

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE



STORY BY
**SYOUGO
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NOVEL

11.5





CLASSROOM OF
THE ELITE

NOVEL 11.5



KARUIZAWA KEI



ICHINOSE HONAMI



"Wait a minute."

While I was on my way back from the café in Keyaki Mall, Horikita called out to me, stopping me in my tracks. I was about to turn around, but she said something else.

***"Don't turn around
to look at me.
There's something I
want to ask you, and
I want you to keep
your back to me
while you answer."***

That was what she asked of me.

CLASSROOM OF NOVEL 11.5 THE ELITE

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STORY BY
Syougo Kinugasa

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 1: A Girl Peering at Herself in the Mirror

TO DAY WAS MARCH 31. It was the last day he... I mean my older brother would be here at this school.

“My face looks terrible.”

Peering in the mirror, I saw I looked depressed and worn out, which could be attributed to the fact that I’d hardly slept last night. How much time had I even spent talking to my brother at this school? We’d been here together for a full year, and I was sure it didn’t even total a couple of hours.

Our relationship was far too tenuous. People might mock me for it, saying my relationship with my brother hardly even qualified as friendship, and there wasn’t much I could say in reply. We were siblings. That might seem like a close connection, but in reality, we were so far apart from each other that it was hard to even imagine we shared blood.

“Is it really okay to part ways while things are like this?” I asked myself, posing the question to my reflection in the mirror.

My reflection didn’t answer, of course. It was just me, staring back with a depressed expression. I didn’t even need to meet my reflection’s eyes to know that she was trying to bring something to my attention.

There were so many things I wanted to talk to my brother about. I couldn’t even begin to list them all. I couldn’t possibly part ways with him now, with things being what they were.

Or so I’d thought. And then a year went by, and in the end, I couldn’t even make time for us to talk. But...things were different now. We could face each other now. I could meet him confidently, without hesitation. I could meet him proudly and we could say our final goodbyes.

“...No. It’s just no use.”

I wasn’t even qualified to say goodbye to him right now.

It was certainly true that our relationship had changed. I’d been able to get my brother to look at me. But...

I'd barely been able to show my brother how much I'd grown this past year. Even if I did manage to say goodbye to him now, I was sure it wouldn't make him happy. If anything, it would only end up making him worry about his incompetent little sister. I couldn't sully the three dazzling years my brother had spent here with feelings like that.

Maybe it would be better if we didn't meet up at all? I ended up thinking to myself. I couldn't bother him with my selfishness...

"No. That's not right. That can't be better, can it?" I said aloud, once again posing my question to my reflection in the mirror.

I couldn't show him what I wanted to. Even so, that didn't mean running away was the right answer. If I could confidently tell my brother that I was all right, everything would be okay. So what would I do? What should I do? I didn't have much time left. I really wished I'd noticed my own foolishness much sooner. What if I had noticed it right after I had started school here?

"There's no point in second-guessing what's already happened, I suppose..."

It was now after eight o'clock in the morning. My brother would be leaving today at noon.

"What do I do...? What should I do?" I asked myself.

I'd thought that everything would be okay if I just showed him myself, as I am right now. But the person I was right now wasn't the real me. I was just an incredibly foolish little sister who'd been doing nothing but chasing after her big brother. My reflection in the mirror seemed to overlap with my past self.

"Who...in the world...am I?"

That was right. The person reflected in the mirror was me, but it was not me.

"...A fake."

In this moment, I was a fake. Thinking back, I'd spent more than half of my life living as an imposter. I'd been hiding who I really was, pretending to be someone I wasn't. Pretending to be the little sister that my brother wanted. My outward appearance, my personality, my grades, everything—

they were all for my brother.

An imposter I had created to be accepted by my brother. But there was no way my brother would ever accept such an imitation.

No, that wasn't right. The person I'd been for all these years was most definitely me. I couldn't call that an imitation. It was my true self, one I'd spent half my life with, although that was admittedly still a short period of time. I didn't regret who I was now.

But...

"What I want to show him... What I really wanted my brother to see was..."

There was only one thing I could show him. I thought I could finally see what that was, now.

"...Thank you. My false, yet unmistakably real, self."

I bowed to the mirror and my reflection in it. My long hair swayed. Then, I brought my head back up and looked away from the mirror. I was done facing my past self. There was no more time for that.

I had something I had to do, as myself. It was something I'd noticed right at the very last moment. A final gift for my brother, so that he could leave in peace.

Chapter 2: Graduation Ceremony

MARCH 24. The Graduation Ceremony.

Today was a big event. It marked the end of the third-year students' studies, and was also the day they could finally bid this school farewell and enter the next phase of their lives. To the other students, this was just another ceremony they had to attend. But I, personally, was interested in watching it.

The first thing I was interested to see was the result of the showdown between Horikita and Nagumo. I still had no idea how their battle—which they had fought, ceaselessly, to the very last moment—would end. Would Horikita's brother be able to graduate from Class A? Or would he be defeated by Nagumo's meddling?

I supposed I could have found out the outcome yesterday in my free time, but I'd stayed in my room because I had things to do. At any rate, all would be revealed today. Besides, I was simply interested in what the graduation ceremony would be like. It was only natural to be excited about things that you were experiencing for the very first time, whether that was a graduation ceremony or a closing one.

Since class time was approaching, I locked my door and headed toward the school building.

“Good morning,” said Keisei, greeting me as I got into the elevator with him. I responded in kind. Since there were several students from the other classes with us, we didn’t really engage in any chit-chat. We just kept quiet, and once the elevator reached the lobby, we left the dorms together.

“We finally managed to work our way up to Class C, only to get knocked back down by the end of the year. Still, I suppose we didn’t take as much damage as I thought we would,” muttered Keisei, his words trailing off like they were being sucked up into the clear, cloudless sky.

Class C being defeated in the final special exam at the end of our first year meant that we would be demoted, once again putting us in Class D. It was a considerable shock to the students in our class. Fortunately, our

opponent having been Class A softened the blow a bit, as did the fact that I, as the one with a Protection Point, had helped mitigate some of the tension by playing the role of commander. I suppose you might even say that we'd simply put up a good fight, and that was admirable in and of itself.

Even though we'd been demoted to Class D again, the actual change in Class Points wasn't too bad. The tentative Class Points as of late March were:

Sakayanagi's Class A: 1131 Points

Ichinose's Class B: 550 Points

Horikita's Class C: 347 Points

Ryuuen's Class D: 508 Points

These figures would only take effect next month, though. Class Points were determined on the first day of every month, and it was at that point that the classes would change. So right now, we were still in Class C, not Class D. Also, Ryuuen and his followers hadn't just re-emerged as Class C, but were now neck-and-neck with Class B in terms of Class Points.

If the point totals stayed as they were until the first of April rolled around next month, it would shake the classes up in a big way. But we had to remember there were a lot of variables at this school that could cause Class Points to fluctuate each month. Ichinose's class had lots of diligent students, but you couldn't exactly say the same of Ryuuen's classmates, even if you were trying to be flattering.

It was also likely that the way students went about their daily lives would make a difference in Class Points. I was sure the students of Class B were scared to death right now, but even so, the fact that Ichinose had been able to defend their position to the bitter end all through this year must be a relief. That being said, the difference between her class and Ryuuen's was a mere forty-two points at present. There was a significant possibility that Ryuuen could seize Class B's position, such as through the next special exam.

If you looked at just these facts alone, it might seem like we were the only ones losing ground, since we were back to being Class D. But what we needed to remember was how the Class Points were as of April and May last year. Last April, all four classes had started on an even playing field, with one thousand points each. At that point, Class A's superiority and Class D's

inferiority didn't exist.

In hindsight, that had probably been our best chance to really establish our position...but, well, we Class D students had lost all our Class Points in less than a month. As a result, the Class Points as of May 1 last year were:

Sakayanagi's Class A: 940 Points

Ichinose's Class B: 650 Points

Ryuu'en's Class C: 490 Points

Horikita's Class D: 0 Points

All classes had lost points between May of last year and now. In fact, you could say last May was the month the competition really began. But keeping that in mind, our class had gone on to gain three hundred and forty-seven Class Points in a year. We might lose some more due to factors like attitude, tardiness, absences, etc., but when all was said and done, we would still most likely have gained between three hundred and thirty and three hundred forty points.

Examining that information led to one conclusion. Which was that our class had seen the greatest increase in Class Points throughout the year. Our gains were far greater than Class A, who had the second highest increase, with one-hundred-and-ninety-one points gained. Considering the fact that we had plummeted all the way to rock-bottom early last spring and been immediately reduced to zero points, you could say we'd done quite well.

And now that we were entering our second year, my classmates were expected to do even better. Taking into account factors like the growth of leadership skills in people such as Horikita and Hirata, and the overall improvement in our class's abilities, it was well within the realm of possibility for us to compete with the classes far above us.

Once we were alone, Keisei opened his mouth, as if he wanted to tell me something...

"It's okay. Most of our other classmates didn't really blame you for anything," he said.

He probably thought I was troubled by our defeat, since I was the commander. I didn't care at all, of course, but I did pick up on his particular wording.

“Most?” I asked.

I was sure he’d intended to say something comforting, but instead, had said something conspicuous. That basically meant that there were some students, albeit a few, who were unhappy with me.

“Well, it’s...I suppose it’s not a perfect situation by any means. It’s just that...while it’s not like people are saying *you’re* at fault, Kiyotaka, I’ve been hearing some people say there should have been someone more capable in the role of commander,” said Keisei.

Which was, in a sense, synonymous with blaming me. People could be irrational. It wasn’t surprising if some were voicing objections after the fact, even if they’d agreed to something before. Nor was it surprising if some of them felt dissatisfied, thinking the reason we’d lost to Class A was the difference in our commanders.

“Well, even if they run their mouths at you, you’ve gotta stay confident, right? I mean, it wasn’t like anyone else *could* have been the commander, since no one else had a Protection Point,” he added, after considering that there might be students who’d come to me with their complaints.

“Well, I’m sure most people think so. But then there’s the example of Ryuuen, too.”

When I said that, a wry smile appeared on Keisei’s face. He gently shook his head from side to side.

“That guy is an exception. I think that his recklessness is all just part of his act. In fact, it was Ryuuen—the one person who didn’t have a Protection Point—coming out to compete that caught Class B entirely by surprise and led them to suffer a crushing defeat.”

But that wasn’t true. It was part of a calculated strategy concocted by Ryuuen to achieve victory. His defenseless act and surprise entrance were nothing more than components of his strategy.

“...Hey, Kiyotaka, there’s something I want to ask you.” Keisei spoke up again once we’d exhausted that topic and reached a spot in the conversation where we could transition to another. “When I talked about going ahead and trying to win over Katsuragi on our own without consulting anyone else, why didn’t you report me to Horikita?”

In order to win against Class A in the final exam of the year, Keisei had proposed an idea to Horikita. His strategy was to bring Katsuragi, who had confronted and been defeated by Sakayanagi, over to our side as an ally. But Horikita didn't approve of his idea, and so Keisei went on to try to win over Katsuragi entirely on his own.

He'd failed, though. Well, in truth, his failure hadn't had a significant impact, either. Although Katsuragi didn't agree to cooperate with us, any harm we suffered as a result was entirely negligible.

"Hey, no harm, no foul, right?" I told him.

That wasn't really the important part to Keisei, of course. Even knowing that, I deliberately offered him words of comfort.

"That's just because Katsuragi isn't the kind to use dirty tricks. If we'd been dealing with someone like Sakayanagi or Ryuuken, we'd have suffered a much more devastating blow," he replied.

Keisei felt an intense sense of responsibility because he had forcefully tried to win Katsuragi over to our side. And he was worried about a future that had never come to be. Judging from the way he spoke, he'd told Horikita about his attempt to try to win over Katsuragi.

"...Oh, yeah, that reminds me. I told Horikita about it. I figured that I should take responsibility," he added.

He'd openly admitted what he had done, prepared for any reprimand that came.

"Kiyotaka, were you certain Katsuragi would never betray Class A?" he asked, laying his concerns directly before me.

"No, not really certain. To be honest, there was a definite possibility that Katsuragi could have changed sides. Don't you think so?" I replied.

"Well... I suppose, but..."

I put aside, for now, the question of whether there was a fifty percent or one percent chance of that happening.

"I didn't report it to Horikita because it slipped my mind is all. I was anxious about whether I could fulfill the duties that came with being commander, and my mind was occupied with those thoughts. In that sense, I had a big responsibility. If things had worked out and you did succeed in

winning Katsuragi over to our side, I probably wouldn't have been able to do my own duties well. We're both to blame," I told him.

Now that we'd both come out and said our piece, that put an end to the whole Katsuragi discussion.

"We're both to blame, huh?" Keisei said. "Even so, I'm painfully aware of my lack of foresight now. Considering the risks, I shouldn't even have considered trying to win Katsuragi over in the first place."

While we couldn't undo what had already happened, we could reflect on it.

"If we're talking about a lack of foresight, then I'm equally guilty. I was there too, and I didn't say anything," I told him.

"Hearing you say that makes me feel a little better."

While many students remained passive during the exam, Keisei had been desperately trying anything he could to help our class win.

"Besides, I think you figured it out now, right? You understand that you can't easily succeed with a strategy like that," I told him.

You could learn a lot from your mistakes. Whether or not you made the most of those mistakes depended on you, though.

"...Yeah, you're right. I wanted to win so badly that I couldn't see what was right in front of me. Man, it sounds pathetic now that I've calmed down enough to think about it," he muttered quietly, as if reflecting on what happened.

Although his idea to try to win over Katsuragi had certainly been naïve, the fact that he'd taken on the challenge was praiseworthy.

"So, what did Horikita say to you?" I asked.

"She didn't blame me, even though our entire class would probably have suffered if I'd handled things poorly. On the contrary, she actually said that she wanted me to let her know the next time I thought of an idea. Of course, she did warn me not to be overeager, too," said Keisei.

It sounded as though Horikita had come to the same conclusion about Keisei as I had. People grew through repeated failures. You can't be a leader if you care only about results, and smack people down for it...though people

who did nothing but fail endlessly had to be eventually cut loose, of course.

“To be honest, I never really got behind the idea of Horikita leading us. Sure, her mind is sharp and she’s athletic. But there’s something about the way she acts—the way she condescends to people—that makes her hard to accept.”

I couldn’t deny that point. At least, not at this current point in time. Horikita wasn’t the kind of person who led by virtue, like Hirata or Ichinose. While she’d been able to make a certain number of allies, she was inevitably going to make enemies, too.

“But...I’m a lot like that, too. I thought that sports were entirely unnecessary, and I looked down on everyone who wasn’t smart. Horikita and I are basically birds of a feather,” said Keisei.

When Keisei had first started school here, he tended to openly scorn students who weren’t academically inclined. He’d thought being a student came solely down to how well you did in your studies.

“But you’re completely different from how you were a year ago, Keisei. You’ve changed a lot,” I told him.

“I suppose so. Honestly, even I find it kind of strange that I feel this way now. I mean, studying is the most important thing, of course. But athletics, communication skills, and even friendship are all important, too. I understand that I need all of those things now, and I suppose it’s the same for Horikita. She is changing, little by little. She’s becoming more dependable and trustworthy than before.”

Keisei didn’t really trust anyone outside of the Ayanokouji Group. The fact that he praised Horikita so openly despite that, complimenting her on the things that she deserved recognition for, made me believe he was being honest about his feelings.

“You might be right,” I agreed.

It had taken a year, and direct contact with her, but the student known as Horikita was finally beginning to be recognized. Horikita’s classmates had gradually begun to accept her ever since the in-class voting exam, but the main reason for this was something other than the pointedness of her strategies and the excellence of her leadership. It was because the wall Horikita put up around her heart was slowly coming down. When that wall

was up, she assumed every other student was nothing more than a liability to her, even concluding it inevitable that the weak would be disposed of. It was the same tendency Keisei used to have.

“Of course, I don’t think doing everything Horikita says is the correct answer. If I think she’s made a poor decision, I will not hesitate to call her out on it. Am I wrong in thinking that?” Keisei asked, having gathered his thoughts.

He was saying he would trust what should be trusted, and doubt what he needed to doubt.

“No, I think you’re right. That’s how Class A should be, under normal circumstances.”

No matter how dependable she’d become, Horikita was still a high school student. She might make mistakes—serious ones, even. The more students who were willing to point out such mistakes when the time came, the better. We could stand shoulder to shoulder and talk things out, working to find a solution together. That wasn’t a possibility for the classes led by Sakayanagi and Ryuuen, which were run like dictatorships. If anything, our class might be becoming more akin to Ichinose’s now.

Besides, it wasn’t just important for us to close the gap. We had to do it in a way that worked for our class.

2.1

THE ENTIRE STUDENT BODY was gathered in the gymnasium. So were all the teachers, as well as some adults that we normally didn't see around. Everyone present, regardless of status, was fondly watching the graduation ceremony unfold.

This was the moment when the third-year students took their next big step toward a new chapter of their lives. Some would go on to higher education, some would get jobs, and some would remain at a standstill, unable to decide where to go next. They would no longer be categorized as children, but would be venturing out to become independent members of society.

How will I look standing up there myself, two years from now? I wondered. And what will I be thinking about?

I wanted to believe you could still envision a great many possibilities if you'd already decided what path to take. I wanted to believe that what I'd learned here would help me in life, like a source of mental nourishment.

"Now then, we'd like to ask the representative of the class that fought valiantly for three whole years to graduate from Class A to come give a formal address," the adult hosting the event said into the microphone.

The gymnasium grew even quieter than before.

"Class A's representative—"

If the student whose name was called wasn't Horikita Manabu or one of his classmates, then... Well, that would mean there had been a shift in the class rankings as a result of the final exam. Many of the current students were probably paying very close attention to this moment. That was because graduating from Class A was the greatest goal—the *only* goal, really—for every student at this school.

"...Horikita Manabu, if you please."

I was sure Horikita Suzune was deeply relieved to hear that name. It was unclear just how much Nagumo had hindered him, but apparently, Horikita's brother had managed to safely graduate from Class A. He proudly

walked up to the stage and then looked out at all the currently enrolled students and other people attending the event.

“Greetings to you all. We’re gathered here on this fine day, when the fresh spring air carries with it the scent of plum blossoms, to witness the graduation ceremony—”

Horikita Manabu began his speech. It sounded like he was expressing gratitude for this magnificent graduation ceremony. Then, he went on to talk about when he first started at this school three years ago.

“I vividly remember beginning my academic career here at the Advanced Nurturing High School and feeling an atmosphere that was altogether different from other schools. I also remember vowing to make my three years here rewarding, while at the same time shouldering a great responsibility for the future.”

There was a feeling of peace in the air as he spoke slowly and calmly. There was something different about the person who now stood in the same place he’d stood at the start of the year, addressing the entrance ceremony of the student council president. As Horikita continued solemnly giving his speech, I sensed a change.

And it wasn’t just in Horikita Manabu. I felt the currently enrolled students had also grown significantly over these past few months.

“Now, this is just a personal note, but as a representative of the student council, I had a few words for freshmen students at the beginning of the year.” Somehow, Horikita Manabu seemed to be in tune with my thoughts. “Compared to when I last saw you, standing up here at the beginning of the year, you have clearly grown.”

At the beginning of the year, Horikita had managed to get the restless first-years in line with his silence. That was something many students didn’t see at the time. Now, there wasn’t a single student speaking out of turn, having their own private conversation. And Horikita Manabu, who was now venturing out to establish himself as an individual in society, was looking warmly at the students who remained.

“Also, I sincerely hope that the second-year students, who will go on to become third-years and be in a position to lead the other students, will demonstrate their abilities to the fullest extent while observing the rules and

regulations at this institution.”

A few minutes later, he finally started to bring his speech to a close.

“I promise you that what you are learning at this school will be more valuable and more useful than anything else in your lives ahead,” he added, looking out over the gathered students once more. “When the time comes for someone to stand up here and give a speech next year, and another someone the year after that, I am sure they will understand as well.”

The person who’d give a speech next year... In other words, the leader of the graduating Class A. I supposed that Nagumo, who had just read the farewell address earlier, was probably the most likely candidate among the second-years. The first-years were still in the midst of a chaotic free-for-all, though. Would it be Horikita? Ichinose? Ryuuken? Sakayanagi?

Or would it be someone else entirely, replacing one of those students as the leader of their class? A third of our lives here at this school had passed by in a flash, but that *was* still only a third. The classes would continue to change, and the number of students would continue to decrease. Even so, only the leader of the winning class would be permitted to take the stage as a representative of that class.

Horikita continued to read off the remainder of his speech, speaking slowly yet eloquently.

“Thank you very much for these past three years.”

Soon, Horikita’s time here would be done. Having addressed the students, he next addressed the teachers, and then the school in general. As his brilliant speech came to a close, the graduation ceremony moved onto the next stage.

2.2

WHEN THE GRADUATION CEREMONY had ended, the current students were the first to leave the gymnasium, returning to our classrooms. The graduates, all the teachers, and the graduates' parents or legal guardians, meanwhile, would be off to attend a party. Apparently, it was some kind of get-together meant for the graduating students and their guardians to show the teachers their appreciation.

The remaining students were permitted to return to their dorms. However, it seemed that those who were close to third-years, whether because they were friends or because they'd been in clubs together, planned to wait for the graduates to emerge after the party. Maybe they planned to give a third-year flowers, or confess a crush to them, or tell them something entirely different. Some students were excited, while others were quiet and nervous.

“Well, even though we can talk about this during the closing ceremony tomorrow, let’s briefly recap this past semester,” said Chabashira shortly after everyone was seated, turning to look at us. “First of all, I must give credit where it’s due, and say that you fought admirably against Class A during your final exam of the semester. The teachers were surprised at how much you’ve matured.”

Even though we’d lost, the normally sharp-tongued Chabashira was offering us genuine praise.

“You’ve changed significantly since last year, when you first started attending this school; I hardly recognize you now. You’ve really grown so much.”

“Hold up, sensei. We’re back to being Class D again though, right? Isn’t that, y’know, super uncool?” said Ike, his voice filled with frustration.

“Yes, it certainly seems like we’ve been sent back to square one. But you’ve definitely all grown this past year. More than simply closing the gap in class points, you could very well say that you’ve gotten closer to the other classes in terms of ability,” said Chabashira.

“Okay, the fact that you’re complimentin’ us this much actually kinda

freaks me out. There's gotta be somethin' to this, right, *sensei*?" said Sudou.

It was completely understandable why he'd react that way to our instructor praising us. Honestly, we wouldn't be surprised if she then went on to say we had another exam or something.

"No, there isn't. This is simply what I think, is all. I've been a teacher for four years now, and I've been in charge of two classes. Compared to the previous Class Ds I've taught, you really are a cut above. However, the same could be said of the other classes. Whether or not you can climb the ranks will depend on your ability to keep putting in a certain level of effort from here, without getting sloppy."

Tak! Chabashira lightly knocked against the blackboard.

"Tomorrow is the closing ceremony. Even though there are no classes tomorrow, please don't forget that it is still a school day."

Having said her piece, she dismissed us. I had no idea how many students would be heading out to wait for the third-years, but I was wondering what my desk neighbor was going to do—the little sister of the guy who'd served as student council president and delivered a speech as Class A's representative, earlier.

Horikita stared intently at the blackboard, looking frozen in place. I was sure there were a lot of thoughts running through her head. Even though bothering her right now felt like kicking the hornet's nest, I figured I'd try her anyway.

"You heading out?" I asked.

"To do what?" she replied.

"Come on, you know what I'm talking about."

"Are you asking if I'm going to go see my brother? If so, then no, I don't plan on it," said Horikita, averting her eyes from me as she spoke.

So, she wasn't planning to go... Hm.

"Wait, were you able to talk to him earlier or something?" I asked.

"It's not like this is really any of your business, is it? We all have our own problems to deal with," said Horikita.

I have a feeling you're the only one with a problem to deal with right

now, though.

“If you let this chance pass you by, it’ll be a while before you get another.”

“Well, that’s...”

Even though the ice around her heart was starting to melt, she was still apprehensive and noncommittal when it really counted. I supposed that just proved how strained their relationship had been these past few years.

“I’m gonna go see him.”

“Huh? You’re planning on meeting my brother?” It was precisely because I normally didn’t get too involved with other people that Horikita looked so shocked.

“We’re not that close, but today might be my last chance to see him,” I told her. It wasn’t a bad idea to at least say hello.

“I see...” said Horikita.

“Is there some kind of problem?”

“Not really, no. You’re free to go meet with him.”

“*Why you, of all people?*” was clearly written on her face, but I couldn’t exactly tell her. I stood from my desk. The teachers were all rushing to the thank-you party right now, which meant Tsukishiro, as the acting director, was sure to be there too. There was no way he wouldn’t attend.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’m going to kill some time, since I have nothing to do while the thank-you party is going on. If you decide you want to see your brother too, let me know and we can meet up later?”

“...I’ll think about it. I wonder how long the thank-you party is going to be,” said Horikita.

She’d said before that she had no plans to see him, but it sounded like she was withdrawing that statement.

“No idea. Maybe an hour or two, I guess,” I told her.

Actually, the thank-you party was scheduled to go for ninety minutes, so we had quite a bit of time before it ended. I figured I’d take care of some

business that needed attending to during that time.

2.3

AND NOW, we're going back in time a little bit. To yesterday, the twenty-third. On the night that the Event Selection Exam ended, I called a certain someone.

"Hello. This is Sakayanagi," a calm, mature voice answered.

The person I called wasn't Sakayanagi Arisu, a fellow student in my grade level, but her father, Director Sakayanagi. The man who had been forced into house arrest due to a trap laid by Tsukishiro. I supposed it wasn't like he'd have my phone number memorized.

"I apologize for bothering you so late at night, as well as for neglecting to call. This is Ayanokouji," I replied, identifying myself so that he would first understand who was calling.

"Huh? Ayanokouji...? Ayanokouji-kun?"

I could tell Director Sakayanagi was surprised to hear the surname Ayanokouji, and my voice. I had to give him that information right away, though, to prove this wasn't a pointless prank call.

"I'm sorry to call you out of the blue like this," I responded.

"Oh, no, no, it's just a surprise, is all. How do you know my phone number?"

"I got it from your daughter. She said this is the number I should use when I want to contact a school official."

While Sakayanagi and I were walking back to the dorms after the final exam of the school year, I'd asked her about it, and she immediately gave it to me.

"I suppose you only gave your phone number to your daughter," I told him.

It probably wasn't favoritism, but just that he doted on his beloved daughter. Or so I'd thought, anyway. Director Sakayanagi's reaction was rather unexpected.

"Arisu did...? But, well... I didn't give my daughter my phone

number, though,” he denied, sounding surprised. He gave a wry, strained chuckle. “How and when in the world did she find it?”

I didn’t get the impression he was lying.

“Is the director’s phone number supposed to be kept secret, normally?” I asked.

“Well, all the teachers know it, of course, and I think it’s included in the materials that we hand out to related staff...”

If so, it wouldn’t be that difficult to get his number. It wouldn’t surprise me if Sakayanagi had just seen it somewhere and committed it to memory.

But there was something that worried me. Director Sakayanagi was the sort of man who valued fairness, even when it came to his precious daughter. I couldn’t imagine him helping her if she came crying to him for something. Why, then, would she bother purposefully memorizing his number? I assumed it wasn’t so she could report to him on recent happenings or to have a chat.

I remembered how happily Sakayanagi had answered when I asked her for the number. Maybe she’d anticipated that I might be in trouble someday, and that I’d ask her for the director’s phone number?

“So, then... How should I respond to you calling me like this?”

Apparently, the director considered that question more important than how I’d obtained his number. Well, I was certain he didn’t exactly welcome things like direct communication from a student with open arms.

“Is there a rule that states that I cannot call the director?” I asked, figuring I’d confirm that first. If he told me calling him was out of the question, this would end here.

“Oh, no, certainly not. It’s not like I’d refuse any calls out of hand,” he replied. “Personally, however, I think we ought to end this call as soon as possible. Now then, what business do you have with me?”

Though he sounded somewhat perplexed, it didn’t seem he intended to take me to task over anything. I supposed that was because there was no rule stipulating that you’d be punished if you called the director.

“Director Sakayanagi. I hear you’ve been placed under house arrest for

alleged misconduct. Is it true?” I asked.

“Well, that’s a question I really wouldn’t expect of a student. And such a direct question, too. It’s quite inappropriate for a student of our school to ask the director such a thing.”

He remained soft-spoken and gentle in his response, even as he avoided answering the question. But it was directly related to the main thing I wanted to discuss, so I persisted.

“I would really like an answer, if at all possible,” I told him.

“...Ayanokouji-kun. I don’t know what it is you’re after, but I cannot answer your question. I don’t need to tell you the reason why, yes?”

“Because it’s not something a student should hear, I assume?”

“That’s right. This has nothing to do with you.”

Considering Director Sakayanagi’s position, the situation he was in, and the fact that the students at this school had nothing to do with it, I supposed it was perfectly natural for him to reject me outright in this way.

“I am fully aware of that. However, I have my reasons for asking.”

First of all, I needed to get Director Sakayanagi to understand my situation.

“I don’t know what kind of reasons you have, but you are still a student at this institution. Even if your last name is Ayanokouji or Sakayanagi, that fact remains unchanged. You haven’t misunderstood that, have you?” he asked.

Director Sakayanagi gave me a thorough, proper explanation, rather than dismiss me offhandedly or treat me like a child. I could tell from how he responded to me that he was a capable man.

“Of course I haven’t. The relationship I have with you is no deeper than the relationship you have with any other student here, Director Sakayanagi. I don’t even think it *should* be any deeper.”

I really didn’t want to be put in a special category. Probably more so than anyone else.

“In that case, we should end this call here. I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear any of this, and—”

“Wait. If you end the call, you’re not going to remove the *impurity*.”

With those few words, I signaled to Director Sakayanagi that what I was saying was important, so that he could really understand what was going on.

“You’re saying there is an impurity at our school?” he asked.

“Yes. And that impurity is Acting Director Tsukishiro.” I cut straight to the heart of the matter, since there was nothing to gain by drawing this out.

“...What’s the matter with Tsukishiro-kun?” he replied, the tone of his voice changing, though only slightly.

I was sure the idea of “Tsukishiro = impurity” had stuck immediately in his mind precisely because he already had theories about the same.

“During an important exam, where students were competing with one another to test their abilities, Acting Director Tsukishiro enacted a scheme to sabotage that exam. Were you not aware of this, Director Sakayanagi?” I asked.

“Hold on, I’m not getting the whole picture here. Tsukishiro-kun interfered in an exam? What in the world...?”

Director Sakayanagi pretended not to know anything. I supposed that was a natural reaction, since he couldn’t see what my true intentions were.

“The allegations of fraud leveled against you are Acting Director Tsukishiro’s handiwork as well. I’m sure he felt that you and your love of fairness were standing in his way, Director Sakayanagi,” I told him.

Director Sakayanagi seemed lost in thought on the other end of the line. Even though we had something of a connection through the White Room, I was still a mere student. I probably wasn’t qualified to speak with him about the affairs of adults. If the situation at hand was about *me*, though, then that was a different story.

Well, I was sure Director Sakayanagi already knew that. However, as long as there was no *actual* harm done, his hands were tied.

“Why would Tsukishiro-kun do something like that? He’s already quite powerful. There’s no need for him to deliberately take down someone like me. Coming to this school and sabotaging an exam? I don’t see why he needs to do such a thing.”

That was the final bit of confirmation I was looking for. Confirmation about whether or not he would share information with me as equals.

“Tsukishiro’s goal is to have me secretly expelled. That’s the only reason he came to this school.” I told him what I knew, stating it as an established fact.

“If you have no basis for saying so, that’s quite a problematic assertion.”

“Yes, I agree. But there’s no time to be casual about this. There’s nothing he won’t resort to in order to achieve success.”

This all came down to how well the director knew my father. If their relationship was tenuous at best, then it was going to be difficult to make him understand what was really going on here. However, based on the responses he’d given me so far, I could make a rough guess. Namely, that Director Sakayanagi knew my father’s affairs—and how his mind worked—quite well.

“You’re saying that sensei... that your father would really go that far, just to bring you back?” he asked.

What he’d just said proved there *was* a basis for my claims. I hadn’t said a word about my father being the one pulling Tsukishiro’s strings. The fact that he’d made the connection himself, without needing me to say it first, was proof.

“You said that the final exam of the year was sabotaged. Was there any real harm done?” Naturally, Director Sakayanagi had no way of knowing what went on behind the scenes during the last special exam. If he’d known, he would have responded in some way by now.

“I’ll explain.”

During the year-end exam, Tsukishiro had taken control of the system and altered my answers. He needed to steal a victory out from under me in order to remove my Protection Point. Although it was only one win, his actions were illegitimate, and significantly impacted an entire grade level. If our class had come out on top in that exam, we could have been suddenly boosted into the ranks of the upper classes.

As I continued to explain what had happened, his responses gradually

grew quieter and quieter. It was clear they were willing to do whatever it took to get one student expelled. And things weren't going to end here. This was just the beginning. They were going to keep at this until the student named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was expelled.

"So, there you have it. Do you believe me?" I asked.

It wouldn't have been surprising if he'd dismissed my words as the nonsensical drivel of a student. But Director Sakayanagi knew my father. He knew about my past. And so he would, entirely of his own accord, naturally come to a conclusion about whether or not what I said was true.

"I have no choice but to believe you," he said. "That he came to this school to get you expelled. I heard that they were introducing a new system, but I never imagined..."

On paper, the changes were meant to serve the school and its students. In reality, they were nothing more than a way to have me expelled.

"This means he's willing to do whatever it takes, appearances be damned, in order to bring you back. Is that right, Ayanokouji-kun? I think I understand why you've contacted me. There's nothing that a student could do in this situation."

I'd figured Director Sakayanagi would say something like that once he understood the situation.

"And I suppose this means you wish to ask for my help," he added.

"Something like that."

I admitted it openly. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The only way to fight the school was to directly engage with the school officials. Not to mention that, currently being the acting director, Tsukishiro was the kind of opponent I'd normally have no chance to come in contact with.

"But first, let me ask you... No, I'd like to confirm something."

"What is it?" I readied myself, preparing to tell him what he wanted to know, whether or not the question was one I could answer.

"Dealing with Tsukishiro-kun—an opponent who can even interfere with the results of exams—will be an extremely arduous endeavor for you. The fact that you've come to seek my help, having decided it would be difficult for you to persevere as you are, speaks to the predicament you're in.

And yet, you're so calm.”

He paused and then continued speaking.

“If perhaps you misunderstand something here, please allow me to address it, and correct any misapprehensions you may have. I am not confident I can live up to your expectations, nor am I in a position to do so.”

I understood what he meant. Director Sakayanagi didn't have the authority to overrule Tsukishiro, and he was trying to say that if I'd called him with that expectation in mind, I was sorely mistaken.

“I am currently under house arrest due to allegations of fraud. I cannot even extricate myself from my own predicament. For you to expect too much of me would be troublesome,” he added.

I supposed that was why he was emphasizing that part to me, since I didn't seem to be panicking at all.

“If this were simply a call for help, that might have been the case,” I replied.

“...Meaning?” he asked.

“Until now, I've lived my life at this school by the principle of trying as much as possible to avoid attention. I came to this school because I wanted to spend three years as a normal student,” I told him.

That was my goal when I started here. How I felt. My true feelings, which brought me here.

“For the first time in my entire life, I'm setting goals for myself, and then trying to follow through on them,” I added.

“...Yes. I understand that quite well. That is exactly why I accepted you.”

Although I didn't know the story there, in the end, I was very grateful for that kindness.

“However, if the Acting Director is allowed to interfere again, that goal I've set for myself will be in jeopardy. The Protection Point saved me, thankfully, but if he's allowed to do something similar next time, my expulsion is inevitable,” I told him.

Of course, Tsukishiro would take advantage of his position to move in

ways I didn't expect. If I tried to deal with him at anything less than my best, I wouldn't be able to fight back against the school's injustice. Which meant I couldn't keep doing things the way I had been so far.

"So, you've come to me to ask for help? Or am I wrong?" he asked.

"The purpose of my call today isn't to ask you to stop Tsukishiro, Director Sakayanagi. If my opponent employs a strategy that breaks the rules, then I will respond in kind. As a result, the school may get caught in the crossfire."

"I see. Which means you called me because..."

"Yes. It is absolutely vital to have someone to back you up in the event of unforeseen circumstances."

I wasn't asking for him to get rid of Tsukishiro for me. Rather, I was asking for help with any negative consequences that came from me getting rid of Tsukishiro myself. If you stabbed someone that came at you with a knife, you needed someone to recognize that what you did was legitimate self-defense.

I would most definitely need the school's aid at such a time. And Director Sakayanagi would be the ace up my sleeve. Once Tsukishiro was eliminated and the allegations against Director Sakayanagi cleared, it was obvious he would be reinstated.

I was sure Director Sakayanagi would welcome the idea of me acting to help clear the allegations against him. I was also sure part of him was uncertain about whether it was a good idea to place such expectations on a child. It was important for me to remove those doubts.

"But can you really stop Tsukishiro-kun? One solitary student simply couldn't..."

"It's certainly true that Tsukishiro is trouble. He has the authority that comes with being a director, and unlike a student, he can't be kicked out of school by means of an exam. That's a big difference."

And since I rarely came into contact with him, I couldn't really launch an attack against him. He was cheating; I could only move freely when *he* was in the process of attacking me.

"In the meantime, since I can't go on the offensive myself, I'll wait and

see what Tsukishiro does,” I added.

“But will you be able to withstand his attacks?”

“There are several steps I need to take. First, I need to expand my defenses to meet the bare minimum requirements.”

If Tsukishiro was receiving orders from *that* man, he wouldn’t be putting things off for later. It did him no good to draw things out and have me expelled after a year or two. If he were to take action, it would be in April, right after spring break. That was probably when he would put his plans into action.

If I could survive that, it would drive Tsukishiro into a corner even without me launching any kind of attack on him. And if he were driven into a corner, he would have no choice but to make a desperate move.

“His time limit is his sole and greatest weakness.”

When that time came, I would be fully prepared to take him on.

“I really don’t think that’s something a student should be saying to a school official,” Director Sakayanagi replied. “If an ordinary person heard you, they’d undoubtedly be furious...but since I know you are sensei’s son, I suppose I can accept it, oddly enough.”

“I will act appropriately toward those who are deserving of respect. However, I have no intention of tolerating adults who would forcefully insert themselves into a competition between students,” I told him.

Director Sakayanagi didn’t respond to that. But the fact that he was hearing me out suggested he accepted what I was saying.

“Even though you say you won’t tolerate it, how are you going to prevent Tsukishiro-kun from interfering?” he asked.

He was asking how I would expand my defenses. I already knew what had to be done. I had no choice but to use school officials to stop this injustice.

“First of all, having someone within the school who can resist Tsukishiro is of the utmost importance. Simply having a heightened level of scrutiny placed upon him will help limit his movements. That way, he won’t be able to take action as easily as he did this last time,” I replied.

Not making things easy for your opponent was an essential component of strategy, no matter what kind of competition you were talking about. I didn't need someone with power. I needed someone who had the courage to stand up and face him.

“Yes, I agree. I don’t think we can start without that.”

Apparently, Director Sakayanagi understood what I was asking of him. I didn't know anything about the school administration. Who could be trusted and who couldn't? Was there anyone who could dish out justice against even someone as great and terrible as Tsukishiro in this organization? Additionally, it was possible some teachers might even support Tsukishiro. We couldn't possibly recruit any of them.

On the other end of the line, Director Sakayanagi was lost in thought. The people you chose made the difference between life or death. No one understood that fact better than Director Sakayanagi.

“You do already know about your homeroom teacher, Chabashira-sensei, don’t you? She’s the one who I had asked to watch over you.”

“Yes. She seems to know a bit about my circumstances.”

“Yes. She understands your rather unrealistic situation very well, actually.”

Whether I could use her or not was an entirely different issue, though.

“Well, I don’t think I can afford to ignore someone who knows about my situation,” I said. “I think it would be best if we started with her, to bring teachers we can trust to our side.”

No one would believe me if I told them that my father was doing things like forcing Director Sakayanagi out of his position and manipulating the school. If Chabashira were the one to explain the situation, however, it would be a different story.

“In that case...” Director Sakayanagi paused, thought for a few minutes, then spoke once more. “I think that Mashima-sensei from first-year Class A would be the most appropriate pick. He’s in charge of the exams for the first-years, and he cares about students more than anyone else. He’s a wonderful instructor who puts children first.”

“And you think he’ll be able to tell how real this unrealistic story really

is?” I asked.

“I’m not so sure... I can’t imagine he’ll accept it immediately. However, once he understands that it is the truth, he will most definitely stand by the students. I can assure you of that. He’s a teacher who doesn’t give in to authority and who stands up for what he believes in.”

If he was the most appropriate person for the task at hand, I had no complaints. If anything, it was a good start to have a teacher like that already so close to me.

“We can also expect the fact that he and Chabashira-sensei were former classmates to work to our advantage. It shouldn’t be difficult at all to get them to connect,” he added.

“I understand. Mashima-sensei, hm. Well, I’ll talk to Chabashira-sensei first, then try to bring them together for a discussion.”

“But it’s not going to be easy. There are eyes all over the school and an abundance of surveillance cameras, too. I’d advise you to think very carefully about where and when to have a meeting.”

It wasn’t like Tsukishiro was monitoring me all twenty-four hours of the day. That being said, it wouldn’t be surprising if he had some kind of warning system in place. If Mashima-sensei and I tried to speak in private, it would incur suspicion. I didn’t know where Tsukishiro usually spent his time, but he was free to move about the campus, to a certain extent. It wouldn’t be a laughing matter if we bumped unexpectedly into one another.

“I think it would be easier for me to make a move if you gave me some suggestions.” I sought advice from Director Sakayanagi, who understood the professional duties of administrative faculty better than anyone else here at the Advanced Nurturing High School.

“If you were to move quickly, then... Yes, after the graduation ceremony, the third-year students and their teachers will gather for a thank-you party. It is customary for the director to attend this event every year. In other words, Tsukishiro-san will most definitely be present. Whether he’s actually interested in it or not, he will fulfill his obligations.”

“So if he neglected his duties as director, the school would judge him harshly for it, hm?”

“Yes. Most certainly.”

In order to be able to do as he pleased, Tsukishiro had to play the part of a man who could do more than Director Sakayanagi. His watchful eyes would inevitably be a lot less watchful during that event.

“Will the first-year homeroom teachers be in attendance, too?” I asked.

“Ostensibly, the thank-you party is an hour long, but it typically extends a bit beyond that. It tends to last about ninety minutes. It shouldn’t cause too many problems if two teachers were to disappear for twenty to thirty minutes. It’s normal for teachers to be up and out of their seats, and essentially, the only teachers that are required to be there are the third-year homeroom instructors.”

This meant that the most appropriate time to hold a secret meeting would be after the graduation ceremony and during the thank-you party.

“As for the place… I think the reception room should be fine. There are no surveillance cameras in that room. It might be best to take advantage of that,” said Sakayanagi.

That meant there would be no clear record of our meeting. Besides, it wasn’t like I could have teachers come to the student dormitories.

“I have no objections to this proposal.” I agreed with his ideas for setting up the forum for our discussion.

“Okay, then here’s the first step,” Director Sakayanagi said. “I’ll go ahead and briefly touch base with Chabashira-sensei ahead of time. But it’ll be up to you to decide how much you wish to divulge from that point on. If you cannot persuade them, you may have no choice but to give up on this plan.”

“That is more than adequate.”

If word originally came from Director Sakayanagi, then Chabashira—and by extension Mashima-sensei, who we would arrange to speak with later—couldn’t ignore this matter. I could say without a doubt that the phone call had yielded the greatest amount of support it possibly could have.

“Once again, I’m terribly sorry for suddenly calling you so late at night,” I reiterated.

“It’s all right… Oh, one last thing. I hope you don’t mind if I ask you

something a little superfluous.”

“Superfluous?”

“I am honestly quite happy that you came to this school with dreams of a normal life. But have you thought about what comes after graduation? What do you want to do and where do you want to go, for instance?”

“I don’t know how much you already know, but my fate has been decided,” I replied.

“...That would mean...”

That reaction alone was enough.

“After graduation, I will return to the White Room and act as a mentor there. That’s the only reason that man has raised me all these years.”

Once I left this school, the protective barrier around me would be gone. He could easily attack me in the night and haul me back to the White Room if I were living in a cheap apartment or something.

“So, you’ve accepted your fate... And now you’re here, after having done so.”

“That is precisely why I intend to protect these three years to the bitter end,” I replied.

Put simply, it was a rebellious phase. I was rejecting my father’s orders and doing what *I* wanted to do.

“I hope this school will become a good memory for you. One that you will never forget for as long as you live.”

“Thank you very much. That’s what I’m hoping for, too.”

After I ended the call with Director Sakayanagi, I let out a sigh of relief. Although there was a part of me that wondered how much I could really trust him, at the very least, I knew for certain that he wasn’t on Tsukishiro’s side. The fact that his daughter was a student and in my grade would be an advantage, as well.

2.4

SUCH WAS THE DISCUSSION I had yesterday with Director Sakayanagi. And now, I was headed to the reception room, which had been designated for the meeting ahead. I made no plans to meet anyone else beforehand, but headed straight there.

Was someone else already here? Or was I the first to arrive?

“Please excuse me,” I said aloud.

After knocking on the door, I stepped into the reception room, and was greeted by Chabashira. She shifted her gaze toward me, still standing by the window.

“You’re early, Ayanokouji. You still have ten minutes until the appointed time,” she told me.

“I didn’t want to get here at the very last minute. Besides, you seem to have arrived early yourself,” I replied.

Chabashira looked at me with prying eyes, like she was trying to figure something out, but also seemed to be lost in thought and choosing her next words carefully. I could more or less guess what had gone through her mind when Director Sakayanagi spoke to her. Funnily enough, the sofa was vacant, but neither of us sat down.

“And Mashima-sensei?” I asked.

“I’ve been talking to him. But he wasn’t able to slip away at the same time as me. Still, I have to say, you’ve made quite a bold move, Ayanokouji. I thought you wanted to live a quiet, peaceful life here at this school?”

I supposed I could play along with Chabashira’s word games for a little bit. Just until Mashima-sensei showed up.

“It’s funny that you say that, since you were the one who originally disrupted my peaceful life here,” I replied.

“I really don’t think that’s any way to act toward a teacher, no matter the circumstances. You have no intention of changing your attitude?” she asked.

