can we change the location for a while? It's getting kind of cold.”

It seemed that the adrenaline that had been pumping through her system during the time she was in the staff room had calmed down, and her body remembered the cold.

Unlike the heated classrooms and the staff room, the corridor was still chilly. The temperature was beginning to drop as the evening approached.

Since I had many questions for Asahina, we decided to go to a café in the Keyaki Mall, although it was a little far away.

4

Asahina, who ordered hot tea, held the cup in both hands and brought it to her mouth in a delicious manner.

“So, to continue what we were talking about earlier, you’re saying that the dissatisfaction and opposition to Nagumo-senpai is becoming increasingly active by the day, right?”

“Yes. I don't know exactly how many people are involved. Basically, such information isn't revealed to Class A. You don't know about the contract Nagumo has made with the third-year students, do you?”

“I thought they were using some method to bind the year together, but nothing concrete.”

“Then let's start with that.”

With that said, Asahina took a moment to look around to make sure no one was nearby before elaborating on the contract's details.

For the first time, Nagumo Miyabi's contract with many of the third-year students was revealed.

- *The transfer of 75% of the private points earned each month to Nagumo Miyabi personally.*
- *To comply with Nagumo Miyabi's instructions and not to engage in hostile behavior.*
- *To earn the right to acquire tickets, one must collect a certain number of points that they've earned and been recognized for.*
- *The funds to transfer must be handed over the day before the class finalization.*
- *If a person disobeys Nagumo even after winning a ticket, their right will be revoked.*

- *Students who abide by the above five conditions will be eligible to compete for the tickets worth 20 million points.*

And one more thing.

“Nagumo’s going to leave tens of millions of points and let the students who signed the contract draw lots at the end.”

This meant that, even if they failed to get a ticket through this contract, they still had a chance to go to Class A with a lottery.

The contract that Nagumo made to the students in the classes below him was secure because Class A’s status, which Nagumo led, was good... Since it was impossible for an individual to accumulate 20 million points, private points would be collected from many others and converted into class transfer tickets.

Students in Class B and below usually had a zero percent chance of graduating within Class A, but with this redistribution of wealth, their chances would increase, if only by a few percent.

The fact that some students, such as Kiriyama, had already earned the right to do so suggested that it was having some effect. A 75% rate was very high, but this was important for the proposition of giving as many students as possible a ticket. At the same time, it was advantageous to Nagumo. By not allowing them to handle large sums of money, Nagumo deterred them from starting a rebellion.

“So he forced this on Class B and below.”

“Yes. Only Nagumo knows exactly how many students signed the contract. But I think most of the students probably agreed to it. And we, Class A, also gave 50% of our points to him, although it's not by contract.”

Only Class A students who were sure to win could use their full amount of private points freely every month. This was a natural right, but students in the lower classes may have felt dissatisfied.

Nagumo understood this part of the situation, which was why he was able to adjust and control the situation.

In the third year, Class A was the lone lead. Therefore, even if the 50% share was paid, it would be more than the full 75% amount collected from the other three classes. Nagumo, who had the power to decide the special exams’ results at will, was the king who was in control of everything.

“I happened to be placed in the same Class B that Nagumo was originally in. He worked hard to move me up to Class A and created the environment that I’m in now. I know I’m not qualified to say this, but I’ve been taking advantage of it this whole time...”

She seemed afraid to say it, but she pulled the heavy words out from the back of her throat.

“I heard that Moeka dropped out of school because of the environment Nagumo created, even if indirectly. When I thought about that, my tears started to overflow...”

That was probably the reason for Asahina's crying face she showed at the school building earlier.

I didn't think there was a direct relationship between Suchi and Kiryūin, but what Asahina said about Nagumo 'indirectly' being the cause might've implied so.

“Asahina-senpai, can you lend me your help?”

“Help? With what?”

“What's your relationship with Yamanaka-senpai in Class 3-D?”

“Yamanaka-san? I've spoken with her, but we don't get along particularly well. I don't think I can help you...”

‘We don't get along particularly well.’ Hearing those words was actually quite convenient for me

“Since you're a third-year student, it's more important for me to have you speak objectively about Yamanaka.”

“Is that so?”

I took out my cell phone and displayed Ikuko Yamanaka's OAA, a third-year student from Class D.

She was a typical Class D student—below average in all abilities. Nothing noteworthy.

“Does she have a wide social circle?”

“Well, I don't know. I think she gets along well with her female classmates, but she's not the type to be very outgoing. She's not popular with everyone.”

I didn't want to rely on Asahina's evaluation alone, but it seemed safe to say that she didn't have more than what the OAA indicated.

“What I'm about to tell you is off the record, please.”

“That's kind of funny. We're both talking in secret.”

“Yeah.”

I told Asahina about the situation with Kiryūin being nearly accused of shoplifting.

At first, Asahina was surprised, but soon she began to understand the situation.

“I see. So you wanted to talk to me about doing an investigation on the third-year students.”

“You're the only person I thought I could trust.”

“I'm kind of glad. When I'm around Nagumo a lot, I'm more likely to be suspected of knowing more.”

Well, if you thought about it, it wasn't unreasonable to assume so when she had a close connection with Nagumo.

“What do you think about this case from your viewpoint?”

“I’ve only spoken to Kiryūin-san a few times over the past three years, so I don’t know much about her. However, she’s probably exactly as you imagine her to be.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“I’m not saying that there’s absolutely no chance of Kiryūin-san and Yamanaka-san having a grudge against each other, but it’s another thing to think about framing her for shoplifting out of revenge. If it were found out, you might be expelled from school, right?”

“Kiryūin-senpai was actually able to notice it right away, and Yamanaka-senpai ended up failing. If it had been immediately reported to the school, as you said, the possibility of expulsion might not have been zero.”

In other words, something inexplicable had been happening from the very beginning of this incident.

“But... I see. I think I remember something.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I think it was right after she almost got accused of shoplifting. I saw Kiryūin-san stomping on a boy on the way home after she made him fall down.”

“She trampled him?”

Kiryūin-san was usually elegant and composed. It was hard to imagine, but...

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“They were probably hindering Kiryūin-san's attempt to go after Yamanaka-san. She was quite angry and was pushing him as if to interrogate him. I don't know why the boy was trying to protect Yamanaka-san but I couldn't help but feel bad. He must have had a scary experience.”

“By the way, who was she pressuring?”

“It was Anazai-kun from Class D, I think?”

A new name. Was he manipulating Yamanaka and trying to sabotage her, or was he just trying to protect her from Kiryūin as a classmate?

This still needed to be figured out.

“I want to talk to Yamanaka-senpai, can you contact her for me?”

“What? Uh, yes. It's not that hard...”

“Then, please...”

As soon as she contacted Yamanaka via chat, the message was marked as read.

“Can I tell her that you want to see her?”

I nodded and told her it wasn't a problem and then she sent another text.

“I got a read but she didn't reply.”

Asahina-senpai stared at her phone for a while, but after a few minutes, she received a message.

“If you don't mind waiting, she said she would be here in about 30 minutes.”

“No problem, I'll wait. Thank you.”

“It's no big deal. I'm curious about the truth too.”

Since I had time, I decided to ask Asahina-senpai about her school life, special exams, etc. for a while.

5

We were just a few minutes away from the appointed time. Just as I ran out of drink in my cup, a male student approached us.

“Asahina, is this Ayanokōji?”

“What? Tachibana? Yes, but...”

“I’ll be disturbing you guys for a bit.”

A student named Tachibana roughly pulled out a chair and sat down empty-handed. Then he immediately put his arms on the table and leaned forward to talk to me.

“What do you want with Yamanaka?”

Tachibana Kento. He was a classmate of Yamanaka's in Class 3-D.

I was expecting Anazai to appear, but it turned out he was another new face.

“Wait a sec, huh? Why did you say that...?”

Asahina-senpai was clearly confused at this sudden appearance.

“I guess you got a message from Yamanaka-senpai, right? She asked you to check things out?”

“Huh? I'm the one asking the questions here, you know.”

He didn't show any sign of weakening his aggressive posture, perhaps because he was a senior. He was probably someone who was superior to Anazai in terms of physical and mental strength.

“This is about Kiryūin-senpai, you know?”

“What does that have to do with you?”

“I'm not directly involved, but I've been asked by Kiryūin-senpai to ascertain the truth.”

“Are you some kind of detective or something? If so, tell her what Yamanaka-san told her before.”

“That Nagumo-senpai sent you to frame her for stealing, right?”

“Right.”

“Hey, is that true, Tachibana? I can't believe Nagumo would let her do such a thing.”

“You can't believe it? Nagumo's always the one who makes us do such things. He's enslaving us and using us like limbs.”

From the looks of it, it seemed that they were at least different from the faction that supported Nagumo. It wouldn't be out of place if they called themselves an anti-Nagumo faction.

“I have no choice but to follow him, no matter how much I don't like it. Just like Yamanaka.”

Tachibana exhaled in a bored manner and tilted his head slightly.

“If you understand, don't get involved with Yamanaka again. Okay?”

“My apologies, but I can't do that either. Nagumo-senpai didn't approve of this matter.”

“You can doubt me all you want, but it's the truth. We can't go against Nagumo.”

“You have a contract with Nagumo-senpai, don't you?”

Tachibana stared at Asahina and gave her a look as if asking, 'You even told him that?'

“Then you know what I'm talking about.”

“I'm sure you could've collected private points and redistributed them into large sums of money that could be transferred to different classes. Why did so many people go to the trouble of following Nagumo's instructions?”

“You don't understand. We, Class D and C, didn't have any class points left before the contract was made. Even if the whole class worked together for a year, we never would've collected 20 million. But if you sign a contract, they let you win a few special exams. That means you get class points. What choice would we have if we didn't sign up? And if the whole class ignored Nagumo's contract, we'd have to fight him every step of the way. What then? The remaining class points would've been stripped away and the monthly private points would've been at zero for a long, long time.”

Seizing the opportunity, Nagumo took full advantage of his class's strength and advantage.

“She was given a stable school life and even a chance to graduate with class A if she was accepted by Nagumo. Only an idiot like Kiryūin could refuse this.”

By being under Nagumo's control, you could maintain your class points to some extent.

Even if you were exploited by the 75% payment, you could always keep your allowance every month.

Once a contract was made, it'd be difficult to break it.

Even if one or two people revolted, they'd be found out by someone tipping off.

“Even if Nagumo spent a lot of money, no one could complain.”

“Well... I'm not saying there's nothing to be dissatisfied about. But as you said, we can't complain. It's okay for those who have the ability, but for those like me who have no hope of reaching Class A without relying on someone, the last resort is to rely on the lottery.”

Even if private points were squeezed endlessly until graduation, there was always the lottery to bet on.

Even if you only had one ticket, there was a 1 in 100 chance of winning. That wasn't bad, was it?

“Was one of his instructions to frame Kiryūin-senpai for shoplifting?”

Tachibana kept his eyes down for a moment, then nodded quietly.

“I’m one of the intermediaries. If I can get Kiryūin to confess to shoplifting, he said he’ll give me the transfer ticket.”

“I don’t understand this ‘intermediary’ thing. The more people you put in between, the more the fact that you tried to make her shoplift will be leaked. Besides, if a large number of people challenge a single event together, each person’s contribution will naturally be distributed.”

It’d be less time-consuming and risky for Nagumo to approach a girl like Yamanaka from the beginning.

Where was the need to pass the baton from Nagumo to Tachibana and from Tachibana to Yamanaka?

This point was stuck in the back of my mind and wouldn’t come loose.

And if you asked me whether all of Tachibana’s statements were worth trusting, I’d say no. Basically, he seemed to be telling the truth, but he was speaking too frankly for that.

“You were told not to tell anyone by Nagumo-senpai, weren’t you?”

“Of course. However, when we’re in trouble, we can’t be blamed if we have to use his name. I don’t think Yamanaka and I are... responsible, if I may say so myself, or...”

When pressed, he simply confessed to the crime. The first time he appeared on the scene, he was all bullish, but he may have had a part of him that didn’t want to be poked at or a part of him which had a weak side peeking out.

“Tachibana-senpai, you may not be the direct perpetrator, but if this becomes public, the school will judge you as well.”

“Huh? There’s no way Nagumo-san will make this public.”

“Nagumo-senpai may be at fault, but Kiryūin-senpai’s angry. You can tell from watching her for the past three years that if she wanted to, she’d bite whoever she was dealing with, can’t you?”

“That’s... Anazai was quite frightened too...”

“You received instructions from Student Council President Nagumo and consulted with Yamanaka-senpai—a girl who could get close to Kiryūin-senpai. He told you that if you succeeded, he’d give you recognition. That was the whole truth. Can you swear to me that you’re completely sure?”

I set my cell phone to video mode and brought the camera close to Tachibana’s eyes.

“That is why...”

“Can you swear to that?”

When I brought the phone close to him again as if to remind him, Tachibana strongly brushed it away.

He then forcibly stopped the recording.

“I'm telling you I'm sure.”

“Then there's no need to panic. Why don't you want it recorded?”

“It's... that... Give me a break!”

“Hey, Tachibana-kun!”

Asahina tried to stop him, but he left without looking back.

“I think he wanted to say something. I wonder what it was...”

“It's okay. I was able to get a rough idea of what he was talking about from his reaction.”

“Is that so? You mean you know who ordered Tachibana-kun and the others?”

Tachibana obediently obeyed the order and carried it out.

When he failed and Kiryūin questioned him, he mentioned Nagumo's name.

Even at the risk of destabilizing his own position, he refused to admit anything other than the fact that he had done so.

“Thank you very much for today, Asahina-senpai.”

