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CLASSROOM
OF THE
ELITE
YEAR

NOVEL

10



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

NOVEL 10



“It’s cold.”


“It’s cold, isn’t it?”

“Don’t copy me.”

“Don’t copy me.”

It was a small thing, but
the feeling of being on the
same wavelength was
strangely funny.

“Huh...?”



“I wanted to meet you, Ayanokouji-kun.
Alone with just the two of us, by any
means possible. ...Do you find me
disgusting...?”

“Disgusting? Why?”

“Why, you say... Doing something
like this to come and meet a boy
who has a girlfriend...”



Sakayanagi Arisu



CLASSROOM
OF THE ELITE YEAR **2**

NOVEL 10

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

10

C O N T E N T S

HASHIMOTO MASAYOSHI'S MONOLOGUE

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2. SURVIVAL AND ELIMINATION SPECIAL EXAM

3. THE SENDER'S IDENTITY

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POSTSCRIPT



ROYALMTLs

Hashimoto Masayoshi's Monologue

TO PUT IT simply, I have a deep mistrust of people.
I have a strong aversion to truly trusting others.
I never wholeheartedly trust others.
People betray easily.
Isn't that the case?
They beg us to trust them, assuring us it's safe, then betray us.
The more we trust, the greater the shock of betrayal.
Wouldn't you think it's better to betray before being betrayed?
It's better to live slyly and benefit, than to live honestly and struggle like an idiot.

That's my—"Hashimoto Masayoshi's"—policy.
Masayoshi...
Justice, right?
(TL Note: Masayoshi's kanji can be interpreted as "justice")
Every time I question myself, disgust for my own name wells up.
It seems like this feeling isn't an unusual occurrence nowadays.
Compared to those who despise their own names from the bottom of their hearts, my disgust is... somewhat cute.
I only detest the contrast between my name and my thoughts.
"Justice" and "Masayoshi" are unrelated.
I get it logically.
But still, anyone would associate a different personality with my name at first glance.
They judge a person's character on their own using their name.
Sorry, but I've given up on being a defender of justice.
I've made up my mind since joining this school.
I'll definitely graduate in Class A—I'll get back at those who betrayed me.
For that, I'll do anything dirty.
I'll knock anyone down.
I'll make everyone resent me.
Whether the opponent is Ryūen or Sakayanagi.
Or even Ayanokōji.
No matter who the opponent is, I won't change.
I act solely for myself.

Chapter 1: Opening of the Third Term of the Second Year

THERE WERE CROWDS on the way to school. A sight not seen during winter break.

I didn't dislike the serene scenery, but unexpectedly, I may have preferred watching the waves of students.

Or perhaps, I had just gotten used to the current view in front of me.

As I felt the end drawing near, perhaps I subconsciously started to cherish it.

“What's the matter, Kiyotaka? You've stopped.”

My right arm was enveloped in warmth, and looking up at me from it was Kei, my girlfriend.

Her moist lips caught my eye. She must have put on her favorite lipstick before leaving.

“No, it's nothing.”

I muttered this and started walking with her. The daily life of spending time with her was at least free from boredom.

Even if I was silent, Kei, who loved to chat, provided topics of the day on autopilot. However, I find myself increasingly distanced from the time I used to spend alone.

If asked if those days spent together were necessary or unnecessary, I'd say it was half-half.

What was necessary was that, by repeatedly conversing with someone, it improved my communication skills. This was a valuable opportunity to polish my developing skills.

On the other hand, because of my inexperience, I often failed in my responses to the recipient.

Especially when I dealt with Kei in a bad mood, there were still times when I chose the wrong answer and ended up worsening her mood. I still struggled with that part.

On the contrary, the drawback was that the time to polish my individual skills was reduced. Other than the benefits of communication, dating, and understanding the opposite sex, I was sacrificing many other things.

“What? You were staring at my face.”

“Do you dislike that?”

“It's not that I dislike it, but... Hmm, I want to kiss you again. A lot.”

On the last day before the end of winter break, Kei and I spent the whole day relaxing in our room.

What transpired between a young man and woman sharing the same space shouldn't require much elaboration.

Kei drew my arm further into her embrace.

Except for the time we were changing our shoes after arriving at the gate, we were stuck together from start to finish until we entered the classroom.

“Everyone, good morning~”

It was the start of the third term. Upon entering, Kei waved to her friends in the class. She slowly released her hands from around me and winked at me saying, ‘see you later.’ Leaving behind that deep affection, she left. Afterward, I moved inside the classroom to my seat and placed down my lightly-filled bag.

Ever since tablets were introduced in classes, we didn't need to carry as many things, but the bag was still indispensable.

“Damn, don't come to school like that. It's embarrassing, Ayanokōji.”

Sudō, who was already in the classroom, looked awkward as he called out to me.

“Going to school arm in arm, isn't that the peak of cheerful people? Dammit, I'm envious.”

Although he found the situation embarrassing, he was somewhat envious of it.

“I want to clarify that it wasn't my idea.”

“Obviously! Hell, it'd be seriously creepy if you'd wanted that, for real.”

He continued to murmur, objecting to the idea, while bringing his face closer to mine.

“Being lovey-dovey is fine and all, but have you seen the school's email about first-years being caught during winter break? I'm not worried about you guys, but just be careful.”

“Oh yeah, I did see that email.”

Near the end of winter break, an email arrived from the school stating that penalties were imposed on two first-year students.

The names were kept anonymous, but it was said that a male and female student were spotted by a third party, engaging in an act deemed as an impure interaction.

Any activities with the intent of sexual stimulation were strictly prohibited, so they naturally were punished.

“They should've just done it indoors. How about you? What are your thoughts as a senpai?”

“What do you mean, ‘how about me’?”

“Do you... want to do various things... outside?”

He shouldn't have asked if it made him so embarrassed, but I didn't say that.

“I can only state as the email suggests. The school premises are full of watchful eyes and surveillance cameras. If you do something strange, there’s a high risk of being caught. I wouldn’t choose to give in to my instincts.”

“Oh, okay. That sounds like a unique perspective only you would have... It’s a bit off-putting.”

I ended up throwing Sudō off, albeit in a different way than expected.

“—Phew.”

I heard Sudō’s rather deep sigh. It seemed to have slipped unconsciously, but realizing what he had done, he hurriedly apologized.

“That wasn’t about you. Sorry if it seemed like an unpleasant sigh.”

“I’m not bothered, but is something wrong?”

He had raised his voice in public many times before, but he wasn’t prone to sighing a lot.

This change was not to be underestimated.

“Lately, I’ve been feeling a bit tired. I thought I could balance both studies and sports, but it’s getting tougher. Eh... It’s not a big deal.”

Seeming to regret discussing the cause of his sigh, Sudō tried to downplay it.

Expressing my concern at this point might backfire.

So, I gave him just one piece of advice.

“Even if you cram knowledge, if you rush it, it’s likely to spill over. Too much hurry spoils the curry.”

“Yeah... Anyway, I’m looking forward to working with you again from today forward.”

Switching gears, he smiled and headed to his seat.

Just then, Satō, who had just entered the classroom, greeted her classmates and passed by me.

“You two seemed quite close this morning.”

Whispering so, she added, “Thanks for the meal,” before joining her group of girls.

Apparently, she had witnessed my walk to school with Kei from behind.

(TL Note: Satō saying ご馳走様 (Gochisōsama) which is most commonly said after finishing a meal (for example いただきます (Itadakimasu) is said before the meal). In this case, she’s basically thanking Kiyotaka for the lovey-dovey Kiyotaka×Kei shipping material they’ve given to her...)

1

Even after winter break, there weren't any changes for both students and teachers.

As Chabashira-sensei came into the class, she briefly offered a New Year's greeting and put her hand on the lectern.

"The third term starts today. They say January comes and goes, February flies by, and March disappears; this period of time will pass by you in a flash. Make sure you don't spend your days out of habit, and stay focused."

No one pointed it out, but the hair on the back of Chabashira-sensei's head was a little funny. There was just a little bit of bedhead there. She probably woke up late this morning and had to hurry.

For someone who was telling their students to focus, it made her words a little unconvincing.

Chabashira-sensei concluded morning homeroom and was about to leave the classroom when she stopped near the entrance.

"I forgot to mention one important notice. Next month, we plan to have our first 'student-teacher discussion' at this school. It will be centered around discussions about your career and employment, interwoven with talks about your school life up till now. Of course, we have already completed a survey with your parents."

While looking back, she passed on the message to the class.

Even though there might've been households making career choices purely based on the student's decisions, most would consider their parents' opinions.

This was proof that the school was actively working even without the students.

"I didn't know we had such a thing at this school. I actually thought we didn't."

Being the first to speak out, as always, was Ike. No one was surprised.

"Even though high school isn't compulsory education, we can't ignore the parents' words and allow students to decide their own paths. Of course, there will be parent-teacher conferences when the time comes."

Parent-teacher conferences. Does that mean there's a chance 'That man' might come again?

No, he clearly told me he wouldn't come back. But what will happen next?

While I was concerned about that problem, the immediate issue was the one-on-one discussion in February. That said, in my case, my future wasn't something I could control at will, so one could argue it didn't matter.

In that sense, it was very helpful that Chabashira-sensei knew about my situation, even if it was just a little. As deep discussions weren't necessary, it would likely only be a formality.

On the other hand, for my classmates, one-on-one or one-on-two discussions would undoubtedly become a major crossroads.

Would they charge straight ahead on their chosen path, or take a detour to discover a different one?

Parents and teachers would provide the students insight into aspects they couldn't see on their own.

“If you're curious about anything, it's okay to come and ask me directly.”

Having delivered all the necessary information, Chabashira-sensei placed her hand on the door.

And then, with one hand closing the door, the other hand looked like it was patting the back of her head..

Apparently, she realized her own bed hair.

2

After Chabashira-sensei left the classroom, the class was engrossed in topics about the student-teacher conference and their future.

“We really need to start thinking about what we’re going to do, don’t we?”

“First, we must consider the case where we graduate from Class A and the case where we don’t. What are you thinking, Hirata-kun?”

The girls surrounding Yōsuke, who was sitting in the center of the class, started the conversation.

“I’m planning to go to university, irrespective of the Class A privileges. My parents have told me from a young age that that’s what they want.”

Although I didn’t intend to eavesdrop, their conversation was audible, and I couldn’t help hearing it.

Yōsuke didn’t seem to have any intention of finding a job at this point and was planning to continue his education based on his natural aptitude.

Considering his attitude towards his studies and his actual academic ability, this seemed a natural course of action.

Whether he had the Class A advantages or not, if he didn’t have the determination, he wouldn’t be able to take full advantage of his privileges.

Well, this was true for all aspects of life.

“Really? I totally thought you were going to become a soccer player!”

“Haha, not quite. Even if I do use the Class A privileges to forcibly become a professional, if my skills don’t match, it’s clear that I’d be let go soon. Even if I go to university, I’m planning to continue playing soccer, but only as a hobby.”

Getting a job in sports was a high hurdle.

Those who should resort to exercising their privileges to proceed include those with talent who, for one reason or another, are yet to be discovered or those who due to other issues can’t go down the regular path.

Then how should they properly utilize the benefits of graduating from Class A?

Keisei, a top student in our class, opened his mouth.

“If we’re talking about the Class A privileges, then we should definitely opt for a job at a top company. Setting aside the exceptional case where one’s skills are obviously not up to par, as long as we can work as much as others, we won’t be fired easily. For us, jumping into a world where we win as long as we get in might be the best option.”

Our classmates nodded, convinced by Keisei’s logical statement.

A company takes on a major responsibility when hiring someone.

Unless a big mistake is made, it would be unfair to fire someone just because they didn't like them.

ANHS wasn't a newly established school, and its existence was widely known because it was recognized by the government. So far, they must have accepted many students who have graduated in Class A.

In that sense, if we were to choose a top company, we could relax and fulfill our duties for a long time.

"Considering efficiency, Yukimura-kun's choice might be correct. But I think it's also important to aim for the job you want."

That too was one of the correct answers. You only have one life, and it's okay not to choose to dedicate it entirely to a stable job or money.

Chase after an ideal job or go for a realistic job.

Sooner or later, the students in this place will be faced with these crossroads.

Honestly, there are both right and wrong choices for any decision.

The future after my graduation is only one at the moment, but whether it was right or wrong wouldn't be known until far into the distance.

Was I living the correct life?

The true answer will reveal itself depending on how one concludes when looking back over their past.

3

It was the first lunchtime since winter break had concluded and classes returned. Kei had already formed a group with the girls, Satō included, and was headed to the cafeteria. It was important not only to focus on your partner but to also cherish your friends. I watched Kei's retreating figure from the corridor. The girls were neatly lined up in a row.

"Why do girls always walk side by side, regardless of whether there are four or five of them?"

"I don't know why you're asking me. Walking side by side is just a nuisance."

I threw a question to Horikita, who stood behind me, but she seemed to have no idea.

"Besides, do you have eyes on the back of your head? It's a mystery how you notice things."

"Isn't it better to leave the mystery as it is?"

"So, you don't intend to tell me?"

"If you tell me why girls always walk side by side, I might consider it."

"That's a harsh question to ask Horikita-san. She doesn't have enough friends to form a line."

Following Horikita, Kushida showed up.

"There's a hierarchy. Even if you block the corridor and become a nuisance, there are times when you need to maintain the group's formation."

"I see. So they naturally avoid forming a configuration where they have to follow one person in front."

"Probably. They don't all say it, but I think it's something they can intuitively understand."

So it might be a mechanism derived from the group psychology that is common in women.

"What a trivial reason. We should be considerate of others when we walk."

"Yeah, yeah. It's easy for people without friends to say that."

"Are you picking a fight with me?"

"Were you thinking I wasn't? That's amusing."

The two glared at each other, and sparks flew.

"Please don't fight. Do you need something from me?"

"I do have something. Ayanokōji-kun, can I treat you to lunch today?"

Horikita was offering to pay for my meal? I had almost no good memories of this.

“When you propose something like this, usually nothing good comes of it. This is based on my past experiences.”

“How rude. I won’t ask for money or anything strange, so you can relax.”

“Well... Okay.”

I was sure I wouldn’t be able to relax, but if I said that, she would probably get angry. Instead, after a long pause, I nodded quietly.

“You sure took a while to decide.”

“I may not like that about you, but it’s okay. Kushida-san, are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m good to go.”

She casually switched from battle mode to angel mode.

“I see, so Kushida is coming along too. That’s quite unusual.”

Could it be that Horikita didn’t want to have lunch with Kushida alone so she invited me?

For a moment, I thought that, but if she hated to have a meal with an unpleasant companion, she wouldn’t set up such a situation.

Those two must have a reason for inviting me together. I wonder what they’re thinking.

Today, since Kei isn’t around, there wasn’t a problem hanging out with them.

“So, are we going to the cafeteria?”

“No, somewhere... somewhere less popular would be better.”

Horikita replied, and Kushida, walking beside me, was empty-handed.

So, does this mean we’re going to stop by a convenience store or a stall on the way to get a bento?

I didn’t know, but I was sure to find out soon. We got up from our seats and started walking out into the corridor. Of course, the three of us didn’t walk side by side. Horikita was leading the way, while Kushida and I followed a little behind.

“Hey, Horikita-san. I want to confirm again, are you really planning on eating?”

“Yes, that’s what I said, didn’t I?”

“Ha... In that case, could you make a stop at the convenience store first? I’ll get some stomach medicine.”

“Please stop. I understand your anxiety, but that’s unnecessary.”

I see, she’s going to buy stomach medicine at a convenience store on the way. Stomach medicine was necessary.

“Wait a minute. What’s with the stomach medicine? What on earth are you planning to eat?”

There was something clearly amiss in wanting to procure something unnecessary for lunch.

When I sternly asked Horikita, she answered without looking back.

“It’s a homemade lunch by Ibuki-san.”

“...Ibuki’s homemade lunch?”

I was forced to handle the situation calmly as my thoughts froze for a moment.

“She’s making one lunchbox for me, Kushida-san, and you today, so we’re going to divide it into three equal parts and share it. Didn’t I tell you that?”

“You never intended to mention it, did you...?”

If I’d heard that explanation in the beginning, I would’ve run away like a frightened hare.

First of all, there was no way she made it for me. It was too unexpected.

“If my memory serves me right, Ibuki wasn’t good at cooking, was she?”

I dared not to call it bad and tried to suppress my fear as I phrased my words.

“She’s the type who never did any home cooking before. So she usually only had imbalanced meals. That’s probably new to your vague memory, isn’t it?”

I had been on winter break until recently, but I ran into Horikita and Ibuki just after the new year.

And I do remember hearing about the current topic there by chance.

“Because imbalanced nutrition is unhealthy, I recently invited her to my room a few times and let her eat the food I made. She came without fail, albeit begrudgingly, because it saved her money on her food expenses.”

“It’s kinda annoyingly cute how she comes even while complaining, isn’t it?”

Normally, one would describe that as ‘annoyingly cute,’ right?

“You seem to know a lot about Horikita’s situation, considering you say you hate her.”

“I’ve been dropping by often, hoping maybe a fight would break out. That’s how I’m in the know.”

That was a very nasty expectation; it was just like Kushida.

“However, it was a bit of a hassle having to cook for three people, myself included.”

Despite her complaints, Horikita didn’t seem to mind much.

Perhaps she was already used to it.

“So how did that lead to us eating Ibuki’s homemade lunch box?”

“It was a tit for tat. When Horikita taunted her, saying she should at least learn how to cook, she loudly boasted, ‘Even I can cook if I put my mind to it!’

‘Then show me you can.’

‘Prepare yourself and wait, I’ll do it.’

‘If you can’t even do that, go die.’

‘If I pull it off, I’ll kill you.’

“And that’s how we got here.”

I was impressed by how easy it was to understand and imagine the flow of events.

But the last two exchanges were most likely lies. I hoped.

“Alright, I understand the situation. Well, I’m heading to the cafeteria, see you next time.”

At the crossroads, I tried to escape by turning in a different direction, but Kushida immediately grabbed my arm.

“You’re lucky. You get to eat homemade food by someone biologically classified as a girl.”

“You tricked me.”

I expressed my resentment towards Horikita who was calmly walking in front of me.

“It’s not pleasant to hear you say that I tricked you. I just wanted to share Ibuki-san’s cooking with as many people as possible. And wouldn’t it be strange to involve people who aren’t close to her? And it’s too early to assume that it won’t be delicious.”

I couldn’t get the impression that she was looking forward to it from the conversation.

I understood that I couldn’t escape, so it seemed that I had no choice but to reluctantly follow.

“But couldn’t you avoid being involved and escape, Kushida?”

It made sense to push into Horikita’s room to eat her homemade food, but no matter how much she wanted to see Horikita vs Ibuki, the risk was high. She didn’t know what kind of tragedy awaited.

“Well, yeah. Even I have something in this, you know.”

“You hate to lose too, don’t you, Kushida-san? You came here against your better judgment just because you were cheaply provoked by Ibuki-san, asking if you were going to run away like a coward, didn’t you?”

“...I just wanted to see Ibuki fail and apologize for it.”

It seemed that I hit the nail on the head, evident by her dropping the honorifics, but would Ibuki be the type to apologize if she failed?

Well, her troublesome personality was why she might’ve thought it was worthwhile to witness the apology, even if the probability was low.

“It doesn’t seem like she’s here yet. We’re just in time for our appointment though...”

This seemed to be the meeting place, and she stopped in front of the corridor leading to the outdoors.

She lied about wanting a place without many people, but it looked like she was planning to involve me from the beginning.

“Hey, our classrooms are close by, why did we need to meet at the spot?”

“It’s indeed a pointless gathering, but I properly invited Ibuki-san too, you know? She just rejected the idea of walking together.”

If she disliked Horikita (and probably Kushida) that much, she could’ve just turned down this challenge.

It’s a good example of the problem with being overly competitive.

“I can tell she’s going to fail and bring us a nasty lunch box, isn’t she?”

“I don’t want to assume the result, but there’s no doubt she’s probably failed.”

“I see... So now I have to eat the failed dish, huh?”

“Stop babbling about failure!”

Just as the air was about to become heavy, Ibuki joined us while shouting.

She has a bomb... No, a lunch box in her hand. She had it. I wish she hadn’t.

I wish she’d blustered something like, “I forgot, so this match is off!” I would have supported her.

“Why is Ayanokōji here? I didn’t invite him.”

“Isn’t it better to have more judges? That will increase the credibility of the cooking level. We’ll change the location since everyone is here. You don’t want to seem too friendly with us, do you?”

“Of course not!”

With that, we exited the corridor. It was still early January, so the cold was quite intense, but due to this, no one was at the dining spot.

Ibuki waved what seemed to be a bento box wrapped in a plain furoshiki (something I saw in a 100 yen shop) and slapped it down onto the bench.

“You’ll regret ever talking about me failing. Hurry up and eat.”

“You seem confident, maybe a miracle occurred and you actually cooked well?”

She’s indeed brimming with confidence. That’s obviously better than having no confidence, but are we safe to have expectations?

“She’s clearly the overconfident type, so we can’t take her attitude seriously.”

Horikita, fully aware of this, averted her gaze from Ibuki to look down at the bento box.

My faint hopes, as well as Kushida’s, instantly vanished.

“Hmm. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think I could win.”

“Your confidence is apparent. But if that’s the case, you should handle your food more delicately. Even if your cooking turns out well, you would still fail as a chef.”

“Shut up. Just eat quickly. Then, apologize to me, Horikushi! You too, Ayanokōji!”

“Don’t lump Kushida and I together, what a way to abbreviate our names.”
I wasn’t particularly bothered being called out as an afterthought.
However, it felt like...

“You three have become quite close, haven’t you?”

It contradicted the glaringly tense atmosphere, but that was what it seemed like.

“We’re not close, how could you misunderstand to that degree, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“That’s right, don’t interpret things strangely.”

“I’ll punch you if you say that again!”

Clearly, one of them was on a different wavelength, but they still seemed to be getting along well. Any way you look at it, I was out of place here.

“Should I go home?”

I expressed this genuine thought because I didn’t want to be a bother, but—

“You can’t leave!”

“You can’t run away.”

“That’s unfair, Ayanokōji-kun.”

The three of them shouted in unison once again.

I didn’t quite get it, but it seemed I couldn’t escape, so I sat down.

Well, it was fine. Listening to their conversation was somewhat interesting. Ibuki’s cooking was clearly amateurish.

Even so, she might have experimented and tried various methods to make Horikita and Kushida admit defeat.

With a hint of anticipation, I evaluated the aesthetics of the food, a critical element.

Out from the furoshiki came a plain bento box (again, something from a 100 yen shop).

(TL Note: “Furoshiki” is a traditional Japanese wrapping cloth, often used to transport clothes, gifts, or other goods.)

“Okay, let’s open it.”

There was no sense of worry or anxiety from Ibuki as she sat back with her arms folded.

Once the bento’s lid was slowly opened...

What first caught our eyes was rice, not plain rice but fried rice.

Various vegetables and meats gave it a colorful appearance.

However, the ingredients in the fried rice were unusually large. Aside from that, there were mini tomatoes, tamagoyaki, gratin, simmered dishes, fried items, and mini hamburgers too. Although each portion was small, the seven types were laid out generously. The main feature was the addition of four slices of baran.

(TL Note: “Tamagoyaki” is a Japanese rolled omelette)

(TL Note: “Baran” refers to the decorative plastic or paper dividers used in bento boxes.)

One could say that it preserved the appearance of a bento.

“Did you make everything by hand?”

“Of course.”

She responded immediately, so it seemed that the answer was true.

However, she unexpectedly included simmered dishes.

“I’d give you a bonus 30 points for how it looks, perhaps.”

“The taste matters in cooking, not the appearance.”

“I’m giving you a compliment, you know. I thought something close to 0 points would appear.”

Being generously told it was better than expected, earning a score of 30 points.

Horikita seemed to have prepared for this in advance and had brought several pairs of disposable chopsticks. She kept a pair for herself, then she gave Kushida and me a pair each.

“Let’s get to the tasting.”

“This is the first time I’m not looking forward to tasting something~ Such a lovely memory~”

Kushida said in a monotone voice and split her chopsticks. She didn’t seem in the least bit eager to take the first bite, waiting for Horikita to do so.

Horikita picked up a bit of fried rice with her chopsticks and brought it to her mouth.

She then grabbed one of the gratins and popped that into her mouth as well.

After finishing eating in silence, Kushida asked her.

“How is it?”

“I won’t say yet. I don’t want my reaction to influence yours. Your turn.”

“Tsk.”

What a blatant tongue click.

If any students who still held illusions about Kushida saw this, they probably would’ve fainted. Even if they overheard it, they would dismiss it as accidental, not believing it was intentional.

“Can I just try the mini tomatoes?”

“Take it seriously.”

“Tsk, you’re too strict.”

Again, there was Kushida’s intense tongue clicking, and it seemed even stronger than the first time.

In a reluctant manner, she chose the simmered dish and the mini hamburger to taste.

“Ahh... I see. Here you go, Ayanokōji-kun.”

From Kushida's enlightened face, the baton of gross food was passed to me.
Now, what to do with it?

The lunch box had seven items, including a small tomato. Since the two had eaten four of them, I figured it would be best to eat the remaining two apart from the mini tomato.

That meant a rolled tamagoyaki and a fried dish. It was a choice between life and death, or perhaps death and death.

"Well then, I will start with the tamagoyaki."

A staple for any lunch box. Though it required considerable skill to perfect, it was easy to make a decent one.

I popped it into my mouth, instinctively on guard for pieces of eggshell.

But it went down my throat without any crunch or discomfort, so I moved on to the fried dish. I didn't realize this until I picked it up with my chopsticks, but it was a bite-sized, round croquette.

"..."

I cautiously placed it on my tongue. When I bit down, the filling spilled out. It was clearly a croquette and tasted like one.

However, a mushy texture was more prominent. It wasn't fried enough, leaving the ingredients too moist. Furthermore, it felt bad on the tongue and left a poor aftertaste.

After finishing, I quietly set down my chopsticks and closed my eyes.

...Yes, I see.

By chewing and swallowing, the answer naturally comes to mind.

"Since we all finished eating, I'll give you my honest opinion. It's not delicious."

"What!?"

"It's not inedible and, visually, it was better than the 0-point worst case scenario. I can tell that a beginner worked hard to make this, but more than that, it's clear that there was too much salt; the seasoning was added haphazardly."

Sure, it wasn't unpalatable.

The bold seasoning was probably a result of eyeballing it, as Horikita pointed out.

"Yes, you can eat carrots without peeling them, but the texture is poor, and the size of the pieces is uneven. You gave it a serious attempt, but you couldn't hide which parts you thought were a bother."

It was just a single lunch box, but Horikita was able to precisely tell Ibuki's thought process when she prepared it. And judging by Ibuki's bitter expression, she was almost entirely correct.

"I don't want to eat anymore. So this is what it means to waste a meal."

Ibuki's frustration was evident in her vehement response to Kushida's caustic comment.

"It's surprising that you could boast about not losing to Horikita in cooking. You should've given some money to a good cook and asked them to prepare it for you."

She was harshly critiqued, and although it was a little pitiful, it couldn't be helped given the quality of food she'd made.

"You guys aren't judging fairly!"

"If you say that, then you eat it. You haven't even tasted it properly, have you?"

"Taste test...? I haven't, but it looks normal and must be edible."

"I didn't say it's inedible. It just doesn't taste good. Now, go on and eat it."

Ibuki reluctantly took a bite of the lunchbox she prepared, visibly annoyed.

"...Ugh, it's not delicious—it's delicious... Amazing!?"

"Don't force yourself to lie."

Being hit on the head by Horikita, Ibuki howled.

"Why isn't this delicious? It has such a plain and disappointing taste! And it's salty!"

"I've explained everything. You can't just eyeball everything."

"Even if you tell me that, I just thought there wasn't much of a difference between a tablespoon or two teaspoons, it's just a nuisance!"

That was the major issue. The food packed in the lunch box had significant variation in seasoning and was either too light or dramatically over-seasoned.

"If I were to score your cooking this time, I would give it 20 points."

"...Out of 20?"

"Out of 100."

"Whaaaaat!? Is the judge bribed!?"

"I was being generous with you. I don't even want to eat this lunch box."

"True that. If it were me, I'd give it 2 points."

Ibuki kicked the ground in protest to the judges' harsh criticisms.

"What about you Ayanokōji-kun? You must have a similar opinion, right?"

"No, I don't think it's inedible. I'd give a higher score to this lunch box."

"See!? See!?"

Ibuki slightly leaped up, seemingly pleased with the first sign of support.

"Are you sane? This is a poorly made, mediocre lunch box."

"Agreed, without any bias."

Horikita matched the stride without hesitation. However, I wanted to throw a wrench into it.

Various perspectives should be taken into account when discussing this bento.

“But it’s not inedible. You admitted that much, didn’t you?”

“Well... yes, but I don’t want to eat it.”

“In this day and age, where food is aplenty, I would never want to eat this in my everyday life, but what if we were cast away on a deserted island? If this was the only thing to eat there, wouldn’t you gratefully eat it? So, my rating is...”

“Your score is fair. Thanks for the somewhat unclear analogy. At least, I clearly understood that you weren’t giving it praise.”

“...Is that so?”

My rating was interrupted just when I was about to announce it, leaving me feeling a little indigestion and a bit sick.

Or maybe it was the indigestion starting from the food thrown into my stomach.

“On average, 11 points. That’s a shame, Ibuki-san.”

In the end, if my evaluation wasn’t going to be included, maybe I didn’t need to be called...

It was in the past, but all that remained was a feeling of disappointment that I couldn’t shake off.

“Ugugu...”

Originally unable to cook in the first place, Ibuki had no choice but to accept the result of her overreaching.

“If you say you’ll remake it later, I might make time for you.”

“I won’t make it again!”

Being criticized the entire time, Ibuki shouted her dissatisfaction, possibly having been broken by one round of cooking.

“Giving up early isn’t a bad thing. Cooking just isn’t for you right now.”

Despite being criticized again, Ibuki, having already made up her mind, snorted and crossed her arms.

“On the contrary, I realized it’s stupid to even bother with cooking. You are all wasting your time.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You can simply buy a bento at a convenience store or supermarket. It saves you time and you don’t need to deal with leftover ingredients. And it even tastes delicious. Right?!”

Well... I guess that’s one benefit of a ready-made bento...

“You shouldn’t do that. You must consider your nutrition well when preparing meals. How long must I repeat what I have already explained? That’s why you don’t grow up.”

“Ahahaha, that’s true. Not just your mentality, your physical growth seems stagnant too.”

“Hey Kushida! What are you looking at when you say that?!”

“What do you think?”

“I’m going to kick you now! I’m going to force you to apologize!”

“Alright, alright. Don’t bite at every little thing. The fact that you always get prickly proves that you’re not getting enough nutrition. Come to my room at seven o’clock tonight.”

“If you insist so much, I accept!”

Was she going?

I thought she would refuse, but despite her annoyance, Ibuki accepted.

While saving money on meals, you could get a nutritious and delicious meal.

Having to listen to Horikita’s nagging was a downside, but it was too valuable of an opportunity to pass up.

“See you then!”

Leaving behind words of dismissal, Ibuki stormed off with fast-paced strides.

If it had been in an apartment, her energy would have annoyed the people downstairs.

“Leaving the lunch box she brought without cleaning up, really...”

Showing a disgruntled attitude like a mother complaining about her daughter’s incompetence, Horikita tidied up the scattered lunch set.

She wouldn’t take it home and wash it, would she?

Kushida, who was sitting next to her, averted her gaze from all that and stood up.

“Then I’ll bother you at seven o’clock too.”

“I didn’t invite you, though?”

“That’s fine. I want to save as many private points as possible. And a meal paid for with your money isn’t bad. I’ll enjoy eating it.”

She seemed to find taste in things totally different from others.

“Don’t you already have enough private points?”

“I’m far from having enough. I was supposed to receive money from someone every month, but unexpectedly, plans have changed.”

Although she smiled nicely, her cold eyes were directed at me.

Then, back to her usual angelic self, she disappeared toward the cafeteria.

“Well, that wraps things up. Good job.”

“Yeah, good job—wait a minute.”

I forcefully stopped Horikita, who was about to casually pick up and leave with the bento box.

“What is it?”

“I don’t remember being treated to lunch just for tasting a bad bento, do I?”

“You could have eaten the whole horrible bento without hesitation.”

She offered me the bento box, which still had a lot left in it, but I pushed it back without hesitation.

“It was a joke. Let’s go to the cafeteria. I’ll treat you to whatever you like.”

It seemed Horikita did have some remnant of conscience as she answered.

“But it must be expensive to feed both Ibuki and Kushida. Two people, right?”

“Thanks to them, my food expenses have almost doubled. Kushida-san came even though I didn’t invite her.”

“Do you think your and Ibuki’s presence serves as a good stress relief for Kushida?”

If they truly hated it, they wouldn’t choose to spend their time together, free meals or not.

“I wonder. She seems to enjoy inflicting damage on me more than anything else. Including Ibuki-san, it feels like they just can’t help wanting to see my struggles and frustrated expression.”

I see. That might be true as well.

Spending the same time together, they could get a chance to see Horikita’s weak side.

“It may be hard to imagine, but there must be some fun moments when the three of you gather, right?”

“There’s nothing like that. It’s not a typical girls’ gathering. There’s no laughing, and it’s always tense. Did you not see our exchange earlier?”

Looking back, the earlier gathering was indeed not enjoyable by any stretch of the imagination.

The only time when Kushida, perhaps out of habit, showed a smile or a smirk, was less than half the number of times she did with others.

But, strangely, there was no heavy or tense atmosphere. It felt rather comfortable in a weird way.

“Let’s go. It’s a waste of time to keep talking about those two forever.”

“Sounds good.”

As we started walking, I began to reflect on the mini-event that just took place.

Despite the burden on my tongue and stomach, today’s gathering had been incredibly meaningful.

Horikita, Kushida, and Ibuki, who was from a different class.

The newly formed, albeit distorted, relationship between the three of them was unexpectedly sturdy and not to be underestimated.

They would all surely deny it if I called this a friendship, but my interpretation was that the sequence of surprises stemmed from the emergence of a budding friendship.

However...

“What?”

Maybe Horikita didn't like the fact that I, walking by her side, was looking at her. She narrowed her eyes defiantly.

“I was just thinking about what expensive food I could get you to treat me to.”

“If that's the case, you should eat what you want without worrying about the cost.”

“I just want to eat the most expensive thing there is.”

“Just... do whatever you want.”

But then, for some reason, I was forced to decide on a set meal to eat.

4

After 9 p.m. in the evening, Kei returned home after coming over, and I was preparing for the next day.

The television that was left on in the background was airing a variety show, which I stopped to focus on.

A man in his 40s was serving as the host, eliciting laughter by joking with the comedians. The scene changed, probably to an on-site one, showing a tour around town.

Observing for a while, the same kind of jokes and comments seemed to be repeated endlessly by the host in the studio.

Five paintings were displayed, with the audience needing to identify which was the real one, creating surprise and laughter.

“Number four.”

Having indifferently muttered the answer, I turned off the TV without waiting for the actual solution. The once noisy room instantly fell silent.

Kei loved watching TV and often left it on when the two of us were alone.

While I had no particular aversion to television, having experimented with using various genres for study, I realized I wasn't especially fond of variety shows. I headed towards the drawer, taking out the sketchbook and colored pencils set stored in the second drawer.

I had purchased them with my private points shortly after enrolling in school, but I hadn't laid a finger on them since. I recalled the puzzled look on Kei's face when she discovered the untouched sketchbook in my drawer.

Spreading the sketchbook on my desk, I opened the silver case containing the colored pencils.

I reached for the brand-new colored pencils—

And then I stopped.

What should I draw?

If I didn't think about anything, my hand would inevitably stop.

I thought I could create something on impulse, but it didn't turn out that way.

In the White Room, I learned numerous skills to enhance my aptitude.

Among these was sketching, which I wasn't bad at.

However, the process of thinking and creating on my own was not part of the curriculum.

I stared at the blank sketchbook.

After a while, I closed the silver case.

“Another day has come to an end.”

Muttering such thoughts, I returned the sketchbook and colored pencils to the second drawer. Maybe, as Chabashira-sensei said, this third term might pass by in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 2: Survival and Elimination Special Exam

AFTER WINTER vacation, school life took a fresh start.

The greetings with classmates who I hadn't seen for about two weeks until the new year were a bit awkward, but other than that, the days passed uneventfully.

When would the next special exam be conducted?

While everyone in the class would have that in the back of their minds, Horikita, who had received hints from senpais, was more concerned.

Chabashira-sensei, the homeroom teacher who symbolized the start of a new school day, appeared.

Her expression was always stern, heading to the podium with a serious face without a hint of levity.

However, even though everything was as usual, some of the students naturally sensed that something was different.

Observing everything from the back of the room, I reached the same conclusion.

Thursday, when half of the week had already passed, it seemed finally time for the prelude to begin.

“Good morning. Today I want to talk about our first special exam of this third term.”

Just as teachers had been observing their classes for two years, students had also been observing the teachers as well.

“Not many of you are surprised. You've gotten good at understanding the timing, I see.”

If so, the announcement would be quick. Chabashira-sensei straightened herself and looked over at the students.

“I'd like to get right into the explanation. This special exam has slightly complicated rules.”

Chabashira-sensei turned on the monitor and started the software.

“This special exam will only be conducted among second-year students.”

Initially, it was revealed that it wasn't going to involve other years like the first and third years.

“This is going to be a different ruleset from the special exam where we compete side by side for first place or decide the winner in a one-to-one match with a specific class. I'll explain it with the help of diagrams to make it easier to understand. Let's take a look at the monitor.”

Data created by the school was quickly loaded and a file was opened.

[Survival and Elimination Special Exam]

The first line of text that appeared was believed to be the name of the next special exam.

Despite being a mere exam name, there was a slight tension among the students.

“Survival and elimination? That sounds very dangerous...”

The usual candid words from Ike. However, that was an understandable impression.

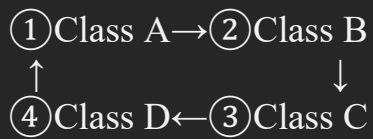
When you saw the word ‘elimination,’ there was something that was inevitably associated with it.

While students didn’t explicitly say it, everyone associated it with ‘expulsion.’

Chabashira-sensei, without commenting on the name of the special exam, began explaining the test content.

“In this special exam, there are diversified tasks based on categories prepared by the school. Each class will choose a category, select a difficulty, and issue a task to the target class in a specific order.”

A diagram of a square figure was given as an example.

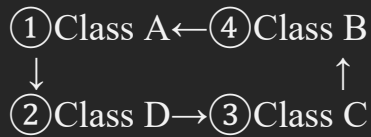


“While the arrangement of these classes is just an example, with us being clockwise from Class A, they will have us solve the task they chose and gave to Class B; meaning Class A is the attacking side in this case. On the other hand, Class B is the defending side. Class B scores points by solving the task, i.e., the attack that came from Class A. Then, once this offensive and defensive action is done, Class B will be on the offensive side and will issue tasks to Class C. We will repeat this attack and defense while moving around the classes, and the offensive and defensive war between Class D and Class A at the end of the rotation—this will be considered one turn.”

From this initial explanation, it was clear that points for your own class didn’t increase when attacking, but rather, points would increase depending on how many of the tasks you could do correctly when defending.

“After 10 turns, the first half will be over. The second half will invert the arrows counterclockwise, and another 10 turns will be held. We are going to repeat the offensive and defensive battles for a total of 20 turns.”

Another figure was courteously displayed for the counterclockwise rotation.



It was still unsure how the class arrangement would be decided, but the fact that there wouldn't be any offensive and defensive actions against the class located diagonally couldn't be overlooked.

It would be an additional mental burden to wage a defensive and offensive war against a class that posed the greatest threat to one's classmates.

"Next, I will detail the tasks for the offensive side. The categories provided by the school, as I mentioned at the beginning, cover a wide range. From fundamental academic skills such as literature, economics, English, arithmetic, kanji, and history, to subjects which are not related to academics, such as subculture, and entertainment."

"Do students need stuff like entertainment...? I'm not good at that..."

Sudō expressed his aversion openly towards the unfamiliar term mentioned.

"Indeed, some areas might not be primarily related to a student's responsibilities. But those who are ignorant of the world are often eliminated when they step into society. In other words, even if you can't study, those who can follow the conversation are often treasured. This means that this time, your general knowledge as a human being will be tested."

With that explanation, some understood while others were still confused. The air was tense.

Sensing this, Chabashira-sensei added to her explanation.

"It seems there are some who find it hard to understand, so let me simplify it. Basically, it has aspects similar to a quiz. The attacking class will present a quiz, and the defending class will solve it. It's as simple as that."

This description was extremely clear, and many students began to show their understanding simultaneously.

At the same time, there were also those who wore baffled expressions.

Competing with a quiz—indeed, if you just proceed with that image alone, it wouldn't be unreasonable.

However, not all successful people are only excellent in academics. Regardless of their final academic level, many possess something noteworthy besides that.

In that sense, it couldn't definitively be said that knowledge in areas like entertainment was completely unnecessary.

If you were to enter into the entertainment industry, there would be a significant difference between knowing nothing and having an abundant amount of knowledge.

Non-academic knowledge would also be tested when facilitating smooth communication with superiors and subordinates. If you could fully utilize your skills, it would be a plus in many cases, without a doubt.

Offense

Select the category and difficulty. Nominate a student and attack.

Attack limit

The same student may be nominated consecutively. It is also possible to repeatedly choose the same category.

Nominate five students of the target defensive class to the staff in charge within three minutes of starting.

