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8

Welcome to the
Classroom of the Elite **2**

Fan Translation
Anime Anyway



8

ようこそ**実力至上主義の教室へ**2年生編

Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year

衣笠彰梧

トモセシユンサク

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Translator's Note

First of all, I want to give thanks to the Author - Kinugasa Syougo and Illustrator - Tomose Shunsaku for this Volume. All Credits go to the original publishers for the Series. This is a Fan Translation of Y2V8 of Classroom of the Elite. This is fully translated by a Human Translator and we made sure that it's accurate to the original version. The whole text from Japanese was translated literally and not paraphrased much to make sure the writing style of the author remains as is. Wherever the literal translation was paraphrased, it is mentioned in TL Note. There are more TL Notes to guide you through all the jp text references throughout the whole volume. Personally, I really Enjoyed Translating this Novel, So I hope you enjoy reading it. Also, If you'd like, you can Support us [Here](#).

Have Fun !

[TL Note 1 : (For Chapter 1 Title) This is the established translation for this proverb, but in the Japanese original, the last phrase is literally “and a hundred battles shall not be a danger to you”]

[TL Note 2 : (For Chapter 2 Title) 読んで字のごとく, Yonde Ji No Gotoku; literally “just as the letters are read”, means literal or self-explanatory.]

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Classroom of the Elite Year 2 Volume 8

English Translation by Anime Anyway

Prologue

Kanzaki Ryuuji's Monologue

A wise man keeps away from danger.

Ever since I was little, I've always kept my distance from people.

Why did I make such a choice?

It was easier that way, and, most importantly, it stopped me from getting wrapped up in trouble.

No making friends, no making enemies.

It was simpler to maintain neutral relationships.

However, one day, I was wrapped up in a non-sensical fight between some children. The only reason being that I was close by.

Three out of the four people there excluding me were relentlessly attacking one person. The three's attitude in particular was arrogant, but they weren't that unreasonable, and it had all started with a lie.

The child that was being attacked was clearly upset towards the three, and had lied to them. It should really have been a trivial thing.

I think it was about whether he received a sign from a famous person or not.

It was the three's wish that he admit his lie and apologize to everyone.

On one side, a lone person insisting that he isn't lying and refusing to apologize.

I coincidentally encountered them on the spot and analysed the situation as an observer, and encouraged the lying kid to admit that he was lying, but in the end, he wanted to keep the lie up.

A flimsy lie. He was pointlessly stubborn.

I thought that things might escalate and he might be harmed, but I didn't do anything.

It's his fault for telling a useless lie in the first place.

I don't know if he wanted to show off or what, but it really was foolish.

There's no need to save him or anything.

It has nothing to do with me.

I sincerely thought so.

No, I actually even thought that he should get hit once and learn his lesson.

However... Things ended without getting too serious for the kid.

A third party suddenly appeared in this predicament and used his quick wits to save the kid.

Just because they were friends, he protected him without blaming him for the lie.

I didn't get it. That's not justice.

The three who had not lied should have been in the right.

My uncertain heart wasn't clear.

Who's in the right?

The three who had not lied but had used violence, or the one who stuck to his lie?

Was it the third party who protected his friend while knowing that it was a lie?

There was one adult who watched the trouble unfold from the start until the end.

That person put his hand on my head, and said :

"If you don't have the strength to save him, you can just ignore him running away. Having the strength and not using it, now that's something a fool would do."

I didn't understand it back then.

I thought that he was telling me to save that liar.

However, as I started growing into an adult, I understood.

The word “save”, there was no reason that it had to be about the kid who had lied.

I think he meant that if you have the strength to dominate the scene, I could have brought the situation to a finish, no matter what point of view I stood on.

It was the moment that something in me came alive, something I didn’t know I had; something passionate, intense.

I still can’t forget the words of that person whom I had met for the first time.

After I enrolled in the Advanced Nurturing High School, I reluctantly chose to socialize with people.

If there was someone in trouble, I remembered to help them, even if only a little.

I wanted to keep being supported by Ichinose’s side, who had been confirmed as the class leader.

However, in the end, things didn’t go well and I lost my motivation.

[TL Note 3 : The above line is paraphrased according to context. Here is the Literal Translation of the Japanese Line - “However, in the end, things didn’t go well and I lost heart.”]

It was Ayanokoji Kiyotaka’s words that saved me then.

Ayanokoji... Really, destiny is a strange thing.

Classroom of the Elite Year 2 Volume 8

English Translation by Anime Anyway

Chapter - 1

Know your Enemy, Know Thyself, And You Shall Not Fear A Hundred Battles

Intro

As November was coming to a close, the awaited day of the school trip finally approached.

On the road to school on a sunny but chilly morning, I see three a small group of three walking ahead of me with Haruka in the middle.

There is no specific loud laughter occurring, but it seemed like they were making up some topics to fill in the gaps.

“You don’t want to call out to them?”

Kei said so while walking by my side.

“It’s fine. This is what I decided back when Airi was expelled.”

For that group, I am now an unnecessary presence. Rather, I have to be so.

“Then I won’t say anything again. Because I know that it’s the correct answer if you’re fine with it, Kiyotaka.”

For Kei, who thinks this is all other people’s business, I’m sure that the former Ayanokoji group’s affairs aren’t something to deeply care about.

“And? That means I can have you all to myself, right?”

She faced me with a sincere smile from the heart.

There's no suspicion about the fact that I have become a pillar of psychological support for Kei after all this time.

"I'm super looking forward to the next school trip, you know! Where do you think it'll be?"

"I'm not giving up on my dream of Kyoto."

"Oh, right, you said something about that. If it's not Kyoto, I'm fine with any place."

For some reason, my aspiration Kyoto is the only thing immediately excluded.

"Do you hate Kyoto that much?"

"Huh? Come on, it's all about the temples and the cultural properties. It doesn't seem fun at all, does it?"

I think that precisely is one of the true charms of it, but...

It is true that for Kei, visiting temples and shrines may not be so fun.

"What's on my mind right now is exactly that, you know. Yep, yep."

"The location of the trip is important too, but don't you care about the results of the end of term test?"

"My grade won't increase if I start caring about it now, will it? Well, I do feel like I did quite well for myself, so. That's also thanks to you, right?"

There is a small problem with that overconfidence, but it is also the reality.

Although she can't expect high scores, it is true that the bottom level for Kei is getting higher.

It is only a vague declaration but doing some self-grading I can truly feel her growth.

"Maybe I should increase my study time with you more too, like Sudou-kun."

She muttered so with the tip of her index finger on her lips.

Perhaps she doesn't understand that her academic ability won't improve like Sudou's simply by studying for the same amount of time.

The motivation of the person in question is very important, but, in the same way, the skill of the teaching side is also important.

Sudo's remarkable growth is certainly the result of Horikita's educational talent.

That's the part about her that gives her the edge over Keisei.

My education does not stand on such a foundation.

It's simple to forcibly raise Kei's academic ability by giving her a thorough education, but that's not my duty.

That part has to be left to someone else from among the class.

I should only do the bare minimum.

I simply have to get them to start studying on their own.

So that one day, the fitting student can take over.

Part 1

Today, two hours in the morning were set aside for a school trip.

Normal schools probably learn of things like this earlier, but for the students in this school, the end of term test before that is more important, so. First, they have to know its results.

It would be like a bad joke to learn you're getting expelled after being told about the plans for the school trip.

"Very well then, I shall announce the results of the second term's end of term tests."

A stinging atmosphere. Anxiety and unease. However, there are currently no students in despair.

Last year, around this time, a special test of this school called 'paper shuffle' was put into practice.

Kushida's scheme, Ryuen's Influence. Horikita's characteristic strategy was strong, but this year is different.

The rules and the standards say that if you challenge the test created by the school and get a definitive failing mark, you get expelled.

It also becomes a fight on the class side, with first place getting 50 class points and second place getting 25 points. Third place gets minus 25 class points, and fourth place gets minus 50 class points. It may be said that it is a pure scramble for class points.

The failing mark is 39 points average from all of the subjects. After close examination, it wasn't hard to avoid expulsion if you earnestly received your classes.

"The end of term test. First, I will start announcing from the lower ranking students."

Without any appearance of leeway, Chabashira-sensei had a stiff expression.

That may appear to be inciting the students, but I think a certain amount of tension is necessary.

"First, it's the student who got the lowest ranking..."

The lowest grade, which is seen as more important than the highest.

"With 53 points as your average mark, it's you, Hondou."

"Whoah!? Me!? Ah, but 53 points isn't that bad, right!? Wait, should I be happy!?"

He yelled out with the mixed feelings of the joy of not getting a failing mark and the reality of having the lowest ranking.

He was always at the bottom group, so I'm sure it isn't the first time that Hondou has gotten the lowest ranking.

After that, the grades were gradually announced from bottom to top, and after a while they started calling the names of the higher ranking students.

I can clearly say that the bottom group's rise is becoming reality.

My girlfriend Kei also got better results than expected with 56 points.

The main cause of this is certainly the expulsion of Airi with the unanimous special exam.

After that exam, all the students below in OAA faced the danger of being thrown away, so they had to challenge the test with all of their might.

Even Kei who doesn't want to study except when it's with me is clearly starting to grow and improve.

But, I have to quickly solve this problem. I've really only taught her the minimum, so there is a risk that she will be separated from the other students because of the difference in potential.

I should ask someone to teach her, like Horikita who teaches after forming a proper plan, or Keisei, maybe even Yousuke.

The grades for all of the subjects, the total grades and the average grades are being shown on the monitor in turns as the names of the students are being called.

I'm 12th place. I'm gradually and steadily moving up in the rankings.

Then, we finally got to the announcements of the class' top 10.

10th place is Sudou. I was a bit worried, but the results were similar to last time with him firmly breaking into the top rankings.

His ranking moved up by one and he broke a new record for himself.

Then, finally, the first place was unexpectedly Horikita and Keisei with the same average mark of 93.5.

"About our rank among the other classes in this academic year... We passed Ichinose's Class average mark and got second place. Good Job."

First place is the Sakayanagi A Class, second place is the Horikita B Class, third place is the Ichinose D Class, and fourth place is the Ryuen C Class.

With this, our class points are 25+ in the total. However, Sakayanagi's Class A had good grades even among the lower ranked students, so we couldn't get first place this time either. It is small, but there ended up being a gap.

"Well then, I know also from how hard you've worked for the end of term test that you are all looking forward to the school trip. But, first, there is one thing I will do before the talks."

After saying so, an image was reflected on the monitor.

Following Chabashira-sensei's instruction, each student's tablet displayed a chart with familiar classmates' names written on it.

The front is the same as the monitor.

There are three items: Name, gender, and number, of which the name and gender are already filled.

As Chabashira-sensei said, all of the students in the class are written on it.

Only the numbers are blank, which must mean that they will be filled in here and now.

Most of it is easy to understand the moment you look at it, but it's unclear what the standard for the numbers are.

It's limited to the range we can see from our seats, but there is not a single student who understands it either.

"On the screen are the students from the second year's B class, in other words, this class. You can see the empty space between the name and gender with small numbers written there, right? Starting from the first number, please fill in all 37 numbers from the class excluding yourself. You can't use the same number twice. First, type "myself" in an easy to read way on the space for your own number."

The 38 members of second year B class, excluding Yamauchi and Airi who have been expelled.

It seems that we're putting in numbers for all the students until number 37, excluding ourselves.

The problem is, what is the meaning of this number?

I can't randomly put in the numbers without thinking about it.

Everyone used their tablets and put in the letters of their own name as instructed.

After confirming that, Chabashira-sensei started explaining the numbers.

“About the meaning of the numbers that you’re about to write down... You can see it as your assessment of the other party. You can simply put in number 1 because they’re talented, because you’re good friends with them, or because they’re funny. The important thing is to use your own standards and give them a proper rating.”

Basically, we’re giving our classmates rankings, right?

No... When I swiped the screen, I saw that it was not just our classmates, but the other three classes as well.

“Some of you must have noticed already, but we’re doing this ranking for all of the classes in year two. When it comes to the students from the other classes, there may be those with whom you haven’t even spoken to, but you can just use your own standard again. I want you to put in numbers in an understandable scope.”

Students rating students. We did something similar in the past, but you could say that this is still quite different from that.

However, just what are they making the students do something like this for?

“Of course, the number you’ve put in will not be revealed to the students. Even us class teachers will not know what kind of ratings you’ve given, so please don’t worry.”

So that means this is under the management of the school’s upper management.

“Further, it is prohibited to talk amongst yourselves or to look at the OAA while filling in the screen. Ignoring the parts you remember, it would be against the objective to put in numbers without your personal thoughts or conjecture.”

It seems that it is also prohibited to mechanically put in numbers by relying on something else.

“There’s a lot of girls here that I’ve never talked to and I don’t understand anything from the OAA either, so is this really okay..?”

Being different from the students who have a lot of personal connections, Hondou muttered so without confidence.

“Yeah. In the end, you can just write a random number for the people with whom you have no relation to. However, in order for the school to use this list for its objective, you will have responsibility no matter what the results will be.”

Basically, it should be done according to a certain criteria, but, in the end, it will be left to the discretion of the individual filling it in. In exchange, she’s saying that we shouldn’t complain about the effect that this will have in the future.

You may be able to grade each student properly in accordance to the relation you've had with them up until now.

You may regret it if you do it randomly, so do it earnestly. That's what she's saying.

"You will finish this within the time limit of one hour from now. In the rare case that you don't finish it within the time limit, you will continue instead of receiving the explanation about the school trip, so do it carefully."

I'm sure no one thought that they would have to do something like this right before the school trip.

While we were still confused, Chabashira-sensei instructed us to start right away.

Everyone started without being able to make the preparations in their heads.

But... General comments, huh?

As it will take the most amount of time, I left my own class for last, and decided to deal with the A class.

If it's about pure talent, I would support Sakayanagi, but this is about an overall assessment.

I can simply decide everything by if I like them as a person or not.

It's up to the individual to put the person easiest to hang out with or the person they like most in first place.

In any case, I should hold a clear standart and start filling in the numbers.

I had intended on starting on the entries right away, but it's unexpectedly difficult.

The easy thing after all is to assess the talent that I can currently see myself.

I can just write by thinking about what I remember from the OAA if it's a student that I've never crossed paths with.

After determining each tropism, I'll start from number 1.

It may be the same for a lot of students, but you could say that it's already decided to put Sakayanagi in number 1.

With that, I took 20 minutes to finish writing down all of my assessments for each of the three classes.

What's left is the class I'm a part of, the B class.

I'll include hidden potential, communication power and development.

There are some similarities to what was on the OAA, but my current number 1 is probably Yousuke.

It's easy if you consider not only their general value but the contributions they've made until today.

If it wasn't for Yousuke, there would be no competition in this class.

For number 2, I chose Kouenji.

His hidden potential, his achievements in the second year's Uninhabited Island exam, his unintended contributions in the sports festival, etc... He has brought in a lot of concrete benefits for the class. Even considering the quirky and uncooperative parts of his personality as a minus, this should be an appropriate rating.

The fact that we have established our current position as Class B is undoubtedly Kouenji's achievement.

I'll also give a good rating to Horikita, Keisei, Mii-chan and the others like them who study well and achieve good grades.

Then, with his physical and academic prowess that can't be underestimated, I put Sudou in number 9. If it's just the second years and above, I could say that he is valuable enough to be around number 3 or number 4 right after Kouenji.

I finished rating all of the students like this and raised my head up.

It took around 40 minutes in total, but the students other than me still haven't—..

Just as I was thinking so, my eyes met with Chabashira-sensei who was observing the students and I noticed that Kouenji sitting next to me had finished before me.

I can't be certain, but he probably filled it in randomly without thinking about all of the possibilities.

Without even looking at his tablet again, he was lightly blowing into his nails.

In the case of these numbers being used for some kind of special exam other than to form groups, I can't imagine what kind of pattern it will be.

For example, when the school takes a look at the results, there may be a special exam being conducted only with the students who were chosen to be in first and second place. In reverse, the students with low combined ability will be gathered and made to challenge a balanced task as a result.

However, in that case, we would be told before to put in the numbers while thinking about the students' talent and success, and they wouldn't have the students make the valuations in

the first place. As a result of assigning numbers based on likes and dislikes, the risk of it being an unbalanced confrontation would be quite high.

Part 2

With a few minutes left until the planned time limit was over, Chabashira-sensei raised her voice.

“Alright. Looks like everyone is finished, so I will consider the list’s creation complete.”

It seems like everyone finished the students’ evaluations without any issues within the time limit.

“It’s a bit faster than what I had imagined too, but let’s start talking about the upcoming school trip.”

“I’ve been waiting for this!”

Being released from the boring list creation, Ike and the others clapped.

Chabashira-sensei, who, unlike before, did not pay attention to Ike, started using her tablet.

We’ve been told that there is a school trip, but we still don’t know the destination.

There were three choices in the unanimous special test.

Hokkaidou, Kyoto, Okinawa.

[TL Note 4 : Meanings of the mentioned Japanese regions: 北海道 Hokkaidou, Northern Sea Road. 京都 Kyoto, Capital City (Kyoto is Japan’s former capital). 沖縄 Okinawa, Sea Rope.]

The location from among these three that gets the most votes from the students is to be chosen as the school trip’s destination.

Incidentally, I’m part of the minority faction that wants Kyoto, like Horikita, Keisei and the others.

The votes in this class ended up flowing towards Hokkaidou, but there should still be some hope.

If two classes from among the three classes vote for Kyoto, my wish will be granted.

In the end, the result is...

“First, it’s the results of the unanimous special exam earlier.”

Chabashira-sensei, holding for a few seconds as if trying to make a dramatic pause.

“The result of every class’ choice, having a total of three votes, the school trip’s destination has been decided to be Hokkaidou.”

As we heard the results, it was delight and disappointment, mixing together at the same time.