“Ummm... I'm glad you figured it out Ayanokōji-kun... Can you tell me about it...?”

“Let's not do that now. I don't want to get you involved.”

It seemed to be bothering her from start to finish, but it was best to keep it to myself for now.

6

Although it took some time, I was able to obtain important information that led me to the truth of the shoplifting case.

With Asahina's help, I didn't waste any time, but that was why I wanted to pause for a moment.

The fact was that I was on the verge of a solution on the very day I embarked on my investigation.

Of course, I could attribute this to my good fortune, including unintended coincidences.

That was why I wasn't satisfied.

It wasn't that the others—Asahina, Yamanaka, and Tachibana—were lying or anything like that.

What will happen if I report the results to Kiryūin?

And what's the goal of the person who orchestrated this scenario?

Depending on the decision and outcome, there was a possibility that it would affect the third semester.

I decided to send a message to Kiryūin about what I found, excluding the crux of the matter.

I then suggested what to do next. The question was whether Kiryūin would be on board with that or not, but since she wanted a solution, she probably would be.

On the way back from the Keyaki Mall, I arrived at the dormitory.

As I expected, there was no call from Kei on my cell phone, and she didn't seem to be waiting for me in the lobby.

I wonder if Kei will be able to keep her distance from me and diminish her relationship with me.

No, that was something I didn't need to think about yet.

As long as she acted as a host's parasite, she wouldn't be able to escape on her own and take independent action.

The elevator arrived on the first floor, so I selected to go to the fourth floor.

Although I had intended to focus on organizing Kiryūin's case for now...

“Welcome back, Ayanokōji-kun.”

As I got off the elevator, I saw Ichinose wearing a coat and smiling at me, looking a little cold.

It seemed that she was waiting for me in front of my room.

“What's wrong?”

“Hm? Like, I just wanted to see you. Am I bothering you?”

“No, not at all. It's just that you've been waiting a long time, haven't you?”

Normally I would've been home by 5:00 p.m., but it was already around 6:00 p.m. because I had to make a detour to see Asahina and the other third-year students.

Ichinose curiously pulled out her cell phone to check the time.

"What? When did it get so late? I didn't even notice."

I thought what she said might've been out of concern for me, but it didn't seem to be that way.

"How long have you been there?"

"Uh, a little after school. So that would be a little after... 4:30, I guess."

So she was on her feet for at least an hour and a half.

She said that she had wanted to come talk to me but didn't because she didn't want to interrupt me.

"You should've let me know beforehand."

Even if I couldn't see her right away, I could've at least told her when I'd be leaving.

"No, I didn't want to disturb you."

I didn't think that was a matter of good or bad, but if she wasn't bothered by waiting for me, there was nothing more to say.

"Hey, there's nothing I particularly need to talk to you about, but..."

She asked hesitantly.

"Have you made up with Karuizawa-san?"

"No, I haven't."

When I answered, Ichinose murmured, "I see."

Ichinose's expression was joyful, sad, or something else.

The expression on her face seemed to be any of these, but it was hard to see her true feelings.

"Then... can I be selfish for a moment? I'd like to have a little chat with you. Only if you don't mind..."

I'm sure it wasn't just to say hi since she took the time to wait for me.

"I'm fine with it. If you don't mind, do you want to come into my room?"

"Are you sure?"

There was no reason to refuse. Since Kei hadn't contacted me, I had nowhere else to be for the rest of the day. This also wasn't a place I could make her stand outside and talk in.

I couldn't let her body get any colder than it already was, so I turned the key in the lock and opened the front door.

"I'm a little nervous. Sorry to bother you."

When Ichinose entered the room having said that, she must've immediately noticed the difference from before.

"The last time you came to my room was on a rainy day."

“Thank you for that time. I was soaking wet from the rain...”

I took off my shoes first, then Ichinose, and she came up to the room neatly. When the lights were turned on and the entire room was brightly lit, Ichinose made a noise.

“Ah—It's a very cute room, isn't it?”

Ichinose's eyes were drawn to the changes in the bed and its surroundings as she replied.

There were no major changes, such as buying furniture or redecorating.

Just stuffed animals, hand mirrors, cushions, etc., which were a little out of place in a man's room.

There were many more small things here than before.

They were all brought in and left behind by Kei who came in and out of the room. If someone who didn't know the situation at this school were to see them, it might've been unsurprising for them to mistaken us for two people living together.

If you looked in the kitchen, you'd easily notice matching cups and chopsticks of different colors.

She knew that Kei and I were dating, and she must've assumed that the situation in the room had changed. In fact, you couldn't see any confusion on her face.

“Please sit down at your leisure. I'll pour you a hot drink. Cocoa?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Ichinose smiled happily as I offered her the same drink as that day.

The best way to warm up a cold body was from the inside.

However, it was getting quite cold in the room, so I turned on the heater and activated the humidifier.

“I think it'll warm up soon.”

Nodding, Ichinose took off her coat and placed it at her feet.

“Girls are impressive, aren't they? They always go to and from school in skirts like that. It must be cold.”

“It's definitely cold, but I'm so used to wearing skirts that I haven't really paid much attention to it.”

After answering, she looked at a photo frame with a picture of Kei and me in my room, she went up to it and stared at it for a long time.

“Can I ask you how you fell in love with Karuizawa-san?”

“Are you interested?”

“Yes. I didn't have much contact with her, but I knew that she was dating Hirata-kun during our first year. I never thought that she'd be dating you.”

Even many students in Horikita's class were still puzzled. If it were another class, it would be more difficult to figure out why.

“It's not that I don't want to answer, but it's hard to answer. I'd never been in love before, and even if I wanted to talk about it in detail, I couldn't. Maybe it was just a natural progression of learning about each other together in class.”

I couldn't talk about specifics, so I just used common words and ran with it.

“Karuizawa-san is cute, isn't she?”

“I don't deny it.”

The water in the pot had boiled, so I poured in the hot water and mixed the powder with a spoon to make cocoa.

“Here.”

“It's warm.”

She wrapped the cup with her hands, which had been cold, and exhaled.

“The other day, I dragged you around to the gym and stuff because of my selfishness. Did you mind?”

“I originally proposed the idea by asking for your day off. And...”

I opened my desk drawer and took out a piece of paper.

“The experience was so good that I'm thinking of pulling this out on my next day off.”

“Oh, a gym membership...”

I already filled out the form with my name, student ID number, and monthly course selection.

“I'm always leading a life of self-indulgence. I thought I'd get some exercise.”

“I see. I'm glad to hear that.”

Until the school trip, Ichinose often showed a downcast face.

However, since the last time we spent the break together, she had been smiling a lot more.

“We'll probably see each other more often at the gym from now on, so I'm counting on you.”

“Yes! I'll count on you too... Oh, right. We'll be able to meet at the gym too, huh?”

Ichinose drank cocoa and squinted her eyes happily.

“Actually, you know, I...?”

“Hmm?”

Ichinose looked into my eyes as if she had been thinking about something.

“I wasn't just waiting for you in front of the room because I wanted to see you. I had something I really needed to tell you... Can you sit next to me?”

She lightly patted the empty bed space with her hand.

I knew she was serious, so I sat down next to Ichinose to fulfill her wish.

“The reason I met with you this past Sunday was to put an end to it.”

“An end?”

“To end my feelings for you.”

Determined, Ichinose made no pretense of looking away.

“You’ve got someone you love, Karuizawa-san, so I thought that day would be our first and last date.”

There was no trace of sadness on Ichinose's face as she said this.

Was that what Ichinose was thinking on the day we shared our time at the gym?

“That's the end of it.”

Ichinose nodded emphatically.

“We won’t see each other in private anymore. I thought it was the right thing to do.”

“If that’s the case, it would contradict our time today here.”

Even if it wasn’t a holiday, it was undeniably a private time.

“But I was wrong. That way of thinking wasn't right. I realized that nothing would change if I kept doing that.”

I still don't know what conclusion she came to.

But I guess that change in thinking is the reason for the bright Ichinose we have now.

“I don't know what I should do. What should I do from now on...?”

The smile seemed to be the same as usual, but it also seemed to be different.

So far, I interpreted Ichinose as a relatively easy-to-understand person whose smile was easily visible on her face.

Of course, she sometimes showed her poker face well in exams, but at least in her private life, I had thought so.

However, nowadays, Ichinose often showed a face that couldn’t be read.

“That day, I had made up my mind that I’d never ask you about your girlfriend, Karuizawa-san, in front of you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it would hurt my heart and make my chest feel tight. I thought that if I asked, I would be in pain.”

Ichinose muttered, choosing her words carefully as if exposing herself to me.

“But after the gym, I couldn't resist asking you which one of you fell in love first.”

That’s right, she did ask me that. I knew how Ichinose was feeling at that time.

“Was it hard?”

“Strangely enough, it wasn't. It was at that moment that I realized I was wrong.”

“What did you figure out? What was the right thing for you?”

“You want to know? I'll tell you.”

Ichinose took a slow breath and looked into my eyes as I sat next to her.

“I still love you.”

Ichinose didn't run away. *She didn't want to catch me to then let me go.* She looked at me with such eyes.

“At that moment, I realized how much I love you.”

It was the first and last date that she accepted with the idea of stepping aside. However, Ichinose came to the opposite conclusion.

“At the same time, I thought that I couldn't remain in the dark. I had to change from the ground up.”

That was the moment that changed Ichinose from being in the dark.

“Hey... Can I touch your face?”

“You won't get any prizes for touching me.”

When I jokingly said that, Ichinose laughed softly and nodded her head.

Then she reached out her right hand and touched my cheek.

With a slight effort, she turned my face towards her.

“I've never done this to anyone. I've never felt this way about anyone. I've been nervous all the time, and somewhere inside, I'm in pain... but I'm so happy right now. Just having the person I love beside me fills my heart.”

I wanted to ask Ichinose, who told me so honestly.

“I asked you on the school trip, didn't I? I asked you if there was something you wanted.”

“Yeah. What I wanted... was to get to Class A. A goal that I could reach with my friends. I lost sight of that, and I almost broke down and said I couldn't do it anymore. No, I was broken. I even thought that I had no choice but to leave this school.”

“Not anymore, huh?”

“Not anymore. I want to stay. I want to aim for Class A. I want to achieve it.”

A hand on my cheek.

“And I want one more thing. The one I love... Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I think you know, but I...”

“Yeah. You've got Karuizawa-san. I know that, so I won't ask for anything more than that now, but...”

“But?”

“Things will be different from now on. I'm going to become the kind of person you will look at.”

Even though her cheeks were blushing, her unwavering gaze remained fixed on me. She didn't take that final step that would go against her morals despite being in love with someone who already had a partner. If she had crossed that line, I would've had to stop her, but she was able to restrain herself.

This was the core of Ichinose Honami.

“Ayanokōji-kun, watch me from now on.”

“I was going to watch over you even if you didn't want me to.”

“It's... at the end of the school year.”

“Yeah. Then when we meet again, I'll tell you one thing.”

“My resolve was broken once, but it's absolutely fine now.”

I don't need to question you about that.

As I sat next to her, I could feel the passion and strength that Ichinose exuded.

I didn't know how the outcome would turn out, but Ichinose had definitely undergone a great change mentally.

It was based on an intense dependence that was different from that of Karuizawa Kei.

This dependence, which may have been a double-edged sword, had undeniably given Ichinose great strength.

By nature, we wanted the person we loved to respond to us.

Even if it was the first time, we'd want them to say, 'I love you' to us.

We'd want to touch them and know what happens next.

But Ichinose didn't beg.

It was clear that she was determined to win this statement for herself.

Slowly, her hand left me.

“I'm going home.”

“I'll see you out.”

“You have to make up with Karuizawa-san as soon as possible.”

“I'll take care of it.”

Ichinose, with her coat in her hands, put on her shoes and opened the front door with light steps.

Then she waved her hand softly and the door closed.

Silence and a slight scent of cocoa and citrus lingered.

I wondered what kind of world Ichinose would create.

How it would affect the people around her, and how it would change my own thoughts.

I look forward to school life even more.

Chapter 6: The Expected and Unexpected

ONLY TWO DAYS were left in the second semester. Today was finally the day of the special exam for the collaborative comprehensive writing test, which was a direct confrontation with Class A. Although there were special rules, they were the same as the usual midterm and final exam.

In the morning, many of the students who had the academic rating C or below gathered in the classroom and worked hard to study until the very end, as much as time allowed.

Keisei and Horikita, who had already completed all their studies in advance, were watching over these students, giving them advice while making careful final checks.

Many students may think that the hardest part of the exam was coming, but that wasn't true.

As the saying went, it was two parts work for eight parts preparation, and most of the work had already been done in preparation for the exam. The attitude before studying, the concentration for studying. The exam itself was only one-fifth of the workload compared to the preparation.

And when it was over, you'd realize that most of the things weren't that big of a deal.

The test procedure was based on a sheet that Horikita had submitted to Chabashira-sensei last night, which listed the order in which everyone in the class would take the exam.

Since everyone was allowed to solve any number of questions from a total of 100 on the exam, some may think that the order wasn't that important.

However, the order was very important. Each participant had 10 minutes, including entering and leaving the room.

This was enough time to solve a problem, but definitely not enough to read and understand all 100 questions.

If a student with low academic ability struggled to read and comprehend the questions, not only would he or she not be able to find five easily solvable problems and then not be able to write down the ideal number of answers, but they would also make easy mistakes due to the panic of running out of time.

Therefore, the order in which you solved the problems was the key to reducing the probability of making easy mistakes.

Less than five minutes had remained until the bell rang to signal the start of the exam.

While everyone was very tense, Kōenji was the same as usual.