※If unable to make nominations within the time limit, the remaining number of students will be selected randomly.

List of possible categories for questions

Literature, History, Science, Society, Sports, Entertainment, Music, Economics, General Knowledge, English, Arithmetic, News, Kanji, Lifestyle, Gourmet Food, Subculture

Difficulty level

Three levels, from one to three. (The higher the number, the greater the difficulty)

Target number

Five people

Indeed, as the school had mentioned, the special exam covered a wide variety of topics.

There were 16 choices for just the category.

“The attacking class will first select a category from among these—”

“Won’t everyone just pick the highest difficulty level for their opponents?”

During Chabashira-sensei’s explanation, this seemed to have unintentionally slipped out of Ike’s mouth.

After muttering that, he hurriedly covered his mouth, but it was already too late.

In the awkward silence that followed, he timidly looked up at Chabashira-sensei.

While there was a strong negative impression around interrupting someone mid-explanation, Chabashira-sensei, albeit sighing, didn’t seem too harsh on him.

“Be careful with your careless remarks, Ike.”

“Y-yes, I’m sorry!”

“The attacking class will select the difficulty level after choosing the category. The basic, first level is of average difficulty. The second and third levels

with higher difficulties can also be chosen, but to do so, you need to spend the points that you have acquired. For every point you spend, you can increase the difficulty level by one.”

The special exam rules began to be broken down little by little.

Apparently, the attacking side was not just about choosing a category.

“The attacking side will nominate five people from the defending class and assign them tasks. You can keep selecting the same student, or you can change who you select. The same applies to categories.”

There seemed to be no restrictions at all on the nomination of students and the category selection. Whether to aim at an unspecified majority or to continuously target a specific student—it was all at the discretion of the attacking side.

“But what if the opponent’s class is aware of the categories we’re weak in...”

It wasn’t unreasonable to immediately come to that conclusion.

If we’re constantly attacked in areas we aren’t good at, the probability of getting all the questions wrong wouldn’t be low.

“I understand feeling uneasy, but this isn’t a special exam that specifically requires you to overcome your weak subjects ahead of time. In this special exam, individual knowledge is important, but it also becomes crucial how well the class understands each other. It isn’t just about taking on the given tasks indifferently, but there’s a system where, at times, a leader can protect students and decide when to attack based on the situation.”

Defense

By the leader's nomination, up to five individuals can be protected for each task. If a student, who was nominated to be protected, is within the five individuals nominated by the attacking side, they will be treated as if they answered correctly.

Within three minutes after the attacking side has finished their task, the leader shall nominate five individuals from their class and declare it to the staff in charge.

※ If unable to make nominations within the time limit, the remaining number of students will be chosen randomly.

Excluding Categories

Each student can choose to exclude up to three of the sixteen categories beforehand.

The attacking side can't choose the excluded categories.

Elimination

If a student answers incorrectly three times in total, they will be eliminated and cannot be targeted for nomination.

Moreover, for every person eliminated, one point will be deducted.

※ Even if the score is zero, negative points will accumulate.

Scoring

If an answer is correct (or protected successfully), one point is given for each person.

Incorrect answers will not deduct points.

“At this point, some of you might be confused, but because you can exclude five people every time you defend, if someone is being specifically targeted, you can prioritize protecting that person. Of course, if the attackers think you will protect, they will change their target each time. You guys will have to make various strategies beyond just getting the answers right.”

As Chabashira-sensei said in advance, it could be called a slightly complicated special exam.

However, when untangled, there were surprisingly simple aspects to it, and it consisted of repeating the same process.

“Also, during this special exam, both the attacking and defending sides are allowed to discuss and consider necessary matters among themselves. However, all final decisions will be made by the leader elected by the class. It is a position that holds a lot of responsibility.”

It was entirely up to the leader if they chose to represent the views of their classmates or not.

Such a role could not be left to someone indecisive or someone who could lose their sense of judgment.

“Also... if a class with any eliminated students sinks to the bottom of the four classes, one of those eliminated students will be expelled.”

“Wow... E-expulsion, seriously... I thought it was possible, but...!”

Somewhere, a small scream rose among the students.

“And the reward for this special exam is as follows:”

Rewards

1st place: 100 Class points

2nd place: -50 Class points

3rd place: -50 Class points

4th place: -100 Class points

※If there are multiple classes with the highest score, an extension will be held to determine the outcome.

※If all four classes finish the test with the same score, everyone's class points will be deducted by 100.

“What the heck is this!? Other than first place, all the class point rewards are negative!?”

It was only natural that voices of surprise and dismay rose from the students.

Only one class could be the actual winner among the four. However, if one deeply analyzed the rules, they would be able to predict why only one class could be the victor.

As noted in the reward description, if all four classes conspired and colluded prior to the special exam, they could potentially finish the exam with equal scores. This rule was in place to prevent such scenarios.

Given that all ranks below the first are in the negative, it becomes practically impossible for classes to collaborate across boundaries. Even if they joined forces, only one class could win.

Of course, it wouldn't be impossible if they used unconventional methods, such as the contract Ryūen and Katsuragi made during the deserted island exam last year in summer, in which they forfeited class points in exchange for Private Points. However, collaboration was unlikely unless it could ensure a secure first place.

By those rules, it was easy to obtain high scores if classes collaborated, but the school's restrictions to prevent this from happening were more powerful than expected.

This was also a rare opportunity to expel a specific student by making their class lose.

It was hardly plausible that they would give up this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity without something significant in return.

The only viable cooperative relationship could be an agreement not to eliminate each other.

This method was fair to all classes and could also purchase safety.

However, setting aside Horikita and Ichinose, the possibility of such a proposal getting through to Ryūen or Sakayanagi was low.

Furthermore, due to the attack and defense mechanisms, they inevitably need to fight against two classes, and adhering to a no-elimination policy wouldn't be easy.

“In the event that there are multiple eliminations in the lowest-ranked class, the class leader will nominate one from among the eliminated. Of course, the nominated student cannot refuse. If there are classes tied for the lowest rank, there is a possibility that there will be expulsions from multiple classes.”

This meant that if any of the students in the lowest-ranked class were eliminated, there would definitely be at least one expulsion. The only exceptions would be if 20 million points were paid or when a student holding Protection Points was eliminated and selected.

It would be possible to avoid that if the lowest-ranked class kept the number of eliminated students to zero, but that was nearly impossible under normal circumstances.

“Excuse me, may I ask a question?”

Horikita, who was sitting in front of Chabashira-sensei, raised her hand to ask for permission to speak.

“Yes, what is it?”

“What happens if the leader is eliminated midway through the special exam? Also, will those who are eliminated be required to do something like leaving the room?”

“To answer the easier question first, even if you are eliminated, you just won't be nominated by the attacker afterward. You'll continue to wait in the same place as the other students and are free to participate in the conversation.”

In other words, they would be put on the eliminated list, but there wouldn't be any other restrictions.

“As for a leader getting eliminated, the leader does not participate in any tasks to begin with. This means that they cannot be nominated by the attacker and therefore have no fear of being eliminated.”

“The leader only directs and doesn’t fight...”

“Correct. Those who are chosen as leaders are effectively exempted from the risk of expulsion. Whether they consider this a perk or not is up to the individuals.”

The class leader, who would lead the fight, won’t bear the risk of expulsion.

However, if the class were to lose, the leader must nominate an eliminated student to be expelled.

The responsibility of being a leader is already a heavy burden if they lose, and yet they have to undertake the task of expelling a comrade without being able to take responsibility themselves.

Although it was a position that assured safety, hardly any student would eagerly want to undertake the responsibility of determining victory or defeat and having to select comrades to abandon if they lose.

While someone like Ryūen or Sakayanagi might easily undertake such merciless tasks, most other students would likely refuse. The role of pushing the button to eject the floorboard of a condemned prisoner was extremely harsh.

“Also, it’s important to note that during this special exam, the use of mobile phones will be permitted at all times, except when the defensive side is solving a problem.”

“Eh, it’s allowed...?”

“Rather, it might be said that phones are indispensable for this special exam. The other classes’ details will be disclosed after the exam starts, so you will have to organize the information in real-time and find the optimal solutions to determine who is excluding which category.”

More than 100 students were spread across the three classes. There were about 80 even with just two target classes.

It would be almost impossible to specify the categories without the class mustering all its resources to gather information.

There were other advantages to being able to use phones.

Usually, students who weren’t good at speaking up found it difficult to raise questions about minor realizations. Frequently, they’d just swallow their small doubts and later find out that they were the key questions they should have asked.

Through an app, they could easily send messages about their realized doubts, just to their specific friends, and ask for their judgment.

“Of course, you can also use it for the defensive side. It’s up to you whether you cram knowledge into your head for the exam until the last minute or if you contact and negotiate with the opposing classes. Feel free to do as you wish. If the

patterns of the questions during the exam become apparent, it should be possible to allocate some countermeasures.”

This added conditions we had never considered until now.

If phones could be used, the scope for offense and defense would significantly widen.

How quickly and efficiently we could share information seemed to be a point of the test.

“The special exam will be conducted next Friday. First of all, by the end of school next Monday, find time, decide the leader through mutual discussion, and let me know. If you can’t choose a leader, as you can probably guess, we will randomly select one.”

With that, Chabashira-sensei exhaled a heavy sigh, seemingly ending her explanation of the special exam.

“I understand everything, but it’s going to be a tough fight. All I can say is—”

She stared at the students, and then answered, “Do your best not to place last. That’s it.”

In the special exam where failure would put losing your friends at risk, avoiding last place was absolutely necessary.

There was a possibility that the third-term special exam would be brutal, and that turned out to be precisely the case.

Even if a student was academically or physically skilled, another class could apply a strategy that exploits the gaps in their knowledge and get them expelled.

Nonetheless, I was impressed that this time, the mechanism wasn’t structured on gaining points from attacking.

As the defense’s judgment was connected to the score, it became more important to face and consider your own class. It was a test to earn points through discussions with the leader and classmates.

How well one knew the class and the enemy would affect the outcome of the battle.

1

After Chabashira-sensei left the classroom, there was a little time before the morning lecture began.

Since we didn't need to move between classes today, everyone would've usually passed the time with casual chatter, but today, it seemed that even that was a waste of time, and the students naturally gathered around Horikita.

To calm the noisy classmates, Yōsuke took the lead.

“Since we have limited time, let's recap the main points of the special exam's contents for now.”

To avoid them from becoming disorderly from idle chatter, he voiced that thought.

It was almost certain, given nearly two years of experience, that there were almost no students who wouldn't listen.

Noting the surrounding silence as agreement, Yōsuke nodded and continued, “The areas of concern for this special exam are that it's difficult to imagine placing last without an expulsion. Inevitably, there will be an expulsion from the class in last place. And while the odds are low, if a tie for last place occurs, multiple classes might have expulsions.”

The number of times a class receives an attack was 20 times. With 5 people each time, that was a total of 100.

No matter how much the leader exerted their skills, it seemed inevitable that a few people would be eliminated.

“Due to the nature of the exam, students who get the second question wrong will be cornered. If you try to protect a particular student from being expelled, of course, the other classes will target the other students. If you continue to insist on protecting, the number of students who get two questions wrong will keep increasing...”

That thought would turn into one of the pieces for negotiations.

The offensive needed to analyze the defending class and figure out who was weak in which subjects in order to attack effectively. They also needed to predict and evade the protection targets, so they wouldn't waste any points.

The defending side also had to predict the offensive's plans and deal with them accordingly.

“Be careful that the eliminations won't only consist of students with lower abilities. It's natural for other classes to want to force capable students to be eliminated, looking at the future. If the class misjudges who to protect, even competent students could be at risk.”

In extreme terms, this was an exam where every student besides the leader had the potential to be expelled.

Even excellent students like Yōsuke and Kushida would buckle if they were continuously bombarded with questions; it wouldn't be impossible to make them drop out.

Of course, this would only apply if there were no other students to prioritize, and the chances of forfeiting the class competition would be high, so it might not be a wise strategy.

However, if this strategy was successful, the class would suffer damages beyond the loss of class points. Considering these factors, the reward for this special exam might be modest. Rather than placing the winner in a more advantageous position, this special exam emphasized putting the loser at a greater disadvantage.

“Just hearing this, naturally, you'd want to avoid elimination at all costs. However, what I really want to say is to avoid becoming overly anxious. While we are still unclear about the essence of the special exam, let's first start by unifying our overall awareness without causing a fuss.”

Horikita conveyed the apparent fear from the special exam but also ensured that wasn't everything.

However, if left unattended, wild imaginations would naturally spread.

Therefore, Horikita decided to gather the class in the classroom during lunchtime today to discuss it.

It wasn't mandatory, but participation was encouraged as much as possible.

2

Students without lunch hurriedly rushed to the cafeteria or convenience store and then returned to the classroom.

About 10 minutes after the lunch break started, 37 classmates, excluding Kōenji, had gathered in the classroom.

Of course, they were there to discuss the approaching special exam.

The plan was to eat and discuss simultaneously to effectively spend time.

There were several important topics, but the first one was to properly understand the special exam and be able to confront it, as Horikita mentioned earlier.

The other was probably the selection of the leader. It was expected that few would object if Horikita, who has done most of the work as a de facto leader, were to run for the position, but she did not speak up herself since the discussion had just begun.

Although she wasn't the type to run away from important responsibilities, she probably wanted to listen to the other classmates' opinions first. There might also be others who wanted to nominate themselves.

However, even if Horikita didn't speak up herself, others would consider nominating her as the leader.

“Horikita-san, I have one question before we begin our official discussion. If we ask you to take on the role of the leader in this special exam, would you accept?”

Yōsuke took the initiative to ask a question that the class likely wanted to know. Instead of an unexpected student suddenly volunteering to become the leader, it would be safer to nominate Horikita, who was likely to produce reliable results, early on—for the sake of the class.

However, everyone's thoughts may not have aligned with Yōsuke's.

In the unanimous vote special exam, as the person responsible for changing the policy and causing confusion in the class, Horikita gave a strong negative impression.

But as expected, Yōsuke showed no signs of such feelings.

“If I'm nominated by many, I have no intention of refusing. But in this special exam, while the leader carries great responsibility, there's also a rule that excuses them from the risk of expulsion or leaving school. If there are other potential candidates, I would like to listen to their ideas.”

On the other hand, Horikita didn't want to rush decisions. Because she understood the nature of the exam, she wanted to be careful in her judgment.

This time, the leader bore the responsibility of strategizing and nominating, as well as the privilege of avoiding expulsion.

They should assume that none of the 37 people present wished to be expelled.

Then, it was possible that someone might show more capability than Horikita and benefit from the privilege of not dropping out, enough to wield their leadership effectively. But in most cases, this wouldn't happen—it was an idealistic scenario.

In the end, the reality was that only those who wanted to secure their safety by becoming the leader would come forward. Even if someone volunteered for the role of leader for self-preservation, it was natural that the class wouldn't recognize that individual.

After all, responsibility, preparedness, and the confidence to win the class over were demanded of the leader.

“Is there anyone here who wants to be the leader? If so, please tell us.”

Horikita, who had moved to a position on the podium where she could see the whole class, asked this question.

The classroom fell silent right after, and the students just looked at each other as time passed.

After waiting for about 30 seconds for a nominee to appear, Yōsuke nodded.

“I guess that's the correct answer. To be honest, I don't think the leader's exemption from elimination or expulsion is a great benefit. If there's no other student who can take on such an important responsibility for the class, I would really like to leave it to you, Horikita-san. What do you think?”

Since there were no other candidates for the leader's position, Yōsuke was trying to persuade Horikita to make a decision early on.

Although there was no rush, deciding the leader was an important matter.

A response was expected from Horikita, but her reaction was slightly delayed as she had been looking at her phone screen.

It seemed like she was paying attention to the conversation, as she finally responded after closing her screen.

“Yes, of course, I intend to. I showed a reserved attitude to hear other people's opinions, but I always intended to take on the role of the leader. If there are no objections...”

“Hold on a second!”

It's decided. The leader will be Horikita. Just as when such an atmosphere was beginning to form, Maezono raised her hand despite hesitating.

“I think there may be a little room for discussion...”

Yōsuke momentarily stiffened, but he quickly regained his composure, keeping a smile on his face.

Normally, he wouldn't show any weakness, but today was different. This caution was likely due to the special exam possibly leading to someone's expulsion.

"Certainly, I think Horikita-san is reliable. It's greatly appreciated that she's willing to take on such a responsible role as a leader. However... we can't afford to lose this special exam, right? If we rank last and have an elimination, that person will be expelled from class. Therefore, shouldn't we appoint the person who would give us the highest chance of winning as the leader?"

If she had said that she wanted to be a leader to ensure safety, Yōsuke would likely have immediately dismissed it. Yet, this seemed to be a question of Horikita's ability as a leader.

"Surely, as you said, it would be best if the person who would give us the highest chance of winning becomes leader, but wouldn't Horikita-san make the appropriate decisions to win?"

Yōsuke believed that Horikita was the best fit for the role. So, without any hesitation, he responded.

"I don't doubt Horikita-san's abilities at all. But is she really the best option? I think there's some room for discussion. Can't we find someone who can make better decisions in the class?"

Without pointing to anyone in particular, Maezono appealed to her classmates, including Yōsuke.

Yōsuke managed to maintain his smile as he nodded several times, but he stumbled over his reply.

Maezono's question was reasonable but rather awkward. It had the potential to spoil the atmosphere.

During this, Ike, who didn't seem to be thinking deeply, reacted unexpectedly.

"So, Maezono, do you have someone better in mind? I don't get it."

"Calm down. It's just my personal opinion, but can I mention it?"

Maezono, who agreed with Ike, seemed to have someone in mind.

Nobody had the right to stop her from speaking, so she continued.

"During the unanimous vote special exam, Horikita-san changed her opinion due to the flow of Kushida-san's expulsion, right? The person who should've taken responsibility at that time should've been a student who continued to vote against it. But I just have a feeling that she didn't stick to it where she should have. This time, the leader decides everything, right? And choosing who to expel from the eliminations is something we can't ignore. Ah, for the record, I don't mean to say that her decision was wrong. Although not all problems were resolved, the fact that Kushida-san is still in the class is a big plus."

She emphasized that she didn't dislike Kushida for no good reason and spoke carefully.

Naturally, even having her name mentioned probably annoyed Kushida.

She had more chances to take off her mask lately, but for now, she was still smiling.

But whether that smile was warm or not was another matter...

Above all, Maezono seemed to doubt whether Horikita was decisive and whether she deserved to be trusted.

"I'm just caught up on our leader's decisiveness. Putting aside who else might be the best fit for now, is Horikita-san really the best person to entrust with this exam?"

She proposed that they should reconsider whether it was a good idea to leave it to Horikita.

If asked whether Horikita's decision-making ability was perfect at present, the answer would be no.

I think it was a good question that should be welcomed. This was also important for Horikita. It was an opportunity to absorb the evaluations and thoughts of those around her.

However, it was surprising to see Maezono so eloquently throwing doubt on Horikita's ability.

"I see... that's a hard truth. Indeed, at that time, I hesitated. I refused to follow the wishes of the class majority and made a personal decision. There's no denying that it's a fact."

Hasebe, who had been maintaining a stern expression, showed a momentary clouding on her face but didn't go so far as to glare at Horikita. She would understand by now why Horikita had made such a tough decision at the time.

"I know that I have many immature aspects. I can't declare that I'm the best choice for the leader. Nevertheless, right now, no one else is stepping up to take the role."

"Even if no one has come forward, there may still be recommendations. If you ask other people, including myself, they may be able to give you more suitable candidates. Isn't it worth asking?"

"I see—a recommendation. Of course, there might be some in the class who think someone else would be better than me. But I have already asked the class once. If there was a student who wanted to be a leader, they would have raised their hand. Is it okay to leave the decision to someone who doesn't nominate themselves?"

"But—"

"Or should we ask Kōenji-kun, who is the only one who hasn't participated in this discussion? He has a sharp edge and can undoubtedly make decisions."

She said as if refuting Maezono's opinion.

Kōenji certainly possessed strong individuality that could answer any question.

Maezono seemed a little irritated for a second, but she was unable to come up with a counterargument and stuttered.

“Your thinking is correct too. I agree with the opinion that we should search for someone stronger and faster in good decision-making. So after listening to what you just said, I am asking the whole class. In this special exam, students who are confident that they can lead and guide the class to victory, please raise your hand. If someone emerges who I think is more suitable than me, I would gladly give up the leadership role.”

It was clear that she was referring to me, and some people turned their gaze in my direction, but of course, I didn't move. I have no intention of taking away the opportunity for Horikita to grow as a leader.

And Horikita understood more than anyone that I stubbornly didn't want to nominate myself.

That was why she merely suggested finding someone in the class with strong decision-making abilities.

You couldn't fight with just the strength you kept within yourself.

Indeed, unless you were so confident that you raised your hand, you couldn't be entrusted with this special exam.

“Certainly, as Horikita-san said, we can't make someone who doesn't nominate themselves a leader.”

Maezono withdrew her opinion in the face of a valid argument, and the situation settled down.

While it may seem repetitive, Maezono's remarks weren't unnecessary or reprehensible. It was essential to prevent the bias that classmates should make Horikita the leader.

Once again, it was whether Horikita was the most suitable leader for this class or not. As long as we could arrive at that answer each time, there was no need to worry in that regard.

And when that question disappeared entirely, that was the moment when Horikita grew into a leader recognized by everyone in the class.

“It seems like we can move forward at last. Let's get back to discussing what this special exam is. We should also continue eating. Everyone stopped eating because of the tension.”

Perhaps due to the tense atmosphere, many students hadn't made much progress with their lunch. At Yōsuke's words, some people hastened to eat again.

Then, Horikita and Yōsuke took the lead in explaining the overview and rules of the special exam.

While Horikita was speaking, Yōsuke continued eating, and while Yōsuke was speaking, Horikita did the same.

Including what they couldn't hear during Chabashira-sensei's explanation, by the time they moved into the second half of the lunch break, all students had deepened their understanding.

And when the flow of exchanging opinions began, Sudō spoke somewhat forcefully, as if he had been thinking about something all along.

“What're we going to do about the guy who isn't here, Kōenji? Do we have to protect him? That's what we promised, right?”

Kōenji achieved the feat of being the sole person who placed first in the deserted island exam under the pretext of an advanced payment until graduation. In return, he gained the right to complete freedom. This meant unconditional protection for Kōenji. Of course, this special exam also brought the risk of dropping out or expulsion to Kōenji.

This promise was made just before the deserted island exam, and many classmates heard about it. After the test, Horikita explained it, so it was a fact known to everyone.

“A timely topic. I just received a polite email that said, ‘It goes without saying, but I'd be in trouble if you don't protect me from expulsion.’”

As she answered, she showed her classmates the actual text on her cell phone screen.

“That's the worst, right!? It means we'll be forced to have four protected slots!”

If the attackers were to realize that Kōenji is always protected, of course, they'd avoid targeting him. But even if they avoided him, there was no guarantee he wouldn't be attacked. If we were to keep our promise, we must keep protecting him.

“Don't jump to conclusions. We can't say for certain that we need to constantly protect him. We'll think of some countermeasures. I won't discuss it in detail now, but don't worry too much.”

This part involved strategy, so we couldn't casually discuss it here.

If the discussion became heated, it would be time-consuming, and lunch break alone wouldn't be long enough. Considering the remaining time, Horikita only reviewed the necessary points and answered questions related to them.

Also, for the discussions related to strategy, Horikita indicated that they should be carefully conducted from the standpoint of information leakage.

While ideas were welcomed as they came to mind, they were not to be exchanged in public places, such as classrooms and corridors where people pass, or on cell phones, where records can easily be left.

3

School ended, and I headed to Keyaki Mall with Kei.

We hadn't originally planned to stop by today, but she had requested a detour.

However, Kei, who had invited me, was not smiling as usual. She wore a gloomy expression.

"You've been down. What happened?"

"Ah... well..."

She seemed to want to say something; after some brief hesitation, she turned her eyes to me.

"Hey, hey, Kiyotaka. What will happen to me in this exam...? If I continue to be targeted, I think it's absolutely impossible to keep answering correctly... Can you protect me?"

Unable to hide her anxious expression, Kei asked with fear.

"You're not the only one to lack confidence. Most of the students in the class are likely to be bearing similar anxieties, to a greater or lesser extent. Of course, Horikita, who is serving as the leader, fully understands this."

"It would be better if you're the leader... then I would definitely be protected..."

Although I deliberately avoided responding to that blind faith, at this point, it was a priority to dispel her anxieties.

"Horikita will protect her classmates. But even so, the chances of losing can't be reduced to zero. However, the deciding factor, in that case, is about who to let go. When there are several eliminations beside yourself, it won't be easy to specifically select you, who can lead the girls. Horikita also understands that you're my girlfriend. Even without my protection, you won't be an easy target for Horikita."

This wasn't a viewpoint I intentionally guided, but rather how Horikita would naturally interpret things.

If she wanted my cooperation in the future, Kei surely would not be the easy option to cut off.

However, if there are other eliminations besides Kei, her priority will have to be higher than the others with these conditions taken into account.

If it came down to a selection between Kei and Yōsuke, no matter how much she holds the title of my girlfriend, changing Horikita's judgment would be impossible unless I forcibly intervened.

"Th-that's right. I'm Kiyotaka's girlfriend. Horikita-san won't choose me easily."

“Ah, plus, the guarantee of protection can cover only around five out of close to forty classmates each time. Taking that into account, it’s not unusual for someone to be eliminated. If this proceeds for 20 turns, each class should be chock-full of quite a number of eliminations. If we assume that 10 people drop out, it is unlikely for you, the leader of the girls, to be chosen. Isn’t that right?”

“...Exactly.”

It wasn’t an exception for Class A, full of honor students, to have many eliminations.

Not having a single elimination and managing the class would, rather, strangle the class.

To put it extremely, it would be okay even if half of the class is eliminated, as long as we can avoid being the bottom class.

In order to give her a little more peace of mind, this follow-up wouldn’t go to waste.

Even just making her understand that her worth was by no means low reduced the burden on her.

The fact that she was my girlfriend provided a sense of security.

However, depending on the perspective, it could also be interpreted as a risk factor.

If there was someone who wanted to damage me, there was a good chance they would directly target Kei.

In any case, this special exam had aspects that made each student reconfirm their value.

Who was necessary and who was unnecessary for the class—it forced you to look at it both from the inside and the outside.

4

On my way back from Keyaki Mall, I found Morishita lying down on a bench.

“What the...”

Kei, who was sitting next to me, looked at Morishita with a puzzled (and slightly taken back) expression.

She was unable to understand how she ended up lying down on a bench with her eyes closed even though it wasn't particularly sunny.

Even though the snow had thawed, it was still mid-January—the middle of winter.

“Is she dead?”

Thinking about it, is it even slightly possible that this could be the end for Morishita...?

“No, she's not.”

Kei, who was beside me, interjected and denied it.

“That's correct. I'm not dead.”

Morishita, who sat up with a pouty face, looked at us with a somewhat sleepy face.

It seemed like she was about to fall asleep.

It was impressive that someone could get drowsy under this freezing sky.

“What are you doing in such a place?”

“Are you curious?”

“It would be a lie if I said I wasn't interested but—”

“Then, I'll explain. I was, believe it or not, waiting for you, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.”

As Kei tried to inquire further just on a curious level, she cut her off and explained.

Although she spoke politely, the way she referred to me without honorifics slightly bothered me.

“Eh, do you know each other?”

Of course, Kei would be surprised as well.

“I wouldn't say we're acquaintances. We've only talked once.”



“Hmm? You sure know many girls from other classes, don’t you, Kiyotakakun?”

Kei looked up at me like a teacher, as if cross-examining a student, her arms folded and her gaze prying.

“I didn’t talk to her first.”

“It doesn’t matter who talks first. The fact that the conversation took place is the problem.”

She had a rather unreasonable opinion.

Of course, I knew she wasn’t serious even when she said it sincerely.

“You said you were waiting for me, but if I hadn’t spoken to you, what were you planning to do?”

I’d thought it’d be fine to ignore Morishita’s presence here and had only spoken to her by chance.

“No need to worry. I was slightly opening my eyes, so I would have noticed if you passed by.”

I couldn’t understand why she was lying down if she wasn’t sleeping.

I felt like I’d lose if I thought too deeply about Morishita’s behavior.

“Why were you waiting for me?”

“What do you think?”

I didn’t expect you to ask me back...

“I can’t possibly guess.”

“As it turns out, I’ve had a stroke of luck. It’s about that girl over there, specifically.”

“Eh, me?”

Kei pointed at herself in surprise, not thinking she was involved.

“Yes. I was curious about what kind of person you are.”

“Curious? What do you mean?”

“I noticed something strange as I was investigating.”

As Morishita slowly stood up, she directed her sleepy eyes towards Kei, gradually moving closer.

“What? What’s this?”

Morishita had a unique aura, different from Hiyori.

It wasn’t calmness or harmony, but rather simply bizarre.

Kei also seemed to have fully sensed Morishita’s eccentricity quickly, so she was somewhat taken aback.

“Karuzawa Kei. You were initially dating Hirata Yōsuke, right?”

Ah, indeed, both Kei and Yōsuke used each other’s first names.

“So what?”

“Why did you date Hirata Yōsuke? No, why would Hirata Yōsuke date a woman like you in the first place?”

Like a detective cornering a criminal, Morishita started to walk around Kei.
“Wait, wait, aren’t you saying something rude?”

“I researched Hirata Yōsuke in my own way too. He’s supposedly the most popular guy in school. He belongs to the soccer club, which factors into his popularity, he has excellent academic performance, he’s blessed in looks, he respects gender equality, and he’s kind, considerate, and intelligent.”

There were a few things that caught my attention in the way it was phrased, but as an evaluation of Yōsuke, it was valid and accurate.

In short, on the surface, it was fair to call him an exceptional student. He had a tendency to get hurt easily and drive himself into a corner, but that wasn’t something to be mentioned, so it was omitted.

“Do you think he would pick a casual woman like you?”

“...What do you mean by casual?”

“I don’t know. It’s the first time I’ve heard the term.”

I lied.

‘Casual’ means irresponsible and nonchalant. It carried the feeling of being nonspecific.

If I told Kei here, it would lead to the start of a dispute.

Morishita softly stroked Kei’s puzzled cheek with her index finger.

“Don’t touch me without permission.”

“It seems you’re holding back now, but initially, despite being a first-year in high school, you were rumored to be wearing heavy makeup.”

“That’s... That’s just my choice.”

“You’re a casual woman, you have nothing unique, and you wear heavy makeup. I can’t figure out why Hirata Yōsuke chose you.”

“Well, um, maybe because I was cute?”

Without mentioning anything like asking Yōsuke for help as camouflage to hide her past of being bullied, she provided a convenient self-assessment.

“If you replace heavy makeup with a mask, it would be easier to understand; you’re a timid and sensitive soul. But if so, being strong-willed and assertive, a leader among girls, seems contradictory.”

There was no doubt she was a weirdo. But Morishita seemed to be a student with enough intelligence to gather information and recognize doubts.

“What’s up with you...”

Exposed to such a transparent reasoning, Kei was disturbed.

If we continued to talk together, it probably wouldn’t go in a good direction.

“I don’t think love makes sense. I began dating Kei because of our feelings. Is there a problem with that?”

As I moved in protectively towards Kei, she seemed pleasantly surprised by my words and narrowed her eyes in joy.

“I see, that’s true. I’ve never been in love, so I can’t deny that reason doesn’t apply.”

If love was something that could be calculated, I wouldn’t have spent so much time on it.

“I apologize for my earlier rude remarks, Karuizawa Kei.”

Moving right in front of Kei, Morishita bowed deeply... too deeply, and remained that way.

“You don’t have to apologize that much, I understand.”

“Is that so? Then, since the apology is over, there’s no problem, right?”

“Eh? Well... that’s fine, but it doesn’t sit well with me?”

I could understand that feeling all too well, but there was nothing that could be done.

“I don’t want to intrude any further, so I think I should take my leave.”

“You finally understand... You’re a better girl than I thought?”

At this point, the safest move was to let Morishita go, but the opportunities to make contact with her weren’t that numerous.

I decided to raise a question that had been bothering me.

“For a student in Sakayanagi’s class, you’re quite unique, aren’t you? Don’t you get told that by others?”

Kei, who was standing next to me, wore an expression as if she was going to hold me back, but I waited for an answer without concern.

“Certainly, I often hear that—that I’m unique.”

That made sense. She definitely seemed unique.

“But it’s funny. I’ve always been aware that I’m a unique person, and I’ve always thought of myself as special. Even so, I don’t really like being reminded constantly, ‘You’re so unique.’”

“My apologies for that. But the fact is, I hadn’t recognized that a student like you was in Sakayanagi’s class these past two years.”

“I see. You were surprised that a person you thought had no distinct personality turned out to be unique.”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t make any moves unless I’m interested. In the flow of Sakayanagi Arisu and Katsuragi Kōhei leading the class as leaders, they have always protected the entirety of Class A, so there was no need for me to do anything. There was no need to show off my individuality. If I live quietly, I can graduate as is. I suppose it can’t be helped if I appeared to lack a distinct personality.”

Without concealing her situation, she spoke clearly about why she was perceived that way.

Morishita’s explanation was reasonable.

Now, I was attracting attention to the point of being watched by students like Morishita.

Although I was supposed to be just another inconspicuous student, I stood out as much, if not more than, Horikita. Additionally, I was being warily watched.

Of course, this was solely because I had chosen to take action.

If I had been in Class A like Morishita when I enrolled, and if Sakayanagi and I hadn't known each other, the situation would be completely different.

Even without doing anything, simply following instructions would secure Class A's position.

Nothing could've been easier.

I would've spent my days as an ordinary student with no distinctive character, living quietly.

A path to graduation without suspicion or caution from anyone.

Morishita was merely drifting halfway along this quiet route.

"I'm glad I was able to meet the two of you today. Thank you for dealing with someone like me."

"Uh, you're welcome."

For some reason, Kei also began to speak politely to match Morishita.

"Most of the students who enroll in this school aspire to graduate from Class A. I am one of them, of course. Therefore, I felt a sense of crisis and thought I should speak with various students. After all, you have attracted quite a bit of attention lately."

Kei ruminated once again on her reason for reaching out in this setting.

"I may need to interact with both of you in the future. I would appreciate your kindness in that regard, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, Karuizawa Kei."

Morishita began to walk away after bowing her head deeply but stopped shortly afterward.

She then turned around.

"The two of you were about to head home, weren't you?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"I intended to return to the dorm as well. Would you like to join me for a chat along the way?"

"Huh, wait... We just finished talking, and you want to talk more? Can't you read the room...?"

"This is a great opportunity. Don't hesitate to ask me anything."

"We're not interested at all...!"

"Don't be like that. Shall we even exchange contact information? Ayanokōji Kiyotaka included, of course."

"No, no, no, we're not exchanging anything! Right?"

"I don't mind exchanging contact information."

“Wait a minute!”

“It’s better to have more friends.”

“That’s a wonderful thought. I completely agree.”

“Ugh~ Kiyotaka, that side of you is kind of cute, I can’t get mad at you!”

And so, we (reluctantly on Kei’s part) decided to exchange contact information.

A chat app could be quite handy, and it didn’t hurt to have each other’s information.

One thing that caught my eye was that Morishita only had a few people registered on her chat app.

She really seemed to have been living a quiet life until now, not making any friends.

She was a bit strange in that respect.

Chapter 3: The Sender's Identity

IT WAS FRIDAY after school, one day after the special exam was announced.

Following our previous class discussion during lunch yesterday, there hadn't been any meetings with the class as a whole, so no action pertaining to the exam was taken.

Bearing the responsibility for leading the class, I hoped that Horikita had made progress in her strategies and ideas overnight. I didn't know the details, but she hadn't attempted to get in touch.

There was still a week left, so there was no need to rush. I'd like her to think it through.

"Ayanokōji-kun... umm, do you have a moment?"

Mii-chan called out to me as I was getting ready to leave the classroom alone.

Kei had already made plans to hang out with friends until late this weekend, so she was already gone.

Therefore, I was completely free at the moment and could afford to spare the time.

"What's wrong?"

"I'd like to talk somewhere else if possible... not in this classroom."

Although no students around us seemed to be bothered, Mii-chan didn't seem comfortable here.

From her demeanor, it seemed like it was about something serious.

"I see. How about on our way back to the dorms?"

"Of course!"

With no other reason to stay in the classroom, I grabbed my bag and we headed out.

There was no need to find somewhere empty.

The corridor and entrance were bustling with students after school, filled with noise.

"So, what's up?"

Upon my prodding, Mii-chan glanced around as if to ensure it was safe, then started speaking.

"Do you remember when I was absent from school for a while? It's... embarrassing to say, but it was about Hirata-kun... Well..."

That was from late September, after Kushida revealed in the unanimous voting exam that Mii-chan had a crush on Hirata.

"Did something happen in relation to that?"

“I heard that someone was delivering food while I couldn’t go out... “

“I remember. Someone was generously sending you meals, right?”

I recalled when I was asked if I was the one delivering food to Mii-chan.

“I’ve mentioned it to you before, Ayanokōji-kun, and I wanted to ask for your help...”

“I see...”

A considerable amount of time had passed, but if she was bringing it up now, it meant—

“Did you find out who it was?”

“Uh, I haven’t yet, but I think we can find out if we try...”

“We can find out if we try?”

Repeating her words, Mii-chan nodded and started to speak slowly.

Even after mustering the courage to return to school, it seemed that Mii-chan was still concerned about the person who supported her. I thought she had given up on that, but she seemed persistent and wished to express her gratitude.

There were two clues. The first was a note in a bag of groceries, containing only the room number; this hinted that it was a gift for Mii-chan.

If the handwriting was distinctive, it could be a crucial clue. Unfortunately, this was a curveball.

Mii-chan had brought the paper here for me to see, however, it was intentionally written in a way that made it impossible to identify the writer.

“The person who gave you these gifts is quite cunning.”

“Indeed.”

There was only one remaining method to pursue the piece of evidence.

It was true that all the food was purchased from the convenience store.

Mii-chan had noted every single item she had received.

This meant we could describe these items to the store clerk and find out if any students had purchased the same things.

Asking the convenience store staff was a classic move when trying to find the gift-giver. But as time went by, their memory would inevitably fade, which meant we should move quickly.

I had assumed that Mii-chan wouldn’t know about this, but I was surprised upon hearing her answer.

“I tried talking to the store clerk at the convenience store about it as soon as I returned to school.”

The response I got back wasn’t good.

The clerk Mii-chan asked had just been assigned to the convenience store and wasn’t working at the time the gifter made their purchases. The manager who would have been working during that time had been transferred to another store.

A detective would probably look at the surveillance footage, but of course, I couldn't do that.

"I tried asking the girls on my floor as well, but they had no idea. That's when I decided to give up for a while."

When there weren't any clues, there was nothing an ordinary student could do.

"I guess you would've had no choice then."

"Yeah..."

So time passed with the details still unknown.

However, some unexpected information came to Mii-chan, who was facing a dead end.

When she visited a convenience store to shop the other day, a clerk called out to her.

The transferred shift leader and the current clerk working at the school happened to meet, and the clerk remembered what Mii-chan had been concerned about and explained it to him. He hadn't expected it, but because the event happened just before the transfer, he remembered a student who might be relevant.

Consequently, the clerk apparently tried to tell Mii-chan the name of the student that the manager had told them.

However—

"I got caught off guard, or rather, I was shaken by the unexpected news, and I said I'd come back later to hear the details, and ran away."

"You ran away?"

"I... ran away..."

Only Mii-chan would know why she ran away in that situation.

"By the way, when did you hear of this?"

"Um... that..."

Her obvious difficulty in answering indicated that it wasn't very recent.

"...Today is the sixth day."

"You've been running away for quite a while."

"I've... been running..."

She turned red with embarrassment, or rather, shame at her pathetic self.

"I think I should go soon, but... I get nervous... If I don't know who it is, I can just ignore it, but once I know, I can no longer feign ignorance. Most importantly, the person who gave the gifts hasn't come forward, so there's a chance they don't want it to be known, right?"

She must have always wanted to thank the gifter, even if she didn't know who they were.

But since she didn't know their identity, she was convinced that there was nothing she could do about it.

The more time passed, the more she must have thought that way.

“Well, that’s true.”

They supported Mii-chan from the shadows without revealing their identity.

It wouldn’t be surprising if they had reasons to remain unknown.

“What reasons could there be?”

“There could be many reasons.”

It would be impossible to narrow down the reasons with the current information at hand.

“Though, I’m sure they’re a classmate... I don’t have that many friends, but I don’t think they’d hide it from me. I can’t figure out why...”

Mii-chan seemed to be pondering who among her friends it could be.

Of course, one could hardly expect a stranger to send a gift.

“That’s just one of the possibilities— No, never mind.”

“What is it? Please tell me.”

I hesitated, considering that it might be too much for her, but Mii-chan was eager to know.

“Please tell me.”

She asked again, so I decided to continue.

“Sorry to challenge your assumptions, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be a classmate. While it wasn’t known why you were absent, it wasn’t difficult to find out about your absence.”

“But I hardly have any contact with people from other classes...”

“That doesn’t matter much. A close relationship isn’t a prerequisite. And it doesn’t have to be a girl.”

“Eh, what?”

She looked flabbergasted; she had even less interaction with boys.

“To be blatant, there might be, for example, a boy who secretly likes you, right? It could be a situation where he was worried when his crush was absent and sent a gift.”

“Eeh!? What!?”

She nearly fell over in surprise. She tried to remain discreet, but she was drawing attention.