“That’s convenient, considering how unbecoming your behavior is for a teacher,” I told her.

She’d gone so far as to threaten me, a simple, unassuming student, to try to boost us out of being Class D. I felt a strong sense of distrust...no, a strong feeling of disgust for her because of that. Chabashira awkwardly averted her eyes from me, looking ashamed.

“I certainly cannot deny that,” she replied.

I supposed it just proved how strong her desire to reach Class A was. She couldn’t openly use me, since Director Sakayanagi trusted her and asked her to watch over me. But she really should have handled things better.

Well, actually...no matter what methods she employed, the result would have been the same. Even if she’d tried to persuade me, I wouldn’t have softened my stance. That being said, my circumstances had changed quite a bit over the year since I had first started school here.

“You hate me. So why call on me, Ayanokouji?” she asked.

It seemed like she couldn’t help but wonder why she’d been asked here. Even though she was just a way for me to recruit Mashima-sensei, I could certainly have excluded her from this meeting. It wasn’t surprising that she wanted to know why I hadn’t done that.

“Well, it’s certainly true that at the very least, I don’t exactly like you,” I told her.

“It certainly seems that way.”

No matter my personal feelings, I needed to seize any advantage I could. My likes and dislikes were entirely different from my potential gains and losses. I had determined that having Chabashira here would help persuade Mashima-sensei to come over to my side, even if it only got him to budge one millimeter closer.

“How much have you heard?” I asked.

“He asked me to call Mashima-sensei and to arrange this meeting here. He also said that you had something very important to talk about and that he wanted me to help, but...” she replied, trailing off.

Had she not heard anything about Tsukishiro yet? It seemed like Director Sakayanagi wanted to give me complete control of this situation.

“And? What business do you have with us?” she asked.

“I’ll wait until Mashima-sensei comes. Saying it twice would be a hassle.”

“I don’t know what this is all about, but if you’re going to come to me asking for help, don’t you think you should fix your attitude?” she replied.

Perhaps because she’d been on the defensive with me all this time, Chabashira seemed very resistant.

“As an instructor, I will essentially follow Director Sakayanagi’s instructions. However, that’s not an ironclad rule. Do you understand what I mean by that?” she asked me.

“Does my attitude rub you the wrong way that badly?” I asked in return.

“Yes, it does. You act so superior, but you’re still just a first-year high school student, right? And although the year-end final exam was a showdown between classes, you still fell behind Sakayanagi and were defeated. That means you don’t have the skills necessary to surpass my expectations, after all.”

So she was, quite selfishly, disappointed that I wasn’t as good as she’d expected me to be?

“If you have the skills, then I’m willing to overlook some of what you say and do. But if what you showed earlier is all you’re capable of, then that’s a different story,” she added.

If I couldn’t beat Class A’s Sakayanagi, I wouldn’t be able to achieve Chabashira’s goals. Apparently, she intended to keep asserting her dominance over me, and she didn’t intend to be quiet about it.

Chabashira was a teacher, but her actions certainly deviated from her normal duties as an instructor. Depending on what I said to her, she might refuse to help, and perhaps even go over to Tsukishiro’s side. I could continue trying to assert that I was no longer completely under her control, but that would just be counterproductive.

I let out a sigh, relieved to see that she had at least some wisdom. “I understand. I will change up my attitude, Chabashira-sensei.”

“What?” she replied, shocked by how quickly I had given in to her.

I supposed she didn't think the level of resistance she was putting up would break me. Although I was only doing this for the sake of the conversation to come, I did want to leave her with the possibility that I could be tamed.

Well, no—that possibility alone wouldn't be enough for Chabashira to trust me completely. She probably thought I was mocking her, laughing at her deep down. So instead, I hammered home the idea that I was a positive influence for Class D.

"I've changed my mind. Starting in April, I'm seriously planning to shoot for Class A," I told her.

"What kind of joke is this? What in the world are you even thinking, setting up a meeting here?"

"I'm telling the truth. By the end of our second year, I plan for our class to be out of D and C. There's too big a gap in our class points to guarantee that we'll be able to move up to Class A, but...I *am* planning to overtake Class B."

What Chabashira desired most of all was for Class D to rise up to A. That was something no class at this school had ever managed to pull off before.

"Well, this is an eye-opener... But it's easy enough to make all the verbal promises you want."

"That's certainly true. But you do want to hold onto your ticket to Class A, don't you?" I asked her.

It didn't matter whether that ticket was real or fake. It was far better than having nothing at all.

"I told you before. You lost to Class A in the year-end final exam. Although you fought admirably, with three wins and four losses, a loss is still a loss. And though a great deal of luck was involved in that exam, I still won't hear any excuses," she answered, once again stressing the fact that my abilities had apparently been exaggerated. "I thought that you could win, no matter the opponent, no matter the test. But those expectations were excessive."

In truth, it was merely that she had this selfish fantasy about me.

“You’ll see the truth for yourself today after this meeting,” I told her.

“I’ll see the truth...?”

“Listen to the whole story. All the way to the end. If you still can’t believe in my abilities after that, then you can do whatever you want.”

“What do you—” she began.

There was a forceful knock at the reception room door, cutting her off.

“...Please come in,” said Chabashira in response.

Mashima-sensei entered the room. “It seems like you’re both here already,” he said.

And then...

“Good day to you.”

The Class A student, Sakayanagi Arisu, had entered with Mashima-sensei. Quite an unexpected guest. I didn’t remember inviting her, and I had a hard time imagining Mashima-sensei doing so.

“I’m from Class A. So even if someone did see me with Mashima-sensei, it wouldn’t raise suspicions,” said Sakayanagi. It went without saying that she must have tagged along with him.

“Chabashira-sensei reached out to me. But she said that she had some relation to this matter, so I brought her with me, but...”

Director Sakayanagi had probably told his daughter that he had gotten a call from me, just to confirm I *had* actually had gotten his phone number through her—and if not, that I had betrayed his trust. But did that have anything to do with why Sakayanagi was here now? Had she been charged with playing some kind of role in this? Or was she simply here out of curiosity? If I were a betting man, I’d say it was the latter.

“It’s no problem. This is within the realm of what I expected,” I answered, accepting this visitor as someone who should be welcomed with open arms.

Sakayanagi responded to me with a soft chuckle and a gentle bow. Then, without even sparing a single glance in Chabashira’s direction, she closed the reception room door. Chabashira seemed like she was struggling to keep up with the situation, let alone grasp why Sakayanagi was here.

Mashima-sensei was probably having the same problem.

Regardless, all of the necessary people were in place. I needed to use this limited amount of time carefully.

“I hear you have something to say to us, Ayanokouji. Purposefully going through Director Sakayanagi to orchestrate this gathering, and holding a secret meeting right in the middle of the thank-you party... This is quite a lot to take in. What in the world are you playing at?” asked Mashima-sensei.

“I’ll tell you right now,” I replied.

First, I urged the two teachers to have a seat. However, Mashima-sensei instructed Sakayanagi to sit first.

“I will kindly accept your gracious offer,” she said humbly, taking her seat.

Mashima-sensei allowed the physically disabled Sakayanagi to take a spot, opting to remain standing himself, now with his arms crossed. It seemed whether or not he would decide to sit down depended on what I was about to say. Chabashira seemed to be taking his same approach.

The three other people in the room all gazed at me. They could only be away from the thank-you party for twenty to thirty minutes at most. Time was extremely limited. I had planned to get straight to the point, but I wasn’t sure how long it would take to make them really understand. This was an extraordinary situation. Too extraordinary to be easily communicated by a brief explanation.

Seeing as how there was no time to spare, I decided to start by talking about Acting Director Tsukishiro.

“I asked you to meet with me during such a busy time because I wished to discuss something important. It’s about Acting Director Tsukishiro.”

“...Something important about Acting Director Tsukishiro?” said Mashima-sensei. “What in the world are you talking about?”

He looked increasingly perplexed by my throwing out such an unexpected statement right off the bat. I supposed it was only natural for him to react this way to a student saying something this absurd. Chabashira seemed to be having trouble keeping up as well, but she just briefly glanced over at Sakayanagi, the only unexpected person here.

Sakayanagi met her gaze directly, with a bold grin. *I know much more about this situation than you two do*, her face seemed to be saying. As I looked at her, all I could get from her expression was genuine joy. It felt very typical of Sakayanagi, to be honest.



“The situation has become something that cannot be overlooked. Something that will shake the very foundations of this school. I sincerely hope that the two of you can help me bring the situation under control, while being committed to total secrecy,” I told them.

“I heard that this was something important, but... Are you playing some kind of prank on me, Chabashira-sensei?” asked Mashima-sensei, seeking an explanation from her. Apparently, he thought there was no way what I said could be true.

“I assure you, this is no joke. Do you think I’m the sort who plays meaningless games, like Hoshinomiya-sensei?”

“All right, fair enough, but I can’t understand what’s going on here at all. We’re right in the middle of a thank-you party that we should be attending.”

This was supposed to be a valuable opportunity to mingle with the graduates for the last time. Mashima-sensei’s disinterest was clear. He had no time to listen to a child’s delusional fantasy.

“What is Ayanokouji doing?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Chabashira said. “It’s impossible for me to explain this to you. As I told you yesterday, all I did was prepare the meeting location on Director Sakayanagi’s orders. Nothing more. Like you, I’m still trying to understand what’s going on here.”

Both teachers cast gazes full of suspicion at me. I tried to keep the discussion going.

“What would you think, Mashima-sensei, if I told you that Director Sakayanagi is currently under house arrest due to allegations of fraud? And that Acting Director Tsukishiro came to this school because of me?” I asked.

“What?”

Even cutting right to the heart of the matter wasn’t going to make this conversation go any smoother. If anything, Mashima-sensei’s doubts were only deepening.

“I really don’t understand a word of what you’re trying to say. You’re the reason why he’s here?” he asked.

A natural reaction, of course. The idea that the entire school system itself was being manipulated toward the enrollment and expulsion of a single person could have never crossed his mind. I supposed I should start by discussing what happened during the year-end final exam, after all.

“I’ll explain what happened in detail—”

Just as I began to recount the events of the exam, however, Sakayanagi raised her hand.

“Please forgive me for being presumptuous, but would you mind if I cut in here to explain that entire situation?” It seemed she’d anticipated this would happen.

“You had said earlier that you know something about this situation too, right, Sakayanagi?”

“Yes. At the very least, I am quite confident that I know much more than you two do,” she replied.

She acted fast, perhaps thinking interested people would pick things up much quicker if they heard the story from a well-informed third-party, rather than the affected person. After I gave Sakayanagi a gentle nod, she turned her gaze toward Mashima-sensei.

“Have you heard about this situation from your father?” he asked.

“No. This is something that I know personally. Ayanokouji-kun and I... Well, yes. Putting it in simpler terms, you could say that he and I are like childhood friends,” she explained, sounding quite happy.

I’d wondered how the teachers would react to hearing her phrase things that way, but they seemed surprisingly shocked by it.

“Childhood friends... I never imagined that you’d have that kind of relationship,” said Chabashira.

“Well, please keep in mind that I said we are ‘like’ childhood friends, at best,” Sakayanagi went on to explain. “At any rate, I will summarize what happened now.”

Leaving the topic of being childhood friends behind, she began to explain the events of the test.

“I am quite sure that the memory of Ayanokouji-kun’s and my match

during the year-end final exam the other day is still fresh in everyone's mind. When we did battle as commanders, that is. It was my victory during the final chess game that resulted in my class emerging as the winner."

As far as the school knew, that was the truth. Mashima-sensei and Chabashira naturally didn't doubt it.

"And what of it?"

"What if...during the test, someone had interfered with the game? And what if the outcome of the game was changed by that person's actions, having a significant impact on the results of the exam overall? Wouldn't that be an extremely serious problem?" she asked.

"Exams are carried out in a fair, impartial manner. There's no way there could be such a problem."

"How can you say that it was fair and impartial? Neither of you were present during the exam, no?"

Since the homeroom teachers were supposed to be kept separate from their own classes, Chabashira and Mashima-sensei had been monitoring Ichinose and Ryuuuen's classes for the exam. Meaning, they hadn't seen our exam.

"By all rights, I had lost that chess game. Ayanokouji-kun should have won," said Sakayanagi.

The first person to respond to that wasn't Mashima-sensei, but rather Chabashira. "Wait, Ayanokouji won the chess game? Wait, no, I saw the results. I saw what happened during the game."

It was understandable why it bothered her. We'd been demoted to Class D again as a result of me losing that chess game.

"You still don't understand?" asked Sakayanagi, phrasing her response in a way that suggested she was testing both instructors.

"What are you saying? You're not suggesting that Acting Director Tsukishiro overturned the results of the game, are you? But we held a meeting with Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei after the exam, and they didn't mention anything problematic."

"He didn't overturn the results of the game. He changed what happened *during* the game. You cannot see the truth if you're trapped within

the confines of common sense. The instructions sent by the commanders aren't transmitted directly to the students. They are reviewed by school administrators and then relayed through the intercom system. This system makes sense in that it prevents fraud, but conversely, you could say that it also allows school administrators to alter things freely," explained Sakayanagi. "Do you understand now?"

Both teachers were slowly beginning to understand what happened. For the first time, doubts about both Acting Director Tsukishiro and the exam ran through Mashima-sensei's mind.

"I'm sure it must have been highly irregular, even for the teachers, to use such large-scale services for an exam. There is that point to consider. That system must have been hastily prepared by Acting Director Tsukishiro so that he could unfairly interfere with the exam," said Sakayanagi, exquisitely weaving together a tapestry of lies and bluffs.

How much of what happened had Tsukishiro really planned out? Only Tsukishiro himself really knew that for certain. Rather than confirm the truth, Sakayanagi offered a convenient interpretation based on her own speculation and spoke as if it were fact. She didn't pause once in her explanation, and I was sure the teachers took what she said as the truth. On top of that, because Sakayanagi had told the story so eloquently and without a moment's delay, both Mashima-sensei and Chabashira simply couldn't handle the overabundance of information being presented to them. Their brains would begin processing what they heard as fact.

"The last command that was given to Horikita-san, that she heard over the intercom—or to be more precise, the command that was read aloud to her via the machine—was different from the command that had originally been entered. If the move that Ayanokouji-kun had come up with had been played, I would have lost. Do you understand what this means?" asked Sakayanagi.

She grinned broadly, as if testing their ability to process information. The other question she implied with her smile was, *Do you understand what I'm getting at by telling you this much?* And by asking them that, she basically narrowed down the possibilities they could imagine to one answer.

"You're saying that...Acting Director Tsukishiro was behind it?"

"As someone who is scheming to have Ayanokouji-kun expelled, the fact that he had a Protection Point was an obstacle," replied Sakayanagi.

Both teachers fell silent. However, Mashima-sensei quickly spoke up once more.

“Was what Sakayanagi said the truth, Ayanokouji?” he asked.

“Yes. She’s correct.”

“I will admit that there’s a certain degree of credibility to what both of you are claiming. I’ve been Sakayanagi’s homeroom instructor for a year now, and I’ve come to understand her personality and her line of thinking. If she purposefully wanted to let Ayanokouji win, she could have just simply thrown each event during the exam, including the chess game. She stands to gain nothing from elevating Ayanokouji and risking her own reputation like this.”

There was no benefit to Sakayanagi, the leader of Class A, going so far as to lie about admitting defeat. Just as Mashima-sensei had said, if Sakayanagi had wanted to let me win for some personal reason, there were plenty of ways she could have handed me that victory, such as by going over the time limit. There was no need for her to go to the trouble of setting up this meeting and talking about such questionable things.

“But hold on. We understand the gist of what you’re saying, but there’s no way for a third party to confirm whether this story is true or not. Isn’t that right?” asked Chabashira. Sakayanagi’s tale had been so ridiculous that it would make complete sense for someone to dismiss it out of hand. “This story is rather hard to believe... What do you think, Mashima-sensei?”

Mashima-sensei was listening to what was being said with a stern look on his face. “Never mind what I think about it. What we just heard is something I have a hard time accepting on the basis of what we know right now.”

He seemed poised to take a step back from his conversation, but Chabashira stopped him.

“In my personal opinion, I think there’s some degree of truth to what these two are telling us. Since Acting Director Tsukishiro arrived, this entire school has been operating strangely,” said Chabashira.

“If you think that simply because you don’t like Acting Director Tsukishiro, or if it’s just your personal feelings getting in the way, then that idea isn’t even worth entertaining. The same goes for having blind faith that

your own class will win.”

Mashima-sensei responded harshly to Chabashira’s attempt to stand by us students, then immediately posed a question to Sakayanagi and me.

“Can you show me any evidence?” he asked.

“You won’t believe us, Mashima-sensei, even if we were to tell you that we heard about Acting Director Tsukishiro’s wrongdoing directly from the man himself?” asked Sakayanagi.

“...That goes without saying.”

There was no way someone who committed such acts of foul play behind the scenes would openly expose themselves. Even if people privately discussed what had happened, it was obvious it would make no difference as long as they didn’t speak up about it.

“Honestly, I can hardly imagine there could be a student at this school that someone as powerful as Acting Director Tsukishiro would want to get expelled,” said Mashima-sensei.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“It’s not like I *want* to doubt my students. I don’t think you’re so foolish that you couldn’t tell you have nothing to gain from wasting your time and lying to me. But this argument simply lacks evidence,” he added.

Even though he wanted to believe us, Mashima-sensei probably couldn’t be convinced without a believable source.

“Who exactly *are* you, Ayanokouji? Please tell me.”

I supposed it had only been a matter of time before Mashima-sensei asked me that question. Director Sakayanagi had been placed under house arrest due to alleged corruption charges, and a man named Tsukishiro was dispatched to our school. And this Tsukishiro person was supposedly here solely to have me expelled, going so far as to rig an important exam in order to accomplish his mission.

It was inevitable that Mashima-sensei would have his doubts about this story. Should I explain things myself, or should I leave it to someone else?

When I didn’t answer, Mashima-sensei turned to Chabashira, who had just earlier said that she thought my story contained a certain degree of truth.

“What do you know about Ayanokouji?” he asked her.

“...To be completely honest, I only know very little myself,” she replied.

Chabashira looked over at me with prying eyes, but I coolly brushed her off. It wouldn’t hurt me if she were to reveal what superficial information she had on me.

“I saw the results of Ayanokouji’s entrance exam. He scored fifty points in every subject, which struck me as strange.”

“Fifty points in every subject... Meaning he did so intentionally?” asked Mashima-sensei.

“If you examine it yourself, you’d understand it was true, Mashima-sensei,” she replied.

“*Fu fu.* My, you’ve done some interesting things,” said Sakayanagi.

“But that alone doesn’t necessarily prove anything. If you think about it, while no student would deliberately hold themselves back like that, it wouldn’t be very difficult at all for a student with a certain level of academic ability to get nearly uniform scores across the board. In fact, the scoring system we use for the entrance exam at this school is exceedingly simple,” argued Mashima-sensei.

“But there’s more. When Ayanokouji started here, Director Sakayanagi told me only that he was a special student,” said Chabashira.

“Wait, Director Sakayanagi said that...? Is that the reason why you’re here now, Chabashira-sensei?”

She nodded, then proceeded to recount what had happened back then.

“Director Sakayanagi had asked that I, as Ayanokouji’s homeroom teacher, report to him if there were any difficulties with Ayanokouji. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka’s father is an exceptionally authoritative figure who apparently didn’t want his son enrolled in this school. I heard Director Sakayanagi used somewhat aggressive methods in order to have Ayanokouji’s admission approved,” explained Chabashira.

“He admitted him without getting his legal guardian’s permission? I see Director Sakayanagi is willing to be forceful, too.”

A normal child would only be permitted to go on to high school with their parents' permission. This world wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. It's not like a child could just freely do whatever they wanted, even if it was for a righteous calling like education.

"My father and Ayanokouji-kun are acquainted," explained Sakayanagi. "Which is precisely why he did what he did, acting out of sympathy for the unfortunate situation that Ayanokouji-kun had been placed in. But it's gotten him in trouble as a result. Acting Director Tsukishiro approached my father, had him placed under house arrest with trumped-up allegations of fraud, and is working to get Ayanokouji-kun expelled,"

That point was probably what bothered Mashima-sensei more than anything else.

"So, Ayanokouji's father had opposed him being forcefully admitted to this school, and then sent Acting Director Tsukishiro..."

That wasn't something that a person lacking in authority could pull off.

"But he didn't need to do that. He could have gone directly to the school and protested," he added.

"Ayanokouji's father had already contacted his son and Director Sakayanagi," replied Chabashira.

"Meaning, Director Sakayanagi had already been notified that Ayanokouji's legal guardian wished to have him taken out of school?"

"Yes," I answered. "Just as Chabashira-sensei said, I met with Director Sakayanagi and my father. We had a meeting right here in this reception room. If you roll back the footage from the security camera in the hallway, you can confirm that it's true."

"So the fact that Ayanokouji is still here means that the request to have him withdrawn was denied by the school, including by the Director?" asked Mashima-sensei.

"Apparently," answered Chabashira, giving him an affirmative nod. "Director Sakayanagi respected the wishes of his student. That seemed to settle the matter for the time being... But I never imagined that Acting Director Tsukishiro was sent here solely for the purpose of getting Ayanokouji expelled."

Upon hearing Chabashira's assessment of the situation, Sakayanagi spoke up, expressing her agreement.

"Well, it's not unreasonable for you to be surprised. You didn't know anything about it, Chabashira-sensei," she said.

"You seem to be quite well informed, though," replied Chabashira.

"Yes. I am *much* more familiar with Ayanokouji-kun than you are, Chabashira-sensei," said Sakayanagi, making a completely unnecessary show of her superiority here. "Isn't that entirely obvious from the fact that he didn't reject me being here, when I showed up uninvited?"

She chuckled haughtily as she said that, as if flaunting the fact in Chabashira's face.

"I'm beginning to see the whole picture. At the very least, the part about a father wanting to bring his son back home seems to be true," said Mashima-sensei.

He had a much better understanding of the situation now, but he still wasn't convinced.

"However... While I don't know how much authority Ayanokouji's father wields, I have to wonder why he'd try to get his son expelled this way? It just doesn't seem realistic," he added.

"It's because Ayanokouji-kun possesses incredible skills, which ordinary people do not have," said Sakayanagi.

"I saw the results of Ayanokouji's performance in the Event Selection Exam the other day. There's no doubt that he is quite good when it comes to his chess skills and flash mental arithmetic. But there are many other extraordinary students. I can't think his skills stand out enough to make him seem particularly exceptional," he argued.

"Mashima-sensei. I will not deny you in your attempt to convince yourself of the truth of this matter. However, I must ask you, can you please understand what is happening right now? My father has had his eye on this young man since before he was enrolled here. Also, Acting Director Tsukishiro is working to have him expelled, going so far as to resort to underhanded measures. That reality is the only truth here," argued Sakayanagi.

Mashima-sensei crossed his arms and briefly closed his eyes.

“I’m sure you’ve already reached a conclusion, Mashima-sensei. We just need to find the evidence later.”

After a brief period of silence, he opened his eyes and looked over at me and Sakayanagi, and then to Chabashira.

“Yes... The part about a son going against his father’s wishes, that the father doesn’t like the idea of his son going to this school, and that he’s doing something to get his son withdrawn from said school, I believe. However, it’s not as though I can just cooperate with you outright. Do you understand the reason why?” said Mashima-sensei.

He understood quite well that what we’d said so far only scratched the surface of what was really going on here.

“Are you not planning on telling me everything?” he added.

Apparently, he had straightened out the sequence of events in his head, and figured out that there was something that we weren’t telling him, that we wanted to keep secret. Though I supposed we would have been in trouble if he *wasn’t* capable of reading what we were saying that well.

“That’s right. Besides, it wouldn’t really matter even if I did tell you everything. In fact, it would be pointless,” I answered.

Even if I told them everything, starting with the White Room, it would probably be too much for the adults to even comprehend. A simple, logical examination of the situation at hand should be enough to make it clear that Tsukishiro’s activities were crazy. Besides, bringing up the White Room right now wouldn’t get me any closer to the truth. I was certain its existence had been completely hidden by means of a thorough cover-up. There was no need to subject myself to such a pointless ordeal.

“Say I refuse to help you. What then?” Mashima-sensei asked.

“Well, I don’t plan to accept my fate and cry myself to sleep. But I’m sure I’ll have a hell of a time racking my brain to figure out how to deal with Acting Director Tsukishiro. Whether it be an exam or something else, it’s easy for a school official to game the system. In fact, the school has already allowed precisely that to happen in the Event Selection Exam,” I replied.

It would be nearly impossible for students to stop him on their own.

The only question that remained was whether Mashima-sensei was the kind of person who could turn a blind eye to something like that.

“Are you trying to test me, Ayanokouji? ...Very well. We will do our utmost to keep Director Tsukishiro from illegitimately involving himself in any further special exams or written exams.”

Mashima-sensei had finally come out and said that he was going to be on my side.

“Mashima-sensei, you do understand it’s not going to be that simple, don’t you?” cautioned Chabashira, after hearing his declaration. “Even if it is true that he’s doing something fraudulent, we could get fired if we slip-up.”

I could understand why she’d say that. Rebell ing against Tsukishiro would essentially mean putting their teaching career in jeopardy. He wasn’t the kind of opponent you could take on out of a half-hearted sense of justice.

“Although I still don’t fully believe everything being said, if what Ayanokouji and Sakayanagi are saying is the truth, then this is a grave matter. A school official should never manipulate an exam or change test results in a fraudulent manner. If we are to do something, we must be thorough,” he argued.

“But Mashima-sensei, wouldn’t it be better for us not to fixate on such troublesome issues right now? You just received a pay cut this morning for violating the rules yourself during the Event Selection Exam,” she replied.

Sakayanagi must have thought that what Chabashira said sounded interesting, because she immediately jumped on that statement. “A pay cut for violating the rules? Whatever did you do?” she asked.

“That is not something I plan to tell you two about,” snapped Mashima-sensei.

“Is it because of the conflict between Class D and Class B during the exam? We’ll be hearing about it sooner or later. Besides, if this incident is related to Acting Director Tsukishiro’s fraudulent activities, then we really must discuss matters that could be cause for concern at this stage. It could become a problem later, wouldn’t you say?” argued Sakayanagi.

“What happened is entirely unrelated to this current discussion,” said Chabashira, speaking up in place of Mashima-sensei. “But I’ll describe it to

you. During the Event Selection Exam for Class B and Class D, the final event to be selected was judo, an event that Class D had submitted. And the student they had picked to participate was Yamada Albert. Class B's Ichinose had completely lost her will to fight at that point, leaving her unable to choose a student to compete against him."

"Well, if their opponent was Yamada-kun, that's entirely understandable. I don't imagine any first-year student could beat him in judo," said Sakayanagi.

"Of course, Ichinose *had* originally had a student in mind for the judo event. But what do you think would have happened if her decision paralysis continued long enough to cause a student from her class to be assigned at random? Anyone could tell there might be unforeseen consequences," said Chabashira.

If Ichinose had run out of time to select a student to compete, a student who hadn't yet participated in any event would have been selected at random. And that student could just as easily have been a girl as a boy.

"If the student simply lost the match at once, that would have been fine. But consider how tightly-knit Class B is. It was possible that the student who got selected would have tried everything in their power to win for Ichinose-san's sake," explained Chabashira.

And it was entirely plausible that Albert would have used all his strength to knock down his opponent so hard that they couldn't get back up, no matter who that opponent was. If that happened, it could've been a serious incident.

"Which was precisely why Mashima-sensei, acting on his own discretion, determined that the fight was unwinnable. I suppose that's what Acting Director Tsukishiro didn't like," she reasoned.

So that was why he got a pay cut, huh? I supposed what he'd done *was* actually a violation of the rules.

"That incident and this situation are one and the same. If there's something that we deem to be dangerous for the students, we put a stop to it. If there's injustice, you correct it. We teach this to our students. What would we be if we didn't adhere to it ourselves?" he answered.

And for that reason, he would do this without any regret, even if it

meant putting his own career at risk.

“It seems I can’t stop you,” said Chabashira.

“As a teacher, I’ve always prepared myself for situations like this,” he replied.

It was easy enough to say something like that and not actually *mean* it. But Mashima-sensei seemed to be an upstanding man. He was true to his word.

“You... Well, all right. If Mashima-sensei is that resolute in his decision, then there’s nothing more to say,” said Chabashira.

“In that case, I’d say that we’ve reached an agreement for the time being, hm?” said Sakayanagi, turning to look at me as she spoke.

I nodded to her in response. Perhaps Chabashira had decided that trying to persuade Mashima-sensei otherwise would be pointless, because she backed down.

“Well, if Mashima-sensei is agreeing to put his neck out for you, then I will help, too. I trust you’re okay with that, Ayanokouji?” she said.

“The more people I can get on my side, the better. I welcome it,” I replied.

“Then let’s put this discussion on hold for the time being. And no one speaks a word of this to anyone outside this room. That’s not a problem, I trust?” she answered.

“Of course not, no,” I answered.

That was understandable, since it wasn’t like Mashima-sensei nor Chabashira had actually seen Tsukishiro’s wrongdoing with their own eyes. Also, the more teachers that they brought into the fold, the greater the likelihood that information could get out. Tsukishiro would naturally become more cautious if he realized people were working to expose his fraudulence.

“I also intend to ally myself with Ayanokouji-kun for the time being,” said Sakayanagi.

“Sakayanagi. Just because you know about Ayanokouji’s situation doesn’t mean that you should give him special treatment. That would be a problem,” said Mashima-sensei.

“Whatever are you talking about? It’s only natural that I give him special treatment. No, it’s my right,” Sakayanagi rebutted directly.

“...Your right?” he asked.

“That’s right, it is. Even though this school is built on the individual classes competing with one another, there are naturally a variety of circumstances that still come into play. Some students betray their classes because of a friend or lover they have in another class. Others may cooperate with students from other classes for financial gain, or be coerced into helping another class. A single shared emotion can cross the boundaries between classes, resulting in the formation of a cooperative relationship. Hasn’t that always been the case at this school? In fact—hasn’t that always been the case for human society, as a whole? Am I wrong?” argued Sakayanagi.

She was asserting that everyone had someone they afforded special treatment. And no one could deny that.

“Even if I were to abandon all of my classmates in Class A and leave them to die, figuratively speaking, choosing to save only Ayanokouji-kun instead, the instructors would have no ground to criticize me. The only people who could resent me for it would be the students who’d been sacrificed,” she added.

I was sure Mashima-sensei was none too pleased about what Sakayanagi just said, but he didn’t argue.

“That being said... I suppose he may not necessarily welcome special treatment. But the question of whether or not he would is a separate matter,” said Sakayanagi.

“What do you mean?”

“It means I will be watching carefully until the acting director is gone. After that point, things will be different. And if Class D does become an obstacle for Class A, I will crush them, without mercy, whenever and wherever.”

“I see. Very well, then.”

Mashima-sensei had understood and accepted Sakayanagi’s statement, acknowledging the force of her will.

“Just to confirm once more, there is no evidence of Acting Director

Tsukishiro's wrongdoing anywhere?" he asked.

"I'm sure it's already been erased. Even if we tried to investigate now, it would be pointless," I replied. There was no way he'd be stupid enough to deliberately leave any evidence behind.

"Then it seems like all we can do now is wait for his next move," said Mashima-sensei.

The teachers knew much more than we did about the exams that awaited once we entered our second year. I figured I'd let Mashima-sensei and Chabashira figure out how and when Tsukishiro would be making his move at that time.

"It's been over thirty minutes now. We can't stay away from the thank-you party forever. First, you students should leave. Then we'll each head out separately."

"We understand," I replied.

Sakayanagi and I left the reception room at the same time and went into the hall, walking side by side.

"It was a drastic decision, but being able to bring Mashima-sensei over to our side as an ally is a big plus. As the person in charge of the first-year grade level as a whole, he can get closer to Acting Director Tsukishiro than anyone else," said Sakayanagi.

"Yeah. Even if he can't stop Tsukishiro completely, he'll be an effective deterrent," I replied.

"I suppose I am a little concerned that his sense of righteousness might be a bit too strong. That is one of his flaws," said Sakayanagi.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. He is reliable, but it's also possible that he might become a liability."

"And if Mashima-sensei gets in too deep, he'll likely get fired, which might be a mercy. Well, if he's the kind of person who'd do this sort of thing anyway, I suppose that's bound to happen to him sooner or later," reasoned Sakayanagi.

When I looked at Sakayanagi's side profile as she spoke, she seemed quite happy.

“You look like you’re enjoying this,” I told her.

“I am having quite a lot of fun. Aren’t you, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I dunno about that. From my point of view, this is all just a big headache. And you’re here because—”

“Yes, because it looked like so much fun. Was I a bother?” she asked, immediately admitting the reason why she came.

“No. You coming here helped in persuading Mashima-sensei. I’m grateful.”

“I’m glad.”

Sakayanagi turned toward me and smiled.

“Besides, we absolutely must not let the school interfere in our battles again and again through such fraudulent means,” she said, expressing her intense indignance at Tsukishiro’s injustice.

Our goal was to completely and totally take down Tsukishiro. The battle ahead of us would be intense.

“Our enemy is unprepared. We ought to settle things as soon as possible,” she added.

From Tsukishiro’s point of view, we were just mere high school students. He was underestimating what we could do. That was the weakness we could exploit.

“Ayanokouji-kun. For the present, please make every effort to eliminate Acting Director Tsukishiro.”

“In that case, please feel free to let me cut loose,” I replied.

Whether or not she could be trusted wasn’t something that I needed to worry about right now. Based on our interactions thus far, I thought I understood Sakayanagi’s personality quite well.

2.5

AFTER THE TWO STUDENTS left the room, Mashima let Chabashira know what his honest thoughts were.

“There are still some things I can’t quite get a grasp on,” he admitted.

“I feel the same way, Mashima-sensei. But the fact is, what Ayanokouji said was true.”

“Interfering in the way that this school operates just for a single student?” he lamented, finding he still struggled to make sense of this, no matter how much the people around him urged him to believe that it was real. “You’ve had your eye on Ayanokouji for this past year. What kind of person do you think he is?”

“That’s a difficult question, actually.”

Not wanting to linger too long, the two teachers left the reception room about a minute after Ayanokouji and Sakayanagi had departed.

“At first glance, he seems apathetic and indifferent. He’s a normal student, the kind who doesn’t stand out. The kind you might find anywhere.”

The homeroom teachers leading the other classes probably had a similar impression of him. In fact, they probably didn’t have much of an impression of him at all. They’d barely be able to recall his name or his face.

“But I can’t believe those eyes are that of a child. Those eyes remain unfazed by anyone, even adults, and they can see through anything and everything.”

“I’m still skeptical, though.”

“That’s certainly fair. I mean, for a first-year high-school student to be described in that way—it makes sense that you’d have doubts.”

“I’ve been a teacher for several years now, and I’ve seen all kinds of students at this school. In the past few years, I had gotten the impression that Horikita Manabu and Nagumo Miyabi are particularly outstanding students,” said Mashima.

“I certainly can’t argue that,” replied Chabashira.

Both students had excellent academic and physical ability. They were the best in their respective grade levels, and each possessed unparalleled charisma, to boot.

“I was under the impression this year’s crop of freshmen can’t compare to those two. There are some students who come close to matching them in certain areas, of course, but not in *every* area. What do you think is the extent of Ayanokouji’s abilities, overall?” asked Mashima.

“Will what I tell you impact what you’ll do from here on out?” asked Chabashira.

“No, it won’t. Regardless of what kind of student Ayanokouji is, I have no intention of letting Acting Director Tsukishiro do as he pleases. I’m simply curious is all.”

“Curious... It’s not often that I hear you say something like that, Mashima-sensei. At any rate, I’m still trying to figure it out myself.”

Chabashira was also one of the people who couldn’t help wanting to know more about Ayanokouji. The truth of the matter was that even if she wanted to give Mashima an answer, she couldn’t.

“Sounds like we’ve really gotten ourselves into a quagmire here,” said an exasperated Mashima, arms crossed. “Teachers are supposed to maintain an appropriate distance from their students and remain in a position to have jurisdiction over them. It is not wise to establish such a strange relationship.”

“And in order to do that, we need to get rid of Acting Director Tsukishiro as soon as possible,” answered Chabashira.

“Will eliminating him really be enough to put an end to all of this?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no guarantee another assassin won’t be sent in after we expose whatever injustice is going on here. And if that happens, this will grow from a personal problem for Ayanokouji to something that affects his entire grade... In fact, depending on how things go, the entire student body could be affected,” said Mashima, sounding uneasy.

That being said, he would never abandon a student in need.

“I’m afraid this situation is going to become ever more dire,” he added.

“I agree.”

If the situation did escalate, parts of the student body would be denied their chance at a fair assessment. That was something the teachers had to prevent at all costs.

“I hope my prediction doesn’t come true.”

The two teachers, imagining how the situation might unfold, hoped that their concerns were unfounded.

2.6

I KILLED SOME TIME after my discussion with the teachers and Sakayanagi ended, then headed over to the gymnasium. Before long, the thank-you party would be over, and the third-year students would come pouring out. All I needed to do was wait. The first- and second-year students gathered here seemed to be getting more and more nervous as the time drew near.

Some of the third-year students would be leaving school today, immediately after the graduation ceremony ended. Some of the students here might have something that they wanted to say that they hadn't been able to share before today. How many people were here in total, I wondered? As far as I could tell, there were nearly a hundred.

This included a familiar figure some distance away from the rest of the group.

"So, you've come after all, huh," I said, greeting Horikita as she stood amongst the other students waiting in the area.

She responded with a glare.

"...What? Is it bad that I'm here?" she snapped.

"No, it's not bad. In fact, I'm honestly a little impressed."

"Impressed? I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"I was just thinking that if you were still the person you used to be, you probably wouldn't have come," I told her.

Horikita seemed somewhat put off by my compliment. "Is that so? I'm just me. Nothing about me has changed."

She denied that she had grown. Or rather, she rejected self-reflection. Well, I supposed it wasn't so much that she rejected it as it was that she couldn't admit to it in front of other people.

The thank-you party in the gym must have ended, because the doors finally opened. It seemed the graduation ceremony was now officially over. This moment in time was officially the last chance for graduates and the

current students to interact with one another. After being dismissed, the third-year students came pouring out of the gym. Many of them were aglow, but some of them weren't smiling, perhaps because of the sadness of leaving school, or because they hadn't been able to graduate from Class A.

If it were the latter, however, then it was weird that the majority of students didn't seem to be depressed. After just a brief glance, it looked like the faces of the students not in Class A did contain a hint of joy.

"What do you think?" I asked, seeking Horikita's opinion on the matter.

"I think that even if you didn't get a shortcut to making your dreams come true, you can still forge a path for yourself. Generally speaking, if you have the ability to get into higher education or land a job, then you can make those dreams a reality even without special privileges," said Horikita.

The path of life continued on, never stopping. Horikita was saying that many students, now facing this reality, had decided to forge ahead on the path they'd set out on, hm? If so, it wasn't surprising that they held their heads high during this big moment in their lives.

Some of the students didn't engage with anyone in the crowd, but instead returned to the dorms. But the majority of them stopped. I felt like I could see the claw marks—or rather, the impact—they'd made in their three years here.

Horikita Manabu, who had formerly served as the student council president, was one of the students who waited around. No one had rushed up to him yet. It was the perfect chance. If people started to crowd around him, then it would be tougher for Horikita to squeeze her way in. Horikita had been looking forward to this moment, but she couldn't seem to budge an inch.

"You should go," I told her.

"I know that," she replied.

I supposed that what I said went without saying, really. Horikita had been waiting here all this time so that she could talk to her brother. However, now that the time had finally come, she wasn't moving. Meanwhile, students started to approach Horikita's brother, one by one, and she still hesitated to take the first step. Deciding nothing was going to happen if I just waited

around, I took more drastic measures, and gave her a push.

“H-Hey, what gives?!”

“Claim your rights as his little sister,” I told her.

Although I had urged her ahead, Horikita stubbornly kept her feet planted on the ground, and refused to move forward.

“...It would look really unnatural if I just rushed off toward my brother’s side right now,” she replied.

“There’s nothing especially unnatural about you going over there.”

“Yes, it is, I’d be out of place.”

She spoke of herself in such a way that it sounded like she was belittling herself. It was a lot like the trap she’d sprung on me the other day, when she cooked a meal for me, and it reminded me of how things were shortly after we had started school here. I remembered how she looked at her older brother, Horikita Manabu, as he was giving a speech to the first-year students. She looked at him like he was so far away, unreachable.

Even though Horikita had changed in some small ways, her core was still the same. Though she’d experienced a great many things and matured as a result, some things were still very hard for her. Maybe it was because she had that timid look on her face again that I was thinking about such things...

“Don’t get the wrong idea, though. It’s not like I’m being timid or anything. It’s just that my brother... Well, I came here because I wanted to see what these past three years have come to, for my brother,” she added.

“I see.”

So, she was saying that she didn’t just come here to talk to him. I suppose that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

Several more second-year students rushed over, flocking to Horikita’s brother’s side.

“Your brother’s pretty popular,” I added.

He was a guy who’d held onto his place in Class A and acted as student council president. Naturally, he must have been well-liked. I had initially thought he wouldn’t have had much contact with the first-year students, but surprisingly enough, many first-years came running up to him

too.

Eventually, the small circle around him started to expand, and began to include other graduates. Horikita's brother greeted the younger students warmly, with a smile appearing on his face from time to time. At the very last minute, though, I thought I caught a glimpse of something different on his face. I could see something like a burden being lifted from his shoulders, like he had been feeling a heavy, oppressive pressure.

And then...another male student appeared before Horikita's brother. It was the current student council president, Nagumo Miyabi, from second-year Class A. He was immediately followed by Vice President Kiriyama, Secretaries Mizowaki and Tonokawa, and Asahina.

The air around us didn't seem to get heavier, exactly. But it *did* feel like something was off.

"Congratulations on your graduation, Horikita-senpai," said Nagumo, offering Horikita's brother words of genuine praise. He drew in closer as he spoke, with a smile on his face.

Horikita's brother welcomed Nagumo with open arms, showing no sign of disdain.

"Man, I really should have known, huh, Horikita-senpai? I mean, in the end, I wasn't able to scare you off at all," said Nagumo.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," replied Horikita Manabu. "To be completely honest, I had no idea how things were going to play out until the very last minute. If I had to give a reason why you were defeated, it's that you weren't in my grade level. No matter how much you tried to interfere, you were ultimately nothing more than a bystander."

No matter how dearly Nagumo wished to do battle with Horikita Manabu, he couldn't do anything to hurdle the difference in their grade level. Since they couldn't directly participate in any exam against each other, Nagumo's options were extremely limited. If he'd *really* wanted to take Horikita's brother out, he could have followed Ryuuen's lead and taken the fight elsewhere...but it seemed Nagumo hadn't resorted to such measures.

"I suppose so. Aww man, why'd I have to be born a year after you?"

I didn't sense any frustration in Nagumo's tone. Rather, I only saw

regret that he wasn't in Horikita's year.

"Hey, I'm really sorry to ask this, but would you mind shaking my hand, one last time?" asked Nagumo.

"Of course. I have no reason to refuse," answered Horikita Manabu.

He readily accepted the other, and they shook hands. There was a pleasant silence for a little while. I supposed that, both being student council presidents, they could understand one another on a number of levels without actually exchanging words.



“You have a long year ahead of you. I hope you lead a fulfilling life here,” said Horikita, offering some advice to Nagumo, as his senpai. He didn’t say anything that suggested he had fears about Nagumo running amok, but rather, simply implied he should do as he wished.

“Yes. I will do my utmost in what little time I have left here, after you’re gone. I’m going to turn this school into a true meritocracy. We’ve already finished making the preparations,” said Nagumo.

Horikita’s brother seemed to receive this positively, nodding once. “You regret not being the same age as me. I admit I might share the feeling. I am a little disappointed I won’t get to see the kind of school you’re building. I’m sure there are things I could understand much better if I were to see them up close.”

“I’m not so sure. I think we might just be incompatible, senpai,” said Nagumo.

One of them wanted to uphold the school’s traditions and rules, while the other wanted to smash them. Because their ideologies were completely opposed, confrontation was unavoidable.

“Besides, it’s not that big a deal. Don’t worry ’bout it. You’ll be leaving some juniors behind, right, Horikita-senpai?” said Nagumo.

As Nagumo said that, he shifted his gaze over to someone standing a short distance away, watching them... Not to me, but to Horikita’s little sister, who stood beside me. I could sense her tense up, even if only slightly.

“If your little sister is still around, news will definitely reach you before long,” Nagumo added.

Once they both graduated, the Horikita siblings would reunite, sooner or later. Nagumo was saying that when that time came, Manabu would be able to hear about everything from his sister.

“I suppose you might be right,” answered Horikita, agreeing.

They each slacked their firm grip and released each other’s hands.

“Thank you very much.”

“No, thank you.”

The former student council president, Horikita Manabu, and the current

student council president, Nagumo Miyabi. Their final meeting had ended in a surprisingly peaceful, amicable way. Nagumo must have not wanted to be in the way of the other students, because he quickly distanced himself from Horikita's brother. Two student council presidents meeting like this was quite the attraction, but on the other hand, I supposed that there was something about it that made it difficult for others to approach them.

Nagumo next approached Horikita's sister, who still continued to watch from a distance. With him was Asahina Nazuna, another student from second-year Class A. It seemed the other members of the student council had gone off to meet with other graduates or something, because they were no longer in sight.

"You heard what we were talking about, right? Make sure to really enjoy what's coming next year. If I remember right, your name's—"

"Horiki... I mean, it's Suzune," she replied, her voice filled with nervousness.

Horikita wouldn't usually be this shaken. Perhaps it was the effect of having this conversation right after hearing Nagumo talk to her brother. Nagumo, who seemed to find this amusing, turned back to look in the other direction.

It went without saying who he was looking at. Former student council president Horikita Manabu, an opponent Nagumo had challenged time and time again, heedless of the risks. Manabu was currently surrounded by his juniors, being handed things like bouquets of flowers to celebrate his graduation.

"Suzune, your brother is seriously one hell of a guy. You should be genuinely proud to be his sister." With those words of praise for her brother, Nagumo once again directed his gaze back to Suzune.

"Yes. I certainly am proud," she replied, more forcefully, as she felt his gaze on her.

"If there's something you wanna ask me, feel free. I'm in a good mood today," said Nagumo.