He was checking his face carefully with his hand mirror and occasionally browsing the internet on his cell phone, seemingly free to do as he pleased.

Horikita confirmed beforehand that Kōenji hadn't said whether he was taking the test seriously or not. He only replied that he had the right to do whatever he wanted.

Horikita, realizing that her strategy would be ruined if Kōenji alone were to disrupt it, offered a clever suggestion.

Kōenji should be the last student in the order to solve.

At that point, 98 out of 100 questions would already be filled in, leaving only two questions.

Even if Kōenji, with an academic rating B, failed to answer the two questions, the loss was only 4 points, and it was unlikely to be a major setback. Furthermore, since these were the last two questions, if they were left blank, it was possible to pass it off as not being able to solve them rather than not having solved them, without violating the rules.

There wasn't any risk of him solving problems on a whim, leaving them blank, or making mistakes.

Kōenji readily agreed to this proposal. Since the class would receive 50 points if they won, there would be almost no refusal from him to answer the questions correctly.

In fact, if we lost 50 points because he didn't solve, he'd only lose the private point income that he desires.

Since we couldn't predict Kōenji's actions with common sense, Horikita had no choice but to use such a strategy.

This was a test that wouldn't be easy.

Although we couldn't be optimistic, the conditions for victory were in our favor.

The pressure on the students with lower academic ability in Class A would be great.

The leader of their class, Sakayanagi, may have her own tricks up her sleeve, but the fact that each student would take the test in a separate room, combined with the nature of the surveillance would make it impossible for the students to fight in an unconventional way.

For example, it wasn't possible to have the weakest students get a large number of points, or to walk a tightrope by planting cheat sheets.

What all classes could do was raise their current level of competence and arrange the order of their class so that they could maximize their performance. Or, like Ryūen, they could indirectly harass them outside of the examination.

There were some cunning ways, such as making a secret agreement to intentionally make a mistake, but the results of this test would be disclosed to the

public. There was a risk of being caught if you made a blatant mistake, and above all, there was no guarantee that one or two bribes would lead to a win.

In a school full of students who were basically doing their best, it was unexpected that there were people like me and Kōenji, who hadn't been properly evaluated in the OAA.

It wasn't ridiculous to receive a few extra points for having received a low score instead of the actual score.

So far, it's safe to say that several conditions were in favor of Horikita's class.

Chabashira-sensei appeared at the sound of the chime, and under her guidance, we all moved to the special building and waited there. Then, we went to the next classroom one by one and solved the problems on our tablets according to the order determined by Horikita. This process was repeated till the last student, Kōenji.

In this room, under the supervision of a teacher, students weren't allowed to bring in tools or use their cell phones. Chatting was also forbidden, so everyone waited for their turn in silence.

The only thing that remained to be seen was whether or not the students would be able to show what they had achieved so far, without being overwhelmed by nervousness.

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The students were relieved to have completed the special examination, which included a long waiting period.

“Thank you all for your hard work. The results will be announced tomorrow, but today is the last day of class. The day after tomorrow is the start of the winter vacation, so don't get too carried away. That's all for today.”

Chabashira-sensei's words of appreciation for the students' hard work brought us to the end of the school day. All that remained was to wait for tomorrow's closing ceremony.

Many of the students would be free from the heavy examination time and would be able to fly freely. Some of the students were discussing how well or poorly they had solved the problems, but Horikita didn't take the initiative in organizing their opinions and evaluating them. The question of how many points one could've gotten was also what the opponent wondered. They decided that it'd be meaningless to find out, since the results would be announced tomorrow.

“You know...”

Kei quietly came near me and talked to me in a small voice.

“What's wrong?”

“Well, I think it's about time for me to forgive you...”

She hesitantly brought up the topic

But soon after, Horikita came to my seat.

“Ayanokōji-kun, may I have a word?”

“I'm sorry, Horikita-san, can we do this later?”

“I wish I could do that, but unfortunately, it's a student council matter.

Kiriyama wants us to gather in the student council room right now.”

As if to confirm that it was true, Horikita showed me the message on her cell phone.

Behind Horikita stood a smiling Kushida.

“Sorry Kei, we'll talk after this is over. Call me anytime.”

“Umm... yes. Have a good day.”

I left Kei behind and left the classroom with Horikita and Kushida.

“I can't believe that just when I thought the special exam was over, the student council is back on the case.”

“Nagumo-Senpai is there too. They don't have to comply with the rules, do they?”

“I don't think so. Even if they are no longer involved in the student council, they are still senior students. And this time, it's about Kiryūin-senpai. You mean *that* case, right?”

“I see. That's what this is about.”

I realized that this was an expected event that I had discussed with Kiryūin several times last night. However, it was a surprising development that Kiriyama came to tell this to Horikita.

The original plan was for it to be just Kiriyama, Nagumo and myself at Kiryūin's urging.

“Hey, hey, hey. I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Well, Kushida-san and...” “Well, let me explain this time. I have something to tell Horikita too.”

“Something to tell me?”

“I've got some third-party testimony in this shoplifting case.”

When I arrived in front of the student council room, I found two first-year students.

Aga from Class A, and Nanase, who had joined the student council with Kushida, were also there.

It seemed that the entire Student Council had increased to the lowest number of people I had anticipated, and that the incident had been mixed up with a different scenario that someone else had envisioned.

“It's kind of my first job for the Student Council, so I came running as the secretary.”

She was holding her notebook with a sense of importance

“Is that for the records?”

“Yes. I heard that the secretary's job was to write everything down.”

“Yes, but the notebook for the meetings is kept in the student council room, isn't it?”

“Oh, really? I bought it myself...”

It seems that she was so enthusiastic about serving the student council that she got ahead of herself.

“Well, it's not a big problem, if you have a receipt, please submit it at a later date. I'll pay for it.”

“Okay. I'm sorry.”

Horikita told Nanase that she'd pay for the notebook from the student council's budget.

“Shall we go in anyway?”

Nagumo seemed to have already arrived at the student council office and was waiting inside with Kiriyama.

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Nagumo wasn't in the president's seat, where he always sat, but was standing.

"I'm sorry, Horikita. The second years must be tired after the Special Exam."

"That's fine. But you mentioned Kiryūin-senpai..?"

Horikita asked Nagumo, not mentioning what I had explained to her, since he didn't know anything about it.

"Yeah, Kiriyama contacted me and told me to prepare the place, since Kiryūin is going to file a complaint against the student council."

"Kiryūin wants to file a complaint against the student council...?"

That's new to me. File a complaint against the student council? I wonder why Kiryūin took that route.

"Even so, did you invite Ayanokōji as well, Kiriyama?"

"He was one of the people who was there, so I decided that it was necessary. I made the decision because I didn't want people to spread rumors about me without knowing what they were talking about."

"Well, whatever. It's a bit of a lucky break to be able to observe Suzune's first performance."

Saying this, Nagumo urged Horikita to sit in the student council president's chair.

"...Excuse me."

Bowing politely, Horikita sat down.

"I guess you chose Kushida as the vice president after all."

"Yes. I had thought about asking Aga, a first-year student who was already enrolled, but I decided that Kushida-san, who had a better grasp of the school, would be more appropriate. Is there a problem?"

"No, I have no complaints about the selection by the student council president."

Horikita took her seat as student council president, and Kushida, the newly appointed vice president, sat down with a serious look on her face.

"But she's got a lot of guts to be late after calling us here."

A few minutes later, Kiryūin Fūka entered the room as the last person to attend the deliberation.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, new student council president."

"Please have a seat."

"No, thank you. I will talk to you standing up. That's all right, isn't it?"

"Okay. Now then, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Ask me anything."

"I understand that you have decided to file a complaint against the student council."

Horikita proceeded with the conversation, continuing to act as if she hadn't been told anything.

“Complaint?”

Kiryūin tilted her head curiously, but Kiriya immediately urged her to continue.

“We're already pushing the time because of your tardiness. I want you to proceed without wasting time.”

“My, you're so impatient. Well, let me explain the background to you again.”

Kiryūin was almost made out to be a shoplifter by Yamanaka, a third-year class D student, while Kiryūin was shopping at Keyaki Mall after school. Fortunately, Kiryūin noticed and stopped the shoplifter as she was about to slip the bag into her pocket. The shoplifting itself ended in a failed attempt.

“I just can't believe Yamanaka acted out of personal resentment.”

Kiryūin gave Nagumo a sidelong glance.

“When I questioned Yamanaka, she confessed that she had been instructed to commit the crime by a certain person.”

“Who is this person?”

“Nagumo Miyabi, the former student council president here.”

The first-year student council members, who had just heard about this for the first time, looked at Nagumo with astonishment.

There had been several incidents centering around Kiryūin Fūka.

Or, rather, acts that should be called 'incidents', whether they were committed by Yamanaka herself or not.

If it was the former, we need to hear what happened and punish her. If it's the latter, we'd still need to find the real culprit.

We ought to let them see whether or not she can affront her first tempest without a hitch as the president of the student council.

“Kiryūin-senpai said this, but does Nagumo-senpai have any objections?”

“Of course I do. Unfortunately, Kiryūin, I did not give Yamanaka such instructions. If such an incident gets out, my credibility will be damaged. There isn't a single advantage.”

“I don't know. I know you've always wanted to have a serious fight with me, but I haven't fought with you for three years. I wonder if you resent me for that. Or you may have wanted to incite me to accept the match.”

So far, like before, we were on a parallel track.

“It's true that I was interested in a match with you. But my interest in you has long since disappeared.”

“He-he. Is that really the case?”

They didn't accept each other's claims.

“Kiryūin-senpai is a classmate of Kiryūin-senpai, and he has supported Nagumo-senpai for a long time as the vice president. What do you think of both sides of the argument?”

Horikita asked Kiriyama, whom she had chosen as a familiar third party.

“I understand that Kiryūin’s upset that she was almost made to look like a shoplifter, but I don't think Nagumo is involved in this case. If Nagumo was serious about this, he would’ve chosen a better and more effective way.”

“Don't you think that's just you buying into Nagumo too much?”

Kiryūin smiled wanly, put her hands on her hips and countered Kiriyama.

“Considering what Nagumo has accomplished at this school, it’s obvious that it’s not a matter of overconfidence.”

“So why did Yamanaka-senpai try to cause this incident? Did she grow resentful towards Kiryūin-senpai without realizing it, and then decide to do it? If so, why did she try to pin the blame on Nagumo-senpai? What do you think about that?”

“I don't know the truth, but it's hard to believe that Yamanaka did it alone.”

“I don't think she did it alone.”

“Yamanaka's position is quite low among the third-year students. Even if it wasn't Nagumo, it was quite possible that she could be manipulated into acting in return for private points, for example.”

Kiriyama claimed that neither Nagumo nor Yamanaka, but a third party was lurking in the dark.

“If this is true, it means we need to start identifying the real culprit.”

“Yes, but it will be difficult to identify. When Kiryūin asked her to confess, she didn't tell the truth and mentioned Nagumo's name. This is something you can only do if you are prepared to do so.”

“Do you know why, Kushida-san?”

At this point, Horikita asked Kushida, who was listening to the conversation.

“Trying to pin the blame on Nagumo-senpai in the third year is only a disadvantage for Yamanaka-san. And yet, if she said it... it means that she is hell-bent on protecting the real culprit.”

“That's right. It means that she’s more afraid of the real culprit than of Nagumo, who she should've feared the most.”

“I don't understand. I can't think of any student who is more frightening than Nagumo. They just want to force us to believe that there is a real culprit, don't they?”

For Kiryūin, who continued to suspect Nagumo, Kiriyama was just another person on Nagumo's side.

The fact that Kiryūin was saying that it was difficult to identify the real culprit only made us distrust her more and more.

“You are the one who is assuming that I am the culprit, aren't you?”

“There aren't any candidates, so I have no choice.”

“I'm going to ask you both to please be quiet. It's obvious that the two of you aren't going to solve any problem by talking to each other.”

As Horikita pointed out, Kiryūin and Nagumo's discussion was endlessly parallel.

“How about you, Kiriyama-senpai, how would you handle this matter?”

“I think we should avoid further inquiry and pursuit. However, what Yamanaka did was an unforgivable act, even if it was only an attempt. Once again, she should have to apologize to Kiryūin and pay her as much compensation as possible. We think that such measures are acceptable.”

“So there's no need to report this to the school?”

“If Yamanaka committed the crime alone, we should do so. But if the real culprit isn't found, even if you report it to the higher-ups, Yamanaka alone will bear all the blame. Am I right?”

“That's right. Even if the school investigates, the real culprit won't necessarily come to light.”

The conclusion was already set that Nagumo was innocent, but perhaps this was one of the appropriate places to reach a point of compromise.

“All I want is an apology from the real culprit.”

“I'm just saying that I knew you wouldn't be able to do it, or do you think you'll get to the real culprit? I don't recall hearing anything new in the last few weeks. Or did you get some good information from Anazai, whom you threatened with assault?”

Kiryūin shrugged her shoulders in response to Kiriyama's statement. He was not believed to have sustained any injuries or anything like that, but there was no doubt that the manner of attack was rather gray. Although there was some room for sympathy, Kiryūin wouldn't be happy to have her feelings challenged.

“Ayanokōji-kun, I heard that you contacted Asahina-senpai the other day.”

At this point, Horikita turned the subject to what she had just been told.

“Through Asahina-senpai, I asked the third-year students about the whole situation. I tried to find out what kind of contract Nagumo-senpai was forcing the third-year students to sign and what kind of relationships they have.”

“Before coming to the student council room, I received a report from Ayanokōji-kun. And by talking with Asahina-senpai, he also investigated Yamanaka-senpai in detail.”