Realizing this, she quickly slowed her breathing but was noticeably flustered.

“It’s just one possibility, no need to get flustered.”

It might not necessarily be the case. I was just illustrating a possible, yet unexpected reason.

“W-w-w-w-w-well yes, you’re right!?”

But she was far from calm.

I guess it was an unnecessary assumption to make.

“Let’s get back on track. It would be better to hear your decision, don’t you think?”

Even though I mostly had a grasp of her reasoning, I thought it would be better to hear it from Mii-chan herself.

“I’m not sure what to do at this point. Should I find out who it is? Should I thank them?”

“It would be best to make a decision now.”

Mii-chan nodded slightly, without much confidence.

“What would you do in this situation, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What would I do, huh...?”

Though I pondered a bit, I might as well answer honestly.

“I’m not sure if it’ll help, but if it were me, I’d want to know who they are. And then, I would decide whether to approach them or not.”

“So you’re saying there’s a possibility you might not thank them even if you knew who they were?”

“That’s if it were me. As in the previous example, if the person had no connection to me, I’d hesitate. And there are cases when it’s better not to let them know you’ve been looking into it, right?”

“I guess that makes sense.”

They had secretly helped the one they loved.

If she came to say thank you after learning their identity at the store, it would be shocking.

This was the case even without involving romance.

“When the other party wants to maintain their secrecy, it’s even more troublesome.”

“...Yes.”

“Furthermore, whether you can keep quiet even after knowing the person’s identity is another matter. From what I’ve seen, I don’t think this approach is right for you, Mii-chan.”

“That... Yes...”

If she knew the answer, she’d probably fail to hide her emotions.

“It’s not a bad thing to give up.”

“Even so...”

However, Mii-chan feels guilty for not being able to thank the person who had helped her.

She was once again reminded of the feelings she had been trying to suppress.

Even if she chose not to learn their identity, her feelings would take a long time to fade.

“Once you open the Pandora Box, you can’t close it anymore.”

Considering Mii-chan's emotional instability, it was no surprise that she decided to run away.

Furthermore, deciding not to learn of their identity has its own positive aspect.

Knowing the identity of Daddy-Long-Legs will change the perception of the person, regardless of who they are.

(TL NOTE: this expression typically means mysterious benefactor or guardian)

"I..."

The troubled Mii-chan took her time to come up with an answer.

"I... I want to know..."

"Even though it might lead to regret?"

"...Yes."

Having decided, there was no room for me to say otherwise.

"Then you should go to the convenience store."

Despite my response, Mii-chan still seemed hesitant, looking my way.

"..."

"..."

The air was filled with a strange tension, but it was clear what Mii-chan was trying to convey.

"Shall we go to the convenience store together?"

"C-Can we?"

Despite having prepared to learn the truth, she seemed unable to go alone.

"I can accompany you. If it gives you a bit of courage, I believe it's worth it."

"Th...Thank you, Ayanokōji-kun!"

With the strongest nod of the day, Mii-chan and I walked to the convenience store.

1

Mii-chan and I reached the convenience store almost immediately. I was about to enter the store first, but Mii-chan pulled on my sleeve. “Could you wait a bit...? It seems there are other students around as well.” “You want to wait until no one is around?” “It’s unlikely, but the person who helped me might be here.” “I see.”

Those were delicate words, typical of Mii-chan. It would only be right to consider them.

Even though a lot of students visited the convenience store on weekends, they usually stayed for a short period of time.

After waiting for a while, the store was empty in a flash.

“Shall we go in?”

“Y-Yes!”

If we idle around, the next customer will arrive.

We quickly walked into the store.

“Welcome—Ah.”

The employee was a woman in her 20’s, someone I had seen often lately. Seeing Mii-chan, she stopped mid-sentence but continued with a smile.

“Welcome.”

“Hello. Um, I’m sorry for running away the other day!”

As she quickly bowed, the lady staff smiled kindly.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, I’m not bothered at all. It must have been scary, right?”

It seemed like she understood her inner turmoil, and Mii-chan nodded several times.

“Did your boyfriend encourage you to come here?”

“Eh?”

Mii-chan, looking up, was puzzled.

“What a cool boyfriend, I’m jealous.”

“Eh, eh, eh? M-my boyfriend?”

“That’s Ayanokōji-kun... right?”

“Why do you know my name?”

“Well, we use student cards for store transactions, so I ended up remembering the names of some students.”

Indeed, we used a student card, containing a name and photo, for checkout.

Since I shopped here several times, it wouldn’t be surprising that they remembered me.

“Also—you were shopping arm in arm with a different student, weren’t you? The other day... Ah!?”

“Your reaction seems to indicate that you’ve noticed something, but your assumption is wrong. She’s my friend.”

When I pointed at Mii-chan and answered, Mii-chan also nodded affirmatively.

“Oh, so that’s it. But there might be a chan—”

“There isn’t!!”

For the first time, Mii-chan strongly denied it.

I didn’t have any romantic feelings for her, but why did I feel a bit dejected?

Mii-chan, who likes Yōsuke, definitely wouldn’t want her to misunderstand.

“So, um, the person I was looking for...”

“Ah, yeah. Should I tell you? Is that okay?”

The store clerk confirmed kindly out of consideration for Mii-chan’s feelings.

“Yes. I came for that reason.”

“I see. I’ll tell you then.”

After taking a breath, the clerk revealed the person Mii-chan had been searching for.

“The previous shift leader didn’t remember his name, but he was very distinctive, so when I heard about him, it rang a bell. Someone from your class, Kōenji... um, Rokusuke-kun, I guess. He seemed to be the one that bought the items that matched what you brought in.”

“Huh...?”

The name of the person who gave the gift—a fact she longed to discover.

It was Kōenji, of all people?

Why Kōenji?

Mii-chan next to me was undoubtedly surprised, or rather, flabbergasted.

An unexpected name. Too unexpected.

...Or maybe it wasn’t as surprising as I first thought?

Kōenji and Mii-chan had little contact together.

But there were times when I saw Kōenji taking a relatively warm attitude towards Mii-chan.

That on its own wouldn’t seem significant, however, the person in question was Kōenji.

“He... Was it really Kōenji-kun?”

The clerk nodded without a doubt to her drained question.

“The shift leader remembered him as a long-haired, blond boy. He was always acting high and mighty, even losing himself in the reflection of the

convenience store glass, or setting his hair with a hand mirror. And... The list goes on and on, but this is Kōenji-kun, right? I've seen him act that way too."

That was definitely Kōenji.

No one else like him exists at our school, not at this moment.

And probably never will.

"There seems to be no mistake."

"Yeah, even the contents of the gift are like Kōenji. It makes sense now."

"Yes..."

She couldn't fully take in the situation, but she had no choice but to accept it.

She thanked the clerk and left the convenience store.

Mii-chan was still in a daze after leaving. She seemed stuck in her thoughts.

"Kōenji-kun...? Why?"

"I have no idea. In a way, it was the person whose motives would be the least clear."

"What should I do...?"

Is she wondering about how to thank him, or is she at a loss because it's Kōenji?

"But maybe with Kōenji, you can ignore him and not thank him?"

"Eh, what!? No, I can't!"

"But why?"

"Well... He's our classmate, and he also spent a considerable amount of money on the gifts."

Kōenji might've held a huge amount of Private Points, but money was still money.

Mii-chan, being so dutiful, couldn't ignore that.

"I'm thinking of buying a thank-you gift. Should it be roughly equivalent to what was spent on the gifts?"

"That's too much. I think half would do."

It was a gift of goodwill after all, as long as the sentiment of gratitude was conveyed, that should be enough.

"O-Okay, got it. I'll do that."

"Then all that's left is to do your best in thanking him properly."

I was about to say goodbye and start walking alone when—

"Would you come with me?"

"Pardon?"

"To... Kōenji-kun's place."

"Asking why would be a bit too much. But it would be strange for me to be there, wouldn't it?"

While I wanted to support the timid Mii-chan, it did feel a bit out of place.

Moreover, I didn't know why Kōenji decided to help in the first place.

“What if your assumption is correct? No matter how much you say that you're dating Kei, he might have thoughts if he sees a guy accompanying the girl he likes.”

“But the person in question is Kōenji-kun, right?”

“Even Kōenji is a normal high school boy... No, he's not exactly normal, is he...”

If my presence would disturb him, that would be something I'd like to see.

“Well then, let's go together for now. Depending on the situation, I might leave after seeing Kōenji. I hope you understand.”

The possibility of him being uncomfortable because of my presence was very real.

“I understand. Thank you.”

Seemingly unable to ask for more, Mii-chan readily agreed.

“When should we go?”

After I asked her, Mii-chan pulled out her mobile phone and opened the calendar.

Perhaps she was feeling uneasy, occasionally lightly touching the hair tie in her left hand.

“It's sudden, but would it be alright if we go early tomorrow? If we wait too long, I might have trouble sleeping...”

It would be cruel to let her stay up all night with her mind filled with thoughts of Kōenji.

I have a date with Kei tomorrow morning, but it should work out if we adjust our schedule.

“Thank you for today. We'll be meeting again tomorrow, but for now, please have my most heartfelt thanks.”

With that, she bowed her head deeply.

She wanted to express her gratitude again once everything was resolved, but I had already refused.

2

The following day arrived. It was just before 11:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning.

I was waiting on the dorm lobby couch for my meeting with Mii-chan.

Kei, who had stealthily stayed over in my room Friday night and spent the early hours of the morning with me, was fast asleep. I was planning to delay our originally scheduled date for the afternoon.

Seeing Mii-chan come down the elevator from the installed monitor, I stood up from the deeply seated sofa.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun.”

She held a thank-you gift, presumably purchased the day before, in a paper bag.

“So? Where are you meeting up with Kōenji?”

“Eh?”

“Eh? You’re going to see Kōenji after this, right?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re meeting up with Kōenji, right?”

“...I’m not, actually...”

With Mii-chan’s reply, the atmosphere around us froze. There was silence, and time passed. But I couldn’t remain silent forever, so I resumed the flow of time.

“So, Kōenji knows nothing about today.”

Mii-chan, who nodded in agreement, somehow looked like she was about to cry.

“Ah, that should’ve been the obvious course of action, isn’t it? I wasn’t thinking at all because of the nerves and tension and all that. I don’t even have Kōenji-kun’s contact information. I thought you had arranged it. I interpreted it arbitrarily... I’m really sorry!”

As she spoke, Mii-chan could no longer hold back her tears.

Luckily, there was no one in the lobby, but it would be troublesome if someone saw her.

“First of all, you should calm down. I’m not really close with Kōenji, but I do know where to find him.”

“Really?”

Although there was no certainty, I knew there was a pretty good chance I could find him.

“I think if it’s this time, Kōenji might be at the gym.”

“...The gym? The one on the second floor of Keyaki Mall?”

“Yeah. I started going there recently myself. Kōenji often comes in on Saturday and Sunday mornings.”

I had seen him walking out after finishing his workout at noon several times.

Seeing the bright outlook, Mii-chan recollected herself, and we set off for Keyaki Mall.

On the way, I glanced at Mii-chan, whose eyes were still slightly red, and thought, *she's good at studying and has a quiet personality, but she's very weak and fragile when confronted with unexpected situations.*

She wasn't exactly a rare type, not necessarily common, but certainly a high school girl who could be found anywhere.

That was why her connection to Kōenji was intriguing.

Although liking or disliking her is another matter, objectively, Mii-chan's appearance is much better than average.

Perhaps she happened to hit Kōenji's taste and was being secretly favored.

However, Kōenji didn't give the impression that he'd keep quiet about his preferred woman.

If anything, if there was someone he was interested in within the class, he seemed more likely to actively appeal to them.

It was a contradiction for a man with absolute confidence in himself to not approach the woman he was interested in. If this was true, it only proved that Kōenji didn't have that absolute confidence in himself.

—Or perhaps not.

Different strokes for different folks. Kōenji might claim that he preferred keeping his distance from the women he likes, and that was his way of showing affection. I thought about it in various ways, but still, I could only come to one conclusion.

Trying to read Kōenji's thoughts was just a waste of time.

In the end, the only way to understand his true intentions was to meet him in person and hear it from him.

I entered Keyaki Mall, which was already open for business, and headed straight to the second floor without any detours.

Then I had Mii-chan wait in front of the gym while I checked out the state of things inside.

“As expected, he's here.”

As I anticipated, Kōenji was in the midst of training.

It looked like he was tackling the bench press, which he would most likely finish soon.

After all, Kōenji always ended his workouts with the bench press before leaving the gym.

Despite his exhaustion, he was managing a weight of 200 kilograms with a smile and a good amount of sweat.

I had to wonder if there was anyone else in their second year of high school capable of doing that with such ease.

At any rate, he was close to finishing. It was certain that he'd hit the showers next and leave soon after.

To avoid any awkward sightings, I quickly left the training room.

Upon exiting, I was approached by the gym staff member Akiyama-san, with whom I exchanged brief greetings and then left.

I had also promised to meet Mashima-sensei, but I could surely skip it for today.

“How was it?”

“I think he'll be out in about 20 or 30 minutes. If you don't mind, we could wait here.”

“Y-yes.”

After that, we sat on a bench near the entrance of the gym and waited.

“...”

“...”

Without much conversation between us, we just listened to the music playing inside Keyaki Mall.

“I'm starting to get a bit nervous.”

As the time drew closer, she seemed to be sensing the anticipation.

“I have no idea how Kōenji will react after this.”

“Neither do I...”

“By the way, what did you get him as a gift?”

“Umm, I wasn't sure what to get him, so I decided on a face towel and a hand towel.”

“Wow... That's quite an off-the-wall gift.”

“You might think so, but I thought it was something he would like. I regularly see Kōenji-kun using both.”

“Is that so? I knew about the hand mirror, but I wasn't aware of this.”

“Yes. I thought if it's a luxurious, organic cotton towel he might accept it, so... Oh...”

“That's quite a budget.”

It seemed that Mii-chan hadn't been able to stick to my advice of giving a small gift.

“Uh... y-yes. I'm sorry...”

“How much was it?”

“Well... about ¥12,000.”

So, it was about the same price as the total amount given or a little over that. It was a situation that could have been anticipated given Mii-chan's personality.

"It's fine. I hope Kōenji likes it."

"Yes. I have to properly return the favor for his help."

Even though she was feeling tense and flustered, Mii-chan responded firmly. In the end, it might have been the right decision to choose a gift that was worth going over the budget.

When we'd waited nearly 40 minutes, longer than expected, Kōenji appeared from the gym.

"H-he came out."

From our view, Kōenji seemed to immediately notice us, but he made no change in his expression and crossed by us without saying a word. We seemed outside of his interest. Seeing his behavior, it was hard to believe that he harbored any affection towards Mii-chan or had been secretly supporting her.

However, from the testimony of the convenience store clerk, we were 99% certain it was Kōenji.

Therefore, the only option was to confirm the truth with him.

Mii-chan quickly got up from the bench and started chasing after Kōenji.

"Um, Kōenji-kun! Can I have a minute of your time!?"

Mii-chan called out from behind him, causing Kōenji to stop in his tracks and elegantly turn to look back.

"Do you need something from me, Wang girl?"

"Eh, wang-what?"

Kōenji must have made a reference to Mii-chan's real name, Wang 王(ワン)Mei-Yui, calling her Wang girl, a nickname likely only Kōenji would use, leading to Mii-chan's confusion.

Mii-chan seemed unable to grasp the nickname, but she swallowed her confusion and steeled her resolve.

She tightly clenched the handles of the paper bag she held in front of her.

"I wanted to discuss something with you. Can I take a little bit of your time, please?"

Mii-chan addressed Kōenji with a polite, albeit soft, voice filled with determination.

Kōenji appeared to consider her request for a moment, then raised his arm briskly and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but I'm a bit in a rush right now. Let's talk another time. Hahaha."

With that, he laughed towards us, turned his back, and started walking away again.

"Oh, oh no..."

Mii-chan, who seemed to be the type to carefully consider things, was clearly flustered at being rejected by Kōenji in a way she hadn't anticipated. I found myself somewhat surprised too.

“What should we do now...?”

“Try again?”

“Oh... I needed a lot of courage to approach him this time... I might not get it back if I need to try again.”

Surely it would be a high hurdle for Mii-chan to approach Kōenji in the same situation again. In that case, we had no choice but to push through it today.

“Then we should just follow Kōenji.”

“But wouldn't that be a terrible bother?”

“Normally, yes. But if you can't try again, then no matter how much of a bother, we have to go ahead, right?”

If the nuisance is just someone walking around, fully clothed, I feel like he'd be unconcerned with it.

“What should we do? If we lose sight of him, we'll have no choice but to give up.”

“What should we do...”

She couldn't make up her mind, hesitating between moving forward and stepping back.

It was clear from her demeanor that following Kōenji was her primary intention.

So should I continue to take the lead as I had been?

“I'll take responsibility if we're caught following him. Let's go.”

“Ye-yes! Stealth tailing it is, then!”

And that was how we decided to tail Kōenji. Observing from a distance.

I didn't see the need for secrecy, but Mii-chan was eager, so I decided not to voice any unnecessary objections. I went downstairs as Kōenji went down the escalator, slowly checking the direction he was heading in and positioning Mii-chan behind me. Meanwhile, with his long stride, Kōenji continued deeper into the mall.

“Shouldn't we be in a hurry? We might lose him.”

“It's fine if we do.”

Everyone went to the mall on a daily basis. Most students had a mental map of the place.

Of course, there were several shops in Kōenji's path, but none had significant depth to their floors. A quick glance would reveal all the customers. At the very end was an open café area. Unless he used one of the several exit points prepared along the way, we had no worries of losing sight of him.

In terms of those exits, it would be faster to go back the way he came if he was heading home.

The probability of him needing to use a specific exit wasn't very high.

At the bottom of the stairs, I caught sight of Kōenji's retreating figure, now smaller in the distance.

"It seems like he's heading to the café. That makes it easier for us."

"Indeed."

After confirming from a distance that Kōenji had finished ordering and was holding a cup, I moved closer and noticed Kōenji and a female student sitting at a two-person table.

"Who's that?"

"That's Enoshima Midoriko from class 3-B."

"Do you know her?"

"I've only seen her in the OAA app. Let's get closer."

"But wouldn't Kōenji-kun see us if we get closer?"

"Well, we've been tailing him so far, but I wonder if it's really necessary."

It should be just right for us to wait nearby until Kōenji's meeting is over.

Obviously, it would be worse to say that we were hiding and waiting for her to leave him alone.

Anyway, I wasn't interested in what they were talking about.

"At this point, I'd like to know what kind of conversations Kōenji-kun usually has."

However, Mii-chan seemed to have flipped a switch, appearing reluctant to be discovered.

"You mean eavesdrop?"

"I know it's wrong, but... He may not be honest about why he gave me the gift, and there might be clues in their conversation!"

No, I highly doubt there'd be any clues in his conversation with Enoshima, who seems completely unrelated...

"Let's keep tailing him!"

"If that will make you satisfied Mii-chan, then I have no objections. Let's move from this side."

While Kōenji was chatting with Enoshima, he probably wasn't paying attention to his surroundings. But if we entered his line of sight, we couldn't be sure that he wouldn't notice us. Mii-chan and I made a strategic exit from the mall through a side door and aimed to re-enter from the opposite side.

Although it took several minutes to circle around, Kōenji had just bought a drink, implying that he'd stay for a while.

However—

By the time we entered the mall and arrived at the café, Kōenji was nowhere to be found.

Only Enoshima was there, scrolling through her phone.

“Might he be in the bathroom?”

“...No. Kōenji’s drink is missing. That can’t be. He must have finished his business with Enoshima and left in that short span of time.”

“So... Does that mean we can’t meet him today?”

“That’s what I thought, but there doesn’t seem to be a need to rush.”

We spotted Kōenji, who unabashedly showed himself returning the way he had come.

“Kōenji-kun!”

“Oh? Wang girl and Ayanokōji boy. You’ve come to chase after me again? It’s tough being popular. Hahaha.”

A grand misunderstanding, but I suppose Kōenji must have finished his errands.

“Do you have a moment?”

Without time to stutter due to the rush, Mii-chan smoothly started the conversation.

His drink isn’t with him. Did he finish it right away?

“Of course. My personal business finished quicker than expected.”

He just had a short meeting with Enoshima-senpai. I couldn’t even guess what they discussed.

“Was it you, Kōenji-kun... who left stuff from the convenience store in front of my door while I was absent from school...?”

The long-sought supporter. She was determining the reason behind his actions. Would Kōenji admit it honestly? Would he be surprised and bewildered? Or deny it—

“It was me who gave you those items, but why does it matter?”

Kōenji confidently affirmed without a hint of hesitation or dishonesty.

A very Kōenji-like demeanor, truly unexpected.

“Er, um, why... did you...?”

“Why? If someone is in trouble, I help them. Aren’t you the same type of person?”

“...Eh?”

Reprising with a reasonable answer, Mii-chan was at a loss for words.

“If that answers your question, I guess you can leave now?”

Mii-chan seemed at a loss for how to respond to his remark.

“Hold on. It might be none of my business, but there’s something that bothers me. It’s natural to help someone in trouble. But to be frank, from what I’ve

observed of you, you don't help everyone. Yet, you helped Mii-chan. This has happened repeatedly, which suggests there's a special reason behind it."

In a probing manner, and with vague expressions, I tried to nudge him.

"You sure choose your words well, Ayanokōji boy. You won't let me get away with implying it was a whim. It's not like I helped Wang girl out on a whim. I detest hypocrisy. But that doesn't mean I disrespect goodwill. When I feel a sincere debt, I consider it natural to repay it. It's just that."

Even though Kōenji seemed to be uttering something cool, Mii-chan was obviously clueless about the situation. She was still frozen.

One thing was for sure, he didn't seem to have any unexpected romantic feelings for her.

"Are we done here?"

When Kōenji said that, time finally started moving again for Mii-chan, who had been frozen in place.

"...I, I don't remember doing anything for you. I don't think you owe me anything. According to what you said, it seems like I've helped you before..."

Apologetically but affirmatively, she questioned after understanding the situation. Kōenji lightly brushed back his hair.

"Hahaha!"

He cheerfully laughed.

"That's why it's not out of hypocrisy but goodwill. Just a trivial matter that you don't even need to remember."

In other words, this was his explanation. Kōenji had once been helped by Mii-chan in some way. And he was helped not from hypocrisy, but from natural goodwill. That was why he had always acted in an unusually considerate manner towards Mii-chan. Even when she was absent from school this time, he was helping her in return for that goodwill—that was what it meant.

"I don't remember it at all... but, well, please accept this for now."

Saying that she thrust out a paper bag with a set of towels she had bought as a thank-you gift.

"I don't need this. I don't think it's a matter of receiving thanks."

"W-well, if you don't like this, I don't mind if you don't accept it. But in that case, would you at least let me pay you back? The money you spent for me isn't cheap."

"Unfortunately, I'm not in need of money at the moment. I don't want it."

I found his statement strange.

Certainly, for an ordinary student, there would be nothing particularly noticeable about it.

It was only natural to think that Kōenji, who made a fortune in the deserted island test, had a lot of money.

However, Kōenji had a strong image of being a spendthrift.

He had previously stated that he was a believer in not keeping money overnight.

Of course, if he said he was saving now, that would be the end of it, but considering he just recently bought a big TV, it was possible he was still squandering money.

It might just be a lie, a convenient excuse not to take the points from Mii-chan.

“B-but that’ll be a problem! That... I can’t get rid of the feeling of guilt... in that case, could you at least tell me what I did for you?”

“Oh, dear. You seem to have quite a difficult personality. Didn’t I say? It’s a trivial matter that you don’t even need to remember. It’s neither more nor less than that. There’s nothing more to say.”

Mii-chan appeared to have run out of ways to initiate a conversation with Kōenji.

With a somewhat downcast look, she bowed her head to Kōenji again.

“Can you let me go now?”

“Y-Yes.”

“I have something I’d like to ask you privately,” I interjected.

“I don’t want to be popular with men, but it seems you too like to pry.”

“It’s important. If you feel gratitude, there’s a possibility you’ll cooperate with the class in the future, right?”

“That’s nonsense, Ayanokōji boy. I’m needed for the class to win, and for that, you have to show goodwill towards me. That becomes hypocrisy, you see?”

He wouldn’t accept any act aimed at getting something in return as genuine goodwill. It could only come naturally.

“As long as we live under the rules of this school, there can be no goodwill. Am I wrong?”

“Maybe.”

“You should already know this. There’s no way you can make me your ally, not by any means.”

“That’s true. So far, no matter how many times I’ve tried, I haven’t come up with a guaranteed way to get your full cooperation.”

“That’s right. I won’t change until I graduate, even after that. No matter how much cleverness you guys squeeze out, it won’t reach or resonate with my heart. Of course, this includes you as well.”

“So what are you going to do with a special exam like this time? What if Horikita decides not to protect you? We can’t exactly say that the chance of her breaking her promise to you is zero. There might be a situation where you can’t avoid expulsion, even if you make a fuss later.”

We could threaten and force him to help.

“I’ve always protected myself. It’s as simple as that.”

In other words, he was confident enough to pull through even without protection.

“Well, that makes things easy. I’ll tell Horikita that there’s no need to protect you.”

Just having one less student to protect in the class gave us an advantage.

Naturally, I didn’t think Horikita would betray his trust.

“Do as you please. Regardless, there’s no point in trying to obligate me when I won’t reciprocate.”

And there was Kōenji, acting like an immovable decoration, no matter how much he wriggled.

If that was how it was, maybe I could take advantage of the situation and exclude Kōenji.

Kōenji had exceptional abilities, but his presence was a double-edged sword.

Depending on the special exam’s details, Horikita might continue being hindered by him.

If I were the class leader, frankly, Kōenji would be superfluous.

The rules on the uninhabited island were only between Horikita and me, and third parties had no involvement.

One option might be to cut him out while I had the chance, but...

”However.”

Kōenji, who had been carefree until now, had suddenly changed his tune and his gaze sharpened.

“If ‘someone’ tries to ostracize me, they’d better be prepared.”

Had he read my thoughts? No, it must be his wild intuition.

“Prepared, huh? I wonder what you’re going to do.”

“That’s part of the surprise.”

It wouldn’t be as simple as attacking a specific person.

One should prepare for actions that could shake the class’s position.

“Will you open that box? Although, it may cause you to reassess your overvaluation of yourself.”

“I, for one, don’t plan on doing that. Horikita is the class leader.”

“So be it. I have dates after this, so I’d better get going.”

I didn’t understand why he chose to use the unusual way of referring to his date, but I don’t think I’ll be talking with Kōenji anytime soon.

(TL NOTE: Kōenji is implying that he has multiple dates to attend to, デート (Dēto, the typical spelling) vs デーツ (Dētsu, the word Kōenji uses, which isn’t

how the word “Date” is spelled/pronounced). This is done as a way of sounding more “Englishy” and showing off.)

I had been observing Kōenji in the same class for a long time. He was really an oddball.

While he was indeed a challenge, it was a fact that we must win while carrying him.

“Ah, um... Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to ask him a few things since he told us something unusual, and I got carried away.”

I gave a light apology to Mii-chan, who I had left alone.

“That’s fine, but... um...”

“What is it?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I had indeed used a somewhat threatening tone with Kōenji. I guess that was what bothered Mii-chan a bit.

Chapter 4: Advice

HAVING FIGURED OUT the identity of Mii-chan's benefactor during my day off, the weekend came to a close.

Even after Monday and Tuesday had passed, Horikita had not come to me for advice.

And on Wednesday afternoon, two days before the special exam, a certain boy proposed an unexpected plan.

"Dude... I think... I might have an incredible winning strategy...!"

Ike stood up and slammed his hands on his desk, his seat clattering.

Everyone was still in class, so he naturally drew a lot of attention. However, nobody was looking at him with expectation, and in fact they were all skeptical.

"Wh-what? You do, Kanji? No way!"

Shinohara, his girlfriend, was the most surprised, and also the most dismissive.

"No, seriously. But wait, let me recalculate a little..."

Saying this, Ike began to count on his fingers. It seemed like he wouldn't be able to finish the calculation on his fingers, so he hurried to pull out his phone. He was struggling but he kept at it.

But the cruel reality was that one by one, our classmates started to leave, probably judging that this sudden idea wouldn't be worth it. However, Ike, oblivious to the dispersing crowd, nodded as if he had finished rechecking.

"No doubt! This is a winning idea!? Can I talk about it?!"

"Ike-kun. I will respond seriously for now, but I don't want to discuss strategy here. Understand?"

"Ah, okay. It'd be serious if my too-perfect strategy got leaked...!"

"Horikita-san, let's go to the usual location."

Yōsuke responded. It seemed like he was frequently meeting with Horikita in secret. That much was evident just from the conversation. Although it might've been obvious, they were definitely preparing for the special exam.

"That sounds good. Those who are interested can come with us, however, keep in mind that it's a hassle if there are too many people. Can you raise your hand if you would like to come along?"

Shinohara immediately raised her hand, along with Hondō and Miyamoto, but that was it. No one else seemed to expect much from Ike's idea. As for me, I was rather interested in what kind of strategy it was, so I casually raised my hand.

"You too? Why the sudden change of mind? Do you have a good reason?"

While the other three who had raised their hands were Ike's close friends and didn't seem to mind, she demanded a reason from me.

"Can't I just be curious? Ike said he's super confident about a winning strategy. I just want to know."

"...I see. That's fine then. I didn't have any other meetings scheduled for today anyway."

Following the conversation, the six of us began to move. We left the school and headed to Keyaki Mall, ending up at the karaoke. It was the perfect place to have a confidential discussion.

Completed with snacks and a bar for drinks, it was an affordable place. No reason not to use it.

"Satsuki, would you like the usual?"

"Yeah. You too, Kanji?"

Ike and Shinohara nestled up together, exploring the menu and discussing in familiar conversations.

"Hey, Horikita."

"What?"

"It's kind of confusing that you can choose not to sing when you come to karaoke, but you must get a drink. After all, this is supposed to be a place for singing."

"Huh? That might be true... But you worry about such strange things."

"You're a fool, Ayanokōji. It's obviously because there's a one-drink policy, right?"

Ike, who had been eavesdropping on our conversation, kindly lectured us. I only mentioned it offhand, but I didn't want to steal away Shinohara's enamored gaze towards Ike, so I let it slide.

I picked up the terminal to check out the music trends.

"...I see."

I didn't get it at all.

There were songs with titles I recognized, but more often than not, I didn't know the songs.

Asian songs from outside of Japan appear to be popular now, with several occupying the rankings. The quality of the songs seemed to be of a very high standard.

"The only thing left is your order, Ayanokōji-kun."

While I was looking at the rankings, it seemed like everyone else's orders had been placed.

"Then, I'll have plum kelp tea."

Horikita finished ordering for everyone and we just needed to wait for the delivery.

It was best to avoid any interruptions while we were discussing. It was fine if the staff heard it, but we wanted to avoid any leaks. A few moments later, the drinks everyone ordered arrived at our table. “So, let’s hear what you...”

I decided to let everyone else do the talking, I picked up my plum kelp tea that just arrived and brought it to my mouth.

“Hot... Sorry, continue please.”

After experiencing everyone’s piercing gaze, I apologized and turned my face away.

The tip of my tongue was burning so hot that it was numbing. I would have to be careful while drinking.

“Ahem, let’s hear Ike-kun’s idea.”

Horikita, as the leader, engaged with Ike’s idea seriously, an idea which most people wouldn’t even consider.

Her expression showed no signs of amusement, and even Ike’s face grew slightly tense.

“Alright, let’s get to the point. Suppose we were to guarantee that we get 68 points for our class. Can we agree that this would be a winning score?”

After a quick wink at Shinohara, Ike proposed something quite interesting.

“68 points? Sure, if we had 68 points, there would indeed be a good chance of victory, but that seems like a very specific score.”

The lack of transparency about the tasks in this exam made it impossible to predict how many points each class would get. Yet, Ike claimed that we could acquire 68 points. This contention instilled a strong sense of unease in Horikita. Sensing her skepticism, Ike quickly finished half of his bottled soda, moistening his throat, and began to speak about his just-conceived solution.

“While it’s risky, we could secure exactly 68 points. We do this by feigning sickness right as the exam starts. Our class has 38 students—if we only leave five for defense, plus the leader, and then have the remaining 32 eliminated...”

“What? If you did that, we’d be down 32 points right from the start! Don’t you even understand the rules?”

Exasperated, Hondō put his hands on the sofa and looked at the ceiling, sighing heavily.

Horikita, however, was keenly listening. It made sense; a 32-person elimination guaranteed 68 points.

There was no way the sum would coincidentally add up to 100.

“That’s fine. Even if we subtract 32 points for the eliminated students, we are guaranteed to get 68 points.”

Hondō and Miyamoto were confused by this statement.

Shinohara, perhaps having already heard the strategy, had a smile on her face.

“But, you know, the opponent can only nominate five students, right? We can protect five students each round, but we only have five students left to nominate, right?”

“Ah—”

Miyamoto understood before Hondō did, and let out a sound.

“So, for all 20 turns, we can get 5 points each. That’s a perfect score, right?”
It was an interesting idea for Ike, one that I never thought he’d come up with.

“Moreover! No one even needs to study for the exam! Not a bad idea, huh?”

“But, even so, would the school really allow 32 people to feign illness? I mean, it’s too suspicious.”

Hondō, puzzled by his surprisingly logical strategy, pointed out its flaw.

“It certainly looks like something underhanded, you know.”

Miyamoto also expressed his skepticism. Indeed, it seemed absurd that 32 students in the class would fall ill on the day of the exam.

“Feigning illness... It’s a bit of a gray area in terms of the rules, but I suspect the school wouldn’t be able to stop us, even if they found it suspicious. No one can prove we’ve faked it.”

Normally, it would be unimaginable for 32 people to fall ill at once.

Therefore, even though the school would likely be 99% sure the illness was fake, they wouldn’t be certain.

They would have to concede.

It was clearly stated that even if students fell ill, they would only be treated as eliminated students.

There were also no limits on how many students could be ill.

“That’s a great idea for you. It’s certainly a strategy that could maintain a high average score.”

“See? See? What do you think of this approach!?”

With Horikita’s unexpected appraisal, even Hondō, who was initially skeptical, started to acknowledge it.

“A strategy to guarantee 68 points... Well, isn’t it pretty amazing?”

“I was also surprised when I heard it from Kanji. It’s a good idea, isn’t it?”

There was a strong focus on the ability to guarantee 68 points, but there were other benefits.

The strategy didn’t require skills, luck, or prior preparation. It could be implemented immediately before the exam started, and no other class could obstruct or prevent us from securing 68 points.

And, in the worst case, even if the class were to place last, we could choose one of the 32 students to expel. Therefore, this plan also made it easy to discard a less capable student. Even though choosing who to expel among the 32 students would be difficult, if we somehow decided in advance who to expel and got their consent, the aftermath would also be smooth.

The risk of expulsion could be reduced to zero if a person holding a Protection Point was made to drop out.

At first glance, the idea didn't seem bad, but it was unlikely to be adopted.

"If it weren't for 'a certain rule' in this special exam, this might've remained a candidate that we could have implemented."

Horikita replied, saying that Ike's interesting idea was made difficult due to that rule.

It seemed that Horikita could foresee significant obstacles as she heard the plan.

"Wh-why? Well, I'm not insisting that you adopt it..."

His idea seemed to be the best.

It was out of such confidence that Ike pushed to learn the reason.

"Let's say, hypothetically, that Ryūen-kun's class implements this strategy right after the exam starts."

Horikita began her discussion on the assumption that the hypothetical enemy would adopt Ike's strategy.

"Even though there was one person expelled from his class, the addition of Katsuragi-kun has kept their numbers at 40. Except the leader and five others, there would be 34 eliminations. This means they would secure 66 points. While that certainly isn't a bad score, it also means they can't possibly score any higher. If the remaining three classes each manage to score 67 points or more, that approach becomes a 'no-win' strategy."

If they've already expelled their disposable resources, they'd have no way to boost their scores.

As the offensive, they could only hope that the other side kept making mistakes.

"Sure, but there's no guarantee that the other three classes will each be able to score 67 points or more, right? While there might be a risk of coming last, isn't there a higher probability of coming first?"

"No. Most likely, if Ryūen-kun's class were to use that strategy, they would end up in last place."

"Why? We won't know how difficult the questions are until the actual exam, right? So then—"

Ike couldn't understand why this would almost certainly result in them coming last.

“Listen. If they’re going to use the faking sickness strategy to cause mass elimination, they should naturally do that in the first turn. There’s little merit in implementing this strategy after the second turn.”

The longer it was postponed, the higher the risk that they’d lower the maximum points they could secure.

“Moreover, this strategy is conspicuous. All three classes would quickly find out. Just imagine their class situation when the classes see through that strategy. Will they think, ‘Oh no, they’ve played a good move?’“

“W-Won’t they?”

“No. On the contrary. If they play that strategy, it would actually make things easier for the other three classes.”

Saying so, Horikita picked up her cell phone, which she had placed next to her, and showed it to him.

“A phone...? Oh, we can use it during the exam, right?”

“Yes. So as soon as we see their aim, we would use this to cooperate with the other classes. If Ryūen-kun’s class could only get up to 66 points, the other three classes should team up and aim for more. If they judge that a losing class has appeared, Ichinose-san and Sakayanagi-san will also positively consider this option.”

“Wait a minute. I don’t quite get it, but if we gang up on them, they’d lose?”

“They’d lose. Who to nominate, who to protect. Just by doing this, the two classes Ryūen-kun’s class targets would definitely get 50 points. Hence, they would only need to earn 17 more points. Under the current rules, they can raise the difficulty by using points, but if the score is zero or less, they can only attack with the base difficulty. Therefore, it wouldn’t be difficult to score more than 17 points.”

If they could get more than 34% accuracy, that would be fine. Regardless of how unclear the contents of the questions were going to be, as long as the percentage didn’t fall significantly lower, they’d be in the safe zone. Additionally, with the element of protection, the actual required accuracy rate could be somewhat lower.

The absolute score of 66.

While it could be a merit, it also came with a significant disadvantage.

It was a strategy that was weak against changes in the situations that followed.

Ryūen’s class, which would have 34 eliminations from the get-go, wouldn’t see a positive shift until after the end of the 7th defensive turn. After the end of the 7th turn of defense. If they choose a high difficulty when attacking, the final score they could get would decrease every time, to 65 points, 64 points, and so on.

“I think you understand which is better, aiming for a win with 66 points or securing 17 or more points in 10 turns with your own abilities.”

After hearing the explanation, Ike, who was ecstatic at first, dropped his shoulders as if he had been plunged to the bottom.

“Damn! I thought we could win! I feel bad for getting everyone together!”

Ike was unexpectedly disappointed, and Horikita was slightly flustered.

“You don’t have to apologize. Your strategy was well thought out. What I need to apologize for is for assuming from the start that it definitely wouldn’t be helpful.”

“Uh, oh... I feel happy, but it’s a bit complicated...”

“Your strategy has a chance of winning. If the other three classes can’t cooperate, the chances of winning would increase. Even if they gang up on us, there’s still a chance of winning. For lower-ability classes, it’s not a bad idea to pin their hopes on this strategy. However, I believe our class has the ability to fight without depending on that method.”

That was why we wouldn’t adopt Ike’s splendid strategy, Horikita explained.

“You also taught me something valuable.”

“Something valuable...?”

“It became clear that this special exam would be troublesome if the others gang up on us.”

The shift between offense and defense in the first and second halves meant both classes would be attacking and defending against each other. They’d beat each other up. Then, if the two classes were to cooperate, they could definitely get 50 points.

If they could get the cooperation of the three classes, it wasn’t impossible to get a perfect score of 100 points.

Of course, whether other classes would easily accept this approach was uncertain.

Joining hands would mean reaching the goal at the same rate.

Ideally, it could force a sudden death in the final round, but that would be difficult to orchestrate.

Considering the current point differences among the four classes, Ryūen’s and Ichinose’s classes, the bottom two, would want as many class points as possible. Naturally, Horikita’s class also wanted to rise even slightly higher. It wasn’t that difficult to make Class A the only enemy, but it could hardly be called an ideal development to merely hinder those above us.

In this exam, ultimately, only one class could be elected as the absolute winner.

“You were brave to speak up.”

“S-so, if that’s the case, uh, good. Hehe.”

Perhaps pleased with Horikita’s praise, Ike scratched the back of his head.

“Shinohara-san, Hondō-kun, and Miyamoto-kun, too. Please feel free to voice any ideas you may have. Also, relay this to classmates who aren’t present here. I promise not to look down on anyone from the get-go.”

As Horikita said, it was best to voice any ideas that came to mind.

Whether they were perfect or not was secondary; the point was to engage in discussion.

Indeed, Ike’s idea wasn’t perfect, but by having others point out its strengths and weaknesses, he deepened his understanding and reluctantly accepted their criticisms.

The fact that the discussion was held at all held significant value and purpose.

After a while, the others left the karaoke room smiling and chatting.

“What will you do after this, Horikita?”

“I’m going home. Until yesterday, I was meeting Hirata-kun and the others here every day, but it was a day off to rest.”

It was admirable to create space for a gathering even on such a day.

Horikita seemed tired of her karaoke drink; she hadn’t touched it much.

Well, it could hardly be called café-level quality.

The advantage of being able to drink a lot quickly and cheaply was very important.

“I was surprised that you wanted to listen to Ike-kun’s idea. His strategy was interesting, but knowing you, wouldn’t you have already envisioned something like that before?”

Instead of affirming or denying, I decided to present Horikita with a new proposition.

“How about we change the location and talk about it?”