"...Then I'll take you up on that offer." She proceeded to ask Nagumo one question. "Do you have any regrets?"

“Regrets?”

“It’s just that I see no doubts in your eyes, President Nagumo.”

She was probably referring to the handshake the two of them had shared moments ago, as well as their conversation. Nagumo seemed to genuinely, deeply admire the fact that Horikita Manabu had graduated from Class A. But whatever the relationship between the current and former student council presidents might look like from the outside, the fact remained that Nagumo had relentlessly waged war against Horikita Manabu, intending to have him demoted from Class A.

Manabu’s little sister couldn’t be pleased at all with Nagumo. Which was precisely why Nagumo had openly praised him for graduating from Class A, even though he’d done so by successfully warding off Nagumo’s attacks.

“I don’t think I can win against Horikita-senpai that easily. I mean, he’s pretty much an unbeatable opponent, don’t you think?” said Nagumo.

“I... suppose so.”

“You openly admit that you lost to Horikita-senpai then, Miyabi?” said Asahina, interjecting.

Miyabi cast a brief glance in her direction.

“Lost? How exactly did I lose, Nazuna?” he replied.

“Huh? I mean, Horikita-senpai graduated from Class A, right? That means you lost,” she answered definitively, as if the question didn’t even need to be asked.

But Nagumo immediately pointed out what was wrong about her answer.

“It’s certainly true that if you look only at the results, it seems I didn’t stop Horikita-senpai from graduating from Class A. But how does that mean I’ve lost?”

“Well... I would think it means you lost, though? Doesn’t it?” said Asahina, looking to Horikita’s sister for agreement. Horikita Suzune didn’t answer, but listened to Nagumo’s explanation instead.

“It’s certainly true that I challenged him to a contest. But I didn’t care

about winning or losing. Even if Horikita-senpai had been demoted to Class B, his underlying worth wouldn't have changed in any way, would it? The man's strength and talent cannot be measured by his class," said Nagumo.

Asahina looked like she remained unconvinced after hearing Nagumo's argument.

"You don't get it? All right, in that case, did my value in your eyes go down at all after all this? I'm still the student council president at this school and I'm still in Class A. Is there any area that you can say I'm losing in?" he asked.

"Well, but still."

"Besides, it's not like you can really have a proper contest between a second-year student and a third-year student anyway, to begin with."

I understood what he was trying to say. However, Nagumo had continued to challenge Horikita's brother despite knowing they could never really have a proper showdown.

"I've just been trying to get him to recognize me ... Well, no. Rather, it's like I've been attacking senpai all this time to *make* him recognize me," said Nagumo.

In that sense, based on what I'd seen today, Horikita's brother did seem to give Nagumo that recognition. Well, no. I supposed he'd recognized Nagumo's abilities long ago. It was just that he couldn't accept his *methods* at all. Perhaps Nagumo had wanted to make him accept his methods, too.

"You know, you kind of sound like a maiden in love or something," said Asahina.

"Maybe so. Well, I've heard the general gist of what senpai is going to do after graduation, and I'm just going to follow after him," said Nagumo.

You really couldn't see a hint of regret in his face, nor did you get the impression he was being a sore loser. Maybe he genuinely had enjoyed his interactions with Horikita's brother, all the way to the very end.

"After graduation? Seriously? You're going to keep following Horikita-senpai's lead even then?" asked Asahina.

"That's my plan at the moment, anyway."

“Wow, you really do like him, don’t you? Horikita-senpai, that is,” said Asahina.

“I have no remaining rivals among the second-year students. And none among the first-years either, of course. Which means there’s only one thing left for me to do at this school—overturn the system it’s based on, and make this boring place a lot more interesting,” said Nagumo.

Half of Nagumo Miyabi’s term as student council president had already passed. Until today, he hadn’t really done anything explicitly new. But now that Horikita Manabu had graduated and Nagumo was entering his third year, he was likely about to finally start taking action. As for what he would do... that was something I couldn’t even imagine right now.

“That said, I still don’t really know what to make of you after this year, Ayanokouji,” he added, laying eyes on me for the first time that day.

The way he looked at me was very different from how he looked at the Horikita siblings. The look in his eyes made it seem like he was bored.

“That just means there’s nothing really worth assessing,” I told him.

I was sure the attention I’d been getting of late was nagging at Nagumo. But his feeling that something was off wasn’t enough to make him actually take an interest in me for now, which meant there was absolutely no need for me to do anything to change that.

“Well, once April rolls around, I’ll find out even if you don’t want me to. When this school becomes a true meritocracy, everyone will have to fight, whether they like it or not,” said Nagumo.

Now that Horikita’s brother and the other third-year students had graduated, this school was now under Nagumo’s complete control. I was still skeptical about the extent to which the student council would be able to really influence the school, but Nagumo’s confidence suggested things were definitely going to be different from how they were in my first year.

Horikita’s curiosity must have been piqued after hearing Nagumo say that, because she spoke up. “Does that mean battles won’t just be between classes, then?”

“If we could arrange for that to be the case, it would be ideal. But it’s just not possible. The school won’t allow it,” said Nagumo, with a shrug of

his shoulders, letting out an exasperated sigh. “But I’m going to change the system this school operates on to make things depend more on individual ability than ever before. I mean, really, it’s a given that exemplary students should be in the topmost classes, right?”

Horikita neither agreed nor disagreed with him on that point. She only listened silently.

“Also, I’ve been proposing a few interesting ideas that will bring everyone, from first-years to third-years, together more than ever before. If the school agrees to those ideas... Then I might even get to face off against you,” said Nagumo.

Of course, someone like me probably wasn’t worth the time of day to him. At least not the way I appeared right now. But even so, deep down, I felt like he was taking stock of my abilities, trying to analyze and evaluate me.

“Hey Miyabi, don’t you think it’s time we were going? There are some senpai that I wanted to say goodbye to, so I’m going to go,” said Asahina.

“Yeah, you’re right. We can talk with first-years anytime, right?”

And with that, they left, apparently off to talk to some third-year students other than Horikita Manabu.

“*Phew...* It’s really exhausting, talking to someone like that,” said Horikita.

“He is the student council president, after all,” I replied.

Although we were only one grade level apart, Nagumo seemed like some kind of untouchable god.

“I’m leaving. I’ve taken care of what I needed to do,” said Horikita. It seemed she’d ultimately given up on talking to her brother here.

“Are you really okay with that? It’s possible that he could be leaving tomorrow.”

“That’s... look, I already know that without you having to tell me, it’s just...”

Horikita, faced with an insurmountable dilemma, seemed to be retreating, already deciding to make her way back to the dorm. I couldn’t exactly force her to stay put, so I decided to just watch her go.

“You’re not heading back?” she asked.

“Nah. I’m going to hang here for a little while,” I replied.

“I see... All right then.”

She seemed a bit curious about what I was going to do, but ended up turning around and heading back to the dorm anyway. As for me, I decided to see how Horikita Manabu and the other third-year students were doing, though there wasn’t anything particularly interesting about their present activities. If anything, it was just that I wanted to capture the scene and burn it into my memory. I tried to imagine myself there in two years’ time, but couldn’t really picture it yet.

The excitement lasted for a little while, but then I saw one person leave, followed by another person. Eventually, the crowd dispersed, and everyone started to go their separate ways. Horikita’s brother must have finished saying his goodbyes. He spotted me and then approached.

“You’re still here?” he asked.

I was sure he understood as well as I did that I kind of stood out here.

“Were you waiting for me?” he added.

“Something like that.”

Even seen from a distance, it was obvious I wasn’t talking with any of the other third-year students.

“I thought this might be the last chance I have to talk with you. When are you leaving the school?” I asked.

Hasty as it was, I decided to come right out and ask him the all-too-important question. If he was going to be leaving right away, I needed to tell his sister about it.

“The afternoon of the thirty-first. I’m planning to ride the twelve-thirty bus,” he replied.

Meaning he’d be leaving a week from now, huh? It wasn’t this very day, it was still soon.

“Looks like Suzune left,” he added.

“She just burned the image of your three years at this school into her memory for now, then headed back.”

We both briefly glanced in the direction of the dormitory building. Naturally, Horikita's sister was no longer in sight.

"Is that so?" he asked.

I couldn't really read any emotion in the look on his face: not joy, anger, or grief. At any rate, if things continued this way and they didn't set something up, the two of them wouldn't meet again before Horikita Manabu left. At least, that was what I feared...

"If it's all right with you, I'd like you to pass on a message to Suzune. Tell her that I'll be waiting by the main entrance at noon on the thirty-first," said Horikita.

"Wouldn't it be better if you told her that yourself? If you go after her now, you'll still reach her in time."

If he was willing to meet with her right now, this talk could happen fast. Horikita Suzune would probably come running right away.

"It's possible she won't be too receptive to that. I want you to be the one to tell her."

"That might backfire. If I tell her, it's possible that she won't come." She did have a stubborn side, after all.

"If that happens, it just means that Suzune has made her choice," he answered.

"Are you really okay with that?" I asked to make sure, but he responded without any hesitation.

"Yes. I'm leaving this in your hands."

If I wasn't going to be held responsible for her saying no, I had no reason to refuse his request. Besides, I was sure his sister would come running to see him when I relayed the message. The thawing of her heart had already begun.

"I wanted to talk with you a little more, but I have plans," he added.

It sounded like he'd gotten invitations from several of his kouhai. I supposed that for today at least, he wanted to forget about his sibling and just be his own person, as a student here.

"And I suppose you probably don't want a long, pointless conversation

either.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that,” I replied.

No matter how much his popularity had declined, I supposed that the former student council president still stood out quite a bit.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like you to come see me off on the thirty-first, too,” he answered.

“I’m not really good at saying goodbye in front of a big crowd of people.”

“No need to worry. I don’t plan to invite anyone other than you and Suzune to see me off that day,” he replied.

In that case, I figured it would be okay. I gave him a gentle nod, agreeing to his request.

“Sorry for the bother,” said Horikita.

And with that, he left. He was the only person out of the graduates that I had wanted to talk to, so since he was no longer here, my business was finished. I figured I’d head on back too, then.

“Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, if you don’t mind, how about we head back together?”

Just then, Hirata called out to me. Even though he was some distance away, I could tell he’d just finished talking to a large number of third-year students.

“You all set?” I asked.

“Yeah. Even though today’s the graduation ceremony, most of the graduates will be staying here for a few more days. And it sounds like some of the people I’m pretty close with are having their own individual farewell parties anyway,” said Hirata.

Considering who Hirata was, I was sure he had invitations for several of those parties. I supposed some graduates would be staying here at this school as long as they could, which would be April 5. That wasn’t too far off. It was safe to say most of the students were trying to take care of what business they had left before then.

Since I had no reason to turn Hirata down, I decided to head back to

the dormitory with him.

2.7

WHEN WE WALKED past the convenience store, Hirata turned to look at me. Then he turned back and faced forward again, as if nothing had happened. He'd done this repeatedly in the past few minutes, over and over again, like he was trying to find the right moment to strike up a conversation with me...

Eventually, Hirata opened his mouth to speak, as if he had finally made up his mind on the matter.

"To tell you the truth... there's something I kind of want to talk to you about, Ayanokouji-kun," he said ambiguously.

For a moment, I'd thought he was going to bring up the year-end exam. But it didn't seem like that was what this was about.

"Something on your mind?" I asked.

"Well... Yeah. I think this is something I want to discuss with you," replied Hirata, after giving it a little thought.

"I'm not too sure if I'll be able to help, but you can tell me anything," I told him.

It didn't feel bad at all to have Hirata depend on me. But I couldn't predict what he was going to ask me about at all. I knew he was still depressed about Yamauchi being kicked out of school, but that matter had already been resolved. He might still have some lingering feelings smoldering deep down inside of him, but they weren't worth discussing. He should have dealt with those issues, at least to the point where he could handle the rest of it well enough on his own.

"Well, this might come as a surprise to you, but..." said Hirata, prefacing his story with that statement. "It's well, I, well, I don't really know if... well, if I'm ready for a romantic relationship right now."

This certainly was unexpected. I never imagined a day would come when Hirata would come to me to talk about romantic relationships.

"You don't know?" I asked.

For now, I figured I'd listen to the whole story. I urged him to keep going.

"I think it might be because I've never really liked a girl that way before, but..." said Hirata, sounding somewhat embarrassed by it.

"You're saying you've never gone out with a girl before?"

"Putting aside the deal that I had with Karuizawa-san, yes, that's right."

It might not be really all that surprising...but it was at least a *little* surprising. I had thought Hirata, who treated people equally regardless of gender, had to have had at least some romantic experience. Though I supposed his relationship with Kei didn't count, after all. He'd only pretended to be her boyfriend in order to stop her from getting bullied. Still, saying that he'd never liked a girl that way before...

"Are you saying that there's no one who's caught your eye, even now?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right..."

The fact that he could see every girl in an equal light was something of an advantage, but at the same time, it was rather odd.

"Well, what about Mii-chan, then?" I asked.

Mii-chan was very eager to start a relationship with Hirata, and clearly had romantic feelings for him.

"I can't really see myself being more than friends with her. But I can't really come out and say that, either," he replied.



Mii-chan had said she wanted to start out by being friends. Naturally, she wanted things to develop from there until they became lovers. But if Hirata wasn't willing to go that far, there was nothing that could be done. And if he avoided making that clear to her for no reason, but let this situation drag on instead, that wouldn't be good for Mii-chan, either.

So that's what this was about, huh? This was what he wanted to talk about. What was worrying him.

"I know I should come out and clearly tell her how I feel. But it's hard," he added.

It was difficult to make her understand without hurting her.

"I'm sure that I'm...definitely not making any sense," said Hirata.

"I understand," I replied.

It was precisely because Hirata was a kind-hearted person that he always found himself faced with such distressing dilemmas.

"But this is just how you feel right now, right? You don't know what it's going to be like in the future, right?" I asked him.

Romantic feelings weren't something that you could control. They could come at any moment, completely unexpectedly, like a switch being flicked on.

...Probably.

"Well, sure, I suppose. If we're talking about the possibility of something happening in the future, I don't know that it couldn't. But..."

I supposed this meant Hirata just couldn't see his relationship with Mii-chan going any further, huh? It didn't seem like there was anything particularly wrong with her, in terms of looks or personality or anything. Of course, there were many things about love that couldn't be measured by those aspects alone.

"But I think I can say...with close to absolute certainty that I won't have those feelings for her."

Though Hirata didn't know exactly what the future held, he still seemed to have strong feelings about the matter, in his own way. In that case, there was only one thing I could say to him.

“You should spell it out for Mii-chan loud and clear, because she’d been hoping that for a while now that you would become more than friends,” I told Hirata, looking him in the eyes as I did.

If Hirata kept how he felt to himself, that would mean he’d be making Mii-chan wait, too. Given that, it was best to come out and tell her as soon as possible. If Mii-chan continued to have feelings for Hirata after that point, well, she was free to have them.

But Hirata momentarily averted his eyes from me. “...Even if it hurts her?” he asked.

“It would hurt her more if you put this off, when you already have your answer now. Right?” I told him, once again looking him in the eyes.

Hirata made eye contact with me again, but then quickly averted his gaze once more, looking off in another direction.

“Y-Yeah. You’re right. Of course...” he replied, nodding several times, like he was trying to admonish himself.

Then, he seemed to arrive at a conclusion.

“I’m glad that I talked with you about this, Ayanokouji-kun. This gave me courage. I suppose if you’re not prepared to face the other person being hurt in a situation like this, it means you’re just running away,” said Hirata.

It seemed he’d succeeded in finding his answer, once again.

“So, are you able to tell her now?” I asked.

“I don’t know if it’s the right way or not, but I know which option would hurt her more,” said Hirata, sounding like he had weighed his options.

He fell silent, but I could tell what he was thinking. When Hirata had realized that the latter option would be better for Mii-chan’s sake, his hesitation vanished. In the past, he would probably have continued to agonize over it, and it would have taken him a long time to come up with an answer. His thoughts and his emotions would have been lost in a labyrinth, as he continued to search and search for an option that would allow him to settle things without hurting the other person.

A little while after his problem had been resolved, Hirata looked like he still wanted to say something else.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh, um, well... it’s just, I was wondering... Is it okay for me to call you Kiyotaka-kun from now on?”

“Huh?”

I was wondering what he was about to say, but that was completely out of left field.

“And, um, if you like, you can call me by my first name too...” he added.

Was it safe for me to say that this meant our friendship had taken a step forward? I suppose this was just like how my relationship with Keisei, Akito, Haruka, and Airi had deepened in the past, too.

“If you’re okay with it, then sure, of course,” I replied.

When I said that, a huge smile appeared on his face, one so overflowing with happiness that he looked genuinely delighted.

“Really? You mean it?” he asked.

“I mean, we’re just talking about using first names, right? I’m sure it’s not out of the ordinary for you to be on a first-name basis with people, right Hirata? Oh, I mean, Yousuke.”

Although I had the impression that Hirata usually referred to people by their last name, regardless of their gender, he was probably on a first-name basis with some people.

“Well, I suppose it wasn’t that unusual until that whole incident,” he replied.

He was referring to what happened when he was in junior high. When his best friend had been bullied and then had attempted suicide.

“Ever since then... I was afraid of getting close to people. Instead of trying to form real relationships and find someone really special to me, I just treated everyone equally,” said Hirata.

It had been about two years since then. Apparently, he’d only ever referred to people by last name during that time. Come to think of it, he really did treat every student exactly the same, no matter who they were. Even Yamauchi, who had been unanimously kicked out of our class.

It looked like Hirata was breaking out of his shell. And this time, he was doing it on his own. His growth was pretty significant, even compared to how much many of the other students had grown over this past year.

“So, I’m especially grateful to you...Kiyotaka-kun.”

He directed his gaze back toward me, after having averted his eyes for so long. From the look in his eyes, he was trying to tell me something.

“That makes me feel kind of embarrassed,” I said. “You being so grateful to me and all.”

It did make me a little uneasy. But I acknowledged and accepted his feelings, all the same.

Chapter 3: Hiyori Date

THE GRADUATION CEREMONY and the closing ceremony had both ended without incident. Spring break was finally here, and the students forgot all about competing with each other and welcomed the short break. Although current students obviously weren't allowed to leave the campus, they didn't feel particularly inconvenienced by that, largely due to the presence of Keyaki Mall.

The mall was an essential amenity not just to students, but to everyone affiliated with the school. I'm sure I don't need to explain this in detail at this point, but it had everything you needed, from cafes to electronics stores, karaoke, and so on. If there was something else you really wanted, you could get it via mail order after putting in a request and getting permission. You were free to live life according to your own whims, as long as it was within what your stock of Private Points would allow.

Fortunately, no one in this year's crop of freshmen would be going hungry due to lack of points. Even the lowest-ranked class, Class D, would be receiving an allowance of tens of thousands of points on April 1st. When you considered the average allowance of high-schoolers throughout the country, it was obvious that the amount we received was almost too much.

However, more than a few of those students had troublesome situations on their hands. I could count myself as one of them. As part of a contract that I had with my classmate Kushida, I promised to provide her with half of my income. Although that contract had served my own purposes at first, things had begun to change.

What should I do about the contract I had with Kushida—or rather, what should I do about my relationship with her in general? I'd have to decide that during spring break. Should I proceed as originally planned? Or should I choose a different option? It was no longer up to me to make that choice, though.

At any rate, spring break had only just begun. There was no need to panic. I slipped into my casual clothes and got ready to head out. I had

planned on spending most of my spring break just relaxing lazily in my room, but I had a brief appointment with a certain someone today. I'd thought it would've been a little later before I heard from them, but they contacted me surprisingly early. Once they did, I got in touch with someone else.

“One last check, I guess.”

It was the first day of spring break, so I'd need to make some adjustments. But that wasn't a problem. My meeting today was of significant importance. Significant importance not for today, but rather, for the end of spring vacation.

3.1

THE DAYS BEGAN getting warmer and sunnier in late March. Just as we heard the cherry blossoms were getting ready to start blooming, they did just that, and were in full bloom in no time at all. Even though I had arrived at our meeting place earlier than expected, I saw the student I was going to meet was already there waiting for me.

“Hello, Ayanokouji-kun.” Hiyori, looking quite striking in her casual wear, waited for me in front of Keyaki Mall.

“You’re early.”

“Well, I was the one who called you, so it wasn’t like I could keep you waiting,” she replied, flashing a small smile. “Sorry for inviting you out today on such short notice.”

“I didn’t really have any plans for spring break, anyway. Don’t worry about it. Besides—”

“They finally stocked some new books at the library just yesterday,” said Hiyori, showing me the bag she was carrying. Her smile got even bigger than before. Shiina Hiyori, from first-year Class C, was a girl who loved reading more than anything else.

“I thought I’d share this information with you as soon as possible, Ayanokouji-kun,” she added.

The books by an author whose works Hiyori and I especially loved were hard to find at convenience stores and mall bookstores. They weren’t even available as ebooks, so the library was our only way of getting them. I supposed we could always put in special orders for them, but the library helped books reach a wider audience. I cherished being able to discuss a book with someone that way.

“There are more people here than I thought there’d be.”

Students filled the seats at tables all around the café. It was spring vacation, I supposed. Depending on the time of day, the café could get really crowded. Fortunately, there seemed to be some seats available at the counter, so we headed over there.

“We’ve never really had the chance to meet up like this on a holiday. It’s kind of refreshing, isn’t it?” said Hiyori.



It was certainly true that we hardly ever met up on vacation, with Hiyori in her personal clothes.

“Yeah, you’re right about that,” I told her. Both our moods lifted as we talked.

“Well, I know this is abrupt, but I figured I’d get straight to the point... I brought a number of books with me. Do you want to take a look?” said Hiyori, happily reaching into her bag to retrieve them.

But then, her hand suddenly stopped. She looked up, as if just remembering something.

“Oh, that reminds me. Before we dive into our discussion about books, is it all right if we touch on something else, first?”

Before she could continue, a loud voice came booming from behind us.

“Aw damn. This place is *packed*, dude. Aren’t there any free tables?”

The familiar voice could be heard nearby. The person in question was complaining about the state of the café. More precisely, how crowded it was.

“Is this spot okay?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

In the midst of the café’s relaxed atmosphere, the two new arrivals sat down in the seats that had just opened up. I directed my gaze in the direction of the voices, which were male and female, and saw my classmates Ike and Shinohara. They seemed to be in the middle of a conversation, so they didn’t notice us.

The two of them had seemed like they were getting closer, just a little while ago. Apparently, that trend was continuing.

“Those two are...Ike-kun and Shinohara-san, if I recall. Aren’t they?” said Hiyori.

She wasn’t leaning in close enough to be whispering into my ear or anything, but she was conscious enough about the volume of her voice that Ike and Shinohara wouldn’t overhear.

“You’ve got a good memory,” I told her.

“One whole year has passed, after all. I’ve gotten to know some of the

students from the other classes quite well," she replied, eyes sparkling with pride.

For some reason, the two of us remained silent, leaning in slightly to listen to Ike and Shinohara's conversation instead.

"It looks like our monthly income has gone back down to being under thirty thousand again," huffed Ike.

"That's just how the cookie crumbles. I mean, we were up against Class A. It's not like we stood a chance of winning," said Shinohara.

"Yeah, you might be right 'bout that. And we're gonna be back to bein' Class D from next month, huh? Ugh, lame." Ike scratched his head. He must have been thinking back to when we lost during the year-end exam.

"But, well... Do you know why we lost?" asked Shinohara.

"What? You mean whose fault it is?" said Ike.

For a moment, I thought he was going to say my name, since I was the commander. But...

"It was my fault. Mine," said Ike.

Shinohara's eyes went wide after she heard Ike make that surprising remark.

"Well, technically, I guess I'd say it feels like I'm *one* of the reasons why we lost. To be totally honest, I think if the class had been more united, we really would have won. I mean, yeah, sure, Class A is like crazy tough and all. But even so, we fought a good fight," said Ike.

"W-Well, I suppose you're right, yeah. But still, it's a huge surprise for you to come out and say that, Ike," said Shinohara.

"Hey, hold on now, I think you're forgetting somethin', Shinohara. You called me by just my first name. I didn't think we were *that* close."

"Hey, look who's talking. You just called me Shinohara. So, I guess that makes us even," she snapped back.

They continued to reflect on what had happened at the end of the year, occasionally inserting some pointless tangents.

"When we start our second year here, I think I'm gonna try even harder. In both classes and sports," said Ike.

“Huh, really? I can’t imagine you’re going to keep that promise.”

“Hey, I’m not gonna be perfect or anything anytime soon. But I was just thinking I’d take things seriously,” said Ike. From the way he said that, it sounded like it was more than simply a passing thought.

“Just out of curiosity, why though?” asked Shinohara.

“...Ken and Haruki.”

Not too long ago, those three had been good friends, referred to as the Idiot Trio by other people in our class. I remembered having gotten fairly close to them when I first started here, but we eventually drifted apart. More accurately, I suppose, I should say that I was ejected from the group.

“I mean, Ken’s totally not the type for it, but he’s been studyin’ like all the time lately, right? He’s been takin’ classes and stuff really seriously. I thought he was bein’ a poseur, but I think he’s actually getting smarter,” said Ike.

“It does seem like his grades have improved,” added Shinohara.

“Yeah, for sure. His grades are really getting better, little by little, and he’s already super good at sports. It’s like, I get the feeling that there’s not a single thing that I can beat him in.”

“But you’ve gotten better at your studies, haven’t you, Ike?”

If we compared Ike and Sudou as they stood now, Sudou had a better chance of coming out on top in both academics and sports.

“He’s...probably gonna reach new heights next year,” said Ike.

It seemed like he was happy about a close friend growing, on the one hand. On the other, he was terrified about being left behind. And the greater reason for this fear being instilled in him was...

“If things stay like they are, I’m probably the next one to get expelled,” he added.

“Ike...”

The lower a student’s position within the class, the more likely it was that they would face expulsion. That fact was inescapable. Yamauchi had exhibited a lot of problematic behavior, and been sacrificed for it. Ike was beginning to feel like he’d be next.

“Don’t laugh. Don’t tell me that it’s not like me to say this kinda stuff,” said Ike.

“Well, it is true that it isn’t like you to talk like this, but... You know, I’m pretty much the same as you.”

Shinohara didn’t exactly have good grades, nor was she someone with any significant talents. Despite their gender differences, they were both in a similar position.

“Besides, I couldn’t laugh at someone who wants to work hard,” she added, with a determined nod. “I’m going to work even harder next year, too. There’s no way I’m going to lose to you.”

“Hell, ain’t no way I’m gonna lose to you!” replied Ike.

Their relationship seemed to be progressing well. In the future, there would be other students who were inspired to work harder themselves after seeing these two. If someone forged on ahead, others would follow. Mutually-beneficial relationships of that kind were extremely important.

“So, hey, Shinohara.”

“Hm?”

Ike, who sat next to me, started speaking in a serious tone. But serious in a different way than before.

“Well, it’s... There’s somethin’ I want to talk to ya about. Is that okay?”

“What’s with you? You’re being all serious,” she replied.

“Well, you know, it’s just like, it feels like we’re the kind of friends who fight sometimes and all, but... I mean...”

Hiyori and I looked into each other’s eyes. It was precisely because we were outsiders looking in here that we understood better than Shinohara herself what Ike was trying to say. It was possible that we might see the birth of a new couple right here and now. At least, that was where this seemed to be headed.

“I—”

“Ah!”

Just before Ike could come out and say what he wanted to, Shinohara

let out a loud shout. Although the campus covered a wide area, most of the buildings were actually quite small. People couldn't help but be aware of their surroundings, and Shinohara, who had been looking at Ike, seemed to have noticed Hiyori and me just next to him.

Ike, noticing Shinohara's surprise, followed her line of sight and turned around. He practically jumped out of his seat when his eyes met mine.

"AAAAH! Ayanokouji?!"

His reaction was much more intense than I imagined it would be. Probably because he was just about to tell Shinohara how he felt about her.

"Wh-wh-what are you doing here?" he asked.

"What am I doing...? What, is there a problem with me being at the café?" I asked.

"N-no, there's not, but like, dude, you should've at least spoken up! I didn't have any idea you were here! You totally snuck in out of nowhere!"

I'd thought trying to talk to him in this kind of situation would be out of the question, though. Also, he said I snuck in out of nowhere, but I was here first.

"Dude. Don't tell me you heard what we were talking about. Did you?" he asked.

"What *were* you talking about?" I asked in return.

When I turned the question around on him, he averted his eyes, flustered.

"N-nothing. I mean, does it even matter?" he replied.

Shinohara, who had been listening to Ike and I going back and forth, commented on something else, though.

"...Wait, Ayanokouji-kun, are you and Shiina-san dating?" asked Shinohara, who seemed to be able to tell we hadn't come alone.

Of course, since she'd seen the two of us sitting here at the café together, I supposed that it wasn't surprising for her to ask that.

"No, it's not like that. What about you?" I asked.

"Oh, no way, no. Ike and I aren't really like that," she replied, flatly

rejecting the idea that they had *that* kind of relationship.

Ike quickly jumped in, perhaps because he didn't really like what he just heard. "Y-yeah, Ayanokouji. I mean, don't get the wrong idea, okay? Like anyone would wanna be with this uggo!"

"Huh?! Who are you calling 'uggo,' uggo?!" snapped Shinohara.

"You!" he shot back.

Wait, no, hold on, why are you two fighting now?

They both stood up and glared at one another, completely destroying the good vibes that had existed just moments before.

"Ugh, this sucks!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth. And here I went out of my way to make time for you during spring break and all."

"Huh? Wait, what? Huh? I had no other choice *except* you! I was out of options!"

"What the hell?! You're such a scumbag!"

I thought they were going to sit back down, but for some reason, they walked off somewhere else, still squabbling as they went. We'd been on the verge of seeing a new couple be born—but alas, things took a sudden turn.

"Are they...going to be all right?" muttered Hiyori, also taken aback by the sudden change in the situation.

"Who knows...?"

They could only curse themselves for having had the bad luck of sitting down next to a classmate. I hoped they could make up and continue progressing their relationship as soon as possible, though.

"Anyway, though, you were about to say something before, weren't you?" I asked.

"Oh, well, yes, I was. Oddly enough, it's actually something strikingly similar to what those two were just talking about," replied Hiyori.

Strikingly similar? I unintentionally jumped a bit when I heard her say that. She couldn't be referring to how Ike had been about to tell Shinohara how he felt, right? Something romantic?

Those thoughts went through my mind for a moment before I immediately rejected the idea.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you, Ayanokouji-kun, about the year-end exam,” she said.

Oh, well. I supposed Ike and Shinohara *had* been talking about the year-end exam, too.

“What did you want to ask me?”

“I’m sorry if my reasoning is off base here. I’ll just come right out and ask. Were you the one who changed Ryuuen-kun?”

Hiyori’s gaze was filled with curiosity, and not a hint of ill intent. Come to think of it, I had noticed the very first time we met that she possessed a keen insight.

“Normally, my response to something like that would be, ‘What do you mean?’”

Playing dumb and pretending I had nothing to do with it would have been the best course of action for me to take. The reason I didn’t was because there was certainty in Hiyori’s eyes.

“Yes, I suppose so. But I figured you’d understand without needing me to explain, since you’re, well, you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Changed Ryuuen. Most people would probably shake their heads to hear such a thing. The people who wouldn’t either had some degree of understanding of the situation, or were the person who had changed him.

“Why do you think that?” Rather than trying to mislead her, I decided to come right out and ask Hiyori her reasoning. I was hoping that she could tell me why she was so sure.

“It was just a matter of slowly putting all the pieces of the puzzle together. Ryuuen-kun was obsessed with you and your class, Ayanokouji-kun. But after a certain point in time, he just completely dropped off the stage. Ostensibly, it was because of a revolt led by Ishizaki-kun, but that just seemed like smoke and mirrors to me. I became convinced of this when I brought Ishizaki-kun and Ibuki-san, who were formerly close associates of Ryuuen-kun, back in contact with him.”

It seemed Hiyori had executed several strategies which I’d been

completely in the dark about. And she had her suspicions about Ryuuен bowing out so quietly.

“If this upsets you, I deeply apologize for that. I was really worried about whether or not to talk to you about this today. I thought that I might make you angry by bringing the matter up, Ayanokouji-kun. No matter what the truth may be, I knew from looking at you that you didn’t want to talk about this,” said Hiyori.

“So you brought up the topic after preparing yourself for the potential consequences.”

This was on a completely different level from everyday chit-chat. This was a decision that she’d made after careful consideration.

“If we can’t be friends anymore because of this, then... I will definitely regret it. If I’m not able to be next to you anymore because of this, Ayanokouji-kun, I will absolutely regret bringing it up,” she replied.

In that case, it would have been better for her to have kept this to herself. But even so, Hiyori had decided to bring up the topic today.

“I just thought that if I didn’t bring this up, we wouldn’t make any further progress,” said Hiyori.

“Any further progress?” I asked.

When I asked her that question, Hiyori’s mouth hung agape, like she was shocked. She seemed surprised by what she had just said.

“Oh, well, um... I suppose I don’t really understand what I’m even saying, myself,” she replied, with a somewhat puzzled look on her face. “Um... Have you heard about the battle between our class and Class B?”

“Only the results.”

I didn’t know the particulars. Changing the topic, Hiyori began explaining how they had won.

“I see. Normally, what you did would be considered problematic,” I replied.

“It’s certainly true that Ryuuен-kun’s way of doing things has no shortage of problematic areas. But I also think there are some necessary evils we must commit for our class to move up to the higher levels. Do you think

what we did was unfair?”

“Well, I can’t deny that part, at the very least.”

Even if it wasn’t a praiseworthy method of doing battle—even if it meant people would talk about them behind their backs—it was a way for them to secure victory for their class. Society needed people like that. To fight a lonely battle that would earn you no praise, an indomitable force of will was essential.

“It’s just, well, there can be no doubt we’ve crossed into extremely dangerous territory. I’m sure some students from Class B are starting to have their doubts, but I don’t think they’ll find any concrete evidence. We avoided all the security cameras that are installed everywhere throughout the school,” said Hiyori.

There were many security cameras installed through the campus. They were in the school buildings, of course, but places like Keyaki Mall and its surroundings were also under their watchful eye. However, it wasn’t like they were everywhere. There were no cameras in the bathrooms or private spaces like the karaoke rooms.

If Ichinose and the other students in Class B spoke up and said that there was something strange about what happened, there would probably be an investigation. But the investigation would probably stall out, unable to find anything conclusive. It was unlikely that there would be any developments from it.

“You got five pretty brilliant wins. You could say the plan went perfectly, couldn’t you?” I asked.

“Brilliant? I don’t think so. If anything, I would say that our methods were extremely flawed.”

“How so? That it was possible to get six or more wins?”

“Five wins is great. But, well, if anything, I think we got greedy. Ryuuuen-kun adopted an extremely dangerous strategy in order to get those wins.”

Hiyori, reflecting on what had happened, analyzed what had gone down during the last exam. Then, she told me how they had won.

“While I think putting continued pressure on Class B students was fine,

attacking their physical health was clearly a bad move. Even if it's a move we resorted to because there are so many good, virtuous people in Class B, it's not an acceptable one."

I felt exactly the same way Hiyori did. I knew the girl in front of me had led an entirely different life from me. There was no way we could be alike, and yet, I was certain there were some similarities in our thought processes and ideas. Which was precisely why some doubts started to creep into my mind when I heard her speak.

"You knew of this before Ryuuen had employed his strategy. And yet you didn't stop him?" I asked.

"Do you think that he's the kind of person who would listen to my advice?"

I supposed that unlike Ishizaki and Ibuki, Ryuuen might at least have lent an ear to Hiyori. But he probably wouldn't have actually taken her advice. He'd never accept someone else's suggestions—all he would do was sneer at them.

"You've got a point there. In that case, how do you think Ryuuen could be stopped?" I asked.

I wanted to see how far she had thought ahead and how much she had acted. That was the answer I wanted to get out of her. Perhaps Hiyori intuitively understood that, too. Understood the reasons that brought her here today.

"By someone equal... No, rather, by someone *more* capable than him. More than anything else, he would only respond to reprimand from someone who'd caught his interest," said Hiyori.

Ryuuen wouldn't listen to anyone's advice—unless it came from someone Ryuuen acknowledged. Which was precisely why Hiyori was telling *me* about all this.

"Hiyori. Would you mind passing along a message for me?" I asked.

I deliberately chose not to use words that might confirm anything she had asked me about. What I'd already said would be enough. If I were talking to someone else, it might be different, but Hiyori probably wouldn't use her current position to make trouble for me. She understood the significance of

the fact that Ryuuen, who had recognized me as the leader of my class, didn't make my existence public knowledge.

"What is it?" she asked in return. Her face didn't change, but she looked at me kindly.

"Tell Ryuuen that if it were me, I could've easily and safely taken the win in five or more events. Tell him that."

"...Okay, I understand. I've committed the message to memory. I'll make sure to pass it along."

Hiyori smiled, eyes squinting happily, and lightly clasped her hands together as if in gratitude. Ryuuen had himself a good ally, in addition to Ishizaki and Ibuki. If Hiyori could control the tendency the three of them had to run amok, they'd become even more formidable.

And so, we finished our discussion of the year-end exam.

"Well, then..."

Normally, I would've parted ways after getting to this point, but the most important part of our meeting was still to come.

"If you find one that catches your eye, please take it home with you and read it," said Hiyori, once again opening her bag and taking out some books. It was these books that we'd originally planned to meet here today to talk about.

"Is that all right? These books were checked out under your name though, weren't they?"

"I've already gotten permission from the librarian. Although it's really not encouraged, the librarian said everything would be all right as long as the books are returned on time."

Hiyori was probably something of a VIP in the library. It wasn't surprising she was getting special treatment.

We engaged in an animated discussion about books for a while, then finished our drinks and parted ways.

"It seems I need to change my assessment of her a little," I muttered to myself.

Up until now, I'd only thought of Hiyori as another student in my

grade. Or more specifically, as a friend with whom I shared a common interest.

Shortly after parting ways with Hiyori, I met up with Kei, who had come to Keyaki Mall.

“...What do you want?” she asked.

The first words that came out of her mouth were spoken in a harsh tone. She didn’t seem to be in a good mood.

“How about you take a seat first?” I asked in return.

I encouraged her to take the seat that had just been vacated by Hiyori leaving, but she refused, only briefly glancing at the spot. Her face suggested it disgusted her.

“Weird rumors would start going around if people saw us sitting here together,” she replied, staring far into the opposite direction.

If a third-party were observing us right now, even from a good distance, it probably wouldn’t look like Kei and I were talking to one another.

“Would it be a problem if talk like that got around?” I asked.

“Yes, it’d be a big problem. You understand that if you carelessly interact with someone of the opposite sex, word gets around like right away, right? It’s like you don’t get that at all,” said Kei.

It seemed that was exactly what I was doing right now: carelessly interacting with a member of the opposite sex.

“So? What did you want?” she asked.

“Sorry. I completely forgot. When I remember, I’ll contact you.”

I had already taken care of what I needed to do regarding Kei.

“What? Ugh, this is ridiculous... I’m out of here,” she huffed with an exasperated sigh, turning her back to me.

I didn’t try to stop her, but just watched her go. That just worsened her mood, which I supposed was completely understandable. She was in a bad mood because I deliberately made her feel that way.

Chapter 4: Lost Lamb

SPRING BREAK WAS HERE and April was just about to begin. Today was 30th March. I hadn't really done much of anything the past few days, other than spend most of that time in my room and just enjoy my time off. I thought I might be able to just take it easy and welcome the start of the new school year like this, but...

When I woke that morning, just before eight o'clock, I saw that I had a message. The sender was a student from first-year Class B. Ichinose Honami. The message asked if we could meet up somewhere during spring break.

It seemed the remainder of my vacation wasn't going to be passing by so quietly after all.

It sounded like Ichinose was fine with any day and time, but she wanted Horikita to come along too, if at all possible. From that part of the message, I guessed that Horikita was probably the main person she wanted to see, and I was nothing more than a bonus.

I could make a rough guess at what the conversation would be about—our final exam of our first year: the Event Selection Exam. Ichinose was bound to have gathered some information about what happened with our class, but I was betting she wanted to know more about our three wins and four losses against Class A. In addition to that, I was guessing she wanted to talk about becoming second-year students. More specifically about the alliance relationship that my class had with her.

Would that relationship continue? Or would it be dissolved? I'm sure Ichinose wanted to sort that out. Either option seemed equally likely at the moment, but the latter, in particular, was something best discussed thoroughly during our spring break.

"Has Ichinose recovered? Or not?" I asked myself.

I thought about the girl who I hadn't seen even once since spring break had started. I was guessing the results of the year-end exam probably continued to weigh on Ichinose's mind. Two wins and five losses. It was a

crushing defeat for Class B.

Even though my own class had been demoted back down to D, the gap in points between classes was certainly shrinking. It now seemed quite likely that a single special exam would change the ranks of the classes. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Class D and C were now almost neck and neck with Class B. Given the situation, a discussion of what to do from here on out was necessary, sooner or later.

The alliance we'd entered into in the early stages of our first year was by no means a bad thing. If we were to keep this vaguely cooperative relationship into next year, it would lessen the mental burden on us. But we could also see that, in the near future, it was possible that this relationship could come to hinder both classes. And when the time came that the relationship grew strained, we'd probably have to dissolve it by force. And something like that would generally be called "dishonest."

At any rate, to clarify what was happening, both the lower and upper classes would need to come up with policies to direct what they were going to do in the future.

If Horikita knew about Ichinose's approach, then she was probably thinking the same thing I was. This wasn't going to be a simple conversation. It would likely be a major point of divergence for both of our classes, which would predict where we went in the future. Even if Ichinose wasn't in a state where she could think that far ahead, there was a good chance that Horikita would bring it up herself.

What I *could* say right now was that turning down this discussion was not an option. Which left the issue of timing. Today wasn't a problem for me, but I had to wonder about Horikita. According to what her brother had said, he'd be leaving school on the thirty-first. I was sure that, deep down, Horikita wanted to talk to him in the little time that remained. It wouldn't be surprising if they wanted family time, with no one else around, just for today.

As for whether Horikita's brother would allow that, though—and whether Horikita could actually go through with meeting him—that was a different matter. For the time being, I figured I'd send Horikita a text.

While I was at it, I added a note, asking if she'd gotten a chance to actually sit down and talk with her brother. Other than that, I simply told her that Ichinose wanted to meet up.

A few seconds later, I saw that the message had been read. The reply came shortly after.

“I’m fine with whenever.”

That was her response. *Well, okay, no, ‘whenever’ is not fine.* As I commented mentally on the text she’d just sent me, I wondered what kind of response I’d get from her if I set the date for our meeting to be tomorrow, the thirty-first. But I supposed she wouldn’t be pleased to have me deliberately bring up something I knew bothered her. That was clear from the fact that she had completely ignored the subject of her brother in her reply.

“In that case, how about April 2?” I replied.

I took the situation with her brother into consideration, deciding to leave today and tomorrow out of the equation.

“I’m free today.”

Her response back to me was immediate. And it had this intense feeling behind it, like she was telling me to mind my own business. Even if coming right out and saying she honestly wanted to spend time with her brother would’ve been difficult for her, she could’ve simply said she already had plans. Also, even if I told her that I had plans for today, it would probably be hard to convince her that was true.

“Okay. I’d definitely want to get troublesome stuff out of the way quickly.”

It would be tiring to push back against what Horikita wanted right now, so I figured I’d go along with it. Even if it was afternoon by the time our discussion ended, that would still leave plenty of time for her to meet up with her brother.

“...Yeah, that’s probably impossible,” I said to myself.

It seemed unlikely those two were going to meet privately, except for when they planned to say their goodbyes tomorrow.

I sent my reply to Horikita, deciding to commit to meeting with Ichinose today. Afterward, in talking with Ichinose, we settled on a meeting time of ten o’clock, at the café on the second floor of the Keyaki Mall.

4.1

IT MUST HAVE BEEN because April was just around the corner, but the temperature was gradually getting warmer. It was now just after nine-thirty in the morning. Although it was sunny and clear outside right now, the weather forecast called for heavy rain just past noon, so we decided to have our meeting time early in the day and be done by noon.

There was still some time before we were to meet. I casually set out for Keyaki Mall and hit the button for the elevator, passing all kinds of students outside on vacation on the way. Classmates, of course, but second-year students from other classes, too. Even though I didn't know very many people, I figured that if I walked around a bit, I would see someone I knew.

But more and more of the graduates were leaving by the day, and now hardly any of them seemed to be around anymore. Once April first rolled around, only the second- and first-year students would be left. I supposed it was probably going to be rather quiet for a few days.

Just as I thought that, I happened to bump into a girl I knew from my grade level. She was on the elevator that I had just called.

“...You again...” she huffed.

The girl, who addressed me in such a displeased tone and then put some distance between us, was a student of first-year Class D. Ibuki Mio. For some reason, I found myself imagining what Ibuki had been doing during the long break. I was sure she was wondering the same of me.

Anyway, since we were in an elevator together, you could say that we were in a private space.

“We’re on break. It’s not that strange for us to bump into each other now and again, is it?” I told her.

“Well, no, but... I just don’t want to have anything to do with you anymore.”

“I know.”.

It seemed like she hadn’t been too pleased when she came to my room

last time, either. If Ishizaki hadn't forced her to accompany him, she probably wouldn't have come. But even though Ibuki hated me, she'd still come along and helped for Ryuu'en's sake. That alone was proof that she felt that Ryuu'en was an essential part of her class.

I didn't really have the choice of not getting on the elevator, so I got on with Ibuki.

"It's not going to break down again, is it...?"

"Now that you mention it, that did happen before, didn't it?"

It had happened during summer vacation, if I recall. Ibuki and I had gotten stuck in an elevator together. Although we were both wary about it happening again, that was obviously too much of a coincidence. The elevator reached the first-floor lobby and Ibuki immediately got off.

Apparently, she was also heading toward Keyaki Mall.

"You don't mind? Keeping pace with me, I mean."

She could have simply broken into a run if she wanted to get away from me right away.

"Why should I need to do anything different? Why don't *you* just hurry up and start going faster instead?" she snapped.

Although she hated being around me, she apparently couldn't stand the idea of backing down herself. That did seem very much like Ibuki, I supposed. I couldn't help but feel like it had something to do with the power of a competitive spirit, the kind that hated to lose.