“Oh? That's Ayanokōji for you, no wonder I put my confidence in him and relied on him.”

I'd already reported this to Kiryūin, but she deliberately claimed to have never heard of it before.

“Did you influence Ayanokōji, Kiryūin?”

“Are you dissatisfied, Nagumo?”

“No, but if that's the case...”

Nagumo tried to continue as if he had something on his mind, but he quickly closed his mouth.

“I'm sorry, this is your first case as student council president.”

He showed his watchful eye again, saying that he would not do anything rash.

“It seems that Ayanokōji-kun couldn't meet Yamanaka-senpai, but someone else appeared in front of him instead. It was Tachibana-senpai, from the same third year class D as him. Why did he appear, when he was supposed to have nothing to do with this? It seems that it was to prevent Yamanaka-senpai from telling the truth.”

“Yamanaka and Tachibana were connected?”

Nagumo asked Horikita, acting as if he knew nothing about it.

“Ayanokōji-kun said that when he asked Tachibana-senpai about the truth, he got the same reply: that he was instructed by Nagumo-senpai to put the goods in Kiryūin-senpai's bag.”

“Of course, I didn't have such a conversation with Tachibana. In fact, I don't even remember hearing him speak for the past month. The real culprit might be Tachibana.”

“Well, you have no choice but to say so.”

It is inevitable that Kiryūin would respond to Nagumo in this way.

“Does Kiryūin-senpai have any deep connection with Tachibana-senpai?”

“Pretty much none. I can say that he has no more relation past Nagumo.”

“In other words, he has less motive than Yamanaka-senpai to be the real culprit.”

“Does this mean that Tachibana-senpai, like Yamanaka-senpai, was ordered by someone else?”

Nanase, who had been taking notes of the proceedings up to this point, asked Horikita this question.

However, Horikita didn't answer the question and remained silent.

Everyone must have been surprised, as they had expected an immediate answer.

“That's not the end of the report you received, is it? Please tell me the rest of the story, Ms. Student Council President.”

Kiryūin urged her to continue, but Horikita didn't answer.

That's understandable. Because I haven't told her the crux of the matter.

I only gave her the same level of information as Asahina, who was in the same room with Tachibana the other day.

If you want to ask for help, I will give you a hand.

But first, I want to see where Horikita's thoughts would lead to.

“Nagumo-senpai says he is not the culprit. On the other hand, Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai consistently say they were ordered by Nagumo-senpai. This is a clear contradiction.”

“One of them must be lying.”

“It’s normal to think so. But first of all, I would like to believe both sides of the story.”

“I think it’s difficult to believe the contradictions in the statements.”

Nanase, who continued to take the records of the meeting, stopped her pen and muttered.

“Usually that's true, but what if both parties aren't really lying? Wouldn't there be no contradiction if a certain condition was added?”

In the course of the conversation, Horikita seemed to have come up with a possibility.

“The real culprit told Tachibana-senpai that he was asked to do a job by order of Nagumo-senpai. Tachibana-senpai and Yamanaka-senpai believed this mysterious person’s words, and that is why they continue to appeal to him, but the request is a criminal act. Normally, one would start by asking Nagumo-senpai to confirm whether the orders they were receiving were true or not.”

It’s normal to want assurance that you would get something in return.

“But they didn’t. Why is that? I think it’s because Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai thought that the real culprit was also worthy of their trust. A mouthpiece of Nagumo-senpai, and one who holds power.”

There is only one person in this school who could make such a statement.

“The real person behind this case is not Nagumo-senpai, but Kiriya-senpai, the vice president.”

All eyes turned to Kiriya at once.

“Me? How did you come to that conclusion?”

Kiriya calmly expressed his doubts about his name being mentioned.

“Did you not understand what I just explained? That conclusion is the most obvious when you organize the information.”

“There’s no guarantee that the information Ayanokōji has given you is true. I have a guaranteed ticket to Class A from Nagumo. I’d never do anything to cause a rebellion.”

As Kiriya explained his position, an unexpected person reached out to him.

“I think the student council president's theory is interesting, but Kiriya is right. This is the main reason why I don't doubt Kiriya. No domesticated dog would dare to bite its master.”

“Then, may I call Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai as witnesses now?”

Horikita tried to confirm Nagumo's refusal.

“You are the student council president. You can do whatever you want.”

“I see.”

“Wait.”

Then Kiriyama interrupted her.

“Do the witnesses already know that they are to be called here?”

“No. I'll contact them now and negotiate.”

Kiriyama glared at Horikita, and then at me, who was now involved in the case.

If it hadn't been for the theory that Kiriyama was the real culprit, I probably would've been able to survive without attracting attention.

However, in order to clear these suspicions that had emerged, I wouldn't be able to avoid a barrage of questions.

I wonder if both of them can hide Kiriyama's involvement without any prior discussion in a meeting where all the major players are present. It's not easy to keep lying in this situation.

“Is there anything wrong with calling them out?”

Horikita asked Kiriyama.

If they don't want to be dragged out into the open, drag them nonetheless.

That's the quickest and simplest way.

“Well...”

“What's all this panic about, Kiriyama? You're not involved in this, so just stand by.”

Nagumo asked Kiriyama in a lighthearted manner, but I could see the will in his eyes. He didn't seem to suspect Kiriyama until now, but he seemed to have sensed that the wind had changed direction.

“...Got it. Let's stop this now.”

Kiriyama, realizing that there is nothing more to be done, appeals as if he has given up.

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means that there's no need to call witnesses. I admit that it was me who instructed Tachibana this time.”

“I didn't know it was you. Let's hear your reason. Why did you do this?”

Kiriyama seemed to have come to his senses and didn't show any signs of panic.

“I'm sorry Kiriyūin, but it had to be you, in order to achieve my goal.”

“It had to be me?”

“Nagumo sent me a message, telling me to do a job to earn points, and Tachibana accepted readily. The end of the second semester was near and he was in a great hurry. He didn't even suspect it.”

It was no wonder that he believed it from Kiriyama, the former vice president, who was also a close associate of Nagumo.

“The plot of the lie goes like this: if it were possible to frame Kiryūin for shoplifting without her realizing, I would give Yamanaka a ticket to Class A. If she failed, of course, it would be invalid, but she'd still get points.”

“That's a bold lie. If Yamanaka had succeeded, your lie would have been exposed immediately.”

Nagumo was right. Tachibana and Yamanaka would have immediately gone to demand their reward tickets. And Kiriyama's false message would have been known to everyone in no time.

“We were in the same class for 3 years, I know Kiryūin's character and ability very well. It was impossible for someone of Yamanaka's caliber to plant the item without being noticed.”

That's why it had to be Kiryūin. He chose someone by whom the plant would definitely fail to work on.

“So they knew from the beginning that they would be discovered. But I don't understand. It's too elaborate for the sole purpose of making me angry, and it doesn't benefit you.”

“The goal was to frame Kiryūin-senpai as a shoplifter. So you were wrong about that idea.”

Nanase repeatedly nodded her head while writing in the notebook.

“That's right. When you questioned Yamanaka, and Nagumo's name came up, I knew that you would first make an appointment with me, a classmate, to go directly to Nagumo. My real goal was to arrange the time for the appointment and to hit a certain point in time.”

Since I was present at that time and given the circumstances, Kiriyama's goal was immediately apparent.

“It seems that Kiriyama-senpai's objective was to destroy the student council election in advance.”

“That's Ayanokōji for you. No wonder Horikita-senpai put his trust in him.”

Nagumo, who had been sorting out the situation, also agreed with Kiriyama's aim and purpose.

“He wanted to dig into Honami's wounds, who has a history of shoplifting, so that she would withdraw.”

“Yeah, I could've pointed out the problems from her past personally, but I decided it was too delicate. Kiryūin hates such sins, and I knew that she would spit out words that would pierce the heart of the uninformed Ichinose without mercy.”

Kiryūin gave Kiriyama a light round of applause in spite of her disgust. “It seems I have been dancing with you, Kiriyama. I’ve got you by the horns.”

It seemed that Kiriyama, who had studied under Horikita Manabu and served as Nagumo's right-hand man as vice president, was sure of his aim and prediction. Kiryūin's ability was as strong as Horikita Manabu's, but she was an eccentric and solitary person who had no friends. Therefore, she was very fragile in terms of information warfare.

“What was most unexpected was Ichinose's decision to abandon the student council election at that stage. If I’d known that early on, I wouldn't have taken the risk.”

The election would have gone to Horikita, even if the shoplifting had not been brought up.

“Why, Kiriyama? Why did you take this risk to try and sway the election?”

“I couldn't stand your selfishness. What would've happened if Ichinose didn't want to resign from the student council and had held the election for the student council as it was? You would've been in a fight with Ayanokōji and bet a lot of your private points on it. Also, you wouldn't have hesitated to buy votes with points in order to win.”

Nagumo certainly had a lot of money. It wouldn't be surprising if he would've adopted a vote-buying strategy if he knew he was struggling.

“I doesn't matter. I'm the one who decides who wins, so why does it matter what I do with the money I have?”

“It doesn't matter? I certainly got my ticket to Class A from you, but do you know how much of a mental burden that's put on me? My classmates envy and resent me every day. It's unbearable.”

The look in his eyes as he glared at Nagumo contained serious anger that Kiriyama had never shown before.

“The private points you put into your own sideshow could be better spent on your peers, so that more students could be moved up to Class A. However, you put all the private points, which are soaked with the blood and sweat of the third-year students, just for your own greed and desire to fight? Give it a rest, you fool.”

Kiriyama's goal was to prevent the unnecessary outflow of private points.

“I didn't know you were thinking about others. I thought all the people I've given tickets to were self-centered meritocrats, who think it's alright as long as they graduate from Class A.”

Nagumo praised Kiriyama, as if he were impressed.

Whether or not everyone would take this as a compliment is another matter.

“It's just unpleasant to see any more unnecessary fights among third-year students.”

“I understand what you're trying to say, but are you ready to betray me, Kiriyama?”

Nagumo had the authority to revoke his rights. No ticket to class A would be left in Kiriyama's hand if he disobeys.

“It is an action based on a contract. Do whatever you want.”

“Let Nagumo decide the punishment for Kiriyama. That'll be enough for punishment.”

Kiryūin concluded and quickly left the student council room.

“Wait, Kiryūin-senpai.”

“I thought we're done, student council president?”

“No, it doesn't work that way. I don't think Nagumo-senpai personally has the right to judge Kiriyama-senpai. Besides, there's still a mystery.”

“Mystery? Is there anything left?”

“Kiriyama-senpai tried to frame you for shoplifting. And, when that was discovered, you tried to bring it to the student council's attention. The purpose was to force a stop to the student council election, and to make Ichinose-san recall the trauma of shoplifting and withdraw from the election.”

This assumption, including his confession, wouldn't be wrong.

“However, there was no need to take such a risk. If they wanted to stop the election, there were many other ways. If you wanted to take advantage of her shoplifting past, you could have approached Ichinose-san and asked her to withdraw from the election; out of sight, out of mind. That way, it would've been safer and more secure.”

“It's hard to believe that Kiriyama didn't think of this, isn't it?”

Kiryūin, intrigued, returned to her original position.

“I wonder why he took such a risk. Maybe Kiriyama-senpai was prepared to be identified as the real culprit here?”

Kiriyama didn't answer, but just looked at Horikita, the student council president.

“I thought that you wanted to make this matter public and raise the issue. The fact that you've gathered here today, not only me, but also all the members of the student council and Ayanokōji-kun... You said at the beginning that this was all directed by Kiriyama-senpai, didn't you?”

I thought it was Kiryūin who suggested the idea of appealing to the student council, but when asked by Horikita immediately after entering the room, she tilted her head, probably because it was Kiriyama's idea. It was Kiriyama who encouraged her to talk, in order to spread these doubts.

“Horikita. It's strange that, for a moment, I saw your presence overlap with that of Horikita-senpai.”

As if to commend the correctness of her guess, Kiriyama conveyed it to her.

“I wasn't sure how well it would work, but you're right. The number of students complaining about Nagumo is increasing day by day. When I told him about it, he wouldn't listen to what I had to say. Am I wrong?”

“Maybe.”

Nagumo didn't deny, but rather affirmed.

“Nagumo-senpai, I think there was plenty wrong with the way he did it, but the truth is the truth.”

“What do you think, Nagumo? Are you going to put all the responsibility for your selfishness on Kiriyama?”

“I guess so. I'd assumed that I had nothing to do with this, but I guess I can't say that from what I've heard.”

Nagumo removed his gaze from Kiriyama and looked at Horikita, wondering what conclusion she'd draw.

“So, because this is a student council matter, you are the judge and jury.”

“...Are you sure you don't mind if I make this decision?”

“You're not just a decoration sitting there, are you? I'll go with your decision.”

What kind of judgment would Horikita, who had witnessed everything, make?

“Then, as president of the student council, I'd like to say this: first of all, Kiriyama-senpai, I would like you to extend a deep apology to Kiriyūin-senpai for this incident. Whatever the background circumstances may have been, the fact that you tried to pin the crime on Yamanaka-senpai and Tachibana-senpai, who had no relation to this, should be taken seriously. However, since it's inevitable that a report to the school will lead to serious consequences, we'd like you to reflect on your actions by voluntarily suspending yourself from school for a week or so.”

The student council didn't have the right to suspend or expel a student. The approval of the school was essential to make such a decision. Voluntary suspension suited that purpose.

It didn't matter if he'd fake a sick day or not, he just had to stay in the dormitory and reflect on his behavior.

“I know you are entitled to deprive Kiriyama-senpai of the right to move to another class, but please promise not to do so.”