However, the Horikita Class had voted for Hokkaidou, so it’s safe to say that most of them are happy.

I see, so it’s decided on Hokkaidou.

From what I can see behind Horikita, she doesn’t seem to be disappointed.

As for Keisei, he doesn’t really seem dissatisfied in the slightest.

In reverse, Sudou and the others who were in the Okinawa faction... Maybe they’ve accepted this from the start, but they don’t look like they care about this at all.

Sharing information between Classes shouldn’t have been allowed, but it’s possible that they have at least heard rumours.

[TL Note 5 : 風の噂 Kaze no Uwasa: Hearsay;rumour. Literally “rumours of the wind”]

I feel that it is a bit unfortunate, but Kyoto is Kyoto and Hokkaidou is Hokkaidou.

From my point of view, either location is an unknown world, and there is no changing the fact that I’m looking forward to it.

“I think you understand, but don’t forget that the school trip, as you can tell by its name, is for the sake of academic learning and knowledge. Unlike normal high schools, there are a lot of rules that must be followed.”

Chabashira-sensei lightly warned the excited students to not confuse this with play.

[TL Note 6 : 遊び – Asobi; playing; used for contexts such as meeting up with friends, hanging out etc.]

“There’s no way it’s gonna be a special exam or something... Right?”

There is no way to be sure, so it’s no wonder that he wanted to confirm it on behalf of the students.

Seeing Hondou’s fearful question and the appearance of the students, Chabashira-sensei laughed just a little.

“Don’t worry, there is no special exam to fight over class points.”

After the clearly told promise, A sigh of relief was heard from among the class.

“Before entering the detailed explanations, let’s touch on the four night five day stay’s schedule.”

School Trip Schedule:

Day 1: Departing from school > Haneda Airport > Arrival at the ski spot > Lessons > Skiing > Inn

Day 2: Free activity day

Day 3: Sightseeing and visiting the important spots inside Sapporo City > Inn

Day 4: Free activity day (With some limitations)

Day 5: Way back

It seems that we can move freely on the second day, and on the fourth day, with some conditions.

“I was so worried, but it’s all totally normal! No, better than normal! Freedom is the best!”

Since this didn’t seem to be inferior to the model cases compared to other schools, most of the students were happy and strangely cheerful because of such a normal school trip schedule.

It is true that it would be expected of this school to have a stranger schedule.

“I’m glad you’re cheerful, but have you all already forgotten what I said? In exchange for the promise of free conduct, there is work that you, the students of this advanced learning high school, have to do.”

There is no special exam, so just what is going to be demanded from us?

“If you know yourself, and know your enemies, you will not fear a hundred battles. That’s the theme of this school trip.”

“Huh? Wha-.. Huh? What did she say?”

Hondou, not understanding “Sun Tzu”’s quote about the art of war, tilted his neck.

“You must know the circumstances of the foe you’re fighting, and your own real strength. The meaning is that if you do this, you will never lose your battles.”

It was Sudou who understood the proverb and explained it to the class before anyone else.

“Oh, wow... Do you really understand even things like that?”

“It’s nothing impressive, really. The meaning is clear from the words in the first place, so.”

He’s not showing any arrogance about his knowledge and leaves a favourable impression.

“Normally, it is the standart to form a few groups in the school trip and conduct ourselves according to that. It will be no different for you, but there is a point of clear difference compared to other schools.”

“Huh? Huuh? HUUUUH? Then, isn’t it very likely that we might be together with people we don’t get along with?”

The students who have been made merry by the yet unseen Hokkaidou were quickly pulled back to reality.

As if pointing that out, Chabashira-sensei started a brief explanation.

“That’s right. Depending on your relationships and groups, almost everyone with you may be people you’ll meet for the first time.”

I can’t really say that I know a lot of people from the other classes.

Depending on the number of people in the group, I can easily see things developing as Chabashira-sensei says.

“With a normal school, in the case of there being at most 160 students in a school year, there is a high possibility that one’s circle of friends would be quite wide. However, the structure of this school becomes a hindrance and interferes with that.”

Of course, when you keep learning in the same environment for over a year, the number of friends you have increases.

It is not hard to see this school’s structure interfering with that, especially now.

“For you all, the most important thing is whether you can graduate in Class A or not. Basically, that’s a battle of classes. That will not change in the future either. Because, naturally, you will see the other students as rivals more than you see them as friends.”

She’s saying that such an environment is not fit to make friends in.

“So, in your school lives during the day, the chances to learn of the real daily lives and actual circumstances of the students from other classes is naturally limited.”

It is true that after spending more than a year together, I’ve learned a lot about my classmates.

However, there are many who don't know anything about the circumstances of other classes except on a superficial level.

Because there is also the fear that if one makes the mistake of showing their weaknesses, they will be taken advantage of.

On an entirely different facet, there might even occur a hesitation to defeat them.

I want my friends from the other classes to graduate in Class A too.

If such a feeling comes up, one would be greatly confused while fighting.

There must be a lot of students who don't want to know anything on purpose.

"This school trip's objective is to clear away that hindrance. This is the best chance to know the other person, not as someone from a different class, but as a student of the same school, and as a fellow human."

A four nights five days stay feels short, but it's long.

The more group activities there will be in that time period, the higher the possibility of the distance between students shrinking.

However, in reverse, there may be cases where the distance does not shrink at all.

Even if the school removes the hindrance, there is nothing to do if the students themselves build up walls.

"Hmm... This school trip is starting to seem really annoying, and I don't feel like I'll enjoy it at all!"

They know that the rules decided by the school can't be changed, but there are a number of students opposing this like Ike.

Passing time with trusted allies. That's one of the things that no one wants to give up.

Especially for Ike, it's no strange thing for him to panic, as depending on the evaluations he might not get a chance to group with his new girlfriend.

As the commotion kept spreading, one man stood up in order to put a halt to it. It's Yousuke.

"I agree with the school's thinking."

Among all the dissenting opinions flying around, he expressed his support, as if cutting off the vanguard.

"That's nice for you, Hirata. I'm sure there are a lot of people whom you get along well with in the other classes, so if you're boasting, we don't need it."

It is true that for Yousuke who has a wide range of friendships, it doesn't matter who he groups with. But, there's no way that Yousuke would speak out in order to brag about that.

"That's not it. There is not even one student from the other classes that I know better than my classmates. Because I think it's no good to step into things unprepared, you know."

[TL Note 7 : Rephrased in a more natural way. I'm trying to be accurate to the original text as well. What the character means here is that he doesn't know anyone from the other classes that well since he wouldn't want to get into any trouble by entangling with them.]

First, Yousuke insisted that his future is on the same side as Ike and the others.

"Then why are you in support of this?"

"Because I felt a sure significance about it. Leaving aside the club activities, this school is quite unconnected, and I had been feeling that there are very few chances to connect with students from the other classes."

You could easily say that is necessary.

There are cases of becoming temporary allies with other students because of some special test or such, but, as classes are usually in a struggle with each other, as Yosuke also said, there is a tendency to avoid being deeply involving with the other students.

From the point of view of a person with a gentle heart, it would make things unnecessarily difficult.

"Then isn't it strange you agree with this after all? It's easier to fight against rivals or people you aren't close with."

"Hmm... But I think that friends are friends and that it has nothing to do with the classes, so..."

The opinions are divided between the girls too. This is an issue of viewpoints.

"Does the chicken come first or the egg? I think that's where this is going. A friend before a rival, or a rival before a friend? I'm sure that both of those answers are correct. Isn't the trip a good chance to learn that, like the teacher said? We have more than one choice. The more we have, the wider the possibilities will be. That's what I think."

"I think I get what you're saying, Hirata. But, you know, it ain't like the school will change the rules if we struggle here anyway, right?"

If they are willing to be flexible because of our complaining, there is a point in resisting.

However, the students must already know that this isn't the case.

"It's not a bad thing to get excited with an argument, but may I continue speaking first? After you hear the concrete details, it will be easier for you all as well to talk things through."

After saying so, she changed the screen from the schedule.

"It is decided that during the four night five day stay, the students will be grouped as evenly as possible. Fundamentally, one group will be made of 8 people. However, there are 156 people in the Second Year. As we cannot divide it with 8 people groups, there will be 2 - 6 people groups made. We will also adjust them to make the ratio of genders as equal as possible."

The 4 who have been expelled are evenly divided into 2 girls and boys, but the fact that they belong to different classes raises a problem; the eight people groups can be divided cleanly, but the 6 people groups will have some unevenness.

However, this is an unavoidable point, so there's nothing to do about it.

Of course, this is all only if there are no new expulsions or students dropping out because of poor health until the day of the trip.

"As for how much you'll be moving together with the group, that depends on after we reach Hokkaidou."

The group rules are being shown not just by words, but also on the monitor.

Situations where group conduct is necessary:

- *When the school instructs it so on the location*
- *Free conduct*

Situations where group conduct is unnecessary:

- *Inside the accommodation facility*

We will depart from the school with buses divided among the classes, and go to Haneda airport. From there, we'll take a plane to Shinchitose Airport and disembark. After, it seems that we'll be divided into our groups inside the airport.

From then on, until we go back to the school with a bus, group conduct will be the general rule.

Including going to the airport from the school and our movements after reaching Hokkaidou, we will move together as a group with a bus most of the time. Including sleeping time, it seems that we'll spend most of our time with our group members.

"Free conduct doesn't mean that each individual can do whatever they want either. Discussion within the group will always be necessary, so group conduct is absolute. In case your destination can't be decided with a discussion, you will not be allowed to exit the ryokan."

[TL Note 8 : 旅館 Ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn]

It's easy to compromise with someone you have a close relationship with, but there may also be some trouble.

If stubborn students gather together, there will be no resolution of opinions.

As a result, there may be cases where the students won't be able to go anywhere.

"Inside the premises of our lodging, you will mostly be released from group conduct. You can go to the bathroom whenever you'd like, you can hang out in the lobby, and as for food, you may do as you like as long as it is inside the set time."

The one exception is the ryokan we will be staying at.

We will still share rooms divided among the boys and the girls, but we can have breakfast or dinner, take a bath or walk around the facility freely as individuals.

"About the ryokan we will be staying at for 4 nights, it is a fine lodging and famed even inside Hokkaidou. I think you will have a pleasant time without getting bored."

[TL Note 9 : 道内, Dounai, Inside Hokkaidou; Literally "inside the road", the word "road" is in reference to Hokkaidou's full name: 北海道, Hokkaidou; lit. Northern Sea Road.]

"Ugh, I guess the ryokan will be our only time to relax..."

"I'll say this again, but this trip is a good chance to get to know the other students on a deeper level."

After receiving the explanation from Chabashira-sensei, it seems that Yousuke felt doubt on another subject.

"If we're meant to come in contact with a lot of people, it feels a bit strange that we will be with the same group the entire trip."

"You're right to point this out, Hirata. We've also considered changing the groups around each day. However, if you randomly come in contact with a lot of people, you will not get to know the other party. It's also easy to pass the time together on a superficial level even if you don't rush it in one day. However, with four nights, the situation changes. If you can't pass these days showing your true self to your partners, you can't enjoy the trip either."

If it's for just one day, it's easy to just bare with somebody.

Even if you end up with a group you don't like, you can just pass the time patiently until your group changes the following day.

On the other hand, if it is decided that your group will stay the same, you have to handle it somehow.

"Those of you who have a lot of friends from other classes like Hirata and Kushida may have an easy time getting along with any group. In reverse, for people with little friends, there may be a development where they struggle no matter what group they're with. However, think of it as a chance to progress."

Of course, human relationships aren't as simple as these words.

If you're a type that can't make friends even though you want to, it may be a chance to move forward as Chabashira-sensei says, but for those who think friends are unnecessary it will be a slightly burdensome school trip.

Well, that kind of person would already feel troubled by a school trip right from the moment they learn of it.

"If there is a case of someone being found out to not have followed the rule of staying with one group, their free conduct privileges may be taken away."

Free conduct being taken away. If something like that happens, half of the school trip would lose its meaning.

In other words, following the conduct of the group that has formed is an absolute rule that must be protected.

Most students follow the rules, but there are some among them who will not, so...

All of the students' gazes turned towards Kouenji in the farthest back seat.

"What's up, guys? You all look so envious of me. I don't mind, you know, so just keep looking."

Kouenji, who had not been listening to Chabashira-sensei's explanation, said so and showed a cool smile.

He's a man you can't read, in a variety of meanings, but he is coming to school and it's true that he is obedient. Maybe he won't cause trouble with the school trip's groups, either... Maybe.

In any case, I'm sure that most students don't want to be together with Kouenji as it's not clear at all what would happen after.

"About the method by which groups will be divided, it will not be by random, but it will be based on the list created earlier."

The task we took the trouble to spend our time on before the school trip's explanation started.

It seems like that was related to the divisions of the school trip's groups.

"Also, about your cellphones that you use, you can keep using them without an issue during the school trip as well. However, the restrictions about the people you can call will not change. Calls to the Second Year students who are still enrolled in the school, and emergencies such as the police or ambulance are allowed. However, communication with family or those outside the school is still forbidden. Your call history is managed by the school, so be careful."

The so-called theme of this school trip.

It's difficult to believe that this is purely for the sake of making the students get along better with each other.

It can be seen as one of the strategic steps for the school life that lies ahead of us.

Chabashira-sensei continued talking about the school trip after that too, but the most important and unusual point was the creation of the groups formed from among all of the second year students.

Other than that, I guess the management of money will also be of some importance.

As we don't have anything except private points, we do not possess a method to do shopping outside the facilities.

Because of that, it seems there is a system where you can exchange your private points for money beforehand in the school and supply yourself with money.

Further, in case you run out of money on location, they will apparently exchange for you 10,000 Yen at most.

After the school trip is over and we return, it seems that you can convert your money back to private points, so I think the best way to do this is to exchange for a large amount of money at the start.

Part 3

When lunch break came, I headed to have lunch with Kei, as was usual.

But, unlike usual, there are numerous guests.

"This is like some double date, huh, Ayanokoji-kun?"

With a hint of embarrassment, Satou muttered so while standing by me.

"Hey, hey, Maya-chan! That's not something to say to Kyotaka, is it?"

We walked as the girls were in a conversation that could be considered both a fight and a friendly chat.

"It's my first time in Hokkaidou, you know. Kiyotaka, have you been there before?"

"No, I haven't."

For someone like me who's been in the White Room, it's not a territory I have experience on.

I have been to a variety of locations and had some experiences, but Hokkaidou is not among them.

The only things I know about that world is the fact that it's extremely cold and the stuff I've seen on television or in textbooks.

The conversation ended up being focused on the school trip, after all.

"Anyway, are high school school trips really this free? Don't we have too much freedom?"

"I was surprised too. I thought that we would be granted maybe an hour or two of free conduct at most."

"Isn't it good to have a lot of free time? I think it's definitely better than wasting time in museums or sitting around listening to people talk."

Yousuke laughed at that reaction, and Satou also nodded strongly to show her agreement.

As for me... Spending my days in an orthodox way like that wouldn't be so bad either, but... If we have too much freedom, things will deviate away from the form of a school trip.

"I am a bit worried about the groups, I think. I welcome the direction to get along well with other classes, but I can't help but feel like there's gonna be something else ahead of that."

"After you start getting along well?"

Yousuke nodded, and looked at me as if expecting an answer.

"As long as we are fighting over the one and only Class A, feelings like pity will only hold us back."

"I'm sure a lot of people think like that after all."

For Yousuke who feels this direction strongly already, this might feel complicated.

The danger of becoming too close is always entangled with the desire to become friends with someone.

"I'm a bit scared. I'm scared of meeting people from other classes who absolutely have to graduate in Class A for some reason, getting to know their circumstances, and becoming close with them."

"Hmm... I see. I think I kind of understand what you're saying too, Hirata-kun. It's empathetic."

I think Satou also used her imagination, and she was a little convinced.

"I don't really think that way though, you know? I mean, it's more important that I rise up to Class A myself... Am I a cold person?"

Kei denied such feelings straight up.

This wasn't being cold, it was the majority's real opinion.

"No one can see a person's true feelings. This is just the way I think, but, people can easily get along with others on a superficial level, if it's limited to a certain place and time. Furthermore, people hate letting others see their unpleasant feelings."

Feelings of love and hate are such a burden.

"Let's say that there are students who have to graduate in Class A. If they don't get into Class A, they may even lose their lives."

"Huh? That's a bit too grand..."

"It is an exaggeration, of course. However, the reality is that it could be true."

No one knows where the limits of someone's feelings lie other than that person themselves.

"Let's say that you know the situation, and possess more than 20,000,000 private points as a class. However, you also have to use the points to protect your own classmates. You can fight without it, but it's an important insurance. What if someone in that situation, like you,

says that they want to do anything they can to save the students whose life might be on the line ?"

"Eh... That's..."

"What if the class ended up in a place where the students are willing to say that they are willing to help the class, while inwardly thinking "no way" and being secretly against it? Wouldn't it create a possibility of students just pretending to help on a surface level?"

If they opposed, they would be looked down upon for taking people's lives lightly.

The reality is, I don't know what even the people I scorn are thinking on the inside.

"I continued exaggerating a bit, but knowing your enemy is also a disadvantage."

"Then why is the school trying to make us friendly with each other?"

As if she said all of her points, Kei's words came to a halt.

"Somehow, in the future... It may be related to some special exam or something, maybe..?"

"I guess I can't deny that."

As we are now, at least, among most of the students from the other classes, we wouldn't pay attention to who gets expelled.

If the people we aren't close with disappear, then we get closer to Class A.

"That list, and the school trip, these may just be the stage setting with the end term test being the main thing."

"In that case, it may become troublesome... That's genuinely scary for me."

"I feel the same. This feels bad, somehow."

Both Yousuke and Satou moved through the conversation and started understanding the fear for the future.

At this stage, we can't know if expulsion will be involved or not, but it will certainly be harder than last year.