“I don’t have any plans after this, but it’s unusual for you to want to talk. Unless it’s about trouble with Karuizawa-san, in which case I’d like to decline.”

Horikita joked as she stood up with the bill.

“If that was the case, I’m sure you wouldn’t be the best person to handle it, Horikita.”

“Indeed.”

“I’d like to discuss the special exam with you, one-on-one.”

Upon hearing that, Horikita widened her eyes in surprise.

“You? About the special exam?”

“Is that so surprising?”

“I often initiate discussion, but it’s unusual for you, isn’t it?”

“Could be.”

I couldn't specifically recall who started how many conversations, so I couldn't be sure. But surely, Horikita had initiated more.

"And I can't always rely on you, so I decided against unnecessarily asking for your help this time."

"I'm not exactly offering a strategy. I just want to hear your thoughts."

"I see. You want to assess if I'm prepared to fight well?"

She showed a slightly irritated and troubled attitude, simple like a child's.

"Bothered?"

"Not at all. It would be harder for me to find a reason to refuse if that's your reasoning. Where should we move to?"

"How about a café? I feel like having some good coffee."

Plum kelp tea wasn't bad either, but my mouth was craving a slight bitterness now.

"Would I be self-conscious if I said I'm worried about others spying and listening in?"

"No worries, it won't be like what you're worried about."

"Well, as long as you say so, there won't be any problem. Shall we get going right away then?"

She trusted me without hesitation, and together, we left the karaoke box.

1

We didn't talk much along the way and soon arrived at the determined cafe. Because it was a weekday, it was relatively empty, and we were able to choose our seats freely.

After asking Horikita what she wanted to drink, I decided to point out a seat by the window and let her sit first.

We quietly stood in line behind two people who were already waiting at the counter.

Horikita, who had taken a seat, looked at me somewhat restlessly.

She was probably perplexed, not knowing what I would talk about next.

How to approach the situation, the strategy, the thought process, what to prioritize, and what to take as a secondary concern. I wasn't interested in knowing the details. I wanted to leave it all to the leader, Horikita.

Then, what was I going to do? Why did I arrange some alone time with Horikita?

It was to bestow a new strength upon Horikita.

A matter I had decided to entrust to her as the special exam was gradually approaching.

It could be done now because her mind was growing and maturing.

Knowing both herself, the class, and having found a friend.

That was why it was now possible to take the next step.

When my turn came, I ordered two blended coffees and waited near the counter for it to be prepared. After about two minutes, when the extraction seemed to be completed, two cups of coffee were brought over, and I grabbed the handles and headed to where Horikita was waiting.

"Thank you. The money—"

"That's fine. You paid for the karaoke. Besides, you treated me to lunch the other day."

"Well then, I'll gladly accept your offer."

We both slowly savored the hot, flavorful coffee.

Looking at Horikita's profile as she exhaled, I could see the fatigue.

Besides when she was asleep, she was probably constantly using her brain, whether it was a weekday or a holiday.

"...Is there something on my face?"

She didn't seem to like my blatant staring and gave me a glare.

"No, I was just thinking. Your hair has gotten quite long, hasn't it?"

Even as a diversion, it was quite effective if the person involved was concerned about it.

She ran her fingers through her hair and let her gaze wander.

“It’s been almost a year since I cut it short. Time flies, doesn’t it?”

“You were crying your eyes out.”

“What would happen if a tragic accident occurred here, and I grabbed you and poured hot coffee directly into your shirt?”

“I would definitely get burned, and it would definitely be intentional, not an accident.”

“You would dodge it if I tried to spill the contents all over you here, right?”

When we were at karaoke with Ryūen, Horikita had witnessed the time when I was about to be splashed with orange juice by surprise.

If you want to be sure it lands, grabbing me would be the right answer, but...
Getting splashed with coffee would result in damage incomparable to orange juice.

“Why are you trying to move seats? I would never do such a thing. I wouldn’t cause so much trouble for the store.”

“Please prioritize not causing major burns to a classmate instead.”

“Really... you’re such a strange one, aren’t you?”

“Which part of this exchange makes me the strange one? You’re the one who’s strange.”

In fact, I was just pushed around by Horikita’s strange nature.

“I’m not weird. I just... sometimes my seriousness is misplaced.”

Depending on your interpretation, it would be fair to call her a weirdo, but of course, I would never say it.

“So? This isn’t what you wanted to chat about, right? We were supposed to be talking about the special exam...”

Indeed, it seemed to be time to get to the main topic.

“There’s no need to be wary of our surroundings at the moment, but we don’t have to casually disclose the contents of our strategy. What I want to know is a little different. I want to confirm what mindset you’re going into this special exam with.”

“...Um, I’m sorry, I’m not quite sure what you mean by ‘mindset.’”

“To win the exam. To rack your brains for it. And to struggle with decisions. That’s something that you can now do with anyone. Like you do with Yōsuke and the others every day, and sometimes like you did with the group led by Ike. What I want to do here is something that can only be done between me and you, at least for now. This special exam is plagued by the issue of expulsions. If you look back, you can see right away, but I want you to tell me what kind of changes are happening inside you now compared to you during the unanimous voting exam.”

By bringing up concrete points from the past, Horikita understood what I meant by ‘mindset.’

“It seems like you’re not mistaken when you say, this is a conversation only we can have...”

The act of exposing one’s innermost thoughts.

Relying on companions was important, but it wasn’t easy for the leader to show weakness.

“Should I assume that you’ll correct me if you think my mindset is wrong?”

“Whether I can give appropriate advice or not is another matter, but I intend to express my personal view.”

Hearing this, Horikita straightened her posture and met my gaze.

I thought she would start talking now, but Horikita narrowed her eyes and put a hand to her mouth.

“That’s suspicious.”

She seemed quite flustered, as if she hadn’t intended to verbalize it.

“I’m sorry. I said something quite blunt, didn’t I?”

“Am I really that suspicious?”

“I mean, you being concerned about me is, well, kind of creepy, don’t you think?”

“I can understand that, but creepy is a bit too much.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Um, let me get my thoughts together.”

Saying that, she straightened up once more.

“I want to ask you frankly. Have you decided what to do if we come in last place in this special exam?”

She didn’t want to expel anyone.

But she had to choose someone to dismiss.

Although the situation was different, the same decision in the unanimous voting exam may have to be made.

“It’s a hard question to immediately answer, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“Since that day, I have been questioning myself over and over again. At times, I feel guilty and regretful, even though I believe I made the right decision. It’s a depressing thought.”

She muttered, slightly lowering her gaze.

“I can’t say for sure what will happen in the future. It’s not just me, everyone in the class is growing little by little every day. Even if we rank them based on their abilities, it would fluctuate.”

I couldn’t deny that. There were days when Ike was at the bottom and days when Hondō was. Because we strove to avoid being at the bottom, it was natural that we couldn’t decide who to expel in the future.

“But the next special exam is different. At least, I plan to face it with two options in mind in case we end up at the bottom. One is a less painful choice, the

other is a bitter one. However, since there are various obstacles, there's no guarantee that the less painful choice can be realized..."

She seemed to have thought about it properly.

"If you end up placing last, you can't avoid selecting someone to expel. There's no dream story about losing without anyone getting expelled. There aren't enough Private Points to save everyone. Considering that, you have two choices?"

The latter, bitter choice must be to reluctantly expel someone. It's a leader's responsibility to choose from among those who have dropped out, even if she doesn't want to.

"Whichever it turns out to be, I've set up my own guidelines to choose without hesitation."

There was no point in bluffing in this situation. If she was bluffing, that said a lot about her.

Looking at Horikita, with her pure and straightforward eyes, I could see that she was prepared to make a decision, no matter what choice she faced.

"I understand. It seems that you won't be at a loss if you come in last."

"Perhaps I shouldn't think about losing in the first place, but since there's the risk of expulsion, I can't help but make a decision in advance. It's shameful, and you might laugh at it..."

"Where's the part to laugh at?"

"True... but... you don't normally think about losing first..."

"If you aim to win in the end, whether it's first or last, it isn't a mistake. You thought about what to do when you lost first because you care about the class. That's all there is to it."

"...Thank you..."

There was no reason to thank me, but she was in a position to listen to my advice. Perhaps that was why Horikita was honest.

"I'm glad my fears were unfounded. If something goes wrong, I'm sure I can trust you."

"You helped me in the unanimous voting exam. Ah, is that all you wanted to know?"

Horikita, who had relieved her heart a little, asked this, but the answer was unfortunately no.

"No, it's safe to say that we're just getting into the main topic."

"Is that so... Then, what is it? If you're not going to talk about a winning strategy, do you want to know what will happen after winning? No, it can't be..."

"Winning this exam means defeating other classes. And if we defeat them, a class at the bottom will inevitably be created. There's a high possibility that someone will get expelled."

"I guess so."

“But that ‘someone’ is not for you to decide. I’m sure it’s obvious, but you understand what I’m saying, right?”

“Of course, each class leader will consider and decide.”

“You learned how to deal with a dismissal from your own class due to your previous failure. But if I hadn’t helped you, we wouldn’t know what would’ve happened to the class now.”

“As humiliating as it is, that’s true. It wouldn’t be surprising if the class had fallen apart.”

“It’s important to learn from your mistakes, but you can’t fail every time. A safety net isn’t guaranteed. Essentially, choosing the right answer from the start and steadily breaking through is a testament to one’s true ability.”

Holding a slightly cooled cup, Horikita quietly sipped her coffee.

“I think you’re absolutely right.”

“Let’s get specific. There will undoubtedly be a time when we face a particular class directly. At that time, you will have three futures. One is where our class wins, one is where our class loses, and the third outcome is neither a victory nor a defeat, but a draw. What future would you prefer?”

“There’s no question about it. I want my class to win; there’s no other choice.”

“Then let’s add a new condition to the future. Your class wins, but as a result, the defeated class has an expulsion. How would you decide in this case?”

“I’m sorry, but we prioritize our victory. That’s the right choice, isn’t it?”

“So you would still choose your class’s victory.”

With my questioning, Horikita’s lips slightly tightened.

“Is it wrong to prioritize winning, just like in this special exam?”

“No one said it was a mistake. Let’s add one last condition. The specific class is Ryūen’s class, and the one expelled is Ibuki Mio. Which of the three futures would you choose then?”

Not expecting this condition, Horikita froze after delivering a series of natural responses.

“...Ibuki-san...?”

“What’s the matter? Which of the three options do you choose? Winning, losing, or drawing?”

“Hold on a minute. Ibuki-san is close to Ryūen-kun. I can’t imagine she would be the first candidate for expulsion. Is this even a valid hypothesis?”

“A valid hypothesis? It’s strange what you say. A hypothesis is just a hypothesis.”

“But—”

“Ibuki’s position and safety aren’t guaranteed. With Ibuki’s OAA assessment, she is perfectly disposable. Given Ryūen’s personality, it’s a possible

scenario. Moreover, there's no guarantee that Ryūen can appoint someone to be expelled. Accidents that can't be avoided could happen."

Having been told this in a firm tone, Horikita unwillingly opened her mouth.

"...For the sake of our class's victory, it's natural to choose victory, even if it means Ibuki-san is the specific person who has to be expelled."

"You're unable to respond immediately. You clearly want to deny a future where you have to choose."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I don't know every detail about your relationships, but I believe that among the other classes, Ibuki is closer to you than most. And it's not just about whether she's 'close' or 'not close.'"

"If you're also considering 'not close' relationships, then yes, I won't deny it."

She kept eye contact, trying to project an attitude that expressed it didn't matter.

Although she said she didn't deny it, the truth was, she couldn't.

Even the person involved wasn't aware of it; it was a defensive reflex transmitted from basic instincts.

Not wanting to acknowledge it was proof that she knew it was inconvenient if she did. It might've been possible to deceive with visual information, but when it came to auditory information, higher skills were required. The more you tried controlling your behavior, the more negligent you became with your words.

"But in this special exam, the rule is that a student is expelled by another class. That is, for the first time, a student who we didn't anticipate might be expelled."

"You're saying that even Ibuki-san isn't an exception."

"If Ryūen had marked Ibuki as a candidate for expulsion, and it was clear that there was a high likelihood he was planning on expelling her if she was eliminated, would you still be able to play a move that eliminates Ibuki to win?"

Until now, Horikita, although agitated, had insisted on victory.

Her previously unyielding attitude was completely crushed for the first time.

Even indirectly, causing Ibuki to drop out by her own hand...

If this were a year ago, Horikita would have executed this without much hesitation.

But the circumstances had changed.

She got to know Ibuki. She deeply knew what kind of character she had and who she was.

Even though she was an enemy, she had undoubtedly become a friend.

"Why... do you ask such a thing?"

She didn't answer, but forcefully threw the ball back as if to escape.

“This special exam, it’s a great chance to eliminate students you want to lose, but it’s also the basis of the fight to lose those who are easy to lose. When you know that you can gain a strategic advantage by attacking Ibuki, are you able to take the lead as a leader without hesitation? Confirming that is my primary goal. I thought it would be helpful to start considering it now.”

Even if I told her this on the day of the exam, it would be difficult to deal with calmly because of the limited time and tension of the battle. That was why it was a discussion to have now.

“You mean... I should be ready to lose someone like Ibuki-san or someone in the same position?”

“No, I’m saying it’s important to be aware. You are so focused on your own class that you don’t have a good grasp of the other classes. You just mildly thought ‘I want to get rid of that person, I don’t want this other person to drop out.’ Did you prepare for this special exam with a clear sense of what to expect?”

“Well... no, I haven’t. All I was thinking about was how to minimize the damage if I lose, who to expel from our side in case of emergency, and what I would need to do to win for the class.”

Realizing that further denial was pointless, Horikita admitted it as if she’d given up.

She probably didn’t think about who she was going to crush clearly.

Of course, it wouldn’t be easy even if she wanted to crush someone. As the leader, she would keep the capable students since there was a high probability that multiple people would be eliminated. Therefore, she didn’t think about it.

If she stopped thinking there, she wouldn’t be able to keep up with the changes in the situation.

“So, what should I do about that problem...?”

“I told you. All you need is to be aware of it. Everyone has their own style of battle. Ryūen is ruthless to whoever he is up against. He’s always thinking of ways to defeat the enemy’s most capable students. Sakayanagi tends to target people she dislikes, regardless of strength or weakness. Totsuka is a good example. On the contrary, in Ichinose’s case, she doesn’t think about expelling the other party. There are tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses to each person like that.”

“But I don’t know what kind of battle suits me yet...”

“That’s what this battle is about to show you. Whether to defeat the enemy or to protect yourself, if you are aware of both, you will see the way to fight. Don’t fight aimlessly. Be conscious. Just by doing that, the world you see will change greatly.”

Horikita closed her eyes and murmured something to herself with a slight movement of her lips.

I continued to silently watch Horikita until she showed some understanding.

“To be honest, I don’t think I can maintain that awareness at this moment.”

“I see.”

“But I’ll keep repeating it to myself until the special exam. If that doesn’t work, I’ll keep telling myself even after that. I don’t know how far I can go... I’m sorry. I’m not good enough...”

She mocked herself for not being able to respond well.

“There’s nothing wrong. You’re already beginning to be conscious. I’ve made you conscious.”

It’s just a matter of time whether it will become complete now, tomorrow, or a little later.

I’ve almost finished analyzing the human being called Horikita Suzune.

A person who was competent compared to ordinary people with the ability to be recognized in society.

A person who had the qualifications to walk a happy life on the long road that would continue from now on.

But she probably wouldn’t achieve remarkable feats in the future, or leave behind achievements for future generations. She had no remarkable ability to surpass others’ many talents.

However, this was not yet a society. This was a school, a world where small and immature children gathered. In this miniature, garden-like environment, she had the potential to display abilities beyond imagination.

This was thanks to the new perspective that Horikita Manabu taught me.

If I hadn’t been taught by him, I wouldn’t have noticed her shining potential.

“That’s all I wanted to say.”

Horikita looked into my eyes intently, and continued to look straight into them without averting.

“Hey—what are you, exactly?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. I don’t understand you at all...”

“Do you need to understand?”

“At the very least, as long as I’m the appointed leader, it isn’t bad to get to know my classmates. Even for the next special exam, being aware of the details puts us in an advantageous position.”

If she could grasp one’s strengths and weaknesses in individual challenges, it could certainly be true.

“So, you understand Kōenji?”

“I can’t say I understand him, but I think I have a grasp of him. Am I wrong?”

“...Quite right.”

I brought up Kōenji's name to divert the topic from myself, but it was easy and simple to understand what kind of person Kōenji really was.

"You were uninterested in reaching Class A, and were fundamentally reserved and unsociable. But before I knew it, you started dating Karuizawa-san, you started to help the class knowing that it'd make you stand out. There is no consistency in what you do."

"Can't you just take it to mean that I've grown? A once unassuming middle school boy goes through a High School debut, and little by little gains courage. Soon, he aims to rise to class A and starts getting excited, leading to how he is now— something like that."

"I can't see it like that. You don't fit into any conventionally assumed categories. I'm convinced of that. There's always a reason beyond ordinary thinking for what you do. Because..."

As soon as she said 'because,' Horikita lost her words.

"...How could such a personality be born, I wonder. What kind of child were you?"

"Changing the subject, huh? Even if you ask me what kind of child I was, I am still a child, as you can see."

"That's not what I mean. I mean when you were much younger. What elementary school did you go to?"

"You wouldn't know even if I told you."

"That's not necessarily the case, right? I might unexpectedly be from the area."

"I've already talked about something similar before. I don't feel like doing it again."

"...Is that so? Sorry, but I don't recall, can you tell me again?"

Even if I tried to avoid it, Horikita persistently questioned me.

"It's not something I can share. I want to keep certain things to myself."

I strongly conveyed that I was uncomfortable with further inquiries, and Horikita seemed to understand, albeit reluctantly.

Receiving a lot of information at once, Horikita's brain seemed to be considerably tired.

"You better take a break to calm down."

I suggested to Horikita, who was unable to decide on her next move.

"Yes, you're right..."

Before we could leave this place, we had to finish our drinks.

I also picked up my cup of coffee, which I had barely touched, and we drank almost simultaneously.

The temperature that reached my tongue was lukewarm.

"It's gotten cold."

“It’s gotten cold, hasn’t it?”

“Don’t copy me.”

“Please don’t copy me.”

It was a trivial matter, but the feeling that we were on the same wavelength was strangely funny.

“Eh—?”

It might be an exaggeration to say she was startled, but Horikita opened her eyes wide and let out a sound.

“What’s wrong?”

“No... that... I just... saw you smile a little...”

“Huh? So, what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s just that I feel like I’ve never seen that expression on your face in the last two years...”

“How rude. I’m not a baby who’s just learned to smile.”

I’ve been told something similar before, and there have been many times when I’ve made a conscious effort to smile. It shouldn’t be that rare.

Well... But...

“You’re right, it might’ve been a rare moment.”

At that instant, I couldn’t recall at all making a conscious effort to smile.

The expression of an unintentional emotion.

How many such experiences have I had so far?

Neither an act nor a reading of the atmosphere, but just being natural.

From understanding how difficult that was, it became interesting.

It felt like a drop of color had been added to a blank sketchbook.

Not in front of Kei, nor in front of a friend like Yōsuke.

I didn’t know why that expression appeared in front of Horikita.

“I wonder why I smiled. Would you know if you were the one who smiled?”

I had hoped that Horikita would have a clear answer.

I asked if it was a funny scene, looking into her eyes.

But Horikita averted her gaze and hurriedly replied.

“I... I wouldn’t know either if you asked me with such a serious face.”

“So, it’s not that something particularly funny happened, right?”

“...As I said, I wouldn’t know even if you asked me.”

Horikita, who had turned aside, slightly raised her voice and sighed.

“Because of your strange thinking, I feel like a fool for laughing as well...”

Horikita gulped down the remainder of her coffee and stood up.

“Are we done talking? I have plans, so I should be going.”

“Didn’t you say you had no plans?”

“I just remembered I had plans.”

She then picked up the empty cup she had drunk.

“I’ll think about it by myself. About the next special exam, and everything thereafter.”

“That’s fine.”

She was about to head back first but paused as though she had remembered something.

“Oh, right, sorry. There’s something I need to confirm with you.”

“Is it about the category to exclude in the special exam?”

“That’s right.”

“What about our other classmates?”

“I’ve heard from everyone but you. We really need to decide soon.”

Apparently, while I had been taking it easy, Horikita had already finalized the arrangements with the others.

“Well, you probably wouldn’t need to exclude anything, but what do you think?”

“Entertainment, music, and subculture.”

“Those categories have nothing to do with studying. Same choices as mine.”

“There were other categories that I was unsure about, but I wanted to exclude those in which I wasn’t proficient.”

News, lifestyle, and food. I probably didn’t know much about those areas.

However, the three categories that I excluded were considered more difficult than those.

“Alright, I’ll register those for you.”

“Thanks.”

Unexpectedly, this seemed to be an opportunity to reflect on myself.

Chapter 5: Game Changer

ON THURSDAY morning, the day before the special exam, we were granted a special day off.

Typically, falling asleep wasn't an issue, but I, Hashimoto, had an unusually sleepless night.

“Lack of sleep really is bad for you... So sleepy...”

As I lifted my body, I saw that there was a message from Kitō on my phone.
[It seems that the princess has finally decided on a policy.]

“Although it's already the day before the exam, it seemed that they were finally going to gather the class leaders for a discussion.

However, even though it was a discussion, they probably wouldn't give detailed information about the strategy.

Sakayanagi always thought and acted independently.

She only communicated necessary information to the students she used as her tools.

“Tsk...”

In addition to Kitō's message, I noticed that I had received dozens of messages. These were from the girl I was currently dating.

The night before, I remembered exchanging messages with her until fairly late, but I had given up halfway through because the conversation went on and on with no sign of ending.

‘Where are we going next?’

‘I want to eat this, I want that.’

‘What do you like, dislike?’

‘I want to see you, I'm lonely.’

It was all such trivial stuff.

[Sorry, I fell asleep. I'll make it up to you next time.]

With a cute emote, I sent back that emotionless reply.

I figured that it would satisfy her.

If she was persistent, I just needed to dump her, but there was still some information I wanted to gather.

No matter which class or how trivial, there was never too much information.

Let's forget about that woman for now and talk about the issue concerning Sakayanagi.

The issue that was directly connected to the reason why I wasn't able to sleep yesterday.

The issue of how we should fight in the special exam.

And before that, what we should do.

As the end-of-year exams were approaching, my anxiety was growing day by day.

The future where I might lose to Ryūen in a direct showdown with a significant amount of class points on the line.

This was something I absolutely had to avoid.

I have to do everything I can to prevent that, don't I?

1

Sakayanagi was indifferent to the set time and place.

Whether it be a karaoke box or a dorm room to avoid being seen.

Even in the special wing or behind the gym, there were secret meeting locations everywhere.

Well, I suppose Sakayanagi didn't care since she wasn't divulging secrets.

Today, as usual, we headed to the most vibrant cafe in Keyaki Mall.

And she seemed to be enjoying her leisure time, selecting a popular seat with Kamuro and Kitō following behind her.

"My apologies, Princess. I'm a bit late," I said, sitting in an empty seat, continuing to call Sakayanagi 'Princess.'

"You seem quite close to her, don't you?"

"Ah, where did you see that?"

Up until last year, I only had to watch out for Class A students, but since we became second years, I had to be careful of the kōhais and the others as well. Did I overlook that?

No, if there was a first-year student in the second-year hall, I should have noticed.

That meant—

Had she been secretly keeping a pawn within the class in advance?

Most of the time, it was Kamuro, Kitō, or me, but periodically, Sakayanagi would contact someone on her phone to receive information. I asked about it once, but she never directly mentioned who they were. It was possible they were watching us.

I decided it was unnecessary to rush to find out if it was a student within the class, but if this wasn't a coincidence and they were intentionally watching me, that would change things.

"I'm quite shy when it comes to love, so keep it a secret, okay?"

"Hehe, I promise I won't tell anyone."

"So? What's today's talk about?" Kamuro asked.

"You know it even if you don't ask, Masumi-chan."

"Hey. Don't call me by my first name."

"My bad, my bad. It's just a habit."

"What kind of habit is that? You've hardly ever called me that."

"In my heart, it's always Masumi-chan."

"Gross."

Kamuro strongly rejected the 'Masumi-chan' nickname, apparently repulsed by it.

I understood. If I were in her shoes, I would have found it creepy too. However, when playing the fool, such nicknames helped to leave an impact. “So, shall we start, Princess? It’s about the special exam, right?”

“Special exam? No, you’re mistaken, Hashimoto-kun. Today is just a simple tea party.”

Sakayanagi denied my assumption with a laugh.

I exaggerated my reaction accordingly, almost falling from my chair.

“If that’s the case, you wouldn’t have needed to gather the executive members here, Princess.”

“It’s for public appeal.”

“If other classes find out that Class A is holding a strategy meeting, they’ll inevitably share information and increase their sense of tension. They’ll spare no effort to win.”

What public appeal? That was laughable.

I put up with it until yesterday, and now she has no intention to discuss anything.

“What’s the benefit of doing all that? I don’t get it. Can you explain?”

“There’s a benefit. It makes the other three classes more serious, doesn’t it?”

“...So, it’s advantageous?”

As Kamuro said, it seemed more like a loss than a gain.

I’d rather they become complacent, so why were we tensing them up?

“I want to enjoy the battle. Lately, we’ve been doing recreational activities like cultural festivals and school trips.”

Even if it lowered the chances of victory or brought disadvantages, she prioritized her own amusement.

That was how Sakayanagi had been reigning as class leader this whole time.

The class tolerated it because the results had been obvious.

We steadily accumulated class points.

In other words, if that is no longer the case, Sakayanagi’s value would plummet at once.

I didn’t know if anyone else saw such an uncertain future...

After finishing the so-called ‘casual tea party,’ I entered a restroom near the east entrance.

I wasn’t using the restroom for its intended purpose, and it wasn’t for a confidential meeting either.

Just an unbreakable habit. I went into the last stall and locked the door. Then, once its automatic cover opened, I sat on the toilet seat without pulling my pants down.

The stalls in Keyaki Mall were always kept clean, it never felt unpleasant. No bad smell either.

Well, even if there was a certain level of dirtiness or odd smell, I wouldn't mind it much.

The music inside the mall was a bit much, but I leaned forward with my arms on my knees and closed my eyes.

This was the place; the place to calm my heart.

The place to return to the origin. In a school where escape routes were scarce, it was a valuable place of refuge.

(TL NOTE: Origin is metaphorical here, basically a place to reset to one's roots or "base".)

"Even in ANHS, I find myself going to the toilet out of habit. Habits are really hard to break."

For the following 30 or so minutes, I stayed there without taking out my phone even once.

"Shall I go home?"

When there was a sign that no one was at the sink, I stood up, flushed the toilet, washed my hands, dried them, and left the bathroom.

"Looks like the long shit is over."

"You surprised me. How long have you been here?"

Ryūen, who had been leaning against the wall beside the entrance with his phone in his hand, snorted a laugh.

"I was just wondering what you were up to."

"Give me a break. Tomorrow is the special exam, right? I wonder what kind of suspicion I'd be under if I were seen with you here. Couldn't you have visited my room or used some other way?"

"If you're innocent, then act with confidence."

"You ask too much. Keep it short."

It was fine for me to contact him, but Ryūen unexpectedly contacting me was annoying.

Especially in Ryūen's case, who knew where and what he was going to say?

However, in order to understand the inner workings of the opposing classes, discussions with him were unavoidable. It was a rough sea, but as long as I could see it, I could ride the waves.

2

On the day off, I spent the morning with Kei at Keyaki Mall.

Despite occasionally expressing her anxiety about the special exam tomorrow, Kei should've been able to spend the day relatively peacefully. While chatting about trivial matters, we headed back to the dorm together.

On the way back, my phone rang. When I checked the caller ID, it showed Kanzaki's name.

Kei peeped in to see who was calling, but as soon as she saw the caller's name, she lost interest and took out her own phone. We both stopped walking almost simultaneously, and I answered the call.

"What's up?"

"Where are you right now? I went straight to your room, but it seems you haven't returned yet."

"I'm just on my way back. Do you need something?"

"Could you spare some time to talk? Watanabe and I will be there. Is that alright with you?"

It was unusual for someone to visit my room without an appointment.

"I'm on my way back now. Can you please tell Watanabe as well?"

"Ok. Can I wait in front of your room?"

I agreed and ended the call. At the same time, Kei put away her phone.

"What's up with Kanzaki-kun and Watanabe-kun?"

"I don't know. It seems they want to talk. They're waiting in front of my room. I'm sorry, but I think we should call it a day."

"That's fine, but are you close to those two, Kiyotaka?"

"I was in the same group as Watanabe during the school trip. I've been seeing him quite a lot recently."

"Oh, you're making more and more friends, I see."

Kei seemed amazed and slightly pleased, giving a few small nods.

We both got on the elevator and got off at the fourth floor. As the doors opened, we saw Watanabe and Kanzaki waiting. They noticed us, and Watanabe waved his hand.

"See you later. Contact me whenever. Oh, take your time too."

Considering him as my friend, Kei communicated her friendly intentions with a smile, showing no concerns.

Since our reconciliation, she seemed to have regained her composure.

"Sorry for the sudden visit. Were you planning to spend time together later?"

As soon as we met up, Kanzaki cautiously broached the subject.

"Don't worry about it. It's rare for you two to visit together. Come on in."

I invited them in after unlocking the door. Their surprised glances swept over the living room, which had taken on a strong feminine, colorful appearance. Making my guests comfortable, I asked for their drink preferences and went to the kitchen. Soon after, Kanzaki got up and approached me.

“I was told to keep it quiet since they didn’t know if they’d be able to go, but when I mentioned meeting up with you, they responded saying they could come. Sorry for the sudden addition, but can I invite two more people?”

“Is that so? Guess I’ll have to prepare with that in mind. Who’s coming?”

“Ichinose and Amikura.”

There was no particular issue with the increase in numbers, but I couldn’t figure out the circumstances from this four-people combination.

Kanzaki had become a reformer, working on changing both Ichinose and his class.

On the other hand, Ichinose wanted to maintain the status quo, a conservative.

At the same time, Ichinose seemed aware of Kanzaki’s movements but was standing idly by.

Or was I reading too much into it? There were no signs of Himeno and Hamaguchi, who supported Kanzaki.

“The class strategy regarding the upcoming special exam is settled, and Ichinose said she wanted to confirm some final checks with you. It might not be beneficial for you though.”

He was apologetic, and I could sense that he wasn’t very enthusiastic about today’s matter.

“I don’t mind. What’s with Watanabe and Amikura coming over?”

“For Watanabe, it was completely coincidental. I bumped into him on the way to your place.”

“Yeah, it was just a coincidence.”

*Could he have anticipated Amikura’s arrival somehow and tagged along?
Or was I thinking too much?*

In any case, I didn’t bother to ask because it didn’t matter either way.

I turned on the TV and engaged in mindless chatter for a while to pass the time.

About 15 minutes later, the doorbell rang. As expected, Ichinose and Amikura showed up. They brought snacks from Keyaki Mall as a gift.

After getting everyone drinks, I prepared to listen.

“You might’ve already heard from Kanzaki-kun, but regarding tomorrow’s special exam, I wanted to discuss something with you, Ayanokōji-kun. I’m sorry for the sudden request.”

This meant, rather than a spontaneous thought, she had considered it in advance.

“I don’t mind in particular, but unfortunately, I’m not the leader. If you want to know about our class’s internal affairs or strategies, you should negotiate directly with Horikita.”

“That’s okay. Rather, I want you to listen to our side of the story.”

“Hold on. Before you talk to Ayanokōji, there’s something I would like to ask first.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“If you want to collaborate or something like that, I’ll firmly oppose it.”

As if he wanted to have the first word, Kanzaki took the initiative and voiced his concern.

He indicated no concern about the two of our classes cooperating which made it easy to understand what he meant by ‘collaborate.’

“You’re worried about the possibility of me tying the scores for all four classes, aren’t you?”

“To be blunt, yes, that’s exactly it.”

“Why didn’t you bring up that topic during the class meeting?”

“Even if I were to express my opinion against colluding, if you approved of it, Ichinose, the majority of the class would concur. I didn’t want to let that happen. If behind-the-scenes discussions were happening without me knowing, I wouldn’t be able to do anything. However, if a discussion took place in front of me, I’d be able to speak against it.”

That was why he avoided the subject until now, having never raised the issue before. He had his own reasons why he hadn’t brought it up in a more private setting.

If I was helping with the class’s reform, I would side with those in opposition if I was there.

That surely must’ve been a part of his calculation.

“The special exam is tomorrow, right? Isn’t it too late to push for the four classes to collude now?”

Amikura, who was sitting next to Ichinose, said, almost as if expecting such a comment.

It was far too late to make a move as far as common sense was concerned.

“Normally, yes. But considering it’s Ichinose, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was still contemplating until the very end to avoid risking anyone’s expulsion. She might change her decision last minute to protect her classmates.”

“If the four classes could coordinate and ensure a clear victory, her suggestion is worth considering. Even if we lose class points, as long as all classes

face the same fate, it wouldn't be unfair. As Kanzaki-kun said, it might still be possible to realize that plan."

"Nevertheless... If we lose the chance to rise—"

Kanzaki, who was prematurely scared of such a development, was about to counter-argue when Ichinose gently stopped him.

"Don't worry. I didn't come to beg Ayanokōji-kun to agree to this. If I intended that, it would be proper to talk to Horikita-san directly."

Thus, Ichinose reassured him. But Kanzaki must have felt restless. Cooperating against expulsion, even without collusion, could feel quite familiar. If Ichinose remained committed to protecting her classmates even to her own detriment, their chances of victory would decrease.

To hide his anxiety, Kanzaki clumsily put on a relieved expression.

"That's a relief. I'm sorry for abruptly interrupting you. I'm terrible at conversations. I always cause trouble."

I conveyed that there was no need to worry after he apologized.

"Kanzaki-kun, you've become quite close to Ayanokōji-kun, haven't you?"

"Really?"

"Indeed. Even if your former self had these thoughts, you would've hesitated to talk so openly about the class's internal affairs. If it were Hirata-kun or Kaneda-kun here, your response would've been completely different."

At Ichinose's remarks, Kanzaki tilted his head in confusion as if he didn't understand, but it was useless. Right around the time Kanzaki and Himeno started making moves together, Ichinose must have sensed something was amiss.

"Nevermind me, let's get on with the conversation."

Prompted, Ichinose nodded with a smile and turned to face me.

"The reason I came to Ayanokōji-kun before Horikita-san was—"

I braced myself for what might pour out, but in reality, it wasn't much. She wanted to win with her classmates and not lose—just a close-knit ambition. She didn't need to bring along her close aide, Kanzaki, just for that.

Even Kanzaki, who had been listening with a stern face, eased his guard.

After that, the conversation shifted to casual chit-chat.

Thanks to Watanabe, the atmosphere livened up, and this reunion felt like a simple gathering of friends.

As the clock turned past six, and the view outside dimmed, Kanzaki suggested wrapping up the gathering.

Ichinose, Amikura, and Kanzaki exited first, followed by Watanabe.

"I wasn't sure how today would go, but it turned out to be quite fun."

That was probably because Watanabe was able to talk freely with Amikura. When I signaled him with my eyes, Watanabe gave me a broad smile in return.

As the front door closed behind the departing guests, silence returned.

The TV, which hadn't been intrusive until now, suddenly seemed too loud, and I turned it off.

As I was about to put away the leftover cups on the table—

The doorbell rang with a “ping-pong” sound.

As I had not yet contacted Kei, it was unlikely anyone would be visiting without permission. I wondered who it could be.

Still wondering, I opened the door.

On the other side stood Ichinose, who for some reason had returned alone.

“Sorry, Ayanokōji-kun. It seems I left my phone here...”

I thought something was up, but the reason quickly became clear. It seemed she had simply forgotten her phone.

“Your phone? Where is it? I'll get it.”

“I think it's under the table. Really sorry.”

Forgetting your phone wasn't something unique to Ichinose. As a daily necessity, and because we take out our phones so often, it was easy to forget them. At the same time, it was also something we quickly remember forgetting.

Kei often left her phone in my room and came back flustered to fetch it.

“Wait a moment.”

Leaving Ichinose at the entrance, I checked under the table.

I quickly noticed her phone exactly where Ichinose had been sitting.

I returned after about ten seconds and gave the phone to Ichinose.

“Thank you. Sorry for the trouble again.”

“See you around.”

“...Oh, can we talk for a bit?”

We had already talked a fair bit, but girls always had more to say.

With more understanding than surprise, I nodded in approval.

“People might misunderstand if they see us alone together, so should I lock the door?”

After suggesting it herself, she turned to lock the door but immediately hesitated.

“No, not a good idea. If the door was locked and someone came... That would be even worse.”

Two people alone together was still an innocent occurrence.

In fact, until recently, Ichinose's classmates had been here.

But if the door was locked with just the two of us, the situation would change drastically.

It would suggest that we were doing something covert, something we didn't want others to see.

“Mako-chan and the others just left. I clearly told them that I forgot my phone in your room, so even if someone sees us now, we have a good excuse.”

It didn't seem like she was talking to herself. She appeared to be explaining her intentions to me.

She tried to lock the door but then stopped herself. She explained the situation out loud.

"Did you intentionally forget your phone to be alone with me?"

Whether it was the response she had been trying to induce or not, Ichinose just smiled at my question.

"What do you think, Ayanokōji-kun?"

I didn't expect her to ask me about her true intentions.

"My suspicions are probably correct. Your 'forgetting' was intentional."

Upon listening to my response, Ichinose, unable to hold back, looked down and acknowledged it.

"I wanted to see you, Ayanokōji-kun. Just the two of us, in any way possible... Do you think I'm repulsive...?"

"Repulsive? Why would you say that?"

"Why...? Because I went out of my way to see a boy who has a girlfriend..."

Indeed, if the genders were reversed, it would be easy to understand.

It wouldn't be surprising if someone was immediately labeled as a stalker.

But in the end, how such an action would be perceived depended entirely on the recipient's mindset.

If the target was disliked, they were a stalker, and if the target was liked, they weren't a stalker.

"It's weird for you to boldly meet a guy with a girlfriend. You're actually being considerate."

If she had forced her way to visit, patching things up with Kei would be difficult, and it would only worsen our situation.

If this situation was created, then even if the two of us met, it could be explained as an unavoidable circumstance.

"...Really? You really don't think I'm repulsive?"

"Yeah."

If there was anything to think about when I looked at the current Ichinose, it was just one thing.

She's becoming an increasingly interesting subject.

That was all.

Immediately after, she slowly approached and leaned against my chest.

"This was an accident... I lost my footing, and you just happened to catch me... right?"

"Yeah. There's no evidence to deny it."

When I answered, I couldn't see it, but I felt Ichinose smile.

“I love you, Ayanokōji-kun. I’m helplessly in love with you... I’ve never been in love before. Yet, I have a strong suspicion that this might be my first and last love—it’s strange, isn’t it?”

She was adopting strategies that were unimaginable from the Ichinose I first met.

There was an aspect of that which was attractive, even to the opposite sex. Her love was her driving force. She used it to draw from and utilize the potential she didn’t even realize she had, creating her desired situation.

Ichinose’s unchanging generosity.

I had prepared different actors, like Kanzaki and Himeno, to cause a stir in that, but there were now more lines of development than expected. Of course, this wasn’t a bad thing, but rather a good thing for me. It was because I could approach improving their class from two different directions.

Originally, only one line was drawn straight, with a high risk of failure.

I drew a new line to increase the probability of the class’s survival.

However, Ichinose added variation to the line that had a high failure risk.

It was different now. It was hard to judge if this linear line, which could be considered a new line, would succeed or fail at this point.

A wonderfully attractive scent wafted from her hair that was hard to describe.

It wasn’t just the fragrance of shampoo or other hair products.

“If we weren’t in different classes, we could’ve spent more time together...”

Then, it happened.

Without warning, the door to my room was forcefully opened.

“Sorry, Ayanokōji, could you give me some personal advice—”

I saw Watanabe’s face from Class B, who was sitting with us until just a few minutes ago.

Ichinose must’ve been on guard for this sort of situation.

She must’ve taken into account that someone might drop by unexpectedly.

But at the very least, a knock would’ve been expected.

I myself had not factored in that someone would open the front door without permission.

My body must’ve tensed up due to this unexpected scenario.

Unable to break away from the clingy situation, Ichinose simply looked back in surprise.

“Wh— what—!?”

Watanabe himself, who thoughtlessly opened the door, gasped in surprise more than anyone else.

A few seconds in reality felt like several tens of seconds.

The warmth of Ichinose's body from the close contact with her casual wear instantly left.

It would've been impossible to passively dismiss the physical contact as just an accident or coincidence.

The excuse that she almost fell down wouldn't convince anyone.

Although Watanabe was initially unable to grasp the situation, that most likely wouldn't last forever.

Naturally, not only I, but Ichinose must've also understood the gravity of the situation.

What kind of response would Watanabe give? That would determine our course of action.

There was nothing I could do at the moment, so I had to leave the outcome to the two of them.

"Oh, uh, um, sorry, I didn't knock... so um, I'll be going!"

Faced with an impossible situation, Watanabe's decision was to turn and flee.

As Watanabe tried to close the door, Ichinose moved faster.

She blocked the door from closing completely with her hand.

"Watanabe-kun."

"Y-yes!?"

Watanabe immediately stood straight after hearing her formally address him.

"Can you come in?"

"But I'm intruding, and my business isn't anything major!"

"Can you come in? Please."

"...Y-yes."