“That's a bold request.”

“You can refuse, but you will abide by my decision, won't you?”

“I can't blame Kiriyama this time either, but is that all?”

“No, if we end it like this, we can't be sure that something similar won't happen again. From now on, the private points collected from the third-year

students must be used only for the third years. I'd like to add this condition as well."

So far, Nagumo had done whatever he liked from his throne.

He must have used many private points without our knowledge, and spent a lot of money playing with fire against Horikita Manabu and other grades. The student council decided to forbid them from doing so in the future.

"If that's the will of the student council, I'll go along with it."

"I thought you wouldn't accept that condition."

"Basically, what Suzune, or rather the student council president is saying, is reasonable."

Is she a much more capable student council president than I thought?

"Are you really convinced by that, Nagumo?"

"You have the power to undermine me."

Or perhaps Nagumo bought into Kiriyama's true nature, at least the one aspect that he showed.

"Are you really going to let what happened end like this?"

"I've learned a lot from this as well. Apparently, I have no luck."

Nagumo's face looked bored, as if he'd given up on something. However, he didn't want to say anything more. On the other hand, Kiriyama's expression didn't show any sign of resignation or sense of relief at the revelation of the truth. Something else was on his mind. It wasn't hard to see that he was looking ahead to the future.

"This is the end of the matter. Please don't tell anyone else about this incident."

With the declaration of the student council president, this entire series of incidents has been resolved. However, I don't know if this is really the end of everything. What was Kiriyama's meaningful expression at the end?

2

The special examinations were over, and the next day, the closing ceremony of the second semester was held.

After listening to the teachers' speeches in the gymnasium, the students returned to their classroom for a brief presentation of awards. Those who excelled in club activities and other competitions got their rewards, and we also received a reminder for the winter break.

Then, Chabashira-sensei announced the results of the special examinations. While everyone was holding their breath, we were told that our class had won.

At that moment, the students were cheering a shout of joy that echoed to the neighboring classes.

Only 50 class points were awarded or deducted for each class' win or loss, respectively.

Yet, we had gained a large number of them.

Almost at the same time, I received two messages on my cell phone.

One was from Ichinose, congratulating me on my victory.

The other one was from...

"Winter vacation starts tomorrow. It's important to take it easy on the first day, and cool down after your heads have gotten all heated up from studying so much."

Chabashira-sensei told us that we were dismissed from the class, while everyone's jubilation still lingered.

It was impressive to see Chabashira-sensei's eyes narrowed with happiness as she left the classroom.

As previously announced, this special test had a system that allowed each student in each class to know in detail who solved which problem, how many questions were answered correctly, the order they answered questions, and the amount of time taken was also disclosed.

By looking at this data, not only did we know who had made the effort, but also the strategy of each class.

It was definitely going to be useful data for both allies and rivals.

I'll check the details later, since I can do that on my cell phone.

I left the classroom ahead of the other students, who were making a fuss over the results.

Kei was watching me the whole time.

After missing the opportunity yesterday, I hadn't heard from Kei until now.

However, she seemed to be trying to make contact with me, since she was looking at me right before I left.

If it's hard to talk in a crowded place like this; we should relocate.

At the moment, Kei is still unstable and lacks a decisive factor for me to take action.

I can't expect her to grow if we continue to be estranged, so it can't be helped.

With this in mind, I decided to leave the classroom for a while, but...

“Are you going home alone?”

I went out into the hallway and the one who came running after me was not Kei, but Horikita.

“Is this okay? The person who played a key role in our victory left the classroom so quickly.”

“I'll go back later. I thought I'd have a little chat with you.”

With that, she caught up with me and we started to walk together. Indeed, there was no bag in Horikita's hand, and it seemed certain that she'd return to the classroom later.

“You used an interesting strategy for this special exam.”

“I don't know if my way was the most efficient or not.”

Horikita's strategy started with making Keisei the leadoff hitter to attempt the problems. Since he's one of the top students in our grade, she had him solve the minimum required two problems quickly. Afterwards he used the remaining time to focus on reading the other questions.

The purpose of this plan was to allow the following lower-ranked students to solve the easier problems.

The strategy was to alternate between the highest and the lowest ranked students.

However, this strategy couldn't be used under normal circumstances, because it was forbidden to talk during the test. No cell phones, pens or notes were allowed.

However, if you were wondering if there weren't any gaps at all, the answer would be no.

While the student in front was solving a problem alone in the classroom, the next student was waiting in the hallway.

In other words, when someone left the classroom after solving a problem, there was a moment when they passed each other, albeit only briefly.

There were two entrances to the classrooms, so if the students had to use the front when entering, and the back when exiting, a distance would be created, but Horikita had devised a solution for that.

All you had to do was to look at each other for a moment. The idea was that each student would communicate with the next using hand signs, to indicate which problems they should solve.

For example, if the suggestion was the 55th problem, they would show their right hand with two pairs of fingers crossed twice. If the suggestion was the 69th problem, they would show both hands with six fingers in total then extend nine fingers.

Horikita confirmed in advance that the rules didn't allow her to say anything about the answers to the problems, but it wasn't against the rules to use hand signs to tell which problem should be solved.

The instruction to simply tell the student which problem to solve didn't constitute cheating, and the rule against talking was also maintained. By repeating this, the less advanced students were able to concentrate on solving their problems more carefully, without having to search for them.

"Sakayanagi-san's class was also very close, even with our many students of low academic ability, we were only able to win in terms of total points, not in terms of percentage of correct answers."

Horikita's class got 72% correct while Sakayanagi's class got 86%.

If the competition had been played under the same conditions and distribution of scores, Horikita would've lost.

"She would not be happy. She did what she had to do, and lost."

She'd always ranked first in the midterms and written exams, and she proved it again this time.

"A win is a win, even if the percentage of correct answers is not as good as hers. No need to be pessimistic."

In fact, it was Horikita's class that gained class points and Sakayanagi's that lost them.

And a 72% correct answer rate is no less than excellent.

"Of course, I'm not pessimistic. I was just frustrated."

I guess that was unnecessary, it seems that their rivalry is much stronger than I expected.

"By the way, Karuizawa-san hasn't been well lately. She's been working hard on her studies, but is there something wrong?"

"Nothing. If I had to say, we may be in something resembling a bit like a cold war."

"I wouldn't call it nothing. It's rare to see you two fight."

"It happens when a man and a woman have been together for a long time. I know that well from experience."

Horikita raised her eyebrows and looked doubtful, as if she didn't like my answer.

“It's a good thing that she was able to get results in the study sessions and in the competition, even though she was in an unstable state of mind.”

“It was said that she was so mentally cornered that she devoted herself to studying which she dislikes... Karuizawa-san's morale can easily also affect the rest of our class. Make up with her as soon as possible.”

As a leader, you want to keep the class stable.

I saw Horikita off as she returned to the classroom and then I decided to leave.

3

The fact that Horikita won this special exam, defeating Sakayanagi, would soon be the talk of the town. Although it wasn't purely an academic contest, there was also an element of rivalry involving OAA. However, the fact remained that Horikita won this direct confrontation.

The gap between Sakayanagi's and Horikita's classes had narrowed by 100 points before the final examinations. On the other hand, Ryūen's class had a tough time. They had tried to disrupt the competition with strategies based on external pressure, but Ichinose calmly accepted them and picked up a solid victory.

She may have been considered mentally unstable due to her resignation from the student council, but Ryūen wasn't able to break her down.

Still, it can't be said that Ryūen's decision was a mistake.

There may be opinions that Ryūen should have ordered his classmates to study as Horikita did, but unlike Horikita, who had laid the groundwork extensively, Ryūen's class didn't have much room to grow in this respect. It would have been difficult for them to catch up in a short period of time.

By achieving a narrow victory, Ichinose still had a small chance of making it to Class A, and the battle between the four classes would be carried over to the third semester, and beyond.

When I put on my shoes at the entrance and went out of the school building, there was someone already waiting for me.

"I apologize for calling you all on the last day of school."

Immediately after the results were announced, a certain person contacted me, asking to meet with me.

"I didn't know Ichinose was coming too."

It was a coincidence that the two people who sent me the messages ended up at the same place.

"What's going on, Sakayanagi-san?"

It seemed that Ichinose hadn't heard about my involvement either, and she looked at me strangely.

"Let's walk, we'll be conspicuous here."

It was inevitable that the front of the school entrance would be filled with students who were about to leave after class.

"First of all, Ayanokōji-kun, congratulations on your victory in this special examination."

"This time it was a victory that I was allowed to pick up. However, if it had been a normal written exam, I would have lost."

“Are you talking about the percentage of correct answers? It doesn't change the fact that I lost.”

Rather than being humble, it's more like she's accepting the result after doing everything she could. You can also sense the composure of the Class A due to their lead in class points.

“And Ichinose-san, who beat Ryūen-kun, was also brilliant.”

“We just did what we should have done. We didn't do anything special.”

“It's also admirable that you didn't give in to Ryūen-kun and his team's obstruction. To be honest, in my initial estimation, I thought the result would be 50-50. However, Ichinose-san's class won the exam narrowly. This was probably the result of the leader's calm and precise instructions.”

Sakayanagi also seemed to have read that Ichinose had been fighting from the hip.

I appreciate her victory, not only because of their difference in academic ability, but also because of the cool and calm manner in which she stood up to Ryūen.

“Is that so? But I don't feel bad when Sakayanagi-san praises me.”

“I can only assume that something happened recently.”

Sakayanagi wasn't able to gather information on her own, so she was always trying to gather information using many students as if she were laying out a spider web.

Holidays spent at the gym. Time spent in cafes. On the way to and from.

The day she waited outside my room. I wouldn't be surprised if she saw some of it.

“I told you a similar story on the boat, remember?”

Sakayanagi said these words to Ichinose, not to me.

“Too much idolisation may result in painful repercussions. Wasn't it something like that?”

“That is right. I have called you both here today to tell you that I am here to give an ultimatum to Ichinose-san, who has a faint crush on Ayanokōji-kun.”

She already seemed to understand that Ichinose has feelings for me, which in itself is not surprising.

“You should distance yourself from Ayanokōji-kun now.”

“Is that your ultimatum?”

Even though she was already told this, Ichinose was now being told by a third party about her feelings for me right here and now.

Normally, I'd expect Ichinose to show at least a hint of unease, but she didn't seem to be upset at all.

“Yes.”

“I don't understand. Why should I distance myself from Ayanokōji-kun? Whatever feelings I have for Ayanokōji-kun, there is nothing wrong with treating him as a friend.”

“I see that the erosion has already advanced considerably. If you can really be friends, it would be a different story. But from what I see, I don't think Ichinose-san would be satisfied with that. But unless Ayanokōji-kun refuses to accept it, I have no intention of changing my mind. You are being controlled by him. Do you realize that if you continue like this, you will eventually be destroyed?”

“Ha-ha-ha. You say the funniest things.”

“I'm seriously concerned. I can't watch you go off the deep end and be satisfied.”

“No need to worry, Sakayanagi-san. I am not controlled by Ayanokōji-kun.”
She sure has such a cold look in her eyes.

As those thoughts crossed me, Ichinose was standing next to me, with a look on her face I had never seen before.

“Sakayanagi-san. You want to control me and use me for your own convenience, don't you? That's why you're trying to stall me like this.”

“I see. That's one possible interpretation.”

“Actually, one more thing, Sakayanagi-san is very conscious of Ayanokōji-kun as a special person, and my presence has become an eyesore...”

Sakayanagi's movement stopped for a moment as Ichinose smiled at her.

This was a rare upset shown by Sakayanagi, who'd always been standing one position above Ichinose at all times.

“I certainly look at him in a special way, but it's not the same as yours.”

“I don't know. I think it is, even if you don't realize it.”

Ichinose confronted Sakayanagi's denial head-on.

“That's fine. If you insist to that extent, I have nothing more to say. I'll only tell you that I can't help you if you have any regrets in the future.”

Sakayanagi concluded, but her caution may have been raised in stages after hearing her intentions. Perhaps it was because she believed that being blindly devoted to love and going on a rampage after falling under that illness was something cute.

But things have begun to change more than I imagined.

The good that is directed inward is the same as before, and the good that is directed outward is completely transformed into evil.

Ichinose's class, which had been sinking, was now strong enough to strike back.

Sakayanagi must have felt it firsthand.

Why do I think so? Because that's exactly what I'm being reminded of right now.

“We're having a victory party at the Keyaki Mall afterward. Can I go back to the dorms now?” Ichinose replied.

“Yes. It would be unwise to keep you any longer, wouldn't it?”

Ichinose waved to me and headed toward the dormitory.

Sakayanagi and I were the only two left behind.

“I never thought I would be re-evaluating Ichinose-san in this way.”

Sakayanagi had not seemed to be able to read the changes so far either.

A side effect, or rather a byproduct, of the powerful changes.

“It's a pity, because Ichinose-san, who has earned my trust, would have been an excellent limb for me.”

“I'm afraid you've missed the point.”

I have been broadening my perspective and making calculations on the big picture in moving human beings, but there are still areas that even I don't understand.

The concept of love has the potential to influence our reason and nature.

This means that unexpected developments could easily occur. It is hard to believe, but it's certainly one of the most mysterious and transcendent feelings.

Is Ichinose Honami a good or bad leader; a good or bad strategist?

This is a different story from those perspectives.

Originally, Ichinose's abilities weren't low.

I remember that her performance in the zodiac test was also excellent.

With her individual ability, she had the potential to resist Horikita, Ryūen, and Sakayanagi.

Or, depending on the situation, unexpectedly surpass them.

“I had no idea that she had such a hidden ability. But it's the same thing if you let yourself get carried away by that power. The consequences will be disastrous.”