Part 4

After school, the students who have been yearning for a school trip did not lose their enthusiasm.

I received a message from a certain person, someone, who has always been one step below me.

It seems that this person wants to meet me by a bench near Keyaki Mall.

My girlfriend Kei should have plans today to hang out in the dorm with Satou and a few other girls.

I can ignore the message, or even change the day, but this timing works well for me too.

I'm curious about what's going on, so I think it's best we meet up.

I replied that we would meet right away, and I headed towards the place we agreed upon.

As I arrived about 10 minutes earlier than planned, I decided to sit down on the bench and wait.

With the timing being right after school ended for the day, students were walking past the bench headed for Keyaki Mall.

However, what I'm curious about is the choice of such a conspicuous place for our meeting.

I'm sure that there was also the fear that I would take precaution and choose not to come to the meeting, but that does not fit this person's character.

The fact that I was contacted in advance is also an inconsistency.

Is it simply because of a mental issue, or is there some other power moving?

From then on, I kept watching the crowd of students heading for Keyaki Mall, but then...

Even as the promised time came, the person in question did not arrive.

It's normal to arrive slightly earlier or later, so I didn't worry and kept surfing the internet.

"Yoo-hoo~"

As I was accessing the internet on my phone and killing time, the voice of a girl coming from the distance reached me. When I looked up, I confirmed that it was the person who sent the message, Amasawa Ichika.

Nanase, who should be from another class, is also there by Amasawa's side.

In contrast to the smiling Amasawa, Nanase looks a bit surprised.

After they waved at me and approached, they stopped a few centimeters before my eyes.

"Kept you waiting."

"Nanase is with you too, huh?"

As there is no way I can ignore her right in front of my eyes, so I'll greet her formally.

"Yes. Please excuse me for joining in without giving you a notice."

"No, there is no need to apologize, really. It was slightly unexpected, though."

Because after I was summoned here, I had guessed that I would be talking one on one with Amasawa.

Such doubts were about to be resolved by Amasawa's words right away.

"The reason I ended up being late is because I was stopped by Nanase-chan."

She said so, and pointed to Nanase, putting the responsibility on her.

"Further, she insisted on following along. I guess she wanted to meet you that badly?"

"Huh, is that so?"

"Ah, no..."

Nanase panicked a little, but denied Amasawa's words right away.

"I came because I was curious about Amasawa-san's conduct, but I did not know that she was meeting with you here."

"Huh~? Did I not say? I think I did, but..."

"You only said it when we met eyes with Ayanokoji Senpai, though..."

"A-ha-ha-ha, I guess I did."

So that's why she looked flustered when we met eyes.

I listened on as the two first years explained the situation to each other.

But, as it doesn't look like she's about to leave, Nanase must have her own reason for joining in.

For now, I'll leave Nanase aside and focus my attention on Amasawa.

"I heard you took a break from school for a while?"

"You know a lot, huh? So you were curious about me and did a little investigation? Well, I'm okay with having a stalker as long as it's you."

Amasawa hasn't showed up in the school since the vacation days after the culture festival ended.

I'm sure it's not like she had fallen ill or something.

"I was giving a report to Ayanokoji Senpai."

"Wait, Nanase-chan, you were the stalker!?"

With a purposeful overreaction, Amasawa raised both her hands up.

"A girl, huh... Well, we are in the age of diversity, right? And Nanase is cute, right? Maybe it's not so weird."

"Please don't have random misunderstandings like that."

In contrast to the highly excited Amasawa, Nanase calmly said so.

"That's actually why I called out to Amasawa-san today. You've been taking a break from school ever since Yagami-kun was expelled. It was clear that this wasn't because of a physical ailment, but a mental one, so it's only natural that I felt some suspicion when you suddenly came back."

It's only natural to feel distrust and become watchful when a White Room student suddenly returns.

Yagami Takuya. I've made some guesses, but there's no doubt that the student was from the same White Room as Amasawa, even after the expulsion affair.

It isn't hard to imagine that he held strong feelings towards his ally Amasawa.

"I learned that you would be meeting Ayanokoji Senpai. After that, there was no way I could leave."

"You're like a knight protecting Senpai, huh?"

"It's nothing that grand, but I judged that with your current mental state, there is no knowing what you will do."

It also seems like a series of coincidences, but I'm sure Nanase was making some speculations in her own way.

It's hard to believe that Amasawa is coming to the school just to take classes after finishing her vacation.

"...It's like that."

Amasawa has been acting cheerfully until now, but I can't feel her usual bright energy anymore.

"I thought that it's a bit bothersome but that it would be alright."

"The fact that you're still in the school means that you've found the answer by yourself, right?"

As I asked so, the smile from Amasawa's face quietly disappeared right away.

From the way her eyes swayed, I could see that this was not the case.

"Senpai, why did you not give an instruction to take me along? I think you could have easily gotten me expelled along with Takuya, but..."

"You gave more importance to enjoying your time in this school rather than getting me expelled. That's how it looked like to me, at least. So I had no intention of trying to force you to be expelled."

No, in the first place, it's the same for Yagami too.

We never had a frank discussion, but if he had given priority to remaining in the school, then there wouldn't have been a necessity to get him expelled.

"Despite what you think, Senpai, I haven't come up with an answer yet. As I was thinking that there would be a place for me here even if I return... Time just passed me by."

After saying so, she laughed in a self-deprecating manner.

She does also have the choice of baring fangs against me.

"Still, I found some direction. That's why I called you here, right?"

"Well, that's right. If it's possible to remain here, of course you'd start thinking that you should. You can't return to White Room either, and you have no idea where your parents are even if you get expelled. Since you'd have nowhere to go, it would be unpleasant to have to get some part-time job or something in order to live, right?"

If you're lost on the roadside, then you have to do anything you can in order to keep living.

However, as long as you remain in this school, your livelihood is guaranteed until you graduate.

Further, there is a system where your private points are purchased by the school in the end.

According to what I heard before, it wouldn't be an equal exchange, but even if it's only half it would still be a considerable income.

After receiving some money, it would be possible to spend some time trying to find a proper job.

Or, the third path.

I suppose Amasawa doesn't consider this as she does not know where they are, but there is also the choice of searching for her parents and returning home.

However, if she formally becomes a drop-out from White Room, there is fundamentally no guarantee in how she will be treated.

In other words, whether or not she can pick that choice depends on Amasawa's parents.

First and foremost, Amasawa's parents should be wealthy celebrities with a lot of power.

If White Room also learns that Amasawa is a child of fame, the possibility of them treating her gently increases.

Further, her parents must give importance to their daughter Ichika.

If these two conditions are fulfilled, there is a way for Amasawa to start a life as a normal girl.

Perhaps puzzled by my silence, Amasawa spoke up in a modest voice.

"I'll remain in this school. If that's not a problem for you, Ayanokoji Senpai..."

"What if I told you to drop out?"

"I'll drop out."

Insistence, anger, or perhaps sorrow.

As I was wondering how her reaction would be, Amasawa instantly said so.

"You seem certain, huh. Don't you want to get revenge for Yagami?"

"I have no intention of causing any more trouble."

This means that she came here possessing a resolve fitting of her.

"Those words aren't fitting for a belligerent person like you, Amasawa-san."

"That's correct. This is only a special treatment for Ayanokoji Senpai. I have no intention of holding back with anybody else from now on either."

These must be her true feelings.

It seems that Amasawa values Yagami more than I thought, as a fellow student of White Room.

There is a high possibility that the people related to Yagami's expulsion will become her targets from now on.

"There's no reason for me to be against it. If you want to remain here, then you can do as you like."

I don't know how relaxing it will be, but I relaxed my cheeks with a little joy.

"So my strength is so insignificant before yours that you feel no threat from me?"

"It's not like that. I'm also one of the people remaining in this school, so it's only natural that I'd want to support you if you were to make the same choice."

Whether she's a friend or ally is a different problem.

Of course, I can't just ignore her if she ends up being a hindrance to my plans.

I'd like to think that after the affair with Yagami, she understands this well.

"...I see."

"If you're really speaking from the heart, Amasawa-san, then I shall support you too."

Nanase's expression was still watchful, but she replied so.

"Oh, some water from my eyes is... This, what is this, I wonder... I never felt this before."

"Come on, there are no tears coming out at all, though."

"A-ha, that's weird. Even though I'm so moved..."

It's always been like this, but she's forcing herself to put on an act in order to try and move us.

"I may not want to hear this, but what kind of guy was Yagami?"

"I'm curious too. I don't understand why he continued his roundabout ways before getting you expelled."

Why did he hurt Shinohara and the others' group even while knowing the risk is high?

Why did he push unrelated students from Year 1 Class C into expulsion?

The school also announced Yagami's scandal, so a lot of people learned of it.

As for Nanase, I'm sure there's a lot she's curious about.

"That's right..."

She pretended to think about it a little, but started speaking right away.

"I think Takuya was scared. Scared of fighting against you, Ayanokoji Senpai. Yet, I'm sure that such feelings of dread were so deep in his heart that even he was not aware of them."

Amasawa, who should know Yagami better than anyone, made such an analysis. I'm sure that I don't need to interrupt her and ask the details, this should be the correct answer.

"In order to escape from the fear, without noticing it himself, he made detours, and detours, and..."

As the final result, he had ended up digging his own grave.

"I think it might take a little bit more time until I go back to my usual self. But, I think... I think I'll get better very soon."

There's no need to force herself and hurry.

It hasn't even been one year since Amasawa's school life started.

She can just slowly think about her path from now on.

"I just wanted to tell you that. So, I'll go back for today. What about you, Nanase-chan?"

It looked like she asked her "wanna leave together?", but Nanase shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have a chat with Senpai. It's okay, right?"

"I see. I'll lend him to you, a special occasion for today, then."

I'm not yours, but I suppose she's trying her best to put on a brave face.

Without staying in this place for too long, Amasawa headed towards her dorm.

Nanase and I looked on together in silence until she disappeared.

Nanase's expression from the side looked fierce.

"What do you think about her words, demeanour, and mannerisms?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm still a bit worried about her causing problems in the future."

It seems that she was looking at her with such fierce eyes because she was worried about this.

"You can't trust her?"

"It's not like I don't want to trust Amasawa-san. But, I'm saying that we can't be careless, after all."

She expressed it in a mild way, but it's certain that she doesn't trust her.

"I won't be careless. Rather, I should just say that nothing has changed."

I'm in this school in order to live my school life.

Whether they're close by or far away, I won't be influenced by my opponents.

"I'm just needlessly worrying... Right?"

"I'm grateful for the sentiment. I'm glad to have even one ally, you see."

It seems that she understood my thoughts in her own way, but Nanase continued.

"I'm prepared to be thought of as being insistent, so I'll say this one more time. Your abilities, and the possibility of Amasawa-san's reform. Please keep them in mind and be careful. It is a certain truth that Amasawa-san is a student of White Room. We can't know what kind of methods she will use."

It's Nanase's strong wish that I be prepared for every possible situation.

"I want you to remain in this school, and graduate, Ayanokoji Senpai."

I won't say we're unrelated, but Nanase looks like she's worried more about me than herself.

"If you're ever in trouble, no matter how insignificant it is, please do ask me for advice."

"I understand well what you want to say. I'll keep it in mind."

After our exchange up until now, Nanase finally looks like she's satisfied.

"I will take my leave, then."

Nanase, perhaps thinking that she's starting to get annoying, turned around and headed for the dorm.

Despite repeatedly being vigilant against Amasawa, there are times when she is strangely entangled.

In order to confirm that, I decided to dig a little deeper.

"I forgot to say it, but the school trip is this week."

"Ah, I see. It was, wasn't it? Senpai, please enjoy it as much as you can. School trips are the true charm of a school life, you know."

"That's my intention."

It feels strange, after all.

Whether she knew about the school trip or not, she should have something to say to me.

Yet, Nanase isn't showing any signs of such a thing.

It's almost as if she's completely forgotten about it already.

"Is there something you'd like as a present?"

I stopped Nanase, and tried to dig into the matter of the school trip.

"By the way, where is the destination?"

"It's Hokkaidou."

"Wow, Hokkaidou, huh? That's nice. If it's Hokkaidou, then... Maybe butter?"

"It's a bit strange to give butter itself as a present..."

If that is really her first choice then I won't decline, but it doesn't seem like it.

"Ah, then some chocolate coated potatoes would be good. They're famous, right?"

"...I don't know, actually."

It ended up being a mutually confusing conversation.

"Chocolate potatoes, I'll look into it later. If I find some over there, then I'll buy some for you."

"Thank you very much."

As Nanase said so and tried to leave again, I strongly urged her to stop.

"Nanase. Can I ask one thing?"

"Yes? What is it?"

The matter of Amasawa and the matter of the school trip.

Even if normal students can't see the relation, Nanase can.

No, it would even be strange if she couldn't.

"Despite worrying about me, you haven't spoken of your worries about the school trip at all."

"Huh..?"

"You don't get it?"

Right after I said this to try and get her to think it over, the soft smile on Nanase's face stiffened in an instant.

"This school is a facility with strict security that is protected from the outside 24 hours a day. In fact, even Tsukishiro himself sneaked inside and tried to expel me. However, with the school trip, things will change a lot. There will be a lot of times with no teachers looking, times when we'll have to be even more careful than when we were on the uninhabited island."

That's right, the risks there should be greater than an Amasawa with her fangs pulled out.

"If you know these people, then you can even imagine that they would even use methods such as forcing me into their car. If you're worried so much about Amasawa, then you should be saying a few more things. Such as "please be careful". Am I wrong?"

She didn't understand how Amasawa would conduct herself, so she kept checking up on her until her arrival at school.

Then, she figured that Amasawa would contact me, and even followed her until this place.

After all that, there's no way Nanase is not aware of the dangers of the school trip.

"You've defeated Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san; there's no need for someone like me to worry about you..."

"That's strange. If that was the case, there would be no need for you to be here today by Amasawa's side, watching over us. The fact that you've insistently been warning me creates

a contradiction. Unlike the outside world where the majority holds the power, even if she is a White Room student, Amasawa is one person. The danger she poses is insignificant."

Nanase was confused, but she was about to open her mouth right away, then... No words came out.

"Can't think of an excuse?"

"What are you saying? You seem to be having a misunderstanding, Ayanokoji Senpai."

She was clearly in turmoil until just a moment ago, but Nanase was now calm.

"It may be a misunderstanding. If so, despite worrying about Amasawa and looking out for me, why haven't you spoken of your unease about the school trip?"

"It's embarrassing, but I think my confirmation was insufficient. Even though the outside world is full of dangers, when you think about it..."

Nanase, replying that she was simply being insufficient.

Truly, if that is the case, then I can understand why the conversation went that way.

However, coming to a conclusion with that, is something I unfortunately cannot do.

"I have always had a suspicion ever since I've met you. It's about the relation between Tsukishiro, the White Room students, and you. You should have received various instructions from Tsukishiro, but why didn't you let me know about anything concrete?"

Nanase Tsubasa had her feelings used by Tsukishiro in order to take revenge on Matsuo Eiichirou's enemy, and she followed Tsukishiro's orders.

On one hand, nothing about the White Room students' identities was made clear to Nanase.

"Maybe it's because... I'm just an ordinary person? It's only natural that I wouldn't be trusted as long as I don't possess the power that the White Room students do."

"At first, I did not appraise the man called Tsukishiro to be of a high value. That's because I thought that there must be a more efficient way of causing me to get expelled. However, as I kept coming in contact with him, I changed my mind. That man could actually push me into expulsion, I thought."

It's so much that I could even think he was holding back on purpose.

"In the end, you were not expelled. Isn't that because your real abilities exceeded Former Stand-In Chairman Tsukishiro's assumptions?"

"If it's going to end so simply, then that may be so."

In other words, there is a possibility that this chain of events is not of such a simple structure.

"We're going back to this again, but, I think that there is a different reason for you being cautious against Amasawa, but not the dangers of the outside world."

"My lack of judgement is the true reason. What else do you think it could be?"

"Isn't it because you couldn't estimate what Amasawa's conducts will be like at this time today? And, the reason that you didn't warn me about the dangers of the school trip, isn't it because you know that the White Room has no ill plans or intentions towards me?"

If there is no probability of them making war on me, then it's only natural that Nanase wouldn't be worried.

"I don't really understand. How can you say that there is no such possibility?"

"That's what I want to ask about."

"After hearing this conversation, I fully understand the school trip's dangers. Now, I think I'd like you to be more cautious for the school trip than against Amasawa-san."

No matter how many times I repeated the question, Nanase insisted that it was a lack of judgement.

"This is nothing but a hypothesis, but may I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"From the start, Tsukishiro never had any intention of expelling me... That's my hypothesis."

Although the premise up until now will be overturned, this hypothesis connects many things together.

"Isn't that strange? How will you explain the presence of Amasawa-san or Yagami-kun? We can understand from the conversation with Amasawa-san that Yagami-kun in particular was moving to expel you."

"If we say that Amasawa and Yagami were earnest because they were not told about the true objective by the people above them, then it all fits together."

"But what about Stand-In Chairman Tsukishiro? He utilized his significant position to use various forceful methods."

"If he was earnest, then I probably would have been expelled already."

Before talking about my real abilities or such, I should have been expelled by one of the countless options.

"I understand your thinking. It could indeed be true that the intention was hidden as you say. But, you including me in all that... It's a bit upsetting. I don't want to be thought of as an enemy just because I missed the school trip's danger."

"Then, I'll ask for a follow-up, what about the culture festival? Without a doubt, I was approached by someone related to White Room, but you didn't appear before me even once. Is that also a lack of judgement?"

"...That's..."

"Were you simply too busy with your own class' program? With your worries being of secondary importance."

"No, that's wrong. Umm, of course I was worried. I even checked up on you now and then, and..."

"Are you sure? So plainly telling me that you were watching me. If you say that, then I'll end up asking where and when you were watching me."

No matter what kind of person Nanase is, she should know me well enough.