That being said, it would be weird for me to run just to get away from her. As far as I was concerned, keeping pace with Ibuki wasn't a problem. More importantly, if I rushed off toward Keyaki Mall, I'd get there too far ahead of schedule. It would just be a waste of energy.

In the end, neither one of us backed down. We continued walking along, keeping a similar place.

My destination was only about five minutes from the dormitory. We would be parting ways soon.

"I'm glad that Ryuu'en came back."

"Ugh, shut up. Just shut up. Don't talk to me."

I wasn't even allowed to make small talk. I supposed that I would hold back from saying anything unnecessary. It didn't seem like silence bothered her, so I decided to keep my mouth shut, like her. We continued to walk alongside each other, me feeling like I was treading on eggshells the whole time.

"Yo, Ibuki! Wait up!" shouted Ishizaki.

"Ugh, *shut up!* Don't shout so loud when you're so close," snapped Ibuki.

"Well, I was only doing that because you weren't respondin' to me. Huh? Wait, you're with Ayanokouji. Wait, don't tell me, are you guys maybe out on a...date?" asked Ishizaki, who had broken into a run to catch up with us.

When Ibuki heard him say those words, she immediately kicked the back of his knee.

"Ow! Hey, what the hell?!"

"You know full well why you got kicked. Besides, it's awkward being around you. Get lost," said Ibuki.

"What? Come on, it's fine, ain't it? I mean, we planned to meet up later anyway," said Ishizaki.

Apparently, they'd made plans to meet up at the Keyaki Mall.

"I'm assuming Ryuuen is going to be there too?" I asked.

"Yeah, he is—I mean, no... Uh..."

After I had casually asked Ishizaki if Ryuuen would be there, he had inadvertently let the answer slip.

"Moron."

It seemed these two had planned to meet up at Keyaki Mall separately, for whatever reason. It wasn't hard to deduce as much, considering how strongly Ishizaki reacted when he heard Ryuuen's name. They must have been planning to meet in secret.

"W-well, whatever, it doesn't matter, does it? There ain't no point trying to hide it from Ayanokouji." Ishizaki got defensive, but Ibuki's expression remained stern.

“It *does* matter. Because in the end, if we don’t defeat him, then we’ll never get to the top,” she Ibuki.

“Well, yeah, I guess you got a point...”

Shouldn’t they be having this kind of conversation when I *wasn’t* around? Although I remained skeptical about Ryuuen’s return, from the looks of things, it seemed pretty likely that it was going to happen. I supposed that the reason they were planning to meet in private was because he hadn’t made his return official yet.

Ryuuen had abdicated his throne before. Obviously, his classmates weren’t going to accept him reclaiming it quite so easily. Ishizaki was faced with a dilemma of his own, as he was the one who’d been given credit for taking Ryuuen down.

While I was organizing my thoughts in my head, Ishizaki called out to me. “Hey, Ayanokouji.”

“Hm?”

“I’ve come up with the ultimate plan to get up to Class A. Wanna be part of it?” he asked.

What he just said was so sudden that I was at a complete loss as to how to respond to him.

“Let me hear it. This ultimate plan of yours.”

“Hell yeah,” he replied, proudly pounding his chest with a *thump*. “Get this. You come over to our class. Then, getting to Class A will be a sure thing, right?”

“Huh? What the hell are you spouting all of a sudden?” asked Ibuki.

“If Ryuuen-san and Ayanokouji join forces, we’d be unbeatable, dude. We’d be able to beat Sakayanagi and Ichinose.”

“No. No. Absolutely not,” said Ibuki, rejecting the idea outright.

So that was the ultimate plan Ishizaki had come up with. Huh. Joining forces with Ryuuen, hm...?

“It’s not a bad idea,” I told them.

“Are you... being serious?” asked Ibuki, looking at me with a look of disgust.

"I know, right? If you say you're gonna join our team, then we'll welcome ya with open arms. I think that you and Ryuu-en-san would actually get along pretty well, surprisingly. And y'know, Albert, he likes you. When you came up in conversation the other day, dude got like *super* excited," said Ishizaki.

This was the first I'd heard of Yamada Albert liking me. Wait. Hold on. Could you really interpret however he felt as actually *liking* me...? We'd hardly even interacted with one another. The only time I could remember doing so was when we met up on the roof that one time. Did he take a liking to people whom he fought with, or something? If anything, I'd imagine he would resent me for it.

"It's not like he said that explicitly though, did he?" Ibuki must have had her doubts too, because she asked Ishizaki about it.

"Dudes can just sense this kind of stuff. It's a hunch. Intuition."

Yeah, that was a really unreliable hunch. If I did take this offer and join Ryuu-en's class, it was possible Albert might try to fight me again. Ishizaki had clearly come up with this idea all alone, and he was the only one who seemed to be getting increasingly excited about it. While I was grateful for his appreciation, I decided to give him a serious answer.

"It's not going to happen. What would you do about the twenty million points necessary for the class transfer? That's the basic requirement."

Even though they had beaten Class B in the year-end exam, there was no way they had saved up that many points.

"Well, y'know. Ryuu-en-san would come up with something," said Ishizaki.

"Yeah, there's no way he'd do anything," said Ibuki.

"You think? I think Ryuu-en-san would lend a hand if Ayanokouji decided to join us."

"I can't imagine he'd lend anything."

I agreed with Ibuki on that point. He wasn't the kind of guy who would entertain such good-natured ideas. He wasn't going to go so far as to join forces with me to get to Class A. His pride as a man wouldn't allow it. Honestly, I didn't *want* him to be the kind of guy who'd allow something like

that, either.

“It’s honestly more fun for me to have you as my enemy than to be your ally. I’m happy to receive the offer, but I’ll have to decline,” I told them.

That point was especially important, even before getting to the problem of having enough Private Points.

“Really? Damn. And I thought it was such a great idea.”

“You really are a weirdo. You think it’s fun being enemies?” said Ibuki with a snort.

She didn’t even turn to look at me once.

“Yeah. I’m looking forward to seeing what you’ll do,” I admitted openly.

When I told her that, Ibuki responded with a show of disgust, acting like she was about to vomit. I didn’t want to draw attention to myself by acting belligerent or anything, but I’d be happy to have a rematch with Ryuuken. However, in order for that to happen, he needed to grow more. He needed to show me that he could win against Horikita, Ichinose, and Sakayanagi.

Shortly afterward, we arrived near Keyaki Mall.

“Sorry, Ayanokouji, gotta go our separate ways here. It’d be a pain in the butt if people saw us hanging with you.”

I parted ways with them near the mall’s main entrance, deciding to enter the building through another route.

Although I didn’t know where they’d be meeting up later, I supposed it didn’t hurt to exchange ideas like we’d just done. It wasn’t like Ishizaki to be so considerate of others, so I was honestly grateful for it. When I first met Ishizaki, I never dreamed that we’d develop the kind of relationship where we could have this much conversation. As for Ibuki, I felt like our relationship had regressed compared to where we stood before, but I supposed that was a kind of development, too.

“A year certainly has passed, huh.”

The environment around me had changed significantly in the past year. I could now have actual conversations with students from other classes, like

Ryuuuen and Sakayanagi, and others, too. Even though only one year had passed, it was still a whole year. It was proof that time didn't stand still. I could grasp the passage of time now, which I couldn't do when I was little.

Speaking of which...that reminded me of this time last year. The time before I started attending the Advanced Nurturing High School, when I was spending my days quietly to avoid letting anyone know I was about to start school. I'd savored that sensation of nothingness. I was especially trying not to provoke...him. That man. Because I knew full well that if I got his attention, he would have stopped me.

I had been saved by a variety of factors. If he had been around me more regularly, he might not have overlooked what I was up to. However, he was a busy man, so he rarely ever came home. Although there were servants posted to keep watch over me, the man himself lived in a hotel for up to seventy or eighty percent of the year.

It wasn't like I was that familiar with the house myself, even though I'd lived there. I'd spent most of my life in the White Room. The house had been nothing more than a temporary abode for less than a year. It was no different from a hotel to me.

"The White Room, huh."

That man hadn't given up yet. If anything, I felt like he was doing everything in his power to resist my efforts. I didn't know what had happened in the past year, but it was safe to assume the White Room had restarted its activities. As long as the White Room needed me, then it was a foregone conclusion that I'd be going back there. I'd be facing that problem in the not-too-distant future, just two years from now.

I hoped I could spend two more years here at this school...but...

It was pointless to think about that right now. Besides, I was currently in a situation I couldn't have even imagined a year ago. And I was certain it would be engraved into my mind as an irreplaceable memory.

I had arrived at our meeting place, near the north entrance of the Keyaki Mall. Normally, the stores opened at ten o'clock in the morning on weekdays, but during long holiday periods, some stores opened earlier at nine. The café on the second floor, where we had planned to meet, was one of those stores.

“This really is the life,” I said to myself.

Doing whatever you pleased. Living the carefree life of a high-school kid. Having conversations with your classmates on your phone and getting together for a little rendezvous. Somehow, these days still felt so unreal. I’d be lying if I said that it wasn’t fulfilling. Of course, life here at this school had its share of troubles, too.

Things had changed a lot from how they were just a few months ago. I had become much more comfortable dealing with the girl who was walking toward me right now. Yeah...I was almost becoming a different person, at least on the surface.

I stopped thinking about that for now and changed over into that other person. For now, I figured I’d focus all my energy on the upcoming conversation.

“You’re here rather early. We still have almost twenty minutes until our meeting. What, do you just have a lot of free time on your hands?” Horikita had, unsurprisingly, arrived clad in casual clothes. She deliberately looked at her phone screen while she greeted me.

“You got here twenty minutes early too. That makes you the same as me, doesn’t it?” I replied.

It was like we were mutually proving to one another that neither of us had any plans for spring break. We made our way toward our destination on the second floor without really engaging in any deep conversation.

“It seems you already understand what we’re talking about today, too,” said Horikita.

She seemed to have concluded as such, considering that I didn’t ask to confirm anything. She was correct, but I thought I’d try to mess with her a little.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You already know, and yet you’re going to try to go through this pointless song and dance?” she shot back.

“No, I don’t understand, at all. What is Ichinose planning to talk to us about?” I had intended to deceive Horikita, who seemed to be suspicious of me, with my insistence, but...

“You really don’t understand? If you do know, and you’re just playing dumb, I am not going to let you off the hook for it. Understand?”

“...Okay, calm down.”

Horikita was glaring at me like she was about to take a bite out of me. I decided I’d stop messing with her right away.

“I can guess what it’ll be about, more or less. It’s not that hard.”

“If it’s not all that difficult for you to do so, then stop trying to mess with me,” she snapped, perfectly understandably so.

I supposed there was no point in trying to get inside Horikita’s head like this.

“Were you testing me? To see how much I understood?” she asked.

“You’re reading way too much into it,” I replied.

“Is that true?” she asked back.

She seemed to be getting sharper. Or rather, I suppose I should say that she was starting to understand my methods. I guessed that superficial tricks wouldn’t work on her anymore.

I decided to back off, since pursuing the matter further would probably result in me suffering injury.

“Well, more importantly... She’s here.”

I could see Ichinose waiting for us by the entrance to the café, so I changed the topic. It was still ten minutes until we were scheduled to meet. It seemed Ichinose had arrived quite early, then.

“Ichinose might have as few plans for the spring break as we do,” I observed.

I couldn’t imagine she’d only just arrived here. How long had she been waiting for us out front, I wondered?

“There’s no way she’s like us. In her case, I’m guessing she’s simply conscientious, or rather, she’s too disciplined to be late. She probably just doesn’t want to make whoever she’s meeting wait,” said Horikita.

She was probably exactly right. “So that’s how you see Ichinose too, then?”

“At first, I thought she was a faker, someone who just acted like they were a good person,” said Horikita. Her words were so shockingly blunt and direct that I almost thought she was exaggerating. “But after this past year, the image I have of her in my mind changed completely. She is a pure, genuinely good-natured person.”

There were many who played the part of good people, but the real deal was quite hard to find. Most people talked shit behind each other’s backs and behaved in a two-faced manner. But there was no doubt that Ichinose was certainly one of those precious few truly good people.

“What kind of life did she have before, I wonder? That led her to becoming such a good person?” said Horikita.

That was the only thing I didn’t have the slightest clue about.

“Being a good person is her strength. But at the same time, it’s also her weakness,” she added, letting out a sigh that seemed to indicate both admiration and concern for Ichinose as we approached.

The more genuinely good someone was, the more bad people would take advantage of them.

“Do you think it’d be better to not be a good person?” I asked.

“If you lived alone in the mountains, surrounded by nature, then it would be fine, sure. But if you want to survive in a competitive society, I think you should abandon the notion of being a completely good person,” said Horikita.

“I see.”

“But in her case, I’m sure that she’ll continue to be a good person, all the way until the end of her days,” said Horikita.

She was saying Ichinose would probably continue to be a good person even if it became a detriment to her.

“Even so, Ichinose knows how to make a distinction between right and wrong, good and bad. I’m sure she’s prepared to do whatever it takes to get her classmates out of harm’s way,” I reasoned.

“If so, then that’s great. Anyway, I think that’s enough of this silly conversation,” said Horikita.

Her expression turned serious as she prepared herself for the discussion to come. We decided to stop our chit-chatting and called out to Ichinose.

“You’re early, Ichinose-san. I hope we haven’t kept you waiting long,” said Horikita.

“Good morning, Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun. Oh, and not at all! I only just got here myself.”

Ichinose welcomed us warmly, with a smile on her face like usual, clad in her personal clothes. I was sure that was just her being polite and giving us a cliché greeting, though. I had to wonder when she’d really arrived here.

“I guess it’ll probably be pretty easy to find a seat first thing in the morning,” I reasoned.

It seemed like students were still few and far between here, so we were able to sit just about anywhere.

“Come on, order whatever you like. It’ll be my treat,” said Ichinose, lightly thumping her chest with her fist, with a *whump*, telling us that she’d take care of paying.

“That’s not... meant to be a bargaining chip, that you can use in our discussion, is it?” asked Horikita.

Horikita had momentarily put her guard up, since she herself had served a home-cooked meal to a certain someone to try to take advantage of the situation in the past.

“She’s not you. She wouldn’t do that,” I answered.

“I really don’t like the way you said that, but... You’ve got a point,” replied Horikita.

Just as Horikita herself had stated earlier, the person we were meeting with was none other than Ichinose. I couldn’t imagine her doing something like that to put us in her debt. Even if she did try something like that, I was sure Horikita would find a way to regain control of the situation.

“Well, I suppose we’ll take you up on your kind offer, if you’re okay with it,” said Horikita.

“Of course! Please, go ahead. You can order first, Horikita-san.”

Since Ichinose had urged her to do so, Horikita decided to go ahead

and put in her order first. There was one thing I was worried about though, so I got in close and spoke to Ichinose in a quiet whisper. I could faintly detect the smell of citrus again today.

“Ichinose, is this going to be okay though? I mean, with your Private Points?” I asked.

Although I was grateful for her offer to treat us, she should have zero points right now, since she’d stopped one of her classmates from Class B from getting expelled. She probably felt like she should pay because she was the one who’d invited us to meet, but I was worried about her financial situation.

“Oh, it’s okay. Even after covering these, I should have about three thousand points left. It’s all right,” she answered.

April was just around the corner. I supposed if she had that much left, then she wouldn’t have any trouble getting through until then. However, I was sure she should have been down to zero Private Points. Perhaps Ichinose had sensed my doubts, because she spoke up once again.

“I got it with my hairdryer. I sold it to Nishikawa-san from Class A, to get some money. I thought it was the only way I could make it through March. The other girls have been toughing it out too, doing similar things to make it through,” said Ichinose.

Although there were systems in place to let you survive without any money, there were cases where you needed cash on hand. If someone was willing to sell an item for a cheaper price than what it was going for in stores, then it was possible to successfully negotiate a deal.

“So, you really don’t need to be modest, Ayanokouji-kun. Please, go ahead and order,” said Ichinose, gently pushing me forward as she spoke.

It was certainly true that she wouldn’t be too happy if I was the only one who didn’t take her up on her generous offer. After Horikita had finished placing her order, I went up and ordered a coffee. Then, we picked up our orders, and took our seats at a table in the corner of the café.

I wanted to get this going quickly, while there were still only a few students around, and assumed Ichinose and Horikita would be thinking the same thing. Horikita launched into our discussion almost as soon as we sat down.

“So, I was wondering if you called us here to talk about the exam. Or, perhaps, about what our policies will be starting in April?”

It seemed she’d correctly predicted what Ichinose was going to talk about without needing to discuss anything with me beforehand.

“*A ha ha!* Guess you saw right through me. You’re absolutely right,” replied Ichinose, admitting to it with a laugh.

Even though she laughed, she still had a serious look in her eyes—proof that she understood this discussion wasn’t in the least bit frivolous.

“Was it a bother that I called you out to talk?” she asked.

“Not at all. I thought this discussion needed to happen soon, too, so it was nice that you reached out, Ichinose-san. You’re quite a popular person too, so I imagined it would’ve been hard to get plans put together,” said Horikita.

“Oh no, not at all. I’ve actually been pretty free for spring break. You can call me anytime,” said Ichinose, answering with a pleasant smile.

It looked as though there was a hint of painful sadness in her smile, though. I was guessing something had happened, like she had gotten an invitation but turned it down. Of course, Horikita could guess what that might be.

“It seems you really had a difficult time with the final exam,” I told her.

That might have not been an appropriate way to start a conversation, but I decided to bring it up anyway. Even if we tried to have this discussion in a roundabout way to avoid opening up those wounds, sooner or later, we’d have to tackle the topic. It was better to get to it right away and deal with some pain at the start, so that she could heal quicker.

Perhaps Horikita had planned to delay bringing that topic up for a little while, because a strained expression flashed on her face for just a moment. Even so, she sensed what I was doing by bringing it up, and her expression changed.

“Well, yeah. I completely lost. I feel like I was totally overwhelmed by Ryuuen-kun’s strategy,” said Ichinose, affirming what I had said earlier. She shook her head side-to-side and let out a deep sigh as she spoke, as if she

were recalling what had happened. She then sighed again, sounding depressed and clearly frustrated.

“I still don’t know the details. What caused you to lose?” asked Horikita.

“The cause is clear. It’s because I’m no good,” said Ichinose.

She didn’t say it was because of the opposing commander she’d faced, nor did she blame her classmates. She answered Horikita’s question without any hesitation, putting all of the blame solely on herself, the commander.

“Although we didn’t watch your exam directly, it’s hard to imagine you making any big mistakes or anything,” said Horikita.

“You’re giving me way too much credit. To be honest, it felt like I was in a panic the whole time...” said Ichinose.

Horikita tried to compliment Ichinose, but she humbly rejected it. To tell the truth, I believed that she’d been in a panic. I’d seen how flustered she’d been from the moment that Ryuuen arrived. I was guessing that meant he’d dragged out that feeling of shock all through the whole exam.

“We had assumed that Kaneda-kun was going to be their commander. But then he wasn’t. That first upset threw us completely off our game,” said Ichinose.

“That’s completely understandable, though. Ryuuen-kun had previously withdrawn from his position as leader of his class. And besides, there was no way that a student without a Protection Point would have become the commander. I’m sure that’s what everyone thought. Ryuuen-kun was the exception,” said Horikita.

That was absolutely right. Neither Sakayanagi nor I had thought Ryuuen would show up like he did. It would be completely unreasonable to expect Ichinose, as Ryuuen’s opponent, to not be surprised. If Ryuuen had lost, he would’ve been expelled. No one other than him could put his life on the line and fight such a desperate battle.

“There’s no changing the fact that the fault is mine. I was unable to pull myself together throughout the whole test, until the very end,” said Ichinose.

Just when she thought she’d be facing off against Kaneda, Ryuuen

appeared. Even though it wasn't my business, the whole situation made me feel sorry for Ichinose. The commander was limited in what they could do. But since the commanders were free to talk during the exam, I'm sure that Ryuuen had completely driven Ichinose into a corner with his words.

"I heard that you and the rest of your class put up a great fight against Class A, Ayanokouji-kun," said Ichinose, offering us words of praise, turning the conversation around.

If there were any problems that might arise from this change in topic, it was that I'd told Ichinose I had wanted to fight Class A. Horikita didn't know about this fact. She'd instructed me to go up against Class D. But I'd lost the drawing, and never had the chance to choose Class D as our opponent. Depending on how this conversation progressed, inconsistencies could pop up and things could get a little tricky for me.

You might think it would have been a good idea for me to meet Ichinose and discuss this beforehand, but the problem was that I'd told Ichinose it was actually *Horikita* who wanted to fight Class A. Ichinose thought Horikita had ordered me to choose Class A as our opponent. Horikita thought we'd lost the drawing and had no choice but to fight Class A.

Both Ichinose and Horikita were at a point where neither of them were aware of the truth. I supposed there was no reason I couldn't forcibly guide the conversation forward in a way that kept them from becoming aware of it. Ordinarily, the old me would have definitely laid the necessary groundwork beforehand. Or, as an emergency stopgap measure, take steps now to prevent them from finding out.

After careful consideration, I decided to deliberately expose myself to Horikita. It was the reason why I hadn't taken action up until that moment. To ascertain just how much Horikita had grown.

"A loss is a loss. I even went to all the trouble of asking you to give up your right to choose Class A as your opponent so we could fight them, instead. I think if Class B had gone up against Class A, the results might have been different," I replied.

After hearing me make that off-handed comment, Horikita turned her gaze over at me, just for a moment. Of course, I didn't need to wonder about the meaning behind that gaze. The look she gave me said, "*What do you mean, so we could fight Class A?*"

But after considering smoothly I'd slid it into our conversation, Horikita decided to let it slide for the moment. The momentary glance she shot me was so natural and so brief that not even Ichinose would harbor any doubts about it. It proved she understood, from the moment she heard me speak, that the topic was not to be broached right now.

The old Horikita would've said, out loud, "What are you talking about?" And in doing so, she would've made Ichinose feel suspicious. Even if things didn't go that far, it would've planted a seed in Ichinose's mind and made her feel like something was off. Horikita's abilities of comprehension and judgment had improved considerably...though perhaps it was more that they'd become clearer to see.

Thanks to Horikita keeping quiet here, the only truth Ichinose was left with was that this was something that Horikita had decided, after all. It also made my presence less visible to the other classes.

"As a result of my request, you and your class had to fight an uphill battle, Ichinose-san." Horikita apologized to Ichinose, falling in sync with my forceful pace.

"This is my responsibility. This isn't something you should apologize for, Horikita-san," said Ichinose.

It was easy to see that it had been a bad matchup for Class B. As a result of their battle with Class D, Class B had ended up with two wins and five losses. More importantly, it had led to Class B losing a lot of Class Points all in one fell swoop.

"Besides, these are all what-ifs, anyway. At the end of the day, it was Kaneda-kun from Class D who won the drawing and then chose Class B as his opponent. So it's not a problem," added Ichinose.

That was certainly true. At least, that was what you might conclude if you were only looking at the results. Even without laying groundwork ahead of time, the battle between Class B and Class D was unavoidable.

"Don't worry yourself about this, Horikita-san. I... I should have thought hard and come up with a better, more solid strategy to win. That's something I'm reflecting on quite a bit," said Ichinose.

While that was a proactive statement, the extent to which things could or would change was a different matter.

“If it’s all right with you, may I ask what kinds of battle strategies you used and in what events? Of course, I’ll tell you all about how things went for us, in exchange,” said Horikita.

Horikita must have heard about what happened to Class B, even if only rumors and hearsay. But the exact nature of what happened between commanders was something that only the people in question could know.

Ichinose responded to Horikita’s proposal with a nod.

Which events she and the rest of her class had chosen. Which events Ryuuen and his class had chosen. Which events were finally chosen and in what order, the traps Ryuuen had laid, where they won and where they lost. Ichinose told us everything in detail, holding nothing back. She even included the reasons why they lost.

Ryuuen’s class had adopted a brutal knockout competition style system in their selections, with all of their events being focused on martial arts. Quite a lethal line-up of events for Class B.

“Well, I suppose you could certainly say they made use of a strategy that played to their strengths,” said Horikita.

“We probably wouldn’t have stood a chance against them either,” I added.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right... For the boys, we at least have Sudou-kun. He’s the only one we could count on to win. Well, actually, no. I suppose there’s no guarantee he would win against Yamada-kun,” reasoned Horikita.

If Kouenji took things seriously, he would be a contender. But I didn’t expect Horikita to bring that. As for the girls in our class, it was doubtful that any of them, aside from Horikita, could go very far in such a competition.

“With Ryuuen-kun’s fighting style, he might have even won against Class A,” said Horikita.

“Yeah, I agree with you there,” I replied.

It had all come down to luck. If fortune skewed even a little bit in Ryuuen’s favor, there was a chance he could win against any class. Still, overall, he saw his highest win rate when he was up against Class B. That was proof that he’d had his eyes set on Class B from the very beginning.

“But wait, what was the reason you ended up with only two wins, even though many of the events during the test were ones chosen by Class B?” asked Horikita.

Ryuuен’s strategy was indeed a force to be reckoned with, but Class B had been lucky in the events drawing. Ichinose should have stood a certain chance of winning, given the fact that four of the events that were selected were events from Class B.

“...Okay,” said Ichinose.

Horikita still didn’t know anything about what had really happened. I naturally didn’t, either. So, we listened to her intently, without prior assumptions.

What happened was part of the strategy that Ryuuен had enacted. Ichinose told us about that strategy—how Ryuuен and the students of Class D didn’t do anything directly to Class B students, but instead, continued to stalk them and inflict mental and emotional anguish. They’d forcefully get in students’ faces, put pressure on them. And on the day of the exam, several students from Class B suddenly fell ill and were unable to demonstrate their full potential.

After she had finished telling us everything that had happened, Ichinose added one more thing.

“I dropped the ball during the event that I specialized in, that I had chosen myself. I wasn’t able to adapt to the situation. That’s my failure as commander,” she said, making it very clear that this wasn’t Ryuuен’s fault. It was her own.

“Multiple people experiencing stomach pains, and students suffering from mental and emotional anguish. That must mean...” Naturally, Horikita also understood that what had happened was part of Ryuuен’s plans.

“I think that it was a trap laid by Ryuuен-kun, without a doubt. When I interviewed some of my classmates who’d fallen ill, they told me they had bumped into Ishizaki-kun and some other people at karaoke, before the exam,” said Ichinose.

Karaoke, huh. That was one of the few places where students weren’t monitored. So, they must have done something there—administered something to the Class B students. That was an extremely risky move.

“Shouldn’t you report this issue to the school? It couldn’t hurt to make an appeal,” said Horikita.

A week had passed since the test ended. Of course, the students’ food or drink would have already been disposed of. Even if you could find evidence that they’d purchased medicine at the pharmacy, it was a moot point. There’d just be endless argument over whether or not they had really given the medicine to the Class B students.

“Raising the issue isn’t a bad thing. Even if nothing comes of it this time around, it could serve as a deterrent for next time. If they continue doing such reckless things, the school will naturally judge them more harshly,” reasoned Horikita.

If the school found out it was true that Class D did those things, it would be a serious matter. They’d likely put measures in place to prevent it happening again.

“You’re probably right. But in any case, I’m not planning on reporting anything that happened this time.” Ichinose turned down Horikita’s suggestion. It had been a week since the exam had ended, and I was sure her classmates had repeatedly appealed to her during that time, asking her to say something. But even so, she hadn’t done anything.

Well, that was no wonder, I supposed.

“Why? Are you just going to roll over and take it? This is a serious matter. If Ryuuken made a single error, even just one tiny slip-up—and you reported it—it could end up completely overturning the results of the exam,” said Horikita.

She was saying there was no way to be sure no evidence could be found. Depending on how things played out, Ryuuken and the other Class D students might get hit with suspension, or worse. The more time that passed, the harder it would be to make that appeal to the school.

“If you’d like, I will assist you,” added Horikita.

If Horikita were in Ichinose’s shoes, she definitely wouldn’t take this injustice lying down. Which was precisely why she was making such a forceful offer right now.

“Thank you, Horikita-san. But I don’t think I can appeal to the school.

There's no hard evidence at this point, and besides...I want this issue to serve as a powerful lesson." Despite Horikita's efforts to persuade her, Ichinose rejected the offer.

"A lesson? What do you mean?" asked Horikita.

"I think that I'm lucky," said Ichinose.

Ichinose had looked down in the dumps moments ago. But now, a slight spark had returned to her eyes. Like a damaged engine desperately struggling to start back up.

"If something like this happened at the end of our second year, or during a critical time in our third, then I have no idea how much trouble I'd be in. But since it happened now, I think I'll be okay."

Ichinose nodded after saying that. Her eyes held a kind of strength as she looked at Horikita and me.

I was probably the only one who understood her brilliance in that moment.

"Our entire class is taking this defeat very seriously. And we've decided we're going to make good use of this experience for what comes next," said Ichinose.

"I see. In that case, I suppose there's no need for me, as someone from another class, to say anything else," said Horikita.

"Guess so," I added.

With that, the Class B vs. Class D discussion came to an end for the time being. We'd heard about the details of what happened during the test for Ichinose and Ryuuken. Horikita asked me a question with her eyes. *You were the commander. Are you going to talk about that?* That was what she had wanted to confirm.

And I, as commander, reported the results of our exam and events we'd had in the same way that Ichinose did. Everything I said was entirely bland, unremarkable, and matter-of-fact, though. What events were chosen? What kinds of strategies did we rely on? How did we lose? Of course, I didn't mention anything unnecessary, like the fact that I'd had answered the final question on the Flash Mental Arithmetic event.

"I had already heard the results of your exam, but I still have to say,

you fought extremely well," said Ichinose.

"Still, of the seven events in the exam, we couldn't hold our own against Sakayanagi in chess," said Horikita. "And so we lost."

It was just one game. As long as we said it was simply an event that we felt confident about, no one would think to probe further. More importantly, the fact that we'd lost against Sakayanagi, of all people, was enough to make anyone accept our loss as understandable.

"The only good thing about this... Well, I'm not so sure that you could really call it a *good* thing per se, but the fact that we only lost thirty points is a relief. We can't afford to let the upper classes get any further away from us," said Horikita.

"You and your class have been steadily building up your strength, Horikita-san. We can't let our guard down." Ichinose genuinely praised Horikita and our class, clearly anticipating that we would become rivals in the near future.

"That's right. Our class is getting stronger," said Horikita.

After seeing the confidence in Horikita's eyes and hearing the confidence in her words, Ichinose nodded gently.

"There's something I wanted to tell you today as well, regarding another talking point in our discussion, if that's all right," said Horikita.

"Of course," said Ichinose.

The second half of the discussion started here. The *real* discussion. It wasn't Ichinose who launched into this, but Horikita.

"To be frank, I would like to dissolve our partnership from the next year onward," said Horikita.

Horikita's proposal was unexpected, but not to Ichinose, apparently. She seemed to have been prepared for it.

"I had a feeling you were probably going to suggest that," said Ichinose.

"We lost against Class A in the final exam of our first year, and we've been demoted back down to Class D. If you look solely at the class rankings, it seems like we've lost. But in reality, we haven't. If anything, I think that

we've closed the gap," said Horikita.

"That's true. Considering the fact you'd once been down to zero points, that means your class gained the most Class Points over the year, Horikita-san. And on top of that, you only narrowly lost against Class A in that exam, with three wins and four losses," said Ichinose.

It was easy to understand if you just did the math, but it looked like Ichinose was also aware of the truth. There was only a small difference in the numerical results. It wouldn't have been strange for the match-up to have gone either way. Although Tsukishiro's meddling had been a deciding factor in what happened, you could say that there was still a good chance we could've won.

"Even so, there's no way we can maintain a successful relationship?" Ichinose didn't readily agree to dissolve the partnership. "For example, could we perhaps hold for now, and discuss this again once the gap in Class Points has narrowed further?"

"I'm very appreciative of the offer. However, I don't think we should continue this cooperative relationship any longer," said Horikita.

There were two necessary conditions for this relationship to be established and maintained. The first was that the gap in Class Points be wide enough to be difficult for us to bridge on our own. And the other was the higher-level class in the relationship must be in a stable position.

In May of last year, there had been a gap of six hundred and fifty points, and Class B's point totals had been stable thus far. That was precisely why it made sense for our class, which was struggling at the time, to involve itself with Class B. But the situation was different now. Our class had gained over three hundred points throughout the year, whereas Class B had ended up losing points near the end. The gap was closing significantly. Which meant that neither of those two aforementioned conditions were being met.

"I would like to make it our definite goal to reach Class B or higher next year. And in order to overtake Class A, I plan to get us within the range of points we need," said Horikita.

Ichinose seemed visibly shaken to hear Horikita announce such firm goals.

"...I see. That makes sense."

What Horikita had just said meant that she intended to defeat Class B, which was led by Ichinose, the person right in front of us right now. Of course we couldn't really have an alliance if that was to be the case. Horikita had refused to continue our partnership, having concluded that a half-hearted relationship would be a complete hindrance to her goals.

"I trust you have no objections, Ayanokouji-kun," said Horikita.

"That's right. I'll follow your lead, of course. That's the correct call, if you want to get to Class A," I replied, nodding in response to Horikita's question.

The decision she was making here wasn't wrong.

Ichinose briefly closed her eyes and then took a deep breath.

"I am quite grateful to you, Ichinose-san, for offering to help us and offering us this partnership when we had no way to save ourselves. However...even if you resent me for this, from this point onward, we will be enemies," said Horikita.

Ichinose listened to Horikita's firm decision with quiet acceptance.

"I would never resent you for that. Besides, we were originally enemies from the beginning. We just happened to make a temporary truce, is all. I am extremely grateful to you, as well," she said.

Ichinose slowly opened her eyes once more. There wasn't a hint of hatred in her gaze when she looked at Horikita and me.

"I suppose we'll be real enemies from our second year here," she said.

"Yes," replied Horikita.

Ichinose offered her hand to us. Horikita took it and shook it firmly.

I was sure Horikita had been running some calculations in her mind. About what Class B's strengths and weaknesses were. About how we could defeat them. I was also sure that, similarly, Ichinose could see things about us. Like the strength our class possessed.

How would we deal with each other? That was something we needed to think about. And so, our short conversation came to an end with that handshake. Starting in April, a full-blown battle with Class B would begin.

4.2

WE HAD FINISHED our meeting and parted ways, but Ichinose decided to stay at the café for a little while longer. With the defeat she'd suffered and the dissolution of our partnership, I was sure there were a lot of things she wanted to think about right now.

Deciding to head back to the dorms, I reached the stairs, and made my way down.

“Wait a minute.”

While I was on my way back from the café in Keyaki Mall, Horikita called out to me, stopping me in my tracks. I was about to turn around, but she said something else.

“Don’t turn around to look at me. There’s something I want to ask you, and I want you to keep your back to me while you answer.”

That was what she asked of me. In consideration of how serious she sounded, I decided not to turn around, a signal that I was agreeing to her request.

“What’s this all about, all of a sudden?”

“What do you mean, all of a sudden? I think you owe me an apology. Hm?” she replied, her anger-filled voice hitting me in the back.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” I replied.

I tried to play innocent. But Horikita cut straight to the heart of the matter without any hesitation.

“So you talked things over with Ichinose-san from Class B ahead of time, so that you could fight with Class A, huh?” she asked.

“Oh, that,” I answered.

“If I hadn’t supported your story, then that would’ve been trouble for you, wouldn’t it?” she asked.

“But you did support it, without issue.”

“That’s... I thought it would be a headache if I said otherwise. Can you

explain what that was all about to me?”

“Ichinose already said it herself, didn’t she? Kaneda won the drawing and he picked Class B as his opponent. Which means that no matter what kind of shady things I did behind the scenes, the results were the same.”

“What I’m asking is why you decided to fight Class A without my permission?”

“Because I decided that would give us our highest chances of winning,” I told her.

“But don’t you think that in all likelihood, we would’ve stood a better chance if we fought against Class C? Against Kaneda-kun and Ryuuuen-kun?” asked Horikita.

“Chances were high that we would’ve gotten overwhelmed, just like what happened with Class B. You and Sudou are the ones who could have really held their own,” I argued.

“That argument is based on hindsight, knowing what you know now. At the time, Class D should have been the logical choice of opponent,” said Horikita.

I could tell from the sound of her voice that she’d taken a step toward me. Even so, she didn’t close the distance between us significantly.

“Am I wrong in what I’m saying?” she asked.

“No, not at all. It’s true that fighting Class A posed the greatest drawbacks. I can’t deny that.”

“I’ll put aside the matter of you ignoring my warnings. Why did you choose Class A?” she asked.

Even though she understood that it was a decision I’d made entirely on my own, I supposed it was that point in particular that she couldn’t figure out.

“Why do you think? Do you understand why I laid the groundwork for that to happen?” I asked.

I thought I’d try throwing the question back at her...though it was a question she probably couldn’t answer. Only someone who knew about the relationship between Sakayanagi and me, and the significance of the White Room, could answer it.

“Based on what I know...I would infer my answer from what you just said about having the highest chance of winning. In that case, why would you exclude Class B and Class D as candidates? Well, I suppose we can rule out Class B without any issues,” said Horikita.

Although we hadn’t expressly planned anything to that effect, we still had an alliance with Class B at the time. It was unsurprising to conclude that the chances of Ichinose breaking our agreement and fighting us were low.

“The problem is Class D. Normally, they would have been the obvious choice as our opponent. We shouldn’t have hesitated to pick them... But in reality, Class B lost badly against them this time. All because Ryuuen-kun’s bizarre plan had ensnared them so well. There’s no way to tell how we would have done against them if we were put in the same situation,” said Horikita.

We couldn’t exclude the possibility that we would have been evenly matched, or even at a disadvantage.

“Everyone thought that Class D would have been a simple opponent for us to handle. Which was precisely why you felt like there was something off,” she reasoned.

Of course, that was probably the best guess she could come up with, based on what she could deduce.

“Did you foresee that Ryuuen-kun would come back? And what events he was going to choose?” asked Horikita.

“Maybe. So I decided to use Class B as a sacrifice, because of that,” I replied.

“Even if what you’re saying is true, you should have discussed it with me,” said Horikita.

“I suppose so.”

I listened to what she said without denying anything. That wasn’t a good reason for me to have acted alone.

“But...is that *really* the reason?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked in return.

“In the In-Class Voting exam, you got a lot of votes from Class A, and you got first place. And then you got a Protection Point. Was that really just a

simple coincidence? It's almost as if...you and Sakayanagi-san conspired together beforehand..." said Horikita.

What she was talking about right now was just a simple coincidence. Still, she *was* beginning to notice the relationship that Sakayanagi and I had, and some of what was happening in the background.

"No... I suppose that's just absurd. More importantly, there isn't a shred of evidence supporting any of it. Forget I said anything," said Horikita, withdrawing her previous statement. "I'd like to hear your thoughts again. As of this moment, you plan to move up to Class A, right?"

"I just said that earlier," I replied.

"Yes. But I don't know if you really meant it or not. As far as I can tell, you've been extremely indifferent to the idea of ascending to the upper-level classes ever since school started," said Horikita.

"People grow. It's just like how you have. You've grown so much that I feel like I was mistaken about my impression of you when you first started school here," I replied.

In fact, I *had* started to begin entertaining the idea of aiming for the higher-level classes. But I supposed that it was understandable that Horikita would doubt me and think she couldn't trust me. Especially because I hadn't exactly been cooperative so far. It wouldn't be a surprise if she considered me unsettling.

"That's right. People do grow... And viewpoints change, too."

Though possibly still dissatisfied, Horikita seemed to forcibly convince herself to believe what I said. However, our talk didn't seem like it was going to end there.

"Our class has grown. There is a definite sense that we're getting stronger. However, that still isn't enough. Your help is absolutely vital in order to reach Class A," said Horikita.

"Meaning?" I asked.

"Up until now, you've been cutting corners and putting in minimal effort in both academics and physical activities. It's certainly true that if your performance is average, you aren't dragging the class down. But it doesn't mean you're contributing, either," said Horikita.

That was painfully true. In terms of actually, visibly contributing to the class, I'd hardly done anything.

"I wonder if you can release yourself from those restrictions for me? I want you to fully commit yourself to whatever you do, in the days that come. That will prove you have the will to move up to Class A," said Horikita.

What she said wasn't a threat. Nor was it a request. She was simply saying things to see my reaction. Of course, the fact that she'd make such barbed comments just amused me.

"I refuse," I replied.

"I knew it," said Horikita.

Rather than looking exasperated, she let out a snort, as if she'd known that was how I'd respond.

"You're all talk. You don't have any intention of helping us get to Class A or anything," said Horikita.

"At the very least, not at present, no," I shot back, in some verbal tit-for-tat.

"...Huh? At present?" she asked.

She'd thought that she'd never be able to get me to cooperate. But now I was willing to make some compromises.

"Keep in mind that a year's worth of activity has led to this point. I've been this way for that whole year. If I suddenly start going all out after spring break, forget about our classmates—everyone in our grade, no, everyone in the *school* would start talking. I want to avoid that happening as much as possible," I told her.

"I will acknowledge that you are an excellent student, but you seem to have quite a high opinion of yourself. If we were to focus just on academics alone, there's Yukimura-kun and I just in your class. In other classes, there's Ichinose-san and Sakayanagi-san. And I'm sure there are many other students out there whose names could be added to that list of top-scorers, aren't there? I'm not so sure you can stand toe-to-toe with them."

Horikita dismissed this out of hand, suggesting it wasn't like I could be counted with those students.

“Although I suppose it’s certainly true that if there’s suddenly this big gap between how you were then and how you are now, it’ll make you conspicuous for a time,” she added. “But if you end up settling in the top ten to twenty percent of our grade, I’m sure you’ll quickly be accepted as one of the top-tier students. It’s not uncommon for students to see their grades improve dramatically in a short period of time.”

Apparently, that was the conclusion she’d arrived at after giving it some thought. If her statements were accurate, then that certainly might be the end of this discussion. If they weren’t, however, this was not over.

“Sorry, Horikita. But right now, I don’t think there’s anyone in our year who’s on my level,” I told her.

Excluding the students who still had room to grow and those who were too lacking in seriousness to demonstrate their real ability, of course.

“...Wow. I’m honestly dumbfounded by the size of your ego,” snapped Horikita, not believing what I had just told her. “Just because my brother had his eye on you doesn’t prove anything. You haven’t once clearly shown me just how incredible you are.”

“What you’ve seen from me so far wasn’t enough then?” I asked.

“Do you have any proof that you’re the best at academics? No, wait—proof that you’re the best in *anything*, even outside of academics? You need to be good enough to win no matter what for me to accept such a grandiose claim. It was just one event, sure, but you did lose in that chess game against Sakayanagi-san. I will admit that you were both playing at an unbelievably high level, but a loss is still a loss. How can you possibly say no one in our grade level is a match for you?” said Horikita.

“You’re free to see things however you want, Horikita. What I said earlier might very well be a simple bluff.”

“And in the end, you just run away. You’re just an insincere liar.”

“In that case, will it make you happy if you just stick me with that label and call it a day?”

When I asked her that question in return, she fell silent. If letting off some steam and calling me that satisfied her, the conversation would simply come to an end right here.

I decided to move to take a step forward, acting like I was about to descend the stairs.

“...Let me test you,” said Horikita in a forceful tone.

“Test what?” I asked.

“Your true abilities. Although I understand to some extent that you are intelligent and quite physically skilled, I can’t get a full read on you. It’s like grasping at air. Your abilities remain entirely unclear.”

Was she saying she wanted to evaluate me based on her own metrics?

“I want to know if your abilities are worth hiding,” she added.

“Are you confident that you can measure my abilities accurately?” I asked.

“I’m confident that I can get a higher score than you on a written exam. And I’m also confident that I can win against you in a fight, if I seriously throw down,” said Horikita.

It was certainly true that over the past year, Horikita had always scored higher than I did on tests. I could also understand why she’d say the last part, even though men held an advantage in speed and muscle strength. If you factored in technique, she would hold the edge if we fought. In fact, Horikita had even put up a good fight against Ibuki, when she was feeling physically unwell.

On top of that, she’d seen me and her brother have our little fight shortly after starting school. Based on what she’d seen, she felt confident that she could beat me.

“In that case how are you going to test me?” I asked.

“There are countless ways we could do this. We could compete by taking a written test in your room,” said Horikita.

She had told me not to turn around because she wanted to avoid using anything other than our words and our voices to bargain with me. You could read a lot of emotions just through eye contact. She had determined that was a disadvantageous position to be in. The one thing she didn’t want was to play mind games with me, so she was wary.

“I’m fine with that, but this is all so one-sided. I don’t gain anything

from this," I told her.

"Is this really an issue of loss or gain? You've been hiding your true abilities, and you've been dangling that secret right in front of my face. If you don't accept my challenge right here and now, I could force your secret out and expose you, thus dragging you out into the open, couldn't I? After all, you've been getting *quite* a lot of attention lately. You can't weasel your way out of everything, can you?" said Horikita.

As a threat, that was weak. Horikita would never expose me if she thought it would be a detriment to her in the future. However, considering her growth, this might be a good place for me to compromise.

While I carefully considered what to say in response, Horikita waited quietly for my answer.

"In that case, how about this? We'll pick one subject on the next written exam that comes our way sometime in April or later, and we'll compete to see who gets the highest score in just that subject. That way, even if I do get one hundred points, I could just pass it off by saying that I studied desperately hard for just that one subject," I told her.

If I didn't get high scores in the other subjects, it would be a perfectly good excuse, most likely.

"That's a somewhat poor way of measuring your abilities, but... Anyway, is it all right to compete in a formal setting like that?" she asked in return.

"Well, I'll have to think about what might happen if I lose to you, just in case. If you're going to have me get high scores in all subjects in the future, I want to make sure I lay the necessary groundwork first," I told her.

"Fine. I accept your proposal. But how are we going to decide upon which subject to compete against each other in?"

"You're free to pick whatever you want, of course. I'll let you pick the time too, obviously. Also, I'm fine with you only telling me what subject we'll be competing in on the day of the exam, right before the test begins," I told her.

"I see... For you to win this without any prior notice of the subject would mean at minimum that you'd be required to study all subjects equally

on a regular basis, every day. This lets me gauge your overall abilities to a certain extent, even if we're focusing on just one subject," said Horikita.

I was sure this would go some way toward convincing her.

"If I win, I will conclude that your abilities aren't all that significant. Then, from that point onward, I'll be expecting you to tackle every issue we come up against to the best of your ability. Is that all right?" asked Horikita.

"Sure. But if I win, I want you to do one favor for me," I told her.