“Did you think you could stop it?”

“No. I have no intention of stopping it. The only difference is who destroys her.”

Sakayanagi didn't consider Ichinose as an ally.

She would have just used her as a useful pawn and disposed of her when she was finished being a consumable.

“I will visit your room again in the near future.”

Sakayanagi, who was also in possession of information on Ichinose, deliberately showed her hand and gave her reply.

Epilogue: A Touch of Anxiety

ON THIS DAY, after the second semester's closing ceremony, the special examinations were over.

The time that students had been waiting for was here.

Although not as long as the summer vacation, it was still a time of joy for most of the students. The hard work of studying day and night has been rewarded with a head-to-head win against Class A. The winter break will start tomorrow, and we look forward to many happy days ahead.

It is sure to be a fun time for all.

That's what everyone thought, except for one person in the class.

The only exception was Karuizawa Kei, who had come to the Keyaki Mall with her best friend, Satō Maya, with a sigh of melancholy. Good at putting on airs by nature, she remained calm at school and concentrated on her studies even after the fight with Ayanokōji.

Therefore, the people around her had no way of knowing that Karuizawa had been suffering. Her best friend Satō was one of them, but Satō was a close observer of not only Karuizawa, but also Ayanokōji. She had noticed that the two of them seemed to be rather distant from each other, even though they were always close.

However, she thought that the cause of their behavior was not because of a quarrel, but because they were keeping their distance to concentrate on their studies.

“Haah...”

“You've been sighing a lot. We've just finished our studies and it's getting easier. What's wrong?”

“Hmm? Oh, it's nothing...”

Karuizawa, who had been trying to avoid being noticed up to this point, realized that she had been sighing repeatedly without knowing it, perhaps because she had become relaxed after being released from her studying and examinations which were her weak areas.

“... Really?”

“Really, really.”

Karuizawa answered stoutly and acted so, but Satō's suspicions remained unanswered.

“I'm going to ask you an insensitive question, but weren't you going to make plans with Ayanokōji-kun today?”

“Eh...”

“Because tomorrow is a holiday. Usually, don't two people go out and have fun together? Shinohara and Ike were excited to go see a movie with their arms around each other, right?”

Karuizawa knew it was strange for her to invite Satō out with no prior appointment. While she felt she had made a mistake, she was showing this attitude because somewhere in her heart she wanted to ask Satō for some advice.

Karuizawa gave a small nod and walked through the café, which was getting crowded. They sat down together on a bench near the rest area on the second floor of the Keyaki Mall.

“Hey, Maya-chan. Can I talk to you about something...”

“Yeah, that's totally fine.”

Satō was not reluctant, but enthusiastic, showing that she has been waiting for it.

“I think my relationship with Kiyotaka might be in trouble...”

“What...? Really!?”

Karuizawa, after making sure that no one was around, revealed her pent-up feelings. Satō, who had not expected a bomb to be dropped on her, was startled to the point of falling over.

“Does 'relationship trouble' mean... that you might break up?”

“I'd like to think that's not true, but... I can't help but feel that way lately.”

The fact that her expression seemed more serious than expected made Satō choke on her words, unable to hide her agitation.

Still, Satō wisely tried to find the right words to say so as not to make the atmosphere heavy.

“You had a fight with Ayanokōji-kun, but you two can't make up and it's been going on for a while... is that it?”

If it was just a small quarrel, the relationship would be back to normal in a few hours at most.

Karuizawa looked serious. Satō could not hide her confusion since she thought the two had been getting along well ever since they started dating.

“I thought it was just a little fight, but maybe not for Kiyotaka.”

Karuizawa sighed gloomily and nodded quietly.

“Have you two had any discussions since that fight?”

Karuizawa told her that the fight did not happen yesterday or today.

However, she was not ready to talk about the contents of the fight, nor the cause of it.

“Isn't it winter break already? I focused on my studies that Kiyotaka told me to work hard on, and I answered 3 out of 4 questions correctly on the exam. I thought I could do this... so yesterday after the exam I made a bold move and approached him...”

“And?”

“Nagumo-senpai called him and they went away. I was going to call out to him after the closing ceremony today, but Horikita-san called out to him again...”

Satō pressed her forehead at the repeated bad timings.

“So, you didn't get a chance to talk to him at all and now we're here.”

“Yeah.”

“But I couldn't tell if Ayanokōji-kun was angry or sulking.”

“He's always expressionless and his attitude never changes.”

This also made Karuizawa's judgment unclear. If he had shown an explicitly angry reaction, she would have been able to apologize earlier.

“Don't take offense to this, but aren't there a lot of fights in relationships?”

It is a word that pops up regularly among girls who are particularly excited to talk about love, and it is not unusual in itself.

Moreover, there are many cases that cannot be called 'fights,' such as when a minor problem starts to make things awkward. Satō wanted to make sure that the situation did not fall under this category, but she could not ask about that right away.

“I can't imagine Ayanokōji-kun being angry at all, but did he get angry that time?”

Satō asked fearfully, but Karuizawa immediately shook her head from side to side.

“I was the one who got angry.”

“Oh, hm, I see.”

Satō thought she was about to hear an unexpected side of the story, but she quickly erased that thought.

“So you are still angry at him?”

If so, the way to end the fight is simple. Satō thought that if Karuizawa smiles and forgives Ayanokōji, things will be back to normal.

“Not that... but...”

“If you don't mind me asking, can you... tell me what the fight was about?”

Without knowing this, she couldn't fully understand.

Karuizawa trusted that Satō was listening to her seriously and decided to tell her the origin of the quarrel.

It all started one Saturday night when she invited him to go shopping for Christmas presents. When she found out that Ayanokōji was going out with Ichinose for the holidays, she got mad.

Karuizawa couldn't imagine him having a good reason for going out with her.

Satō, having finished listening to the situation, quietly closed her eyes. Then she strongly patted her knees with the palms of her hands.

“I see... it's definitely Ayanokōji-kun's fault!”

Satō gave her thoughts and opinions as a pure girl, without any biases. She answered with confidence.

“R-Right!?”

Having her friend as an ally, Karuizawa's expression became a little more cheerful.

“That's right. It's out of bounds to go out with someone other than your girlfriend on a holiday, no matter what the circumstances are! You have to say no, or at least have Kei-chan or some other boys or girls with you! You have every right to be angry. On the contrary, you *should* be angry.”

“I was surprised that you met with Ichinose-san without taking offense... and held yourself together this long.”

From the time she was told about Ayanokōji going out with Ichinose until today, Karuizawa had been worried and anxious. Still, she devoted herself to her studies as instructed and persevered until today.

“Ichinose-san's not dating anyone is she?”

This was a source of uneasiness that Karuizawa couldn't shoulder alone.

‘Anyone.’ It is not a reference to Ayanokōji, but to Karuizawa's wish of someone *else* being in a relationship with Ichinose.

“...I don't know if you've heard of her. She's quite popular and famous at school, so if she went out with someone, you'd know right away...”

“...Right.”

Karuizawa cast her eyes down, confirming once again that she understood.

“Uhhh...!”

Satō couldn't hold back any longer and hugged Karuizawa.

“Hey, Maya-chan!”

“It's not Kei-chan's fault!”

“...Thanks. But I have my faults too. If I had listened to Kiyotaka more honestly and understood what he said, we wouldn't have ended up in a... fight. I should have smiled and said, 'Let's go shopping for Christmas presents next week,' and grabbed him by the arm. If I could go back in time, I would have fixed it; I regret that I can't.”

From Satō's point of view, Karuizawa is cute. She is one of the top girls in terms of pure looks.

When I first entered the school, there was a time when I disliked her as a wanton^[1] girl who nestled close to Hirata. A high-handed, overbearing, power-hungry girl with a nasty personality. But now that we fell in love with the same person, and got to know each other, I have come to realize that this girl was just being stubborn. She has a cute personality despite her outward appearance.

I can confidently say that even if other girls try to get Ayanokōji, there is no way they can beat her.

However, it's a different story if it's Ichinose Honami, of all people.

Suppose that Ichinose has a crush on Ayanokōji.

I couldn't eliminate the possibility that Ayanokōji would switch from Karuizawa to Ichinose.

“Hey... Let's do a little digging, shall we...? On the people in Ichinose-san's class.”

It's possible that they will see things that they are afraid of, but even if Karuizawa can make peace with Ayanokōji after this, the worry and anxiety will resurface if something like this were to happen again. However, if Ichinose were found to have no intention of doing so...

(TL Note: Wanton: a lewd or lascivious person)^[1]:

“No... I don't think so.”

Still, Karuizawa's anxiety got the better of her and she turned down Satō's offer. Then, as if to shake off her bad feelings, she stood up enthusiastically.

“I'll try not to think about it anymore. I'm going to have a lot of fun with Maya-chan now and go see Kiyotaka at night. Then we'll make up for sure!”

“That's the spirit! I'll support you!”

Right after that they laughed at each other, and the cell phone in Karuizawa's hand vibrated.

For a moment, Karuizawa thought it was a call from Ayanokōji, and opened her chat.

“What?”

“What's wrong?”

Karuizawa's expression froze as she stared at the phone screen.

Satō instantly looked at her with concern.

“Kei-chan?”

ROYAL
MTLS



She called her name again, but Karuizawa kept staring at the screen as if time had stopped. Satō wondered what was going on and stole a glance at the screen from the side.

“...”

Satō saw the picture on the screen and stiffened up.

“Who gave you that?”

“From Nene-chan...”

It was because the two people they were just talking about were in the picture attached to the text sent by Mori Nene.

It was Ayanokōji and Ichinose coming out of the gym while talking.

The photo showed the entrance to the gym where the two of them were walking in front of a bench.

“When was this taken?”

“Ask her...”

She quickly asked Mori to confirm the date and found out that it was the evening two days ago.

It was when Karuizawa and her group were studying with Horikita and her group for the final push.

“Why...”

“Maybe they just happened to be together around here or something like that.”

Satō replied in a desperate attempt to console her, but he had obviously just come out of the gym.

“Does Ayanokōji-kun go to the gym?”

“I don't know...”

“Hello Karuizawa-san.”

“!?”

As if to push her into an unstable state of mind, she was approached by Ichinose in front of the gym.

Ichinose was in her casual clothes.

“Huh? Did you come to the gym by any chance?”

“No, no, it's just that... we just happened to be here... right?”

“Uh-huh.”

Satō nodded repeatedly over and over to back up Karuizawa and said she was taking a rest on the bench.

“I see. I thought you and Ayanokōji-kun had started going to the gym together.”

Ichinose replied with a nonchalant smile, as if it were a matter of course.

“Eh...?”

“Huh? What's wrong?”

“...Ichinose-san knew Kiyotaka went to the gym?”

Turning off the screen, Karuizawa put the phone away in her pocket.

“I told Ayanokōji-kun about it and we tried the gym together. He liked it and decided to start.”

“I see...”

Karuizawa muttered in a muffled voice.

“Is Ichinose-san going to the gym now?”

“We're going to celebrate with the whole class since we won the special exam. We're going to meet at the cafe, but I forgot something the other day when I came to the gym, so I thought I'd stop by and pick it up.”

Ichinose smiled.

“Hey Ichinose-san, is it true that you and Ayanokōji-kun met the other day?”

If Karuizawa couldn't ask her, Satō had no choice but to make her own move.

“What?”

“Nothing happened with Ichinose-san... and Ayanokōji-kun, right?”

“Oh no. There's nothing between me and Ayanokōji-kun.”

She waved her hand lightly and denied it.

“...Really?”

Even so, Satō's suspicions were not confirmed, and she showed a more aggressive attitude in her pursuit.

She tried to stop Satō by pulling her cuffs, but Karuizawa's resistance was not strong enough.

“Yes. I wouldn't lie about something like that. I was just asking Ayanokōji-kun for advice about my class... Was I perhaps misleading you?”

Ichinose was puzzled by Satō's glaring eyes and Karuizawa's uneasy look.

“I am thinking that maybe Karuizawa-san is upset.... sorry.”

Ichinose looked apologetic and bowed her head.

Seeing this, Karuizawa also had the courage to express her unspoken thoughts.

“... Was that Kanzaki-kun's doing?”

Karuizawa's mention of Kanzaki's name allowed Ichinose to deduce the situation, even though she had no personal knowledge of it

“I had no idea about it, but I could guess the situation just by hearing it. Our class was down to Class D and we couldn't afford to lose any more time. We didn't have the strength to rebuild ourselves and we were struggling. Ayanokōji-kun saw that and said he would try to help us. I wonder if you've heard of any other names, like Mako-chan.”

“Mako-chan?, do you mean Amikura-san? I'm not sure... but did Himeno-san hear about it?”

As the suspicions around Ayanokōji and Ichinose faded slightly, Karuizawa's tone lightened.

“Yes, Himeno-san is going to help us rebuild the class. We are discussing it together. There are other people who know about it, so don't worry.”

Ichinose, who did not seem to know much about it, said this to reassure Karuizawa.

“But I don't understand why Kiyotaka is helping Ichinose-san's class.”

“I know. There must be some strange reason...”

The two, still not fully satisfied with the information they received, looked at each other and voiced their concerns.

Ichinose nodded and closed her eyes.

“It's a matter of mutual interest.”

“Mutual interest?”

“We've been struggling to win recently. We were in a pinch with the special exam at the end of the second term against Ryūen-kun, where if we lost, the gap between us and Class A would widen again. It's more convenient for Ayanokōji-kun to have us, the bottom-ranked class, win against Ryūen-kun, who is aiming for second place, rather than us losing. That's why he helped us.”