It is inevitable that I will see right through her if she clumsily makes a false statement like that.

I still remember the events of the culture festival in detail.

"Even at the Cultural Festival, they didn't try to force me out of the school. There was a voluntary push, but they should know very well that I would not be expelled so easily. That's why you didn't show up."

While trying to keep her emotions under control, Nanase breathed quietly.

"White Room never intended to expel me, not at the Culture Festival, and not at the school trip. No, they had no such plan from the start. If this hypothesis is correct, then your presence looks extremely strange, Nanase."

"....."

"Did Matsuo really kill himself? Then, did his son, Eiichirou really die? With your words from the point of view of a third party, Matsuo's death looked to be true, but if you have been here as a calculated plan from the beginning, all of your credibility is lost."

Both, what we talked about on the uninhabited island and that she has been standing in my way first like an enemy and then as an ally, it all loses its assurance.

"It is all true, Ayanokoji Senpai. Even if I say that, if you're suspicious of me like that, even if it's hypothetical, then your doubts won't be cleared."

In order to find out if this is the truth or not, I have to investigate the official copy of the family register.

Of course, if the White Room side is involved, even that would be unreliable.

"According to that hypothesis, what's the reason that I've come to this school? It doesn't make sense."

"No, there is an explanation. If you were an aid to me, then it all makes sense. You were supposed to support me in the unlikely event where I'm about to be expelled by the White Room students Yagami and Amasawa. I can simply think of how you disputed with me over the Matsuo affair as a way for you to make me let my guard down."

Fought as enemies and turned into allies. Depending on the time and circumstances, trust can be built up in a short amount of time.

"That's exactly what Amasawa said about being given the role of a knight.... That's what I'm talking about."

Tsukishiro gave the group of Nanase, Yagami and Amasawa the duty of expelling me.

He gave Nanase the role of pretending to be an enemy, to see my capabilities and then becoming an ally.

In this role, it is also possible for her to make truthful deductions by my side by deliberately not giving me information about the White Room students.

"It's only a hypothesis. In truth, there is still a high enough possibility that they really are aiming to expel me. In either case, there is no loss for me. If this hypothesis is correct, then you're a simple ally, and if it isn't, then there is no changing the fact that you have been an ally."

There is no concept of two sides of a coin, just the same pattern on both sides.

However, I shall keep this in the corner of my mind.

The possibility that that man is not moving to expel me.

Then, what does he want?

From which stage?

Matsuo's life and death, his son's life and death.

Whether it is the truth or a lie, its impact on the situation is insignificant.

If everything that has happened so far has been turned upside down...

Everything may have been decided from the start, even my enrollment into this school.

"No matter what I say now, Ayanokoji Senpai is not going to just accept it, right? My only choice is to clear your doubts with time. That's what I think."

"It isn't clear whether there is a way to clear my doubts or not, but I suppose you're right. In fact, I would rather have them treat me the same way that they always have."

"That can't happen. In that case, I... I can't accept that."

Nanase quickly bowed her head, and began walking towards the road home.

Of course, there is no way Nanase would be as physically fit as a White Room student.

There is no telling the depths of her academic abilities, but even when it comes to the way she thinks, she is a step behind Amasawa and the others.

There's still something I don't know about Nanase.

That hunch, at least, was surely true.

Part 5

After 7 pm, when the sun had completely set, Sudou visited the room.

"Sorry to barge in without telling you. ...Hmph, hmph... Is it curry today?"

Sudou muttered so while sniffing the smell of supper, which had gone all the way to the front door.

He suddenly looked at the two shoes lined up in the entrance hallway.

"Is someone here?"

"Yeah, I was just making some curry to eat with Kei."

"Karuizawa, huh..?"

As soon as I replied, the door leading to the living room opened and Kei in her personal clothes showed her face.

"Is it a problem if I'm here?"

"No, of course not. What is this, are you guys always together..?"

From his reaction, I can predict that he visited because he thought no one was here.

"Of course we're always together. Because we're a couple."

"I guess it's not hard to imagine a couple being together 24 hours a day..."

Sudou was about to object, but he dejectedly replied so, as if having imagined several couples already. Ike and Shinohara have been doing many conspicuous things in public recently too, like holding hands or Shinohara sitting on her boyfriend's lap without caring about the people looking.

I think they even said they're going to a karaoke together after classes again today.

"It looks like you're back from club activities, Sudou."

I have the impression that he usually returns at around this time.

"I don't have a girlfriend, you know, so basketball is all I have."

That's... I don't know how to respond to those words.

"Anyway, I'm sorry to delay your meal, but do you have a second? Don't worry; it won't take that much time."

It is probably something confidential, seeing as he checked the shoes earlier.

"You can start eating."

"Eh~? I'll wait. It won't take long, right? He said it won't take a lot of time, so."

When asked again, Sudou thought for a moment, but when he replied that it would take less than 5 minutes, Kei was satisfied and closed the door.

I put on my shoes, and went out onto the corridor with Sudou.

No matter what this is about, it is unthinkable that Kei would leak anything to a third party, but this should be more reassuring.

"Ayanokoji, you... Well, how should I put this? Umm... Did you already... With Karuizawa?"

He asked me so in a muddy, vague manner.

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

"Wow... Isn't that like an answer already..?"

How he takes this reply depends on him.

"So? What on earth do you want?"

"Oh, oh, right. It's only natural that you're so popular, and I don't have the time to worry about that anyway."

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Sudou checks his surroundings.

"Actually, recently, the pressure from Onodera has been... Well, it's pretty heavy. So I've been confused, you know."

He spoke so not in a joyful manner... He looked quite troubled.

I can see that the words I uttered at the festival are weighing heavily on Sudou day after day. That's why, as a person with responsibility, I have to earnestly listen to this kind of talk. Still, what needs to be corrected should be corrected.

"About Onodera's push, looking from the sidelines, not much has changed since after the Sports Festival. Perhaps you see it that way because it is your viewpoint that has changed."

As for Onodera, she is not even aware of her own fondness for Sudou. On the surface, it should only feel like inviting a friend out to dinner or to hang out.

"...That may be true too."

He is scratching his head and does not look to be calming down.

"Ever since you told me about Onodera, I can't calm down, or perhaps I should say that I feel uncomfortable. Even if we talk, I end up wondering what she really thinks on the inside."

As for Sudou, he should only see her as a good friend, on the same wavelength as his impression of her as a sportsman.

If Onodera knew that Sudou was fond of her, then it would be understandable for things to change. Then, the conversation with Sudou came to a halt. Around 10 seconds passed in silence.

"So? What are you saying is the thing you wanted to talk to me about? I think that there's more to it, so."

When I pushed him so, Sudou came up with the resolve to start speaking again.

"When I'm with Onodera like that, you know... Some kind of bad feelings come up inside me. If we start dating someday, I might get my first girlfriend, and that it would be okay since Suzune isn't going to turn around to me anyway. Now, I don't know if I'm being objective, but, Onodera is pretty cute too."

She and Sudou are very similar and are both stoic sportsmen.

If we only consider the compatibility, it's the best combination of those around us.

"It's not a bad thing to think like that. In the first place, it isn't a sure thing that your fondness for someone from the other gender will be given back to you. In a lot of cases, it's only one sided."

That being said, not all of us can take it in stride.

Sudou is also here, struggling with that.

"Maybe... Also, there's something else I think about. Maybe your judgement was wrong, and she simply thinks of me as a friend? In that case, my hubris would be embarrassing and I would be very confused."

It is almost certain that Onodera has a fondness for Sudou.

However, it is true that there is no proof of things being the way I think they are.

The arrow that is pointed at tomorrow could be pointed somewhere at someone else.

"You have a lot on your mind too after all, don't you? I mean, Karuizawa was dating Hirata, so..."

"Well, you're right."

The reality is completely different, but I will keep the conversation moving in that direction for now.

"If, if Onodera confesses, I'd be very scared, you know."

"What would you do if you were confessed to now?"

"No idea... No, wrong... That confession, I probably wouldn't accept it."

He will quickly destroy his chance of finding happiness. That was Sudou's reply.

"I do like her, after all. Suzune, I mean."

That is one of the certain answers that Sudou possesses now.

"Just imagining how hurt she will be when I refuse her makes me feel bitter."

"So you've come here because you don't know the path you should take?"

"No... It's not like I'm asking you for advice. This is about my feelings, it would be wrong if I asked someone else to answer."

It seems that he did not come here seeking help.

"I've come up with an answer for myself. I wanted you to hear it."

"Let's hear it, then. What kind of answer did you come up with?"

"I'll confess to Suzune properly during the school trip. I'll earnestly ask her to date me."

"I see."

It seems that this isn't about whether there is a chance of victory or not.

In order to break up this situation, he judged that he has to move on his own.

"It's because I like Suzune, and I can't imagine dating anyone else right now. No matter what kind of results it will bring, I want to make things clear."

Sudou has shown rapid growth so far.

There is no doubt that Horikita values this highly too.

"The probability may be low. I might get embarrassed. But, still..."

Sudou thinks that if he does not convey his feelings, he cannot move forwards.

That is why he is determined to do this.

"Also, it's not like I'm thinking I can just go for Onodera if I get refused, okay? Actually, I would probably get even more insistent..."

After saying so, Sudou squeezed his fists tight.

"I came to you today because I want you to witness my resolve."

"Witness? Wait, do you mean when you confess?"

"I know confessions aren't usually something you show to the outside world, but I think I need this."

It may be the push he needs to come up with the courage to do this.

By cutting out his way of retreat, he will be able to speak out loud his feelings towards Horikita.

"I'm going to put my hand out and ask her to date me. If she'll date me, then she'll grab my hand, and..."

After saying so, he held out his own right hand, as if performing a rehearsal.

It's not at that stage yet, but I can tell that things have already heated up quite a bit.

So he will put all of his feelings into words right in front of Horikita.

As things are right now, I certainly cannot say that his chances of success are high.

But... Perhaps the force of his thoughts and his determination will be conveyed.

It's Horikita, so she may not answer an immediate romantic relationship.

Nevertheless, starting as friends as a first step is still a good idea.

"I get it. I think it'll depend on the time and location, but I'll witness as much as I can. Are you okay with that?"

After I said so, Sudou patted his chest down as if he was relieved.

"Right, sorry. Asking you to do something like this... Well, that's pretty much it, so... I'll let you know, so thank you. I'm sorry for having disturbed your time together with Karuizawa."

Sudou, saying that he can't take up more of my time, headed for his room. After seeing him off and returning to my own room, Kei was sitting on a cushion before the table.

Looks like the curry was also still waiting for me.

"Welcome back~. What did you talk about?"

"All kinds of stuff."

"All kinds? Come on, that's so mysterious. Tell me~. I'll keep it a secret, okay?"

"I can tell you, but can you stand up before that?"

"Hm?"

I stood Kei up as she tilted her head curiously, and touched the surface of the cushion with my hand.

As I did so, I felt a cold sensation.

"You were listening, after all."

"...Did you notice?"

If she was waiting sitting down, then the cushion should have been warm.

"Was my acting that bad?"

"Your performance was perfect. I just figured that you would be listening."

"Uh... I see."

"And if you're going to try and trick me, you should have an excuse about the cushion. Like you went to the fridge to get drinks, or something. Other than water, there's milk and even tea."

"Huh~? But, I haven't even eaten the curry yet, so wouldn't it be strange? There's water in my cup too. I know that you would have gone to the fridge to check how much of the drinks there were left."

"If you're going to eavesdrop without being detected, then you need to do that much, at least. You can just drink the water, and if you will not put it in your body, you can just spill it out somewhere in the kitchen. There's a lot of water in the kitchen because of the cooking, so."

It would be impossible to tell the spilled water apart.

If the kitchen is not wet, then she could also use the toilet.

"Well, that's not important. Come on, let's talk about the school trip."

Trying to escape the topic, Kei said so as she leaned forward.

It's meaningless if we continue talking about this further, so I'll end it here.

"What did you think about the school trip schedule? The fact that there's a lot of free conduct is quite the topic in the class."

"Looks that way. But, for me, it feels like a demerit. I mean, you can only pass that time with people from the same group, right? The chances of me ending up with you seem low too. Right?"

The possibility is around 5%. However, this is only if it will be determined purely by chance.

"Ugh, God, please let us be together!"

Kei crossed fingers on both hands, and prayed so to the heavens.

"Even if we can't be together during free conduct, there are no restrictions when we are in the ryokan. In fact, I think this is a perfect opportunity for me to learn more about the students from other classes."

If I end up in the same group with Kei, we will naturally end up spending 24 hours a day together.

I won't say that it would be a bad time, but I feel like it would be a bit of a waste.

We will have a number of chances to spend time together, just as we do here.

"Hmm, it feels like you don't want to be in the same group as me."

"That's not the case. But, you should be ready to enjoy your time even if we don't end up in the same group."

Kei may already understand this, but she does not seem to be accepting it.

"But..."

She puffed her cheeks sulkily and hugged my shoulders.

"If you're not there, I might die of loneliness."

"You're exaggerating."

"But..."

I may need to do something to motivate Kei somewhat.

"There is a reason that I'm fine with being in a different group than you. We're at a stage where in order to rise up to Class A, we must have information on the other classes. I'm sure that most of the students on the school trip will be defenceless."

In response to a dissatisfied Kei, I continued further.

"After hearing about the school trip's schedule and the groups, I did some research on the internet about other schools. I found out that it is a rare thing for there to be two full days of free conduct. Thinking from here, I think that it is the school's objective to transform the classes' relationships with each other."

"For what?"

"I don't know that yet, but, either at the end of 2nd or 3rd semester... Well, in a nearby time, information from the school trip may come alive."

"So you want me to gather information that can be used as a weapon?"

"Your abilities are remarkable, you know. If there is an opportunity, then I'd like you to use them effectively."

As I said so while patting her head, her dissatisfaction seemed to diminish a little.

"Ah, well? I understand that you want my help, but..."

"Of course, I intend to have fun together if we are in the same group. But, in case that doesn't happen, don't lose your motivation and try to be useful for the class."

"...Mhm. It's you saying that, so I'll work hard."

Repeatedly patting her head, I decided to change the subject.

"About Sudou earlier..."

"Ah, about Sudou-kun confessing to Horikita-san, right? Yep, that's kind of interesting."

I didn't think she'd take the bait, but she was more interested than I thought.

"Girls seem to like other people's confession stories, so..."

"Of course. Well, I definitely think he'll get rejected, though."

"Really?"

"Eh? Do you think it'll go well?"

"I felt that there is a possibility. If we'll count it as a success if they start out with a relationship above a friendship, then I'll bet that it'll be a success."

"No way, really? Let's have a match, then. Let's bet on if he'll succeed or not."

"What do you intend to bet?"

"Hmm~. Then, if I win, maybe I'll ask for something a bit expensive as a Christmas gift~"

After saying so, she started imagining all sorts of things right away.

"That's easy to understand. Then, what if I win?"

"Then I'll do whatever you say."

"Are you sure? You're willing to make such a big bet."

"Come on, there's no way, right? It's not about whether Sudou-kun is good or bad, it's about Horikita-san. She has no interest in romance."

"Maybe."

It is true that at a first glance, Horikita does not seem like the type to fall in love.

Not to mention that if she is asked if she likes anyone in particular at this time, she would be very suspicious.

Horikita is still at a stage where she is learning a lot.

I cannot deny the possibility that she may step up to that stage like me.

If her partner is to be Sudou, then Horikita wouldn't have a bad impression.

"Ah~ I'm looking forward to Christmas~. I wonder what I should get..."

"Then I'll take my time and think about what I'll have you do."

"Wow, that feels a bit lewd!"

That's just Kei's own imagination.

Chapter - 2

A Literal School Trip

Intro

The morning of the day of the school trip. Four buses in total gathered, and all the Second Year students in their personal clothes lined up.

The temperature was below 5 degrees this morning, and the cold wind was almost prickling my skin from time to time.

However, in Hokkaido, where we're headed now, the temperature will drop further.

Because of that, the school made sure that the students did not forget things such as gloves or coats.

The final checks of the luggage including clothing, and necessary items such as cell phones are finished.

"First of all, I'm relieved that everyone made it to the school trip in good health."

Mashima-sensei, the teacher in charge of Second Year Class A spoke out thusly before we got onto the buses.

The homeroom class teachers in charge of the Second Year students boarded each of the four buses, with Mashima-sensei in number 1 and Chabashira-sensei in number 2. Sakagami-sensei with number 3, and Hoshinomiya-sensei with number 4.

Basically, it was in order from A Class to D Class.

In the meantime, I checked the schedule on my phone.

The bus will head for Haneda Airport, and we'll disembark from a plane in Shinchitose Airport.

From then on, we'll get on the buses on location, and head for the ski place for the first day.

I quietly browsed the listing page of the groups.

I can see the names of the eight people in my group, with group no. six written there.

Kitou Hayato and Yamamura Miki from Class A.

Me and Kushida Kikyou from Class B.

Ryuen Kakeru and Nishino Takeko from Class C.

Then, Watanabe Norihito and Amikura Mako from Class D.

I don't have any complaints about the groups divided by the school, but to think that I would be grouped with Ryuen, a presence of great trouble for many students.

I don't know a lot of details about Kito, Yamamura, Watanabe, Nishino, and Amikura because I almost have no interactions with them, but I'm sure I'll learn more about them soon.

The members who will be with me for 4 nights and 5 days during the school trip are decided.

It's a peculiar group that is difficult to judge if the relationships are strong or not.

By the way, the numbers I've given to each student is 6 for Kushida, 18 for Watanabe, 14 for Amikura, 6 for Ryuen, and 18 for Nishino, 9 for Kitou, and 14 for Yamamura.

I gave them their rankings by only taking the OAA shown by the school as a basis, without considering my closeness to them.

Of these, I gave Kushida and Ryuen the highest rankings.

However, this doesn't have to mean that the other 7 have given each other the same ratings too.