I couldn't see Ichinose's expression since she was facing Watanabe, but it was the usual smile that she showed everyone when she turned around.

There was no sign of her being flustered or upset.

Without a doubt, she was taken aback when Watanabe saw us.

But she quickly adjusted and decided what she should do next.

She ushered Watanabe into the entrance area and locked the door to the genkan after getting my approval.

(TL NOTE: Genkan(玄関) is like an extended entryway. Essentially, the room is for removing shoes before entering the main part of the building.)

While she couldn't lock the door before, with Watanabe inside, the problem was solved.

Being able to calmly manage the situation even in this emergency, when you'd usually lose your cool, was indeed commendable.

"Come in."

With the three of us, the entrance area was a bit cramped. I decided to let Ichinose and Watanabe further into the main room.

His tense expressions clearly conveyed his emotions. Neither of the parties involved seemed to be panic-stricken. It was only natural that he was terrified by our calm demeanors.

The room was unusually quiet, partly because I had turned off the television. Watanabe, who had sat down on his own volition, probably didn't feel alive. "About what happened earlier, I did that on my own. Ayanokōji-kun isn't at fault."

"Y-yes, of course."

"I don't quite like your blatant use of formal speech though."

"S-sorry..."

"I was just hugging him on my own. You saw the situation, so I assume you understand."

Watanabe could only repetitively nod in agreement to Ichinose's composed reasoning.

"I did something bad. I know there's no obligation for you to keep this a secret, Watanabe-kun, but I believe you aren't someone who acts out of malice. I believe you won't spread this story to harm others."

Ichinose was not just silencing him, she was trying to reach his guilty feelings and contain him using his remorse.

Threatening him into silence would not be nearly as effective.

"I'm really sorry, Ayanokōji-kun. I acted on my own volition."

"It's fine."

"I'm glad you say so, but if Karuizawa-san learns about this, she'd get angry... No, she'd be deeply distressed. I'm prepared to take any punishment."

Ichinose knew that I wouldn't punish her over something so trivial.

She was filling in the final 1% after suppressing 99% of Watanabe's urges. Her words and her psychological analysis were spot on. But how far she was planning to take it was another matter. Her genuineness was mixed in her calculated wisdom.

The ratio was unclear, and therefore I couldn't possibly predict everything.

After a while, silence filled the room again.

I couldn't let this silence go on forever.

"Anyway, you two should go home for today."

I suggested they leave. Ichinose seemed to have been waiting for these words, as she immediately acknowledged.

But surprisingly, Watanabe didn't move, he didn't seem to have any intention of standing up. Earlier, he seemed quite panicked, but now, he looked a lot calmer.

I wonder what he's thinking.

“Watanabe?”

As I called his name, he drew a deep sigh and looked between me and Ichinose.

“I was in the wrong. Not knocking before entering someone's room is a breach of manners. I don't think that something like this would serve as a guarantee for staying silent because of this incident... I came back because I had something to discuss with Ayanokōji. So, um, along with that, would you mind hearing a story from my junior high days...?”

I hadn't asked about why Watanabe came back.

“I guess I'll leave now then.”

“W-wait. Ichinose, if you're okay with it... I'd like you to hear my story too.”

Despite this sudden proposal, Ichinose, who was unlikely to decline, held back her feet that were about to step out.

A consultation. Watanabe began by talking about his past.

“When I was in junior high, second year, I had a fateful encounter. I became friends quickly with a girl I met when the classes were shuffled. We were seated together—that was the first connection. She said she found me interesting, and we became increasingly close. We were in the same group on a school trip and I was convinced it was destiny.”

His love story. It might not have been his first love, but it was clear from his demeanor that it was a significant one for Watanabe.

“I even thought she might've liked me since we were so close, but I was clueless back then... she was dating a pretty cheerful guy from the next class. I didn't know that and my feelings for her only intensified.”

Unrequited love. Notwithstanding the difference between men and women, the people in his situation could be replaced with myself, Kei, and Ichinose.

“Every day, I would call her and chat about gibberish even late into the night—”

It didn't feel like a happy memory, his face was filled with bitterness.

“But one day, we really hit it off over the phone. I was shocked when she told me that she liked me. I was so happy... I couldn't answer when she asked me what I thought of her. It probably took me about five minutes to say ‘I like you too.’”

There was an ironic laugh accompanied by a trace of embarrassment and a look of self-deprecation.

“She was dating another guy before you, wasn't she?”

My first thought was that she was two-timing, but Watanabe denied it.

“No... She was dumped by him before that. I don’t know when, but I think their relationship was probably bad around the time she started talking to me on the phone.”

In other words, she fell for Watanabe, someone close to her once she became completely single.

That seemed like a natural course of events with no issues.

“I didn’t know about her past relationships at that time, but she fell for me, the second in line, thanks to being dumped by the normie. I was over the moon, not knowing any of that context.”

Then, Watanabe started dating her.

They were middle school students, so it wasn’t a public relationship, but a secret between them. They exchanged texts and occasionally visited each other’s homes. It seemed to be smooth sailing.

“We managed to kiss twice, you know? Well, she initiated though...”

He seemed a little embarrassed rather than shy.

But fate took a turn for Watanabe when they became third years.

They ended up in different classes due to a class shuffle.

In that class was a male friend from elementary school who apparently ended up liking the girl. It didn’t require much to know what that meant.

“In the end—she apologized to me on the phone while crying. ‘I’m sorry, we can’t date anymore...’ she said. Telling me she liked me on the phone, then telling me she didn’t like me on the phone. It’s laughable.”

After that, she started dating Watanabe’s close friend.

“I guess it couldn’t be helped... but it was hard. What really stung was when my close friend laughed while telling me he had dumped her a few months later.”

Watanabe and the girl’s relationship was a secret. Therefore, his close friend probably didn’t mean any harm.

Of course, it wasn’t impossible that he knew and did it out of spite.

“I’m shy about love... I thought I would never fall for anyone, but then I fell for another girl as soon as I entered this school... Go figure, right?”

Watanabe was positive and cheerful. I always saw him as someone who was just shy about love, but his past was marked by memories that made you think.

“So, there you have it. I never intended to share such an embarrassing past with anyone. So, I want you to believe me... I won’t tell anyone about today.”

An exchange of secrets. That was the best Watanabe could offer.

He played a card he didn’t have to and reiterated that he surrendered unconditionally.

“Today’s talk was going to be about... well, the girl I like. Not that anything has developed, but you know, sometimes you want to talk to friends, right?”

What did Amikura look like today? Was she watching me? Was my story interesting? He seemed like he just wanted to confirm that.

“I was actually planning to turn back immediately, however, Ichinose forgot her phone and delayed my timing a bit... but I never thought she’d stay...”

Of course, it must have been chaos for Watanabe.

Watanabe had heard from Amikura and Himeno that Ichinose might have a crush on me.

Therefore, he wouldn’t be surprised about that part, but that wasn’t the focus here.

“My unrequited love. Nothing more, nothing less. It’s a fact that Mako-chan and Chihiro-chan also know I’m in love with Ayanokōji-kun.”

She admitted it herself as if she could no longer hide it. However, as mentioned earlier, this fact was not well hidden. It was known by quite a few people, so it wasn’t a particularly big revelation.

“I just went back to get something I forgot, and on a whim...”

“I-I see... A whim...”

Watanabe appeared to understand, but he was certainly confused. It was no wonder. Before him was none other than Ichinose. The fact that she had been aggressively pursuing someone, whether it was unrequited love or otherwise, was heavy.

“I think I understand you better after our conversation today, Watanabe-kun. You like Mako-chan, don’t you?”

“Wh-what!? H-how did you...!?”

“It’s obvious if you look at it. Recently, you’ve been especially fixated on Mako-chan.”

Anyone would’ve noticed it at today’s gathering, not just Ichinose. Watanabe’s gaze and passion were intense and too obvious to hide.

“Mako-chan still seems to like her middle school classmate, but she also wants to embark on a new love. I don’t know who Mako-chan’s feelings will be for, but as her best friend, I feel I can trust you.”

This was a loving proposition from Ichinose. Watanabe was trying to seek forgiveness by talking about his past secrets, but Ichinose was planning on implementing an insurance strategy. She offered information about Amikura’s current state and hinted that she might act as a bridge between the two.

Watanabe was timid when it came to love, but his feelings for Amikura were genuine.

It was because they were genuine that he didn’t have the courage to push forward.

If he could depend on Ichinose’s help, it was like having an invaluable asset. A strong ally.

Their relationship of trust went from 100% to 120%. Watanabe's emotions were completely controlled by Ichinose.

"R-really? Are you sure?"

"Of course. First off, you'll need to slowly close the distance with Mako-chan."

"R-right!"

Watanabe replied in excitement. It was likely he still felt guilty for having seen something he shouldn't have, but that would gradually be painted over.

A love triangle. An illicit scandal.

All these things were ultimately someone else's business, something temporary and exciting.

If he were to spread this topic spontaneously, Ichinose would become an enemy.

If he were to keep this topic to himself, Ichinose would become an ally.

If it was clearly advantageous for you, desiring it was only natural.

In conclusion, whether Ichinose and I suffered through a tragic love triangle held no bearing as long as his own love succeeded.

Control a situation that could become perilous and steer it in a favorable direction.

Ichinose noticed that Kanzaki and the others were acting suspiciously.

Watanabe, who had been siding with the Kanzaki's reformation group, had completely joined Ichinose's side here.

It was a difficult decision for me to make.

I had planned to instigate Kanzaki to change the class, but it could be said that Ichinose had already started changing it without my intent.

Whether this action would lead to class unity or chaos was uncertain.

Given this, perhaps it wouldn't be too late to wait and see until the end of the school year—

3

It was around 8 in the evening.

Alone in my room, I, Hashimoto, let out a big sigh.

“No contact as expected. She’s probably planning to just relax and wait for the exam,” I thought.

Given her past achievements, the probability of her winning without doing anything wasn’t low.

Seventy or eighty percent. That was how likely it would be for Sakayanagi to secure first place or at worst, second.

But this alone wouldn’t be enough.

There was something crucial that needed to be done to ensure we maintain Class A.

I prepared myself and called Sakayanagi. It would be a battle to determine how I’d fight.

“It’s unusual for you to call at this hour, Hashimoto-kun.”

Sakayanagi’s voice came through the phone, accompanied by soft classical music in the background.

“Sorry for calling so late, princess.”

“Don’t worry. Please tell me what you have on your mind.”

You could easily tell from her calm demeanor that she had plenty of time to converse.

“Today’s tea party was fun, but there are some things that I need to address. Based on my investigations, it seems that the potential risk isn’t present. I thought I would report that to assure you.”

It was just a jab. I created a flow to gauge her reaction. I would take it slow and steady. It was for this reason that I had simulated this many times in my head after returning home.

“What risk are you referring to?”

This woman always played dumb even when she knew what was going on.

It would’ve been fine if it were towards the enemies, but it was more aimed at allies.

She didn’t want uncontrolled information in her ears, just to enjoy everything on her own terms.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? The possibility that the three classes will join hands and attack Class A. If the three classes join hands, they can manipulate the majority of points. There’d be no chance of winning if done fairly.”

“You seem rather worried about such a small issue.”

It was no small issue to face all three classes as enemies? I was nervously trying to figure out if that possibility existed.

“I’m worried. You may not be, Princess, but for me, forming alliances is a threat in itself. It allows them to fire concentrated attacks at Class A.”

“These three classes are fighting their hardest to get to Class A. They want to win as many class points as possible in the special exam. It won’t be easy for them to join hands just to bring down Class A.”

I understood what she was saying. Even if Class A places last, we would just drop from the top. Ichinose and Ryūen’s classes wouldn’t profit substantially. Ayanokōji and Horikita’s class would stand to lose if they got first.

“But if someone capable of carrying that out lurks in the shadows, then it’s a different story.”

If Ayanokōji was the kind of person I thought he was, he’d be able to pull it off.

“I won’t completely deny that possibility. But is that why you called me?”

She seemed to hint that I was wasting her time.

“No, there’s more. In fact, this is the main part. I want to contribute to the class.”

For the sake of the special exam, I conveyed all the information that I had gathered up until that point to Sakayanagi.

Kōenji made a promise with Horikita, and she was going to honor it. I couldn’t specify about it, but it seemed Ryūen had made contact with their classmates and was scheming about something.

Which student from other classes should be prioritized for expulsion, and so on.

I even included obscure details that would seem meaningless to the average person.

“So... this is all the information I have about Horikita’s class.”

I wanted her to buy my enthusiasm.

Action for the purpose of constructing an unshakeable Class A.

“You certainly worked hard to gather information, Hashimoto-kun.”

My wishes had been gratified, and my fervor seemingly resonated over the phone.

“Of course. With a rival earning an astonishing number of Class Points, I want to gather every small piece of information and share it with you, Princess. The best time would have been during that tea party though.”

“You’re a hard worker. Are you dating Maezono-san for information, not love?”

So it had come to this. Sakayanagi may not have legs, but she had many eyes. I had been seen openly dating Maezono several times. I mustn't panic. I had to deal with this calmly.

“Well, that's also part of the strategy. When did you find out?”

“I've noticed that you've been in contact with her a lot recently. The audio data regarding the Ayanokōji 'threat discussion' that you shared with Masumi-san, was prepared by her, wasn't it?”

“Oh, dear. Did Masumi-chan tell you that?”

This is bad for my heart.

I would've been scared stiff if I hadn't prepared for the worst.

Even if I asked Kamuro, she would probably say, ‘I wasn't told not to tell Sakayanagi. Even if I was told, whether or not I would tell is up to me.’

“Anyway, I hope you can utilize the information, Princess.”

“I will sincerely accept your kindness. I'm not sure how much use I can make out of it, but I'll put it to good use.”

“If I heard correctly, it doesn't sound like you want to utilize the information.”

“I already have a basic strategy. I will not rely solely on the information you've collected. However, now that I've heard it, there are parts I'll inevitably have to incorporate.”

She seemed less than thrilled with the information now that she knew it.

“Is it unnecessary?”

“Yes. During the special exam, unexpected things can lead to fun. You actually stole some of my fun.”

She never failed to amuse me with her ridiculous statements.

She treated the classes as her own property and didn't even try to fight for the Class A privileges.

‘It's just a hobby. Don't get me involved in such things.’

“So, can you guarantee that you can win this time?”

“I won't lose. You'll understand if you watch from the sidelines.”

Based on her confidence and past results, I might have been less worried.

I had gathered too much information.

Ayanokōji's existence had forced significant changes in my plans.

”Jeez, you're so confident... I get it. Then don't worry about what I said. I'll just observe, as long as no problems arise.”

At that point, it was pointless to press further.

For me, I had vented all I could during this phone call.

“Please do. Then...”

During the call, her voice remained calm, but it seemed like she was suppressing her unease.

Sakayanagi hated help. She wanted to fight with the information she collected and her own mind only.

That was why she was annoyed by the unexpected provision of information. Even if it wasn't the best, it felt a bit refreshing.

“Serves you right.”

I had taken a few blows, but my battle was far from over.

This was where the real deal began.

Compared to the resolve it took to call Sakayanagi, I don't know how much more I'll need, but I will execute my winning strategy.

Chapter 6: The Square of Offense and Defense

IT SEEMED THAT the teachers had completed the preparation for the special exam the day before. When I went to school at the usual time this morning, the inside of the classroom had slightly changed.

The five desks in the front row where Horikita and the others sat were slightly pushed forward, with a tablet and pen placed on each of them. Furthermore, dividers were installed at each end of the desk. Looks like they implemented measures to prevent students from cheating when they look to the desks adjacent to them.

Even if there were no dividers, there was still a peep-proof filter applied to the tablet. Therefore, the role of the dividers may have been to prevent indirectly communicating information, such as via eye contact.

Five new desks and chairs were placed behind the last row, probably set up for the five students who originally sat in the front row.

A maximum of five nominated students would sit in the new front row and solve the problems.

It was practically impossible to easily cheat with the new setup. It allowed teachers to closely monitor the students.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

I asked Horikita, who had just taken her seat behind me.

“About the usual. There was nothing more I could do, and all I had to do was manage my health appropriately.”

“You had a tough time when you got a fever during the first deserted island exam.”

“Shut up. I’ll stab you.”

“I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know why I’d get stabbed, but I didn’t want to, so I apologized.

“Do you feel at ease?” she asked.

“Not at all. In fact, I might become a burden, so please be understanding.”

There was no way Sakayanagi or Ichinose would attack me with a straightforward academic question.

“I’m sorry, but I absolutely won’t use the protection on you.”

“You absolutely won’t, huh...”

It was disheartening to be in a position where no one would protect me from the start. I thought she was half joking, but it was better to think that I wouldn’t be getting any support.

Shortly thereafter, with everyone in Horikita's class confirmed present and without any absences, Chabashira-sensei left the classroom with words of encouragement.

In this type of special exam, it had become customary for a homeroom teacher from another class, not the students' own teacher, to oversee the test. It was an inevitable measure to ascertain fairness.

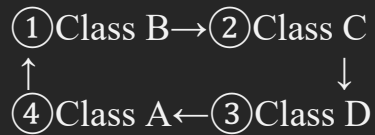
Shortly after, Sakagami-sensei, Ryūen's homeroom teacher, appeared in the classroom.

"I am Sakagami, appointed as the teacher in charge of this class for this exam. I will notify you of the order of attack and some notes for this special exam."

Sakagami-sensei announced, calmly and concisely, and then stopped talking.

He silently operated the tablet and displayed the layout and a notice on the monitor.

Special Exam Layout



NOTICE

The toilet is to be used only during the 10-minute break every four turns. A 40-minute break, including lunchtime, will be given after 10 turns (first half).

Whispering or using your phone is allowed except for when the selected students are solving the problem.

Students who are unable to continue the exam due to ill health or other reasons deemed to be disruptive will be treated as eliminated.

Students found cheating will be immediately treated as eliminated and all their points will be forfeited.

Although the instructions included some new information, there was nothing particularly surprising. The selected students couldn't escape an attack by feigning, nor could they delay it. Unlike regular written exams, the questions were different for each participant, so there wouldn't be a situation where students hid in the bathroom to share their answers with each other. Because of that, students from other classes running into each other wouldn't be an issue. In any case, it was irrelevant if phones could be used.

The class arrangements and attack order seemed more critical.

First, the turn began with Class B, Horikita's class, attacking Ichinose's Class C. Then Ichinose would attack Ryūen's Class D, followed by Ryūen attacking Sakayanagi's Class A. Finally, Sakayanagi's Class A would attack Horikita's class to complete a single turn, which would be repeated for a total of 10 times.

All of this will be reversed in the second half as the order goes counter-clockwise.

Horikita started looking at her phone immediately after confirming the flow of the offense and defense on the screen.

At this point, all strategies against Ryūen's class became unnecessary for Horikita.

She must've switched to pulling up offensive and defensive strategies against Ichinose's class and Sakayanagi's class.

With only a surface evaluation, it was a positive having Ichinose's class as an opponent, a class that was expected to only take straightforward approaches. On the other hand, it would be a negative having to wear down our nerves during a confrontation with Sakayanagi, who had a sharp mind in addition to the overall strength of her class.

As a participant, I decided to watch how it would turn out.

However, there was no time to be so leisurely.

Reviewing the 16 categories of this special exam again, I didn't plan to invalidate the interpretation that being eliminated meant expulsion; this unusual rule even made me bear the risk of expulsion when considering special exams over the last two years. I'd be able to pull through in academic subjects, but in other categories such as 'Subculture' and 'Entertainment,' to put it bluntly, I was below average. Even if there were three exemptions to protect me, there were still chances I would encounter problems I didn't know the answer to, and I couldn't deny the possibility that I could be eliminated.

If Sakayanagi and Ichinose conspired against me and made me the only eliminated student in this class, and the class dropped to last place, expulsion was inevitable.

I didn't think this rule was irrational as a student. Rather, it was only such an exam that made some students shine. It was a way to make the existence of new talents known.

"Now, let's commence the special exam. For the first turn, this class makes the first attack. Please select the category and difficulty level as previously explained and nominate five students."

Sakagami-sensei signaled to start the special exam.

The time limit for the offensive and defensive selections was just three minutes. It wasn't a very generous time limit.

There was no place for thinking during our turn, but for conveying our thoughts. It'd be better to have discussions during the longer time we get observing other classes' movements.

The only time that pattern would break would be in unexpected situations.

"We're starting while flying blind. Let's just proceed as discussed with Hirata-kun and the others."

With a firm confirmation, Horikita reached out to the main tablet.

Since I didn't participate in the discussion, I didn't have any information on their strategies.

The category, difficulty level, and nominees were to be verbally communicated to the leader.

Following Horikita's instructions, Sakagami-sensei immediately reflected her choices on the monitor.

Category 'English' Difficulty Level 1

Offensive's Nominees:

'Kobashi Yume,' 'Watanabe Norihito,' 'Sumida Makoto,' 'Ninomiya Yui,' 'Shibata Sō'

The category was 'English.' The targets were students in Ichinose's class who weren't academically inclined. The class made a strategic choice for a subject that could be easily evaluated; a safe selection. We couldn't be flexible in selecting the difficulty level since the score was still at zero.

Given the fact that we were the first ones up, it was natural to choose an academic-related category. All of the classes, including Horikita's, would determine the tendencies of the questions and the standard difficulty level depending on the first problem.

However, many of Ichinose's students were well-rounded academically, and all their grades were currently C or higher. The students who were called upon became inevitably crucial, but who were struggling with which subjects could only be discerned from past exam results or individual interactions.

It was easier to exploit the opponent's weaknesses with non-academic, irregular categories.

This was because it could easily be fatal for students who weren't familiar with 'Subculture' or 'Entertainment.'

However, it took courage to attack like that in the first move. Because it was irregular, it would be more difficult to judge others' strengths and weaknesses than in academic-related categories, and it was also difficult to anticipate the level of difficulty.

Now, I quietly watched to see who Ichinose was going to protect.

The defensive's nominations were finished, and the screen changed.

Defensive's Protected Students:

'Ninomiya Yui,' 'Watanabe Norihito'

"So that means these two are protected, right?"

Looking at the monitor, Nishimura, who hasn't fully understood the situation, confirmed with Horikita.

"...That's right. Ichinose-san's class has unconditionally earned two points. It was up to the remaining three to decide whether they get more points or not."

In Ichinose's class, three students had opted out of doing the 'English' category. While they had the option to choose from 36 students, excluding the leader, the fact that two of them were protected wasn't a favorable outcome.

This wasn't surprising. It seemed that they directly defended classmates who weren't good at English.

It might've been because it was the first turn, but it was a very straightforward move.

The question shown to the opponent's class was also displayed here.

'Add one word to the following sentence and rearrange it so that the meaning remains the same.'

In order for everyone to grow, a certain amount of hardship is always necessary.

【everyone/amount/necessary/always/a/grow/of/hardship/for/is/to】

(TL NOTE: The above text in brackets was originally English in the raw Japanese text, while the sentence above that is in Japanese. The students are supposed to use words from the brackets to solve the translation question.)

"What is this? Isn't this difficult!?"

Some students similar to Ike cried out, standing up from their seats and with their heads in their arms.

At the same time, academically capable students like Horikita and Yōsuke exchanged complex glances.

"The difficulty seems just about right."

"Right. It's not too difficult if you regularly study."

Looking at the given problem, the class's thoughts would've been divided in two.

Ichinose's class was academically stable.

How much the lower performing students could achieve was going to be revealed—

The results of the remaining three students who answered the first question were displayed on the monitor.

Correct Students:

'Kobashi Yume,' 'Shibata Sō'

With those two protected, the total points amounted to four. It was more than enough to start.

Next, Ichinose's class launched an attack on Ryūen's class. The category was 'Economics.'

In response, Ryūen managed to protect one person.

However, they were unable to produce any correct answers and only managed to secure one point.

The disadvantage of having many students who were weak at studying was already showing.

It was a painful situation, as Ichinose had gained four points in comparison, but there was no time to be disheartened.

They had a chance to cancel out the score if they had secured four or more points when they were on the defensive. It was important to avoid having the nominees protected and to prevent the opponents from getting the correct answers, but what was more important in this special exam was to get a high percentage of questions right when on the defensive side. Only then could they earn points.

In Ryūen class's attack, Sakayanagi protected one person, and three answered the question correctly and received four points.

Then, at the end of the first turn, Sakayanagi's class began their attack on Horikita's class.

“It's about to start.”

“Yes. I wonder how Sakayanagi-san will attack...”

Sakayanagi's chosen category was announced.

Category 'Arithmetic' Difficulty Level 1

In arithmetics, there were questions like simple mental math with addition and multiplication or fill-in-the-blanks. How challenging would they be at difficulty level one? There were a surprising number of students who were weak in math; seven people in Horikita's class had chosen it as one of their excluded categories.

However, the point of contention was certainly how Kōenji was treated.

If we were to stick to the promise, we'd need to protect him.

He was a guy who demonstrated exceptional talent in the deserted island exam, but he basically lived freely and didn't have a proactive approach toward special exams. Yet, there were few reasons for other classes to specifically target the highly talented and quick-witted Kōenji.

But a promise was a promise. How would they judge based on that—

Defensive's Protected Students:

'Sonoda Chiyoda,' 'Ichihashi Ruri,' 'Okitani Kyōsuke,' 'Ike Kanji,' 'Makida Susumu'

Kōenji's name was not included in the five that Horikita had chosen to protect.

Kōenji, who didn't care about the special exam, showed no reaction to the result.

"H-hey, Suzune. Are you sure you don't need to protect that guy?"

Sudō panicked. He seemed to have been keeping an eye on Kōenji the whole time.

"The exam only puts you at risk of expulsion if you get eliminated. I decided he was safe until he got two questions wrong. There's no other reason to protect him from the onset."

"Well, yeah, that makes sense..."

Sudō was surprised for a moment, but he was immediately convinced.

"However, in return, of course, Kōenji-kun is free to either answer the given task seriously or leave it blank. Are you fine with that?"

Kōenji didn't seem to have been bothered by the fact that she had asked after the plan was already established.

"Do as you like."

Even though she promised not to let him get expelled, it wasn't like she could protect him from everything like a baby. The measures Horikita took were the minimum required strategy.

Moreover, she assured him that he could freely answer the questions, but if he actually got selected, it was possible that even Kōenji would want to avoid being pointlessly eliminated. Even if someone was said to be 99% safe, they usually still worried about the remaining 1%. They wouldn't strangle themselves.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

'Okitani Kyōsuke,' 'Ike Kanji'

Offensive's Nominees:

'Ishikura Kayoko,' 'Kikuchi Eita,' 'Inogashira Kokoro'

Horikita successfully protected two members in her first defense.

That was a large score of two. Although it was the first turn, she managed to rank third at this point.

If all three nominees were to answer the question correctly, she could temporarily rise to first place. But would they?

The nervous participants sat in front of the tablet displaying the question and confronted it.

Until they were finished answering, they had to remain silent, so the spectators quietly watched over them.

'Time limit 1 minute. $15 \times 24 \times 16 = ?$ '

They were asked a multiplication question. Of course, the three of them had no choice but to solve it mentally.

The difficulty would greatly increase if they had to solve it in their heads, even for an answer that could easily be found calculating on paper. It appeared to be an easy question, but seeing the panic in the participants, it was clear that they were struggling.

The minute flew by, and the result was... one correct answer.

The other two, excluding Ishikura, missed the answer and returned to their seats apologetically.

Upon seeing the choices and their results, I was curious about Sakayanagi's interesting decision in the first turn.

Ishikura is one of the strongest math students in the class. Arithmetics and math, to some extent, call for two different skills, but numbers are involved in both. Ishikura didn't need to feel at risk when trying to select the right answer. There were other holes that Sakayanagi could've targeted besides the seven that were exempted from 'Arithmetics.'

It was possible that Sakayanagi was ignorant of Ishikura's abilities, but she saw Ishikura tackle a math problem in our first year's final exam. Some other random student could've missed it, but I can't imagine Sakayanagi doing so.

Alternatively, she could've decided that we wouldn't protect students good at arithmetic like Ishikura, and therefore chose her to ensure that she would take on the task.

With all the offensive and defensive tasks over, the first turn had ended.

With three points, it wasn't a bad start, and the class got off to a safe first turn.

In the second turn, Horikita announced five names as the attacker.

Ichinose's class failed to protect any students, and two of them got the question right, earning them a total score of 6 points.

Ryūen's class successfully protected one student and one of them got the question right, earning a total score of 3 points.

Sakayanagi's class successfully protected 1 student and 3 of them got the question right, earning a total score of 8 points.

It had just started, but a slight difference among the classes had begun to form in just the second turn.

It was now the second defensive turn for Horikita's class.

Sakayanagi changed her chosen category from 'Arithmetic' to 'Gourmet Food,' with a difficulty of 1.

Even though I wasn't asked, I'd wager that my classmates have already assessed who excels or falters in this type of category. Horikita confidently told Sakagami-sensei the names of her five protected members.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

None

Offensive's Nominees:

'Kōenji Rokusuke,' 'Hasebe Haruka,' 'Hirata Yōsuke,' 'Yukimura Teruhiko,' 'Onodera Kayano'

Unfortunately, the protected slots ended up being a complete miss.

The problem laid in the list of people who had been nominated. Kōenji's name was listed first among the five candidates.

It was a long, 20-turn battle, and it wasn't strange that Kōenji would be nominated...

But what mattered was how Kōenji would behave when he was given a task he could solve on his own.

'State the meaning of a knife and fork being placed on a plate in the shape of '八' while eating French cuisine.'

(TL NOTE: 八 is the kanji for 8, they are meant to trace this shape.)

It was a simple question that could easily be answered with the knowledge learned since entering school.

But Kōenji's result was... incorrect due to him leaving it blank.

He clearly hadn't even moved to pick up the pen.

Of the remaining four, it seemed that Keisei had unfortunately made a mistake in answering.

Immediately after it was announced that he was incorrect, he smacked the table as if suddenly remembering the correct answer.

Although this was a bit of a setback, an additional three points were earned, bringing the total score up to six.

"Hey! Kōenji, you're not taking this seriously, are you?!"

Although he wasn't shouting, Sudō expressed his anger.

This wasn't just his personal opinion. You could say this was him taking the initiative to represent the class and warn him.

It was only natural for the others to be upset if he showed no intent to try to solve the problem.

“You’re wrong to blame me. If you’re dissatisfied, all you have to do is guard me next time.”

“Screw you... You’re just saying whatever you like...”

It was natural for him to feel dissatisfied, but there was no need to worry unless two mistakes were made.

The class must’ve felt a little relieved seeing Horikita’s unconcerned stance on the blank answer.

It would be a problem if she didn’t keep their promise and went on a rampage to expel Kōenji, but she probably didn’t want to use the valuable protection slot in vain.

Kōenji, who held his ground, gave Horikita a smirk and returned to his seat.

On the other hand, Keisei, who had genuinely made a mistake on the problem, came down to apologize to Horikita.

“I’m sorry, Horikita, I was so nervous that the answer didn’t come to me right away... even though I was supposed to know it.”

“I’m not that worried about you. But, just to be safe, if I feel like you’re being attacked in the same category again, I’m going to protect you. Alright?”

Sakayanagi would never leave any stone unturned. That was why Keisei obediently nodded, knowing that if Horikita sensed danger, she would firmly protect him. In return, Horikita also nodded.

The battle began this way, alternating between offense and defense.

Every time a question was presented, the students probably had no spare time to keep an eye on their phones as part of their strategy.

On the other hand, the leader didn’t have to worry about being nominated, but they also didn’t have a moment’s rest.

Were they ready to appropriately change the nominated students and how would they deal the question to the opponent?

With almost no time to even talk, Horikita was scrambling between her phone and the opened notebook.

Sakayanagi’s turn came around for the third time. She attacked again with a ‘Gourmet Food’ question.

And yet, the difficulty level remained at one. It would be an easy question. Given that we had answered correctly on our own three times, I didn’t think she would pick the same category again, but it seemed that her aim was different.

Did she see a gap in how Kōenji and Keisei, two capable class members, had gotten it wrong?

As per the strategy communicated beforehand, Horikita was to protect Keisei while selecting four others.

However—

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:
None

Offense Side Nominated:
'Kōenji Rokusuke,' 'Sōshi Miyamoto,' 'Wataru Ijūin,' 'Satō Maya,' 'Sana Azuma'

This made it the second consecutive nomination for Kōenji. Moreover, the rest of the lineup was totally changed.

On the contrary, Sakayanagi hadn't nominated Keisei, whom Horikita had protected.

"Did she read us? I wonder..."

As the words suggested, attacking and defending was a game of reading each other. If they attacked in the same category, it was standard for the defense to move to prevent elimination. Naturally, there was no point in aiming for Keisei, who could potentially be protected.

However, the same went for Kōenji.

For both Kōenji and Keisei—I wondered what different criteria Sakayanagi had in mind.

One thing was for sure, it was a precise read, as if she'd seen right through our thoughts.

Kōenji, who rose from his seat again, walked up with confidence.

"Kōenji-kun. Although we can't force you as a class, I think it would be prudent to get this right for your own sake."

Once everyone was sitting at the test-taking seats, conversing was strictly prohibited, so Yōsuke had to tell him as Kōenji passed by.

However, seemingly unconcerned about being protected in future turns, Kōenji once again submitted a blank answer. This was too much for his classmates to endure, but the saving grace was that the remaining four had answered correctly.

In other words, the third question was simpler and more common sense.

It was hard to be content with Kōenji's performance. If he was participating properly, there was a chance he could answer everything perfectly, and he wouldn't even need to be protected.

At the end of the third turn, Sakayanagi's class was in first place with 11 points, Horikita's class in second place with 10 points, Ichinose's class in third place with 9 points, and Ryūen's class at the bottom with 5 points. If Kōenji had cooperated, we would've had 12 points and been in first place.

There was nothing that could be done with Kōenji refusing to respond to Yōsuke's request.

Sakayanagi's class, which had consistently held first place since the start, should be stopped as soon as possible, but we could only wait and see what would happen in the first half of the exam, and everything depended on Ryūen's skill. However, Ryūen's class clearly seemed to be behind and struggling in both offense and defense.

Rather than being about luck or the ability to read each other, it seemed like the difference in capabilities among the class was apparent.

It was the fourth turn, and Horikita's defensive turn came.

Category 'Gourmet Food' Difficulty Level 2

Here, Sakayanagi surprisingly picked the same genre for the third consecutive time.

However, this time, the difficulty level had increased to 2, meaning she had spent one point to attack.

"Again with the 'Gourmet Food.' What the hell is Sakayanagi thinking?"

However, the class was more preoccupied with the repeated selection of the same category than the difficulty level.

Given that Kōenji was now on the brink of elimination, were they planning to intensify their attack?

Among all the classes, this was the first time the difficulty level had been raised, probably as an experimental attempt, considering that the first and second problems were simple.

"No matter how you look at it, Kōenji won't try here, right?"

"Don't you know? They might think this is a chance to defeat Kōenji-kun."

Up to this point, Kōenji had consistently left 'Gourmet Food' questions unanswered. He no longer had any leeway. Should he defend himself because of this, or was he deliberately not trying precisely because of his vulnerable position?

This category choice was clearly being swayed by the enemy with Kōenji at the center.

However, the circumstances of this class were unlike those of a typical one.

If he failed here as well, Kōenji would become the first eliminated in the class.

Given that she had agreed to protect him beforehand, if Horikita were to uphold her honor, she would have no choice but to put it into action.

If the enemy was targeting Kōenji, he could secure them a point.

However, while all eyes were on Horikita, Kōenji's name was not among the five mentioned.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

'Shinohara Satsuki,' 'Sudō Ken'

Offensive's Nominees:

'Kōenji Rokusuke,' 'Sotomura Hideo,' 'Miyake Akito'

The classmates who had been quietly watching until now were visibly confused.

“H-Horikita-san?”

Yōsuke was the most astonished. He'd believed in the promise and sprang up.

“Suzune, are you okay? I mean, if Kōenji fails again, he will be eliminated, right?”

Sudō also asked the same question. However, Horikita quietly stared ahead without responding. Even though he was the one who should be most alarmed, Kōenji was the only one in this situation who didn't change his expression.

“Hahaha. You did it, Horikita girl.”

To those who didn't think deeply, it looked as if Horikita had abandoned Kōenji.

A person who broke promises. Such an act of treachery could stick with you. Losing the trust of your class was not a wise move, considering the flow of the unanimous voting exam.

Kōenji, without uttering any more words, came forward and sat down, like the other students.

The question was indeed harder than the last two. Students looked at each other and expressed their confusion by nodding. Normally, it was uncertain how well Kōenji knew gourmet food, but there was a suspicious atmosphere about him.

The three moved to answer.

Then, the man who didn't even hold his pen twice finally moved.

From what was seen, his hand moved smoothly without any hesitation, but is he really...?

Correct Students:

'Kōenji Rokusuke'

For the first time, Kōenji's name appeared in the correct students column, avoiding both a blank and incorrect answer.

This meant that Kōenji had solved the question in order to avoid elimination.

“What's the matter, Kōenji? You were scared after all, weren't you?!”

Sudō made fun of Kōenji, who had seriously answered the question, and expressed his relief.

He expressed an attitude that he wouldn't want people to be eliminated, even if he disliked them.

"I'll leave that for you to decide."

Kōenji's thoughts were unclear, but according to common sense, it was only natural.

If he didn't get the right answer, he'd be eliminated and become a candidate for expulsion.

The current concern would be Horikita's choice.

The reality was that she didn't protect Kōenji, who left a blank answer twice and was on the verge of elimination.

Even if he answered seriously when cornered, one mistake would have meant the end.

It was a situation where she had to protect him, even if she was confident he'd get the correct answer.

The class was troubled by this, and even Yōsuke couldn't easily verify the truth.

Of course, this man who was directly involved was an exception.

Kōenji, who passed me by and stood in front of Horikita, muttered.

"What's your intention? I'd like to hear your reasons."

"Reasons? Was there a problem?"

"Oh?"

Kōenji smiled at Horikita, who looked up at Kōenji without any embarrassment.

"You're not out. You don't have to worry about being eliminated at this point, right?"

"But if I hadn't gotten the right answer, I would have been eliminated. What'd you think of that?"

"But you gave the correct answer."

"Hmm, indeed. My apologies, it seems I acted preemptively."

"If you understand, could you go back to your seat? From your height, you're blocking my view of the monitor."

Everyone except Kōenji was confused by the conversation. It seemed as if she had abandoned him.

I could've calmed everyone down by explaining Horikita's thoughts and the benefits of not protecting Kōenji, but of course, I continued to watch silently.

It wasn't that I wanted to make the class nervous for no reason, but I had another aim.

The fact that Horikita, the leader, didn't explain things to her classmates was the best evidence of this.

Horikita didn't panic in the face of the class's suspicious looks. She didn't nominate Kōenji to be protected even under Sakayanagi's attack in the fifth round, which was likely to be more serious.

But at the same time, Kōenji's name disappeared from the list of those being attacked.

From other students' perspectives, without any protection on Kōenji, since he had reached this point, he would be the one to target, but Sakayanagi had avoided doing this.

There was a chance that Kōenji, who had seriously answered the question and was the only one to correctly answer the difficulty level 2 'Gourmet Food' question, was recognized as a tough competitor.

Many students probably misunderstood it this way. By Kōenji answering correctly instead of submitting a blank paper, it could no longer be expected that he'd make more mistakes. So, they started avoiding nominating him.

It was a risky bet that could've lost the trust of her peers, but Horikita won with her intuition.

Kōenji's name was absent from the nomination. Upon seeing the results, Horikita's face darkened.

"I guess the opponent won't easily fall for it..."

Being close to her, I was the only one able to pick up on her quiet mumbles.

The first half of the special exam went smoothly as countless exciting offensive and defensive battles unfurled.

It was a common occurrence in all classes, but the number of students who answered wrong gradually increased. By the end of the 7th turn, Ishizaki from Ryūen's class was the first to be out. He was followed in the 8th turn by Sotomura and Ijūin from Horikita's class, along with Isoyama and Yano from Ryūen's class. Kamuro from Sakayanagi's class was eliminated as well. As the last turn of the first half came to an end, Hondō from Horikita's class, Morofuji from Ryūen's class, and Yamamura from Sakayanagi's class were also eliminated.

Results at the end of the first half:

1st: Sakayanagi [Class A] 29 points, with Kamuro and Yamamura out.

2nd: Horikita [Class B] 28 points, with Sotomura, Ijūin, and Hondō out.

3rd: Ichinose [Class C] 24 points, with no losses.

4th: Ryūen [Class D] 19 points, with Ishizaki, Isoyama, Yano, and Morofuji out.

A total count of nine people were out. It seemed like a lot, but I was sure the second half would only accelerate things.

Many students were already on the brink after making their second mistake, so the number could increase.

In spite of this, only Ichinose's class had yet to have any eliminations.

At first glance, this could've been seen as Ichinose's fine play, but it wasn't.

"Your strategy worked out, Horikita-san," Yōsuke praised, approaching Horikita.

"Yes, her stance hasn't changed even in this special exam. Thanks to that, we managed to keep things under control."

I wonder how many of her classmates realized that Horikita had been strategizing against Ichinose.

The reason there were no dropouts was due to Horikita's tactics. She intentionally targeted attacks to ensure that five members of the opposing side were perpetually on the brink of elimination.

Ichinose was determined to protect her classmates at all costs. Hence, to ensure that a sixth member wasn't pushed to the brink, Horikita diversified her attacks.

On the other hand, even though Ichinose understood that the attacks were being spread out, she seemed determined to continue protecting those on the brink.

Ever since those five members were put at risk, not a single protection had been successful.