This is the most plausible answer as to why Ayanokōji helped Ichinose, his rival. She emphasized that Ayanokōji was only a temporary helper to assist in defeating a strong rival.

“There's really, really nothing going on with... you and Kiyotaka, right?”

“I have nothing to do with him in that sense.”

With straight eyes, Ichinose clearly stated that she had nothing to do with Kiyotaka.

Karuizawa and Satō could only nod their heads repeatedly at this attitude that could not be considered a lie.

“I think Ayanokōji-kun is a bit of a jerk for not being able to communicate with his precious girlfriend. But if I'm the one who caused the rift, then yes, I'll take responsibility for making things right.”

“That's okay. Now that I know what's going on, I'm sure we can make up today! Thank you for clearing things up, Ichinose-san.”

“No problem. If you have any more problems, please let me know.”

Ichinose told them kindly and watched their backs as they left the gym.

“I'm telling you the truth, nothing has happened with Ayanokōji-kun yet.”



As Karuizawa and Satō walk away, there is a small voice that can't be heard behind their backs.

Ichinose muttered something to herself.

“Not yet, you know...”

Leaving behind the scent of the perfume she wore, Ichinose walked away.

1

The first day of winter vacation. The sky was covered with thick clouds and had been pouring since the morning.

About 10 minutes past the appointed time, Ryūen approached with an umbrella in hand. Ichinose, who had been waiting ahead of time for him, gazed silently into his face.

They stopped when they were far enough away from each other so that they could hear each other through the sound of the rain

“The weather has been like this lately, hasn't it?”

Ichinose spoke to Ryūen without making any inquiry about his delay.

“Not going to complain about the delay?”

“I was prepared to wait for 30 minutes. If you didn't show up by then, I was going to leave without hesitation.”

Ichinose, who answered with a relaxed attitude, seemed to be more concerned about the sky than Ryūen. She tilted her umbrella and looked up at the rainy sky a little.

“It won't stop for the rest of the day.”

“You're such a softy for taking the trouble to answer my call.”

Ignoring Ichinose's muttering, Ryūen told Ichinose.

“I don't know if Ryūen-kun would be satisfied if I said we were friends, but I think it's normal for me to answer when you call. I didn't have any plans at this time. So what do you want?”

“My schedule got a little screwed up. I thought I'd see if I could figure out why.”

“Is it the special exam you're talking about? I was a little confused about the harassment.”

“I know you think it's not artistic to do that, but it suits our needs. If it's the easiest and most effective way, why not repeat it?”

Ryūen instructed his classmates to relentlessly pressure and sabotage Ichinose's classmates. He would force his way into classrooms, libraries, or karaoke rooms where Ichinose's classmates would gather for study sessions, and would disrupt their studies by making a lot of noise.

Unbeknownst to Ayanokōji and the others, Ryūen was also giving dangerous instructions. He offered money to students with high academic ability and rewarded them if they got all the questions wrong. Or he threatened that answering all the questions correctly would cause trouble for some of their peers.

The strategy was based on the idea that a weak class would be able to open a hole in a tight-knit class.

“I'm sure everyone was annoyed.”

“I guess.”

However, it did not cause much damage in the end.

In the academic competition, Ryūen did not have a good chance to win even if they played a straightforward game.

Knowing this, Ryūen planned to fight them outside of the ring.

“But did you really think you could win that way?”

“Yes, I did.”

However, as it turned out, none of the strategies worked against Ichinose.

“I thought your class would fall apart after something like that, but it seems you've grown since the first year.”

Ishizaki and the others who came up to Ryūen were all reporting that the sabotage of Ichinose's class had been a success. Although some of the students did not accept the temptations and threats, they were aware of their effectiveness, as evidenced by the agitation that could be seen in the students.

However, the students of Ichinose's class were only outwardly showing that they were in trouble. Behind the scenes, they were steadily making time to study and acting as if they were frightened by the threats.

“Where'd this wisdom come from? If it had been you in the past, you might have canceled the study sessions immediately and shut yourself in early instead of wasting your energy. You would've rejected our threats outright. Yet, you went through the trouble of pretending that you were still falling for our strategy.”

If it was Sakayanagi or Ayanokōji, Ryūen would not have been surprised.

Instead, he would have considered making a stronger move as a natural countermeasure.

A cornered rat bites the cat. The cornered and weak strike back.

To find out firsthand, Ryūen invited Ichinose to talk.

“There is no wisdom in there, Ryūen-kun. We just continued to study in the midst of the noise. The threatening words simply frightened everyone. It just happened to not have much effect.”

“There's no need for modesty here. Obviously, something must have changed in your class.”

“Ryūen-kun and the others should have taken it seriously like we and the other classes did. You should have studied and scored points... just like the way Horikita-san and her class beat Sakayanagi-san.”

“You're talking from a very high place just because you picked up a win in a favorable exam. Well, this special exam was the ultimate in lukewarmness. No risk of anyone dropping out, just a firm grip on the pen and arm movement. I didn't care enough to take it seriously either.”

“Why couldn't you have done it the normal way like everyone else did?”

“I've been teaching these idiots for a week or two, but I don't think they're going to improve much. It's just easier and faster to kick them down the road.”

Ryūen laughed as he faced Ichinose in the pouring rain.

“But that decision was a mistake, wasn't it?”

“I was beaten by you people whose only merit is earnestness, but next time I'm going to have to sabotage you even harder.”

“So you're not going to change your ways if the same special exam is repeated?”

“Yeah, I'm not going to change. I'm going to sink you on the spot.”

Ryūen answered with a confident manner as if this was his own way of doing things.

“I see. It seems that no matter what we say, we can't agree on anything anymore.”

“You're back in Class C by a narrow margin for a while. But don't think that's going to help you win again. You're a pathetic sheep that's long since been defeated. No matter how hard you struggle in the mud, you are doomed to sink eventually. Don't you agree?”

“We've been losing so much lately. That hurts my ears.”

“I'll say it again, you're only saved this time by the content of the special exam.”

“I won't deny that.”

Ryūen had his own reasons for relentlessly and forcibly biting Ichinose.

He thought that he could see through the other party by talking this way. However, he couldn't see it. The openings that Ichinose would have shown in the past did not appear at all.

“The class you'll face in the final exam is Ayanokōji's class. That's a pain in the ass, you know? Even more so than Sakayanagi, the class I plan to crush. So defeat is inevitable for you. I'm not the only one who thinks so. Sakayanagi must be thinking the same way. You will be finished at the end of the school year. There is no way we could have won this time. I urge you not to get your hopes up.”

Ichinose did not answer immediately, but stood still and listened to Ryūen continue on.

“It's easy for Ayanokōji and the others. They get class points for fighting small fry like you without having to deal with me and Sakayanagi. Nothing could be luckier.”

He attacked Ichinose relentlessly, ignoring her lack of response and trying to push her into a corner.

“Indeed... If we lose in the final exam, we may be finished.”

If the gap widens for the new Class C in a direct confrontation, it will be almost impossible for them to make up for it in a year.

“So I'll tell you how to graduate in Class A.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“The end-of-year exam will cut off your path to Class A. Then the only way to graduate in Class A is to collect private points.”

“It would take a large sum of points to save 40 people. I don't think that's possible.”

“We can't save all of them. But what about one person? Just 20 million points. You have the ability to collect points out of the goodness of the hearts from your class. They'll deposit 1 million, 2 million, whatever you want with you as collateral for their trust. You just have to spend the money in the end.”

“Using the money entrusted to you to move to another class is embezzlement. The school won't allow it.”

“I don't know. Certainly, if people like me or Sakayanagi were to do the same thing, we would be punished. We would be expelled without question. But that's not likely to happen to you.”

“Why?”

“Because the good guys will take your feelings into consideration. Even if you know you've been embezzling, you can tell the school that ‘the money was given to you somehow.’ It's not 100% true, but it's a good enough chance to bet that you'll get straight to Class A.”

“Interesting story. But I think I've had enough.”

Ichinose, who had figured out the reason for the invitation, had no reason to stay there any longer.

“I think it's time to end this conversation.”

“I was going to play with Suzune and Sakayanagi from now on, but if there is a battle involving expulsion from school in the future, your class will be a target. I'll erase your friends who have been trying so hard to protect you.”

From Ryūen's point of view, Ichinose is still not recognized as an obstacle and tried to threaten her.

Ichinose took the threat head-on and smiled.

“Then I'll just stop you before you do. If necessary, I'll just have you expelled.”

“Kuku. You think you can make me, or anyone at all, disappear?”

Ichinose, who is a good-natured person, is extremely against other people getting hurt. This has been the uniform impression of not only Ryūen but also everyone around her for the past two years.

“You've certainly become more skilled at lying, haven't you?”

“What's the need for you and Sakayanagi-san to be so cautious of me now? I don't really care about what you say. I'm not the kind of person you need to worry about.”

Thick clouds covered the sky and the sound of rain became stronger.
Before he knew it, Ryūen's smile was gone and he was thinking about Ichinose's words.

'The woman in front of me is not worth the trouble.' I thought I had been treating her as such.

However, when I looked back on it calmly, I realized that I was being very stubborn.

"I won't hold back against anyone in the future. I won't choose a means to an end."

"That's not like you to be bluffing."

"I just realized I don't have time to worry about it anymore. That's all there is to it."

Ryūen's rash thoughts quietly receded from his mind.

"You're not going to give any mercy to anyone, huh? You seem to be quite obsessed with Ayanokōji these days. If that's the case, the first thing you should get rid of is Karuizawa's existence, right?"

A joke. This was Ryūen's way of harassment to upset her mentally.

Even after saying this, Ichinose did not change her soft, smiling face.

"What do you mean, 'obsessed'?"

"Rumors travel fast in this small school."

Ryūen was already aware of the increasing contact between the two parties in the process of gathering information. Ryūen was also convinced of Ichinose's one-sided feelings, though he can only guess.

"Why don't you move more calculatingly? If you want, I can help you get rid of Karuizawa."

'Impatience, anger, frustration or disgust.' Whatever feelings you have, show them to me.

This is Ryūen's aim in this incitement.

"If Ryūen-kun already knows. Then there's no need to hide it."

Ichinose, with a faint smile on her face, looked Ryūen in the eyes and replied without hesitation.

"I don't want to expel Karuizawa-san because of my personal feelings. That's a different story."

Despite her bold words, she is a good person after all.

So Ryūen tried to interject this, but...

"But Ryūen-kun is mistaken. I am a calculating enough person."

Saying this, Ichinose puts her hand on her chest and smiles.

"If you can't solve a problem, think about it and come up with an answer. If you still can't find the answer, take action. That's how most paths open up."

"What do you mean?"

“I wonder?”

Ichinose thought back... to the night of the school trip.

It was then that my destiny began to change.

There is a slight possibility. No, it was a result derived by instinct that didn't even consider the possibility.

The situation at midnight when everyone was at the inn. A blizzard. A vanished self.

How will my classmates react and what will happen to them if it turns into a commotion?

What Ayanokōji found out for me was not a surprise at all.

Everything at that time, at that moment, was inevitable.

Something unpleasant clung to Ryūen's hand holding the umbrella, and then spread to his whole body.

“I've got to go to the gym now. I don't want to waste even one second of happiness.”

All the analysis of Ichinose that he had been holding until then, all of it, was negated. Ichinose was not interested in Ryūen at all anymore. She started walking, passing by Ryūen and heading for the Keyaki Mall.

“I take it back, Ichinose.”

Ryūen turned around and spoke to Ichinose.

“It might be lucky for us not to run into you at the end-of-year exam.”

That was a hunch.

It was a word of respect for her presence, which made him think she was more troublesome than Sakayanagi, even if only for a moment.

Postscript

Happy New Year 2023 and I'm Kinugasa and I hope we can continue to have a great year together. Last year was quite eventful with the second season of an anime and various other things keeping me busy. This year, with the third season on the horizon, I'm hoping things will continue to be exciting.

On a personal note, I've established a routine for weekdays where I choose one out of three cafes and walk or bike there to brainstorm ideas while sipping coffee until lunchtime. Then I work at my desk until evening and repeat this five days a week. On weekends, I spend half the day with my kids and the other half working. Although weekdays seem to fly by, weekends feel three times as long and can be challenging. However, I often come up with interesting ideas during those times, which is a bit of a mystery to me.

My recent concern is that once I catch a cold, it takes a long time for me to recover. Since before Christmas, I've been suffering from a persistent cough and runny nose, and neither over-the-counter nor prescription medication has helped much. I feel embarrassed when I cough frequently while shopping at the supermarket, even with a mask on. I hope it will get warmer soon so that I can recover and be healthy.

Now, back to the main topic. The second semester arc ended in volume 9, and I'd like to thank those who have been following along so far. Ayanokōji and other characters are preparing for the third semester and their third year of high school. The third semester may be a bit more challenging than the second, so please be prepared.

As always, the next volume will be the winter break arc. Considering that our relaxing time will be limited for the time being, this may be a valuable and enjoyable volume. I'll have to say goodbye for a while, but I'm looking forward to seeing you again before summer.

Ichinose Honami's Short Story: Jealousy

AH, I WAS nervous.

I had left Ayanokōji-kun and Mako-chan under the excuse of getting some water.

Recently, I had gotten used to the 30-minute course and was sweating enough to get a sense of satisfaction, but now...

Strange sweat and a high heart rate.

This wasn't normal.

It wasn't a sudden illness or whatever. It was clear that it was because of the two of them.

"Mako-chan had said something odd..."

I tried not to remember in order to stabilize my breathing, but it was a pointless endeavor.

I couldn't help but think back to what had happened earlier.

"I mean, you're kind of nice Honami-chan."