"All right. I suppose it would be unfair if this arrangement were one-sided. What favor?"

"Don't know. I'll think of something."

"...Now that's just sneaky. If I agree to your terms for this contest, it would mean I'd have to deal with some potentially absurd demand from you if I lose," said Horikita.

"Are you already worried about what's going to happen when you lose? I thought you'd be much more confident about this."

"I can't believe you..." she huffed.

"You don't have to force yourself into doing this. If you're not feeling confident, we can just scrap this whole contest idea altogether," I replied.

Telling her that, though, only ensured Horikita could no longer back down.

"Fine. If I lose, then I'll do whatever you ask, no matter what it is. That's fine."

"All right. It's settled, then."

And so, Horikita and I had made our decision to compete with each other on the very next written exam that came our way, sometime in April or later.

Horikita walked forward and stood next to me. Then she continued walking, descending the stairs.

"I'm looking forward to this. To directly doing battle with you."

Of course, I was sure she'd exhaust all possible means to prepare for this exam. As for me...I supposed I'd just do things like I always did.

I watched Horikita, firm in her determination, walk away. As I stood there, she gradually disappeared from view.

“Now then, what should I do next?” I wondered aloud.

At first, I’d meant to head straight back to my dorm room. But I had changed my mind. I was a little worried about how Ichinose was doing. Even though she told us to go on ahead, I had to wonder what she was thinking about now, all by herself.

Just as I thought that, though, I noticed a certain guy looking at me. It didn’t seem our eyes had met simply by chance. I descended the stairs, almost as if I were being beckoned by his gaze.

4.3

JUST AFTER ELEVEN-THIRTY that same morning, two guys stood talking in the men's restroom on the second floor of Keyaki Mall. One of them was the leader who'd stepped down from his throne, only to later re-emerge, taking to the stage once more. Ryuuen Kakeru. The other was Hashimoto Masayoshi, a student from Class A, which had managed to maintain their position all throughout the first year.

They hadn't met up by accident. Hashimoto had contacted Ryuuen and specifically chosen this location for not having many people around.

"So? What kind of devious scheme are you gonna tell me all about, since you've called me all the way out here?" asked Ryuuen.

"Come on man, devious schemes? That just makes me sound disreputable. I thought we could just recap our first year of school, is all," said Hashimoto, acting like he was trying to wheedle something out of Ryuuen.

Ryuuen didn't dislike guys who always had that sort of vibe about them, like they were evasive or shifty. However, he didn't like them, either. He found muscle-bound idiots like Ishizaki and Ibuki to be easier to understand and preferable to be around.

Of course, Hashimoto didn't trust Ryuuen either, nor did he think Ryuuen trusted him. They had the kind of relationship where they came together only when their interests aligned. But they both knew that that kind of relationship could sometimes be a powerful connection.

"So, seems like you really beat the crap out of Class B during the year-end final exam, huh. Can I assume that you're back in full force then?" asked Hashimoto.

"Who can say? Maybe I just did that on a whim," said Ryuuen without a hint of seriousness, crossing his arms and smiling.

"A whim, huh? If so, that sounds like the scariest whim ever, dude. I can't even begin to imagine how bad it'd be if you decided to target Class A on a whim." Hashimoto briefly and casually threw up both his hands, as if

raising a white flag, saying he didn't want to fight.

"Are you that worried about what I'm up to?" asked Ryuuен.

"You retreated all the way to the back, and then returned to the forefront. It'd be weird if I *wasn't* worried," said Hashimoto.

People were significantly more concerned about the movements of individuals who could potentially become obstacles in their path.

"Did you come here snooping around on Sakayanagi's orders?" asked Ryuuен.

"Unfortunately, that's a question that I can't easily answer," replied Hashimoto.

Although Hashimoto was being vague, Ryuuен knew that he wasn't sniffing around on Sakayanagi's orders. He'd deliberately mentioned her name, trying to get a feel for Hashimoto based on his reaction.

"So? What are you planning on doing now?" asked Hashimoto.

"What the hell do you think I'm gonna do?" Ryuuен shot back with a sneer, closing the distance between them.

Hashimoto stiffened slightly, his body getting into a defensive posture so that he could defend himself, just in case something happened. Even though Hashimoto had chosen this location himself, there weren't very many people around here. If something did happen, there were no surveillance cameras here to guarantee his safety. The idea that he should record this conversation on his cell phone, both audio and video, had surely crossed Hashimoto's mind, but he risked destroying his relationship with Ryuuен if he got caught doing something like that.

"Don't go thinking you can score an easy win just by playing it smart and being a double-agent, okay?"

The kind of pressure that Ryuuен exerted when he spoke, even though he was smiling, was far, far different from what an ordinary person could do.

"Heh. Wow, I guess even though your class certainly qualifies as 'in the rough,' I guess that makes you the 'diamond in the rough.' You really pack a punch," said Hashimoto.

Even though Hashimoto was a little flustered, at the same time, he

seemed pleased. Class A was a rock. They were stable. However, depending on Sakayanagi's whims, things could go up or down. And should the time come when they went down, it would most likely be Ryuuen's class that rose up and won. Therefore, it was only natural that Hashimoto would want to try to stake a claim himself.

Which was precisely why Hashimoto then brought up a point he knew he ought to refute. "Sorry, Ryuuen. But I'm not planning on settling things with only two classes."

"*Ku ku*. What does *that* mean?"

"Well, it's a little early, but—"

Hashimoto took out his phone and deliberately showed Ryuuen the screen for a brief moment. While he was proving to Ryuuen that he wasn't recording this conversation, he was also showing him that he was about to place a call to someone.

The call only lasted a few seconds. Ryuuen immediately recognized that the person on the other end of the line had been waiting for Hashimoto to call.

"Come on over. We're still at the place I told you about." With that short message, Hashimoto ended the call. "Who do you think that was, Ryuuen?"

"No idea."

"Ayanokouji."

"Ayanokouji? Ah, I thought it might be him."

Ryuuen didn't panic even after hearing that name. Hashimoto's scheme to suddenly throw Ryuuen off guard and get some information out of him had failed, but he wasn't ready to give up yet. He pressed the matter.

"Can you guess why I called Ayanokouji here?" asked Hashimoto.

"Nope," answered Ryuuen, clearly and distinctly. He then immediately followed up and pressed Hashimoto in turn. "Did you *really* call him, though? Because it doesn't look like it to me."

Hashimoto had planned to spring a trap on Ryuuen, but Ryuuen had easily turned the tables on him.

“...Christ, dude. Guess some casual bullshit isn’t gonna cut it for you, huh?”

Hashimoto had hoped mentioning the name “Ayanokouji” would make Ryuuen react differently than usual. But instead, Ryuuen was acting like the name was no big deal at all, like he couldn’t be bothered with this.

“What kind of nonsense are you spouting? Is there something goin’ on behind all this, Hashimoto?”

It was precisely because Hashimoto was worried about Ayanokouji that Ryuuen suspected something else was going on. There was no sign that Ryuuen was putting on an act, but even so, Hashimoto couldn’t completely shake his distrust of Ayanokouji and Ryuuen. It was hard to imagine that Ryuuen, who’d been the king of his class, could have been so easily overthrown by Ishizaki and the others. Hashimoto could also see Ayanokouji’s shadow flickering over a series of actions that Sakayanagi had taken. If he had just one more piece of information, he could be certain.

“The person I called was—”

The sound of footsteps could be heard approaching the second-floor restroom. Then, the figure of a lone male student came into view.

“Oh? Oh ho, looks like you called someone pretty *interestin’* over, Hashimoto,” said Ryuuen.

The person who appeared before Ryuuen and Hashimoto was Kanzaki Ryuiji, from first-year Class B. And so, three people who never normally interacted with one another had gathered in one place.

“He said he wanted to come talk with you. So, I decided to bring you together,” said Hashimoto.

“So? What do you get in return for it?” asked Ryuuen.

“Ain’t that obvious? A connection with Class B.”

“Sakayanagi took a cheap shot at Ichinose. Meaning you guys should be enemies. Did you seriously think Kanzaki would go for something like that?” asked Ryuuen.

“Sure he will. Isn’t that right, Kanzaki?” asked Hashimoto.

“I don’t trust you, Hashimoto. But I do think that you’re worth using,”

said Kanzaki.

“There you go.”

Hashimoto had appealed to Kanzaki, saying that they could work together if their interests were aligned. Smiling flippantly, Hashimoto placed his hand on Kanzaki’s shoulder.

“Come on, just hear him out. For me,” said Hashimoto.

“I getcha. So this is what you meant when you said you weren’t going to settle things with just two classes, huh?”

So far, Hashimoto had only been interested in Ryuuен’s class. However, once Ryuuен had retreated, he shifted gears, broadening his scope.

“Yep. I plan to plant some seeds in Ayanokouji’s class later, too,” said Hashimoto, announcing what move he planned to make in hopes of saving himself, no matter which class came out on top.

However, Ryuuен’s interest had already shifted away from Hashimoto and to Kanzaki. “You’re not going to say somethin’ that’ll bore me to tears, will it?”

“I have no idea what you’re expecting, but it’s not going to be anything that will make you happy.” Kanzaki continued undaunted, even before Ryuuен. “The year-end final exam. I wanted to talk about what happened then. That’s all.”

“What, you’re gonna tell me about how you feel about getting completely and utterly crushed?”

“Sorry, Ryuuен. I don’t think I lost to you,” said Kanzaki.

After hearing Kanzaki’s forceful statement, Hashimoto whistled.

“You only snatched a victory because of dirty tricks. Nothing more. Don’t forget that,” added Kanzaki.

Kanzaki was proud and confident of the fact that if they had fought fairly, they could’ve competed on even ground, or that Class B would have had the upper hand. Victory had been stolen from them because of Ryuuен’s underhanded tactics.

“Big deal. So, what, you seriously came all the way out here just to tell me that?” said Ryuuен.

From Ryuuen's perspective, there was no such thing as clean or dirty when it came to fighting. A win was a win. Kanzaki's loss was a result that could never be changed.

"Sides, what dirty tricks? Are you talking about me being the commander?" asked Ryuuen.

"Don't play dumb. I'm talking about stomachaches on the day of the exam and the way you psychologically attacked some students," said Kanzaki.

Hashimoto, who hadn't known exactly what had happened during the exam, clapped his hands in apparent amusement. "Wow, dude, no wonder he's pissed! Really outlandish plans there, Ryuuen."

"Let's just say that such cowardly acts aren't going to work against Class B in the future, at all," said Kanzaki.

"*Ku ku*. You really think that Ichinose can stop me? Or maybe you're planning on crying to the school?" asked Ryuuen.

"No. That would be pointless."

Kanzaki immediately shot down Ryuuen's question. This wasn't something that the good-natured Ichinose could do anything about.

"Okay, then who is going to stop me?" asked Ryuuen.

"Me."

Kanzaki had answered Ryuuen's question without hesitating for even a moment. Two competing thoughts popped up in Ryuuen's mind after hearing that. Was he simply bluffing? Or perhaps...

"You're just Ichinose's lap dog. What can you even do?" He pressed forward, trying to find out just exactly what Kanzaki meant by what he said.

"It's certainly true that I've stood by Ichinose and supported her during our first year. But that's because at the time we had started school, I determined her to be a talented individual, someone who could demonstrate superior leadership and teamwork skills compared to the students from the other classes. In that regard, my faith in her still has not wavered. But I've found that she has a major weakness, in that she has a tendency to avoid crisis situations rather than deal with them, and that she cannot abandon the weak in an emergency," said Kanzaki.

“Oh ho? Huh. I thought this was gonna be nothin’ but a boring waste of my time, but it’s getting interesting. I mean, who would have thought there’d be someone in Class B, where people only wanna hold hands and get along, who could think like that?”

Even so, Ryuuen brushed off what Kanzaki said.

“You ain’t nothin’ but talk. If you’re just gonna pointlessly bitch and moan, well, even a lap dog can do that.”

“In that case, I’ll show you. I’ll prove it.”

Hashimoto had only cooperated with Kanzaki in order to establish a connection with Class B, but his opinion of him had changed slightly. *He might be more capable than I thought he was*, he thought.

“All right. If that’s what you want, I’ll thoroughly crush you next time,” said Ryuuen.

“I don’t know what kind of dirty tricks you’re planning, but I’m not like Ichinose. I don’t show mercy. If you hate losing on your own turf, fight fair and square.”

“Let’s just hope your class isn’t that lame,” said Ryuuen with a smile, as he relieved himself at the stall.

Hashimoto lined up next to him.

“Well, well, isn’t this interesting? Don’t you think so? Anyway, if something else happens, you gotta come talk to me, Kanzaki,” said Hashimoto, thinking Kanzaki would leave after making his declaration.

But instead Kanzaki got in closer, lining up at the stall next to Hashimoto in a show of intimidation, perhaps to signal that he wasn’t going to fall behind Hashimoto or Ryuuen. After he had finished his business, he gave one final parting shot, speaking with intensity.

“Remember what I told you, Ryuuen.”



After saying that, Kanzaki left the restroom.

“*Ku ku ku*. Ooh, scary.”

“So, what are you gonna do next to knock Class B all the way to the bottom level?” asked Hashimoto.

“No idea,” replied Ryuuuen with a laugh, dodging the question.

At the same time, he also remembered something else. Something that had only happened an hour before his discussion with Hashimoto and Kanzaki.

4.4

AFTER PARTING WAYS with Ichinose and Horikita, I was wondering whether or not I'd just head on back to my dorm room. But then I happened to bump into Ryuuuen, who seemed like he was leading me somewhere. We moved over to a corridor within the mall where there weren't many people around. We stood just far apart that if anyone did spot us, we could quickly disperse and pretend we happened to both be in the area for totally unrelated reasons.

"Did you hear from Ishizaki? That I came to Keyaki Mall?" I asked.

"Yeah. I specifically came out looking for you," replied Ryuuuen.

So, did his discussion with Ishizaki and Ibuki end after about an hour then? Or did they just take a break from their discussion? In any case, Ryuuuen's eyes seemed to have more of a spark in them than they did before.

"You know, I do already have your contact info. You could have just called or texted me, couldn't you?" I told him.

"I just figured I'd talk to you, face-to-flat-as-hell-boring-ass-face," sneered Ryuuuen.

In that case, I supposed that I'd hear what he had to say in the limited time I had.

"So, what was *that* all about?" he asked.

By *that*, I assume he was referring to the message from Hiyori. That I could have secured five or more wins safely and easily, through a much better strategy. I had asked Hiyori to pass along the message to Ryuuuen for me, and apparently, she had fulfilled her task well. I'd expected he would try to get in touch with me after hearing my message.

"It means exactly what it sounds like. If it were me in your shoes, I would have done better," I told him.

"I don't care about the methods. I do things my own way," said Ryuuuen.

"I don't want you to meet your end that way. If you do something

reckless and have to leave this school, I'll be lonely."

The words came out of my mouth quite naturally, but apparently didn't land all that well with Ryuuen.

"*Ku ku*. What the hell kinda joke is that? For a low-ranked scrub who lost to Sakayanagi, you sure are talkin' a big game," said Ryuuen.

"Yes, it's certainly true that my class lost to Sakayanagi. And since I was the commander for our class, I can't make any excuses. But as for the question of whether Sakayanagi is actually better than me, well, you'll just have to fight her directly and find out for yourself," I told him.

"*Ha!* ...Are you lookin' down on me?" he sneered.

The smile had disappeared from his face. He closed the distance between us.

"You beat me before. There's no way you're weaker than Sakayanagi," said Ryuuen.

Apparently, he'd been trying to provoke me earlier by calling me low-ranked.

"I'm grateful that you hold me in such high esteem, but isn't it possible I might've just cut corners and done a sloppy job on the exam?" I asked.

"Sorry, but I don't buy that. It wasn't like you took it seriously and still ended up losing. It feels more like you just didn't care about the competition in the first place, or something... Or you had an accident or ran into something beyond your control. That feels very plausible. It's way easier to believe someone at the school rigged things so that Class A would win, for the sake of their reputation," said Ryuuen.

While he wasn't technically correct, he had hit closer to the mark than I had imagined he would. Ryuuen was probably the only person at this school who could read into things so outrageously deeply and well. He possessed an absolute certainty that of from him having confronted me once before.

"So? Now that you're back, what are you going to do, Ryuuen?" I asked.

"Don't just decide I'm back without my say-so. I'm planning on enjoying this little break a bit longer," replied Ryuuen, implying he wasn't going all-in on the offensive for a while yet.

“But... I guess if I get bored of vacation time, then I’ll crush Ichinose and Sakayanagi as a warm-up.”

“That’s quite a dramatic change of heart.”

“*Ku ku ku*, yeah, I s’pose so. I’m surprised at myself, too. I didn’t think I’d be this eager to go and get my revenge on you so soon.”

“I see,” I replied.

It seemed the snake was about to wake from hibernation. When that happened, neither Class B nor Class A could afford to ignore Ryuuen. I supposed that from Sakayanagi’s perspective, this was just what she wanted, but as things stood right now, it wouldn’t be surprising if either she or Ryuuen won.

“Well, I’m quite grateful for that. If you crush Ichinose and Sakayanagi first, then everything will work out just as I hoped. My path to the top will be smoother for it,” I told him.

The upper-level classes getting all tangled up in fighting one another was an important part of our plans to reach the top ourselves.

“I thought you didn’t care one bit about class rankings and stuff,” said Ryuuen.

“Things are a little different now. Our class will be high in the ranks around this time next year. Even if I’m no longer in the class at that time,” I told him.

“Huh?”

Ryuuen eyed me suspiciously after hearing the part about me no longer being in the class.

“I might be put into a position where I’ll be targeted in the future. If that happens, it wouldn’t be surprising if I did get expelled because of somebody. Isn’t that right?” I told him.

If Tsukishiro were so inclined, any number of things might happen—things I couldn’t do anything about. Even if I drew a hard line and tried to defend myself, he’d probably still succeed. Of course, I would make sure he couldn’t take me down easily.

“Relax. If there’s anyone here who’s gonna get you kicked out of

school, it's me, and only me."

Such confidence was very typical of Ryuuен.

"But—"

Ryuuен, still standing in front of me, was just about to say something else. But then he suddenly slipped out of my field of view. He swiftly closed the distance between us, and then extended his right arm, taking a swing at my face. Without hesitation, he reached directly for my eyeball with his pointed fingertips, forcing me to respond.

"Rah!"

He then spun around, delivering a roundhouse kick. He tried to kick at me with his right foot, but it was a fake-out. His real attack came from his left leg, using the momentum from his spin. I dodged once again and put some distance between us.

"*Ha*, wow, and that was a total surprise attack. Christ, dude. Seriously, how much of a monster are you?"

"Those were some pretty flashy moves," I told him.

Even though you could say we were in a private spot, there were many security cameras throughout Keyaki Mall. Of course, as long as the students involved didn't actually complain about what was happening, it was unlikely it would attract all that much attention. Still, this was the sort of audacious act only Ryuuен could pull off.

"My heart is telling me something. It's telling me to devour you," said Ryuuен.

Even though the snake was hibernating, he bit on instinct.

"You're not gonna attack me?" he asked.

"I'd like to avoid risking going toe-to-toe with you here. Besides, it's not time yet."

"*Hah*. So, this is like, the composure of the strong, huh? You sound like you're bein' totally real with me when you say that. Makes my skin crawl."

The glint in his eyes shone as brightly as before. No—perhaps even brighter, now. Seeing how fired up he was right now, it was hard to imagine

he'd been keeping his head down for months.

"You have potential. That's exactly why you need to grow more and get better, Ryuuen."

He must not have liked what he heard, or thought I was lecturing him, because he slammed his fist against the wall.

"Grow more? Get better? When the hell did you become my master?" said Ryuuen.

"I'm telling you the truth. Underhanded tricks, cowardly attacks, criminal acts... I think it's fine to do whatever you need to do, use whatever strategy will make you win. But don't do anything that can be so easily traced back to you."

"Huh?"

"I heard from Ishizaki that you used laxatives. Lacing their stuff with laxatives while they were in the karaoke room wasn't a bad idea, but if the leftover food and drinks had been preserved for safekeeping, it would have been all over for you. What you did merits expulsion without question. Even if you somehow managed to slip by at first, the school officials would naturally grow suspicious of such strange things happening during the exam. The only thing that saved you was that Ichinose didn't raise the issue and complain," I told him.

"I factored Ichinose being a goody-two-shoes into my plans," said Ryuuen.

"If that's true, you're being naïve. You'll never be able to surpass me."

"...You really said it now," growled Ryuuen, once again closing the distance between us.

But unlike before, there was no sign that he intended to attack. Well, even if he were completely suppressing his intent to attack, it wouldn't be difficult for me to deal with him. Still...

"You're free to listen to my advice or not. It's up to you. But...if things continue as they are right now, we'll never have our rematch."

How would Ryuuen respond to getting some friendly advice from an enemy? His reaction would help me measure his wits.

Ryuuuen still had his fist up against the wall. Then he lowered it, as if to signal he was calming down.

“Fine, I’ll take your shit advice for right now. But I definitely *will* crush you, sooner or later,” said Ryuuuen.

“That’s the spirit, Ryuuuen. If I’m defeated by you and get expelled, that wouldn’t be so bad,” I told him.

Even though Ryuuuen seemed furious deep down, it also seemed like my words had gotten through to him. Which meant the strategies he came up with from here would probably become more refined.

The race ahead of us, starting with our second year, had honestly become even harder to visualize. Would Ryuuuen devour Sakayanagi and rise to Class A in one bound? Would Sakayanagi prevent him from doing so? Or perhaps Ichinose would leap back into the fray and attempt to make a comeback? And how would Horikita, facing off against those other three, factor into the mix?

Things would be quite different from how they were in our first year. And we’d be able to see those changes quite soon.

4.5

THAT WAS WHAT Ryuuen had done before he went to the restroom. He glanced at Kanzaki out of the corner of his eye as Kanzaki walked out of the restroom, then spoke up once more.

“I’m returning to the battlefield. Though I used some pretty showy moves against Class B, I admit there are definitely some things I’ve gotta think about.”

He had admitted it. In order to defeat Ayanokouji, he would need to admit to the things that he should.

“Well now, that’s pretty commendable, dude. And here I was thinking that you were all about usin’ dirty tricks. So, you’re plannin’ on fightin’ fair and square just like Kanzaki wants, huh?” asked Hashimoto.

“*Hah.* Who said anything about that?” replied Ryuuen.

“Oh?”

“I took advantage of Ichinose’s naivete and won big. But doin’ that ended up givin’ them too many opportunities to hit me back. That’s why the small fry’s gotten all cocky,” said Ryuuen.

“...I see.”

It wasn’t his usage of cowardly methods that he ought to be reflecting upon. It was the fact that he left himself vulnerable to attack.

“Next time, I’ll crush them even harder, and in an even flashier way.”

No matter what Kanzaki had proposed, Ryuuen wouldn’t be going along with it at this stage. If he had really hidden his fangs, he would understand soon.

“You’ve grown over this past year yourself, Ryuuen. I’m sure glad we got to connect. Looks like I better seriously consider the possibility that Sakayanagi might be devoured by you,” said Hashimoto.

The eagle-eyed Hashimoto was also getting closer to Class B, vigilantly watching for an opportunity. So that no matter which class won in the end, he’d be able to graduate in Class A himself.

4.6

JUST AFTER NOON, it started pouring rain like someone was upturning buckets overhead. Over thirty millimeters of rainfall. For some reason or another, I couldn't bring myself to head back to my dorm, so I stayed at Keyaki Mall by myself.

There were lots of conveniences around campus. So even in sudden rainfall, it was never all that difficult to get back to the dormitories. Provisional umbrellas were made available for students who didn't have any, and since they were free as long as you returned them on time, more than a few students took advantage of the offer. Some of the students who'd gone out to have fun this morning hadn't brought umbrellas with them, to reduce the amount of stuff they had to carry around.

That being said, today was a bit of an exception. When it was raining this hard, you'd be completely soaked even if you had an umbrella.

"Doesn't look like it's gonna let up at all today," I muttered to myself.

If the forecast was correct, it sounded like the downpour was supposed to keep coming down from noon today until tomorrow morning. My phone's notification sound went off from time to time. Each time it did, I saw that people in the Ayanokouji Group chat were talking about the rain, as well as other miscellaneous topics, as well. Right now, it seemed like they were talking about how the rain was really coming down.

"What should I do, I wonder?" I muttered to myself.

I didn't feel like participating in the chat, so I decided to just leave the messages on read for the time being. I stared blankly at the screen, looking through the messages in the chat group. Then, I would look outside the window at the rain, as if I suddenly remembered something. I repeated that process several times.

An unproductive waste of time. It was nice to spend time like this every once in a while, though. Instead of going back to the café, I sat down on a random bench, and spent some time just zoning out. But it wasn't like I was going to just sit here and do this for hours. After listening to the sounds of the rain for about twenty or thirty minutes, I decided to leave.

I ran my student ID through the machine and rented an umbrella. Even though the lower half of my body would get wet, especially the part below my knees, that was still way better than not having an umbrella at all. Then, when I went outside to make my way back to the dormitories, I saw a familiar student near the mall exit.

It was Ichinose. Even though she was standing in the heavy rain, she wasn't holding an umbrella. She must have been at Keyaki Mall this whole time. She hadn't been hanging out with her friends though, she had been alone. Maybe she had a lot going through her mind after she parted ways with Horikita and me.

"I guess she was probably trying to wrap her head around the situation, huh," I said to myself.

But from the looks of things, it didn't seem like she had been able to do so all that well. If she headed back to the dormitories without an umbrella, she'd obviously get completely soaked, down to the bone. For a moment, I had thought that maybe she was waiting for a friend who had an umbrella. But that didn't seem to be the case.

It might be a kindness to just leave her alone, but... I was a little bit worried, since Class B had just been completely devastated in that last exam. I hurried back and rented another umbrella. When I got back outside a little later, Ichinose was out walking in the rain. She was apparently prepared to get soaked after all.

She wasn't heading in the direction of the dormitories. Ichinose was heading in the opposite direction, toward the school. Without an umbrella, she continued to get showered with rain. I could just watch her go, but...

I chased after Ichinose, umbrellas in hand. Because of the sound of the rain being so intense, it seemed like she didn't hear me running toward her. She probably wouldn't be able to hear me if I called out to her at a normal volume. Eventually, Ichinose got within eyeshot of the school building, as she continued walking on the path.

As you'd expect, there wasn't any sign of anyone else around, in the midst of this heavy rain. And then, she looked up at the sky. Rather than seeming like she didn't want to get soaked, if anything, it felt like she wanted it to happen.

What was she feeling right now? What was she thinking about? It wasn't difficult for me to read. I supposed that it wasn't a bad idea to just let her stand there and get soaked until she was satisfied, but she would definitely catch a cold. And if she caught a cold, I'm sure that her heart would suffer at the same time, along with her health. That would probably be a little too much, a little too cruel for Ichinose to handle right now.

"You'll catch a cold if you stand around here for too long," I told her, speaking at a slightly louder volume, as I approached her.

"...Ayanokouji-kun."

Ichinose probably didn't expect to see someone come up beside her. After that moment of surprise, she looked over at me.

"...Yeah, you're probably right," she added.

Even though she had responded to me, speaking in a soft voice, she wasn't moving. She looked back up toward the sky, not afraid of getting soaked in the rain.



“You can head on back. I think I’d like to feel a little rain coming down on me,” said Ichinose, when I was close enough to be able to hear her voice clearly.

“I see.”

This downpour was far too intense to call it just a little rain. If I just left things be, Ichinose would probably stay out here in the rain for an hour or two.

It didn’t seem like she was in a position where she would listen to me, even if I tried to talk to her. In that case, I’d just have to adopt slightly more forceful measures to make her stop this. There was a particular way of handling Ichinose that worked well. I put down the umbrella I was holding and folded it up. In an instant, my whole body started to get soaked by the rain, from my head to my toes.

“A-Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I thought I’d join you,” I replied.

Naturally, Ichinose wouldn’t be able to ignore such bizarre behavior.

“Why...?”

“Sometimes I just want to get caught in the rain for no reason at all,” I replied.

This was in contrast to Ichinose though, who had a reason for getting caught in the rain. Even while I was holding onto two umbrellas, the both of us were getting soaked to the bone. It was such a strange experience.

“Won’t you catch a cold?” she asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I replied.

“I’m okay. If anything, I was thinking it’d be fine if I caught a little cold,” said Ichinose.

I see. In that case, I supposed that staying out in the cold rain for a long time would probably be the optimal solution.

“All right, then maybe I’ll catch one, too,” I replied.

If I gave her an answer like that, then it was obvious that Ichinose would be flummoxed. After all, she would never say something like, “*All*

right, let's both catch colds together!"

"No, you can't. Ayanokouji-kun, you should really head on back. You even have an umbrella, too," said Ichinose.

"Well, there's little point in me having one now, though," I replied.

I was already completely soaked down to my underwear.

"Gosh, now that's just mean."

"Sorry."

If Ichinose wasn't heading back, I wasn't going to head back. Ichinose had given in to my threat.

"...All right, I understand. Let's head back," said Ichinose.

"In that case—"

I was going to hand her an umbrella, but then I stopped.

"Well, I guess we're already soaked anyway, so let's just head back."

"*Ha ha!* Yeah, I guess you're right," replied Ichinose.

If we headed straight back to the dormitories, we'd get there in only a few minutes. It wouldn't really make much of a difference anymore if we used them or not. So, we both started walking back, already drenched. I had thought it wouldn't be so bad to just head on back in silence, but shortly after we started walking, Ichinose let out a sigh.

"I feel like I've only been coming off as entirely hopeless to you all the time, Ayanokouji-kun... I'm so lame..."

"Hopeless? Well, I suppose you might have a point."

There was that time before, too, when she was being tormented by Sakayanagi. She had lost sight of herself that time, too.

"People can only show that side of themselves, that hopeless side, to the person they can trust. That's just what I think, though," I told her.

At the very least, I supposed that people wouldn't show weakness in front of people they disliked. They would act tough, even if it was just a front, and only reveal their weakness when they were alone.

"That was a little pretentious. Forget what I just said," I added.

“No...I think you’re probably right. You’re someone I can trust a lot, Ayanokouji-kun. I think that’s why I feel like I’m always complaining and whining about my issues when I’m around you. But... I feel like you’re always there beside me whenever I’m feeling weak, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Well, that’s just been coincidental,” I replied.

“I’m really sorry,” said Ichinose.

“There’s no need for you to apologize. In fact, I don’t think it’s bad at all for you to vent like this. But I think if the other students found out, they’d probably get pretty ticked off,” I replied.

Ichinose was an exceptionally popular girl in our grade level. This was the kind of conversation that would probably make ordinary guys envious if they heard about it.

“If you want, you can keep coming to me with your complaints, it’s okay.”

“That’s—”

Ichinose shook her head from side to side, like she was flustered about something.

“I-I shouldn’t. I’d look so lame, showing my vulnerable side.”

Even though it was getting a bit warmer, the temperature was still low. Eventually, while walking through the heavy rainfall, with no one else around, we reached the front of the dormitory. We were just about to enter the lobby, but once again, Ichinose stopped in her tracks.

“I think... you should go on ahead yourself, Ayanokouji-kun, after all.”

“What are you going to do, Ichinose?”

“I’ll just stay a little longer... I don’t want to go back to my room right now,” she replied, refusing to go back.

It was a weaker-willed refusal than the one she had previously given.

“Even so, it’d be better if you headed on back,” I told her.

I supposed that if she stayed out and got drenched in the rain, that certainly might distract her from her issues, somewhat. However, it wasn’t going to lead her to a fundamental solution. Even though Ichinose was

showing some resistance, I didn't think it'd be a good idea for me to back down.

"But... I really don't want to go back...for right now, I don't think," said Ichinose.

"Okay. In that case, I'll hang out here too, then," I replied.

Ichinose appeared to be both surprised and perplexed about how forceful I was being.

"I just feel like that if I stay alone in my room, I'll think about all sorts of things, and I'll start to feel down... So, I don't want to go," she said.

She probably wasn't going to move, even if I stayed out here in the rain and got drenched with her. In that case, I'd have to find another way to move her forward.

"All right, then. How about we go to my room?" I asked.

"Huh?"

After hearing a question from me that she didn't expect at all, Ichinose looked me right in the eyes.

"If you have someone to talk to, then you probably won't get depressed," I reasoned.

"But... I'm soaked..."

"Well, so am I. It doesn't really make much difference. If you say that you're not going to go back though, then I'll just stay with you, for as many hours as it takes," I replied.

"You are surprisingly pushy, aren't you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Maybe."

So, the two of us, soaked to the bone, headed inside. It might have been a lifesaver that it just so happened that there wasn't anybody in the lobby at that time. We got onto the elevator, and we headed up to my room on the fourth floor.

"Come on in," I told her.

"Is that really okay?" she asked.

"Yeah."

“...Thank you, and sorry for the bother,” said Ichinose.

Ichinose came into my room, and for the time being, I asked her to sit. Sitting down on the cold floor would probably just make her feel even colder, though. And I couldn’t say that wearing such wet clothes could be good for her health. So, at the very least, I decided to turn on the heater, to prevent her from getting any colder. Then, I took out a towel and handed it to Ichinose.

“So, how about we have a nice long chat about it?”

“It?” she asked in return.

“About what you’re thinking about right now, Ichinose. About what you’re worried about. Everything.”

“But... I-I can’t, I shouldn’t bother you.” Ichinose refused my offer, apparently flustered. “I’ve been relying on you all the time lately, Ayanokouji-kun. I feel like I’ve been asking you for so much help, more than anyone else. And talking to you about that stuff, it’s just, it’d be too much for me to ask of you... God, I’m so lame, I just can’t do it.”

Ichinose Honami was a weak girl. However, she had always continued to maintain a cool composure as a leader. That was a necessary skill for a leader. It was necessary to make people think that it was all right to follow you. It was something that the leader had to show to the people underneath them.

“I’ve already told you so much about me, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Well, it’s certainly true that I know a lot about you, yes. But that’s just limited to you, the individual. The student Ichinose Honami. I still don’t know very much about your worries, as the leader guiding Class B.”

“But if you go this far out of your way for me, I...” she replied.

Ichinose, unable to be honest with how she felt, covered her face with her towel. It was like she was refusing to let me try to read something from her expression.

“You can’t trust me?” I asked.

“Huh?” she replied, her face still hidden.

“If that’s the case, you don’t have to force yourself to come out with it. If anything, it’d probably be wrong to let someone try to get it out of you

then.”

“No, that’s not it. I probably trust you more than anyone else, Ayanokouji-kun...”

Whether that was the truth or a lie, it hardly mattered. No matter what it was, I had decided to follow up by telling her something else.

“I’m honored, but how can you say that for sure? I might just be taking advantage of your honesty. Although I already know a little about it myself, you already told Sakayanagi about your entire past, didn’t you? Right?” I asked.

I’m sure that incident was still fresh in her memory. The crime she had committed when she was in junior high, an incident from her past that she had wanted to keep secret. Although she had only done it for her little sister, she had still shoplifted. And her enemy, Sakayanagi from Class A, came to know of it.

Ichinose had told Sakayanagi things that you couldn’t easily confide in your one true best friend about. Granted, she had been led into telling her about it. Even for a good-natured person, that was too much.

“You wouldn’t normally tell your secrets to someone in a situation where you don’t know what your relationship with that person is like yet,” I added.

Of course, it that was done intentionally, for a certain purpose, then that would be a different story. However, what Ichinose did was truly meaningless. Well, actually, she did it, even while knowing that it would cause trouble for her.

“So, if you happen to find yourself in a similar situation again, what will you do then?” I asked.

“Well, I think I don’t want to go through the same thing again either,” she replied, touching her bangs, which were glossy and shiny.

“I see. In that case, good. Now that you’ve learned to be cautious, then I’m not going to press you any further.”

“Oh, well, no, it’s uh... It’s definitely true that I can’t afford to get stuck in a crisis like that again. But you’re different, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Ichinose.

“I’m in a different class, too. There’s no changing the fact that I’m your enemy, is there, Ichinose?” I replied.

“I don’t want to call you an enemy so easily,” she replied.

“Whether you want to say it or not, that’s the reality of the situation,” I replied.

“...But...”

She must have been unable to accept that, because Ichinose went with a different choice of words.

“You’re not an ally...but you are someone I can trust,” said Ichinose.

Considering how she phrased that, she must have hated using the word *enemy*. The water that I had been heating up had now come to a boil.

“I have coffee, café au lait, and cocoa,” I told her.

“Okay, then... I’ll have cocoa, please,” she replied, with a little smile, nodding.

I poured her a cup of cocoa. A hot drink could warm you up inside. Eventually, the rain started to subside, and the evening glow of the setting sun peeked through the clouds. After looking at the scenery outside for a little bit, Ichinose then turned back to me, with a meek smile still on her face. A little while later, Ichinose slowly started to talk about what she was feeling now, little by little.

“When I got assigned to Class B and met my classmates, I felt sure that we were going to win. You could say that I was being conceited, but I felt that I had really been blessed with wonderful friends. That feeling still hasn’t changed,” said Ichinose.

Then, Ichinose spoke up once more, as if she wanted to clarify something.

“However, the one miscalculation was making me the leader. I think that if I had handled things better, Class B would have many, many more points than they do right now,” said Ichinose.

“I’m not so sure about that. I don’t think there’s any doubt that you are an incredibly gifted person, Ichinose,” I replied.

She denied that, shaking her head side-to-side.

“I felt keenly aware of something when I was talking to Horikita-san today. She really has grown so much this past year. Ryuuuen-kun and Sakayanagi-san seem to have grown, too. All of the other class leaders are getting much, much stronger,” said Ichinose.

She wasn’t able to see any growth for her own part this past year, unlike what she saw for those around her, who seemed to be rising to power rapidly. Because of that feeling, she was losing confidence. As she felt like she was being overwhelmed by her own feelings, she was also feeling more and more strongly that she was being left behind.

“Can...I even win, down the road?” she wondered aloud.

“Can you even win, huh?” I repeated.

“Ayanokouji-kun, if I said that I wanted to know your opinion, would you tell me your honest thoughts?” she asked.

“If that’s what you want, then I don’t see any reason why I wouldn’t answer,” I replied.

My answer wasn’t necessarily the correct one. But there was one answer that Ichinose wanted to know right now. However, that wasn’t really something that I could state definitively right now. The future hadn’t yet been determined, and there were infinite possibilities. I knew very well, though, that Ichinose wasn’t the type of student to give up here.

“We’re going to be starting our second year soon. Meaning a whole new year is about to begin,” I told her.

“Yeah...”

“During that year, you’ll push forward with your classmates, as far as you can go. There will be happy times and sad times along the way. And I think there will be times when you feel crushed and disheartened. But even so, don’t ever stop,” I added.

What could Ichinose Honami, the leader of Class B, do right now? All she could do is go about her daily life, being as foolhardy as she always has been until now. The only option she had was to trust in her allies and fight to the end. That was a weapon that was only allowed to be used in Class B.

“That’s... Will that... be the answer I’m looking for... one year later...?”

Herself, one year later. She couldn't see what that looked like. I'm sure that must have made her feel incredibly anxious.

"I'm scared. I'm scared of... what you'll say to that version of me then, a year from now, Ayanokouji-kun..."

She had gotten off to a good start at the Advanced Nurturing High School, being placed in Class B. She had made it through the first year together with her classmates and they had successfully defended their position. Surrounded by a great number of friends, her life here had been smooth sailing. However, before she knew it, the reality that the gap between classes was now staring her in the face.

The word *defeat* was on Ichinose Honami's mind.

"I—"

"I know. I'm sure that it's hard to accept that as an answer," I told her.

Ichinose turned her gaze away from me. I deliberately didn't give her an answer for her question of whether or not she could win in the future. Well, I suppose I didn't need to answer. There was starting to be a big gap in strength, from what we could see from the current situation. If I were to speak objectively about the state of things at this current point in time, Class B could very well sink to the bottom of the class rankings next year.

That thought had inexplicably stirred up Ichinose's anxieties. She was trembling slightly, not from the cold but because of fear.

"What should I do...? What should I do...?" she said to herself quietly.

I'm sure that Ichinose probably couldn't let the other students see herself in such a weak state. Especially her classmates. It would be easy to give her some kind words right now. It would be no trouble at all to whisper sweet and gentle things to Ichinose, who had opened up her heart to me. So that I could take advantage of her openness. Or maybe now I could touch her skin, hidden underneath her wet clothes.

When I moved, Ichinose reacted strongly, almost to an excessive degree, looking up at me. I moved over by Ichinose's side and sat down, catching sight of her gaze. From her eyes, it looked like she wanted to run away.

"A-Ayanokouji... kun...?"

I reached out with my right hand and touched Ichinose's hair, then lightly placed my palm against her cheek. I felt a cold, soft sensation, and then there was faint building heat that I could feel through my fingertips. Then, I moved my thumb and gently caressed her lips.

As I did so, the trembling of her body started to lessen, and eventually, her lips also stopped quivering as well. Normally, Ichinose would have rejected something like this. It wouldn't have been strange for her to have turned away from it. But she wasn't.

"So strange... You really are a mysterious person... Ayanokouji-kun..."

"You might be right."

We stopped speaking, and Ichinose and I looked at one another. Just looked, nothing more, nothing less.

"Hey, Ichinose. How about we meet like this again, one year from today?" I asked.

"...What do you mean?" replied Ichinose.

She didn't break away from my hand. Ichinose's wet, glassy eyes caught me and wouldn't let me go.

"Exactly what it sounds like. I want to meet just like we are now, one year from today. Just the two of us. You and me, Ichinose."

What I just said might have come off as telling her that I had romantic feelings for her. But that was as far as I went. I gently pulled my hand away and let go of Ichinose. Then I stood up and put some distance between us.

"Don't get trapped by hesitation this coming year. Meet with me again. Can you promise me that?" I asked.

"I..." She paused for a moment. "But what if, at that time, I... my class..."

"It doesn't matter. I just want to meet with you a year from now, Ichinose."

Ichinose closed her eyes and then nodded gently.

"I'll tell you what I wanted to tell you now when we meet then. I promise."

“Okay. Thank you... Ayanokouji-kun.”

Some life had come back to her eyes, which had lost their spark before.

“I’ll make a promise to you, too. I will try my absolute hardest this year, and I’ll shoot for Class A,” said Ichinose.

Ichinose had a bigger smile on her face than she’d had in a while. We made a promise to each other to meet a year from now. If we both survived and made it through, that promise would be fulfilled. Class B, led by Ichinose Honami. What would happen to Class B in the future?

Even though there were many things to be pessimistic about, the future had yet to be determined.

However...should Class B fall, I would be the one to finish Ichinose off.

Chapter 5: From Older Brother to Younger Sister

THE NEXT DAY, March 31, was quite a special day for me as well. Yes—it was the day Horikita Manabu left. Our agreed meeting time was exactly noon. As usual, I did things early and arrived at the front gate. He must not have told his other kouhai about him leaving today, because there wasn't no else around except for me.

From time to time, while I waited for the others to arrive, I looked at the students headed toward Keyaki Mall in the distance. Come to think of it, I had come to this school through this very gate a year ago, hadn't I? The location was one I often came close to, but never really walked right up to. There were times when we might head through the gate on a bus for things like special activities and exams, but other than that, the only way you'd walk through this gate would be if you graduated or got expelled. And since there was no system in place for students to repeat a year, we would inevitably see those things happen within our three years here.

"I feel like I've been thinking about that all the time lately," I muttered to myself.

Now that we were about to enter our second year, I'd been reflecting back on my current state of mind more and more.

Just then, close to twenty minutes before we were scheduled to meet, Horikita Manabu arrived. After confirming that it was me, he briefly glanced around at his surroundings. I didn't even need to bother asking what he was looking for.

"Unfortunately, your sister still isn't here yet," I told him.

"Looks that way," he replied.

Right now, it was around 11:40 a.m. She certainly wasn't too late, not by any stretch. However, considering how little time there was left, it would have been better if she had arrived earlier. I thought back to when Horikita and I met with Ichinose the other day. The fact that she had gotten to the meeting place then with plenty of time to spare was still fresh in my mind.

Was it possible that she had gotten into some kind of accident?

“I think I should try giving her a quick call,” I suggested.

I figured that if I were to make the call, then Horikita’s brother would agree to the proposal quite easily. That’s what I had thought, anyway, but...

“No, there’s no need.”

He refused my offer, gently stopping me with his hand.

“If she fell or something, she would’ve let us know ahead of time,” he reasoned.

“It’s possible she might just be sleeping in.” It was highly unlikely, but I thought I’d mention the possibility.

“If that is the case, then there’s no need to wake her up,” he answered.

He was saying that if she were to oversleep on such an important day, that meant she wasn’t worth his time anymore, huh? Even though this was the last chance they had to meet, his attitude was the same as ever.

“Well, there’s nothing to worry about. There’s still plenty of time until we’re supposed to meet.”

I could also imagine pretty easily that she was sitting around nervously in her room until the last possible minute, since she was meeting with her older brother.

“Suzune aside, though, I didn’t expect you to have gotten here so soon,” said Manabu.

“Somehow, I had a feeling that you’d be getting here early, too,” I replied.

We had agreed to meet at noon. Of course, we still had plenty of time until the bus departed. But this would be a final goodbye. I’m sure that both Horikita siblings must have anticipated that there would be a lot to talk about. And sure enough, Manabu had arrived twenty minutes early. The only thing that both Manabu and I didn’t expect was Horikita’s absence, as she was supposed to be the central person in this gathering.

Anyway, since she wasn’t here, that meant that we could only talk about things with just the two of us. It would be a complete waste to just spend our time in silence. After thinking for a little while, I opened my mouth

to speak, telling him about something that had been on my mind lately.

“I’m sorry. I probably should have done a little more for you regarding the student council stuff,” I told him.

Horikita had come to me to talk, in order to find a way to stop Nagumo Miyabi from running amok. However, at the time, I couldn’t eagerly accept his request, because at the time, I had been wishing for a more peaceful life, much more strongly than I do now. So, in order to establish a connection, he had gotten me acquainted with Vice President Kiriyma, but that’s about as far as things got. In the end, I had gotten all the way here, to today, without enacting plans involving Kiriyma.

“Everything has been my responsibility. It was wrong for me to try to impose that on you. Don’t worry about it,” said Manabu.

For him, this school was a thing of the past. He was in a good position now, where he didn’t even need to worry about what was going to happen here in the future.