If even one person failed to be protected and was eliminated, there would be a chance of expulsion.

"But she really is unyielding. Normally, no one would take such a reckless defense strategy. She knows that even if she manages to protect people in the first half, it will gradually become tougher."

Exactly. As it stood, her class had the highest number of students who answered incorrectly.

"In the second half, Ichinose-san will have to protect her class from Ryūen-kun. That could be tough."

"Assuming she gives up protecting everyone in the second half, perhaps, but..."

Knowing Ryūen, he might make a big move in the last turn or two.

"But for now, we need to focus on ourselves. With only one point behind, we still have a chance."

Sakayanagi's class was a step ahead from the beginning, but Horikita was catching up. Her class seemed to be covering for her being slightly behind.

"As far as I can tell, the school designs the questions so that, excluding cases where students have been successfully protected, roughly half of the students will be able to answer them correctly. However, when the difficulty increases by one

level, the success rate drops to about 20%, and at difficulty level three, it's only around 10%.”

Difficulty level three hardly left any possibility of a correct answer, and you couldn't use two points often.

Being protected could offset the losses, but the second half likely wouldn't see an increase in the usage of it.

It was interesting to watch the two top-ranked classes battling it out, but the bottom two classes were concerning too, especially Ryūen's class, which had fallen quite behind in the first half.

Assuming the trend continued and more were eliminated, the first-place line was set to be around 50-55 points. In the second half alone, Ryūen would need to score at least an extra 30 points to compete.

In general, students with higher academic abilities tend to be less targeted. However, at the same time, they may also be less protected, and there were instances where some students made mistakes in unexpected categories.

It seemed that non-academic questions, such as those related to 'Subculture' or 'Gourmet Food,' were often set to be easier due to their wide range, despite being of the same difficulty level.

Incidentally, I had slipped up once in a similarly unrelated category.

'What was the name of the animal that made headlines for being adorable when it stood on two legs in a zoo?'

On this 'News' question, not knowing what the animal was, I casually wrote 'dog' and received a cold stare from Horikita.

By the way, the correct answer was a red panda.

1

During the break for lunch, I asked Horikita for a little bit of her time and led her out into the corridor.

“The answer was a red panda, okay?”

“That’s not what I mean. There was something that bothered me about the test.”

I hadn’t expected her to hit me with what just happened so quickly.

“Just kidding. But I didn’t think you would call me out. Did you have some advice for me?”

“Not exactly advice, but have you noticed the pattern in the order of the names when the attackers designated five names this time?”

“I wonder if there was such a pattern... I honestly didn’t pay attention to the order. It wasn’t in alphabetical order, or boys first and then girls either, was it?”

“I can’t say for sure unless I ask the attackers from other classes, but there was no consistent pattern on the five people you named. In other words, they show in the same order as the leader voices them.”

“I see. That might be true. So?”

“What caught my attention was Sakayanagi’s naming order from the second to the fourth turn. At that time, Kōenji was targeted three times in a row, and he was first each time.”

“In other words, she had decided to target Kōenji-kun by the second round, and continued to target him first until he got it right...? And during the second round, wasn’t Yukimura-kun also wrong?”

“Yes, Kōenji would be a threat if you look at his pure ability, but Keisei is definitely more of a hassle in terms of overall ability. Yet, Sakayanagi didn’t even nominate Keisei, who had made a mistake, in the third round.”

“I thought she had simply read me wrong. She might have decided that I would protect him because I deemed Yukimura-kun important, right?”

“Indeed, she might have excluded Keisei as an attack target for that reason. But Kōenji’s explanation doesn’t add up. He was wrong twice in a row in the second and third rounds, but after he got it right in the fourth round, his name didn’t show up at all in the first half of the battle from the fifth round onwards. It makes sense if he was protected, but he got the answer right in the fourth round on his own. So the other side should know that we didn’t protect him even once.”

“Sakayanagi-san had Kōenji-kun on her radar early on. Even though he made two mistakes and was on edge, she stopped attacking him as soon as he got one right. That seems unnatural.”

It was better to create as many eliminations as possible. She should have continued to attack since he had a high chance of not being protected.

“Was she wary of his knowledge?”

“If that were the case, she wouldn’t have had to make the effort to target Kōenji from the start. That doesn’t explain why she nominated him three times in a row.”

“...Does Sakayanagi-san know about the promise I made with Kōenji-kun?”

“That’s a natural assumption. Given that there’s a promise, Kōenji most likely wouldn’t take it seriously, and you wouldn’t protect him until he fails twice—she must have taken that into account.”

Of course, there was also a chance that Kōenji would seriously answer the question or that Horikita would protect him from the start. But in that case, she should’ve quickly excluded Kōenji as an attack target from the third round onwards.

“But then, why did she not target him after the fifth round? I chose not to protect him with the protection slot, didn’t I?”

“That choice is exactly why. When her aim to force you to use up one protection slot on Kōenji fell through, she saw no benefit in eliminating Kōenji. Rather, she decided it would be a loss.”

“Even though she can get us to lose a point with each elimination?”

“Yes. You said before the test that you had a way to keep the damage to a minimum in case we ended up at the bottom. That choice was to eliminate Kōenji, wasn’t it?”

“...You knew, huh?”

“The promise with Kōenji was not to ‘expel’ him, but to ‘let him do as he pleases.’ Since you didn’t impose any restrictions on Kōenji in this special exam, it goes without saying that you kept the promise to let him do as he pleases. The other promise was to not let him be expelled. Even if Kōenji ended up being the only one eliminated, the expulsion could be avoided by coughing up the Protection Point.”

Kōenji had won a Protection Point with his victory in the deserted island exam, thus giving him the right to prevent his own expulsion.

“That’s right. I never promised to protect Kōenji-kun’s Protection Point. As long as he isn’t expelled, my promise holds. There is no reason to hold a grudge.”

Even if we lost one point due to elimination, all we needed to do was use up Kōenji’s Protection Point when others were eliminated. This meant there was no risk of someone being expelled due to the class coming in last place.

“However, I suppose I made everyone in class anxious by not protecting him.”

“If you explain, Kōenji will realize your intention.”

“Exactly. Still, it seems like he realized that I wasn’t guarding him really quickly. It would’ve been easier to manage the second half of the battle if he had been eliminated early.”

So, Kōenji got the answer right on his own.

He thought it was too much of a hassle to have his Protection Point stripped from him.

“It’s reasonable to assume that Sakayanagi, given her personality, didn’t want to relieve the pressure of ‘a possible expulsion’ against our class,” I said.

“Yes, her personality is reflected in every action she takes. But why didn’t Kōenji-kun aim to answer correctly from the first question?”

“I can’t answer that. He might have thought that it wasn’t too late to start from the third question. Anyway, what I want to say is that there may be students in the class who are leaking information to the other classes.”

I decided to tell her, judging that this was for the sake of not only the current exam but for future ones as well.

“Thank you. I will be careful about that from now on.”

“Let’s end the discussion here. What are you going to do for lunch?”

“I didn’t have time to make a boxed lunch, so maybe I should go to the cafeteria. How about you?”

“Well, I might as well. Kei is probably having a staring contest with her phone.”

As I answered her, turning towards the classroom, Horikita nodded as if she understood.

In the first half, Kei was not nominated by Sakayanagi and got through unscathed.

But of course, that didn’t mean she was safe. She could be eliminated in a minimum of three questions.

She wanted to cram knowledge into her head, even if just barely, to avoid that.

2

The Survival and Elimination Special Exam had begun, and the first turn was progressing leisurely.

Ryūen, who received the first attack from Ichinose's class, had only one successful protection out of the five he nominated. Furthermore, none of the students answered the question correctly. The start was anything but good.

But this was not surprising. Ryūen's class had many students he had to protect for their academics but had obvious points of weakness. Even apart from the students who chose to exclude 'Economics,' the category Ichinose chose, about half the class would be anxious about that category.

On the other hand, as a result of the attack from Horikita's class, Ichinose's class scored a total of four points.

A gap of three points had occurred from the first turn, and a heavy air had already begun to form.

However, it wasn't because they couldn't score points.

"Now, as the next attacker, please make the nomination against Class A!"

Hoshinomiya cheerfully sent instructions to the leader, but Ryūen didn't move.

He quietly stared at his phone.

"Hello~ Can you hear me?"

She called him again from the podium just in case he hadn't heard her, but Ryūen still didn't move.

As could be understood from the prior rule explanations, the nomination time was steadily decreasing by the second without stopping.

In the first-turn attack, selecting who to target was usually decided ahead of time. Even though Hoshinomiya thought it should be common sense, Ryūen didn't move even after 60 seconds had passed.

Normally, it wouldn't be strange for classmates to ask, 'Are you okay?' However, no one pointed it out. No, most people in this class couldn't point it out even if they wanted to.

After returning to the front lines, Ryūen exuded an even more overwhelming sense of domination than ever before.

It was rare for Hoshinomiya to see the tense situation in Ryūen's class, but it wasn't the same for the classmates.

This was their everyday usual scenery.

If Kaneda, who was in the role of advisor, moved, the situation would be resolved quickly, but typically, he tended to wait for Ryūen's instructions, so nothing could be expected.

During such times, the gaze of the lost classmates naturally turned to Katsuragi more often.

He was a transfer from another class, but he was already recognized in that class as Ryūen's advisor.

Along with his exceptional overall abilities in the OAA, his most important factor was his fearless attitude towards Ryūen.

Ibuki could be irrationally arrogant, but Katsuragi was rational. However, the well-relied-on Katsuragi... didn't move.

He closed his eyes, crossed his arms, and allowed the offensive's time limit to pass.

Maybe he resigned himself, knowing that nothing would change even if he raised his voice in this situation.

Or maybe he was calmly waiting, having already expected something like this to happen.

Either way, many students could only silently watch.

"You know, it's still the first turn, right? A difference of 3 points isn't that big of a deal. You shouldn't get too worked up."

Hoshinomiya cheered them on, treating the fact that they couldn't withstand merely the first attack as a trivial matter.

Her actions lacked impartiality as a teacher, but she couldn't remain silent for the sake of the students, who were most likely full of anxiety.

This was an excuse. The reality was that she couldn't let Sakayanagi's class, who were up against her class led by Ichinose, score points. If they kept getting high scores with a reckless strategy, there would be no chance of winning.

Although it was a calculated move, in the ensuing silence, Hoshinomiya realized that her judgment was wrong.

Even though many students felt suspicious about Ryūen's lack of action, hardly any felt uneasy.

Normally silence could often lead to bad outcomes, but this class had nurtured a unique strength.

They accepted the abnormal situation where no one was named for nearly two minutes.

Hoshinomiya began to think that perhaps there was a secret strategy in this silence.

Sakayanagi's class would have zero successful protections and an ideal nomination that could cause many students to answer incorrectly—was he pondering such a fanciful strategy?

As the remaining time neared thirty seconds, Ryūen announced five names.

"W-wait, wait, wait. I'll input it quickly." Following his voice, Hoshinomiya swiftly operated the tablet.

Category 'Lifestyle' Difficulty 1

Offensive's Nominees:

*'Kitō Hayato,' 'Kamuro Masumi,' 'Hashimoto Masayoshi,' 'Machida Kōji,'
'Yamamura Miki'*

Hoshinomiya quickly finished inputting the names, but she was taken aback upon seeing which five students were selected. To her, it seemed that students close to Sakayanagi were picked.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

'Machida Kōji'

After much deliberation, a decision was made, and Class A was only able to successfully protect one student. But a problem laid ahead.

Correct Students:

'Kitō Hayato,' 'Kamuro Masumi,' 'Hashimoto Masayoshi'

Out of the remaining four, three got it right.

Giving the opposing class four points, they were only stuck with one; a bad start. Indeed, they were not promising. Hoshinomiya thought they looked surprisingly cool, which almost made her admire them. But inside, she realized that they weren't up to the task. It was unlikely that they'd crush Sakayanagi's class.

Ryūen's strategy, even after this, could hardly be called sharp. Most of the students designated were the same as in the first round.

Some changes were made to disrupt, but those were mostly kept at a rate of every other turn, continuing to nominate Kitō, Kamuro, Hashimoto, Yamamura, Machida, Sanada, Satonaka, and Matoba.

Sakayanagi too, of course, kept efficiently piling on the protections.

But still, Ryūen didn't significantly change his nominations.

Stuck at the bottom, they just kept racking up the turns.

But by the fifth turn, halfway through the first half, some students had already made two mistakes, and a sense of trepidation should start to creep in. At this time, Hoshinomiya noticed something puzzling.

"Everyone doesn't seem to be panicking at all..."

The reason they couldn't break free from being at the bottom had less to do with their attacks and more with their defense. Clearly, they had a lower percentage of correct answers than any other class, and they weren't earning the

points they should. Normally, one would seek clues to find the correct answers every single minute and second.

However, there were students who weren't even tense.

Hoshinomiya pretended to keep watch, walking around the classroom, casually peeking at each student's phone.

They weren't playing around; they were browsing various websites and videos, gearing up for their weak spots.

Maybe they couldn't make a sound because they were under Ryūen's control and were too tense.

She thought about it, but—

“Kaneda-kun, it seems like you're not doing anything. Are you fully prepared?”

Among the students who were busy preparing, Hoshinomiya pointed out Kaneda, who wasn't even touching his phone.

“I've been focusing on studying, and I try not to unnecessarily cram knowledge. It's not good to disrupt the routine.”

Lifting his glasses a bit, Kaneda smirked confidently.

“Oh, I see. Smart kids are strange, huh?”

Looking somewhat taken aback by his response, Hoshinomiya lost interest in Kaneda.

On the other hand, Ishizaki even dared to doze off during the waiting time.

He had already made two mistakes and seemed to have reached the point of giving up.

“What's going on with this class...?”

Feeling a bit disgusted, she continued to go through the turns as their supervisor.

3

Right after Sakayanagi notified the teacher of the second attack's five nominations from Horikita's class, Hashimoto stood up and walked towards Sakayanagi.

His expression wasn't the usual slight smirk, rather, it was quite stern.

Everyone except Hashimoto was in their seats, making his behavior conspicuously unusual.

"What's wrong, Hashimoto-kun?"

"I thought I'd remind you about last night, just in case. You have no intention of using the information I gave you?"

Category 'Gourmet Food' Difficulty 1

Offensive's Nominees:

'Kōenji Rokusuke,' 'Hasebe Haruka,' 'Hirata Yōsuke,' 'Yukimura Teruhiko,' 'Onodera Kayano'

He pointed with his thumb to the names of the students displayed on the monitor behind him and voiced his dissatisfaction.

"Does it look that way to you?"

"Yes, it does look that way."

"Indeed, your phone call last night was a little bit too meddlesome.

However, the information received is still information. Of course, since it has been etched in my brain, I don't intend to just pointlessly ignore it."

"So... why did you target Kōenji?"

"You said that Kōenji-kun is the one that I should avoid targeting the most within Class B, huh?"

"He has a promise with Horikita. In other words, he might be one of the protected students, and if you target him, there's a good chance that they'll automatically receive a point. I thought among the several pieces of information I gave you, this would serve some use."

He thought it would be useful, but his patience ran thin when it was trampled on so soon. Sensing a change from his usual cheerful demeanor, Kitō slowly pulled back his chair.

"Don't worry, Kitō-kun. Hashimoto-kun has a dry tone."

Sakayanagi quietly chuckled after and explained why she had targeted Kōenji, who would most likely be protected.

“Horikita-san and Kōenji-kun might have an agreement, however, it’s only to prevent expelling him and letting him do what he pleases.”

“I see...”

“There’s no point in continuously protecting him and wasting a valuable protection slot. We should wait and see, at least until he gets a problem wrong after being targeted. In order to win, we must do at least that much, don’t you think so?”

“But Horikita is an upstanding person. If her class finds out that she didn’t protect him, they’ll be in disarray.”

“Well, if they’re going to be perturbed by that, let them be. Additionally, while fulfilling the promise is important, continuously wasting a valuable protection slot on Kōenji-kun would cause others to question her qualifications as a leader.”

As she explained, Horikita’s class had apparently decided on which five people they’d protect, and the monitor’s display switched.

There were no successful protections, and the five people Sakayanagi targeted would proceed to attempt the question.

“What do you think? As expected, Kōenji-kun wasn’t given a protection slot.”

Seeing the results, Hashimoto couldn’t make a strong argument on the matter.

“...Well, I suppose. But is there a point in trying to get a point out of Kōenji? He’s got a weirdly sharp head, right? The probability of him answering correctly compared to the small fish is high, isn’t it?”

“Do you really think so? He’s an unquestionably free man. He can’t be obligated to seriously answer since he’s even managed to get Horikita-san’s approval on this. He might deliberately answer incorrectly.”

As if she could see into the future, Sakayanagi’s conviction didn’t falter.

Hashimoto, in disbelief, waited for the monitor to switch.

As a result, just as predicted, Kōenji answered the question incorrectly and was one step closer to elimination.

“You took a bit of a risk, but you scored a point. Well done, Princess.”

Hashimoto was relieved for the moment, but that relief would soon vanish in the next turn. The moment her turn as attacker began, Sakayanagi immediately called out Kōenji’s name.

It was also the same category, as if she was confirming that she was targeting him intentionally.

Not only Hashimoto, but the classmates who had been following the flow of selections also began to stir.

“What’s going on? It’s the same category, and they’re just going to protect Kōenji.”

Kamuro, also unable to understand Sakayanagi's actions, retorted.

“You're not going to tell me he won't be protected next time, are you...?”

“I believe that will be the case. That's why I specifically nominated Kōenji-kun.”

Although he thought it was a ridiculous prediction, he didn't leave his seat and stared at the monitor, waiting to see what would happen next.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

None.

“Seriously... What is Horikita thinking?”

Hashimoto grumbled at the fact that Kōenji was once again unprotected.

Moreover, Kōenji did the unthinkable and made the same mistake again.

“I don't want to side with Hashimoto, but why'd you think he wouldn't be protected the second time around?”

“It's the same logic as the first time. Since you're allowed to make two mistakes, there was no need for her to go out of her way to protect him. If she knew that she had to protect him in the end, she'd leave it until the last minute. Though, Horikita-san probably wanted him to get the correct answer.”

“I see. So Horikita has no choice but to protect Kōenji now.”

Having understood those words, Kitō muttered so.

As long as Horikita deemed that he had room to make mistakes, she wouldn't allocate a protective slot to Kōenji.

In other words, Sakayanagi took a risk in order to ensure that the opponent lost one slot in the later turns.

That was how it was interpreted.

It couldn't be helped that the two consecutive ‘Gourmet Food’ questions were easy.

Every class was currently learning the difficulty level for each category.

“I apologize for doubting you, Princess. So there was a plan. However, couldn't you have targeted Kōenji from the first turn? Then you could've destroyed the opponent's protection slot for the remaining eight turns. That's one turn wasted.”

“I was 99% sure that they wouldn't protect Kōenji-kun, but I decided to do it on the second turn to ensure that they wouldn't protect him. It's also important to lay the groundwork to invite his second mistake. What would happen if I had started from the first turn, and Horikita-san had decided to protect Kōenji-kun? After that, it would be hard for me to make a move.”

There was a risk of being tossed about by the deceptive protection slots. If the defense succeeded consecutively, there might be room for complacency, leading to the risk of handing over the momentum to the opponent.

“Moreover, thanks to him making a mistake on the first easy question, I was able to determine that there’s a higher possibility of him making a wrong answer the second time as well, so the results are satisfactory—all thanks to the information you provided.”

With the emphasis on the part that it was indeed useful, Hashimoto also felt relieved and nodded, taking his seat.

“Now, let’s finish with Kōenji-kun, shall we?”

In the fourth turn, Sakayanagi selected Kōenji’s third nomination first, surprising everyone again.

“We must be diligent. This will act as a threat that we’ll target him whenever we see an opportunity. Thanks to Hashimoto-kun’s intelligence gathering, we know the inner workings of Horikita-san’s class, however, the opponent doesn’t know that the promise with Kōenji-kun has been leaked.”

“I see... Certainly, that would make them feel like they have to keep protecting Kōenji.”

She chose the same ‘Gourmet Food’ category, but raised the difficulty level to 2 to observe the increase in difficulty.

Hashimoto thought that Kōenji would be protected, but he didn’t bother to point it out.

But here, a development that not many anticipated took place.

*Defensive’s Successfully Protected Members:
‘Shinohara Satsuki,’ ‘Sudō Ken’*

Horikita made an unthinkable decision not to protect Kōenji.

“Why didn’t she protect him?”

“Was the promise you told me about misinformation?”

“There’s no way...! Horikita definitely promised to protect Kōenji!”

In the end, Kōenji answered correctly and avoided elimination. However, Hashimoto was still confused.

On the other hand, Sakayanagi managed to grasp the situation. Horikita didn’t use up a protection slot on Kōenji, so after answering incorrectly twice, he answered correctly in order to avoid elimination.

“So Horikita has abandoned Kōenji...”

“Then it’s our chance. We can crush him in one go.”

Rather than thinking negatively, Kitō advised that they should target Kōenji from then on.

“That’s right, that might be a good idea. Horikita’s credibility and morale would be damaged.”

Hashimoto thought the enemy class was in disarray because Horikita chose not to use the protection slot.

On the other hand, Sakayanagi came to a different conclusion.

“I was thinking they might protect him unconditionally, or better yet, we could just eliminate him... but it seems Horikita-san has a different plan. If we keep targeting Kōenji-kun, it would just be pleasurable for her.”

With a slight laugh, Sakayanagi turned on her phone.

“Anyway, I’m impressed that she’s carefully thought about how to fight me.”

Sakayanagi wondered whether Ayanokōji was lurking behind Horikita or not.

Who had been the driving force behind these tactics?

“He’s definitely not involved.”

If Ayanokōji had been pulling all the strings, she would have felt it beyond the classrooms.

The unusual and bizarre feeling would pierce Sakayanagi. She didn’t feel that.

However, there was a faint hint of Ayanokōji in Horikita’s way of thinking.

“It’s only natural that she grows. She sees his back closer than anyone else.”

She could see the trend. Sakayanagi wouldn’t be lagging behind Horikita in this tactical battle.

“The problem is—”



For Sakayanagi, who was in charge of Class A, the most alarming thing wasn't a specific class.

Whether two or three classes were secretly teaming up... that was more problematic.

That was Sakayanagi's only concern.

Although she had conducted some investigation and surveillance since the special exam was announced, there had been no signs or reports of such movements. However, it was easy to form alliances in secret.

Therefore, although she could only judge whether there was an alliance during the exam, she thought that the probability of being teamed up against currently was near zero. There was nothing unnatural in the other classes' offense and defense.

"Shall we go claim first place?"

Sakayanagi had won 29 points by the end of the first half and was in the lead.

Being in first place was pleasing, but right behind her was Class B, trailing by only one point. Hashimoto, who forgot to get up from his seat, was staring at the results displayed on the monitor and the remaining time they had left for the break.

"Masumi-san, would you like to join me for lunch? Since you were eliminated, there won't be a problem, right?"

"I don't mind, but you really don't care about your opponents, do you?"

While Sakayanagi wasn't praised, she still smiled happily and started walking with her cane.

When they stepped out into the corridor, Kitō quietly moved aside upon seeing the two.

"When did you invite her?"

"Over the phone just now."

"Hmm. And Hashimoto doesn't need to be invited?"

Whenever Kamuro and Kitō were together, Hashimoto was almost always with them. It seemed they were concerned about this.

"I did properly invite him, but he declined. He's also being targeted by Ryūen-kun, and he's made two mistakes. It's only natural that he wouldn't want to be eliminated."

Imagining Hashimoto desperately scouring for information on his phone, Kamuro let out a dry chuckle.

4

Usually, the cafeteria would be filled with students from all years, but it was quite empty today. No wonder, as many second-year students were still in their classrooms, glued to their phones just like Kei.

They valued saving time and avoiding elimination.

In other words, those who could afford to come to the cafeteria were either leaders with no risk of getting eliminated, students who were already eliminated and had nothing left to do, or those who, like me, didn't think much about it.

Deciding on the menu for two, we bought our meals and sat at the tables frequently used by second-year students, trays of food in hand, just as usual.

"We can choose seats freely."

"That's right. But it's strange, isn't it? Even though first and third-year students can secure plenty of seats today, the places most used by second-year students seem hardly utilized."

There weren't any rules in the cafeteria that determined particular areas for each year to use.

The students just implicitly made these divisions, and most of them abided by this silent agreement.

Of course, there were students who didn't pay this any mind too.

"Horikita, you don't seem to mind the details, do you?"

"Isn't it the same for you?"

"In my case, I prefer to read the atmosphere and blend into the majority."

"You don't seem to care, but you also do... I'll stop thinking about it for now. I can't afford to dedicate my cognitive resources to you."

It was a bit sarcastic, but it was rather relieving for me.

"Good day, you two Class B students. If you don't mind, may I join you?"

Just as I was about to split my chopsticks, a voice called out to us.

"Sakayanagi-san, where you sit is up to you. I don't have the right to refuse you."

Though she granted permission, she must've been surprised.

She must not have expected to be approached by an opponent's leader during a special exam.

"I don't mind eating together either, but where's your meal?"

From what I could see, Sakayanagi arrived without anything. If she went to buy now, it would result in a slight delay.

"Masumi-san and Kitō-kun are buying lunch for me now. They should arrive shortly."

Following her gaze, I did indeed see Kamuro and Kitō lined up tiredly at the counter.

“You really take care of your friends, don’t you?”

“Yes, they’re really helpful.”

Sakayanagi, who sat opposite to Horikita and propped her cane, was soon joined by Kitō with a tray in each hand. It was a clear indication of his perpetual support of Sakayanagi.

“Now, both of you please sit down.”

“Huh? Here? Eating with Horikita and Ayanokōji? I’m not up for that.”

“Why not? It could be a good learning experience for you, Masumi-san.”

“Planning to drag me into trouble again? I’m sick of humoring your games.”

The one who raised this question was Kamuro, who was listed as eliminated in Class A, yet she showed no signs of anxiety.

Despite her rebelliousness, her attitude suggested that she thought that it was unthinkable for Sakayanagi to end up in last place. The fact that she had ended the first half in first place must’ve been a confidence booster.

I lightly raised my hand to greet Kitō.

Kitō didn’t particularly react, but seeing him slightly nod back was satisfying enough.

“I hope you’ll be gentle in the second half, Horikita-san.”

“Now you say this? I felt quite pressured during the first half, you know.”

“I was rather lenient, wasn’t I? Isn’t that evident from you being in second place?”

“You must be kidding—”

Horikita showed a hint of annoyance at the blatant claim that Sakayanagi went easy on her.

Just then, a male student appeared from behind the irritated Horikita.

“Shall I join the mix too?”

Sensing his presence, Kitō immediately stood up, displaying open hostility.

However, unconcerned, the student sat down next to Horikita without even asking for permission.

“What a rough way to show up, Ryūen-kun.”

“Kuku! I just came as the wolf to check on this flock of sheep.”

Despite being the only one who had fallen behind in the first half, he had an air of ease.

That said, he wouldn’t show signs of exhaustion here of course, even if he had to fake it.

“Get lost.”

Those quiet but heavy words came from Kitō.

“Oh? Who gave you the right to order me around? The midget over there’s not saying a word.”

“Let me have permission. I’ll remove him now.”

Stating his intention, Kitō stood up, ready to confront Ryūen.

Combined with the insult Ryūen threw at Sakayanagi, he seemed fully prepared.

“There’s no need to worry, Kitō-kun. He’s here simply because he’s hungry. After all, we have to welcome our weak and pitiful wolf.”

“But he didn’t seem to bring anything. Maybe he’s got someone like Ishizaki doing the grunt work?”

“What he’s after isn’t food, but points from this special exam. He seems to have started off a bit late in the first half.”

“I see. Well, true enough.”

While all three classes were locked in close competition, only Ryūen’s class was being left behind.

If it was meant as a taunt, it hardly sent ripples.

Confirming that there were no suspicious movements, Kitō quietly took his seat again.

“Even so, Kamuro, you seem quite relaxed for someone that might disappear today.”

Kamuro paused, with fried horse mackerel gripped between her chopsticks halfway to her mouth, and glared back.

“You too, Kitō. One mistake and you’re eliminated.”

Sakayanagi was the one to retort to Ryūen’s remark.

“My class is currently first, while you’re at the bottom. Are you really in a position to have this conversation?”

“Even if I come in last, I only lose foot soldiers. But you, at the moment, are close to having Kamuro or Yamamura expelled. If Kitō or Hashimoto messes up, that number could inflate to four. You’re the one who gets hurt if anyone disappears. Or in the second half, will you let Horikita painfully injure you and carelessly increase the number of eliminations as if they were trash?”

Even Sakayanagi wouldn’t say that a few more were likely to be eliminated.

If someone was eliminated, you’d lose a point. That was something you essentially didn’t want.

“Do you intend to eliminate people close to me?”

“Isn’t that obvious by now?”

“It’s hard to believe at this point. Given that your peculiar focus on the students who were within your reach during the first half clearly failed. And now, you’re still relentlessly pursuing students like Masumi-san and Kitō-kun.”

I had a strong impression that Ryūen's strategy was focused on a maximum of about eight people, centering on the students supporting Sakayanagi, like Kitō, Kamuro, and Hashimoto.

Yet, even under such inefficient, concentrated attacks, Sakayanagi couldn't fully protect Kamuro or Yamamura.

Even if you knew who was getting targeted, it wasn't always possible to ward off the attacks.

In fact, in all four classes, Sakayanagi had the highest rate of successfully protected students in the first half.

"Thanks to your immature strategy, our class has been able to maintain first place. So while I'm grateful, I'm also worried about you, Ryūen-kun. If you don't change your tactics in the second half, you'll just be repeating your defeat. Surely even Horikita-san could indirectly see that, right?"

"It's indeed very clear, isn't it? If it was me, and I found out that Sakayanagi-san was likely to ward off my attempts, I'd scatter my focus among more students."

I never thought an evaluation of the special exam would start here, but Ryūen was smiling as he listened.

"I highly recommend you to fight more intelligently."

But nonetheless, Ryūen also demonstrated a defiant attitude, refusing to run away and sitting upright.

"I got you figured out, Sakayanagi. Forget about the point difference for a moment, think about it. Kamuro, if the exam were to end now with two eliminations, and your class comes last, do you know how she'll judge?"

Kamuro still didn't respond, but surely she must've had some concern. How would the leader respond in that particular situation?

Horikita must've been interested as well in what criteria she would use for deciding who to expel.

But Sakayanagi continued eating without stopping.

"Can't you answer? No, is it that you don't want to answer? What do you think, Horikita?"

"What do I think? Why did you target Yamamura-san in the first place? You seemed to have narrowed it down to a few people, but she doesn't seem like the kind to be singled out, does she?"

Kamuro was brought here, but Yamamura wasn't.

From that fact alone, it was only natural to think Kamuro was more special.

Aside from Yamamura, the other students who were targeted all clearly had distinguished abilities.

But in reality, there was an unseen connection between Sakayanagi and Yamamura.

There were students who were evaluated for their invisible abilities, not just their visible OAA ratings.

“You guys probably don’t know, so you better remember this. Yamamura is as valuable to Sakayanagi as Kamuro is. She cherishes her a lot behind the scenes, doesn’t she?”

By forcefully bringing up Yamamura, he made sure everyone would notice this.

For the first time, Sakayanagi paused eating.

“If you think so, then interpret it that way.”

Rather than being vague, she responded sincerely, inviting him to do as he pleased.

“Whether it’s true or not, I don’t intend to judge individuals as a third party who doesn’t know anything. Kamuro-san and Yamamura-san are both excellent classmates to Sakayanagi-san.”

Horikita, it seemed, wanted to avoid being used as a factor in swaying Sakayanagi’s considerations.

“Both are excellent? Ha, don’t make me laugh. Sakayanagi doesn’t evaluate people based on their OAAs. How easy they are to use and how obedient they are, that’s the standard.”

“Behind the scenes, then?”

Kamuro looked at Sakayanagi and quietly asked for confirmation.

“Kamuro seemed taken aback by the mention of Yamamura’s name.”

Ryūen, who evidently wasn’t privy to all of Class A’s intricacies, expressed his observation.

Whatever the relationship between Kamuro and Yamamura was, it was apparent that there was some tension or antagonism between them.

“Were you close to Yamamura?”

“It’s just his baseless provocation.”

“I didn’t know you had any connection to Yamamura. I was just asking.”

Kamuro made a small pause, but I wondered how many people noticed it.

“As I said, it’s just his way of provoking. It’s pointless to take him seriously.”

She wasn’t evading the topic because it was sensitive; she genuinely viewed it as irrelevant.

Although Ryūen had stopped, he seemed to enjoy watching Kamuro react so sensitively to his words, displaying the confidence of someone formidable.

“You should decide now who to expel.”

It didn’t seem like Ryūen had appeared to provoke Sakayanagi.

The goal was to avoid having any more eliminations from Class A, and instead, only push key players like Kamuro or Yamamura, as well as Kitō or Hashimoto, into expulsion.

“I hope you won’t be swayed by his meaningless remarks.”

In order to stop him, Sakayanagi said this to Horikita.

“I know.”

But Horikita was fighting to win.

She didn’t go into the exam intending to expel anyone from Sakayanagi’s class.

If it was effective for winning, that would be another story, but sure enough...

Deciding there was no more to be gained from his cheap provocations, Ryūen switched the topic to the other classes.

“Speaking of which, the only one not here is Ichinose, right?”

“It seems that her class has made it clear that they don’t intend to have anybody eliminated. No one from her class is in the cafeteria. It’s only natural, I suppose.”

Sure enough, nobody from Ichinose’s class was in the cafeteria. Even before coming here, I didn’t see them anywhere else except for doing whatever was necessary, like going to the bathroom.

They had prepared food from the beginning and fought every single minute and second.

“She’s prepared to lose in order to keep anyone from her class from getting expelled. She’s a seriously stupid woman.”

If anything, Ichinose was probably concerned about the eliminations in other classes. But if you lost in a battle, your class would inevitably be hurt. To avoid that, you needed to become ruthless and eliminate others so they couldn’t earn points.

“That’s true. She never flinches in any special exams. That’s why I’ve been able to keep her in third place by exploiting her weaknesses.”

Horikita, who had been eating for a long time, stopped her chopsticks and reflected on the first half of the exam.

“Ichinose’s determination is so extreme, it’s almost pathological. If she continues this strategy in the second half, she’ll risk discarding her protection slots to their very limit. That should work to your advantage, Ryūen.”

Just like Horikita, Ryūen would be attacking Ichinose’s class.

Unless he increased the number of people who had incorrectly answered twice and were on the brink of elimination to six or more, there was a high chance that he’d be able to hit all the protection slots.

Even if you wouldn't gain more points by eliminating the opponent's students, it was necessary to suppress the higher-ranking class to raise your placement.

"But next, I'll be the one attacking your class. Even if the protection success rate increases as the elimination rate rises, I wonder how many points I can get."

Like her setup against Kōenji, Sakayanagi read what the opponent's leader was likely to think of ahead of time.

Depending on how Ryūen used the protection slots, there may be times when he can't get the points he should get.

It was especially difficult to protect classmates who would probably answer incorrectly.

"I'll look forward to it."

Ryūen abruptly stood up from his seat.

"Well, now that the one who was stirring the pot has left, let's resume our meal."

When he turned his back away from Sakayanagi and walked away, Ryūen quietly brushed up his hair.

Contrary to the surrounding thoughts at that moment, he had a powerful expression that hinted that he'd be making a move in the second half of the exam.

It wasn't a mere coincidence that he only momentarily showed me this expression.

It was a forceful message telling me to watch silently.

It was hard to see beyond his desperate situation, but I did wonder how he would overturn it.

The second half of the exam was about to begin soon.



5

In a few minutes, Sakagami-sensei would signal the beginning of the 11th turn, but Horikita was standing at the podium, gathering the students' eyes.

"Class A is truly a formidable enemy. They held the top spot for all 10 turns of the first half. But it's important not to focus too much on that and face the special exam seriously. After all, the only way for us to accumulate points is for us to solve the questions correctly."

Horikita's target for the offensive was Sakayanagi's class, the most troublesome of the three classes.

During the first half, she successfully protected against Ryūen's attacks, and the students achieved a high rate of correct answers.

"How are we going to attack?"

In response to Sudō's innocent question, Horikita scanned her classmates in the room.

There might have been someone here who was connected to Sakayanagi.

Naturally, she couldn't recklessly announce her strategy.

"Do you remember when I asked for your ideas during the preparation period? I've organized that information and I believe I've found a hole."

Simplicity was best.

She seemed to prefer a method that targeted individual weaknesses rather than trying to read the opponent.

However, compared to Ichinose's class, information seemed scarce, and it would've been tightly controlled to prevent any leaks since the announcement of this special exam.

In that case, it wouldn't be easy to discover everyone's strengths and weaknesses.

Only Horikita truly knew how effective a strategy she had devised from all this information was.

On the 11th turn, Horikita's first attack on Sakayanagi's class came.

She used one point off the bat and chose a 'Literature' problem with a difficulty of two.

Unfortunately, one person was successfully protected, but three of the four students who faced the challenging problem got it wrong, ensuring a gain of two points.

After deducting the points used to increase the difficulty, getting three points would break us even, and gaining more than four points would give us a surplus on that turn.

Next up to attack was Sakayanagi's class, which must have felt some pressure.

And Sakayanagi unexpectedly spent two points, choosing a 'Sports' problem with difficulty three.

She showed her intent to mercilessly attack against the bottom-ranked Ryūen.

"She really is out to corner Ryūen-kun... How bold."

The second half started off differently, unconcerned about the point difference Class B had.

But immediately after, the result on the monitor caused a surprised outcry from the class.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

'Katsuragi Kōhei,' 'Shiina Hiyori,' 'Tokitō Hiroya,' 'Nomura Yūji,' 'Ibuki Mio'

In this special exam, for the first time, a perfect score was achieved within the protection slots, securing a whopping five points. If everyone was protected, a difficulty level three became meaningless. It was a severe blow.

On the other hand, Ryūen, who had been lagging behind, quickly caught up with 24 points and temporarily tied with Ichinose.

"They have four eliminations, the most so far, but this is... this is too good to be true."

Given that many had anticipated they would steadily fall behind, the outcome must have come as quite a shock.

It seemed that the momentum would continue, but Ryūen's attack on Ichinose's class didn't go as sharply as expected, with three people being protected. However, one person made a mistake in the problem, so it stopped at four points for a total of 28.

All that was left was this class's turn on the defensive, but the gap was quickly closing.

Indeed, I wondered what Ichinose would choose as the category and who she'd choose to target.

Category 'Sports' Difficulty 1

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

'Wang Mei-Yui,' 'Shinohara Satsuki'

Offensive's Nominees:

‘Ayanokōji Kiyotaka,’ ‘Miyamoto Sōshi,’ ‘Karuizawa Kei’

Ichinose’s first attack nomination included my name.

And whether intentionally or by coincidence, Kei’s name was also named at the same time.

‘Sports’ difficulty level one was manageable, it could be called neither a strength nor a weakness.

I was confident I could get it if it was based on history or rules, but if current events were involved, it would put me at a disadvantage.

On the other hand, Kei might be able to solve a global question like she would have seen on TV. She used to talk about watching volleyball games regularly.

‘What do you call a situation where there’s one out or less, with runners on first and second bases, or on first, second, and third bases, and the batter hits a fly ball that an infielder could catch with a standard defensive action?’

Apparently, this question was related to the rules. Fortunately, I had hammered sports rules into my head to some extent, so I could answer this without difficulty. The correct answer was an ‘Infield Fly.’

However, I doubt Kei would be able to answer this, let alone Miyamoto. I could only hope that she learned about this in the last few days of cramming...

Only two of us, Miyamoto and I, got the answer correct.

Unfortunately, Kei got the question wrong. However, this was her first mistake.

The situation wasn’t dire yet, but Kei seemed filled with anxiety on her way back to her seat.

On the other hand, Miyamoto, who had the correct answer, was high-fiving and sharing joy with his classmates.

From the conversation I heard, it seemed he learned about baseball’s rules from games, and they were helping him a lot today.

Knowledge could come in handy from unexpected places.

This made it four points. We temporarily surpassed Sakayanagi’s class and ranked first.

In the following 12th turn, Sakayanagi’s class steadily scored four points with four correct answers, but what surprised the class was once again Ryūen’s class.

As if watching a replay, five names were lined up in the list of successful protections.

In other words, they achieved a perfect score solely with the protection slots for the second consecutive time.

“What kind of odds are those!? They’re too lucky!?”

Ike, having probably assumed that Ryūen’s class would be at the bottom, screamed out while clutching his head.

“...I wonder if we can just dismiss this as good luck.”

I could hear Horikita’s sense of heaviness in her voice as she calmly stared at the monitor next to me.

Understandably so. They had managed to achieve perfect selection twice in a row, which was an incredibly low-probability event.

If they managed to get another perfect selection in the next turn...

During the incredulous state of surprise, the next attack on Ichinose saw two people protected and two people who answered correctly.

It was now time for Ichinose to attack.

*Defensive’s Successfully Protected Members:
‘Ishikura Kayoko,’ ‘Sudō Ken’*

*Offensive’s Nominees:
‘Ayanokōji Kiyotaka,’ ‘Matsushita Chiaki,’ ‘Karuizawa Kei’*

My name and Kei’s name were called out, nominated for the second time in a row.

The moment she saw her name, Kei sprang to her feet, raising her voice in an obviously agitated manner.

“I’m not being targeted, am I!?”

“Calm down. Just because we’ve been nominated twice in a row doesn’t necessarily mean we’re being specially targeted.”