Mako-chan had whispered those words after glancing at both me and Ayanokōji-kun.

"It's probably nothing out of the norm, but did you notice you're dressed pretty boldly?"

"...!?"

I had been too busy thinking about other things to be concerned about my own appearance.

I thought I'd just work out at the gym like I usually did and enjoy peace.

"So you didn't notice, Honami-chan?"

"What is it...?"

"Oh, well, it's just that wearing that kind of outfit can be embarrassing when you're not used to it, right?"

"I see?"

Mako-chan carefully conveyed her feelings.

She likely thought that being direct about it would make it easier, but it had the opposite effect.

Due to her gentle meddling, I now wanted to hide forever.

That's why, for the past 30 minutes, I had solely been focusing on running on the treadmill.

However, this was the situation that I currently found myself in.

"Ugh... It's so embarrassing."

I wanted to change out of this outfit immediately, but I couldn't.

If I put on a modest shirt just because I was sweating a little, my intentions would be revealed.

If the other person was naive enough, it could be different, but Ayanokōji-kun would certainly realize it.

I suddenly found my throat dry.

It may have only been a reason to escape, but I decided to hydrate myself.

“I’ve calmed down a bit.”

Drinking some cold water helped me regain my composure.

“...Right. Let’s do this.”

I just needed to focus on my gym training, and everything would be okay.

However, as I returned to the crowded gym, my feet grew heavy.

As I looked in the distance, Ayanokōji-kun and Mako-chan seemed to be having fun.

“...It seems like their chat is taking off.”

I didn’t know what they were talking about, but their conversation continued smoothly.

Mako-chan’s attitude was identical to when talking to a classmate.

Was it because of the time she was together with Ayanokōji-kun during the school trip.

They seemed to be getting along well.

Even though it was good for my friends to get along, I couldn’t calm myself as my heart felt uneasy.

It felt like some sort of vile emotion was clinging to me.

My feet, which should’ve felt heavy, were light again.

The feeling of being chained had vanished.

Rather, I wanted to quickly get rid of this uneasiness in my chest.

I couldn’t think of anything else.

“I guess I’m a little weird after all, er, but I’ll get through this today.”

I took a deep breath as if to push myself forward.

And then, I decided to go back to the two of them as my usual self.

Kushida Kikyo's Short Story: Like Hell I'd Join

I THOUGHT I HAD just been called out to the hallway, but she wanted me to join the student council?

And to top it off, with Horikita as the student council president, I'd be working under her? *Don't joke with me.*

No matter what merits were present, I couldn't accept.

Just as I was about to firmly turn her down, I felt a weird presence behind my back.

"Well, it's settled. If you join the student council, Kushida-senpai, even if there are people who dislike you, they won't be able to get their hands on you~"

The one who was clinging to me was the first-year Amasawa.

She was one of the people I hated so much to the point of wanting to murder her. She was the last person I wanted to be around in that instance.

Horikita also considered Amasawa as an obstacle to this meeting and was trying to get rid of her.

"It wasn't anyone in particular. If I had to choose, I'd say Kushida-senpai."

"Me? O-Oh, I see. What kind of business is it?"

"Huh? What could it be~? What do you think I want?"

This woman. She absolutely came out here just to mess with me. I seriously want to murder her.

But since I couldn't take any action at this point, I had to endure this with a calm mind.

Besides, Ayanokōji-kun was here.

No no, it didn't matter if he was here or not...

I felt an incomprehensible emotion for an instant, so I pushed it down and forced it away.

While Amasawa continued to participate in the conversation, I continued thinking of a way to get out of this.

"I'm sorry, I can't live up to your expectations. The student council isn't for me..."

"Why don't you just join the student council instead of saying that?"

Again, Amasawa interfered by saying such a thing.

Furthermore, she clung to me, touched my body without permission, and got further carried away.

She even touched my cheeks, but, knowing there were other people there, I had to keep smiling.

"Kushida-senpai is kinda pretty, has a kinda nice figure, and is kinda smart,

right?”

I couldn't do this anymore, I was at my limit.

“Hey, you know... If we're going to keep talking, can we change the location, please?”

If we didn't change locations, it might've resulted in me ending Amasawa's life immediately.

After my desperate plea, Horikita seemed to understand and agreed.

Oh my god, why do I have to spend my time around people I hate?

I absolutely won't join the student council.

Let's just get this over with so I can go home, I vowed that to myself while I continued building up stress.

Himeno Yuki's Short Story: A Boy I Don't Really Understand

ON THE NIGHT when I was doing karaoke with Kanzaki-kun, I was stuck around in Keyaki Mall until late. Ayanokōji-kun, who was passing the time in a similar fashion, called out to me.

“Huh! ...I was in a daze. I was going to the general store and making my way to the front of the movie theater for no reason?”

I answered why I had remained in the mall until late at night, and mentioned whatever came to my mind.

“Since we're both here, if you'd like, do you want to head back together?”

I couldn't say that I understood my classmates, but Ayanokōji-kun was even more of an unknown.

That was why I thought it would be good to understand what kind of person he was, even if only a bit.

Talking to people certainly wasn't my forte, and I didn't like it either. I couldn't count how many times I felt annoyed when doing so.

But before I knew it, I was having a lively conversation with the boy by my side.

It wasn't like I was attracted to him as a member of the opposite sex, I just got the feeling that our wavelengths or something matched.

But I didn't really know the reason. He was just a boy that was hard to understand.

“I realized that I couldn't do anything compared to what I had imagined. I had this groundless confidence that I was doing something amazing by picking up that Ichinose-san was in danger, unlike those around me who failed to notice. I feel like I was humbled.”

I would've been angry if someone else had said something like that to me, but his words genuinely stuck with me.

“I'm sorry for saying something so negative.”

“That isn't something you need to apologize for. Rather, what you said was correct.”

While I thought it would be better to be more honest with myself beside him, I was still scared.

Someone like that wouldn't be me though. I felt like I would become a different existence entirely.

“I thought it would be easier to do something amazing... Taking action is difficult.”

“Everyone feels that way. Even Ichinose and I find it difficult to take action.”

“We’re currently looking for the correct way forward. But as is, I’m losing faith that continuing with Kanzaki-kun and Hamaguchi-kun would make things better.”

“Being hesitant isn’t a bad thing. However, it’s not a problem that can be solved if you do nothing.”

That’s true. It’s valid reasoning, but...

I didn’t know if the efforts we were putting in to change the class were moving in the right direction.

“Yes, but... even though I started moving to save the class, I can’t help but feel like invisible gears are slowly starting to go away.”

What I was feeling was that the situation would get even worse than it was then.

I wanted to think that it wasn’t going to be like that, but I didn’t have the evidence I needed to feel at ease.

I hope that my anxiety is just due to me overthinking.

Ichinose Honami's Short Story: I Must Move Forward

LAST NIGHT, I was laying in bed thinking until I fell asleep around midnight.

I woke up a bit after 5 am. I only slept for 5 hours.

I usually get 7 or 8 hours of sleep... Maybe it was because I was thinking too much.

I had a meeting with Ayanokōji-kun at 10 am at Keyaki mall.

I considered going back to sleep, but I didn't feel like indulging my favorite pastime—sleeping in—today.

When I closed my eyes, the only thing that came to mind was what was going to happen from then on.

Since yesterday, when Ayanokōji-kun had asked to meet, my heartbeat had been rising.

Though I knew this wasn't really a boyfriend-girlfriend sort of date. Ayanokōji-kun already had someone special to him, and I was just someone from his year.

So there must've been another reason for him to invite me out, but it wasn't necessary to ask.

I guessed that it had to do with me quitting the student council.

Nagumo-senpai had ordered me to keep quiet, but rumors had already begun to spread. The rest of the class must have been curious as to why I quit the student council.

I continued to think of things like that while I shifted from left to right in my bed.

Then, after some great efforts, at around 9:30, I began to reach the limit of my staying idle in my room.

The forecast called for rain in the afternoon, so I grabbed my umbrella.

I then walked slowly towards Keyaki Mall, avoiding contact with as many people as possible. It was cold outside, but it helped me keep my composure.

Thinking I had made the right choice in leaving early, I arrived at the meeting location and started to make mental preparations for when Ayanokōji-kun would arrive.

First, to not look upset or show anything negative.

Then next, not to ask about Karuizawa-san.

And finally, not to show any peculiar emotions.

I am Ayanokōji-kun's friend, friend, friend, friend, friend.

Yeah, I'm fine. It'll be fine.

I clenched my umbrella as I believed this.

The reason I decided to meet with Ayanokōji-kun today... is to move forward.

I had to be prepared to move forward.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun.”

I called out to him as he walked towards me.

By the end of that day, I’d forget everything. I kept that feeling hidden in my heart.

Royal MTLs Afterword

Hey there everyone. Cast here. So it looks like we were able to finish this volume ‘a little’ quicker than usual, hehehe. I’d like to express my extreme gratitude to the entire RoyalMTLs Team. I can’t stress how much I appreciate the work they put in because this volume because it was definitely not an easy one to get through considering our circumstances. We had some problems along the way but did our best to make sure the accuracy and quality of the volume was as good as it could be. I’d also like to give a big thank you to all of you for sticking with us for, roughly the past 2 year, and helping us grow our community even more. We are very close to 20K members on our discord so please consider joining if you haven’t already.

Once again, a big thank you for reading from us and the continuous support you have provided. This could not have been done without you and we will continue to release high quality translations for Classroom of the Elite series.

See you all when the next volume is released.

As always, a big shout out to Kinugasa (the author) for writing this novel in the first place, please do support him by buying one of the official copies of Classroom of The Elite somewhere down the line.

Keep checking in on our website to be updated on Classroom of The Elite translations and consider joining our discord events and early access!

-Cast - Translator

<https://royalmtls.com/>

<https://discord.com/invite/royalmtls>

Also follow our new socials on Twitter and Instagram for updates and information.

<https://twitter.com/royalmtls>

<https://www.instagram.com/royalmtls/>

Credits

Ice#6557 – Partner

“Read Re: Zero; also, feel free to check out my Twitter: @LoremIpsumVerb.”

Seinu#7854 – Japanese Proof-reader

“Remember how I said I was suffering? Even with no translating to do? This was why. Also check out <https://www.youtube.com/@Seinu/videos>”

Bell#9877 – Japanese Proof-reader

“Kiryūin lucky I wasn’t in COTE. Shit woulda played out totally differently!”

PuddingTC#7480 – Japanese Proof-reader

“What will happen to Kei?”

Alya#7028 – Illustrator

“Hope you enjoyed the illustrations this vol! Follow me on Twitter for more COTE coloring’s and fan art: @Alya_116”

ZF#4052 – Illustrator

“Make the White Room a reality.”

REITO#7359 – Illustrator Cleaner

“Just wish me good luck. Can't tell for what though.”

DoSomething#5700 – Senior Editor

“Hello [REDACTED]:00 AM, my old friend.”

Grimmfx24#0843 – Senior Editor

“Tomatoes are a vegetable.”

Akuma#5279 – Senior Editor

“I disagree with Grimm.”

gaynesis#5185 – Senior Editor

“Hopefully I'll still be around to edit the next volume.”

[unknown]#9495 – Senior Editor

“If you're reading this, I got a question for you. What are you doing with your life?”

Ichisamui#9527 – Editor

“Honami and her faction just can't stop taking Ws. A huge shoutout to all her fans but remember, she's mine. (;”

Meyobos²#0117 – Editor

“Ichinose stocks are going through the roof, invest in your Ichinose best girl stocks today! Also fire emblem 3 heroes a goated game, crimson flower best route.”

SuperSkillz#2043 – Editor

“forsen forsen forsen i am your biggest fan.”

spoopykay#4348 – Editor

“This is certainly one of the elite moments of the classroom of all time.”

Rolan ￣_(ツ)_/＼#9654 – Editor

“I can’t believe Kinugasa made something readable after writing such an awful series as cote.”

Shawarma#2369 – Editor

“How did we lose that.”

Fato#4414 – Editor

“Kiyotaka fumbled the baddie fr fr”

1N2L#0038 – Editor

“Reading just once is not enough.”

fahadk#6510 – Proofreader

“*Evil Ichinose can't hurt you she is not real.*

Reads epilogue.”

Lombardia#6571 – Proofreader

“0 mentions of Hiyori in the volume? Do you really think I would let that pass?”

callum#1313 – Proofreader

“Phenomenal.”

i became meguca#9890 – Proofreader

“Kei x Ayanokōji is still gonna work out... I SWEAR IT WILL.”

Budos#9022 – Proofreader

“Be kind to each other. RIP Hana Kimura.”

Kall_tho#9331 – Proofreader

“Screw you guys, I’m going home!”

ComaVent#1505 – Proofreader

“1f 7h1s m3554g3 3v3r r34ch35 y0u, 17 m34n5 17'5 4lr34dy 0v3r f0r m3...
wh03v3r 15 r34d1ng 7h1s, p1345e 134rn fr0m m3 p457 m1574k35 4nd s4v3
y0ur53lf wh113 y0u 5t1ll c4n... ju57 s4nd 3m 7h3 N4gum0 5h17 - anonymously
yours, me ~”

WhereMyDaddyGo#9706 – Proofreader

“おはよう ございます! So glad to help translate such an awesome story! I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did! Ichika is best girl forever! She and I are enjoying a steamy Oyakodon in my dreams!”

VSWELL#3189 – Proofreader

“Take school somewhat seriously.”

Plus#4600 – Proofreader

“Thank you all so much for reading, all of us in the Royal team had a blast preparing this one for you, so we really hope you enjoyed! That's all, now get out of here, we'll see you in the next one :)”