When it comes to Ryuen in particular, many students hate him and it wouldn't surprise me if extremely low numbers were written for him. Kitou in particular, who stands by Sakayanagi might have given Ryuen a good number.

No, that may just be my imagination after all.

Since Ryuen has the qualities and the characteristics of a leader, there is no contradiction for him to be given a high enough ranking to be fitting of that.

I know from the other day's numbering that it isn't completely random, but I may not be able to find the answers with my delusions from now on.

"I don't even know 5 out of these 7 people..."

Further, is it really okay to consider the one person I know, Ryuen, in that category?

I think I've been able to extend my circle of friends in my own way for the past year and a half, but it's a different matter when it comes to the other classes.

Well then, it seems that the time for the bus ride is approaching.

The students started gathering with the other students they're close with.

On the bus we are about to ride, there is no fixture for who will sit where. If it was me from a long time ago, then I personally would have been glad if the seatings were decided.

Now that I have Kei as my girlfriend, it is easy to know who will inevitably sit next to me.

As if this was her cue, Kei waved her hand and stood next to me.

However, at around the same time as Kei, Yousuke showed up.

"Kiyotaka-kun, got a moment?"

"Hm?"

"It's about the bus seats, but can I sit next to you if it's okay?"

"Next to me? But Why?"

Next to Yousuke, a special seat.

Me taking that away would provoke antipathy.

I wouldn't think Mii-chan has the courage to invite Yousuke openly after it became known that she likes him because of Kushida's revelation, but she's not the only one waiting for an opportunity.

Backing this up, I can see the enthusiastic gazes of several girls.

Yousuke looked into my eyes and pleaded.

After worrying about the sparks coming from the struggle for the seat, I suppose this is his best course of action.

"It's a lot of work to be popular, huh?"

"I don't wanna be popular, you know."

Without pride, he simply answered so calmly.

His ability to infer the unwritten rules of the class is outstanding.

He worries about his own affairs as much as he does other people's, and most people think he tries to avoid conflict.

"So, is it okay if I have Yousuke sit next to me, Kei?"

"I wanna say "Ehh~?", but I guess it can't be helped. Okay."

Kei seems broad-minded towards Yousuke who she is indebted to, so she agreed.

"In exchange, Kiyotaka has to sit on the aisle seat, okay? Because I'll sit on the other side of the aisle, so."

Well, I suppose that's a simple response. As a result, with the four seats in one row a little behind the center of the bus, it was Yousuke, me, then Kei and Satou sat on the other side of the aisle from left to right.

A few minutes later, we finished boarding the buses and left for the airport.

We are not allowed to leave our seats while the bus is moving, but we are free to chat, and we are allowed to consume the food and the drinks we brought in.

As a result, some students immediately started taking out snacks.

"Now it feels like a trip, huh?"

Yousuke happily muttered so after looking around him.

For this man, whose happiness is the happiness of others, I am sure he is comfortable with the feelings he is sensing from the other students.

"Ah, ah~. It would have been great if I was grouped with Kiyotaka."

The boy that Kei was together with in class was Akito, someone with whom I can say she has no contact with at all.

"That's why it's a good opportunity, isn't it? We don't have many opportunities to interact with the other classes."

"I'm not really asking for something like that, but... Tsch."

Perhaps thinking she is going to be lonely here, she pouted her lips with some dissatisfaction.

But I'm sure she still remembers what I said the other day.

Kei's eyes are also very important for learning the situation in the other classes.

By the way, Yousuke is in the same group as Matsushita, and Satou is together with Okiya.

"Hey, hey, Ayanokoji-kun, how is it going with Kei-chan recently? Is it going well?"

"Of course it is, right~? There's no need to even ask that."

"Maybe he just feels bad for you, or..."

"Don't be silly. We're super lovey-dovey, so. Right~"

Until we reached the airport, this innocent exchange continued.

Part 1

When we landed at Shinchitose Airport, we began lining up in the airport's lobby.

The buses to Haneda were boarded as a class, but from now on the group conduct finally begins.

Mashima-sensei is in charge of group number 1 to 5, Chabashira-sensei is in charge of groups 6 to 10, Sakagami-sensei is in charge of groups 10 to 15, and Hoshinomiya-sensei is in charge of numbers 16 to 20.

"Once the group is all gathered, you can decide on the seating. Please discuss and decide which seats will be whose."

My group, group 6, has 8 fixed seats granted to us.

The 8 of us will decide where to sit in these 8 seats.

By the way, the seats are in two rows of two seats on each side from the beginning of the car.

As I am in group 6, I walked over to the area led by Chabashira-sensei.

"It looks like we're in a group together, Ayanokoji-kun."

The one to call out to me like that was Kushida from the same class.

"Looks like it. So are you really fine with whoever you get grouped with?"

"Basically, yes. Well... I'm not so welcoming of Ryuen-kun, however."

I don't know to what extent they showed their true nature, but Ryuen and Kushida should have joined hands for a time. With that reason, he may be a difficult partner to deal with.

"I'm sure he's not a scary opponent for you any more. You've never been the type to be afraid of anyone, anyway. Even if he were to make a careless remark about you, it would have no influence on your classmates, so."

"I know. It's Ryuen-kun, who's aiming for Class A. He could threaten me at some point. I was worried if I can handle it, but I think it might be easier now."

Even if his true nature is exposed, it won't affect many people. It seems that Kushida also has created such a resolve.

"Kikyou-chan~!"

As they emerged from the crowd of students, a boy and a girl from the Ichinose Class raised their hands.

It's Watanabe Norihito and Amikura Mako.

Kushida, of course, seems to be good friends with Amikura too and they joyfully took each others' hands. On the surface, they're acting like best friends, but when I think that Kushida is probably unmoved on the inside, this scene makes quite the spectacle

.

"Let's have some fun for the next 5 days."

After Watanabe called out to me, I lightly raised my hand and replied so. We haven't interacted with each other before, so this should be a good opportunity to get to know his personality.

Half of us are here now. The next one to show herself was Nishino, followed a little later by Ryuen.

"Good morning, Nishino-san. And you too, Ryuen-kun."

Taking the lead, Kushida spoke up with a smile. Watanabe and Amikura followed up too.

"...Hi there."

The girl called Nishino seems a bit awkward, not having interacted with Kushida and Amikura that much.

On the other hand, Ryuen did not reply to anyone in particular, and stopped a distance away.

"Now it's just Kitou-kun and Yamamura-san left, huh?"

"If it's those two, they've already come."

"Huh?"

When I pointed behind Kushida, they noticed that the two had quietly lined up together. As soon as he showed himself, Kitou glared at Ryuen with a silent pressure mixed in.

Yamamura, on the other hand, approached with her gaze downcast, looking at no one in particular.

"It looks like we're all gathered, so let's quickly decide on our seats."

At a time like this, having a presence in the group that can take the lead like this is a big factor.

If there is a problem, I am a little concerned about what Ryuen, who serves as the leader of Class C, would say, but...

Surprisingly, however, he did not particularly seem to be interrupting. Either he has no intention of commanding other classes, or perhaps he thinks that there is no need to go out on matters as small as where we will sit.

"Isn't it the best for the boys to be with the boys and the girls to be with the girls?"

Taking advantage of the fact that Kushida took the lead, Amikura proposed so.

"What do you think, everyone? No disagreements?"

No one spoke out in objecting about the boys and the girls sitting separately.

Neither Nishino nor Yamamura seemed to care about it.

On one side, the boys would not be able to complain in the slightest about Amikura's statement.

If they clumsily disagreed, a composition where the boys want to sit with the girls would be formed.

"Then we can have the girls discuss with the girls, and the boys with the boys, right?"

After saying so, Kushida began skillfully separating the boy's side. It would have been easier to let Kushida make the decision on how to divide us, but... I suppose it cannot be helped.

Watanabe and I naturally gathered together, but Ryuen and Kitou did not move a step.

"What should we do, Ayanokoji? This feels like there's going to be a big problem."

"Yeah."

"I'm fine with anyone, you know, but I can't see myself talking with Ryuen and Kitou."

"Can you see me talking with them?"

"Huh..? Umm... Well... It's better than putting those two together, right?"

I could not be happy about the compared subject matter being what it is. Personally, I feel like I can get through this without being wrapped up in trouble if I sit with Watanabe, but... As I was starting to think that I should just go ahead and make a decision, Kitou approached me without making a sound.

"As long as I'm not next to Ryuen, I have no complaints."

He blurted out the most troubling statement, then returned to his original position.

"...What should we do?"

"If you force those two to be side by side, it's going to be a disaster..."

Having easily imagined this situation too, Watanabe nodded his head in dismay.

"Then... We have no choice but to separate ourselves. Where do you want to be?"

"I'm fine with any seat. Sit wherever you'd like, Watanabe."

"Wherever I'd like, huh..?"

Faced with two choices that made him want to hold his head, Watanabe pondered for a moment before giving an answer.

"I'll just go with Kitou, then. I mean, that guy seems calm in general, so. If I don't turn hostile intent towards him, I don't think that he'll do anything to me."

Indeed, Kitou is not as ominous as he looks. I have a clear image of him being harmless to all except those hostile to him.

[TL Note 10 : 人畜無害 Jinchiku Mugai, lit. harmless to humans and animals.]

Well then, I should make sure I greet them too. The school trip is long, with 4 nights and 5 days.

"You may be unwilling, but as long as there aren't any problems, I'll be next to you during the school trip. I want to be considerate and give you the window seat, so are you alright with that?"

"Whatever."

For now, he seems as quiet and meek as a borrowed cat.

[TL Note 11 : 借りてきた猫 Karitekita Neko, lit. "borrowed cat". Expression used to mean someone who is acting quiet and meekly like a cat not in its own house.]

If he thought it through, it would be no strange thing for him to be absent from the school trip without permission, but he's earnestly participating, which is impressive of Ryuen.

"You ain't misunderstanding things, eh, Ayanokoji?"

"Misunderstanding?"

"The preliminary battle between me and Sakayanagi has already begun, you know."

After saying so, Ryuen gave a glare to Kitou. Kitou, on the other hand, is also glaring back as if he was expecting such a gaze to come towards him.

"I see. This school trip will inevitably lead to exchanges with the other classes. So you're saying that this is a great opportunity to look for gaps in each other?"

"It's a good opportunity to see what kind of guy Kitou is. Depending on the situation, I'll crush him right away."

It's a disturbing statement that makes it hard to believe the trip to Hokkaidou will be joyful and enjoyable.

I suppose this won't end as just a simple trip. That being said, was Sakayanagi's group number 4? I recalled in my mind the members who were allocated to number 4.

It's Tokitou Hiroya and Morofuji Rika from the Ryuen Class.

The second term is not over yet, but, heading towards the end of the school year, there's nothing wrong with starting to look into each other already. If we end up clashing with the two classes that have prepared for battle, it will be quite the challenge.

When the school decided that the group's discussion was over, they began to lead the way. I gave Ryuen the window seat in the bus, and I sat next to him.

There was a lively atmosphere inside the buses travelling on a class-by-class basis, but it was now silent like a lie.

A group designated by the school mixing with different classes. Not all students are close friends, so I suppose it will take some time for them to open up and be able to talk casually.

As if proving this, half the students riding on the bus were separated by class and not by gender.

This is an inevitable example of what happens when you can't take the initiative like Kushida and decide who you'll sit next to.

Still, all of the students wanted to enjoy the trip. About 30 minutes after the bus' departure, most of the introductions were over, and the group's conversation started widening outside just one's own classmates.

Then, when it was explained that we can use karaoke, one of the boys started singing with a microphone in his hand.

"I felt the same thing from that first year as I do from you. Do you know him?"

I did not think Ryuen would ever speak to me during the trip, but such words flew from the side with no warning.

With the posture of his elbows, he's speaking as if talking to himself without even looking at me.

"What if I say I have nothing to do with him?"

"That can't be true. He was beating the damn teachers away just to get to you."

It's true that with that, it doesn't look like we're unrelated.

"I just know him a bit. Nothing more, nothing less."

"So I shouldn't care about him? I can smell something fishy from over here."

"There's no point in turning your eyes towards a first year. Isn't the important thing getting up to Class A?"

"I'll do whatever I want. This may be useful for beating you to death one day."

I see. So rather than having an interest in Yagami, he's keeping an eye on him because he thinks that this may be a weak point for me, who is standing behind him.

Well, it will not become a weakness, but I won't deny that it's a troubling factor.

"It's enough to make some crazy guys drag a first year along. Further, the damn school even took a stance of tolerating it. I feel like for a moment, I saw the true identity of a suspicious bastard like you."

"That's a shame, though. Yagami isn't here anymore."

"It's true that he's out, but isn't there still a girl from first year called Amasawa left? I can just play with her."

It seems that Yagami somehow left behind a little information.

If I remain silent, there is a high enough chance that Ryuen will start to mess with Amasawa. In a one on one fight, I'm sure Amasawa would not fall behind. But, in the case of Ryuen, it won't end with that.

It's easy to imagine him to persistently keep clinging for an opening, and repeatedly trying to make contact.

Of course, in normal times, Amasawa would have the ability to react to this to some extent, but now that Yagami has been expelled, the situation is unstable.

"Whatever. Anyway, there's still some time before I'll fight with you."

Ryuen, seeing my thoughts and replying as such. There's a lot I want to say, but it is true that he would focus on the Sakayanagi class which is certain to get to the end of the school term, rather than the Horikita class with which there is no knowing when a battle will materialize.

"By the way, Ryuen, there's one thing I want to ask. I've been thinking about it since this morning, actually."

"Huh?"

I put my hand out and reached into the netted pocket in the back of the seat in front of me.

Then, I took the black plastic bag set there.

"I've been wondering what this bag is for."

"Huh?"

He suspiciously came close to me, and laughed with his nose.

"It's a bag to use when you puke, right? Are you fucking with me?"

"I see. Indeed, I suppose there is a possibility of puking if you get nauseous in cars."

So this is what is commonly known as an etiquette bag.

"It wasn't set up in the bus to the Uninhabited Island Special Test. I guess it isn't used commonly."

We've gotten on buses many times until now, but it's the first time something like this was in the pocket. I suppose this is for us as much as it is out of consideration for the bus company.

I'm sure it would be very hard to clean up if someone clumsily spread their vomit all over the seats or the floor. I've come here after looking into a variety of things, but there are still numerous things I don't know about. I suppose it is expected that I will encounter the unknown if I leave the school.

"You're a weirdo as always. Are you telling me you're some rich kid that's never rode on a bus?"

[TL Note 12 : ボンボン Bonbon, a child from a rich family in Kansai dialect]

"It is true that I don't have that much experience."

I've seen a lot of children vomit because of semicircular canal disturbances, but they weren't in an environment where they would be allowed to throw up into bags like these.

[TL Note 13 : Inner ear canal]

I'm not thinking with the premise that it's okay even if you puke, so I'm not being unreasonable.

I have experienced the sensation of motion sickness a few times myself, but I should keep in mind that there are such useful things in this world.

Part 2

After having lunch in the large cafeteria attached to the ski place, the Second year students finally got their ski lessons.

The risk of losing something or having an accident is still high, so a directive was put out that prohibits taking mobile phones onto the slopes.

There were some complaints from the experienced students who were dependent on their phones and insisted that they were used to handling them, but there is no breaking the school's rules, so it can't be helped.

Fortunately, from the following day onwards, we were informed that we would be allowed to take our mobile phones if we wanted to go to the ski place ourselves. However, in the case of a lost item or an accident, there will be a fitting amount of private points required.

Then, we put on our rented skiwear and received our ski boots. The outer face seems to be made of plastic. I followed the instructions to unbuckle, spread the innerwear and put my feet through. I fit my heels through them, straightened up the innerwear and tied the buckle from down below to the top. Finally, I tied my power belt and powder guarded it. With this, it seems that my required preparations are complete.

I tried to walk as normal, but I can't seem to make the correct movements. When I followed the instructor and walked by landing on my heels, I was able to move smoothly.

My preparations are finished, so I headed outside. The lessons are divided into three categories of advanced, intermediate and beginner. As I do not have any experience with skiing, I didn't hesitate to join the mass of people who wanted beginners' training.

I could have investigated in books or the internet beforehand, but this is a good opportunity to learn on the spot, so I didn't take in any unnecessary information.

About 60% of the entire school year wanted this beginners' training. It isn't clear whether this is a lot or few, but it was a little surprising that 40% of the students were intermediate and above.

I don't think you would get many chances to ski in the Kanto region, but these people somehow experienced it.

Ryuen, Kitou, Nishino and Kushida from Group 6 were absent, probably because they were intermediate or above, with the remaining members being beginners.

The crowded beginners' course is further divided into groups of about 10, and the instructors are teaching us how to ski from scratch.

As I held great interest in the ski equipment I'm touching for the first time, I listened to the explanation.

On the other hand, the advanced skiers who were the fewest in number seemed to be free to ski immediately after receiving only a simple explanation, and were quickly getting ready to get onto the slopes and ski.

Ryuen's figure was also among them. I cleared the snow from the back of my boots, then aligned the binding with the front and the back, and stepped in with my heel. I see. I'm walking around with both my feet enveloped.

While thinking that it was unexpected to not fall down as I tried to walk, I was perplexed by this new sensation.

Right... At any rate, while using the pole, I tried to slide somewhat forcefully, intentionally tilting my center of weight to the left.

When I did so and moved the board forward, my body collapsed the other way in response.

"...Are you okay?"

Yamamura, who was watching from closeby called out to me.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just wanted to take a little tumble."

"Right..."

A bit of laughter occurred around me, but it's nothing to worry about. It's important to try and fail at first.

Ryuen, who I thought was already headed for the lift, raised the corners of his mouth slightly when he saw me fall down and walked away in satisfaction.

Perhaps he wanted to see me fail.

"Be careful over there!"

After being warned, I lightly bowed and apologized, and followed the instructor's directions.