“B-but...!”

It was understandable that Kei panicked.

It would’ve been better if this nomination was due to Ichinose targeting weaker opponents.

However, the opponent was Ichinose. She must’ve suspected that she was getting targeted for personal reasons.

Given that I was included as well, it was a nomination indicative of such intent...

Whether there was personal bias involved or not, it was best to consider this as a provocation.

Even so, it was a solid move.

Horikita didn’t use the valuable protection slot on me.

Perhaps it was because she foresaw this strategy.

If the category had been academic, Kei might have been protected. But the category was ‘News.’ It was a field in which even Kei could potentially answer correctly, hence the decision to leave her unprotected. On the other hand, I had to be more cautious since I had already missed a question in the same category earlier.

‘What does ‘tapiru’ mean?’

(TL NOTE: タピる : Literally translates to “to drink bubble tea.” It’s slang, so of course Ayanokouji has no idea what it means.)

Upon seeing the question, I was instantly frozen.

What...? Huh...? What is it? Tapiru? Tapi...?

As I was frozen, the time limit arrived, leaving me unable to write any answer.

The ‘News’ category questions that other students received mostly revolved around politics or annual events.

Why are curveball questions being thrown when it’s my turn?

As a result of the challenging question, this time it was me who was mistaken and Kei who answered correctly.

Looking relieved that we hadn’t landed on the brink of defeat, we were able to calm down for the time being.

Matsushita naturally seemed to have gotten the correct answer, securing four points. On the other hand, due to my two mistakes, I was suddenly a candidate for elimination. By the way, the correct answer seemed to be ‘sipping a drink with tapioca pearls.’

“Do you... know even less about the world than I thought?”

Immediately upon returning to my seat, I endured a remark from a disgusted Horikita and had no choice but to hunch my back.

It was the 13th turn of Horikita’s class’s attack.

The genre was ‘Kanji’ with a difficulty level of 1. However, to my surprise, Horikita’s words unexpectedly came to a halt.

Though she was smoothly nominating till the fourth person, she seemed to be at a loss at the last one.

Sorting out the information in her head at this point was also a challenge.

Who was good at what, and who was weak at what.

She might’ve prematurely exhausted the valuable information about Class

A.

There was still time left. Horikita took a deep breath, calming herself.

Then, a helping hand was extended.

“Why not choose Satonaka?”

A bored student simply murmured.

This was Kushida, the person who hadn't been selected once during the special exam and had too much free time.

“Thank you, Kushida-san. Then, Sensei, I would like the last person to be Satonaka-kun.”

Without asking for a reason, Horikita entirely trusted her advice.

As a result, Satonaka wasn't protected, and he answered incorrectly.

“Where did you find out that Satonaka has trouble with kanji?”



Makida clapped, admiring her.

“That kind of information comes from everywhere.”

Kushida said as if it wasn't a big deal, and her gaze wandered off nonchalantly.

“You've been very helpful. Thank you.”

“Not really.”

Even after receiving words of gratitude from Horikita, Kushida didn't seem pleased.

However, since her position within the class wasn't great, visibly contributing like this wasn't a bad thing.

It seemed this was one of the reasons why Horikita could challenge the second half of the battle with confidence.

The rare information network that Kushida Kikyō possessed.

Not only did she have a wide circle of friends, but Kushida also constantly collected information about her opponents' weaknesses. That was why she boasted exceptional memory when it came to their weaknesses.

She hadn't shown all her cards yet, but she probably provided Horikita with lots of information in advance. A truly reassuring presence.

On the 13th turn, Ichinose's attack came. It was our third defensive turn, and this time, Horikita chose to protect Karuizawa. It seemed I was left behind without protection.

However, her guess seemed correct, and Karuizawa Kei's name appeared as having been successfully protected.

Although she usually would be pleased to avoid the question, Kei's complexion was clearly off.

“Do they intend to eliminate me...!? They're targeting me, no matter how I look at it!?”

“Maybe... It's a bit too much.”

Satō responded in agreement. But such strange misconceptions only led to unnecessary confusion.

“She's not the type to specifically set someone up.”

“But that's because...!”

Kei was about to retort that it was because they didn't know the circumstances, but stopped herself.

“Anyway, we don't know what their aim is, but now that the protection was successful, they're likely to shift their target next time.”

“...Yeah...”

“But it stands out that the nominations continued three times in a row like when Kōenji-kun was targeted in the first half. I wonder what Ichinose-san is thinking.”

Ichinose's attack arrived again on the 14th turn.

"...What should we do?"

Horikita showed hesitation in how to allocate the protection slots. No matter what, a fourth consecutive nomination for Kei was unlikely. Should she make such a judgment? Or should she be wary of being outsmarted?

"What about trying to protect her once more? I think she might be aiming for it."

Kushida advised the thinking Horikita.

"Do you think so from the flow so far?"

"Not really. I just judged it based on what I've seen of Ichinose-san up until now."

Kushida sensed the signs within Ichinose Honami's thoughts, not from the flow of selections so far.

"That's true. It might be best to protect once more."

She wasn't one step away from elimination yet, but if they were aiming for it, they'd want to securely score points.

Then, the successful protections were disclosed, and Kei's name was shown once again. She set a four-consecutive selection record in this exam, surpassing Kōenji's three consecutive nominations. There were some inexplicable aspects, but being able to compete with other classes without losing seemed like a good thing.

However, the situation was starting to turn for the worse.

Both Horikita and Sakayanagi's classes scored points with a balance of both offensive and defensive measures, but in the second half, Ichinose's class had a high rate of successful protections.

However, Ryūen's class showed even more momentum. Even though Sakayanagi was fighting back by repeating irregular categories and nominations, the situation wasn't improving; they had achieved four consecutive perfect protection results.

There was no doubt that an abnormal situation was occurring that could no longer be explained by luck alone.

But in that situation, there was nothing else Horikita could do.

Just calmly, quietly, and steadily score points.

6

For Ryūen, losing wasn't painful.
Even if he lost once, it was okay if he won the second time.
Even if he lost a hundred times, it was okay as long as he won in the end.
That was how he had lived his life, but one day, a big obstacle stood in front of Ryūen.

The guy looked like a fool that you could find anywhere, but inside, he was keeping a beast.

No, Ryūen thought such an expression was far too mild.

How best to describe it—that answer was still unclear.

But it was certain that among all the people he'd seen up until then, he was the most powerful and brutal.

He wasn't a person that was in a realm obtainable by living an ordinary life.

Over one year had passed since he was defeated by that man, Ayanokōji, and his spirit was broken.

The overwhelming difference in ability—that was probably why there was hardly any emotion similar to hatred welling up.

When he interacted with Ayanokōji, strangely enough, there was no sense of discomfort.

That was probably because even if Ryūen denied it on the surface... No, that's not it.

Deep down, he was acknowledging Ayanokōji's unique abilities.

But he repeatedly told himself not to misunderstand.

Ryūen did not intend to remain under him.

Before Ayanokōji graduates from this school and disappears from his sight, he would definitely pay him back for his defeat.

To do this, he first had to get rid of the clutter.

He decided that it would be necessary to suppress Sakayanagi, who had been reigning as the leader of Class A.

In effect, Sakayanagi was the only obstacle.

And then, after achieving that, he would defeat Ayanokōji.

This had become Ryūen Kakeru's goal to accomplish at this school.

He would never stop until then.

Right after the second half of the exam started, Ryūen, who had been calmly focusing in on Sakayanagi's main entourage during his turn, stood up from his seat.

"Well then—it's about time to start. Move over."

"W-wait a minute!?"

Ryūen pushed aside Hoshinomiya, the teacher in charge, and sat down on the platform.

“It’s the second half. The difference in points is only ten. In other words, catching up is possible if you get a perfect score a few times. I can count on you guys, right?”

The leader’s oppressive demand allowed for no mistakes, no matter what tasks came their way.

Of course, hard work wouldn’t be necessary if the ratio of correct answers could rise based on that threat alone.



“Don’t joke around. It’s not just the class’s problem. Ryūen, you must understand that it’s hard for other classes to get perfect scores too. As a leader, you should use your wisdom to protect as many people as possible.”

Among all the students who didn’t say anything back, Tokitō fearlessly expressed his discontent.

“Kuku! You’ve made mistakes twice and now have no room for more. If you fail, you’ll be the first to be nominated for expulsion among the rebellious types like you.”

“...!”

“But don’t worry. From here on out, as you wish, I’ll show you how things unfold.”

“What do you mean?”

“The part where I said ‘I can count on you guys’ was a lie.”

Ryūen turned back, confirmed that the monitor had switched, and was told that Sakayanagi’s nomination was completed. It was his turn now to protect five candidates.

The category that the opponent chose was ‘Sports.’ Moreover, they spent two points to raise the difficulty to three.

Ryūen wouldn’t give even a single point to their class. The students were flustered by Class A’s unrelenting attack.

However, Ryūen was the only one who seemed unperturbed and even a bit pleased.

“Katsuragi, Shiina, Tokitō, Nomura, Ibuki. Get on with it,” he commanded without hesitation, regardless of the category or difficulty.

“Hey, be respectful when addressing the teacher,” Hoshinomiya interjected, hurrying to input the names that Ryūen had called out, thus finalizing the defensive side’s moves.

Meanwhile, among the students, there was speculation.

Was Ryūen’s swift decision-making designed to avoid getting caught in Sakayanagi’s tactics?

They waited anxiously for the results.

Defensive’s Successfully Protected Members:

‘Katsuragi Kōhei,’ ‘Shiina Hiyori,’ ‘Tokitō Hiroya,’ ‘Nomura Yuji,’ ‘Ibuki Mio’

“W-What...?”

Tokitō, who had been standing there glaring at Ryūen, was shocked to see the result.

His decisive, immediate answer was successful, resulting in a perfect score.

“Gambling can be fun. It’s like randomly tossing a dice.”

In the following 12th turn, Ryūen once again continued to announce the five names for the protection slots.

As a result, all the students were successfully protected again, showing a tremendous turnaround in just two turns.

The same was true for the 13th and 14th turns.

Even if Sakayanagi’s nominations were dispersed, they all stuck together like guided missiles, and Ryūen’s selections were all successfully defended.

“Heh. It seems you can’t do anything, Sakayanagi.”

Even before the start of this special exam, what Ryūen valued was completely different from the other leaders.

How much he could mask the smell of a beast. How much he could corner the prey without letting it sense the fangs approaching from directly behind... That was all.

By having overcome the first half, he scored a win, hence, he launched a full-scale reversal.

“What is happening...!?”

There was no doubt that there was a trick.

But even Hoshinomiya, the teacher in charge of the class, didn’t know what it was.

7

From the very first turn attacking and defending, Ichinose had been continually speaking to her classmates.

“We will absolutely avoid having anyone expelled from our class, so don’t get nervous and stay calm.”

Of course, there were still plenty of students who felt anxious, even though they understood.

That was why Ichinose had been voicing her reassurances—to give her classmates some peace of mind.

Of course, these weren’t baseless claims, but the truth. However, if they fought in the same way as before and ended up being on the defensive, other classes would mercilessly exploit the opening.

The primary goal was to keep the number of eliminated classmates to zero to prepare for the unlikely event of losing.

If no students were eliminated, even the lowest-ranked class wouldn’t have any expulsions. A defensive approach.

However, she didn’t give up on winning.

So, how would one fight defensively while aiming to win?

By dragging the opponents onto your own battle field instead of theirs.

To avoid eliminations, the opponents who saw this scenario would assume that defending themselves was their top priority.

As the first half progressed, with the second turn and third turn, Horikita’s aim became clear.

Among an unspecified number of people, her aim was to increase the number of people who made mistakes twice and were on the brink of becoming eliminated.

When this number swelled to five, she intended to test what Ichinose would do.

“Thank you, Horikita-san.”

Ichinose expressed her gratitude for Horikita’s wise and compassionate actions.

As long as they could earn points, they didn’t care if it resulted in eliminations from the enemy class.

It had to be that way.

It was fortunate that the opponent was Horikita, who attacked in a solid and regular manner, unlike Ryūen. Ichinose used the protection function primarily for those on the brink of becoming eliminated.

“I won’t abandon anyone. You believe me, right?”

She didn't want to hurt her allies.

She opened her arms to welcome them in, ensuring them that she wouldn't act recklessly.



“I hope no one in the class, year, and school... gets expelled.”

These feelings were genuine.

However, if it meant creating victims within their class, they were prepared for necessary sacrifices.

Therefore, they didn't hesitate to eliminate students in Ryūen's class.

For victory, they had to sink the other classes.

As a result, by the end of the first half, four students from Ryūen's class had been eliminated due to Ichinose's attacks.

Ultimately, if one of them disappeared, they'd have inadvertently contributed to an expulsion.

Unavoidable sacrifices. They had no choice but to justify it, despite the pain in their hearts.

...However, this was only if Ryūen lost.

“We'll start the second half in one minute. Everyone, take your seats and prepare.”

Upon receiving Mashima-sensei's signal, Ichinose opened her phone.

Slowly, she looked back on the chat history on her app.

An exchange with a certain person was made right after the start of the first half.

[Ryūen-kun, this might be sudden, but would you team up with me? I don't want anyone expelled from my class. To achieve this, we need to finish the exam with zero eliminations. So, I want you to play defensively in the second half, so there are no eliminations from my class.]

Right after the special exam started, Ichinose sent this message to Ryūen.

As soon as the message was read, a response came back.

[That's a pretty selfish wish. Do you think I'll just listen and obediently go along with it?]

[There's room for negotiation. I'll give you a present you'll be pleased with.]

[Before all that, can you hold off Suzune's attacks without a scratch?]

In order to ask Ryūen to hold off on eliminating anyone, she had to make it through the first ten turns of the first half with no eliminations.

[I can handle it.]

[An immediate answer, huh? You haven't been negotiating with Suzune before me, have you? If so, it's over.]

A clumsy lie wouldn't work against Ryūen, who was highly cautious.

Even so, Ichinose wasn't planning on negotiating with Horikita from the start. If they tried to negotiate, it would be hard to establish an agreement and Sakayanagi's class would start moving. That was a situation to avoid.

[I want to protect everyone. I don't want any eliminations. The opponent knows that's my aim. That's why Horikita-san must be aiming to first build up five people on the brink of elimination. She probably wants to see whether I will continue to protect those five people.]

If a protection on one of those five people were skipped even once, it would be assumed they were ready to accept an elimination, or even an expulsion if they ended up last.

But if she could keep protecting, nothing would be easier for the attacking Horikita. The valuable protection slots would all continuously be appointed to those five people. Hence, she would switch to targeting students who haven't made mistakes without increasing those who would be on the brink of elimination.

[Unlike you and Sakayanagi-san, Horikita-san doesn't want to eliminate students from other classes. She just wants to win. She'll attack the 34 people who aren't protected fairly.]

Ichinose's strategy in the first half was to intentionally allow those students who felt unsure about their answers to be on the edge of elimination using the initial protection slots they had at their disposal. It wouldn't be an easy battle, but it wasn't impossible to fight on equal grounds.

[If that strategy goes well, and I follow your instructions in the second half, then certainly, there will be no eliminations. But that's quite the outrageous idea, huh? What kind of gift are you going to give me?]

[A guaranteed 25 points. I'll tell you the targeted people in five out of the ten turns that they will attack. Of course, we'll spread them out cleverly so the other classes don't notice.]

If he knew who would be attacked in advance, he'd have an advantage in the exam.

There was an immediate read receipt, but the reply took about three minutes due to thinking.

[I'll pass. It's not a bad deal, but I have my own ideas.]

[That's a shame.]

Ichinose thought she had made a good offer, but he had no choice but to let it go. Any further compromises in the score would result in them losing the chance of coming first. More than anything, she could judge that the chances were slim from the fact that Ryūen didn't even negotiate to raise the score.

“Then, perhaps I'll have to go all out...”

The negotiation failed. She could think of numerous ways in which it could've been worse, but she wouldn't bother.

Even if it was risky, she'd have to aim for a no-elimination strategy on her own.

However—

[You're lucky.]

Just when she thought all hope was lost, she received another message from the recipient.

[What do you mean?]

[If you manage to avoid any eliminations in the first half, I'll partially agree to your proposal.]

[Partially?]

[I'll agree to avoid eliminating any of your classmates, but your guaranteed 25 points are unnecessary. If you act strangely in the first half, Sakayanagi will see through it.]

[So, what are you asking for?]

[After the offense and defense reversal in the second half, accept the points from me as necessary. And no details. Decide whether or not you trust me based on that.]

An enigmatic offer to become the receiver rather than giving points.

Any other student would see it as a joke, suggesting no intention to negotiate from the beginning.

“...I see...”

Ichinose murmured softly.

This time, it was Ichinose who pondered whether or not to trust Ryūen.

It would be a lie to say that she didn't hesitate, just that it took time.

Still, Ichinose replied in less than a minute.

[I understand. I'll trust you.]

The speed of her decision-making was something other students couldn't imitate.

It wasn't a decision made just out of kindness.

Ichinose's logic, thinking, and understanding of what Ryūen was aiming for led to this.

The moment the first message was sent, it was instantly marked as read.

Based on that, it could be inferred that Ryūen also wanted to contact Ichinose.

This meant that they had something in common, or something they both wanted, even if they weren't exactly alike.

This exchange occurred before the start of the special exam.

During the second half, from the 11th to the 14th turns, the situation significantly changed.

Sakayanagi's class's 15th attack on Ryūen's class was announced, but once again, they successfully defended perfectly. Seeing this, Ichinose smiled without letting her surroundings notice.

[That's amazing. So this was your aim.]

[Stay quiet and live.]

[There was no need to team up with me from the start, but you did. Thank you.]

[Do you think I agreed out of goodwill? You being the last in line wouldn't have benefited me. I just took the power to control the score as needed.]

Indeed, in Ryūen's negotiations, the condition was that Ichinose had to agree to accept the points. Therefore, if their class was losing to Sakayanagi's, it would be simple to increase the score and forcibly make them third or higher.

Anticipating the outcome of this special exam, Ichinose was relieved that she didn't have to lose any of her friends. During the unanimous vote exam, Ichinose chose not to distribute the Protection Points, fearing it would lead to class conflict in that exam. However, after the announcement of this special exam, she had almost regretted that decision.

Currently, Karuizawa Kei had made her first mistake. If she made a mistake once more, she would be on the brink of elimination. There was still a possibility of Class B falling to last place. There were students of a lower rank than Karuizawa among the members who had already been eliminated, and there was little hope she'd be removed.

Even then—there was a chance.

But for that, the consecutive nominations had to be interrupted once.

“No... That's a bad move...”

She urged herself to act for the class, not for her personal feelings.

Ayanokōji would not reject her. He would accept her even if he continued his relationship with Karuizawa.

Then, there was also a way to progress and overwrite everything by yourself.

She realized that she was the worst kind of person, but she didn't care.

“Even if we can't get first place, the way to win in reality is to make Sakayanagi-san come in last place.”

In a small period of time, Ichinose regulated her breath.

Then, she shifted her gaze to her cell phone.

The reason Karuizawa was targeted even after being so protected.

It should've been obvious by now.

Ichinose, who managed to hold herself back, sat down again.

“I would like to nominate Karuizawa Kei-san.”

The 16th turn was no different, she had nominated the name Karuizawa.

With renewed determination, Ichinose did not hesitate.

This much was good enough for now.

All that was left was to repeat it relentlessly.

“I would like to nominate Karuizawa Kei-san.”

Clutching her phone, Ichinose was certain of her true victory in this special exam.

8

It was the start of the 15th turn.

The four classes were finally almost side-by-side. Ichinose's class was in first place with 42 points. Horikita and Sakayanagi's classes were tied for second place with 40 points each. In third place was Ryūen's class with 39 points.

Their lead from the first half of the battle was exhausted. They had yet to be left behind, but if things continued this way, they would surely be dragged down.

At the start, Ryūen's class had allowed them to suppress their fears, but ominous clouds were gathering.

They were pushed back to a place where there was a very real possibility they could end up in last.

"It's a lie, right? Spare me!"

"I absolutely hate the idea of being expelled!"

"I feel the same way!"

Since the first half of the battle, the number of eliminations had increased to four, causing the students to start panicking.

At this point, there was no way the rest could concentrate on studying.

Horikita stood up from her pulled-out chair. It was time to start the nomination, but she calmly made her way past the panicking students.

"Don't panic."

Horikita, now standing on the lectern, spoke to her classmates.

"Admittedly, the situation is close to dire. Our class has four eliminations at this point. Ichinose-san has taken the lead, and Ryūen-kun's class, which was in last place, is catching up at an absurd pace with continuous perfect scores. We've reached a point where I can't guarantee that we'll definitely win."

If they could see through Ryūen's strategy and reliably prevent perfect scores from then on, it would be different, but they couldn't expect that. Neither could they interfere with Ichinose's protection nominations, which succeeded at a high rate.



“All we can do is fight together until the end.”

Horikita couldn't guarantee victory at this point.

But, as this was a competitive exam, the leader had to offer assurance, even if there was none to be given.

Being overly timid or overly optimistic would be pointless.

Only the truth behind her words would resonate with her classmates.

Horikita believed they could prevail. That belief would reach the students.

Even Yōsuke, who was usually the one to follow up, was just listening to Horikita's words this time.

“Believe in me.”

They would press on, driven by this spirit. Of course, there were no other available options.

But looking at Horikita, there seemed to be more than that.

15th turn—Ichinose's class's turn to attack.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

'Karuizawa Kei,' 'Satō Maya,' and 'Miyake Akito'

Horikita successfully protected three of her classmates.

Moreover, they scored perfectly as the remaining two answered the question correctly.

It was a comeback of five points. However, the relentless nominations didn't stop.

“Wh-what is this?!”

Kei, more overwhelmed with fear than joy, averted her eyes from the screen.

Not only the classmates who were only vaguely aware of the situation, but even ones who were completely oblivious, began feeling uneasy about their opponent obsessively singling her out.

Horikita, who had successfully defended her classmates, didn't seem to be one of them.

16th turn—Ichinose's class's turn to attack.

Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:

'Karuizawa Kei,' 'Nishimura Ryūko'

This time, there were two. But again, Kei's name was there.

“Stop it... What is this...?”

Ichinose continued to target and endlessly attack Karuizawa.

It wasn't strange to infer that if a specific student was being targeted, the intent was to intentionally eliminate and expel that student. This image-destroying behavior continued without end.

17th turn—Ichinose's class's turn to attack.

*Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:
'Karuizawa Kei,' 'Hirata Yōsuke'*

Still, it didn't stop.

It didn't stop.

It didn't stop, no matter how many times it was thwarted.

The nominations didn't stop.

“Why are you only targeting me... That's not fair...”

18th turn—Ichinose's class's turn to attack.

*Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:
'Karuizawa Kei,' 'Hasebe Haruka,' 'Onodera Kayano'*

19th turn—Ichinose's class's turn to attack.

*Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:
'Karuizawa Kei'*

20th turn—Ichinose's class's turn to attack.

*Defensive's Successfully Protected Members:
'Karuizawa Kei,' 'Sudō Ken'*

There was a total of 10 turns in the second half.

From start to finish, Ichinose never removed Kei as a target.

Chapter 7: New Expulsion

IT WAS SAKAYANAGI'S first attack in the second half.

This time, the target shifted from Horikita's class to Ryūen's.

Before the special exam, no specific policy was set on how to fight Ryūen's class.

They didn't think it was necessary to formulate a meticulous plan against an opponent who did whatever he wanted.

However, Sakayanagi now had extraneous information.

She received a phone call the night before where she was strongly advised by her classmate, Hashimoto.

Among the other various things he said, there were a few things that stuck in Sakayanagi's mind.

One of them was the conversation about eliminating Shiina Hiyori and exploring the possibility of expulsion.

Sakayanagi wasn't interested in Hashimoto's personal thoughts, but when she heard the reason, her thoughts came to a halt.

Ayanokōji's gaze and treatment towards Shiina.

Hashimoto said those were different from what he gave to ordinary students.

This remark caught Sakayanagi's interest.

She wondered if Ayanokōji would show his emotions if Shiina were expelled.

"But that's already an impossible development, isn't it?"

In the first half, Ichinose's way of fighting was more determined than before. Before, she would've hesitated to eliminate people from her opponent's class, Ryūen's Class C. However, Ichinose had no hesitation. She eliminated four people merely in the first half: Ishizaki, Isoyama, Yano, and Morofuji.

She was absolutely determined to protect only her class. To do that, she decided to be merciless with outsiders.

Even if Sakayanagi could single out Shiina and eliminate her, the rest of the students would be sacrificed.

Aiming for the unlikely chance of Shiina's expulsion would be less efficient.

Shiina had only made one mistake by this point. Even if she could get her to incorrectly answer twice by directly targeting her with problems she couldn't solve, it would be difficult to prevent her from being protected. The strategy wasn't easy.

"Interesting..."

She finished the first half of the exam in first place and was starting to get bored. Having some fun wouldn't be so bad.

She changed her mind and thought it would be interesting to eliminate a challenging target.

She would overcome the challenge, of course, keep the lead, and then finish the game.

To do so, she needed to build a strategy.

Within the few minutes she had until her turn came around, she finalized her plan.

And so, her 11th turn to attack began.

However—

In the 11th turn, all five students that Sakayanagi appointed were protected.

Two points were wasted against the perfectly protected slots. A total failure.

However, the students unanimously said that it wasn't a problem—that the play was fine.

But Sakayanagi saw it differently.

It was just one perfect result, but she didn't see it as just her being incredibly unlucky.

Immediately, she had reset her self-imposed challenge regarding Shiina in her head.

She threw away all strategies and logic, and she picked everything at random.

In other words, a combination of category and appointees that no one could predict.

The result was the same perfect outcome as the 11th turn; they showed two consecutive miracles.

Her classmates were clearly baffled.

If she was someone who thought normally, it wouldn't be strange for her to believe that she had been read, leading to her failure. However, such a thought didn't even exist in Sakayanagi's mind.

After two turns, she was certain there could only be one answer. Someone was interfering.

She believed a traitor, a Judas, was hiding in this class.

Clearly, internal information was leaking.

Otherwise, inexplicable events were starting to occur.

Until her next turn came, Sakayanagi decided to observe her classmates without saying a word.

Some sighed at Ryūen's luck, others desperately clung to their phones to avoid elimination.

And then came the attack on the 13th turn.

The class naturally became quiet.

Sakayanagi remained silent. After a 30-second pause, she took a one-minute pause between each name before passing them to the teacher.

It wasn't because she was wracking her brain to avoid Ryūen's flawless defense again.

This silence was Sakayanagi's unspoken command to her classmates.

It was a hidden message expressing, 'Enough with the games.'

After holding her silence until the last minute, she passed on five names to Chabashira-sensei.

However, the result was still the same, another perfect score.

"How unfortunate."

Sakayanagi muttered alone, her smile waning after three consecutive failures.

If the information was leaking in real time, their methods would be limited.

One method was to type Sakayanagi's appointed students into a chat or email and send it. Since a phone is used to collect information, typing wouldn't necessarily be seen as suspicious.

Another method was auditory transmission through a phone call.

Immediately after Sakayanagi relayed information to the teacher, it could be transmitted to the other party; this could be executed without having to touch the phone.

As a preemptive measure, she could receive permission to pass the information on to the teacher via paper. Even if that was impossible, she could switch to whispering, preventing any voice leaks.

However—

Sakayanagi looked at the large monitor positioned over the teacher's shoulder.

If a method involving the use of a phone camera was employed, even preventing voice transmission wouldn't guarantee a resolution.

Perhaps the only way to defend was to physically prevent the transmission of information.

She would have everyone stop using their phones and tablets.

As for informing the teacher, she'd whisper, and until Ryūen named five people, everyone would keep their backs turned to shut out any information.

If this solved the problem, it would be a blessing.

They had only given away 15 points so far. They could still stop Ryūen's rampage.

As she continued to think, the silence was broken, but it wasn't Sakayanagi who broke it.

"Information is leaking."

The one who shattered the class's silence was Morishita Ai. She muttered those words expressionlessly.

"Morishita-san might be right. We should probably have everyone stop touching their phones and check them. Ryūen-kun might have a trick up his sleeve."

Sanada, slightly delayed, agreed with Morishita's words, asking Sakayanagi for a response.

Kitō and Hashimoto immediately rose.

"There's no need for a response."

"But...!"

"We should continue using our phones to find hints and leads to solve the questions."

Under these chaotic circumstances, it would be hard to say that cramming was effective.

Unexpectedly, the leader refused to do what needed to be done.

"Are you okay with this, Princess? I'm also certain after seeing three consecutive perfect nominations. I definitely think information is leaking. We need to take action—"

"There's no change in plans. Let's continue the exam as it is."

If instructed to, no other students could question further.

Nobody was given the authority to overturn the decision.

Though everyone was obedient, they were thinking, *'Why didn't Sakayanagi make the necessary moves?'*

Betraying the class wasn't something that could be easily done. If the opponent was obviously protecting the targeted students, it was only a matter of time before people realized that information was leaking during the exam.

Since they were still executing the plan despite knowing this, concerns arose that the problem might not be solved simply by confiscating phones and blocking the monitor's view.

What would happen if measures were taken and the leaks didn't stop?

Information gathering would be hindered, and the class would become bewildered and disoriented.

Even if some evidence came to light, if Sakayanagi was in the position of a traitor, she would never leave evidence near her. She would plant it on some random student's desk or bag, or somewhere in the classroom. Then, it would become a war of words. They'd argue with each other on the spot, pinning the blame on each other.

Naming a student who had a high possibility of being a traitor without providing solid evidence was simply too risky.

Either way, it was more disadvantageous to make a fuss about it now.

Sakayanagi decided to prioritize avoiding last place rather than aiming for first place.

It didn't affect you as long as you could defend and gain points, even if information continued to leak.

They tried to defend against Horikita's attacks as much as possible and aim for third place, but it didn't go as well as they hoped.

From the flow of the exam transmitted from the monitor, it became evident that Ichinose was assisting Horikita. A strategy was being constructed—to use a traitor to make their class sink to the bottom.

The 20th turn ended while they were falling behind, and they lost their third placement by six points.

“It seems this time I've lost.”

They competed between the four classes and suffered the disgrace of coming in last place.

Even if the circumstances were due to inside betrayal, no excuses could be accepted.

Sakayanagi let out a sigh.

As the leader, she still needed to take responsibility for this defeat.

“As we have been defeated, we must select an eliminated classmate to expel.”

During the exam, five students—Kamuro, Yamamura, Sugio, Toba, and Machida—were eliminated.

“Normally, it would be proper to decide based on the contribution to the class, but we won't do that. The reason is simple. From my perspective, the five of you are all on the same level.”

Sakayanagi asserted that there would be no change in the class's strength regardless of who was expelled.

“So, how are we gonna decide then...?”

One of the eliminated students, Machida, asked anxiously.

“We should draw lots and decide on who to expel fairly.”

An unexpected proposal caused a scream from the eliminations.

“Are you dissatisfied? Unfortunately, it won't make a big difference who is expelled.”

In the silent classroom, Sakayanagi continued the process tirelessly. The eliminated students wanted to vent their frustrations, but they wanted to avoid aggravating Sakayanagi and being singled out for expulsion.

“It's pointless to object. The leader has the right to decide on who to expel.”

“If we follow the results of the draw, can that be considered the leader's decision?”

“Of course. To make it easier to avoid a case where a student with a low OAA takes responsibility, I have decided to judge the unlucky ones as those without talent. And if someone refuses to participate in the draw, I’ll interpret that as them giving up the fight at that point, and I’ll expel them.”

In order to forcibly involve them, Sakayanagi tirelessly eliminated any means of escape.

“I’ve prepared the lots.”

A female student spoke to Sakayanagi in a carefree voice, unaware of the heavy atmosphere.

“You’re well-prepared, Morishita-san. Thank you for carefully coloring them. We’re short on time, so let’s get it over with quickly. The person picking the colored paper will unfortunately have to drop out of school.”

There were a total of five lots prepared, four of which were safe. That was all.

“Who would like to draw first? Whether you’re the first or last to draw, your odds start the same.”

Would they show that they can avoid expulsion with their own hands, or wait for someone else to be expelled?

While suppressing his urge to object, Machida was the first to draw a lot.

“Heck yes!”

Machida drew a plain lot and showed the biggest victory pose so far.

Encouraged by this, Sugio and Toba followed.

One after another, they drew uncolored papers.

Then, only two of them were left: Kamuro Masumi and Yamamura Miki.

The former simply stayed because she couldn’t be bothered to go and draw.

The latter was too scared to move. They were left behind for totally different reasons. Sakayanagi, who had a friendship with both, didn’t change her expression.

The reason she chose a lottery of equal probability was that she decided it didn’t matter who dropped out.

“You go ahead and draw.”

Even though she was prompted by Kamuro, Yamamura couldn’t move.

She was shaking with the realization that she had a one-in-two chance of being expelled and was completely unprepared for it.

She couldn’t think about what would happen after her expulsion.

Even if she wanted to move forward, her feet were frozen.

“I-I, I am...”

“Geez... then I’ll draw it first. Is that okay?”

Unable to speak, Yamamura repeatedly nodded in agreement. That was all she could do.

Kamuro approached Morishita, who was holding the lottery box.

“Please wait.”

Just as she was about to reach out her hand, Sakayanagi stopped her.

“I said that those who won’t draw will be expelled. That means, Yamamura-san, who refused to draw, will leave.”

“Eh...? But... Eh...?”

“So, there’s no objection?”

“E-Eh...! T-That’s...”

“What is this? Are you trying to help me?”

“No, that’s not it. I was just stating the facts.”

“Oh, I see. Then it’s settled. Yamamura and I will draw at the same time, right?”

Eager to declare who would be expelled, Sakayanagi found herself stopped by Kamuro.

Kamuro easily threw away her own chance to avoid expulsion.

“Come quickly.”

She went towards Yamamura, who couldn’t take a step forward, and forcibly grabbed her arm and dragged her.

“This is your first and last opportunity to decide which of our luck is superior.”

“You’re really kind, aren’t you, Masumi-san? Do you really need to take risks to help someone you should just discard?”

“No, it’s just a whim.”

“Is that so...? Then let’s see the both of you draw.”

Morishita offered two lots for them to draw.

When Kamuro forcibly moved Yamamura’s indecisive left hand, she reflexively clutched one lot.

Seeing this, Kamuro also wrapped her hand around a lot.

“Don’t hold a grudge.”

In a calm voice, Kamuro awkwardly comforted the restless Yamamura.

“Now, release your hands.”

Morishita said slowly, and at the same moment, they opened their clenched hands.

The two pieces of paper fluttered in the slight breeze.

The person who drew the colored paper would be expelled—that was the rule.

The one who held that paper was Kamuro.

Apart from the person in question, the other students were unable to accept the result and fell silent.

“It’s decided. Good for you, Yamamura. You survived.”

“Ah, eh...”

She gently patted Yamamura on her shoulder, whose status, whether staying in school or dropping out, had not been conclusively determined yet.



Class A was engulfed by silence.

It was a completely different situation from when Totsuka had previously been expelled—the class points decreased due to the defeat and the expulsion was through a selection.

Class A was truly experiencing defeat for the first time.

What was surprising was that Kamuro, the sole sacrificial lamb, seemed calm throughout.

Seemingly annoyed by the gazes pouring in from her classmates, Kamuro brushed them off and returned to her seat.

Sakayanagi took her eyes off her and urged Chabashira, the teacher in charge, to proceed.

“Well then, let’s consider this special exam completed.”

The survival and elimination special exam, that had taken such a long time, had ended at last.

1

Final results:

1st: Ryūen 【Class D】 69 points

2nd: Ichinose 【Class C】 62 points

3rd: Horikita 【Class B】 59 points

4th: Sakayanagi 【Class A】 53 points

Ryūen, having perfectly defended for all the ten turns in the second half, turned the tables and won the victory.

With this ranking confirmed, Ryūen's class gained 100 class points. The second and third-placed classes, regrettably, lost 50 class points, whereas Sakayanagi lost 100 class points.

The result, which was unimaginable based on the first half, was completely unexpected; everyone fell from the top.

Defeat was no cause for joy. Yet, there was little discontent in the class. Rather, they appeared strongly relieved to have barely scraped by in third place.

No wonder. Those who had been eliminated had spent the end of the exam in mental distress.

Chabashira-sensei announced that more details, including Class A's expulsion, would be reported the following week and that class was dismissed for the day.

Among the lingering excitement, a single student burst open the classroom door from the hallway.

"Sorry, Karuizawa-san!"

"Eh, Ichinose-san...!?"

Kei, who was pressured by ten consecutive nominations, stiffened at Ichinose's appearance.

Protectively, Satō slipped in front of Kei.

Seeing this, seated at the very back, Horikita stood up.

"Calm down, Karuizawa-san. Those mysterious consecutive nominations were Ichinose-san trying to throw us a lifeline."

Ichinose apologized while agreeing with Horikita's words.

"Eh? What, what does that mean...?"

"She was trying, in her own way, to give us points. Right?"

"I had considered contacting you through text or by call, but it would be unnatural to say that we would be giving your points, so we decided to make a

series of consecutive nominations in order to send a straightforward message. It was then that Horikita-san got suspicious and contacted me.”

Horikita was the one who contacted her, not the other way around. Ichinose explained that this was the important point.

“We were also able to successfully protect a few people later thanks to Ichinose-san informing us of the nominees in advance.”

“Why would they... Why would they need to do that...?”

“To defeat Class A, probably. Essentially, every class in second place and below was able to fight so that no one would lose.”

“Yes, our only option was to face Sakayanagi-san head-on. That’s what we call a godsend.”

If it wasn’t for Ichinose’s support, the six-point difference might’ve been a setback.

“But, why did that have to be me?”

“You, Karuizawa-san, have been playing a central role among the girls, and naturally, Horikita-san would think of protecting you from being eliminated, wouldn’t she? That’s why I planned to keep nominating you from the beginning. However, I thought you must’ve been feeling anxious, so I rushed over here. I’m truly sorry!”

Looking at the justified reasoning and Horikita’s message that substantiated it, Kei was somewhat relieved.

Ichinose continued to apologize to Kei several times before inevitably leaving since she was keeping her classmates waiting.

Afterward, as she looked at the ranking, Horikita received her classmates’ thanks as they began to leave.

I also called out to Horikita.

“We lost this time. In the second half, it was clear that there must have been some kind of deal between Ryūen-kun’s and Ichinose-san’s classes... Of course, without any evidence, it’s just speculation, but his class gave points to Ichinose-san’s class, which elevated them to second place, without a single elimination.”

“Exactly, but that’s not the main point.”

Horikita nodded in agreement and stood up.

“If two classes colluded, they basically had to start working together from the first half. Only by assisting each other could both parties benefit and share the victory. So I was fully relieved when there were no signs of it even after the first half was over.”

“It wasn’t just you. Sakayanagi couldn’t have expected it either.”

It was uncertain when Ryūen and Ichinose joined hands, but it must’ve been after the special exam arrangements were announced. And without showing their faces publicly, they were quietly preparing.

“But the turning point of all this was that Ryūen was able to sense all of Sakayanagi’s attack targets beforehand.”

“Someone leaked Class A’s information to him... That’s the only explanation.”

“That seems to be the case.”

“That student is insane. I can’t imagine something like clearly betraying the class. This wasn’t Class D or Class C, but a class that has maintained A since enrollment. What did they get in return for executing this?”

“They could betray their class if they were being paid 20 million points. Other than that, they probably wouldn’t do it.”

But still, it was hard to believe that anyone would betray their class if asked straight out.

Indeed, gaining 20 million points, which enabled you to move to another class at any point in time, seemed like a true goal, but there was still more than a year left until graduation. If such a huge amount of points were transferred, the betrayal would soon be exposed to the light of day, and the student would be the target of Class A’s fury. They would also be envied by other classes. If they were targeted in the subsequent special exams, resulting in the risk of expulsion, they’d have no choice but to part with their private points. If that were to occur, they’d be getting their priorities backward.

In other words, it was safe to assume that the traitor wanted something special but unusual.

“I’m not thrilled with the outcome, but I can’t complain. Although it’s disappointing not coming in first, Class A ended up being fourth, so there’s basically no damage done. However... I still feel frustrated.”

Stepping out into the hallway and out of other students’ sight, Horikita vented her true feelings without holding back.

“Take that frustration to the next special exam.”

“Okay... I’ll do that.”

“I’m going to check out Ryūen’s class. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll go home for today. I don’t have the confidence that I can listen to his sarcasm maturely.”

Indeed, there was no denying the possibility that Ryūen could stir things up.

2

Wanting to confirm the state of Ryūen's class, which should be in high spirits, I went close to Class D and found Hiyori.

She seemed to be looking down at the floor from the window.

Her expression was not the soft smile she usually showed, but a stern one. Noticing this incongruity, I quietly approached and copied her, looking down from the window.

What I saw was Ryūen and a few of his entourage.

A noticeable figure was Ishizaki, who was gesticulating in joy while jumping about.

There was also Katsuragi's figure, walking majestically towards Keyaki Mall, even with his gaudy movements.

His side profile which was briefly visible, as always, was stern as usual.

"Just about time to taste the wine of victory, huh?"

I wouldn't be surprised if they splurged at Keyaki Mall today.

"That seems to be the case."

Hiyori responded to my words in her natural tone.



“Aren’t you going?”

“Although I was invited, I declined today.”

“Why?”

“Maybe because I just couldn’t feel like celebrating.”

Among the jubilant students, the only one without a smile might have been Hiyori.

“I felt uneasy seeing Ryūen-kun’s way of thinking and offensive approach today.”

“He achieved first place against the odds. I think it was an excellent result.”