“But even so, let me just give you one final warning. I basically see the policies of this school as fundamentally positive and lean toward agreeing with them. Even though the school is fundamentally based on the idea of a meritocracy, it leaves enough room for the lower-ranked classes to be able to win. Though it’s by no means an easy battle,” said Horikita.

“I can’t think that argument is all that convincing, considering you were in Class A for three years running,” I replied.

“But you could say that’s also because a lot of people haven’t realized the true nature of things. It is certainly true that there are many areas in which the school can improve. However, in retrospect, you should be able to understand something. Whether it’s the uninhabited island exam or the year-end final exam, there are always chances provided to the lower-ranked classes to beat the upper-ranked classes,” said Horikita.

It wasn’t just with written exams. Other factors needed to be taken into consideration quite strongly for the special exams. For example, on the uninhabited island exam, it wouldn’t be that difficult to beat Class A or Class B by simply coming together and showing solidarity. It was the same kind of thing for the year-exams, too. Although it was an exam where luck certainly played a huge role, it was also proof that there was the possibility for the

lower-ranked classes to win.

“Luck plays a big role in determining victory or defeat. It’s a necessary consideration, so that the still inexperienced, immature first-year students can have a chance at winning against the higher-level classes. However... that is also something that is difficult for the upper-level classes to accept. It’s an element that they’d probably revile,” said Horikita.

The school’s considerations for the students at the bottom would certainly draw complaints from students at the top. Putting aside the ability for students to move between classes by accumulating twenty million private points as a special case, the system this school operated in such a way by treating each class as a fundamental unit, and also, the system would not abandon those students who were less capable. In every class, there are superior students who excel, and there are those who struggle even at the lower levels.

I’m guessing that Nagumo had experienced a year going through examinations just like we did, and then had come up with an idea. He wanted to create a system that was even more meritocratic, which allowed individuals to rise up and win on their own power. A system where the people at the top would keep rising and the people at the bottom would keep falling.

“What Nagumo’s trying to do might not necessarily be wrong, though,” I replied.

While I’m sure some students in our grade level could be dissatisfied with what he was doing, at the same time, there were many students who agreed with it. And in the case of the second-year students, you could say that the majority of those students would agree with Nagumo. Of course, that probably wasn’t simply because they just happened to be agreeable people.

I’m sure that more than a few students had no choice to agree to it, after being swept up by the state of things around them. If everyone was to excel, then every class would have to be fiercely competitive.

“Is there a pretty significant gap between second-year classes? In terms of their Class Points, I mean,” I asked.

“Yeah. Class A, which Nagumo is in, has one thousand four hundred and ninety-one points as of March. Class B has eight hundred and eighty-nine

points. Class C has two hundred and eighty points. And Class D has seventy-six points,” said Horikita.

Considering the fact that they only had one year left, that meant that Class A was already in position to win. Despite that, though, Nagumo dared to propose something that could save the lower-level classes. It was certainly true that with only seventy-six points, it was nearly impossible for Class D to turn things around.

“There are a lot of people who agree with him. If they have no way to win as Class A, then their only way to get to Class A is to cling to a system where individuals can rise to the top,” I reasoned.

“You might be right. But Nagumo’s ways of doing things would make a great number of people unhappy,” said Horikita.

If the system becomes too meritocratic and individualistic, then suspicion and distrust would grow, even among classmates. It was possible that everyone around you could become your enemy. Horikita’s brother, no, Horikita Manabu still insistently believes that the cooperation of the group, of the classes, is absolute. Not only that, but also, that it was an organization designed with the future in mind.

“Won’t it be the same with how the system works now, though? All three classes except for Class A will be unhappy,” I replied.

I could only imagine just what Nagumo’s ideal system would look like, but if a system that allowed individuals to rise up were to be established, it might add a little something extra, some added relief, for classes that had forty students or fewer.

“Yeah, for example—”

Just as I was about to say anything more though, Horikita cut me off.

“Consolidate the Private Points of all the students in Class B and below all together and use them to compete in a bid to see who gets to move up to Class A. Or something like that.”

He thought of the exact same thing that I did. I nodded in response. Not taking expelled students into account, the total number of students between Class B through Class D was one hundred and twenty people. If you put together all of their Private Points, that would most likely exceed twenty

million by quite a bit. It was possible that you might even get forty or sixty million.

Of course, not everyone would likely take part in that gamble. Although I don't know how the system might have changed, not too long ago, there was a system in place where students could convert their Private Points into cash upon graduation. I'm sure there were some students who probably wouldn't mind graduating from Class D as long as they were able to get that cash.

However, students who could meet the conditions to participate *and* secure the number of Private Points needed really ought to take that gamble. Even if they can't win with the rest of the class anyway, it's not a bad idea to try to make one last gamble. Besides, that way, there should be a few more students who can get up to Class A. The larger the gap between Class A and the lower levels in terms of Class Points in your grade level, the easier it would be for this last chance to become a reality.

"Have students not talked about that in your grade level?" I asked.

"I'd be lying if I said that people haven't talked about it. But no one actually did it. Because Class A and Class B were in such close competition, Class C and Class D didn't have enough points to be able to make it happen," replied Horikita.

I recalled a student from third-year Class D that I had gotten in contact with almost a year ago now, who seemed to be in desperate need of points. If you keep losing, it would become more difficult to get Class points. If you find yourself falling into a situation where you have to keep spending month after month with only zero points, you'll be trapped in a downward spiral.

"If that's all there is to it, then there won't be any effect yet. However, Nagumo is planning on stirring things up into a frenzy, one which will drag even his own class into it, Class A. In other words, he's going to put even his own allies at risk as well."

That meant that the students in Class A whose abilities were meager faced the possibility of falling by the wayside. That was probably likely. If only Nagumo's own class, Class A, was safely in the clear, then there was no way that everyone else would approve his appeal to create a meritocracy. Every class, whether it was A or D, would be placed on a level playing field.

“I don’t know how far he’s planning on taking things, but even still, it’s a decision that you need courage to make,” I reasoned.

“He just feels bored, he’s bored with his current situation, that his victory is already assured. That’s probably the reason for all of this. The reason why he originally joined the student council in the first place was largely just because he wanted to kill some time,” said Horikita.

If he had the ability and also, the endorsement of others, then no one really had the right to complain, though.

“The class is a whole, where everyone is in the same boat together. Everyone has a shared destiny. I don’t think we should move past that framework,” said Horikita.

“Which is why you can’t agree with Nagumo’s way of doing things,” I replied.

Although he didn’t nod in response to what I said, Horikita’s brother seemed to accept what I said. I understood what he was trying to say, but you couldn’t say for sure which one of them was right. And besides...

“I’m planning on seeing what Nagumo is trying to do, for the time being. If he’s going to change our grade level, no, rather, our entire school into a more meritocratic environment, then I can’t deny him without experiencing that environment,” I told him.

I decided that I would simply state what I was going to do, with no lies.

“I see. You’re going to soar to even greater heights than I did,” said Horikita.

“You think way too highly of me,” I told him.

Furthermore, I just didn’t have the inclination nor the means to stop Nagumo right now. In that case, it wasn’t a bad idea for me to take a look at the world that Nagumo was trying to create. I was able to firmly etch this past year into my mind, this year that Horikita’s brother had been protecting.

“I’m really not as great a person as you think I am,” I added.

“Well, sorry to say, but I don’t think that’s true,” he replied.

Horikita firmly rejected my modesty.

“In any case, it seems like your assessment of me in your mind isn’t

getting any worse," I said.

"If there was anything that would cause it to get worse, it would have," he replied.

Come to think of it, he hadn't really changed his opinion of me at all for almost a year now. No matter what he knows or doesn't know, that standard didn't change.

"I just can't wrap my head around it, though. What exactly is it about me that you find so praiseworthy?" I asked.

The only bit of information that he had about me, information that was different from what other students had about me, came from that little fight we had, when I was trying to stop him from going too far and hurting his sister. In addition to that, he had knowledge of my test scores from when I had enrolled here. Test scores that frankly were a ridiculous joke. Other than that, what else he knew was general information: he knew that I was a fast runner, as evidenced when I ran against him in that relay. He didn't actually know how capable I was in academics or in sports.

"I can sense someone's talents through my own senses and intuition, to a certain extent," said Horikita.

So, rather than anything concrete, it was an abstract idea, huh. For him to be able to evaluate me so thoroughly with that kind of method was impressive.

"So, what do I look like to you, exactly, with your senses or whatever you call it? I'd like to know, as a parting gift," I asked.

I was curious, so I thought I'd try asking him. In fact, I was thinking I'd compare his evaluation of me and see if it was the same as the one I had made of myself, in my own mind. I'm sure that Horikita's brother would be able to give me an answer, without any kind of unnecessary filter.

"All right. From what I see, you're..."

Horikita Manabu paused for a moment after saying that, thinking back on the past year that he had spent watching me.

"Based on everything I've experienced in my life thus far, you seem to be someone who deviates greatly from what I can predict. No matter what angle I try to come at you from, I can't find any flaws with you. I don't think

anything would work on you. I don't think I'd be able to deal with you in terms of brute force, such as in physical strength. Not to mention strategy and resourcefulness, either. Out of everyone I've ever met, you are the last person I'd ever want to fight," said Horikita.

That's an extremely generous assessment. Especially considering that he's saying all that simply by what he can sense.

"So, does that mean you're raising the white flag? You've completely surrendered to me?" I asked.

"That's a different matter. Even against a completely perfect opinion, there's always a chance to win," said Horikita.

I felt slightly relieved after hearing his response to my question.

"At this school, it's especially true that everyone competes as Class A, as a unit. No matter how outstanding the individual, there is a limit," he added.

"That's true. That's exactly why I think it's interesting," I replied.

"Ayanokouji. What kind of environment were you raised in? I'm certain that it's not like all of your abilities happened to be instilled in you by accident, naturally. And they're not the kind of abilities you could easily pick up because your family found you a thorough tutor," said Horikita.

"You didn't grow up in a normal family either, did you?" I asked in return.

If you were an elite student who even as student council president, you probably knew how to rise to the top.

"It's not as though I've stood at the top of everything since the beginning or anything. There were times when I struggled, when I only made little progress. But I have worked tirelessly in light of that fact. From early childhood and even to now, and beyond," said Horikita.

Horikita's brother was saying that he had gotten to where he was thanks to the accumulation of all the effort he's made.

"I suppose if I were to put my answer into that sort of logical pattern, then maybe I've put in even more effort than you have," I replied.

"...I suppose so," said Horikita.

To beat those who put in effort, you put in even more effort. That wasn't the answer to everyone, but it was certainly one answer. Horikita Manabu then took out his phone. He showed me the screen, which displayed a phone number on it. Then, he changed what was displayed on the screen and showed me a different number.

"Remember these two sets of phone numbers. The first is mine. The other is Tachibana's. If you have any trouble after graduation, feel free to contact us, any time. If you can't memorize the numbers right now, you can jot them down in your notes. But make sure you delete those notes later," he told me.

Contact with people outside of the school was forbidden, even by phone or other means. If I carelessly jotted down the numbers and made a record, that would only be a disadvantage for me. I nodded in response, signaling to him that it was no problem, and memorized the two sets of eleven-digit numbers, committing both phone numbers to memory. Personally, I couldn't imagine a day would come when I would actually call either of those numbers, but I supposed there wasn't any harm in keeping them in mind.

"Oh, that reminds me. I still haven't heard yet. Where are you going now, after you've graduated?" I asked.

Considering the fact that he also gave me Tachibana's phone number, I figured that they would continue to have a relationship after graduation.

"About that—"

Just as Horikita was about to tell me, he stopped speaking, and checked the time on his phone.

"Let's continue that conversation after you graduate. It's almost time for our scheduled appointment," said Horikita.

It was almost noon. The time when we would be meeting with his younger sister. However, she was nowhere to be seen. Even though Horikita's brother looked the same as he ever did, his expression unchanging, there was something about this that made me feel a little sad.

"Maybe it'd be a good idea for me to give her a quick call," I suggested.

I couldn't imagine something like she wasn't showing up because she didn't keep her promises. Even if she didn't oversleep, it was realistic to think that she might have had some kind of accident.

"No... Better not," he replied.

Even if she did have some kind of accident, it seemed like her brother's stance was to not call her anyway. Though, considering their past, I understood quite well that it wasn't like he disliked his sister or anything.

"You don't have to be so stubborn. It wouldn't be a bad thing if you reached out to her yourself from time to time, y'know," I told him.

"I would be afraid that me temporarily showing such emotions might stunt my sister's growth. If my sister was late simply because of some kind of accident, then that's fine. However, if she has decided that not meeting with me will help her grow, then me reaching out to her would merely be a hindrance to her," said Horikita.

"She'd grow without seeing you? Do you really think she'd arrive at such an idea?" I asked.

"That is for Suzune to decide."

Though he didn't come right out and say it directly, he was basically suggesting that this wasn't something for an outsider to have any say in.

"I can't see you ever indulging her like this, though."

"I've just determined what kinds of situations I can indulge her in is all," said Horikita.

So, he was thinking that this was exactly the time to indulge her then, I supposed. It was now a minute past noon. I thought that he'd immediately start walking through the main gate, but he hadn't started walking yet. Although it didn't look like he was indulging her, I supposed you could see this situation as him doing just that, albeit only a little bit.

"There's also something that I wanted to confirm with you, as well. I want you to give me an answer about something. Considering it a parting gift for me, for graduating," said Horikita, directing his gaze at me as he spoke.

In light of the consideration that he was showing to his sister here at the very end, I decided I'd act in kind, and nodded.

“If it’s something I can answer, sure,” I replied.

Horikita would probably start walking through the main gate once this conversation was over.

“Why do you spend your days hiding your talents?” he asked.

It wasn’t like I didn’t expect that kind of question, but he asked me fairly straight out.

“It’s simply because I don’t like standing out, I guess,” I answered.

“That’s something you plan to stick to, even if it means hiding who you truly are?” he asked.

“I can’t say for sure, really. I’ve never thought that much about it,” I replied.

When I came to this school, I just wanted to lead the life of a normal student. However, when he posed that question to me like that, I did have some doubts.

“I decided that I wanted to spend my days living like a normal, ordinary student. The kind of student you’d see anywhere else. Though there have been many twists and turns along the way so far, and there have been times where I’ve had to take action, I suppose,” I added.

“Are you planning to continue on as you have been, in the future?” he asked.

“No clue. I have been getting more and more attention lately. Maybe I’ll start taking things a little more seriously,” I replied.

To be perfectly honest, there were lots of things I didn’t understand, but I told him how I honestly felt right now. Upon hearing my answer, I wondered how Horikita would respond.

“What did I accomplish at this school? What was I capable of accomplishing? That’s all that I’ve been thinking about lately,” he replied, briefly glancing toward the school building in the distance.

“Did I give it my all? Was there any more room for growth? Those kinds of questions.”

Meaning, he spent his life in a way close to the exact opposite of mine. That was exactly why he rose to become even student council president.

“Is it really meaningful, spending your life here at this school while keeping your head down?” he asked.

“Well, if you consider what’s meaningful to me, wanting to take it easy, then I don’t think it’s wrong for me to do so.”

“You might be right, I suppose. But didn’t you come to this school so that you could leave something behind, to mark your mark, too? If that’s the case, then I think that you should make every effort, to have the most impact,” he replied.

“Leave something behind… That’s something that can only be done by people as radiant as you, though.”

I denied the suggestion of making my mark, but Horikita didn’t seem to be convinced.

“If you can’t make some kind of mark on the school, then make your mark on the students. The students probably wouldn’t ever forget it—their memories of the person named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, which have been inscribed in their mind.”

Inscribing my existence into someone else’s mind. I had never thought of something like that before.

“I appreciate that you’ve been helping my sister mature. But throughout this past year, I’ve come to understand well enough that you aren’t the kind of man to stop there, with only accomplishing that. You are hiding the strength of a giant. Which is why… I ask you to not disappoint me.”

He was giving me a stern, strongly worded pep talk, both as the former student council president and as my senpai here at the Advanced Nurturing High School.

“If you’re going to pursue finding yourself while you’re keeping yourself in bondage, then become someone who will remain in the memories of those around you in the three years you have here,” he added.

“Someone who will remain in the movies of those around me, huh? I might get expelled along the way though, in my second or third year.”

“Even if by some accident you are fated to be expelled from school before the end of your third year here, you can still remain in people’s

memories. If you can make even one student glad that Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was there when they look back on the three years they spent at this school, then I would consider that to be an accomplishment,” said Horikita.

When he told me that, reinforcing his point, I felt his words slowly but surely burrow their way into my heart.

“I see...huh. I’ll think it over,” I replied.

That was the best answer that I could have given at the present moment.

“Then, good. The answer won’t come from me. It will come from you, Ayanokouji.”

The student council, led by Nagumo. Horikita’s little sister. The school. I’m the one who will make a decision about those things in the end. The world is full of things that can help you grow. No matter where you look, there are hints you can find all over, which will help you improve yourself.

I supposed that’s just what I was doing by engaging with Horikita’s brother right now, like this. By leading a quiet life here at this school, while keeping my head down, I supposed I certainly would still leave something behind. My memory. Just a random memory that I could think of as fun. At first, I was satisfied with that.

That’s exactly why I had been living my life here as quietly as possible for the past year. But maybe that wasn’t the answer. Coming to this school itself also has meaning. That’s right.

“Sorry, I got strangely preachy there at the very end. Apologies,” said Horikita.

“Not at all. Actually, as your kouhai, I think those might have been the best words I could’ve heard from my senpai,” I replied.

I’m going to feel kind of lonely, once you leave. I thought about saying that, but stopped myself.

“Hm... It seems like we’ve each shown each other a side of ourselves that is rather unlike us,” he mused.

There were things we could discuss with one another precisely because we knew the distance between us. And also, there were some things we could understand precisely because we didn’t put them into words.

“Well, I suppose I’d better be going now,” said Horikita, as if he had sensed that his little sister wasn’t going to show up, now that it was after 12:10 in the afternoon.

Then, somewhat regretfully, he looked over in the direction of the first-year dormitories. The absence of his little sister, who was supposed to have come. No one could have predicted this turn of events. *Was this your answer then, Horikita?* I couldn’t help but wonder. I certainly had to admit that the relationship that these siblings had built was somewhat complicated.

However, I’m sure that they continued to suffer for years, in order to break that relationship. And finally, it was the very moment when we would arrive at the correct answer. I took hold of my phone inside my pocket. Should I forcefully bring her here to be together with her brother? Even if it’s just for a moment, even if it’s just for a short glance, if it’s something that will nurture Horikita, then even somewhat forceful measures will...

No... Even if I did that, it would probably have the opposite effect. That would likely cause a rift to open up in their relationship, when these two siblings had only just started warming up to each other. In the end, whether they met or not, whether they wanted to meet or not, everything would happen based on how both of them felt, together. This wasn’t something that a third party should intervene in.

“I’m sorry. My sister’s been causing you trouble all the way until the very end.”

Horikita quietly apologized to me, as if he could see what I was feeling.

“It’s not like I’ve suffered in any way, though,” I replied.

Turning his back to me, the man who had continued to stand at the forefront of this school for three years, started to leave.

“I’m quite proud of the fact that over these past three years, I haven’t stopped, and I’ve continued to lead the way here,” said Horikita.

That’s how he had summed up his time here. Last words from Horikita’s brother, as he looked back on the three years he had spent here.

“I had lost a great number of classmates along the way. And students from other classes, too,” he added.

I didn't feel the slightest hint of joy over graduating from Class A from him. But still, having said that, it wasn't like he looked disappointed, either. He was solemnly reflecting on what happened.

"In the end, a total of twenty-four students had been expelled by the time I reached graduation. Thirteen of those just in my third year here alone," said Horikita.

Whether that was more or less compared to previous years, I had no idea. In Nagumo's grade level, the second-year class, there had been seventeen withdrawals as of winter, if I recall.

"You first-years, you've still only had three students drop out," he observed.

It wasn't difficult to imagine that things would get tougher and tougher as we moved up through each grade level.

"I mean, it's inevitable that the students who don't get through the assignments will fail, right?" I asked.

"Yes, that's certainly true. The students who get left behind are generally those who fail to meet the requisite standard. However, sometimes, you lose exceptional students, too."

Maybe it was because that student was protecting someone else, or they ended up getting caught in a trap by more a powerful opponent. The disappearance of students you didn't expect wasn't necessarily a mystery.

"There are some who question the school's methods. However, I am very grateful to this school," said Horikita.

Horikita didn't reject the school's way of doing things, which at times could lead to people losing friends in quite an unreasonable fashion.

"At this school, students are being educated in order to carry the future of Japan. It's obvious that out of a hundred people, not all one hundred of them will be able to adapt. The same is true for people at a university or people who get a job at a company," said Horikita.

It wasn't just whether you were suited for it or not. A pass or fail decision was made after consideration of a variety of factors.

"I was able to learn this foundational principle. My experiences have taught me that once I leave here, I won't be easily screened out for a

superficial reason.”

I guess that’s how much he had grown here then, huh. I wondered how many students in his same grade were able to reach the same heights that he had gotten to.

“Well, I suppose this is it.”

The front gate. Horikita looked at the gate a few meters in front of him. Then...he looked back at me one last time.

“This is a very one-sided request for me to make, but take care of Suzune,” said Horikita, offering his right hand to me.

“Can I shake your hand?” he asked.

“Of course.”

I took his hand and shook it. A handshake was the act of joining your hand with someone else’s. Horikita’s brother’s hand, which I was grasping with my own, had a curious power behind it. Then, we both released each other’s hands.

“Let’s meet again, Ayanokouji.”

After giving me that parting message, he started to walk toward the front gate. If he were to go through that gate right now, there’s nothing anyone could do about it. Two years at minimum. Or getting expelled from school. Those were the only options that Horikita Suzune had for reuniting with her brother. And I would never see the man again myself.

“*Oniisaaaan!*”

A shout rang out from behind me. Considering the situation, there was no doubt in my mind whose voice it was. After hearing the voice, Horikita Manabu stopped in his tracks. It seemed that she had arrived just in the nick of time, at the last possible second, apparently. It was past noon, and Horikita Manabu was only a few short meters away from leaving. If she had arrived just one minute later, she probably wouldn’t have been able to see his face.

When Horikita’s brother turned around, I saw that in his eyes, there was a strong feeling of surprise. Something I hadn’t ever seen before. Was his little sister’s arrival really that unexpected? Well, I supposed there was that, of course. That’s what I had thought, but it wasn’t yet. Well, I suppose I should say that it wasn’t all there was to it.

The answer, the real reason for his surprise, would soon become clear to me.

“You...”

It was past the time we had been scheduled to meet. Horikita, who must have been running here in a hurry, was completely out of breath. She lined up next to me. But I supposed that right now, in this moment, I was basically just part of the scenery to Horikita. I wasn’t even in her field of vision. Then, while she caught her breath, she took a step closer to her brother.

“I’m so sorry I’m late...!”

She bowed deeply, apologizing. But why was she late? Normally, I would have probably asked her that question.

“Well—”

But this time, there wasn’t any need for her to answer why. Because you could tell the reason why with just a glance.

Was I confused? No. Just surprised. Because there was such a big difference between the Horikita of yesterday and the Horikita of today.

So, that was it, huh? The reason why Horikita’s brother had been able to tell right away that his little sister hadn’t grown at all when she started school here.

It looked like Horikita’s brother was at a loss for words right now, seeing her. The same went for me. This was their final day, a day to say farewell. And it was clear that Horikita had come here, fully prepared to be late, but coming anyway. There was no way a brother could scold a sister like that.

“Seems like you’ve changed,” said her brother softly, sounding somewhat relieved that his sister had appeared.

“I’ve...changed?” she repeated.

“No... Allow me to correct myself. You’ve returned to your old self, Suzune.”

This wasn’t a new beginning. She had returned to her original starting point.

“A year... No, many years have passed,” said Suzune.

As she continued to catch her breath, Horikita slowly started to respond to her brother.

“I don’t know why I couldn’t go back to being my old self much, much, earlier... I can’t begin to tell you how much I’ve deeply regretted it,” she added.

Taking a step forward, Horikita closed the distance between herself and her brother.

“What are you thinking about right now?” he asked.

“I wonder... To be honest, I’d be lying if I said that there weren’t still things that I was confused about,” said Horikita.

She struggled to get out what she wanted to say, sounding flustered. Horikita’s brother just watched her with calm, gentle eyes, waiting for the words to come.

“But there’s just one thing that I can say, quite clearly. I...have been chasing your shadow for a long, long time. But I’m not that person anymore,” she added.

Horikita Suzune, who thought only of her brother and lived only for his sake. She studied hard and did well in sports, all to gain the approval of her brother.

“Then, let me ask you something. Now that you’ve decided to stop following me, what are you going to do?” asked her brother.

Horikita took a deep breath and then started to speak once more. “I’ve had enough of chasing after other people. I’ve learned my lesson. I’m going to look for my own path.”

She was finally beginning to shed her doubts and indecision. She had only just begun to see what was happening around her. Even so, she couldn’t stop moving.

“And...”

Walking on your own path. It sounded easy, but was actually extremely difficult. Just being able to show her brother that was the best farewell gift she could have given him.

“I’m hoping that I can continue walking forward on my own, for the sake of my classmates,” she added.

Becoming an example, a mentor to others. That was an important aspect of being a leader.

“And in order to find my own path, I’m going to keep learning together with my friends at this school,” said Horikita.

When I met Horikita a year ago, I didn’t think that would have grown this much. A somewhat arrogant honors student, who excelled above other people. A neighbor who simply sat close to me. I had this image in my head of her as someone who, for better or worse, was all about personal ability.

“I see. Finally, you...really seem to have gone back to being your old self. The version of you that I kept tucked back in the corners of my memories.”

Unlike me, Horikita Manabu might have been able to really see it. He knew about and believed in his sister’s potential more than anyone else.

He placed the luggage that he had been holding down by his feet, and then drew in close to his sister. With just a few steps, the emotional distance that had existed between them would be no more. The two of them were now close enough that they could reach out to one another.

“Do you know the main reason I coldly pushed you away?” he asked.

“...No,” she replied.

Most likely, Horikita didn’t quite understand how her brother felt. She had only just been released from the spell of her past that had kept her bound. It was like forcibly wrenching open a locked treasure chest, unintentionally. Which means that she hadn’t found the key, her answer. Why did Horikita’s brother come to reject his sister? How did he come to shun her so harshly?

“It’s because you’re very precious to me,” said Horikita.

“Wha—?!”

And now, Horikita had received one final gift from her brother, in the form of him telling her what that key was.

“And I sensed incredible talent in you when you were very small. Even though you were inexperienced, I could see a brilliance in you, like an

unpolished gemstone. I was hoping that in time, you would be refined and polished, that you would acquire abilities that surpassed me.”

Her brother took one last step, closing in even closer. He was now so close that he would be able to touch her if he just raised his arm a little.

“But you were held prisoner by some illusion of me. You decided that you were inferior to me, and you gave up on trying to surpass me, deciding that it was impossible. You chose to throw away your own potential to grow. You simply chose to chase after me, making following me your last stop. I just couldn’t possibly tolerate such a thing,” said Horikita Manabu.

Chasing after her brother’s shadow and wanting to stand beside him certainly wasn’t a bad thing. You could say that it’s an admirable goal, of sorts. However, if you were to put it another way, that meant she’d be reaching her goal when she stood next to her brother. That’s precisely what he meant when he said last stop. There was a conflict between the little sister, who wanted to chase after her brother and have him as her final destination, and the older brother, who wanted his sister to surpass him and go beyond. I’m sure that created a significant estrangement between the two siblings.

“Be strong for others. And be kind.”

The older brother gently embraced his younger sister. He held her strongly, as her brother, supporting her when she was trying her absolute hardest simply to keep standing.

Horikita’s hair—*which had been cut short*—was fluttering.

“Oniisa—”

“You’re all right now. I’m sure of it,” said her brother, interrupting her.

There was no longer anything for me to say. There wasn’t any space for me to say anything.

“I’ve been silent for several years now about something. And it’s something I owe you an apology for.”

“An apology...?” asked Horikita, her face still buried in her brother’s chest. She didn’t know what he was talking about.

“I’m the main reason why our relationship has gotten so strained,” he replied.

“What do you mean by that...?” she asked, in a quiet voice.

“A long time ago, I told you that I like long hair. That was a lie I told on purpose.”

“Huh? Wh-what do you mean?!?” she replied, the shock evident in her voice. She must not have known, even now.

“I did it on purpose, to confirm something. You had always preferred short hair, and I was wondering if you would take me at my word and would grow your hair long, even if it meant losing a bit of your own personality,” said her brother.

As a result, Horikita had started growing her hair out in order to suit her brother’s preferences. Which was exactly why her brother immediately understood where things stood with his sister when they reunited at this school. He knew that Horikita Suzune hadn’t changed one bit. When he met with his younger sister, who continued to simply chase her brother’s shadow and nothing more, he was filled with disappointment. He didn’t even need to go so far as to check whether or not she was good at her studies or sports.

“...Please forgive me for lying to you.”

“...That was really cruel, oniisan.”

“I have no excuse.”

Maybe her brother purposefully didn’t come clean about the lie because he was trying to detect some kind of change in his sister, whom he believed *would* change some day.



“I forgive you, oniisan, for that lie. Since I’m sure that it’s because of that lie that I’m here today.”

It was precisely because Horikita, too, understood the reason for the lie that she smiled and forgave her brother for it. Manabu held her shoulders, and the two siblings looked at one another, face-to-face. Horikita was smiling ear-to-ear as she looked up at her brother. When her brother saw that, he returned a smile of his own, almost like he’d taken off a mask.

It wasn’t like he was a guy who never smiled at all. But this was just the first time I’d seen him smile so gently. I’d never see that smile ever again. Just one more year... I felt like if I could have spent just one more year with him in the same school, I could have gotten to know the person named Horikita Manabu better. Gotten closer to him. And I might have been able to change.

That really was a pity.

“Suzune. In two years, I’ll be waiting for you outside this gate. Please show me how much you’ve grown, then.”

“Okay. I will do my best... I’ll continue fighting until the very end,” she replied.

Everything that stood in the way of Horikita’s growth had now been removed. From here on out, Horikita would continue running forward, as far as she could go.

“Ayanokouji. I’m also looking forward to meeting you, too,” said Manabu.

Perhaps Horikita’s brother was feeling the same way I was.

“Yeah, definitely,” I replied.

Even though I knew that it was a wish that wouldn’t ever come true, I agreed strongly that we were feeling the same way.

“Well, it’s about time.”

It was almost twelve-thirty. Before I even realized it, the time that the bus was supposed to be arriving was already fast approaching. The Horikita siblings pulled apart from each other slowly, albeit reluctantly.

“Until we meet again.”

And with those parting words, Horikita's brother passed through the front gate. And just like that, he left. Horikita continued watching him, fixated on his back, trying not to even blink. I felt like Horikita Manabu had left behind a signpost for both his younger sister and for me.

5.1

EVEN THOUGH Horikita's brother could no longer be seen through the gate, she and I still continued looking in that direction for a while. But it wasn't like we could just sit around and stay immersed in this sentimental moment forever. Horikita seemed like she was petrified, unable to move. I used my words to break her free.

"It's going to feel lonely, isn't it?"

"...Yes."

Although it wasn't like they were saying their final farewells or anything, she still wasn't going to be able to see her brother or even hear his voice for two years. But Horikita's expression remained firm, and the look on her face seemed dignified, resolute.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun... I'm glad you were here today."

"Is that so? I thought I was just getting in the way, though," I replied.

"That's not true. If you hadn't talked with my brother, then I wouldn't have caught up in time. I'm truly grateful," said Horikita.

Horikita once again expressed words of gratitude to me, a guy who was clearly out of place here. But she wasn't even looking at me, she turned to look away, like she was looking in the direction of the future.

"Besides, this is the day that my brother left. It would have been sad if I was the only one to see him off..."

Although you could say that was what her brother had decided, it certainly did seem a little sad, I supposed.

He was someone who should have had a lot of students coming to see him off. I'm sure that the reason why he only had us come here was for his little sister's sake. In order to make it easier for Horikita to face herself, he kept everyone else away. Maybe her brother had planned that far ahead, taken that into account.

"I also had a kind of connection with your brother, too. Enough so that I wanted to talk to him a little more," I told her.

Initially, I didn't really treat talking to him as a welcome thing. But now, I think I really would have liked to have talked with him a little more. Hindsight is 20/20 they say, I suppose. The two of us walked back toward the dormitory.

"Anyway, though, you really chopped a lot of hair off, huh?" I told her.

Considering the fact that she looked the same as she always did up until yesterday, and that she had gotten here late, it wasn't hard to imagine that she had hastily come up with the idea to cut her hair this morning. I'm sure it was a last-minute decision.

"I used to always like it like this. But now it feels kind of strange," she replied.

However, that being said, I suppose it wasn't like she could just hastily lop her hair off and spoil her brother's big moment. In order to see her brother off in proper form, she had to bet on making an all-or-nothing last-ditch effort, even if that meant choosing to arrive late. In the end, though, Horikita won.

"But wouldn't it have been a better idea if you had talked to me about that in advance? If you were afraid of missing your chance of seeing your brother, you could have improved your chances of meeting him by using me to keep him here," I answered.

If I had known for sure that she was coming, I could have given her a little helping hand. It was a good thing that I just so happened to talk to her brother and buy her a little time, but...

"So, if I asked you for something, you would honestly help me, then?" she asked.

"I would have for today, at least," I replied.

"I'm not so sure about that. Well, that's what I'd like to tell you, but... The truth is, I actually tried to ask you for help," said Horikita.

But when I took out my phone, I didn't see any kind of record showing that she had tried to contact me.

"It's because I was in too much of a hurry, I suppose. I forgot my phone in my dorm room when I left to go get my hair cut. I didn't realize it until after I started getting it cut. God, I really am a mess, aren't I?" she

added.

Meaning she had gotten herself into a situation where there was nothing she could have done. It would have been much quicker for her to make a mad dash for the front gate rather than trying to go back for her phone after she got her haircut.

“Such an idiot,” said Horikita, smiling with self-derision.

“It just tells me how big a deal this decision was for Horikita, that you made today.”

It was a little amusing, though, to imagine Horikita rushing into the salon the second it was opening. Since Horikita usually did things in a very calculated manner, I supposed it wasn’t unreasonable to think that she’d make a mistake if she were flustered.

“Cutting my hair was my way of drawing a line in the sand, of making a statement about where I stand.”

“So, you weren’t thinking about what your brother’s likes were at the time? It wasn’t in the back of your mind?” I asked.

“Of course not. I was simply thinking of going back to how I used to be. The time I had started growing it out happened to coincide with the time that I had started to follow in my brother’s footsteps. In that sense, I thought it would be the best way to convey my feelings,” said Horikita.

It was the best course of action, but it was just a coincidence, then. After seeing her with long hair for a year, the feeling that there was something different about her was overwhelming.

“So, how does it feel to be back to being you, after all these years?” I asked.

“How does it feel? I don’t really know how to answer that. It’s true that when I was little, I liked short hair like what I have now. But after having long hair for so long, you feel a kind of affection for it. It’s kind of a complicated feeling, to be honest,” she replied.

Short hair, which she used to like. And long hair, which she had come to accept having now. Her old self and her current self. There wasn’t any doubt that both of them were Horikita Suzune.

“Right now, I feel like I could accept either version of myself,” she

added, as she touched her now short hair with her fingertips. “Which is why I’m going to think things over again, from the beginning. Because there are things about me right now that I’m not seeing. Do I continue to grow my hair out until I graduate? Or do I keep it short? If I do keep growing my hair back out, it’ll probably take about two years before it gets back to its original length... Well, I suppose that would be just in time for graduation.”

Her old self, and the self that she had been just before now. Horikita had accepted both of them.

“What I do know is that it doesn’t matter how long my hair is. I’ll be able to meet my brother proudly,” said Horikita.

I’ll be looking forward to seeing what the future would hold for Horikita as well, now that she had cut her hair short. Right at the very last moment, Horikita Manabu had left his sister a great asset. I had thought that Horikita wouldn’t grow without significant help, but it seems like that might have ended up being an error in judgment on my part.

“Do you miss him?” I asked.

To be honest, I feel like even if she had a whole hour...well, no, actually, even a whole day to talk with him, she still wouldn’t be able to say everything that she wanted to. She probably had a million things that she wanted to talk to him, years of thoughts of feelings that had built up. There was so much she wanted to say that she couldn’t even if she wanted to.

“Well... Yeah, I can’t help missing him,” she replied, nodding, as if to convince herself of the fact. “Anyway, though, the wall that stood between my brother and me has been taken down now. I just have to get through these next two years, and then afterward, I can talk a lot with him. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, that’s certainly true. He even told you that he’ll be waiting for you to graduate,” I replied.

Once the graduation ceremony was over, she would be free to contact people outside the school. When that time comes, would she be able to face her brother proudly and talk to him about everything?

“Well, it feels like today was a richly rewarding day. If I got anything more today, I feel like it’d just be getting greedy, and karma would come back to bite me,” said Horikita, quickly changing the topic.

Yes. On the surface, she was changing the topic, at least. I'm sure that she had changed the topic because she was trying her absolute hardest to stay calm and collected in her mind. But it wasn't that easy to just change how you felt and switch back to normal.

"But... This is enough, though," she said, stopping in her tracks but not turning around to look at me when she said that. She wasn't showing her face to me. Well, actually, I think it would be more accurate to say that she couldn't look at me.

"What's up?" I asked.

Although I knew what was really going on, I decided I'd play dumb and ask her that question. The usual cool-headed Horikita would've probably noticed that I had been playing dumb from what I had said. But right now, she didn't have that composure, so she wasn't in a state to see through me.

"I...I'm going to take a little detour on my way back," said Horikita.

It was like she was trying to throw me off the trail, implicitly telling me to head on back by myself.

"A detour?" I asked.

Even though I asked her where she was going, she couldn't give me an answer.

"It's just, well, I think I'll go for a walk around," she replied, giving me an ambiguous answer. There was a slight trembling in her voice.

"Want me to come with?" I asked.

"No, thank you," she replied.

After she said that, still being vague, she turned her back to me and started walking away. She wasn't heading toward Keyaki Mall, nor she was heading toward the convenience store either. She seemed to be walking off in search of a place where there weren't any people around. I suppose that she wouldn't exactly find such a place if she were to head back to the dorms together with me.

I followed Horikita. Of course, she was intending to be alone, but she wouldn't be able to calm down if she were being followed.

"Why...are you following me?" she asked in a hushed voice, without

even turning back to look at me.

“Dunno, I wonder,” I replied.

“If you don’t have any reason to, then don’t follow me,” she shot back.

She was refusing me, but I showed absolutely no pretense of heading back. Because Horikita had done a number of nasty things to me over the past year.

“All right, then I’ll give you a reason. Because I wanted to be a little mean to you,” I replied.

“...What are you even saying? I can’t understand you,” she shot back.

“I see. In that case, I’ll tell you.”

“You don’t need to say anything,” said Horikita.

“No, that won’t do,” I answered.

I slowly opened my mouth to speak once more, intending to collapse the defensive line that Horikita was holding.

“When you’re sad, wouldn’t it be better to just let it all out and cry?” I asked her.

That was it. That’s all I said.

“...Were you not listening to what I just said?” she replied.

“I was listening. I’m sure you must have been really happy that you were able to reconcile with your brother, right?” I told her.

“Yes, I was. And I was satisfied. So, what do I have to be sad about? Huh?”

“But there’s no way you could be satisfied. Sure, it’s true that you might be able to talk to him again in two years. But it’s not like people are creatures that are satisfied that easily,” I told her.

The girl who had been dreaming of this day now had to postpone it for another two years. I’m sure it wasn’t like she wasn’t feeling a sense of clarity about this, but I’m sure that wasn’t all there was.

“I’m...I’m satisfied. I am.”

“In that case, how about you turn around and look at me?” I asked.

Horikita still had her back to me. She shook her head no, without even listening to my request.

“I refuse. Why would I need to look at you?” she asked in return.

“I don’t know. I wonder,” I replied.

I hurriedly walked up to Horikita, saying just one more thing to her as she was trying to get away.

“It’s okay to cry.”

Reuniting with her brother after being apart for two years, only to be rejected. Her solitary battle on the uninhabited island, with a high fever. Playing a thankless role in the class poll. But in all those times, Horikita never cried.

“I-I...” she stammered.

She tried to keep moving forward, but her legs stopped. After trying and trying for so long, she had just finally been able to have an actual heart-to-heart moment with her brother. I’m sure that from tomorrow onward, they would be able to go back to how they were and be able to laugh together and talk together. However, her brother had already crossed the gate and was starting a new phase of his life. The next time they would be able to see each other would be two years from now, at the earliest.

“Stop... Stop it...” she replied, her voice slowly starting to tremble more.

During these next two long years at this school, Horikita would have to fight.

“But there’s nothing I can do about it...!”

Horikita tried to argue back with herself, but the things that she had been holding in just flowed out of her.

“Because...!”

She was thinking of her brother, who she had only just parted with.

“Even though I finally... I finally realized what my mistake was...!”

She collapsed and fell to her knees. She covered her face with both of her hands, trying desperately to stop the flowing tears.

“I’ve been separated from my brother again...!”

I’m sure that if she could have, she would have run out through the gate together with her brother. She didn’t breathe a word of those thoughts though, and she had resolutely watched her brother leave.

“Yeah. I’m sure you’re feeling lonely,” I told her.

“Yes, I am... I am...!” she wailed.

She was wailing, large tears streaming down her face, like she was a small child.



Tears continued to pour from her eyes, but Horikita was still trying to hold them back. If she didn't have school, I'm sure that Horikita would have followed her brother wherever he might go. Be able to see him whenever she wanted to, be able to talk to him whenever she wanted.

"So, go ahead, you can cry your eyes out right now, get it all out. Then, afterward, you can show your brother how much you've grown when you meet again. You've started to change, right at this very moment," I told her.

There wasn't any need for her to fret. Two years. In two years, I'm sure that Horikita can grow much, much more. I'm sure that her brother is looking forward to that, too.

"Isn't that right...Manabu?" I muttered to myself.

My voice couldn't reach him anymore. It disappeared into the blue sky, which was about to welcome spring.

5.2

NOT LONG AFTER pouring out her emotions, Horikita had stopped crying. But her willpower must have not yet returned to her, because she was still sitting down. I stood next to her, waiting quietly for the right moment. Fortunately enough, there didn't seem to be anyone else around. There weren't any other students around who could see us.

"I'm glad."

"What's there to be glad about? It's humiliating to me that you saw that..."

I had tried to offer her a little comfort, but I suppose that it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Well, I suppose you're right," I replied.

That's exactly why she was trying to be alone, I supposed. If I hadn't been there, no one would have seen her crying.

"But what's done is done, you saw it. I'll try to look on the bright side. Turn it into a positive."

"Turn it into a positive?" I asked.

"...I'm glad it was you who saw me. That's what I've decided to think," she replied.

She let out a deep sigh, sounding like she was really relieved. It certainly wasn't the kind of look that she had wanted other students to catch a glimpse of, that's for sure.

"All right. How about I share what happened today with Keisei and the others?" I asked, taking out my phone and aiming the camera lens at her.

"Do you want me to kill you?" she asked in return.

After seeing her bright red eyes glaring at me, I immediately put my phone away.

"It was a joke," I replied.

"Seeing as how you make such pointless jokes, it makes me want to

teach you what ‘appropriate time and place’ means,” she replied.

I supposed that if she could talk this much smack with me, that meant she was probably okay now.

“...Somehow, this seems kind of similar to something that happened a year ago.”

“You might be right.”

I remembered that we had talked like this in the middle of the night before, although it was in a slightly different place. Horikita, after reuniting with her brother, was feeling incredibly dejected. Even though today’s situation was the complete opposite of what happened then, I was feeling a sense of déjà vu.

“Why in the world do I keep making mistakes when you’re there right in front of me, watching me? You just happen to sit next to me in class,” huffed Horikita.

Come to think of it, I suppose that I’ve had a strange connection to Horikita ever since we’ve started school here, from the looks of it. It seems as though Horikita doesn’t like that at all though, apparently.

“How about you show me some of your mistakes once in a while?” she added, lamenting about how the situation was unfair.

“Mistakes, huh? Well, you did see one, recently. I lost that chess game against Sakayanagi,” I replied.

“I wouldn’t call that a mistake. That was simply a loss,” she shot back.

It didn’t seem like I could satisfy her, apparently.

“All right, just hope for something to happen when we become second-year students then,” I told her.

“I suppose that’s all I can do. I’ll be certain to add it to the list of things I’m looking forward to in the future,” she replied.

It sounded like Horikita wanted payback for me seeing her cry today, at any cost. At any rate though, I have to say, Horikita cutting her hair really was immensely shocking and impactful.

“I’m sure that a lot of people are going to be shocked when they see you,” I told her.

I'm sure that among our classmates, there would naturally be some of those who wanted to change their image up a little bit, but not that many.

"I don't mind if they're shocked to see me, really. It doesn't really matter to me," said Horikita, declaring that how other people viewed her didn't matter and that she didn't care.

I'm sure that Sudou would probably be the first person to pick up on her new look. There were only a few days left of spring break, so I'm sure that word might get around in that time... Well, no, if anyone were to witness her with short hair in that time, I'm sure that information would spread.

"I know this probably isn't the best time to bring it up, but do you remember the contest we talked about the other day?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied.

"I've come up with something. About what I want to request from you, when I win," I told her.

"Huh... I had thought for sure you would've waited until much later to tell me. To try to shake me up, mentally," said Horikita.

"No, I hadn't thought of doing something underhanded like that. It's just that I simply didn't think of anything before is all," I replied.

Even though she still seemed somewhat suspicious of me, Horikita urged me to say what my request was.

"If I win, then I want you to join the student council," I told her.

"...I believe I've already talked to you about this before," she replied.

Before, I had asked Horikita if she was interested in joining the student council. I told her that her brother endorsed her, even though he actually hadn't. He told me to decide whatever I wanted. I even had Horikita call her brother to back up what I said, but in the end, she had refused the idea of joining.

"Yeah. So, can you accept my condition?" I asked.

"I am not interested in joining the student council whatsoever, but... fine. Besides, all I have to do is win," said Horikita, agreeing to my request, saying that as long as she won, there was no problem.

"But even so, there's no guarantee that I'll actually be able to join, is

there?” she added.

“Don’t worry about that part. Nagumo is basically the type of person who would welcome anyone,” I replied.