After that we had to do some actual light skiing, but an unexpectedly large number of people fell.

There were a couple of unintentional falls, but, alright, I'm getting the hang of it now. The course took about 30 minutes.

With all the steps completed, I have a lot of free time.

"Alright, let's do this."

Part 3

After the training was over, it seems that Watanabe and the others gathered together and were heading for the beginners' course, which has a gentle slope.

"Ayanokoji? You're not going?"

Watanabe, who had started walking away with his board turned around, spoke so with wonder.

"I think I want to ski in a different place a bit."

"I see. See you later, then."

While seeing them off from their backs, I decided to start moving myself.

"Hey, Ayanokoji. You should piss off to the beginners' course over there, this is for advanced skiers."

Ryuen, who was headed for that advanced course, pointed at me in a depressing manner.

"No, it's fine. I just want to challenge it."

"Huh? Can a guy who was walking like a penguin just now really say that line?"

"I think you should stop there, Ayanokoji-kun. It's about 70% hard humps and steep slopes, so even I was scared.", said Kushida.

It seems that the two already skied once, so they warned me so.

"That's right..."

There was a warning, so I wanted to follow it, but...

In the corner of my eye, Yamamura restlessly got onto the advanced lift and went up. I don't think that she chose the advanced course on purpose.

Perhaps she saw Kitou's back on the lift ahead of her, and got onto it by mistake without being stopped by the others around her.

"Looks like it wasn't just for show when Yamamura said in the bus that she has a faint presence."

"Huh?"

"It's Yamamura. I don't think she got onto it knowing that it's the advanced course."

I told them about Yamamura who was sitting on the lift going up.

"Whoa... We should probably go after her."

With that, I took a ski lift for the first time in my life and headed for the advanced course together.

Two can enter the lift at the same time, so I got onto it with Kushida.

The lift started to climb up without stopping, and my feet separated from the ground.

"Interesting ride, huh?"

"You're riding one for the first time, right? Aren't you scared?"

"I'm not scared. Because a fall still won't do much damage at this height."

"Wait, that's the problem..?"

"Hm? Isn't this something to fear because of the danger of the shock of the fall?"

"That's, yep, I think it's like that, but..."

She seems a bit confused about some of my words, but I don't understand the reason.

"Well, whatever. I've been thinking lately that it's a waste of time to think about you, so."

She huffed, and I could see the true Kushida for a moment.

There is a relatively long distance between lifts and the wind is still blowing somewhat strongly, so she must have judged that there is no need to worry about our chatter being heard by Ryuen ahead of us and those behind us.

"I'm not so happy about that expression."

There's no human that would be glad about being told that it's pointless to think about them.

"It can't be helped, right? I really feel that way, so."

After saying so, Kushida sent her gaze towards the mountains in the distance.

"I'm confident that I can read the atmosphere around me and the thoughts of other people. This is the same even for Horikita-san or Ryuen-kun. Of course, I can still lose if this is outweighed by other factors, though."

Because victory isn't certain just because you can guess the thoughts of other people.

"I used to think that I could read you too, Ayanokoji-kun. But I was completely wrong. For the first time, I can't even guess what a person is thinking."

"For reference, how does that feel?"

"Huh? You wanna ask that?"

Without looking back, she asked back with the back of her head towards me.

"I guess I shouldn't ask, after all."

The atmosphere strongly suggests that she is reluctant.

"By the way..."

Kushida's expression as she quickly turned back was not fierce... It was the same as usual.

"It's a very important subject so I'd like to confirm it here and now... You're not planning to expel me, are you?"

"Hmm... You asked that quite clearly."

"As long as I can't read your thoughts, Ayanokoji-kun, I have to think on my own. If I was Ayanokoji-kun, what would I think? How would I move?"

"You mean the conclusion of that is that I'm trying to expel you?"

Kushida nodded without hesitation, and then stared into my eyes.

I think she's trying to unsettle me and find out my true intentions.

I'll avert my gaze on purpose and try to create an atmosphere where it looks like I am aiming to expel her.

From a normal person's point of view, it would look like she was right on the mark, and I looked away with discomfort.

I was curious how Kushida would think about this.

"Are you messing with me?"

"I am sorry..."

As my hidden secret was obvious from my face, I understood that I was being glared at even though she was smiling, and instantly apologized.

"Come on, you're definitely making fun of me, right? Is this funny for you?"

“No, it isn’t funny at all. Sorry.”

I’m sure she is reluctant, but with what happened just now Kushida was able to completely read my mind.

“I have no intention of expelling you.”

“...Really?”

“When Horikita decided to let you stay, I lost my means of expelling you. If I wanted to leave that possibility open even now, I would have taken the choice to talk Horikita out of it. I don’t think Kushida’s suspicions will be cleared, but this is an undeniable truth.

“The Unanimous Special Exam, you know...”

I know that for her, the time of the Unanimous Special Exam must be an unforgettable humiliation.

The main premise now is that Kushida won’t repeat the same mistake again, but there is no point in going to the trouble of mentioning that here.

In the first place, now that all of her classmates know about it, it is no longer realistic.

“Even if I can’t eliminate everyone, there is a possibility that I can abandon this class. A class transfer ticket, or I could save my private points. I can leave with such methods. Can you ignore such a risk factor?”

The fact that she calls herself a risk factor on her own, is the interesting part about Kushida.

“That would not be treachery or any such thing, it would simply be a personal strategy. As the school actually has this system in place, there’s nothing wrong about transferring to a class that can win. Rather, if I don’t think my own class has a chance to win, I will find an opportunity and move forward with the transfer when I can.”

She’s saying that no one has a right to tell her to continue staying on a sinking ship.

“I can’t read you after all, Ayanokoji-kun. I can’t tell in the least if you’re talking truthfully or not.”

“It might be because I don’t show it on my face.”

“It’s not just that, but...”

Looking Dismayed, Kushida turned her sight to our destination.

“I wonder why. My secret that I absolutely wanted to keep hidden was exposed, so I should have been so frustrated and bitter that nothing would matter any more, but... I’m coming to

the school trip and having fun skiing. Further, I even feel that there is nothing wrong about that.”

“The school trip is a fun event for many students, right?”

“For many students, yes. But for me, every event has been a struggle, so.”

The effort to keep pretending something you’re not.

I suppose that is precisely what these events require.

“Umm... Can I ask a little something about Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san?”

“Those two from first year, huh? I had a bit of an entanglement with Amasawa, but I don’t know much about Yagami.”

For now, I tried to emphasize this, but Kushida may have simply spoken out the doubts hidden inside her.

“If you don’t know, Ayanokoji-kun, then it can’t be helped.”

“That’s fine. So? What about those two?”

“You know Yagami-kun was expelled, right?”

“I heard that the fact he used violence in the Uninhabited Island Exam came to light. Further, there are even rumours he hit teachers, so I think it’s only natural he was expelled, but... He’s your Kouhai, right? You two looked close, so it was a shock, wasn’t it?”

[TL Note 14 : 後輩 Kouhai, someone from a lower year/rank. Opposite of Senpai]

Yagami was a White Room student. In other words, he had no connection with Kushida in the past.

The information given by Tsukishiro’s side was used as a guise, and Kushida was probably made to think of him as her Kouhai, considering the risk of him learning about the past.

However, there is no way for me, an outsider, to deduce this, so I have no choice but to give this answer.

“Wrong. Yagami-ku-.. He knew of my past. Only the Horikita siblings went to the same middle school as me.”

“So you’re asking how he knew of your past?”

“He told me directly. So I, naturally, was suspicious of Horikita-san and you, Ayanokoji-kun. Ryuen-kun also knew of my true nature, but he doesn’t know my past, so I can leave him out.”

It is true that her true nature and her past are completely different things.

“But it doesn’t add up with Horikita-san, right? There is no merit for her to speak of my past. In which case, by a process of elimination, you’re the only one left, Ayanokoji-kun. That has been bugging me for all this time.”

“I see.”

Indeed, I am one of the few students who know of Kushida’s past.

It was inevitable that she would act hostile towards me in the Unanimous Special Exam, but her suspicions towards me may have also been among the reasons for her hostility.

Further, with it being clear that Amasawa was also involved with Kushida, I end up being a suspicious person with my own connection to Amasawa.

If I simply deny it here, then the question of who revealed her past would cling to Kushida’s mind. It’s a different matter to clear away her suspicions.

“I don’t care either way. I just want to know the truth.”

“Even if I am connected to Yagami and Amasawa, you’ll forgive me?”

“Huh? Of course I won’t. But... All I’m saying is that I won’t try to do something to you because of it. Rather, I think I will recognize again that you are a foe far beyond my level.”

Right now, her fangs are meekly pulled back. She’s saying that she will only pull them back even further.

“Hmm, no... There’s no one other than you coming up in my mind, Ayanokoji-kun, but I think it might not be you. That guy wanted to expel you. He wasn’t pretending, it was from the bottom of his heart. There’s a contradiction, isn’t there?”

The reason for me being connected to the Yagami side and leaking information becomes doubtful.

It is only a hassle to go out of my way to hunt down Kushida like that.

With such suspicions in her mind, it must have been quite difficult to continue her school life.

Still, I can’t talk concretely about White Room.

“I met Yagami in my old school, so I knew who he was. We lived close by, so.”

“Huh..?”

"It's also the same for Amasawa. I think I've caused those two to have a misunderstanding, so they always resented me. I was able to solve the misunderstanding with Amasawa, but, I couldn't do so with Yagami. I responded by ignoring him, but I suppose he came in contact with you before I knew it. "

"Wait, in that case, isn't it strange? He shouldn't have known about me, right?"

"I don't know how he found out, but maybe he looked into you because you're my classmate? He must have been looking for a chance to take revenge on me. In other words, you were simply dragged into this."

I lightly bowed, and apologised to Kushida.

"Even though I didn't know about it, I'm sorry that you got involved because of me."

"...Ayanokoji-kun."

I won't say she is completely relieved, but I'm sure she will come up with a lot of answers now that she knows I was connected with those two in the past.

"Could Yagami-kun's expulsion... Could it be your doing, Ayanokoji-kun?"

"If I ignored him, there is a high possibility that it would bring you, who chose to help the class out, into harm's way. The fact that Amasawa came into contact with you must have also been because she knew Yagami would do something to you."

For this point, I'll answer honestly.

Nagumo, Ryuen, and Horikita. Several people either know or suspect my involvement.

If the truth comes out after I deny it, it will be too much trouble.

"Amasawa remained in the school, but, like I said earlier, I solved her misunderstanding. She shouldn't hinder you in the future. She may still have some issues with the things you say and do, though."

The creation of an environment where Kushida can utilize her true abilities to their full extent in her school life. It may be created from this unexpected discussion.

"I..."

As a strong wind blew, Kushida's white knit hat, which she was wearing shallowly, was about to be blown off.

In order to stop that, I reached out with my hand and pushed the hat with my palm.

At the same time, Kushida's hand also came on top of mine.

“Oops, thanks.”

It was highly likely that it wouldn't have blown away even without me lending a hand, but Kushida turned towards me while thanking me.

She immediately went rigid, staring into my eyes, and wasn't moving away.

“What is it?”

“...Oh, it's nothing.”

I didn't understand what she was thinking, but she quickly turned her gaze away.

Then the lift reached its destination and we got ready to disembark.

“Can you go?”

“I think I can handle it.”

I replied so, but Kushida got off first, as if to set an example, and I followed after her. After the long lift ride, we arrived at the advanced course.

There seemed to be fewer people here than down below, but it should be enough.

“This is pretty amazing, huh.”

“The slopes are steeper than you thought, right?”

Just as Kushida said, the slope looks steeper than what I had seen looking up from below.

“Are you really sure?”

“Well, I'll manage somehow.”

“If something goes wrong, it might be better to walk down to the side of the slope after taking your boards off. I guess it wouldn't be cool, but...”

“I got it. But, Yamamura is more important right now.”

The ski place is crowded with a mix of students and regular tourists, so it will be hard to find her.

“I thought she would notice that she can't ski here and be waiting by the lift, but...”

Kushida and I looked around our surroundings together.

Yet, we can't find Yamamura's figure right away.

“Maybe she has already started skiing..? That can’t be, right?”

There are many sliding down the slopes, but no one appears to be a clear beginner. On the other hand, there were many boys and girls gathered around Ryuen.

“Those students are in Ryuen-kun’s class, right? I guess he’s more popular than I thought.”

“They don’t look like they’re having a lot of fun talking to each other, though.”

“Indeed.”

The gathered students are saying something to Ryuen with a very serious expression on their faces.

Ryuen, who is in the middle, seems to be simply listening without looking at anyone in particular.

Why are they gathering in an uncrowded place like the advanced course on purpose?

If they wanted to keep in touch with the class, they could just use their cellphones later.

In which case... I can only assume that they intentionally formed such a gathering.

“Maybe he was reporting something?”

“It looks like it.”

The members who had gathered were Kaneda, Ishizaki, Kondou and others who often received instructions from Ryuen.

“There she is, Ayanokoji-kun. Yamamura-san.”

As Kushida said so, Yamamura really was in the direction she was looking at.

Without skiing, she was looking at Ryuen’s class which was dispersing.

“Yamamura-sa-..”

Kushida was about to call out in a loud voice, but I signalled for her to be quiet with my finger and eyes.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Please wait a bit.”

Yamamura’s movements are a bit puzzling.

She went up to the advanced course while knowing it was a mistake, and stayed there silently, as if trying to hide her presence.

“What kind of student is Yamamura?”

“What kind of student? I guess I don’t really know much about her either.”

“You have the widest range of acquaintances in the school, but there are students even you don’t know, huh...”

“That’s right. I could get a grasp if she was someone that talked to me on her own, but Yamamura-san is different. She hasn’t talked to me even once, and if I talk to her myself, she gives a short reply of nodding silently and ends it. I can’t get to know her like that, can I?”

If she is closing herself off, then it is true that even Kushida can’t do anything about it.

“Who are the students in Class A that she gets along with?”

“I don’t know that either... I can’t even imagine her talking with anyone. She has a very faint presence, doesn’t she?”

The group was just formed, but I still have a faint impression of her.

Yamamura’s personal OAA revealed that she has low physical ability but high academic ability.

Soon enough, the students who had gathered around Ryuen scattered and returned to their own groups.

At the same time, Yamamura cut her gaze off from Ryuen’s side and began to slowly move.

The two of us followed her with our eyes so as to not lose her, and...

“Ah, she fell.”

Perhaps caught in the snow, Yamamura fell on the spot.

There were some people around, but no one noticed or even looked like they wanted to help her.

“It’s hard to have a faint presence, huh?”

“So why are you looking at me?”

“You’re the representative of a faint presence, aren’t you? Well, you used to be, I should say.”

It's a sad thing that I can't deny it.

No matter how hard I try, I can't do anything about that.

"By the way, how does Yamamura's movements look like to you, Kushida?"

"Running away from the subject, huh?"

"I'm not running away."

I denied it, but Kushida still laughed.

"Yamamura-san's movements... Maybe she's watching over Ryuen-kun's movements under someone's instruction?"

"That's very likely. I think there's only one person who could do that."

"Sakayanagi-san, right? But I don't see a connection between her and Yamamura-san."

"That would precisely be the reason, wouldn't it? No one is aware of that connection. Even I might not have noticed if I wasn't put in the same group as Yamamura. We are both beginners, so I was curious what she would do. If I had been an intermediate or higher, I would have already started skiing without worrying about it."

"If you can confirm whether there is a connection or not, then it's best you do so, if you can."

"It may be important for fighting with Sakayanagi in the future. I can't avoid the task of figuring out who is an important person at hand for Sakayanagi."

"I see."

"Yamamura's moving."

We kept watching over Yamamura's movements.

Taking off her boards, she was walking down the steep slope from the edge with fear.

"I'll go support her a bit. Maybe I can get closer to her."

Kushida, deciding what she had to do, started sliding.

"She's moving fast, huh."

She is quick-witted, and she can smoothly read my intent.

Further, Kushida has strong conversational skills that lets her get close with most people.

As long as that is the way for her to stay in her own class, then she has to keep it up.

Well then, maybe I should try experiencing this advanced course by myself.

Part 4

After our time at the ski place, we arrived at the ryokan before 5 pm.

In order to head towards the room given to us, we went to the lobby in turns starting from group 1.

It was group 6's turn right away, so we followed on.

Though the exterior felt historic, the interior of the lobby and such were well maintained and clean.

I changed into my inside slippers, put my luggage down, and waited to receive my keys.

"I knew it already, but we're supposed to sleep with these people, huh..."

Watanabe sighed with a little melancholy after receiving his key in the lobby.

We'll be sharing a room with the same group of people we'll be with from now on, so there's no changing this.

That means it's up to us whether we can make it a comfortable space or not.

"Hey, Watanabe."

Watanabe turned around when he heard his name called, and saw a Boston bag coming at him.

"Whoah!"

Watanabe, who caught it with both arms, couldn't comprehend the situation and was surprised.

"Carry it to the room. I'm going to the bathroom."

It was Ryuen who threw the bag, who apparently intended on making Watanabe carry it.

As Watanabe did not have the bravery to say no and smiled bitterly, Ryuen disappeared towards the back of the building, probably where the large bathhouse is.

"Uuh... I don't think I can do this."

"I'll take it."

"No, it's fine. I'm the one he asked, after all."

Rather than asked, I would say he was the easiest one to push this onto.

“Leave it. I’ll send it back to him, no, I’ll send it back to hell.”

Kitou, after seeing Ryuen’s arrogant behaviour, tried to snatch the Boston bag from Watanabe’s arms.

I put my arms in front of Kitou, and stopped him.

“You better not do anything untactful. Watanabe would be the one getting in the most trouble after.”

“So do you intend on letting that man do whatever he wants? If he takes this, then Ryuen will do the same thing again next time. He can use his own classmates as slaves, but Watanabe is a student of the Ichinose class.”