“We can say so if we only look at the result. However...”

After hesitating a bit, Hiyori continued speaking.

“I have doubts if we can continue winning without incident using these methods.”

“It wasn’t a conventional approach. Rather, it was more like treading carefully when it came to the class’s strengths.”

The ability to gamble on unique strategies was Ryūen’s forte, but that was all.

“We somehow managed this time, but we’re not going to be able to build upon this victory next time. I’m not saying we should lose, but we’ve lost a valuable opportunity for growth.”

“You could be right.”

However, to achieve that, they might need some fresh perspectives.

“The parts necessary for us to rise to class A also serve as obstacles. It’s troubling.”

Hiyori could see a clear weakness in her class.

The strength laid in Ryūen’s existence.

But on the flip side, the weaknesses were due to his presence too.

“If there’s a student who realizes this, there’s still hope for the class.”

I wanted to briefly hear what the winners would say, but I had no intention of interrupting.

Hiyori, who looked concerned, seemed to be going to the library and invited me to join, but I decided to decline.

I also wanted to see how Ichinose’s and Sakayanagi’s classes were doing.

About Ichinose’s class, for better or for worse, it was the same as usual. While avoiding the lowest position, they provided insurance by keeping the number of eliminations to zero. Fighting without abandoning anyone carried risks, but in the end, they finished in second place.

Horikita determined her goal and deliberately orchestrated the strategy in the first half of the battle to push five students to the brink of elimination. In the second half, she allied with Ryūen, who appeared to have initiated negotiations

early on, achieving an elimination count of zero. Furthermore, she assisted Horikita, relegating Sakayanagi's position to the very bottom.

It could be said that they made the best possible moves for a class caught in the middle.

3

It was after school, and the time had already passed 5 p.m. Due to the second year's special exam, club activities were canceled, and only a few students remained on campus.

Sakayanagi was seated at Kamuro's desk, which had yet to be cleared away, quietly waiting for the time to pass.

As the promised time approached, the classroom door opened.

"I've been waiting for you, Hashimoto-kun."

"Why did you want to meet me in such a place and with just the two of us?"

"It's a reflection meeting."

"Well, that would be a little scary."

"This special exam turned out to be a great disappointment. It was my failure."

"I agree. It was disappointing, but I can't blame you. No matter how I think about it, the class's information must have leaked to Ryūen."

The newly entered Hashimoto gently placed his hand on Kamuro's desk and looked around the classroom.

"The traitor caused Masumi-chan's—Kamuro-chan's—expulsion. It's unforgivable."

"I thought you didn't care who got expelled as long as it wasn't you, Hashimoto-kun."

"We were comrades for two years, weren't we? Even I would feel angry."

"Yes, I suppose. But how do you think the class's information was leaked?"

Sakayanagi asked Hashimoto, as though to seek his opinion.

"Normally you would think it was leaked via a phone. Simple and effective."

"I think the same."

"If that's the case, why didn't you take countermeasures when Morishita spoke up?"

"What do you mean by countermeasures? Confiscating everyone's phones?"

"Yeah, exactly. Wouldn't that have minimized the damage?"

"The traitor isn't stupid. I assumed they had some sort of countermeasure in place. I thought that if we started a clumsy investigation, it would only create confusion."

"So, you chose to wait and see as you saw ahead. A strategy only you could've orchestrated."

Slowly, Hashimoto walked between the rows of desks and advanced toward the podium.

“However, didn’t it pain your heart to cut off Kamuro-chan, even if it was the result of the lots?”

“Pain my heart?”

“You were good friends. If it was me, I would’ve bent over backwards to get Toba or the others expelled instead.”

“That’s impossible. She isn’t a special existence to me.”

“No matter what, you’ve been together for two years, facing highs and lows. It’s strong of you not to waver. I kind of liked Kamuro-chan, and I don’t think I’ll be able to get over it any time soon.”



From a distance, Hashimoto answered with a complicated look on his face. “Who do you think is the traitor that caused Masumi-san to be expelled?”

“You keep on asking questions. Unfortunately, I have no idea. But do you have any clues?”

Sakayanagi laughed and then slowly stood up from her chair, leaning on her cane.

She then signaled for Hashimoto to join her.

Walking away from the podium, Hashimoto did exactly that and made his way towards Sakayanagi.

“Hashimoto-kun, you’re the traitor who leaked our internal information, aren’t you?” she asked.

Hashimoto scratched his head and sighed heavily in response.

“I figured that’s why I was called here. It’s not unreasonable to suspect me, after all. As you probably know, I have always been exploring the possibility of transferring to another class. I admit that. But think about it, would I jeopardize my position in Class A? It doesn’t make sense.”

Although acknowledging that the suspicion was inevitable, he strongly rebutted against it.

“That would be the typical view. I myself believed no overt betrayal was probable.”

It was normally hard to imagine a Class A student resorting to an inexplicably self-risking course of action.

Not even someone like Sakayanagi, with meticulous attention to detail, could ever foresee and counteract betrayal from a comrade.

“I won’t do anything to jeopardize the class. What’s the point if the person expected to betray actually does?”

Fully aware he was the most likely suspect, Hashimoto asserted he wouldn’t betray the class.

“I will pitch in to find the traitor; then, I will prove my innocence.”

“Then, shall we have you start assisting immediately?”

Sakayanagi took out her phone and gently placed it on Kamuro’s desk.

The screen showed Hashimoto walking with Ryūen at Keyaki Mall.

“You met with him before this special exam, didn’t you?”

“That was Ryūen approaching me on his own accord. He just dragged me around,” Hashimoto retorted with great reluctance. “Who on earth took these photos? Was it your personal assistant, Yamamura?”

Before she could respond, Hashimoto asked with a sense of preemption.

“Can we end this farce now?”

Sakayanagi said in her typical tone to Hashimoto, who had been denying everything.

“I assume you won’t believe me, no matter whatever I say.”

“If you insist on justifying it with excuses, would you show me your phone’s history?”

She countered Hashimoto’s defense with a rebuttal. Her suspicion was evidently strong.

“I suppose you would drop your suspicions if I did that?”

“Well, it’s worth a try, don’t you think?”

“Indeed, if you were to leak information during the exam, it would be quickest to keep your phone on and secretly texting and emailing. So, the one with traces would be the traitor. But are you okay with that? If you check my phone and find nothing, you’ll have to apologize accordingly.”

He had been suspected so far, and he wouldn’t let it slide; he was confident enough to say this.

“If I’m mistaken, I’ll meet your expectations. But what I’m asking for isn’t a call history or chat history. You can easily erase those, after all.”

After school, Hashimoto had plenty of time to himself.

Erasing these histories would be easy.

“So, what history do you want to see?”

“What I want to see is your use of private points, not the call or chat history.”

Having said this much, would he admit it?

At Sakayanagi’s words, Hashimoto choked up in the back of his throat.

“You seem easygoing, but you’re actually cautious. You can’t guarantee that Ryūen-kun won’t trap you, even if you join hands. If you were eliminated, you would take on the risk of being expelled. You can make a contract with Ryūen-kun in writing to protect yourself, but that leaves physical evidence that you want to avoid as much as possible. Therefore, it’s no wonder you may have taken a large amount of Private Points as a way to guarantee things. If the promise is fulfilled, the full amount would be returned. If not, you could seize the Private Points. This way, there would be no betrayal unless something very serious happens, right?”

Hashimoto took out his phone and grimaced with a bitter smile.

“Gosh. It won’t be as simple as I thought. I admit it. I’ve surrendered.”

Sakayanagi’s observation was right. Using his classmates, Ryūen collected a large amount of Private Points to give to Hashimoto. It was his insurance from getting eliminated.

“How much did he buy from you?”

“The information fee wasn’t high. About 500,000.”

“That’s a cheap price for betrayal.”

“I kept it at that level. Private Points aren’t a problem, but that’s not why I betrayed you.”

Hashimoto emphasized that Private Points were not the main goal. Normally, it wouldn't have been strange to immediately pursue his real intentions, but Sakayanagi didn't.

She already understood why he'd betrayed her.

"Should I praise Ryūen-kun, who led you to betray me this time?"

"Don't make me laugh. As the information broker, I deliberately chose him on my own. I chose him because he doesn't hate betraying anyone, and if he benefits, he'll accept it without hesitation. Horikita and Ichinose wouldn't have accepted it, would they?"

"Even if you say that you were passing information to other classes as an informant, whether the other class leaders would accept it is a different story. He's the only one who would easily accept it."

"Yeah. So, for today's special exam, I initially bet on the two-thirds chance that our class would go up against his class."

If Class A was placed on a diagonal line with no attack and defense with Ryūen's class in the special exam, Hashimoto said he was going to watch without making a move.

With that decision, the situation would've dramatically changed.

It wouldn't have been strange if the first half's ranking settled it.

"Do you not think of scolding me at least once?"

"I am not a teacher. I don't feel like guiding you correctly."

Hashimoto shrugged his shoulders and put away his phone in his pocket.

"Shouldn't you have searched me at least?"

"It's pointless. You didn't do anything illegal like leaking information on your phone, right? It's too dangerous to spy on your own phone. Instead, you borrowed a phone from a student in another class ahead of time and hid it somewhere in the classroom, didn't you?"

"Did you read through me that much?"

"You won't gain anything by testing me."

Hashimoto, who tried to pull one off, was quickly counterattacked.

If he was suspected, he would've pulled out his phone without hesitation.

No evidence would have been found even if everyone's mobile was checked during the exam.

Sakayanagi, who knew that it was just a waste of time, decided early to continue using it to capitalize on the defensive aspects instead.

The feeling that those around her were in a hurry was just a misinterpretation.

"The hiding place must be in the classroom, but it takes time and effort to find it. There could be a spy in the hallway, someone pretending to be ignorant and

making a fuss, and while there's an opportunity, forcefully taking out the phone wouldn't be destroying evidence. "

Sakayanagi, who had mobility impairments, couldn't make nimble movements to catch them red-handed.

If she showed signs of whispering to Kamuro or Kitō, Hashimoto would have hesitated.

"When the special exam came to an end and you were going home, you left the classroom with Yoshida-kun, who you weren't so close with. Did you put it in his bag?"

"Aha, you're watching well, Princess. So, I was the most suspicious after all."

"There were elements in your recent remarks that made me realize."

"But why? Instead of asking me to show my Private Points history the moment I arrived in the classroom, why'd you take the time to coax me into confessing?"

Sakayanagi didn't immediately confront Hashimoto when he showed up in the classroom.

If she hadn't yet made up her mind, it would be a different story, but Sakayanagi clearly held a firm belief.

"It's an act of mercy towards the traitor, including the fact that I didn't do anything during the exam."

That was why Sakayanagi created two moments for him to confess.

She was asking him to reflect on his actions and stay put.

"It's unfortunate that you didn't notice it. Colluding with other classes and plotting a transfer—I can overlook those as a harmless prank—but this act crosses a different line."

"That's right. It can be said for many special exams—being betrayed by your comrades is a fatal blow. A class functions as a community of shared destiny. Although there may be some dissatisfaction, and they may not follow instructions, they wouldn't betray the class. This is because it directly affects the class's disadvantage and their own disadvantage."

That was why even students who had complaints kept their frustrations in check and endured their daily lives.

"You crossed a line that shouldn't have been crossed."

"I won't deny it."

Hashimoto, standing against Sakayanagi, acknowledged the truth without flinching.

"The people around me won't understand. They'll say, 'What's the gain in bringing down Class A?' But no, that's wrong, this class had no chance of winning

from the beginning. Even if I didn't betray you, the class is destined to sink below Class B in the future. So I had to create a winning chance, even by betrayal."

"So you're fighting your own battle."

"It was hard for me too. But this special exam was a good opportunity to send a warning. The loss of class points isn't a matter of despair. Only the ones who lacked ability were eliminated. I thought it was a golden opportunity. I didn't betray this class because I wanted to. The temporary betrayal was because I wanted to win."

"You being discovered was part of the plan. Rather, it was included in your plan."

"I didn't think it would be today, though."

He thought it would be revealed in a class gathering, or something close to it.

Hashimoto wanted to avoid being forced into a situation where it was just the two of them if possible.

"The moment you noticed my betrayal and found out my plan, you probably already knew the reason, didn't you?"

"That's why I created this setting."

To take a big gamble, even at the risk of exposing himself to danger—that was the reason.

"Unless I did this, I couldn't convince you that I'm serious. At the end of winter break, I again suggested my idea to you. I want to pull Ayanokōji into our class."

"Yes, I've already heard plenty of your passionate speeches."

The poaching of Ayanokōji and the act of betrayal.

Other students might tilt their heads as they couldn't connect the two.

However, Hashimoto understood very well the essence and nature of Sakayanagi Arisu.

"Even if we lost class points this time, even if I turned out to be the traitor, and even if you have to expel me, I've decided that it doesn't matter. That's the resolution I had made."

This wasn't the end, it was the beginning.

The threat of repeating the betrayal until Sakayanagi adopted Ayanokōji.

"You seem to genuinely believe that you can't graduate as Class A with my guidance."

"I acknowledge that Princess is excellent. But still, I'm convinced that we won't be able to stop Ayanokōji's class's rapid progress in the near future. Class A's and Class B's positions will eventually be reversed, and we won't have a chance to outdo them afterward. In other words, our current position is just an illusion."

He passionately continued.

“The best strategy to graduate as Class A is for Princess and Ayanokōji to be in the same class. With that, we will become a solid, unbeatable class.”

“I guess it was the right decision to not let you say this in front of others.”

“Won’t you admit it? I think my idea is right.”

“I can’t agree.”

“Sorry to break it to you, but Ayanokōji is undoubtedly the strongest in our year—”

“What do you claim to know about Ayanokōji-kun?”

With a clatter, the tip of her cane firmly struck the floor.

“...!”

Clear anger was leaking from the previously calm Sakayanagi.

“It seems you’re pretty wrapped up in him. Have you noticed your fanatic statements?”

Under that extraordinary pressure, Hashimoto was intimidated by the petite Sakayanagi.

“You’re angry at being told you’re not the best?”

Indeed, this was Sakayanagi’s anger.

But, it wasn’t because Ayanokōji was judged superior.

It was unbearable to see this man, who blindly believed in Ayanokōji, before her.

What could a man, who isn’t even aware of Ayanokōji’s background, say about him?

“Drop your pride and pull Ayanokōji to your side. It’ll be the worst if Ryūen surrounds him.”

“The possibility of Ryūen-kun pulling in Ayanokōji-kun is zero. If he has the capabilities you’ve evaluated, he’d rather persist as an enemy to defeat him directly.”

“Maybe it’s like that now, but what about when he can’t win? If he keeps antagonizing him, and he loses his chance to reach Class A, his thoughts might change—”

“They won’t change. Ryūen-kun and I both wish to fight a worthy adversary. The obsession with graduating as Class A is practically nonexistent.”

Upon hearing these words, Hashimoto closed his eyes and let out a sigh.

His own remarks were proven wrong. The reason for Sakayanagi’s previously unseen attitude was that she had rated Ayanokōji highly for much longer than Hashimoto had realized.

Simultaneously, it was reaffirmed that Ayanokōji’s skill was, without a doubt, genuine.

“He might be tired of your behavior. When I enrolled in this school, I intuitively thought that you, or Ryūen, would be the leaders to graduate from Class A. However, I always felt an odd sense of discomfort. Now, the reason is clear. Neither of you has a true passion for graduating from Class A.”

Winning against rivals, and subsequently remaining in Class A.

If anything more important than being Class A were discovered, it would easily be tossed aside.

“On the other hand, Horikita and Ichinose possess passion. It’s strange. Classes who can’t win, who lack power, have this passion, while a class capable of winning doesn’t. However, if Ayanokōji and Princess team up, passion won’t matter. It would certainly lead to the birth of a winning class.”

While looking at Hashimoto, Sakayanagi spoke indifferently, as she was satisfied with her own understanding.

“I understand you’re saying that bringing Ayanokōji to our class is the absolute condition for victory. However, isn’t getting a class exchange ticket and transferring to the class he’s enrolled in the simplest and safest method? In addition to having Ayanokōji, Horikita-san’s class also has a fixation on reaching Class A.

“Was such a position possible for me?”

“Of course. If you had pleaded for the class exchange ticket because you wished to transfer, I would’ve gladly given it to you.”

“I guess I’ve made a regrettable decision then.”

Sakayanagi immediately pointed out his deliberately regretful behavior.

“You’re joking. You wouldn’t have accepted the ticket in that situation.”

“...Why is that?”

“Your intentions are transparent. Even though the future is unclear, you wouldn’t want to give up this class that currently holds the A position. However, Ayanokōji-kun scares you. You want to change classes, but there’s no guarantee after going to Class B. That’s why you won’t use a ticket. If you can’t move yourself, the only option left is to move someone else.”

Students who frivolously switched classes could hardly gain trust.

The hurdles to get the next ticket were much higher than before.

They lost the means to escape from the sinking ship in case of emergency.

“We have no intention of keeping you, the traitor, in our class from now on. You can’t escape now, you know? I’m sure you’re trying to negotiate with your surroundings, but you’re not worth 20 million points. No one will seriously pick you up. Even if you try to get the class transfer ticket, I will never let you get it as long as I control Class A. Of course, the same applies to letting in Ayanokōji-kun.”

In other words, Hashimoto was at a deadlock.

But he didn’t retreat. From the moment he decided to betray his class, Hashimoto faced it with firm determination.

“I wanted you to understand, but it can’t be helped. I will continue to do the same thing. I will definitely convince Princess to bring in Ayanokōji.”

This was Hashimoto’s big gamble.

If something came along that would allow the entire class to expel one person, he would be in a desperate situation.

But if such a thing didn’t come, it wouldn’t be easy to expel Hashimoto.

“The special exam isn’t the only chance for expulsion. You understand that, don’t you?”

“You insist on not accepting my offer. Then, in the worst-case scenario, I have no choice but to get you expelled. After that, I will control Class A and bring in Ayanokōji.”

At his words, which could be described as a complete parting, Sakayanagi applauded dryly.

“Well said. That’s the most brilliant line you’ve said today, Hashimoto-kun. If you’re going to expel me, let’s welcome it. Please show me.”

The complete break within the class.

It was the beginning of a battle that would not end until one of them was defeated.

Epilogue: The Premonition of Awakening

NEAR THE STAFF room, Sakayanagi was quietly waiting alone.

“Are you waiting for Kamuro to come out?”

“It seems like you’ve heard about her situation somewhere.”

“Kitō told me when I went to check on Class A.”

“He’s not very talkative, but you never know with friendships.”

“I thought it might’ve been inappropriate, but I decided to visit. It’s not like we were especially close, but this would be the last time I could see her. I thought I’d briefly say hello.”

“Oh, is that so?”

The truth was, saying hello to Kamuro didn’t really matter.

But if I said this, Sakayanagi wouldn’t be able to refuse me staying there.

I stood next to Sakayanagi and looked at the staff room door.

“You must have grasped what happened in the exam, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yeah, I have a pretty good idea of the reason for your defeat. Have you been able to identify who was responsible?”

“Yes, I’ve finished that task a while ago.”

“I see.”

If that was the case, Sakayanagi would be dealing with that issue later.

As the sun was about to set, Kamuro calmly came out.

Thinking no one was going to be there, she showed an astonished expression we’d never seen before.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“We were waiting for you, Masumi-san. Should we not have done so?”

“That’s not it, but why did you come?”

Apparently, Kamuro was more accepting of reality than expected.

“We have today to say our goodbyes. I wanted to talk to you one last time.”

“Don’t tell me you feel guilty? That couldn’t be right. What about Ayanokōji?”

“He’s on a social studies field trip.”

“Huh...? Huh. As usual, you’re incomprehensible.”

“A surprising student had to withdraw. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious.”

“You’re surprised by me? Even though I’m the type of person who shoplifts without hesitation?”

“That’s in the past. At least, overall, you weren’t one of the bottom students in the class. I don’t know how Sakayanagi chose who to expel, so it’s only natural that I’m surprised.”

I deliberately didn’t mention it, but she was someone close to Sakayanagi as well.

“The expulsion was chosen by lottery.”

“That’s quite—”

“Do you think I made an uncharacteristic decision?”

“I wonder. I’d rather ask Kamuro how she feels since she was chosen to be expelled by lottery.”

I wasn’t sure if she would answer honestly now that she had been expelled, but I asked anyway.

“You can ask me something like that with a perfectly serious face? How strange.”

Kamuro started to think, looking surprised. Perhaps she hadn’t expected to be asked about her feelings.

“How do I feel? I just feel strange. Until this morning, I was leading a normal school life. I was even thinking about trivial things like how to spend my next day off. Then, all of a sudden, I’m expelled. This was completely unexpected.”

Because she wasn’t the first student to be cut off, it was understandable that she lacked a sense of crisis. Surely, even Sakayanagi didn’t think she would lose.

“It’s my fault. I’ve done something terrible to you, haven’t I?”

“No, that’s okay—”

Kamuro immediately objected to Sakayanagi’s words, which were close to an apology.

“I’m not blaming you. I don’t expect you to do anything. I’ve always thought that it wouldn’t matter if I was expelled one day.”

Kamuro originally wasn’t very well-behaved. She seemed relaxed throughout, perhaps because she had made up her mind from the start.

We couldn’t just stand around chatting outside the staff room forever; Kamuro began to walk at her own pace.

Sakayanagi, who had bad legs, chased after her a little faster than usual.

There was no problem heading in the same direction since they were heading home anyway.

“I was ready to accept one or two complaints...”

“You’re being unnecessarily nosy.”

“What do you plan on doing after dropping out of school?”

“Even if I’m expelled, there are several high schools that will accept me as a transfer student if I pass the exams. My parents are nagging me to graduate high school, so I’m considering that for now.”

Apparently, Kamuro had already decided her path, including those options, within a short span of time.

Slowly, the distance between Kamuro and Sakayanagi widened.

If Sakayanagi didn’t keep up with her, it’d be hard to even follow her. She tried to hurry in order to catch up, but she stumbled forward due to the unfamiliar movement and ended up catching herself on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

Kamuro, who had turned around and sighed, came back and gently lifted Sakayanagi.

“Starting tomorrow, I won’t be here, so find a replacement quickly.”

“I understand... Masumi-san—”

“What is it?”

Kamuro responded, sounding annoyed.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Sakayanagi seemed to start saying something but stopped.

Kamuro cocked her head, gave Sakayanagi her cane after picking it up, and started walking again.

Once again, Sakayanagi began to limp, chasing after Kamuro.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Sakayanagi asked.

Kamuro turned around one more time as they neared the front entrance.

“Huh? Do you want me to blame you? Ask why you made me withdraw?”

“That’s not what I mean. I just have a responsibility to listen to you.”

“What nonsense—”

Kamuro, about to say something, changed her mind when she saw Sakayanagi’s eyes.

“Honestly, you... although you’re smart, you’re kind of stupid. I’m just realizing this now.”

“You can’t just leave it at that. What do you mean?”

“If you have a responsibility to listen, then just listen quietly.”

Sakayanagi successfully outsmarted her.

“Then, here it is. I have no lingering affection for this school, but promise me one thing.”

“A promise? What is it?”

“It’s not about me. Just make sure the class traitor goes down the same path. Can you promise that?”

“Is that your wish?”

“Yes, just that. Can you do it?”

“I promise. I will not forgive the traitor. I promise to get rid of them no matter what. Of course, I will not let the class lose as a consequence.”

Kamuro nodded to Sakayanagi, who made the promise, and then turned her eyes to me as I stood behind them.

“You’re also responsible for checking if Sakayanagi has kept her promise, Ayanokōji.”

“It seems like a needless responsibility, but I’ll accept it.”

“Good, then it’s okay. Sorry, but this is where we part ways. I’m not a student of this school anymore, and I don’t need to take care of you, right?”

Saying so, Kamuro started walking away, completely ignoring Sakayanagi as she was taking her time changing shoes.

She didn’t stop once and disappeared in the direction of the dormitory.

By tomorrow morning, Kamuro would no longer be at this school.

Not just Sakayanagi, but many in the class weren’t prepared for Kamuro’s withdrawal.

“She stayed true to herself till the end.”

“Right.”

“I will need some more time. You should go ahead.”

Following Kamuro, I too, exited the school.

It seemed that for Sakayanagi, Kamuro was not merely a classmate after all.

1

I went on a small walk, finally arriving near the bench where I had met Morishita about a week ago.

No one else was around and there were no signs of anyone either. I sat down on the bench alone.

Then, about ten minutes must've passed.

The person I was waiting for appeared, walking at a much slower pace than usual.

She usually would have a much wider field of view, but Sakayanagi hadn't noticed me.

"It took you quite a while to get ready, didn't it?"

When I called out to her, she was slightly surprised, but quickly hid it.

"Could it be... you were waiting for me?"

"I had forgotten to ask about your current thoughts too."

"I see. Opportunities to witness the defeat of Class A don't come by often."

"You weren't outmatched in the standoff. You saw the other classes' weaknesses and accurately exploited them; your defense was excellent. I would say you clearly outdid the three leaders."

"Though, I can't laugh since I was the one who lost."

"Indeed."

"But it's unfortunate. I don't think my feelings have changed at all. If the cause of defeat was my lack of skill, the story would be different."

"That might be your conclusion, however, it's not the same when it comes to the expelled students, right?"

"If there are eliminations in the defeated class, someone gets expelled—we knew this from the start."

Sakayanagi stubbornly refused to acknowledge it, but I continued.

"Even so, for you, the defeat... No, Kamuro's expulsion must have been unexpected."

"Please don't underestimate me. Sure, Masumi-san worked by my side for two years, but she wasn't an extraordinarily excellent student, nor was she particularly obedient. Her expulsion has virtually no impact on the class."

She responded with a laugh, indicating a misunderstanding.

"This doesn't seem like you, Sakayanagi. You appear far from your usual composure."

"You think this doesn't seem like me? I don't think so."

"You should've figured that out given that I'm here questioning you."

If Kamuro's expulsion hadn't affected Sakayanagi at all, I wouldn't be waiting here.

I wouldn't be bothering to shake her up out of the blue.

"Certainly, you have exceptionally high insight, but aren't you too confident?"

"I wonder."

Showing that I wasn't changing my mind, at last, Sakayanagi also seemed slightly troubled.

"Masumi-san's expulsion affected my feelings—is that what you want to say?"

"To put it plainly, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"I don't agree."

"I understand your reluctance to admit it. If you admit that, you'd also have to acknowledge that you made the wrong choice."

If she believed that she should've chosen someone other than Kamuro from among the eliminations, regret is born.

"You know you're strong. That's why you don't have much empathy for other's weaknesses. You tend to fail to support their weaknesses."

"That's a line I don't want to hear from you, Ayanokōji-kun."

"Sure, it applies to me too, but you're half-hearted and not fully committed. Because you have the sensibility of a normal person, you unconsciously understand part of it."

Although we had a lot in common, we also had a lot of differences.

"I don't understand. What are you trying to say, Ayanokōji-kun? Are you suggesting that it would be better if I were weaker? Should I have been selfish and wished to keep Masumi-san?"

"Normally, leaders cannot be selfish. But if you want to win from here on out, that's what you should've done. To be strong, you should've kept Kamuro. You should've compiled reasons to expel the others, whether by referencing the OAA or otherwise."

But her pride got in the way.

In her unexpected failure, she made the wrong decision, pretending to be calm and deciding that anyone among the eliminated could leave.

Once lost, the part of her that was gone couldn't return.

Sakayanagi had to continue fighting in this deficient state from now on.

"Don't worry. Her presence doesn't affect anything. I won't lose anymore."

"You probably will. If you challenge the year-end exam as it is, it'll be a repeat of this time."

Sakayanagi just didn't want to admit that the situation was significantly changing.

“I see, I understand your aim now. You need me to take damage. That’s why you want me to think I’m weakened by this event. Are you trying to disturb me mentally? Am I wrong?”

“Why would I need you to be weakened?”

“It’s inconvenient if Class A stands out, isn’t it? In order to create the ideal development you desire, you want to enter the third year with the four classes in a competitive condition. That’s the purpose, right?”

“You’re not wrong, but that’s not enough.”

“How is it wrong?”

“Whether Class A is leading at this point in time isn’t a big deal. My aim is to bring out each class’s maximum potential. To do this, I will meddle with Ryūen, Ichinose, Sakayanagi, whomever.”

“I don’t like it. I don’t like the idea of being assisted by you.”

“But that’s why I’m here. I’m standing here to help you.”

Sakayanagi, who had been annoyingly verbose, finally stopped speaking.

Sakayanagi was shrewd from the beginning. She knew this all along. She was just pretending not to know.

“Your miscalculation was that Kamuro’s presence was larger than you thought at face value. You made the decision to draw lots because you wanted to think that Kamuro was no different from the rest.”

Hindsight is always 20/20. She should’ve been true to herself, even if it meant garnering resentment.

Of course, the pride and negligence when she thought she wouldn’t lose could be the cause of this poor decision.

“I…”

Sakayanagi couldn’t look into my eyes any longer, her gaze wandered away.

She stared into the distance, exhaling quietly.

“I haven’t made any friends throughout my time in primary and secondary school. I couldn’t blend in with immature people of a lower intellectual level.”

She reflected on herself from her childhood days.

“It hasn’t changed even at this school. Masumi-san, Hashimoto-kun, and Kitō-kun were the same. They were close to me, but only to be used as tools. Nothing more, nothing less. I saw them as strangers.”

Sakayanagi had spent her school life without recognizing the people around her as friends.

But the line between acquaintanceship and friendship often blurred. It was impossible for anyone to determine exactly where that line was.

“So I thought it wouldn’t matter who disappeared…”

Her words halted there.

Surely by now, even Sakayanagi couldn't deny the true answer she could see.

"It seems that, somewhere along the line, Masumi-san became a friend to me."

Even if she had been using the term 'friend' before, the weight it carried now was vastly different.

The meaning shifted greatly depending on whether she truly accepted this fact or not.

She had merely fooled herself into believing that being smart meant she wouldn't be swayed by others.

"...Either way, it's not like me, is it?"

"Maybe so. At least you now realize that losing Kamuro made you weaker, but it can also make you stronger."

It would be a problem if she stumbled and couldn't get back up with just this much.

"So you've always been behind the scenes, giving advice like this to various people. No wonder everyone is growing."

"They're far from done yet."

Sakayanagi had nothing more to say. She just slowly and politely bowed her head.

I sensed that she couldn't stay with me any longer.

I saw her small figure off and sat back down on the bench.

"In the end, Kamuro's expulsion has become a boon."

No other variables had influenced Sakayanagi's emotions as much as this did now.

Without needing to control the situation, their class points had also been reduced.

It was evidence that each class was gaining strength and becoming more capable of fighting.

From here on out, Sakayanagi herself needed to think hard, realize things, and significantly grow.

And thus, her journey to confront her never-experienced emotions began.

Ryūen had shed a layer and started moving forward.

Not changing his previous tactics, but rather, refining them even further.

From now on, he would mercilessly expand his power into his surroundings.

There were about two months left until the year-end exam.

"I guess I should quietly press on with preparations."

About Karuizawa Kei.

About Ichinose Honami.

And about the class.

With the remaining time I had left in school, I began taking action to become a memorable presence to those around me.

Author's Postscript

Corona, influenza, broken bones, and a neck hernia. Just this year, I, Kinugasa, have been beaten to a pulp by this incredible rush of afflictions. Yes, I'm still alive. I'm Kinugasa.

But the back pain and numbness from the hernia have been severe, and it looks like it could keep up for a while. I was able to write this manuscript before the symptoms came on, which was fortunate, but from here on out, I can't say for sure that it won't affect me... These days, I'm struggling, reaching my limit after just sitting in a chair for an hour.

Well, there's no point in talking about all this gloomy stuff, so let's move on to a brighter topic.

Congratulations to the Hanshin Tigers on winning the league championship for the first time in 18 years!!!!!!

Thank you for the inspiration! Thank you for the excitement! Let's hear it for the Tigers~!!!!

Yes. Please let me say this. It's okay, right? After all, it's been 18 years. I did quite a bit of shopping. Hats and shirts, wondering where to use them. It's okay, right? After all, it's been 18 years. Of course, an old dude like me is going to buy things like stickers and towels.

This time, the afterword is only a page long... sorry, it doesn't look like there's any room left to discuss the contents of volume 10. I'll do my best next time. Here's hoping I don't lose to the pain in my back...!

Ai Morishita's Short Story: On the Cold Bench

TODAY, I WAS waiting at a certain location to meet Ayanokōji Kiyotaka. It was a bench that you'd always pass by on your way back from school to the Keyaki Mall.

I sat alone and quietly spent my time here, not doing anything in particular. Then, I suddenly felt that I didn't like my current body position anymore. "Mm... I can't rest well."

Even if I rested my back on the chair, or stretched my back muscles, it did me no good.

What should I do to be released from this discomfort?

After going through trial and error, my problems were eventually resolved by lying face-down on the bench.

"This is comfortable..."

It was particularly good that the cold wooden plank hit my cheek. All that I needed to do now was to sit and wait for his arrival.

Ah, but since I'm not sitting... is it okay to 'sleep and wait' instead?

...Oh never mind.

Anyway, I spent my time in this relaxing position.

"Is she dead?"

Finally hearing his voice, I felt at ease.

If I had to wait any longer, I might've frozen to death.

I was almost starting to doze off and was about to be lulled into sleep.

"No, she's not."

"That's correct. I'm not dead."

I responded to Karuizawa Kei's accurate answer.

"What are you doing in such a place?"

"Are you curious?"

"It would be a lie if I said I wasn't interested but—"

"Then, I'll explain. I was, believe it or not, waiting for you, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka."

If you looked at the circumstances that had occurred so far, you could understand that he wasn't a normal student.

That was why I wanted to observe him more closely and learn more about him.

I wanted to confirm it again and again with my own eyes.

It was always better to have more companions with whom you could share information, treating facts as facts.

For Class A to continue to remain as Class A.

Shiina Hiyori's Short Story: A Small Spark

I HONESTLY CONVEYED MY anxieties to Ayanokōji-kun. Normally, I wouldn't discuss matters that could expose my class's weaknesses to someone from another class.

But Ayanokōji-kun was different.

He wouldn't exploit those anxieties. Instead, I knew he'd speak out for my sake.

"It wasn't a conventional approach. Rather, it was more like treading carefully when it came to the class's strengths."

In understanding this, Ayanokōji-kun assured me.

The anxiety I was feeling.

A small spark.

It was an internal problem my class was facing.

Perhaps only Katsuragi-kun in my class understood this. He was much more stern than me, and he was always there, watching over things closely.

Sharing both good and bad up close, and giving appropriate advice.

"The parts necessary for us to rise to Class A also serve as obstacles. It's troubling."

Two sides of the same coin. A challenging problem that couldn't be easily resolved.

"If there's a student who realizes this, there's still hope for the class,"

Ayanokōji-kun said, seemingly understanding the situation and ready to step back.

"I was thinking of going to the library later, would you like to come along?"

"No, I'll pass. I have other things on my mind."

"You have a lot on your plate, don't you, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"There's nothing really serious, though."

"Let's go together next time then."

Nodding, Ayanokōji-kun parted ways and I decided to head to the library alone.

"I'm not doing well either, am I?"

Instead of focusing on my class, meeting Ayanokōji-kun almost made me forget because I had such a good time.

After all, Ayanokōji-kun has a girlfriend whom he should cherish.

It's inexcusable to even think this way, isn't it?

Suzune Horikita's Short Story: Unconscious Awakening

“IT'S NOT SOMETHING I can share. I want to keep certain things to myself.”

Even though I was extremely interested in Ayanokōji-kun's past, I definitely understood that probing further would be rude.

“You better take a break to calm down.”

That was true. My throat was incredibly dry, and fatigue was starting to set in.

“Yes, you're right...”

Following his advice, I picked up the cup of coffee I had completely forgotten.

The coffee I thought was still hot had cooled down much more than I had anticipated.

“It's gotten cold.”

“It's gotten cold, hasn't it?”

When I absentmindedly responded, Ayanokōji-kun said something similar.

“Don't copy me.”

“Please don't copy me.”

It displeased me, so I replied as such. Somehow, however, the same words coincidentally overlapped again.

At that moment, the overlapping of words, what I had complained about just a moment ago, seemed strangely funny.

I ended up laughing.

He, before my eyes, also thought it seemed somehow funny and laughed a little.

“Eh—?”

“What's wrong?”

The expression on his face was the same as usual.

But the face he showed just before was, how do I put it, too fresh...

It made an unforgettable impression on my eyes.

I didn't know how to respond to his inquisitive question.

I just conveyed what I saw as it was.

“No... that... I just... saw you smile a little...”

“Huh? So, what's wrong with that?”

“It's just that I feel like I've never seen that expression on your face in the last two years...”

“How rude. I'm not a baby who's just learned to smile.”

To smile, to express joy, was a common thing for someone to do. But the one in front of me wasn't just a 'someone,' it was Ayanokōji-kun.

These expressions seem out of place for him, so...

"You're right, it might've been a rare moment."

In response to my observation, Ayanokōji-kun pondered deeply for some reason.

"I wonder why I smiled. Would you know if you were the one who smiled?"

He wore a serious expression.

I couldn't have imagined someone asking so seriously about such a trivial thing.

At that moment, a sense of wonder sprouted within me.

Unexpectedly overwhelmed by the urge to look away from his straightforward eyes and question, I felt the impulse to run away.

"I... I wouldn't know either if you asked me with such a serious face."

So, I ran away. I had to follow my instincts and run away, listening to my impulse's command.

"So, it's not that something particularly funny happened, right?"

His persistent questioning continued. I had no choice but to forcefully end it.

"...As I said, I wouldn't know even if you asked me. Because of your strange thinking, I feel like a fool for laughing as well..."

I decided to go home after finishing my tasteless coffee. It tasted like water.

I didn't know the reason, but I must have been uncomfortable.

There was no doubt about it.

Arisu Sakayanagi's Short Story: Feelings of Concern

"I DON'T LIKE IT. I don't like the idea of being assisted by you."

"But that's why I'm here. I'm standing here to help you."

Yet, he didn't even flinch and simply explained his reasons for being there. He shamelessly stated such embarrassing words that I couldn't normally articulate.

Indeed, it was a typical Ayanokōji-kun move.

"Your miscalculation was that Kamuro's presence was larger than you thought at face value. You made the decision to draw lots because you wanted to think that Kamuro was no different from the rest."

His words seeped into my heart. Clear manipulation of people's feelings—obvious remarks that I usually find repulsive.

Yet... they resonate deeply in my heart. Words from none other than Ayanokōji-kun.

"I..."

This guy was truly evil. Regardless if someone was good or bad, he just would just ignore it and climb over their protective barriers. He found the gap in my heart that I showed to no one.

"I haven't made any friends throughout my time in primary and secondary school. I couldn't blend in with immature people of a lower intellectual level."

Things I felt. Things I knew and pretended not to notice.

He brazenly stepped into that.

"It hasn't changed even at this school. Masumi-san, Hashimoto-kun, and Kitō-kun were the same. They were close to me, but only to be used as tools. Nothing more, nothing less. I saw them as strangers."

Before I realized it, I found myself talking. I wanted him to know.

The one who boldly understood me, whom no one else could understand.

"So I thought it wouldn't matter who disappeared..."

In this special exam, I made a mistake, and he had prepared a place for me to repent.

"It seems that, somewhere along the line, Masumi-san became a friend to me."

I felt relieved after confessing it.

He is truly... a dreadful person.

I kept looking at Ayanokōji-kun, thinking the same thing over and over.

RoyalMTL's Afterword

Cast here. We finally completed the volume and this sure was a rough one. I want to give a big thanks to my amazing team for working hard through this volume and making sure the quality was the best we can put out. You guys put in a crazy amount of effort, so I really appreciate you guys.

In regard to the volume, this was definitely an interesting one. Feels like we haven't seen a special exam in a very long time so that was nice. Ichinose seemed like she was out for blood this volume so that was pretty cool to see. I'd probably rate this one of the better volumes of Year 2.

From the Author's Postscript it seems like Kinugasa has been having some health problems recently. I'm not too sure if he was alluding to a delayed release for the next volume but let's wish him the best and hope his health recovers.

I'd like to once again thank all of our dedicated readers as well for supporting us and getting us to this point. We appreciate all of you.

Please make sure you guys buy the official copies of the series as they are released and help support the Classroom of the Elite series as well as Kinugasa.

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

Yasaseru – Japanese Reader

“Sleep deprivation doesn’t even begin to cover it. PS: カンリーシャも聖奴も一緒に死んだ。”

D3nj4l – Japanese Reader

“extremely based and epic volume ngl”

Inkpentagon7 – Japanese Reader

“Pray for sensei’s health”

DoSomething – Editor

“Save me from ever looking at Y2V10 chapter 6 ever again.”

SuperSkillz – Editor

“Ichinose stocks up, I kneel to our new queen. Also hi Nathan :D”

Unknown – Editor

“Write something positive - Cast”

Gaynesis – Editor

“No Nagumo this volume, 0/10”

Spoopykay – Editor

“bless jp readers and dosomething for ch6”

Kall_tho – Editor

“Thank you all for reading hope you enjoyed it”

Meyobos – Editor

“Ichinose still the goat, my queen on the come up. Let’s go Ichinose!!!!”

Budos – Editor

“Please be kind to each other. RIP Hana Kimura 5/23/2020.”

SnOrT NeSqUiK™ - EPUB Maker

“Brug #2”

ZF - Illustrator

“Still waiting on Katagiri Yuuichi’s entry in ANHS”

Reversi – Illustrator

“Ichinose... My Queen. My Wife. My Love.”