He was very different from Manabu, who rejected a great number of people. More importantly though, since Horikita was Manabu’s sister, there was no way that Nagumo would just flat-out reject her.

“Can you at least tell me the reason why you want me to join the student council?” she asked.

“That’s a secret. I’ll tell you when you lose,” I replied.

“I really don’t like this. Is it not okay for me to at least hear that much right now?” she answered, urging.

“You’re thinking about what’s going to happen when you lose again, huh?” I asked.

“...That’s not it. I’m going to win. I just wanted to hear what your reason was ahead of time, is all. And besides, I could interpret what you said to mean that when you lose, you won’t tell me the reason why you want me to join.”

It was certainly true that after the outcome was decided there wouldn’t be any point in telling her the reason.

“Your brother has been concerned about Nagumo Miyabi for a long time. That’s why,” I replied.

“So, that means you want me to stand watch and monitor the student council president, then?” she asked.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“My brother requested you to do this, didn’t he?” said Horikita, directing her gaze at me, looking somewhat frustrated.

“Well, you two weren’t able to really maintain a friendly relationship before, so there wasn’t much choice,” I replied.

If they had opened up to each other before, Manabu might have been talking to his sister about this from the beginning.

“Stop being so modest. My brother pays more attention to you than anyone else at this school. If that wasn’t true, he wouldn’t have invited you to

see him off on his last day. Seriously... Why is it always *you*?" she huffed, complaining, slowly getting to her feet.

"Let's stop talking about this. I'm going to put you out of my mind for a while," said Horikita, shaking off the notion in exasperation, almost as if to say that if we didn't stop talking about this, she wouldn't be able to take it.

"There's just one last thing I want to check with you about though, Horikita," I told her.

"What is it? Are you planning on saying more weird things to me?" she replied.

"It's about Kushida. I figured I'd give you a quick rundown on the current situation, and what I'm thinking," I told her.

Horikita cocked her eyebrow at me, apparently feeling suspicious, after hearing me bring up something that she didn't quite understand.

"Current situation?" she asked.

In order to prevent Kushida from running amok, I entered into a contract with her. The deal was that I would give her half of the Private Points I had earned each month, in order to protect myself. That way, I would be able to remove myself from Kushida's list of targets.

"Are...you an idiot? How could you come up with such a ridiculous contract?"

"I did it to gain Kushida's trust," I replied.

"Even so, that was just completely thoughtless. Half of what you have every month is way too much," said Horikita.

"I wouldn't have been able to make her get real with me if I hadn't done at least that much. But that being said, I'm sure that whatever trust I had gotten from her has completely gone up in smoke now, after you publicly called her out in class before."

I supposed that rather than feeling dissatisfied with me right now, it seemed like she was probably feeling distrustful of me again.

"Oh, for the love of... I am honestly beginning to doubt whether you are actually such a superior person again after all," said Horikita.

Although I understood that she was feeling exasperated, we still

weren't done with the topic at hand.

"So, what's your reason for telling me this?" she asked.

"Because I've determined that making this crazy deal won't be a hindrance to me in the future after all."

"You don't think that continuing to share half of your points will be a hindrance?" she asked.

"Because if the contract holder, Kushida, gets expelled, the risk is gone," I told her.

When she heard what I had just said, Horikita's hands stopped moving. She turned to look at me, her eyes still somewhat red.

"You just nonchalantly said something entirely outrageous just now. Was that a joke?" she replied.

"I was planning on getting Kushida expelled. Well, no, actually, I still think that she should be expelled, even now."

"You're not... joking, are you?"

"Nope. Even as early as last summer, I had the idea of getting rid of Kushida in mind," I told her.

In truth, it wasn't like there weren't any good opportunities to have her eliminated.

"But... since you're telling me this now, that means things have changed, then?" she asked.

"Yeah. I wanted to entrust that decision to you," I replied.

Rather than passing down judgment myself, I'd let Horikita decide what to do about Kushida. That's why I had told her about what was going on.

"Isn't it obvious what I'm going to say? I have absolutely no intention of letting Kushida-san get expelled. No, rather, I have no intention of letting any of our classmates be discarded so carelessly, not a single one of them."

It seemed like her will was becoming more resolute day after day, after all.

"But I have no intention of being as naïve as Hirata-kun. There are

always students who are going to stand on that line, to be potentially sacrificed. Of course, who we have standing there may change, depending on their degree of contribution to the class,” said Horikita.

Meaning, if there was a situation where we needed to have someone expelled, like with what happened during the Class Vote, she would make that decision.

“And what happens if Kushida’s degree of contribution is the lowest?” I asked.

“Then she would become the prime candidate for expulsion when such a time comes,” replied Horikita.

There didn’t seem to be any lies or falsehoods in what she just said.

“But the possibility of Kushida falling down to the bottom tier of our class is very low,” she added.

“I know. From what I’ve seen, Kushida contributes quite a lot,” I replied.

She was capable both in academics and sports, and on top of that, she occupied an indispensable position in our class. Yamauchi’s expulsion had certainly caused her some pain, but nothing fatal.

“I just told you all this because I thought you could handle it. But the more that you grow, Horikita, and the more that you become the central figure of our class, the more Kushida will become a thorn in your side,” I added.

People who knew about Kushida’s past. A truth that cannot be erased, no matter what anyone did.

“So, you were thinking that you’d get rid of her before that happens then, I take it,” said Horikita.

“Yeah, that’s right. I mean, you’re not so naïve as to think that you’ll be able to persuade her into becoming your ally that easily, right?” I replied.

“I have to concede that point, I suppose. I am keenly aware of the fact that there’s no point in trying to persuade her or talk things out if I’m only going to do things halfway,” said Horikita.

So, even knowing that, she’s still planning to accept Kushida, huh? In

the past, I suppose I would've regarded that as mere naivety, but things were a little different now.

“In that case, I guess there’s nothing more for me to say,” I answered.

“You...weren’t trying to get Kushida-san kicked out of class during the class vote, were you?” asked Horikita.

“That would’ve been stupid. Sure, even though she helped Yamauchi, she’s still deeply trusted by our classmates,” I replied.

“Y-yes, I suppose you’re right. And I couldn’t see anything that suggested you were trying to do something like that before... But now that you’ve told me about this, am I right to assume that you’re going to completely leave the matter of Kushida-san to me now, from here on out?” asked Horikita.

“Yep. I promise not to do anything,” I replied.

It was up to Horikita to decide what choice to make in the future.

“So, the reason that you’ve told me all of this is because you’ve determined that you’re able to overcome this obstacle?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, I’m not that optimistic. I have consistently been leaning toward the idea of eliminating Kushida, even now,” I replied.

“All right. In that case, why?” she asked.

After she had asked me for the reason why, I stopped to think.

“You haven’t thought about it before?” she asked.

“Yeah, I haven’t... Well, I suppose that what I’m doing right now isn’t efficient,” I answered.

Thinking about the future, quietly working to get Kushida expelled was definitely the correct decision. And yet, I didn’t do that. I’m going to leave that decision to Horikita. The reason. The reason for that was...

“I suppose it’s that...I wanted to see how you would deal with that obstacle, I guess,” I told her.

I wasn’t too confident in the answer that I had come up with after racking my brain, but there wasn’t anything else.

“Probably,” I added.

“I’ll just leave it at that, then. It seems like it’s a better idea for me to take whatever you say with a grain of salt,” she replied.

Horikita, having seemingly made a complete recovery now, started walking away.

“I’ll be going now. What about you?” she asked.

“I’m going to hang around for a little while longer,” I replied.

After giving me those brief parting words, Horikita returned to the dormitory. She might start crying again in the middle of the night, but I suppose that’d probably be fine for the time being. I thought back to my conversation with Ichinose the other day. Sakayanagi. Ryuuen. Horikita’s growth. I was looking forward to it. The battle between the four classes. I wondered how much more they could change after another year had passed.

There were tons of factors that could spur them to grow more. The words of wisdom that Manabu had imparted were still stuck in the back of my mind. Be someone who makes a mark on the memories of the other students.

“Talk about a hell of a parting gift to give me...” I muttered to myself.

The things I could do in order to be remembered by the other students. That would be doing things to help nurture those students, helping them grow, I supposed, right? And then I could have those students who have matured compete against one another, making them aim for even greater heights.

When I imagine myself in that position... Yeah, I suppose it would be fair to say that it does make me feel pretty excited, I guess. I’m starting to feel like this is going to be fun. In my mind, I unconsciously started analyzing the strengths of the classes, going through the calculations. The results that I could see after one year had passed. Every class was still looking to grow.

Their strengths were still far too feeble. I felt like my heart was starting to race, when I thought about those things. But at the same time, I felt like my heart was rapidly cooling down, as well.

“What I was looking for was...a peaceful everyday life... That’s what I originally wanted, wasn’t it?”

Right now, for the first time in my life, I felt like there was some kind of filter in my heart. What I know as my heart certainly seems to have grown over this past year, undeniably so. Well, no, actually, it's still growing, even now. I'm sure that my heart is growing.

I tried to tell myself that. But it didn't work. It was almost as if my own impressions about myself weren't connecting with me. I wondered if the plating that had been sealing away my insides had just peeled off and fallen away. I couldn't help but feel a kind of blackness, something like anxiety.

I...

I wondered if I'd still be here at this school around this time next year...

Such an inexplicable darkness...enveloped me.

Chapter 6: Matsushita's Suspicions

ON APRIL 3, the end of spring vacation, I, Matsushita Chiaki, have made up my mind.

"Yeah, it's definitely nagging at me."

Ever since the year-end exam until today, there's been this feeling that's just continued to nag at me, deep down. Something about my classmate, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. I just can't seem to stop thinking about him lately. I'm sure that if I told anyone else that, they'd probably tease me and say that it's love or infatuation or something.

But that's not it. I can, unequivocally, declare right here and now that I am not feeling anything romantic for him or anything like that. I've started to feel very wary of Ayanokouji-kun. Even if I talked to other students about this, I'm sure they'd probably just give me a confused look. But I'm in the process of getting an answer, in my own way.

I suppose that for you to understand these feelings, first, you'll have to know me as a person. I was born into a fairly affluent family, and I was blessed with kind parents who raised me quite well, and who didn't really restrict any of my freedoms. They bought me anything I wanted, and in return, I've always studied hard and gotten excellent grades in regular classes and in cram school, becoming accomplished in all subjects.

Parents are grateful for their child's excellence, and children are grateful for their parents' excellence. We have an extremely blessed relationship. On top of that, I think that I've been blessed with fairly good looks, if I do say so myself. I'm guessing that many people would probably envy me, if they learned about those things. I will grow up, fall in love, eventually marry a man with means.

My life probably isn't the best or anything, but I can say that I've been blessed with a solid plan for my life. Also, I can see that I have some nice prospects for the future. Although there are several options I've been considering, I thought that working as a flight attendant for an international

airline or getting hired at a major company wouldn't be so bad.

But now that I've been attending this school, I've started to dream a little bigger. Getting accepted to a top-notch college abroad, and then in the future, going to work for the embassy, and later going on to the United Nations... That's the path I've been envisioning. My life had been smooth sailing, and there was a path for me that all I had to do was follow. I've never stumbled in my life before.

However, my first miscalculation came after I had enrolled in this school. It was only by graduating from Class A that my dreams of going on to college and getting a job would be fulfilled. Meaning that I wouldn't see any value in graduating from Class B or below. Of course, I am confident that I'm capable of securing my desired future path on my own to some extent.

But...graduating from Class B or lower will probably be a hindrance to me. I would probably get stuck with the distressing label of "student who couldn't manage to graduate from Class A." The significant difference between the advantages that I'd get when I achieve my goal vs. the disadvantages of missing out was a negative for me, as someone who wants stability.

And then I was assigned to Class D, not Class A. That meant I had been given a very painful setback. However, when I first enrolled here, I wasn't really panicking yet. That carelessness was my downfall. In just a month, we had quickly run out of Class Points, and we sank all the way to the bottom of the rankings.

"If you think about it calmly...we did have a chance to win then, didn't we?"

That's right. Even though we had started in Class D, we actually started side-by-side with the other classes, in a way. If we had really gotten a good grasp on the situation in that first month, we would have been able to move up in the class rankings. Though we had the worst possible start, we have managed to get some Class Points back after the year has passed. We even briefly moved up to Class C for a time. We can still aim for the higher classes in the future, too...

"No, that's impossible, isn't it?"

Even if we had realized it early on, the gap in basic ability between us and the other classes is bigger than we imagined. They probably would've pulled away from us sooner or later anyway. It just so happens that this year went well for us, but when you consider the difference in talent between classes in terms of students as individuals, we're sorely lacking. As long as we don't do anything to overturn those facts, then my chances of making it to Class A are close to zero.

I really don't like to say this, but I am proud of the fact that I'm one of the best students in my grade. I am close to certain that if I applied myself, I could place within the top ten percent. However, the reason why I haven't gotten toward the top and instead have been staying somewhere in the middle of the class hierarchy is that I've been holding back. Of course, I try not to drag anybody down when it's something important, but I really don't like standing out too much.

Besides, the group of girls that I've gotten to be friends with is full of people who are at a rather low level academically. About half of the students in Class D fall into the bottom ten or twenty percent of our grade level. If I thoughtlessly displayed my true abilities in such an environment, I could either make the other students jealous, or they'd end up relying on me heavily, which would put me in an awkward situation. I wanted to avoid that.

Still though, even if I had applied myself seriously, the situation probably wouldn't have changed all that much. For better or worse, I'm just an excellent student at most, not a genius or anything. More than anything else though, I'm not the type of person to take the initiative. It's just...

Well, it's not like I was thinking I'd rely on others to take care of everything for me, but personally, I do want to graduate from Class A. If I could make that happen, then I'd want to follow along an easy route, which would lead me in a direction of stabilizing my future. To do that, I needed to make our entire class work hard, but...

After seeing everything that happened this past year, I felt like that was impossible, and halfway gave up. It's certainly true that there are some outstanding people in our class. There's Horikita-san, Hirata-kun, and Kushida-san. There are also smart students like Yukimura-kun and Wang-san. But we still don't have enough pieces. The reality of the situation is that many people are dragging their feet.

Even if you subtracted those students from the equation, we were still in the negative. If only two or three more people could stand up and hang with those exceptional students I had listed... Ugh, so frustrating.

That's right...

I was tormented by those thoughts, until Ayanokouji-kun had caught my attention. This is just a complete guess on my part, but I think that Ayanokouji-kun is the same type of person as me. He came to this school because he wanted to live his own life, for some reason. He seemed to be far less ambitious than me, regarding making some success in life, and he seemed like he couldn't care less about Class A or Class D.

And yet, he has significant ability. If my interpretation of things is on the mark, that is. He and I would be two more cards that Class D can add to its hand. If that happened, then we might be able to aim for the higher-level classes, depending on our efforts. That thought had been popping up in my mind lately. Why did I come to think of him as that type of person? Well, that's because of the evidence that I've found so far, or rather, the concerns that I've had, I suppose.

Karuizawa-san's occasional gazes at Ayanokouji-kun. And the fact that there's this sense of closeness between them, somehow. At first, I thought it was just a misunderstanding, but when she and Hirata-kun broke up, deep down, I was convinced. She's attracted to him. Karuizawa-san, who usually feels like dating a good guy is a sign of status, has chosen Ayanokouji-kun.

Why? Because he was good-looking? No, I couldn't imagine that was all there was to it. If that were the case, it would've been more convenient for her to simply have continued dating Hirata-kun, who is also quite popular. In that case...

I think that it's probably because Ayanokouji-kun has a level of ability high enough to make up for a lack of popularity. That's what I've concluded. If that was true, then a great number of pieces fell into place almost frighteningly well. Just look at how Horikita-san, who acts as the leader of our class engages with him, and also how Hirata-kun engages with him. There isn't a doubt in my mind that both of them think very highly of Ayanokouji-kun.

Then there's the fact that he's quite close with Ichinose-san, too. Even when I think back on it now, I can't help but feel like there's something

strange about his intense race against the former student council president during the sports festival. On top of that, there was also the time when Sakayanagi had mobilized the entirety of Class A and he was awarded a Protection Point.

I had thought that he had just happened to have been selected by Yamauchi-kun as a student to get expelled back during the class vote, just by coincidence. But the fact that he had later went on to fight as our commander in the exam made it seem too far simple for me to dismiss it as mere coincidence. I'm sure that anyone could feel like Ayanokouji-kun was such a complete mystery, given the situation.

But most of the students haven't noticed anything. That's right. I suppose that's because he hardly ever took action while he was in the public eye. Even though his speed was certainly outstanding, that alone would probably only place him near the top of the hierarchy up until elementary school, at best. High school students... Well, no, it's more like: the closer that you get to adulthood, the more your communication skills will be tested.

Many of the students who reign up on high at the top of the hierarchy have outstanding abilities, as well as communication skills. Lacking just one of these aspects led to people getting a different impression. He's fast, but he doesn't make much of an impact. That's the impression that many people have of Ayanokouji-kun.

If he had communication skills too, then his position in the hierarchy would be considerably higher. Depending on what his personality is like too, he might have even been in the same position as Hirata-kun, equal to him. But that was all just armchair theory, or rather, me just overthinking things, talking about something impossible. It would be like saying something totally unbelievable, like what if Sudou-kun were smarter and more sociable, or what if Yukimura-kun were great at sports.

The top priorities our class needed to satisfy right now were academic ability, followed by physical prowess. And it was highly likely that Ayanokouji-kun could satisfy both of those needs. Moreover, he might even surpass Hirata-kun in both of those areas. He's quite the find. Of course, these assumptions of mine contain a *bit* of wishful thinking, I suppose. Because if that were the case and he was that exceptional, then he would be a great help in improving our class's situation.

In fact, I'd honestly have no complaints if he was at least as capable as I am. It was what happened during the final exam that made me pay so much attention to Ayanokouji-kun. He had correctly solved a problem during the Flash Mental Arithmetic event that he shouldn't have been able to. That was one of the few decisive moments that led to my decision. His unknown abilities. I wanted to know all about them. And, if he was the real thing, then there was no way I wouldn't take advantage of it. I am almost certain that he's quite close to me in academic and physical ability.

Considering the fact that he had been keeping his head down and keeping quiet for this past year, he probably isn't the sort of person that I'd be able to entice into helping so easily. But I am confident in my interpretation of the facts. I was confident when it came to psychological warfare. In that regard, I am superior.

I could make him think that I was getting in touch with him simply out of curiosity, and then I could discern his true nature and get him to cooperate. That will become the starting signal that heralds our class's counterattack next year.

“...Yeah, right.”

Getting up to Class A was certainly appealing. But that wasn't the only thing that was driving me right now. There was boredom, too. I didn't just want to steadily walk straight ahead along the path of my life, I wanted some thrills, too. I wanted to pursue this mysterious element, which my other classmates didn't have. That was the main reason why I wanted to get in touch with Ayanokouji-kun.

After I had finished getting changed, I headed out toward Keyaki Mall, since I had promised that I'd meet up with my friends today. Lately, I'd spend my days searching for Ayanokouji-kun amongst the crowd. But the odds of a chance encounter weren't exactly that high, even on school grounds.

I didn't see him once during the first half of spring break. It was a complete waste of time. I wanted to find some kind of clue, a lead. My curiosity and desire were selfishly directing my gaze, day after day.

6.1

“MATSUSHITA-SAN! Hey, over here!”

“Morning!”

It was just after eleven in the morning. I met up with my usual group of friends, Shinohara-san and Satou-san. During spring break, we got together just about every day, for no reason at all really, and spend the day indulging in silly chit-chat. I didn't necessarily hate it or anything, but it was kind of boring.

I had been playing the part of the good girl for about a year, but right now, I was looking for some stimulation. So, I decided to dive into this conversation and press my classmates a little, for something juicy.

“Shinohara-san, have you made any progress with Ike-kun?” I asked.

I try to overcome my burden with whatever meager stimulation I can get.

“H-huh, what?! Wh-why would you ask that? Ugh, with *him*?! No way!” shouted Shinohara-san, panicked, denying that anything was going on.

But judging from how she was acting, she couldn't hide the fact that she was really shaken by my question. Satou-san's eyes went wide with amazement. The look in her eyes seemed to both show surprise and excitement, as if she were asking me: *Are you seriously going to bring that up?* That was interesting.

The fact that Ike-kun and Shinohara-san had quickly become more and more intimate with one another over the past several months had already become public knowledge. I'm sure that they're both trying to hide it, but this is a small school. No matter how they try to hide it, if a guy and a girl start dating, people will notice.

“I was just thinking it was about time you came out with it and told us already. You know?” I asked.

“L-look, I told you, it's not like that... Besides, ugh, *him*? Ike? He's like the epitome of a lousy jerk boy!” she replied.

Shinohara-san denied it. The wording she used when doing so was appropriate, though. It was certainly true that if you looked at him based on his qualifications alone, he was certainly at the bottom of the barrel. He's short. He's not capable academically. And he's not exactly a smooth talker, either. There wasn't any limit to the number of things that you could find fault with when it came to Ike-kun. But you couldn't measure something like love with that alone.

It's true that sometimes, people can be attracted to those no-good loser types. It's kind of like a sudden traffic accident, in some sense. And besides, when you think about what level Shinohara-san is at, they could actually be considered a good match. It's not like they're a mismatch at all.

"Come on, it's all right, isn't it? I mean, it's not like we know who has a crush on who exactly, in this situation," said Satou-san.

For some reason, Satou-san's eyes lit up at talk of romance. She turned toward Shinohara-san with a smile on her face.

"I told you, it's not like that," huffed Shinohara-san.

Since Shinohara-san had refused to admit it, I decided to speak up, so that I could spur Satou-san on to keep pressing.

"Hey, you don't have to deny it. Personally, I'd really like to hear how you really feel is all. Y'know?" I added.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm really curious, too! Come on, tell us, tell us!" said Satou-san.

It was really quite easy to get Satou-san to obediently do what I wanted her to with just a little bit of instruction at times like this. She's the type of person who can't think about things too deeply. I couldn't help but think that this also had quite a negative effect on her academic abilities, too, actually.

Even though I've given her such a scathing evaluation, it's not like I dislike her as a person at all. Both Shinohara-san and Satou-san were open, honest friends who I could let my guard down around. They're invaluable female friends in my private life.

If they were ever having trouble, I'd want to listen to what they had to say and help them out. Of course, if they had enough ability to keep up with me, I don't even need to say how great that would be. Just then, Shinohara-

san, who had no clue that I was just thinking those kinds of things, started to talk about her relationship with Ike-kun.

“Well, to be honest, we’ve been fighting for no reason all the time lately. So, it doesn’t especially feel like we’re really making much progress,” she said, letting out a sigh and shaking her head.

It wasn’t like she was denying the idea that they were making at least *some* progress though, from the sounds of it.

“It kind of feels like you both have a similar personality type, where you can’t be honest with how you feel. I’m sure that’ll change after a little while though.”

Although they were a good match, I had the impression that they pushed back against one another in some weird ways. I felt like if they got the right push, the right opportunity, the distance between them would quickly shrink.

“Enough about me though, what about you, Matsushita-san? Is there anyone that you have a crush on?” asked Shinohara-san.

“Me?” I asked.

I had expected her to reply to me in such a way. Actually, if anything, I had guided her into doing just that.

“I think you said something before to us, like that if you were to date someone, it’d be an upperclassman,” added Satou-san, jumping into the conversation. It seemed like she had remembered something after hearing Shinohara-san bring it up. No matter whose story of romance it was, if it was exciting and juicy, then it was welcome. That’s just what girls were like.

“Yeah, that’s right. But...as long as whoever it is meets certain conditions, then I wouldn’t limit myself to looking only at upperclassmen, I suppose.”

I took control of their thought processes, and slowly guided the conversation in the direction that I had wanted it to go. It’s not like that’s something all that special though, really. It’s something that everyone does in their everyday lives, nonchalantly. The only difference is whether you’re aware you’re doing it or not.

“Oh? So does that mean you’ve changed your mind?” asked Satou-san,

taking the bait, as if it was the natural thing to do.

“I mean, a guy’s qualifications are something you can’t compromise about, sure. I do want someone good-looking, who is also a good person on the inside. And also...a good family background is a necessity. I’d also want someone whose parents are educated and accomplished,” I replied.

No matter how miraculously good their child’s accomplishments might be, if their parents were worthless, then they wouldn’t meet my standards.

“Someone with good qualifications, who has a good family background... Do you mean someone like Kouenji-kun then, by any chance?” asked Shinohara-san, somewhat skeptically.

“Huh? I mean, sure, in terms of looks, he might be good, but isn’t he kind of, you know?” said Satou-san, seemingly taken slightly aback after hearing Kouenji-kun’s name.

Kouenji-kun’s reputation in our class is unimaginably bad. The reason for that is plain and simple: he’s a strange person who constantly causes nothing but trouble for our class. However, I suppose you could say that the difference in how he’s regarded inside our class vs. outside our class is significant.

At a glance, he has no shortcomings whatsoever when it comes to things like his appearance or his family background. And he also seems to have quite a gentlemanly side to him, in his interactions with women. Which is why it’s completely understandable that he’s fawned over by girls across grade levels.

In regard to his academic prowess, I can see that he hides nigh-limitless ability, though he never usually brings out his full potential. You could see that he’s a rare breed, someone who meets nearly all of the qualifications I’m looking for in a guy. If I were going by ability alone, I think that Kouenji-kun would be the number-one pick. But there are some other things that I can understand about him, without even needing to check.

He’s not the kind of person who could be persuaded to do anything by a normal person. He was a weirdo, unimaginably so. You can tell right from the very beginning that he wasn’t worth the time or effort. Trying to do anything with him would be pointless. In that sense, compared to Sudou-kun or Ike-kun, he’s even worse... Well, no, actually, you could say that he’s the

biggest burden on our class.

“No, not Kouenji-kun. If anything, I’m not even sure he’s even human.”

After hearing my evaluation of him, the two other girls suddenly burst into laughter.

“If he ever took things seriously, he would definitely become even more popular than Hirata-kun. But there’s no way he’ll ever take anything seriously,” I added.

That was my evaluation. And it was something that Shinohara-san and Satou-san both vigorously agreed with. I was grateful to him, because he was a rare breed of person who taught me that even a single flaw could make someone go from a full one hundred points to zero points. We had started with the topic of Shinohara-san and Ike-kun’s romance, and then went on to my idea of an ideal partner. Then, we were on to the next part of our conversation.

“Oh, that reminds me, Satou-san. What ever happened with Ayanokouji-kun?” I asked.

“Huh...? Wh-why are you asking me that?” she replied, stiffening up after hearing my abrupt question.

Then, Shinohara-san also looked over at her, as if she had just remembered something as well. It was what happened during winter break. Something that Satou-san had told us about. She had confided in us that she was interested in Ayanokouji-kun, and she was agonizing over whether she should tell him how she felt. At the time, Shinohara-san and I had just intended to enjoy watching the situation unfold from afar, while cheering them on, just like what Satou-san and I were doing with Shinohara-san and Ike-kun today.

“W-well, I didn’t really...”

Satou-san seemed like she was going to deny anything had happened at first, but then she suddenly stopped speaking. I noticed that she had come to a complete stop when Ayanokouji-kun became the subject of the conversation. Of course, both Shinohara-san and I understood what that meant, but we didn’t make mention of it. Did she tell him how she felt and get rejected? Or, perhaps, did she have a change of heart?

Anyway, out of consideration for her, I decided I wouldn't touch on that unless Satou-san herself talked about it. But it was a path I couldn't avoid going down, if I wanted to know about Ayanokouji-kun in greater detail.

“...I-is it okay if we keep it secret, just between us?” she asked.

That's how we'd get on the topic. Shinohara-san and I, both convinced that we were about to hear something very interesting, gently tapped Satou-san on the shoulder.

“Of course.”

6.2

AND SO, we headed over to the café, to listen to what was bothering Satou-san. We were beginning to start the process of listening to her concerns and then repeatedly expressing agreement. A time by girls, for girls. Unlike guys, who go straight for a solution, girls first begin by seeking affirmation. That wasn't always a bad thing.

“Well, to be honest, I... I-I told Ayanokouji-kun how I feel about him...”

Shinohara-san and I nearly spat out our tea simultaneously when we heard those words pass by Satou-san's lips.

“Huh? Huh?! S-seriously? When?!” shouted Shinohara-san.

Since she thought she was the furthest along in our group when it came to having a relationship with a guy, she couldn't help but jump on the topic. I knew that there was something going on between the two of them, but I didn't realize that she had gotten that far. But on the other hand, I suppose that the result was actually obvious. If they had ended up deciding to start dating, I'm sure she would have told us about it. Even if she were hiding the relationship out of embarrassment, I surely would have noticed. But since that wasn't the case, that meant...

“I got rejected.”

From the sounds of it, some time had passed since she had talked to him, then. I couldn't sense any sign that she was upset or anxious in her voice. I'm sure that she had cried over it many times over, and now was just trying to move on. And considering all that... then she might have told him how she felt during winter break. If that happened because we had inadvertently pushed her into rushing things and telling him right away, then we might have really done her a disservice and let her down.

“No way, you're kidding me! Is Ayanokouji-kun stupid or something?!” huffed Shinohara-san.

Having a girl tell you that she has feelings for you—and a girl like Satou-san, no less, who is certainly nothing to scoff at in terms of physical

appearance—was very unusual. Shinohara-san sounded both shocked and angry that she had gotten rejected.

“Why, though? Why did you get rejected?” she added.

“...He said it was simply a problem with his feelings. He told me that since he didn’t like me that way, he couldn’t go out with me,” said Satou-san.

Shinohara-san brought her hand to her forehead, muttering a disgruntled “Ugh, he’s unbelievable,” under her breath.

“Maybe it’s simply that there’s someone else he likes already? Like Horikita-san, for example,” I replied, in order to confirm with Satou-san whether that might have been the case.

But she shook her head. It was certainly true that whenever Ayanokouji-kun’s name popped up, Horikita-san’s seemed to follow shortly afterward.

Recently, Ayanokouji-kun’s presence could be felt more and more within our class, he was becoming harder to ignore. There had been a little bit of gossip going around that Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san might be getting together. But in the end, nothing really seemed to come from it, so talk died down.

“He said it would’ve been the same even if it was Horikita-san or Kushida-san,” added Satou-san.

Sure enough, it seemed unlikely that those two were actually that close after all.

“No way! Really?! Like, for real?!” shouted Shinohara-san.

Saying nothing about the mention of Horikita-san’s name, Shinohara-san’s passion seemed to hit its peak when she heard Kushida-san’s name mentioned.

“Okay, so that just proves it. He’s this weird antisocial loner with no interest in romance. And he’s a little bit creepy. Like, ugh.”

I could understand why she’d arrive at that conclusion. However, Satou-san, the person of interest in this conversation, didn’t seem to share her opinion.

“If he doesn’t even want to get to know a cute girl... Then maybe that

means he already has a true love?" I asked, cutting into the conversation, looking over at Satou-san.

When I looked at her, she averted her eyes, but still nodded in response. People tend to observe the person they like more than they do anyone else. The person who would be able to best sense who Ayanokouji-kun is interested in would be Satou-san.

"I think that Ayanokouji-kun probably...likes Karuizawa-san," she replied, while directing her gaze elsewhere.

"No way! Wait, wait, hold on. Really? Like, what? WHAT? Seriously, for real, Karuizawa-san?!" shouted Shinohara-san.

Shinohara-san and I exchanged glances once again. I supposed that if someone didn't already know, they would come off sounding like an incredibly unexpected pair. But I only pretended to be surprised. Deep down, I was quite convinced already. Because my reading of the situation seemed to be in complete agreement with Satou-san's opinion about who Ayanokouji-kun liked.

"Yeah. And also... I think that most likely, Karuizawa-san...likes him back, actually," replied Satou-san.

"Is it possible that had something to do with her breakup with Hirata-kun then?" I asked.

After hearing my question, Satou-san, though seemingly still skeptical, nodded in response.

"Okay, hold on, switching over from Hirata-kun to Ayanokouji-kun? Okay, I'm sorry, but I just don't get it," said Shinohara-san.

I supposed that wasn't really something that Shinohara-san, who was trying to choose Ike-kun as her partner, should be saying, though.

"I don't think it's weird at all. I...I also think Ayanokouji-kun is the better pick of the two, actually," said Satou-san.

"You still like him...?" replied Shinohara-san.

"I'm trying to forget how I feel about him, but I just keep finding myself drawn toward him..." answered Satou-san.

She had realized the truth of the matter, since she had been following

Ayanokouji-kun with her eyes day after day now. *I'm sorry, Satou-san, but you've been a very helpful point of reference.*

“Anyway though...I do feel like I’ve been hearing Ayanokouji-kun’s name a lot recently, for some reason,” said Shinohara-san, casually expressing the suspicions that had come to mind.

“Like when he was the commander? Oh, and then also when he got that Protection Point from Sakayanagi-san?” added Satou-san, who also felt that his name had been coming up a lot lately, mentioning the instances when Ayanokouji-kun was a hot topic.

“It’s so strange. Why did it have to be Ayanokouji-kun, anyway? Horikita-san said it was all just coincidence and all, but...well,” said Shinohara-san.

I had thought that was strange, too. But there wasn’t really any point in having a serious discussion with these two.

“Well, thinking back on it now, I actually think what she did was a super good move. If you gave someone a Protection Point, then they basically would have been put into a position where they would have had to become a sacrifice for the final exam, right? If you think that Sakayanagi-san had all that in mind from the very beginning, then it all makes sense,” I replied.

I decided to bring that part of the conversation to an end by giving them an explanation that was at least somewhat convincing.

“Ah, okay...!”

If Ike-kun had been put in that position instead of Ayanokouji-kun, then Sakayanagi-san would have won more easily, though. Of course, she might have chosen Ayanokouji-kun for the sake of picking someone unexpected. At any rate, I figured that I would save those thoughts for later. The fact that Karuizawa-san liked Ayanokouji-kun, and vice versa, might very well be true. I could say that just finding out that much was a substantial gain for me today. I could probably use that as a starting point, to make contact.

“I thought that Karuizawa-san was the kind of person who put a lot of importance on a person’s qualifications, like me,” I stated.

“Well, you know, Ayanokouji-kun is like, super amazing, isn’t he?”

replied Satou-san.

“Just for being fast? Isn’t that all he’s got?” replied Shinohara-san.

“But he’s also really clever! Or like, doesn’t it feel like he seems to know just about everything?” replied Satou-san, asking us if we felt the same way.

“No way,” replied Shinohara-san immediately.

Since she had disagreed with what Satou-san had said, I decided I’d align myself with Satou-san.

“I do definitely get the impression that he’s cleverer and more capable than the weird guys in class,” I replied.

Since Shinohara-san wasn’t showing any sign of aligning with Satou-san here, I wanted to make sure I was taking Satou-san’s side.

“I know, right?!” replied Satou-san.

Even though she had gotten turned down by him, her eyes sparkled when she heard me compliment Ayanokouji-kun. She seemed really happy about it. I suppose that she still had romantic feelings for him after all, huh?

“Maybe he just looks like that, because he doesn’t really say that much though?” said Shinohara-san.

“He’s the complete opposite of Ike-kun. He’s always talking, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, totally. Even when I tell him to be quiet, he just keeps going,” said Shinohara-san. Even though she sounded disgruntled when she said that, she didn’t seem like she was actually all that bothered by him.

“So anyway, I—”

Just as Satou-san was about to keep going, I happened to catch sight of Ayanokouji-kun out of the corner of my eye. The other girls were too absorbed in the conversation and didn’t notice.

“Oh, hey, sorry. Do you mind if I go make a quick call?” I asked.

When I asked them that question, they both responded cheerfully, saying that they didn’t mind.

“It might take kind of a long time, so if anything happens, let me know,” I told them.

After telling them that, I got up from my seat and acted like I was going to make a call. As soon as I followed Ayanokouji-kun's trail, I caught sight of him from behind. Strike while the iron is hot, they always say. I made sure not to panic, not straying out of Shinohara-san and Satou-san's line of sight. I pretended like I was on my phone while following Ayanokouji-kun.

I did feel a tinge of anxiety, trying to shadow someone without them noticing me. How much distance between us would be safe to keep? What distance wouldn't be safe? If I was careless with how I tailed him, he'd become wary of me. That was exactly why I would want to pretend that it was just a coincidence if we did bump into each other.

If I miss this opportunity during spring break, then the only time I'd be able to meet him would probably be after we've started our second year here. I'd like to make contact with him before then, if possible. And moreover, Ayanokouji-kun wasn't accompanied by any of his companions at present, fortunately.

Now would probably be a good time to try to talk to him. That's what I had thought anyway, but...I quickly hid from view. Because I noticed someone else approaching Ayanokouji-kun.

"That person is...the new acting director...if I recall," I muttered to myself.

For some reason, he appeared to be talking with Ayanokouji-kun. What an interesting pair. I might be able to get my hands on some new information. If anything about his *abilities* happened to come up in the conversation, then I might be able to get something straight from their own mouths.

"He's been engaged in conversation with the director for quite a long time now..."

It had been close to ten minutes. I think that was probably too long a time for them to simply be making small talk. Could Ayanokouji-kun and the director already be acquainted with one another, by chance? The director was talking to him as if they were close. But Ayanokouji-kun, on the other hand, had the same blank expression on his face as usual.

"...I don't understand."

While it did seem like they had already been acquainted with one

another, at same time, it seemed like they were saying lots of things that would typically come up when meeting someone for the first time. Their behavior revealed nothing about their respective backgrounds. If I could get a little bit closer, I might be able to hear their conversation. But that would be dangerous.

I could pretend that I was just a passerby, but if I did that, I wouldn't have anywhere to hide. I think I should just stay here and keep watching them for a little bit longer...

Then, their long conversation suddenly came to an abrupt end. The director seemed to have gone over to meet up with some other adults who were waiting for him near the entrance to the pharmacy, a little way away.

What was Ayanokouji-kun going to do, I wondered... Then, he moved. He started to walk away somewhere, as if nothing had even happened.

I had been hoping that I could have gotten some information from his conversation with the director, but I struck out, I guess...

I was planning on calling out to Ayanokouji-kun, but then I started to feel like I should withdraw the idea. Maybe I should get better prepared after all, get some backup. As I tailed Ayanokouji-kun after he just turned the corner, I thought to myself: I'll follow him a little bit longer, and if nothing happens, I'd go back and join Shinohara-san and Satou-san.



6.3

ON THAT DAY, I came to do some shopping at Keyaki Mall by myself. Spring break was ending, and the new semester was just about to begin, so I thought I'd like to go looking for some new clothes and such. That's all that I had planned to do today originally, but things started to change. And the first change came from behind me. Then, the next change came from directly in front of me. Changes for the worse.

“May I have a moment?”

It all started when four adults approached me, just as I was thinking about where I'd start my shopping trip. Three of them were dressed like they were construction workers or something, with clipboards in hand. However, one of them was empty-handed and dressed in a slick suit. That was Tsukishiro. Once I had stopped walking, Tsukishiro briefly turned back to look at the three others.

“Please continue to handle the construction work just as we've planned,” he told them.

After Tsukishiro gave the others those instructions, they walked on ahead.

“My, Ayanokouji-kun, you seem to be enjoying your spring break quite a bit. Just like a real, honest-to-goodness student.”

I was wondering what he was going to say to me in that gentle tone of his, but his words were dripping with sarcasm.

“Do you have some business with me, Acting Director Tsukishiro?” I asked.

“Oh, my. You don't seem to welcome me here,” he replied.

Even though he knew this, Tsukishiro deliberately raised his voice a little louder when he said that. Although it was only loud enough where people who just happened to stop nearby would barely be able to hear it, it was meant to show that it was very intentional.

“Well, that's because talking with the director would attract a lot of

unwanted attention, after all. I think that students with no ability should probably hide in the shadows at this school, you know,” I answered.

I wanted to settle whatever business he had with me as soon as possible. I was also worried about Matsushita tailing me.

“So, I’ll ask you once again. What is it that you want?” I asked.

Matsushita was far enough away from us where she probably wouldn’t be able to hear our conversation, but it would probably lead to a lot of unnecessary speculation.

“I will tell you my business when I want to tell you. I know that must seem agonizing to you, but you will endure it. Are you displeased?” he asked.

I supposed there was no way that Tsukishiro would show me any consideration. Rather, he worked only based on his convenience, and deliberately started talking to me at length in a place where people would be coming and going.

“I understand. In that case, please take your time,” I replied.

“I intend to do just that. First, how about we talk about the weather?” he proposed.

He clapped his hands together as he said that, with a *smack*. He squinted his eyes right after, appearing to be smiling with his whole face. If he was doing this just because he wanted to enjoy seeing how I’d react, then that was really shallow and superficial. There was no way that he could make my emotions rise and fall in my mind with something like that.

“I’m joking. I actually have plans later, so how about we get right down to business, hm?” said Tsukishiro.

Tsukishiro seemed to know that too, as a matter of course. Even though he knew, he still wanted to act like he was trying to provoke me in such a manner, apparently. But it did seem like there was something he wanted to say. The school and the student. No matter what happened, those positions could never be reversed.

As long as I was a student, there was a power dynamic that I couldn’t do anything about.

“How about this?” said Tsukishiro. “Think of this spring vacation as your last holiday and then return to your father.”

Tsukishiro didn't care at all about where we were. He was speaking openly, being rather explicit about the content of this conversation. Well, I supposed that even if other students happened to overhear, it wasn't like this would be a problem he couldn't deal with. Even though I was at a disadvantage here, he probably wouldn't suffer any damage. Having said that...

"I'm sure you'll want to ignore me and walk away. However, it would be best if you didn't do that. I do have my position here as director, after all. If a student happened to treat me harshly, well, I'd have to act accordingly," he added.

Tsukishiro smiled, as though he could see right through me and what I was thinking.

"I'm sorry, but unfortunately, I have no intention of voluntarily dropping out of this school," I replied.

"Do you hate the thought of going back to the White Room that much?" he asked.

"I like this school. I just thought I'd like to graduate here, like a regular student would. I don't have any reason other than that," I replied.

"It certainly is *quite* a nice school. They built all this, even this shopping mall, using the ample funding that they receive from the government. If this became well known, though, I'm sure that people would lament, calling it a waste of taxpayer money. Hundreds of millions spent every year, down the drain. But even so, the majority of citizens in this country are idiots. After simply hearing the gist of the idea, that these funds are going to be used for raising their children, they were convinced, without even knowing anything about it."

Tsukishiro scanned his eyes over the interior of the mall, letting out a sigh as he did so.

"Which is precisely why there are countless things that need to be done. I am also the director of this school now. It's because I care about this school that I'm working here now, like this," he added.

So, he was probably talking about what was just going on with those people who looked like construction workers, then. He had to, at least on the surface, play the part of a capable director. So, I'm sure that it was true that

he did have a lot to do.

“By the way...that girl following you. That’s Matsushita Chiaki-san, from your class, no?” muttered Tsukishiro, without moving his gaze away from me.

“It was only for a moment, but I saw her hiding on the other side of that wall. You seem quite popular,” he added.

I was sure that Tsukishiro wasn’t looking directly at me most of the time, but I supposed he was still observing me closely. I guess that meant that he was always paying attention to his surroundings, even while he was conversing with other adults.

“Wow, you’ve even completely memorized the names of the students in my class,” I told him.

“It’s a good idea to at least know about your classmates,” he replied.

It seemed like his method of attack was trying to go after my mind, trying to get in my head and shake me up.

“She knew the answer you gave during the Flash Mental Arithmetic event. Well, I suppose that’s just the way things are going for you lately, isn’t it? The walls are closing in more and more, you’re feeling trapped, no? You want to spend your time here like a normal student, but it’s getting more difficult,” said Tsukishiro.

It felt like he was trying to plant a bad impression of the school in my mind.

“If this is all there is to deal with, I’ll put up with it.”

“To be completely honest, I couldn’t really care less about you. If anything, I’m *quite* peeved that I have to devote precious time dealing with you,” said Tsukishiro.

“In that case, why not just stop this now? It’s not like this is something that is being forced on you,” I replied.

“Your father would never allow that. If I went against him, I wouldn’t be able to live in the world that I’m currently in. I’m still a person who wants to aim higher, after all,” he answered.

He showed no sign that he was going to leave yet. Tsukishiro

continued speaking at length.

“Come now, don’t eye me up so suspiciously. I could make any number of excuses, anyway. Isn’t that right?”

“Well, yes, I suppose you’re right,” I replied.

“I’ve looked over your records in the White Room. I will readily admit that you are indeed a remarkable child. At just a little over sixteen years of age, you have a combination of abilities that could be described as abnormal. An ordinary adult would lag far, far behind you in all respects, mind, technique, and body,” said Tsukishiro.

He closed the distance between us, beaming, a wide grin on his face.

“For what it’s worth, you did manage to make it through one year here safely. So why don’t we just settle things here? That’s what being mature is all about,” he added.

He was basically telling me to return to the White Room and keep this past year as a memory.

“I’m still a kid, you know. I don’t have any intention of settling anything.”

“Hmph. You think you can get away from me?” he asked.

“I’m planning to resist, until the bitter end,” I replied.

“There’s a saying, you know. ‘The frog in the well knows nothing of the great ocean.’ You tend to think of yourself too highly, apparently. I can imagine that’s why you can act so tough, like you’re bigger than you actually are,” said Tsukishiro.

Tsukishiro spread his arms out, showing his hands.

“Although I don’t know where things stand for you within this school, you are certainly not number one, by any stretch. There are already a number of students created in the White Room who are equal to or better than you, who came after you did. You really ought to be aware of the fact that you’re nothing more than one of the mass-produced units,” said Tsukishiro.

“If that’s true, then there’s really no need to care about me, is there?” I asked.

“If you weren’t *his* son, then no, there wouldn’t be. Your father must

have a strong desire to take you to even greater heights. That means that he is your father, no matter how hardheaded he might seem. He won't stop believing that you are someone who can become an example and lead the masses," said Tsukishiro.

Tsukishiro didn't hide the discontent he felt toward that man; he showed it. It was as if he was doing so to show me the power and status of his position.

"What do you think of the White Room, Acting Director Tsukishiro?" I asked.

"What do you mean, what do I think of it?" he asked in return.

"I mean how do you feel about its existence? Do you think it's necessary or unnecessary?" I asked.

Since I wasn't in any position to just take this lying down, I figured that I'd kindly ask him to explain it to me.

"There is absolutely no reason for me to answer that question," he replied.