Kitou is right.

However, there is no need to do anything with this luggage because of that.

“You should separate from this Boston bag, and tell him directly.”

“And what if he doesn’t listen? Do you want Watanabe to suffer during the trip?”

“Oh, no, it’s not like I’m suffering or anything...”

“If Ryuen does something selfish to Watanabe again, I’ll be the one stopping him.”

“Hah, you?”

“If he still doesn’t listen, I will take all of the responsibility.”

“I can’t say it’s a fundamental solution.”

“That’s not entirely true. If the person left with the work is displeased about it, then it is force and coercion. On the other hand, if I don’t feel any frustration and I think that I want to do it for the sake of the group, then it’s fine. With that, the problem disappears, right?”

Kitou thinks that everything should be done by oneself.

He may not agree with what I’m saying, but he should understand it.

“...Do whatever you want.”

After staring at me for a while, Kitou finally broke down and backed off.

“I’m sorry, Ayanokoji, this is all my fault.”

"It isn't your fault, Watanabe. It is only natural that we should come together to solve the problems of this group."

Just as I saw the look of relief on Watanabe's face, two room keys were supplied to us by the ryokan staff.

At about the same time, Kushida and the other four girls also received their keys and came over here.

"Hey. I think we should talk about our conduct tomorrow. This is a special trip to Hokkaido, so I'm sure everyone has a lot of places they'd like to go to."

It is important to make plans in advance, but considering the members of our group, we have not been able to discuss our free conduct until this point.

"So, tonight, I was thinking that all the girls should go to the boys' room, but... What do you think?"

"Oh, that's fine, isn't it?"

Watanabe lowered his eyes in joy after receiving the words that the girls would be coming to hang out.

Kitou, who was listening from the side, kept silent without saying much.

"...Umm... Ah, Ayanokoji, you're fine with this too, right?"

"I think it's alright."

Not being able to ignore Watanabe's worried face, Kushida smiled and clasped her hands together.

"Then it's decided, right? See you later, then. I'll go talk with Amikura-san and the others too. I'll get in touch with you and Watanabe when I know more details about the timing."

I'm sure the girls will be enjoying the ryokan by soaking in the bath, eating lunch and such.

"Should we go to our own room too?"

"That's right."

The boys will be using each of the rooms in an area called the east wing of the ryokan.

The girls on the other hand will be in the main building. They're connected with the lobby, so coming and going isn't particularly far or difficult, but I'm sure the boys and girls are properly separated.

"Wow, Kushida-chan is way too nice of a girl, huh? She's cute too."

I have already experienced the appeal that Kushida has which attracts the boys to her.

It is no wonder that he is attracted to her after only knowing her on a surface level.

If a student like Watanabe was to learn of Kushida's true nature, then there is no knowing what would happen.

"I knew it already, but I shudder to think what would have happened if Kushida-chan wasn't here."

Indeed, Kushida has been very good at taking the lead of the group. Even the meeting to decide our free conduct would have taken a back-seat if there was no one to take initiative to lead the meeting.

I can do nothing but be grateful to Kushida for working to avoid that.

But, I don't know if all of the problems are solved with this.

After all, the big problems will still be Ryuen and Kitou.

Ever since they started moving together in group 6, they've always been turning killer intent towards each other.

They have been checking and probing at each other, so the critical situation has been continuing.

Tapping our slippers on the ground, we arrived at room 203.

I inserted the key, and opened the door leading into the room.

It was reasonably spacious, a Japanese styled room with about 12 tatami mats in size, with a table and 4 tatami chairs.

Further, there was a mini-table and two single-person sofas.

I have seen the same scene many times on television, this is quite the traditional ryokan.

After putting my luggage down in the Japanese-styled room, I checked the fridge right away.

[TL Note 15 - 和室 Wa Shitsu, Japanese Style Room. The word 和 is used for things that are traditional Japanese style as opposed to western style.]

Other than the free water, there was a small amount of soft drinks inside.

However, the price per bottle is higher than the market price, so I don't see a reason to touch them.

There seems to be a vending machine in the lobby, so if I needed something I could just buy it there.

After entering the room, Kitou silently sat in the corner and closed his eyes.

Further, he was sitting in a meditative stance.

Leaving Kitou alone, I opened a thick file with a guide written on it.

It contained a map of the ryokan, the name and the password for its internet connection, a description of the day-trip bathing service, and a list of each of the sightseeing spots in the area were also written on it.

There might be a chance to use it in the discussion with Kushida and the girls.

After taking a quick look, I decided finally to take a look at the toilet facilities and such as well.

I also learned that the rooms did not have baths, so we would have to bathe in the large bathhouse. I guess there is no particular problem with this point.

For me, rather than soaking in a small bathtub, I'd like to enjoy the large bath if I have the chance to.

"Let's see..."

Dinner is served at 7 pm, so there is still some spare time.

I should probably go to the large bathhouse. There must be a lot of people going there already.

"I'll go to the bath."

"Ah, hey, hey! Wait a bit. I'll come along too!"

Watanabe, who was sitting on a chair, stood up while almost falling down.

"What about you, Kitou?"

"Not yet."

"I see. I'll leave one key here, then. When I meet Ryuen, I'll let him know, so."

If there is no one present when he comes back to the room, Ryuen will not be able to enter the room.

That would be trouble in itself, so we have to avoid that happening.

Watanabe started whispering as we closed the door and left out onto the corridor.

“This is worrying. We’re going to sleep together with Kitou and Ryuen now, right? Will we still have a life in the morning?”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

“No, it’s 4 nights, you know, 4 nights. It’s not unreasonable to think that some mistake could happen in that time.”

In which case, there would certainly be a lot of trouble.

However, leaving Ryuen and Kitou aside, I’m not used to sleeping together with other people.

With the training camp last year, and my life with Kei, I have been increasingly sharing my bedtime with others, so maybe I will be able to easily accept it.

Since I have always slept alone from when I was a child, I am still confused with the change in my environment.

“How do I say this... You’re pretty easy to talk to, Ayanokoji.”

“Is that so..? I don’t really know about that myself, though.”

I’m happy to hear him say that, but I feel like he’s only comparing me with those two.

“Well, I guess I can say that I get why Ichinose ended up falling in love with you.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, no!.. Please forget what I said just now!”

He noticed his obvious slip of the tongue and corrected himself, but I already heard it.

Well, nothing will change because I heard it, but...

“From that expression, you already knew?”

When I didn’t reply, Watanabe looked a little relieved.

“...I heard about it. Girls talk about that kind of stuff. I think most of the boys still like Ichinose without knowing it, but... Aren’t you dating Karuizawa from the same class?”

There was no point in denying this truth, so I nodded and replied.

“I think it must be complicated for the boys who like Ichinose... No, I think most of them would actually be happy about it.”

"What about you, Watanabe?"

"Me? I... Well, it's a secret."

From how calm he looks, it doesn't seem like he holds any special feelings towards Ichinose.

I don't know who, but it looks like he has feelings for another girl.

"This school trip can be said to be a big event, right? I think there will be more than one or two people who confess to the people they like."

"Is that so?"

Indeed, Sudou also had decided on confessing to Horikita during the school trip.

It is not unusual, but a rather important event for students.

"Me too ~... if I had a little more courage, I'd think about it, y'know, but..."

He seemed to imagine a variety of things, Shaking his head from side to side in frustration.

"Anyway, at the moment I don't know anything about the creature called a girl. For the time being, I want to start practicing by raising my likability so that the girls in our group can like me. If I can be someone that leaves an impression, I can gain a lot of experience for the real thing. "

It's been less than half a day since I met Watanabe, but I haven't had any bad impressions.

There's no doubt that he's basically a good guy.

He seems to get lost in the flow somewhat, and although he is the type that can't refuse anything, he can communicate well with both men and women.

Both his academic and physical ability in the OAA is slightly higher than the average with C+.

Other items were C or higher in the same way.

In other words, he has no shortcomings.

It depends on the opponent, but I would say there is a good enough possibility...

Love has many intertwined elements, and mere appearance and ability do not determine the success or failure of a confession.

Since it depends on the relationship that has been established between the two, you can't identify it in a relationship of about half a day.

Part 5

08:37 pm. Many of the students who finished their dinner went to the large bathhouse of the ryokan.

That was one of the things that all the students, including Horikita Suzune, were looking forward to.

Horikita had finished the meal relatively sooner than the surrounding students, but she was surprised to notice that three students had already started to take off their clothes in the dressing room.

Some of them are girls who don't like being seen naked, and want to finish their meals quickly.

On the other hand, for Horikita, there is no such thing as disgust or shame at being seen naked by the same sex.

One of the reasons for this was that originally, she had a very faint presence in elementary and junior high school, and she didn't have any friends, so there was no one around who would pay any attention to the way she looked.

Nevertheless, she spread out her face towel in a certain manner and opened the sliding doors to the public baths while concealing her body.

A muddy heat rushed through, and a large bathing area came into view, larger than she had imagined.

There are two large indoor baths in the room.

Then there is one outdoor hot tub, but the large rock bath can be seen through the window.

After lightly rinsing off the dirt with hot water, Horikita decided to head for the rock bath immediately.

Then she was able to recognize two unexpected visitors in the rock bath.

One of them is a classmate, Kushida Kikyou.

"Ah, Horikita-san."

As soon as she noticed the visitor, Kushida replied, waving lightly to welcome her. Of course, Horikita understands that this is not from the heart.

This was because Rokkaku Momoe, a class A student, was also present. Kushida won't show her true feelings in front of students from other classes.

Horikita answered with a gentle gaze, and went to the end of the bathtub without approaching Kushida.

She wanted to get to a place where no one could talk to her or bother her.

After ignoring Kushida and Rokkaku, without speaking with anyone, she continued enjoying the hot springs for 5, 10 minutes. At some point, Rokkaku disappeared, and only Kushida remained.

There wasn't even a trace of the smile on her face left.

"Why didn't you leave with Rokkaku-san? Not Exciting Enough?"

"Huh? I don't need a specific reason, do I? I just love the hot springs. Wait, did you think I wanted to talk to you?"

"I'm not thinking anything like that."

"Really? Didn't you ask that because you were aware of it?"

"Those are some stabbing words."

Facing Kushida, who suddenly showed an aggressive approach, Horikita sighed with some regret.

"You really have a wide range of friendships. I've never even spoken to Rotsukaku-san before."

In an attempt to change the direction of the conversation, Horikita talks about Rotsukaku who left the open-air bath.

"She cried for me to come with her. She was embarrassed, or something. It's not surprising, since she has such a poor body. "

Even though she knew no one could hear, she was speaking quite harshly.

"As for you, Horikita-san... you look pretty good. Not that I'm impressed, though. "

After observing Horikita as if evaluating her, Kushida came a little closer to Horikita.

"What? Do you want me to do something?"

"Nothing. But, isn't it a bit weird to be so far apart? You and I are classmates. It would be weird if I hadn't approached you and talked with you."

If Rokkaku was there, it would not look strange for the two to be separated.

However, if they were far apart in this large open-air bath, new visitors may have questions.

"All I know is that your struggle is incalculable."

"The best thing to do, would be to leave this place and go to the indoor bath."

"I'll have to refuse that."

"You won't listen even if I ask you to quit the school... you're pretty stern, huh, Horikita-san?"

Horikita sighs again as she puts out the word of expulsion. Seeing this, Kushida smiles.

"What an elegant smile."

"Of course. We can be seen from the indoor bath, so I can't do anything clumsy here."

Besides her voice, she's also considering the surrounding eyes. Students who don't know anything can only see from indoors that their classmates are friendly and laughing with each other.

In addition to a sense of distance, she always pays attention to the surroundings and does not leave gaps.

"If you can act that well, maybe you should have lived your school life without being revealed to Ayanokoji-kun."

"When I first enrolled in school, I wasn't stressed at all. I didn't think you would be there."

"I'm sure that was unexpected, but..."

The disappointment after she thought that she was completely cut off from the people in middle school is immeasurable.

"Living on the premises alone to build new relationships. We have to diverge somehow, right?"

As a result of that divergence, the tragedy began when she was found out by Ayanokoji.

"You're free to keep hating me. If you're going to contribute to the class, I don't have any complaints. Your contributions at the culture festival were impressive, Kushida-san."

"Well, I can do that much without difficulty."

It's a weapon to protect herself.

Then, Kushida sends a gaze to the sliding door that leads to the open-air bath and stops talking.

Immediately afterwards, Ibuki opened it with a face towel on her shoulder. Kushida, who was watching out for visitors, loosened her awareness... because Ibuki already has a good understanding of Kushida and Horikita's true natures.

"Horikita!"

Perhaps looking for Horikita, Ibuki raised her voice as she came into view.

"... Now you're here?"

Approaching boldly and naked, she jumped into the open-air bath. Splashes of water swell up, and hot water splashes onto Horikita and Kushida.

"That's a massive violation of manners."

"Don't care. More importantly, it's time for a match!"

"A match in a place like this? Are you saying we should play rock-paper-scissors or something?"

"Huh? In such a large bath like this, there's only one thing to do, right? A match to see who swims fastest from one end to the other!"

"I could say swimming is more a violation of manners than jumping in."

"Who cares? It's not like there are any regular customers, and no one's watching."

"A match sounds good to me. I'll be an impartial observer, so why don't you do it?"

"You're talking now? In the first place, it's your role to stop things like this, right?"

"I'll consider this as something you and Ibuki-san started without listening to me, so it's okay. I can just make a concerned face and look worried to put on a show."

"Kushida says it's fine too. So, it's a match!"

"I won't do it."

"Huh? But I came here because I thought I would have a chance to compete. How disappointing."

She said so and quickly left the bathtub.

"Did you really show your face here just for that? Do you like open-air baths?"

"I don't feel like getting along with you. Outside or inside, it's all the same hot spring, isn't it?"

Saying she has no intention of staying if there will not be a match, she quickly pulls out.

"That Ibuki-san... what an idiot."

After the sliding doors were strongly shut, Kushida laughed.

"She's weirdly obsessed about having matches with me. You're also similar, though."

Again and again, Kushida tried to engage in a fight.

Kushida laughed after Horikita replied that she was similar to Ibuki.

"Don't put me together with her."

Kushida's words and expressions said different things, but Horikita ignored it.

They expected new visitors so that further conversation would be unnecessary, but it is still meal time, so no other students showed up.

"Still, you were pretty lucky, huh, Horikita-san?"

"And what would you be talking about?"

"I'm talking about Ayanokoji-kun being in the seat next to you right after you enrolled in the school. Thanks to that, you were able to get close with him, and you were able to secretly get a lot of help, right? "

Kushida shouldn't know the details of how things have been up until now. However, she knows that Ayanokoji, in some capacity, was involved.

"If it wasn't for Ayanokoji-kun, you might have been expelled by me now, Horikita-san."

It wasn't your own strength that let you make it this far. At that time, if she was told such a thing,

Horikita would have immediately objected.

But now, she can calmly see things and look back on them.

"I suppose I can't completely deny it. But, I'm sure it wasn't good luck just for me, but for you also. Without Ayanokoji-kun, the you who has exposed everything wouldn't be here now. You would have kept playing the good guy, and kept repeating the same mistakes."

Of course, she doesn't know the result. There is a good enough chance that Kushida would have gotten through her three years of school life under false pretences.

But it is a different matter whether she could keep doing that forever or not. Because, in truth, Kushida continued to feel constant pain each and every day. Now, she can disperse her stress by having two different sides to her.

"...Perhaps."

The truth that she can be thrust at by someone she doesn't like.

Kushida nods, saying that although admission is usually nothing but humiliation, there are some things that must be admitted. And that, was only possible because she was pushed to the abyss of death in the unanimous special exam, and was able to come back to life.

For the first time in her life, a change came to her mindset and values.

"If you think about it, maybe you were even luckier than me."

"That's annoying, to be honest. When you make a good come-back like that, Horikita-san."

With this, the two's words stop.

There is no particular reason for long baths between people who would not otherwise mesh with each other. As such, there was no clear answer as to why they were staying, but leaving first would mean losing. Such an atmosphere was the cause of this.

"...Excuse me~"

It was only a few minutes after Ibuki's departure that the two's time came to an end.

Ichinose Honami reservedly showed up at the open-air bath.

"Ichinose-san alone? That's kind of rare."

"A-ha-ha... I guess so, huh."

Kushida knew well that a large crowd of people were talking to her at dinner. From that too, it was clear that she showed up here because she wanted to be alone.

"I guess there are times when everyone wants to be alone. I'll go if it's a bother."

For Horikita, for whom the flames were starting to get a little hotter, it was decided that this was time for the conclusion.

This was her chance to touch batons with Ichinose and switch. Because after this, she estimated that Kushida would only chat about trifling things.

"Ah, no! It's not like that at all! Don't worry about it!"

Ichinose hurriedly stopped Horikita trying to get up.

Then, adding onto this, Kushida turned a smile towards Horikita.

"You're already up, Horikita-san. Ichinose-san is also saying this, so why don't we chat together?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought we haven't talked enough yet. No good?"

Even though she didn't, Kushida spoke so, as if she meant it from the bottom of her heart.

Ichinose also gave a slightly uneasy expression, wondering if she had interrupted something by coming here.

"I've decided we've talked enough, but... fine. I'll hang out just a bit longer, then."

Then, she stood up and sat down on a boulder to cool her body that was burning in the night wind.

With the snow, it was cold outside the bath, but it was actually pleasant.

"Hey, I had something to ask you, Ichinose-san. Is that okay?"

"Hm? Whatever, ask me anything."

"Is there anyone you're dating?"

"Hmm? Ah, huh!?"

Ichinose was in a great panic because a question that she hadn't even thought of came up.

"Recently, boys in various classes have asked if you're available, you know."

Kushida asked so, appearing to not know anything, but the truth was different.

In fact, Ichinose is currently available, and has a favourable attitude towards Ayanokoji.

The gathering of such information has been completed early on.