"Depending on what answer I hear, I might change my mind right now," I answered.

"You know that talk is cheap. But fine. If it's something that might change how you feel, Ayanokouji-kun, then I suppose it's a small price to pay." Even though Tsukishiro knew that I was most likely lying, he still accepted my request. "If we're going to talk about that facility though, we need to look back at its history. The White Room was built about twenty years ago now. You know that, right?"

"Of course. I was part of the 'fourth generation.'"

"Yes. As you know, the White Room has created a new group every year, starting with the first generation in its first year. Each individual group is trained under its own individual mentor. Then, we make our inspections, checking to see which group can be cultivated most effectively. Due to the suspension of operations last year, only nineteen generations have been cultivated, but... Hundreds of children have already been through the education program, being raised in the White Room," said Tsukishiro.

Children of different ages never once saw each other. Even though

everyone was in the same facility, none of us knew anyone's face or name.

"You certainly know a lot about the White Room. You're well informed," I told him.

"More or less."

It was easy for me to understand through having this conversation now just how close Tsukishiro was to my father. He must have said all of that in order to make me understand that point. Depending on how you looked at him, he could simply look like a small fry. However, if you looked at him from a different angle, you could see that he looked like he was the opposite. He could change himself, from time to time. It was precisely because of that that he was entrusted with handling espionage activities.

"Every child can show a certain degree of growth, up to a certain standard. However, they can't really go beyond that standard level. As a result, in the nearly twenty years that the facility had been in operation, not a single child has been born who has successfully managed to reach the goals that we have set. Except for you, that is. Well, that was only true until two years ago, though," said Tsukishiro.

Just how much money has been invested into the White Room? Not even hundreds of millions would probably be enough. And in the end, I was the only one to reach the target they set. Once again, I couldn't help but feel like it was such a futile endeavor.

"What about the best and the brightest, those exceptional students? They're still out there, right? What are those children doing now?" I asked.

That part was something I didn't know anything about. I couldn't even begin to imagine what my peers—the ones from my same generation, who I had left behind—were doing right now. Tsukishiro seemed a little bit surprised, but he understood immediately what I was asking.

"I suppose there's no way you could know where the children who fell by the wayside and were removed from the facility ended up. They are maturing splendidly, contributing to society... Well, it would bring some solace if that *were* true, wouldn't it? In reality, most of the children raised in the facility proved to have a number of issues. In many cases, they turned out to be useless. They're unable to withstand the environment, and their spirits break as a result."

Tsukishiro, looking exasperated, continued speaking.

“Thorough management and education of a person, from the moment of their birth. If this could be realized, Japan will be able to attain incredible, unprecedented growth, the likes of which the world hasn’t seen. However, things aren’t that simple. Strangely enough, each person’s manner of development varies wildly. In the end, we cannot achieve success in nurturing everyone in the same manner. Nevertheless, we are continuing to produce solid results. Speaking of which, regarding the generations that came after you, the fifth and the sixth, some of the surviving children have blossomed into truly outstanding, talented individuals. If that system is perfected, then in the decades to come, the facility’s status might be elevated, with the White Room considered an indispensable asset. Your father’s plans are excessively grandiose and ridiculous... and also quite terrifying,” he explained, rather eloquently. “So, those are my thoughts regarding the White Room. It’s ridiculous and terrifying.”

“Thank you very much for the detailed explanation. I’ve learned quite a bit,” I replied.

“Your group was referred to as the demonic fourth generation. Students dropped out of the program one after another, due to the incredibly harsh nature of their education, until only one single child remained and went on to complete the final curriculum without any difficulty. I consider you a valuable sample, too. You’d best go back home before that shining record of yours is sullied,” said Tsukishiro.

Then, he pulled out his cell phone and held it out toward me.

“Contact your father right now and tell him that you are dropping out of school. That’s an easy way for you to be able to both keep your pride intact and repay your father’s love,” he added.

“Acting Director Tsukishiro. It’s certainly true that absolutely nothing of what you said contains anything that could remotely be considered a lie. It seems to me like you have told me the full truth, completely,” I replied.

Not just about the White Room, but about me as well.

Tsukishiro replied with a broad smile, as if to say, *Of course, you’re absolutely right.*

“The way I envision you, Acting Director Tsukishiro, is like *you’re*

wearing an iron mask, so as to not let others read your emotions. But in our conversation today, it looked as though you have removed that mask," I answered.

In other words, he had been deliberately manipulating the impression he gave off, to make what he had been saying during this conversation seem more truthful. Thus, everything he said felt like it was false, rather than coming off as credible. I supposed that for a man as capable as him, there wasn't any need for him to weave together aspects of truth and lies into what he said.

He probably had complete mastery of those skills, able to make black seem like white and white seem like black. In other words, it was possible for him to say something that was completely one hundred percent pure fiction and pass it off as if it were true.

"It doesn't seem like I can get you to trust me," said Tsukishiro.

"Unfortunately," I replied.

"My word..." said Tsukishiro.

"Acting Director Tsukishiro, isn't it actually better if *you* stop this now and back off? If you're unable to force me into dropping out of school, you will lose my father's trust. I think that it would be wiser for you to simply back off at this stage, even if you might suffer some reprimand. You're going to get embarrassed," I replied.

"I thank you very much for your concern. However, that is entirely pointless. I will not fail."

Tsukishiro flashed an uncanny smile, but I didn't really know how much he had really meant of what he said.

"Besides, I'm an adult. I'm not afraid of making one mistake. Even in the unlikely event that you are able to evade me, then so be it. I'll just go on to the next job. Embarrassment isn't that big a deal," said Tsukishiro.

"In spite of the fact that you're afraid of my father and are cooperating with him, you seem like you're unusually accepting of failure. What are your true intentions?" I asked.

"Who can say?" he replied.

Tsukishiro had probably been fighting on the front lines for decades.

That iron mask of his that I had hypothesized about earlier might actually be even more significant than I had imagined. I understood that if Tsukishiro had been sent by *that* man, then he wasn't someone who did things half-cocked.

"If there's no convincing you, then I suppose you leave me with no other choice. We'll have to compete with another," said Tsukishiro.

"Yes, I suppose so," I replied.

At this point, Tsukishiro finally seemed like he was satisfied, because he started to move away from me.

"I'll be going now. It would be rude to keep them waiting any longer, after all," said Tsukishiro.

He must have been referring to the other people he had been talking with earlier, who had gone on ahead.

"However, I will say, if you don't drop out voluntarily, your life here at this school will become rather difficult later," he added.

"I would like to spend my days peacefully, but I suppose I don't have any choice. I'm prepared."

Tsukishiro continued to look at me with a broad smile on his face. Just as he was about to turn and leave, he made a proposal.

"How about we play a game? One where you'll have a rather one-sided advantage," said Tsukishiro.

"A game?"

"At the start of the new term, I will be inviting one person from the White Room to come enroll in this school, as a new student," he replied.

I was wondering what he might say. It turned out to be something rather unexpected.

"Are you sure it's all right for you to be telling me this?" I asked.

"There's no problem in me doing so. I'm sure that the possibility of something like that happening was already in your mind already. We were thinking of giving the role of dealing with you to this child. When this student realizes who you are, they'll work on the process of getting you expelled."

So, he decided that he didn't need to even make a move himself, then. My sense of wariness was neither becoming increasingly heightened nor was it waning. I committed what Tsukishiro said to memory, but I didn't believe a word of it.

"You don't seem to believe me. You think that I'd send four or five in? The school isn't so lax that I'd be able to send in any number of people in the first place, you know. That's just nonsense," said Tsukishiro.

"Whether you said one person or a hundred people, I still wouldn't believe a single word you say," I replied.

If he wanted to squeeze people in, I'm sure this man would put in as many people as he wanted to. I understood things well enough to know that he was that type of person.

"Well, you might be right about that."

"But how do I actually win this game?" I asked.

"There will be one hundred and sixty-four incoming students starting here in the new term, as first-years. If you can find out which among them is the student from the White Room before the end of April, I'll happily withdraw. How about it? Isn't that quite an extraordinary offer?" said Tsukishiro.

If that was true, then that certainly was quite an extraordinary offer. If the troublesome Tsukishiro leaves, then that means there will be less of a burden for me to deal with.

"I find that very hard to believe," I told him.

"I don't mind you taking what I say with a grain of salt, but really, it's fine, isn't it? After all, there's no risk for you at all," said Tsukishiro.

Aside from the psychological harm, it certainly seemed as though there wasn't any actual risk. It seemed like there wouldn't be any harm in me accepting this offer.

"All right. I'll play your game, even if you're offering it simply as a formality. However, while I'm sure you're quite confident in the abilities that this student from the White Room has, there's also one thing that I'm quite confident in myself," I replied.

"Oh? And what would that be?" he asked.

“Even though the frog in the well knows nothing of the great ocean, he does know the depths of the sky,” I replied.

“Meaning...since you have been in the confined world of the White Room for so long, you understand the depths of that world better than anyone else, is that it?” answered Tsukishiro.

It was that unmistakable education that I had received from the White Room that had granted me the kind of confidence to never waver. No matter how many other children have been given the same education, none of them would ever reach those same heights. It doesn’t matter if it was someone from the third generation or from someone younger than me, from the fifth generation, the idea was the same. I continued speaking to Tsukishiro, who continued looking at me, as though he were sizing me up.

“Of course, there are people in this world who are superior to me. There are nearly seven billion people on this planet, after all. However, in the White Room, it’s a different story,” I replied.

There was no one in *that* world who was better than me. That was the only thing that I could answer with certainty.

“Those eyes... They’re just like your father’s. Eerie eyes that have a deep darkness in them. That depth in your eyes is the one thing no other student of the White Room can imitate, no matter how exceptional they are,” said Tsukishiro.

Perhaps it was because he had realized that trying to continue this conversation any further would be pointless, but Tsukishiro turned and walked away.

6.4

AFTER I PARTED WAYS with Tsukishiro, I wandered around Keyaki Mall for a while. It would probably be fine if I forgot about Tsukishiro for the time being. The problem was Matsushita, who had been staying out of sight and keeping her presence hidden for some time now. Even though I could just leave things be, it would be a hassle if word got around about me and the director.

After I had confirmed that Matsushita was still following me, I decided to ambush her. I needed to find out the reason why she was tailing me. Although I didn't think it was likely, I did consider the possibility that she had something to do with Tsukishiro. I didn't know if she had been following me around ever since the beginning, or if she had just started to do so sometime along the way. That point alone made it clear that I needed to do something.

The problem was where I should try to talk to her. Today, we were near the end of our spring vacation, and it was just before noon. The mall was absolutely packed with people. If I was careless with how I approached her, I would attract unwanted attention. In that case, I figured I'd find the right time, and then try to settle things early on. The only saving grace is that Matsushita was a student in my same class.

Even if we were seen talking with one another, other people would probably only think that it was simply casual, everyday conversation. I had turned the corner somewhat quickly and got ready to ambush Matsushita. If she didn't follow after me, then I could use Key as a way to make my move. A little over ten seconds later, Matsushita turned the corner, following after me.

“Wagh?!”

Matsushita must not have been expecting me to have been waiting for her, because she let out a surprised yelp. If she hadn't actually been following me, she probably wouldn't have been so completely shocked like that.

“Do you need something from me?” I asked.

When I had calmly asked her that question, Matsushita placed her hand

to her chest, as if she were trying to calm down her quickening heartbeat.

“Something? What do you mean? ...Well, that’s what I’d like to say, but it feels like I’ve been found out, I guess,” she replied.

It seemed as though she had decided that a lame excuse wouldn’t work to explain her behavior and the apparent blunder she just made. But why was she following me? That was the important part. Normally, if you just wanted to talk with someone, there wasn’t any need to hide and tail them.

“Yeah. So, um, I have been following you a little, actually, Ayanokouji,” said Matsushita, admitting that she had been following me, after first confirming that there wasn’t anyone else nearby.

There wasn’t any deep connection between Matsushita and me. We hadn’t ever really talked. But by carefully observing Matsushita’s behavior, I could sense that she was quite cautious. And I could see that she was trying to probe me, while at the same time she didn’t want me to see through her mind.

“Why do you think I was following you?” she asked.

That wasn’t just a simple question. It was clearly a psychological attack. I was sure that she was planning to try to draw some information from me.

“No idea. Seriously, I have no clue. More importantly though, when did you start following me, anyway?” I asked in return.

I wasn’t going to tell her when I had noticed that she was following me. Even though I had answered her question, I responded to hers with my own.

“Well, just a little while ago. Yeah—”

“A little while ago?” I asked.

I interrupted Matsushita in order to prevent her from turning things around and asking me more questions, hitting *her* with another question instead. If I gave her an opening, she would probably ask me, *When did you notice me, Ayanokouji-kun?*

“Who was it now...? Oh, that’s right, when you were in the middle of talking with the new director, I think,” she replied.

Matsushita admitted that she had seen me talking with the director, but she also mixed a lie in there. But immediately afterward, Matsushita lowered the corners of her mouth slightly. It seemed that she had realized her error in judgment. I'd pause here and give an opening. If she had any doubts about the relationship between the director and I, Matsushita would inevitably ask a question about it.

"So, yeah, I saw you talking with the director. Did something happen?" she asked.

"They're going to remodel Keyaki Mall apparently, and he just happened to spot me and asked me for my opinion. He asked me lots of questions, about what kinds of facilities I would like to see here and such," I replied.

"Oh, I see, so that's what it was..." said Matsushita.

Matsushita had lied about having seen me when I was already in conversation with Tsukishiro. She might have been trying to use any information she had gotten from following me before then to her advantage, but it actually worked against her. As long as she had seen the workers who were there together with the director earlier, she would recognize that what I just said seemed highly credible.

"So, what's up?" I asked.

"Oh, it's nothing, really. It's just...I was a little curious about something," said Matsushita.

After saying that, Matsushita got the point and started talking about why she had been following me.

"Well, during the year-end final exam... Ayanokouji-kun, you were the commander, weren't you?" she asked.

That was it. With just that one brief question, I understand why Matsushita had contacted me.

"During the Flash Mental Arithmetic event, the answer you gave me and the answer Kouenji had said were the same," she added.

It would be difficult to dismiss that as mere coincidence, I supposed.

"I used to do those kinds of quizzes when I was in junior high, so I'm relatively good at them," I replied.

“I did too. But you’re not on the kind of level that I’d describe as relatively good. I think you’re good enough to do national competitions,” said Matsushita, immediately after I had given her my response.

Apparently, she didn’t like that I had cut her off before, about the whole tailing-me thing.

“It was just an event I’m genuinely good at is all. To be honest, I have actually competed in national competitions,” I told her.

“...Really?” she asked.

“Yeah. There just so happened to be an event that I was good at. I think that’s probably what’s given you the wrong idea, Matsushita.”

“But in that case, shouldn’t you have said so earlier?” she replied.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. But you know what I’m like, right? I’m not really the kind of person who can stand up and assert himself openly in class. I was just a makeshift commander anyway, who just so happened to have gotten a Protection Point, by sheer coincidence. More importantly, we were up against Class A, Sakayanagi. Even though I said I’m good at flash mental arithmetic, I was worried, because I didn’t know how far that’d take me.”

No self-confidence = lacking communication skills. That was the impression that my classmates had of me.

“That’s... Well, I suppose you might be right,” said Matsushita.

Although she felt that what I said had some degree of credibility, Matsushita couldn’t just accept that’s the way things were, and she made another move.

“You know, I...saw you, actually. You and Hirata-kun. I saw you talking with him on the bench, Ayanokouji-kun.”

She was probably talking about the time I’d spoken to Hirata when he was isolated and alone during the class vote. It’s not like I had eyes in the back of my head. I didn’t know there was anyone watching. But that didn’t mean this was something worth panicking over. It wouldn’t have been surprising if someone had seen us from a distance.

“I stayed far away because I thought that you’d notice me if I got in too close. But I kind of got the feeling that he was crying,” said Matsushita.

So, from seeing us back then, and from what happened during the Flash Mental Arithmetic event, she had gained a number of insights, from the sounds of it. Matsushita's intentions had started to come into focus. Even considering her behavior and her manner of speaking, it seemed safe for me to conclude that she had nothing at all to do with Tsukishiro.

"It wasn't just a simple coincidence that Hirata-kun came back the very next day, is it?" she asked.

I thought she was just a normal student, but she was surprisingly perceptive. What was bothering me was that she came to tell me those things. It didn't seem like it was just like she couldn't keep these things to herself or something. It did seem like maybe she had approached me simply because she was feeling curious, but...

I could tell without a doubt that she was bluffing, from certain subtle gestures and actions. Meaning, she had another goal. When I considered that Matsushita seemed to be operating with her own sense of logic even in what she was doing today, then this wasn't some spur-of-the-moment whim. She had decided beforehand to make contact with me and talk with me. The reason she did so today was probably because she found me here all alone in Keyaki Mall.

"Considering that you're skilled enough to do mental math at the national level and your running speed during the sports festival, and on top of that, the fact that you had managed to get Hirata-kun back on his feet... When I put all of those things together, it looks like you're holding back. Aren't you, Ayanokouji-kun? You really are much more capable when it comes to academics and sports, aren't you?" said Matsushita.

She had gone so far as to make contact with me, and was trying to draw things from me, even though our relationship was tenuous at best. She had her suspicions about my abilities, and she came here to confirm the facts. She was completely different from the image of Matsushita the classmate that I had in my mind during this past year. I had come to this conclusion early on and decided to get straight to the heart of the matter.

"You want me to help you because you want to get to Class A, right?" I asked.

"...So, you admit it?" she replied.

Matsushita seemed somewhat creeped out, in the fact that I had so readily admitted her hunch was right.

“I suppose you could say I might be holding back, yeah,” I told her.

“Why? It’s better to keep your grades up at this school, isn’t it?” she asked in reply.

Matsushita, who had thought she had gained an advantage, began to assault me with questions.

“I guess...it’s because I just don’t like standing out. I mean, even if you’re only decently capable when it comes to book smarts, you’ll probably end up having to tutor other students, right? I’m not good at dealing with that kind of thing. I feel the same way about sports,” I replied.

“I see, hm.”

Matsushita seemed to have some hidden ability as well, like me. Perhaps there was some part of her that felt like she and I were alike in that regard, and that had made her feel deeply convinced. She believed what I was telling her.

“I want you to contribute to the class from now on. If you’ve got the skills for the job, I want you to show them. So that our class can keep winning from here on out. If your abilities are the real thing and you have the qualities to be a leader, then I have absolutely no qualms about vouching for you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

In short, she wanted the same thing as Horikita. They both said that if you have the ability, then you should actually use it.

“Well, I was actually thinking I was going to do just that,” I replied.

“Huh?”

I guess she must not have thought I would’ve accepted her request to cooperate so openly, since she let that “huh” slip out.

“But I want you to not get your hopes up too high. I’m already showing about seventy or eighty percent of what I can do. To be honest, even if I did give it my all, I still wouldn’t be as capable as Hirata when it comes to academics or sports,” I replied.

For the moment, I’ll put aside the question of how I’m going to be

living my life here at this school from here on out. Right now, I should probably try to convince Matsushita, to some degree. By telling her that I've been hiding my ability, it would give her the impression that I don't have any more secrets. Also, I'm not going to make any mention whatsoever that I've guessed that she has hidden abilities. Naturally, she'll feel that she's gained the upper hand in our psychological warfare, and she'll tentatively calculate what kind of ability I have from there.

"Wait. Earlier, you just said seventy or eighty percent, but... Is that true?" she asked.

Matsushita should have very little information on that, to know for sure whether or not I was at or above Hirata's level. But, she asked that question, to see if what I said was the truth.

"Yeah," I replied.

She nodded once again when she heard me say that, but it didn't seem as though she had accepted it as the truth.

"And what about the thing with Karuizawa-san?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" I asked in return.

"...About you having some connection with her breakup with Hirata-kun, or something like that, Ayanokouji-kun."

"And where did that information come from?" I asked.

"It's just a hunch, something that I've sensed myself... I think there's definitely some kind of connection."

Apparently, she seems to have done quite a bit of investigating. So, she wouldn't be so easily convinced of anything. That clear confidence that Matsushita had kept slipping in and out of view during our conversation.

"Why does Karuizawa-san think you're so special...? So much so that she'd even break up with Hirata-kun? Tell me the reason why."

"The reason why, huh..."

Basically, if I were worse than Hirata, then Matsushita wasn't convinced about what Karuizawa's motives were.

"Are you going to say that she doesn't see you as someone special?" she asked.

“...I suppose she might,” I replied.

When I said that, she responded with a small nod, as if she were somewhat satisfied.

“I knew it. You really are much more—”

“Well, no... I’m not sure how to put this, but I think you have a really huge misunderstanding here, Matsushita.”

“A misunderstanding? I’m asking you these questions because I have conclusive proof.”

“Well, I think it’s certainly true that Karuizawa and I... have an unusual relationship.”

“That’s what I want to know about. Your true abilities, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Well, that’s—”

“You’re not going to tell me, even after telling me everything else so far?” she asked.

“It’s not like that. How do I put this? It’s just difficult to say.”

I held back my words several times, hemming and hawing a bit, as I let my gaze slip away and looked off far in the other direction. With Matsushita trying to press me further though, I had no choice but to use my words.

“It’s hard to explain, well, I suppose maybe it’s not that difficult actually, but... Well, I think that it’s simply because I have some feelings for Karuizawa, and I told her that. So, I think it’s probably just that she’s oddly aware of me being around, rather than her actually thinking I’m like, special or anything,” I replied.

“Huh...?”

“...Huh?”

We exchanged looks.

“So, Karuizawa-san didn’t see your true abilities and think of you as special because of that, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

“It has nothing to do with that.”

“But... Even so, I can’t imagine that she would think that you’re *that*

special just because you have feelings for her,” she replied.

I closed the distance between myself and Matsushita and placed my hands on her shoulders. She must not have expected that I would grab her, so her eyes had reflexively widened in shock. I looked deep into her eyes and said something.

“I like you, Matsushita. I want to go out with you.”

“Huh?!”

Matsushita must have been in a complete panic deep down, for a moment. I immediately let go of her shoulders.

“If someone told you that they had feelings for you like that, wouldn’t it stick in your mind afterward, whether it was good or bad?” I asked.

“Y-you were joking. I see. Okay...”

If you made her experience that firsthand, directly, then she would fill in the rest of the gaps on her own, after that experience. If someone of the opposite sex had seriously told you that they liked you, it was only natural that you would become more aware of that person, at as long as it wasn’t from someone that you extremely disliked or anything, at the very least.

“I think that it was just a coincidence that she and Hirata broke up. I told her how I felt about her after that happened,” I told her.

Since I actually hadn’t ever told Karuizawa anything like that before in the first place, Matsushita had no way to confirm the order the events took place.

“...I see. So that’s what happened. I’m sorry for following you.”

“I do have one request. About Karuizawa—”

“I understand. I’m not going to go around telling anyone about it.”

I couldn’t say for certain that she had completely accepted what I told her, one hundred percent. But for the time being, we would leave things at that. I had intended to provide her with only that much to work with. I don’t think she’d casually mention things about Kei and me to anyone. It would be more disadvantageous for Matsushita anyway, if she had put me in a bad mood and made me uncooperative by doing so.

Chapter 7: Adolescence About to Begin

QUITE A NUMBER OF THINGS had happened around me just during spring break. There was the incident with Matsushita, and before that, the ones with Horikita and Ichinose. There was the establishment of a cooperative relationship between Director Sakayanagi, Chabashira, and Mashima-sensei. And finally, there was my bargain with Tsukishiro.

I should probably be most vigilant of all about Tsukishiro. Unlike the other issues at hand, the problem he presented would just worsen if I ignored him. The next thing I knew, I might be getting told I was being kicked out of school. That was exactly why I needed to coordinate with the teachers to try to deal with this situation.

As for what Tsukishiro had said about sending in a student from the White Room, it wasn't necessarily definite, but it was plausible. There was no way Tsukishiro could come and go in and out of the classrooms and the hallways all hours of the day. He could only attack me through indirect means, like the exams.

But if I was dealing with a student, that was a different story altogether. A student could come and go as they pleased in the classrooms and hallways. They could even come up and make contact with me at any time, affording them more chances to get me expelled. It would be a solid move in terms of gathering intelligence, too. If all of that did become a reality, it would be the biggest change that had taken place around me yet.

And then there were Horikita and Matsushita. Problems internal to the class, so to speak, each having their suspicions about my true abilities and wanting to know my full potential. I'd promised Horikita I'd have this little competition with her, but there was probably nothing else I needed to do for the time being.

As Ichinose, that could wait a while. After seeing what battles lay ahead, all that remained was to casually, indifferently, do what should be done. However, that only applied to the things that were happening around me. As for my *internal* changes...well, those were still very subtle.

At least...that was true until today.

There were only two days left until spring break ended. Just Tuesday and Wednesday. On these days, when students enjoyed their final rest before the new battles to come, I was determined to make a big change and take some action. If I was going to get things moving, this was the time.

It was now past six, the time of day when the sun started to set and night began to fall. There was a question I'd like to ask a great number of people, if possible. Let's say, hypothetically, that there was someone of the opposite sex whom you liked. How would you push forward and open a path to the point where you would tell them you had romantic feelings for them?

I supposed that if you were an exceptionally beautiful man or woman, you could immediately confess your feelings to someone without needing to go about it in a roundabout manner or draw things out. If you said you liked them, and they said they liked you too, it would be happily ever after for all involved. But most people weren't so blessed. People were insecure about their faces, their personalities, their bodies. Complications like love-triangles might form obstacles on the path to telling someone you love them. Ultimately, it was clear that confessing your feelings to someone—the gateway to romantic love—was certainly no easy task.

Which was precisely why I was mulling it over so seriously in my head, letting my thoughts carry me. I thought hard, racking my brain to calculate the certainty of success of such an endeavor. Of telling someone how you felt. Ten percent? Twenty percent? Or was there a success rate of fifty percent? I supposed that you might have an eighty percent, ninety percent, or even close to one-hundred percent rate of success, depending on the circumstances.

But even so, there would be uneasiness. People would be afraid that if their attempt failed, they'd get shut down when they told the other person how they felt. That the relationship they had with the other person would change dramatically. There might be a few positive-minded people out there who could shrug off such things, but to high schoolers, school was our world, and that world was everything. The possibility that the relationships you'd built within that world might fall apart was terrifying.

And so, people took such things very seriously. They'd think about what they could do in order to raise their chances of success, even if only by

one percent, and start working toward that end. They might change their hairstyle to their crushes' liking, as much as they could, or dress fashionably. They might study hard and work out, or try to approach their crush's heart through their stomach by cooking them meals or going out to eat. They might even give them gifts.

They would use every trick in the book to try to improve their chances. Sometimes, this might make said chances jump from one percent all the way up to ninety-nine percent. But a single failure could also make your chances plummet fall from ninety-nine percent down to one percent. People would try desperately to read the other person to sense what they were feeling.

Such was the process of telling someone that you had a romantic interest in them. And I...experienced that process in the same way. I thought and I worried, just like any other man or woman.

But these feelings weren't limited to romantic love. Speaking more broadly, there were unseen probabilities in everything, and they could fluctuate depending on what happened from day to day, just like how studying could increase your chances of being accepted into high school and college.

Additionally, simply being aware of all this could greatly change your understanding of the situation. It didn't stop at school entrance exams or romance, either. Even if you succeeded at those things, it wasn't like that was the end. If anything, it was the start of many *new* things. If you failed in your attempts to seek higher education, it might lead you to leaving school or getting expelled. Also, your love life could fall apart through cheating or violence.

I envisioned what the future would look like. A month from now. Six months from now. A year from now. Sometimes plans do change, but I didn't exactly like acting in the spur-of-the-moment. That was especially true when it came to self-initiated actions.

Now then, let's go back a bit. Everything I'd done up until today had been to affect a certain probability. In other words—to increase the probability of success, of course. Whether I'd be met with success or failure would be revealed today. If I was reading things correctly, I should be hearing from someone right about now.

The phone I was already clutching in my hand rang. There was a

nondescript 11-digit phone number shown on my phone's display. The number wasn't registered in my phone, but it belonged to Karuizawa Kei.

"It's me. Sorry for bugging you earlier," I said, answering the phone after it rang a few times.

I had called Kei about thirty minutes ago, but she didn't answer the phone then. She was just calling me back now.

"It's fine. What's up?" she asked.

"You sound like you're irritated."

"Not really. I guess, rather than saying I'm irritated, it's more like I just want to make sure of something with you."

"About the time when I asked you to come out before, and didn't call back later?" I asked.

On the day that I met up with Hiyori, I had asked Kei to come out. But in the end, I didn't tell her anything we'd had talked about. All I'd said to her was that I could call her later if I remembered. And I didn't even try to get in touch with her again until close to the very end of spring break.

"It seems like you already know, then. What, are you *trying* to annoy me?" she asked.

"How about we talk about this in person?" I asked, cutting in.

"Huh?"

"About what I said. That I'd tell you if I remembered. I remembered. Can you come now?"

"For the love of... You do things based on your own time and convenience way too much, you know? But fine. But you know, if someone does happen to see me going to your room at this time of day, you sure you're not gonna care what happens?" said Kei.

There would be many students coming and going in and out of the dorms at this time of day. The chances that Kei could be seen visiting my room were high.

"Don't worry about that," I replied, encouraging her to come.

"Okay. Oh, I do have plans at seven though, so I can't take too long."

“I’ll make it quick. Probably about ten or twenty minutes.”

“In that case, it’s no problem. See you soon,” said Kei, before hanging up.

Now then... Let’s get started, shall we? All preparations had been made. I looked around my room, which was even tidier than usual inside. I briefly glanced over at the mirror, gazing at my reflection with a serious look on my face. Then I quickly averted my eyes.

7.1

KEI SAT IN MY ROOM, looking quite displeased and sullen. Judging from the fact that she was dressed nicely, it did certainly look like she had plans to go out later.

“So? What is it?” said Kei, giving me a sour look when I didn’t start by saying anything. I supposed it wasn’t like I could call her here and then just stay mum.

“What do you mean, what?” I asked.

“What do *you* mean, what? You called me here because you said you wanted to talk, didn’t you?” said Kei.

“Oh, yeah, I did say that, come to think of it.”

“.....”

“.....”

The displeasure in Kei’s eyes got even more pronounced as I continued to act evasive.

“Come on, what is it already?” she huffed.

“Come on now, no need to be in such a rush.”

“I told you this before, but I have plans. I’m having dinner with my friends at seven at Keyaki Mall. Understand?” she asked.

“There’s still plenty of time. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, this is kind of giving me some bad vibes now. It feels like you’re talking complete nonsense.” Kei was starting to get suspicious, since I was behaving differently than usual. Since I wasn’t saying anything, she elected to complain instead. “...That reminds me. I need to tell you that I’m *not* happy with you.”

“Is there something you want to tell me?” To be honest, I really didn’t know what Kei wanted to say, so I just asked her that straight out.

“Satou-san has some suspicions. About our relationship,” said Kei.

Satou. A classmate whom I hadn’t interacted with much lately, but

who'd taken a liking to me.

"I thought she'd hate me after I turned her down. What kind of suspicions?" I asked.

"She thinks the reason I broke up with Hirata-kun was so I could start going out with you. She tried to confirm her hunch in a sort of roundabout way," said Kei.

Meaning that Satou had avoided directly saying anything about her suspicions, but said something ambiguous that could be interpreted that way instead.

"I denied it, of course. But I have my doubts about how much she actually believed me," said Kei.

"I see. I actually have a similar story."

"Huh? What do you mean, a similar story?"

"Matsushita. She has some suspicions about our relationship. Like if we're dating."

When I told Kei about the conversation I had with Matsushita the other day, her face went as white as a sheet.

"Huh? HUH? You're kidding, right? Or wait, are you serious? You're not joking?"

I nodded to show that it was certainly no joke. I continued speaking, explaining what happened. I told her how Matsushita was the kind of person who hid her true abilities, like me, and that thanks to her powers of observation, she had some doubts about my relationship with Kei. And that she also had her suspicions about my own abilities. Things like that.

"W-wait, hold on a second. I can't wrap my head around all of this." She placed a hand to her forehead, as if she had a headache. "Okay, I feel like things are really, really looking bad, but... What do you think?"

Kei, understanding the situation, asked me what I thought about it. No —she was asking me for a plan of action. This was related to what I had called her here for today, so I figured I'd give her a straight answer.

"Why don't we just let it go? Not worry about it?" I asked.

"No way, we can't do that! Besides, our relationship, it's... There's

nothing really going on between us!" huffed Kei.

"You mean you don't like people thinking that there's something going on when there really isn't? In that case, even if Matsushita were to go around spreading rumors or something, isn't it fine to just let her say what she wants?" I replied.

"What? Just let her say whatever she wants...? We can't just ignore something like this alone! Go talk to Matsushita-san right away. Tell her that there's nothing going on between us," said Kei.

"Even if I gave her a lame excuse like that, it would only have the opposite effect."

"You knew all this from the start, didn't you? Why did you give her some half-assed lie?" said Kei.

"No matter what I say, the situation won't change. Satou has her suspicions that you and I have some kind of relationship, right? And if Matsushita is close friends with Satou, sooner or later, she'll hear from Satou that there's something unusual going on between us. Actually, there's a good chance she already heard something from Satou and acted on it." I had to consider the possibility that Matsushita had made contact with me after seeking the opinions of those around her.

"...I see. I guess that might be true, but..."

After that had happened, getting in touch with Kei was unavoidable. Even if I vigorously denied anything was going on, their suspicions would only be confirmed. If they found out I was lying, then they might spread word to everyone else. If that was the case, it would be best to get them on our side as quickly as possible.

But that wasn't what Kei was concerned about, apparently.

"But, well...it's just that, in the unlikely chance that people in class go around saying that the reason I broke up with Hirata-kun was, so, um, I could start dating you...and word got around the school, it'd be a problem," said Kei.

"Why would it be a problem?" I asked.

"Well, you know, it's just...if word did get around, then it would have certain, you know, *effects*, on my future." She continued to press the issue,

exhibiting her discontent. “Get it? Whether you’re a guy or a girl, if there’s like, talk or signs that you have something going on with the opposite sex, that means fewer people are going to approach you.”

Kei pointed her forefinger at me, holding it in front of my eyes, as if to ask me if I understood.

“Meaning I’m getting in the way of you finding a new love?” I asked.

“...Yes, that’s what it means,” she answered.

Looking at this from the perspective of an objective third party, I could certainly understand what she was getting at. People who knew that Sudou liked Horikita would be less likely to approach her. That was basically what she was saying.

“Do you really understand? Hey, hold on, are you listening?” Kei must have thought that I didn’t understand, because she continued speaking.

“You...you’re pretty close with that girl, Shiina, right?”

“Shiina? Oh, you mean Hiyori?”

“Hiyo...” she replied, stammering.

Hiyori was one of the people I called by their first name. Of course, the list of people I called by first name also included Kei, as well as people like Haruka and Airi, and I was sure Kei already knew that. But it seemed she hadn’t thought of the people I was close to in other classes.

“Yeah, I suppose we are pretty close, sure. We share a hobby in that we both love reading. What about it?” I asked.

When I told her that, Kei’s expression changed.

“Huh...the same hobby. A love of reading...hm... Hm. That’s completely different from me,” said Kei.

Of course, Kei and Hiyori were completely different kinds of people. She should have known that already.

“So?” I asked.

“...Well, it’s just... Agh, whatever! I forgot what I was going to say!”

Kei, angry, crossed her arms in frustration and then looked the other way. Not long afterward, she seemed to calm down and opened her mouth to speak up once more, apparently having remembered what she wanted to say.

“Well, if word got around that you had something going on with me, then, well, it would make it harder for you to get, well, *closer*, with Shiinasan, right?” said Kei.

“I see. I suppose you might be right about that.”

When I replied with that, recognizing the truth of the matter, Kei stood up.

“Well, whatever. You’re free to get close to whoever you want,” she said, turning her back to me. “I’m sorry, but...can we talk about this some other time? I kind of want to get to Keyaki Mall a little early. There might be guys from other classes coming to hang out too, so I gotta be pretty on point to be able to dispel any rumors. I don’t really have the time to be worrying about you.”

“On point?” I asked.

“Since I broke up with Hirata-kun, I’m looking for a new boyfriend. Is that wrong?”

“No, it’s not.”

“...Okay, so, you get it? In that case, I’m gonna go.”

It looked like I’d gone a little overboard with the teasing. I stood up too, just as she did. Kei probably thought I was getting up to show her the door.

“I’m fine, you don’t have to,” she said, rejecting me forcefully.

I called out her name. “Kei.”

“What? What is it?” she huffed.

“If you don’t like it, then just ignore it. That’s it,” I replied.

“Huh?” she replied, exasperated.

She looked very cautious now, wary of what I was about to say next.

“Will you go out with me?” I asked.

“Huh?”

Kei furrowed her brow, unsure of what I meant.

“What? Like, hold on, go out where?”

Apparently, she'd interpreted what I said to mean that I had wanted her to accompany me someplace.

"That's not what I meant. I'm asking you, will you go out with me? As in, dating."

"Wait, hold on... I don't understand...what you...mean..." stammered Kei.

There was probably no more need for words, just the way that I was looking into Kei's eyes. She caught my gaze and returned it. Even in a tenuous relationship, if two people gazed into each other's eyes like this, they could communicate their feelings to one another, to some extent.

"Wh...huh...wh...huh?! Wh-what kind of joke is this? Okay, this is just like totally problematic... ?!" shouted Kei.

"It's not a joke."

"B-but! Just now, you were *just* hinting that you had something going on with Shiina-san!" she wailed.

"*That* was a joke."

"But... These past few days..."

"That was just, well, you know. I guess I was trying to see if I could make you a little jealous, Kei."

There'd hardly been any need for me to ask Kei to come out to the café so she could see me talking to Hiyori. But it was just one way to show her my rather clumsy, awkward idea of romance.

"I-if you're lying about this, we are seriously going to be through, you and me... Okay, so if you want to take back this fake romantic confession, this is your last chance to do it... Do you *really* get it?" she asked.

Kei was a deeply skeptical, suspicious person, and this was a situation where she couldn't simply just answer me with a yes or a no.

"This is not a joke in the slightest. I want to hear your answer," I replied.

"Y... B-b-b-but wait, how am I supposed to, well...?!"

"I already told you. If you don't like it, you can go ahead and ignore it. Or you can reject me. Whatever you want," I told her.

“No one said anything about ignoring anything! But more importantly, *why*?!”

“What do you mean, why?” I asked.

“Well, it’s...I’m...you know...and stuff. I mean like why ask me today, in the first place...?”

She wasn’t very clear with the first part of her statement, so I could only answer the second part of it.

“Why today, huh? Well, I can’t really explain the reason I did it *today*, but I can say why I wanted to do it *now*. It’s because I wanted to stop you from becoming someone else’s girlfriend,” I replied.

“Meaning...you, um...you like...me?” asked Kei.

The question Kei had just asked me was filled with more depth of emotion than I had ever felt before. At that moment—or rather, just before that moment—my heart trembled. I felt like I could answer her with certainty.

“That’s right. I like Karuizawa Kei,” I replied.

Telling someone that you had feelings for them was supposed to be one of the most significant events of your life. The moment when you laid your heart bare. I wondered if I had really managed to give Kei an answer to her question that came from my heart. Normally, the act of telling someone how you feel about them was motivated entirely by the simple fact that you love them. It was an act of courtship based on the desire to make the person you love your own.

“So, what’s your answer?” I asked.

The ball was now in Kei’s court. All that remained was to wait for her reply. Kei was trying her absolute hardest to organize the chaotic mess of her thoughts. Before she knew it, she averted her gaze and then desperately tried to bring her eyes back on to me.

“—I-I’ll go out with... you.”

“So, I can take that to mean you like me, then?”

“Y-you want me to say it?!” she wailed.

I understood that she was feeling flustered, but this confirmation was a part of the process that couldn’t be skipped. It was by receiving her answer

that, for the first time, there would be a definite change in our relationship.

“Yeah, I want you to say it.”

I urged her to come out and say it. Kei, while surprised, didn’t explicitly reject my request.

“Um...”

It wasn’t like there was a third party listening in. Nor was there any kind of contract being signed and stamped. Only the two of us would know. Only the two of us were having this conversation. A promise that only the two of us would keep.

“Can you not answer?” If she couldn’t give me an answer, I would need to propose what we ought to do from here on out, I supposed.

“W-wait, hold on. I-I’m trying to hurry and get my feelings in order right now, so...!”

She suddenly extended both hands, holding them out in a gesture like she was asking me to stop rushing her. I decided to wait, quietly watching her and letting her take her time. Then, less than a minute later, Kei looked at me, and I could see the resolution in her eyes.

“...Okay, well? Agh, how do I say this...?”

Although she had made up her mind, it seemed she was still struggling to find the right words. Perhaps it was because seeing her like this was strangely adorable, I didn’t mind waiting.

“So, you... well, I...”

Although she was struggling hard to gather up the courage—a great deal of courage—she never once looked away. Perhaps that was proof of Kei’s firm determination. The force of Karuizawa Kei’s will. The conviction to carry something through once a decision had been made, no matter what the circumstances may be.

“I-I like...um... Well, I guess I should say...”

Her voice gradually became quieter and quieter, until it was a whisper, though she continued to struggle forward, mumbling through her feelings.

“I’ve come to...like you...too... It’s frustrating, but... Okay, I-I admit it! I admit it, I like you!”

I didn't know why she was angry. But anyway, Kei had put her answer into words, saying that it was mutual. She liked me back.

I reached out and gently grabbed hold of both of Kei's arms.

"W-wait, wait?! D-don't tell me you wanna starting kissing or something?!" she wailed.

Her reaction was even more intense than when I told her that I liked her. Even if I did go in for a kiss right now, I didn't think she'd object. But I wasn't going to go that far.

"I'm not. Not yet."

"N... Not yet..."

By wording it that way, I was saying it was something we could consider doing in the future. When Kei imagined that, she stiffened, as if she had been frozen in ice. I pulled her into my arms, in a gentle embrace. That was proof that our relationship had taken a big step forward.

"Just doing this much is fine, right?" I asked.

"...Well, I suppose this much is..."

Even though I couldn't see her face, I understood. Right now, Kei probably felt confused, nervous, and happy. I was sure the look on her face right now was probably a cross between a smile and something indescribable.

"Hey, have you gotten a little bit taller?" she asked.

"Maybe," I replied.

When I was measured before starting school here, I was one hundred and seventy-six centimeters tall. It wouldn't be strange if I'd grown over this past year. I'm sure the other students had probably grown too.

People are creatures that grow and develop. And they are creatures that love to learn. That was instinct. Just like learning how to ride a bike or how to swim. Just like learning how to handle chopsticks and how to drink through a straw. I was learning to love, through Kei, and it was something I hadn't learned to do in my life so far. Something I hadn't been able to learn in the White Room. I was compelled by my inquisitive mind.

Also, there was one other important reason for me choosing Kei for this. It was because this romance was necessary for Karuizawa Kei to grow

as a person.

Looking ahead to the next year, her relationship with me was going to be very important. If Kei continued to live as a parasite that needed to attach itself to a host, she would eventually break down. This step was vital to prevent that from happening.

I...

I wondered what kind of expression I had on my face right now? Was I smiling? Or did I perhaps have a look of embarrassment? Maybe I looked flustered, or maybe I had a big, goofy grin?

I didn't know.

I didn't know what kind of look I had on my face right now.

...No.

That's not right. I did actually know the look I had on my face right now. I knew what I was thinking and what I was trying to do.

People take joy in learning. It's the same whether it's studying, exercising, or even when you're playing a game. You feel pleasure when you realize you've improved.

It was the same with love.

I didn't know anything about love. Not romantic love, and not familial or platonic love. I didn't know anything about the relationships between men and women. The shyness and the pleasure that awaited them in those relationships, I didn't know anything about those things.

I was sure that I would find answers for each of those things in the near future. But nothing would probably change as a result. I was just learning is all. I would grow and move forward. I could say that Kei was like a textbook about the opposite sex for me, in a manner of speaking. Once I was done reading it, that textbook would have served its purpose.

Or perhaps...

Maybe there was a future in store that wasn't like that? Would I become someone irreplaceable to her, never leaving her side? I didn't know. There was a part of me that wished for that to happen. And another part that realized it was impossible.

Please, I prayed.

In this moment, as I was smiling happily while embracing someone precious to me, I sent up a prayer. As I gently hugged Kei, I silently wished to myself that I would become a young student who would vow to take care of her.



Postscript

IT'S BEEN FOUR MONTHS since the last time we met once again! Been keeping that tradition steady.

Hello everyone, it's your Kinugasa here. It's the first year of the Reiwa era, so how are you all doing? Me, I'm full of energy.

As for what I've been up to recently, I went kayaking out on the sea one weekend, and I did nothing but work the rest of the time. I've been quietly working, even now, while thinking to myself, *Maaan, I'd love to go for a drive and take an overnight trip to an onsen somewhere during the fall vacation.* Come to think of it, I haven't been able to really go out and visit any shrines properly for the past year or two now.

This is a digression, but lately, I've really been feeling my age. I used to think I was great at handling machines and gadgets like computers, but now I'm noticing myself having trouble keeping up with the functionality of mobile devices as they are continually updated with new versions and revisions. They're way too complicated. I can't figure out what's what at all. And I only use the bare minimum of an app's functionality, basically leaving everything else completely untouched. When I look at myself objectively, I can see myself being labeled as one of those adults who aren't good at handling machines. Even when driving my car, there are lots of buttons and functions I don't understand...

Ah... Yeah. I guess I'll never be able to keep up.

Anyway, that's enough about me being pathetic...

Okay, so, the first-year arc of the story has now ended. It's strange, because it seems like it was so long, but also feels like it was over in an instant. There's the main character, Ayanokouji, and his circle of friends. Although only a few of those many friends appeared in this book, I think you can see the various ways that they've changed and grown.

Starting with the next volume, the second-year arc of the story will finally begin. From there, the story won't just focus on the conflict between classes, but also on battles with upper- and lower-grade levels, as well as

against the school itself. There will be battles on all sides! The amount of information being revealed is going to go up, so there may be some difficult parts, but please, bear with me.

Work on the illustrations is coming together steadily, and the main visuals are already in progress. I think some illustrations will be put publicly on display soon, so I hope that you're looking forward to it. I sincerely hope that you're looking forward to what's to come in the next volume, too. No, wait—rather, in the next volume and beyond!



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