She was more familiar with the situation than anyone in the Ichinose class, but she wouldn't say that out loud.

"No, there's not, there's not!"

"I see. Then, is there anyone you like?"

The reason that she was talking as if she didn't know anything was that Kushida wanted to learn more about Ayanokoji.

To find out the reasons why Ichinose has feelings of affection towards Ayanokoji.

She took into account the possibility that it would eventually become her new weapon.

"No, there's not. Really, there's nothing like that for me."

However, Ichinose refused to accept it, and sank her face in the bath.

It's an action to hide her red embarrassed, awkward face.

If she admits it here, she could talk about the matter of Karuizawa, or even deeper subjects, but that can't be done so simply.

Then, she purposefully decided to transfer the conversation onto Horikita.

"What about you, Horikita-san? Don't you have anything to say about romance?"

"I don't."

Less than even a second later, Horikita responds.

She has little interest in romance.

"I see. You seem like you'd be very popular, though. Horikita-san. You seem to get along with Sudou-kun too."

"I don't know anything about that. What about you, actually? You seem close to the boys from other classes too. I wonder if Ichinose-san is also curious about that."

Facing the dreary question, Horikita returned it as it is.

With the aim of quickly removing herself from the conversation and letting the two talk.

"Oh, right. I get a lot of questions from boys about Kushida-san too, you know."

While clicking her tongue at Horikita in her mind, Kushida shows a shy smile to Ichinose.

"Huh..? Really? I don't really know anything about romance either, so... However, I think it would be a waste to fall in love as a student."

Considering that this was an idle chat, Kushida made sure to spread the seeds here.

"A waste?"

"Mhm. I mean, I hear that student romances hardly ever come to fruition. About 10%-30%, I think? When I think that it's not even half, I don't really feel like stepping into anything... That's why now I'm conscious as to not fall in love."

She thought that by telling this to Ichinose, who has a wider circle of friends than even Kushida, she would be able to kick out the boys in advance who would confess to her with the resolve to get rejected.

Since enrolling in this school, the number of confessions to Kushida made in the shadows has exceeded 10 from all classes.

"I'm glad people like me, but... at the same time, I'm afraid of being hurt."

"That's right... I think, I get it somehow..."

Nothing was more futile than a love affair as a student, that's what Kushida thinks. While listening to these two talk about romance, Horikita was about to get up.

"I think I should go now."

"Huh? You're leaving already?"

"I don't know anything about love."

"I see. There's no helping it, then. But, isn't there another reason that you want to end this?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Forget it. I guess this is too hot for you. I did want to chat a bit more with you though, Horikita-san."

"Are... are you serious?"

"Of course. You think so too, right, Ichinose-san?"

"Mhm. I still want to talk to Horikita-san too."

In response to Kushida's provocative remarks and leading, Horikita sits back down.

"Let's do that, then."

As the class leader, her option of escaping Kushida's invitation disappeared.

"Are you sure you're okay? It would be really bad if you got dizzy and collapsed."

"Thank you for your concern. But, I'm worried about you too, Kushida-san. Your face is all red too."

"Maybe because I was talking about love."

"That's all? I hope you're not forcing yourself."

Horikita's sharp gaze, and Kushida's smile collide into each other.

"What's wrong with you two?"

Ichinose felt the discomfort and slightly tilted her neck.

Seeing that, Kushida completely eliminated the dislike she had left for Horikita.

"Oh, no, that's not true, is it? Right, Horikita-san?"

"...That's right."

There is no need to give Ichinose additional information, even though she is seen as trustworthy.

Horikita also judged so, and followed along.

After that, for a while, the romance talk between Kushida and Ichinose continued, and it eventually turned into idle chatter.

「一之瀬さんって誰か付き合ってる人とかいる？」

「んん？ え、ええっ!？」

思ってもみなかった質問が
飛んできたことで、大慌てする一之瀬。

「最近色んなクラスの男子から、
一之瀬さんがフリーかどうか聞かれるんだよね」

「いいい、いいいよいいよ！」

「そうなんだ。
じゃあ好きな人とかはいるの？」

Horikita listened on, enjoying the hot springs and the gentle snowfall.

After that, Ichinose was called back to the room by her friends who had finished their meals.

As yet another group of women came to the open-air bath, both Horikita and Kushida continued to endure and challenge each other's patience. And then, after about 10 minutes of this...

"Maybe it's time for both of you to get up? You're completely red, you know?"

Seeing the two at their limits, Ichinose peeked out from inside.

"Right, Horikita-san?"

"No... you should listen to Ichinose-san's words too."

They were both trying to cling on in this situation, but the other students who finished their meals began to appear in the open-air bath. After this, it became difficult to continue the match, so they both read the room and stood up at the same time.

"It was a nice bath, wasn't it?"

"It really was. Too much already, actually..."

"Did something happen between you two after all?"

Ichinose once again felt a strange atmosphere, but the two left the bath as if nothing had happened.

Part 6

Before 10pm.

The guest room's door was gently knocked twice.

Seeing that, Watanabe quickly stood up from the tatami mat, saying that he would respond. Did he take the initiative for us, or himself?

"Kept you waiting."

Together with such a voice, four women entered from the opened door, with Kushida at the lead.

"W-Welcome. You're late, huh?"

Must be nervousness and embarrassment.

Watanabe suddenly slowed down, and made way for them.

"Sorry. We spent a little too long in the bath, that's why we're late."

Kushida, who replied so, definitely had a slightly red face.

Further, her hair was all smooth. You don't get many chances to see girls right before bedtime.

That's precisely why this is such a valuable experience for Watanabe.

With the four women coming in, the indescribable fragrance spread to the room instantly.

It's not like the gathering of boys stinks, but this is a completely different atmosphere.

"I wonder why it smells so good now..?"

"Well, that is a mystery, indeed."

The large bathing area was stocked with a large bottle of soy milk shampoo and rinse for commercial use.

There was no dissatisfaction, but the foaming was not particularly good, and it felt like it was relatively inexpensive.

Normally, I think the same thing is placed in the women's public baths too, but... The scent that drifts from them is obviously different from the same soy milk shampoo.

Perhaps they brought it in themselves.

"Hey, please ask them. How can they smell so good?"

"Sorry, but I can't really ask that."

Even if I lack common sense, I knew better than to ask.

I think that if I make such a statement, they'll definitely be creeped out.

"When you think that this is the boys' room, it's a bit exciting, huh?"

Amikura uncomfortably whispered so, to the other girls, looking around the room.

The floor plan of the room is the same, but it may look strangely different.

"When the discussion is over, why don't we go to Honami and the others' room later? I heard the girls are gathered all the way up until sleep time."

"Really? Yeah, I'm totally fine. "

Unlike Kushida, who pleasantly agreed, Nishino refused without showing interest.

"I'll pass. It's not like I'm good friends with them."

Following along, Yamamura also lowered her head and whispered.

"...Me too, I'll pass..."

"Is that so? I think everyone would be welcome, but... Well, that's fine."

Knowing that the girls would disperse soon, Watanabe looked sad.

The lights out time seems to be a little late at 11pm, so there is still time to spare.

It's a special school trip, so everyone wants to avoid awkward situations.

"So this is how it feels to have girls in your room..."

In a daze because of the girls, Watanabe quietly whispered so.

"Anyway, Watanabe. You'd better start following up with the girls. Isn't this your chance to increase your likability?"

Me, Ryuen, or even Kitou could invite them into the room.

After that, he has to take a step forward to make an impression

"Huh? Follow? Follow what?"

Still in shock because of the girls' appearance, it seems that Watanabe couldn't see the situation.

The girls, coming to an away match in the boys' room, were lost as to where they should gather.

[TL Note 16 - The word "match" isn't included but "away" is as it is in the original. It's a sports reference, when a team is having a match in another team's stadium it's an away match.]

"Um... where should we sit?"

The Japanese-style room already has four futons laid out by the staff with a little space between them, so you have to move to the edge of the tatami mats to sit on the floor. It's a show of skill whether to force them into a tight corner or to take other steps.

"Huh? Anywhere is fine, right? I'm fine with sitting on a futon too, you know?"

Watanabe didn't seem to understand things, so he took two futon blankets, and prepared a space.

The girls looked a little surprised, but there was no other suitable place, and Kushida showed agreement.

On two futons close to the entrance, each of the four sits down.

"Well then, the lights are almost out, so let's start right away. Wait, where's Ryuen-kun?"

"Beyond the shoji."

[TL Note 17 : 障子 Shoji, traditional paper sliding door]

The closed shoji opens up to a small table, two single person sofas, and a small refrigerator.

As Amikura was scared of going to the shoji, her classmate Nishino vigorously opened the shoji on her behalf.

Ryuen seemed to be relaxed, sitting on the one person sofa while playing with his phone.

"You heard, right? Come on."

"It's fine here, isn't it? I can hear just fine."

"That may be so, but I hope you can come over to everyone because this is also to increase the sense of unity of the group."

Without fear, Kushida called out to Ryuen to tell him to come over. Perhaps annoyed by Kushida, Ryuen turned off his phone screen while laughing.

"You seem to be getting ahead of yourself, but you know your position, right?"

"What do you mean, I wonder?"

"Just as I said. If you're saying you don't understand, then I can make you understand, you know?"

The other students can't understand why Ryuen was saying this to her. Ryuen is the one person outside the class who knows Kushida best, so his words were heavy.

"What are you talking about?"

As if taking this as a simple quarrel, Nishino approached Ryuen.

"Stop saying annoying things, and just come over here."

Nishino was not frightened or timid, and she was already grabbing his arm and pulling him up.

"Nishino. You've been saying a lot too lately, haven't you?"

"I've always been like this, though? I just didn't get involved more than I needed to."

She must mean that she's in a group now, so it can't be helped.

I thought that things would get even more tense from here, but Ryuen annoyedly got up and stepped towards the Japanese-style room.

As Kitou turned his gaze, the atmosphere instantly became tense.

Still, for the time being, it is true that eight people were now gathered in one room for the discussion.

"Do you all really need to be here? We could do this on the phone."

Kitou, who hadn't uttered a word since the girls arrived, asked so.

Indeed, if we made a group on an app, it would be simple to talk with everyone.

"It looks like the other groups are meeting face-to-face and making up their minds as well."

"Wow, you know everything, Kushida-chan."

Watanabe sat between me and Yamamura with an exaggerated nod, impressed by the flow of information.

Perhaps alarmed by the unexpected sudden approach of a boy, Yamamura took a half step back to get away from Watanabe.

"Ah, sorry, Yamamura. Didn't see you there."

"No... please don't worry about it."

Apart from such a trivial exchange, there was still a strong sense of tension because of the interaction with Ryuen.

"I don't care about other people. We can do things our way."

It must be Ryuen that Kitou is worried about.

I can clearly see that he is afraid it will not be a proper discussion.

"It's important to meet face to face, isn't it? I wanna hear everyone's true opinions, you know."

Kushida replies that there are things you can't understand with an app, and doesn't seem to be pulling back.

Kushida probably didn't want to step on the landmine that is Ryuen either, but she has to protect her own position.

If Kushida decides not to back down here, I'm sure he will just push forward.

"Well then, let's talk about the free time tomorrow."

[TL Note 18 - There is a word used that is like "after" or "from after" but it doesn't work in english with this context so I left it out now.]

"More importantly, you forgot about something we gotta decide first."

Looking over the Japanese-style room lined up with futons, Ryuen opened his mouth.

"I don't want to sleep side by side with you bastards, but the space is limited, so... I'll be sleeping here."

At the end of his gaze, was the futon at the far end of the room. It is ideally positioned so that if someone wakes up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet or such, there would be no disturbance.

Indeed, we haven't decided who will sleep where yet. No, but, do we have to decide that now?

I think it's better to make a decision after the girls go back, but... Is he simply unable to read the room, or has he spoken out now deliberately?

Considering how Ryuen has been so far, I can't help but feel that it is the latter.

However, on the other hand, what about the people around?

Clearly, after that remark, everyone thought that he was being selfish and speaking out of place.

"No objections, yeah?"

He glanced at me and Watanabe for a moment and slightly strengthened his tone of voice.

"I... Well, I'm okay anywhere."

Like a frog against a snake, Watanabe accepted. Now, what would I say?

While I was thinking about it, Ryuen had already cut his gaze off from me.

"Yo, Kitou. If you have something to say, you can say it, you know?"

It seems that he thinks Kitou is the only one who would disagree.

"I won't accept it."

A rebuttal to symbolize it.

"Huh?"

He told Kitou he should speak, but Ryuen leaned his head, not liking the refusal.

"I won't agree with something unfair like that. Besides, we shouldn't discuss it now. Don't you even get that?"

"I don't give a damn. I don't remember giving you a right to refuse, you bastard."

"I'm free to speak how I want, where I want."

Kitou did not step back, rather, he entered a state of confrontation.

"Come on now, Kitou, calm down. It's just a sleeping place, why don't you let him have it?"

"I refuse."

"Ugh..."

Watanabe, who stood up and tried to stop this, sat back down after an intense glare.

In terms of the rage on his face, Kitou surpasses Ryuen.

"I'm not gonna let this man get away with being irrational."

"Hey, come on, boys. We're not talking about that now, so you can..."

Amikura timidly tried to warn them, but Nishino pulled the sleeve of her yukata and stopped her.

[TL Note 19 : 浴衣 Yukata, a type of kimono worn in the summer or used as a bathrobe.]

She shook her head left to right, silently warning her not to get between them.

"I'll say this as many times as I have to, but I'm not gonna surrender it to some bastard like you."

"Are you saying you wanna fight over it, fucker?Huh?"

"You want violence? I can give it to you, but you're gonna be laying here the whole trip."

Kushida looks troubled, but I can tell from her eyes...

I can tell that she feels depressed to death by how annoying this is getting.

"In that case, let's do this. Are you all gonna fight over it too?"

"I'll refrain from that... I said it before, but I'm fine anywhere."

I personally prefer to be on the edge rather than being pinched between, I hate to be caught up in trouble.

Whether the winner is Ryuen or Kitou, when one of them takes the edge, the two will no longer sleep next to each other.

Rather, the possibility that I or Watanabe would be caught between them as cushioning is higher.

"I'll pass too. Fight as you want and decide. However, if you two want that edge spot, Watanabe and I can take whichever one we want from the remaining three, alright?"

If you do not claim your natural rights, you will struggle again later.

They both want the same futon, so Watanabe and I should be free to choose from the free spots.

"Also, Please don't decide this with violence."

If I don't say this strongly, group 6 will stand out in a bad way.

I heard that the groups causing trouble will be relentlessly restricted.

It's a special school trip, so it would be a shame to not be able to leave the ryokan because things got a little out of hand.

"I like fighting better since that's easy to understand for me, but I guess we can't do that, huh?"

For now, I'm glad that they will refrain from using violence.

"Thanks, Ayanokoji, for saying what I wanted to say."

"No, it's not like I said anything significant."

"That's not true, though. Actually, yeah. You can sleep on the edge."

Are the only fundamentally good people here from the Ichinose class? Even though I didn't ask for any help,

He said so and gave me the edge spot.

With this, from the back, it's Ryuen or Kitou, and Watanabe by their side.

The loser of the match will get the third one. We agreed that I will sleep on the end closest to the entrance.

"I gotta show a little endurance too."

Apparently, one of the reasons for giving up was for personal reasons.

I'm sure being caught between Ryuen and Kitou would be too much of a thrill too.

"When you say school trip, I guess this is all that comes to mind, huh?"

Before long, a pillow was clutched in Ryuen's hands.

"It's a face to face match. I don't have to explain the rules, right? Kitou."

"Of course."

"What is it? What are you going to do with that pillow?"

Not knowing what was waiting after this change, I tilted my neck.

"When you combine a school trip and pillows, there's only one thing, right?"

Only one thing?

I don't get it at all...

However, the students other than me seem to understand and, and Kushida quickly gets up.

"Well, then, I'll be the referee, okay? I think that it would be best for someone to watch over this in an impartial way."

Kushida, who seems to regret being in such a ridiculous place, spoke out as such.

"Even at a time like this, you're so disciplined, huh, Kushida-chan?"

I want to know the truth, but other than Watanabe, there are other girls around.

More importantly, I'm deeply interested in what they will use the pillow for.

"I'll give you the first attack."

"Nah, you don't wanna be defeated without firing a single shot, do you? Come at me with no regrets, Ryuen."

Ryuen laughed as he bounced the pillow over his hands.

"In that case, I'll kill you without hesitation, Kitou!"

After saying so, he swung his pillow and threw it like a ball.

The pillow stuffed with buckwheat chaff attacks Kitou at high speed.

Though there is plenty of distance between the two, the throw is so strong that he could suddenly lose the match.

Kitou calmly and surely caught the pillow.

"I'll... I'll kill you!"

This time, Kitou himself swung and threw the pillow back with the same force.

Ryuen on the other side, again, elegantly caught the pillow, and instantly shifted to a pitching stance.



"Not bad, Kitou! Looks like we can have a little fun, huh!"

Again, the pillow is returned.

"This is..."

"It's pillow throwing. Haven't you done it before, Ayanokoji-kun? I thought that all the boys were doing it in school trips in elementary school and junior high school, and outdoor schools. "

First time I'm hearing of it.

[TL Note 20 : Expression, 初耳 Hatsumimi, lit. "First Ear"]

Last year's training camp didn't have anyone throwing pillows either.

"Darkness Ball!"

"My mad, raging serpent... devour him!"

Darkness, serpent... that pillow is being turned into a lot of different things, huh.

"Ah, this is pillow throwing... right?"

A one-on-one match where outsiders aren't allowed to be tagged in... no, a pillow throwing match.

Amikura muttered as pillows were being thrown left and right.

From then on, the deadly battle lasted for a few minutes with no signs of a conclusion.

Both of them had no problem with draining their energy, and seemed like they would be able to continue fighting for longer.

Here, however, all of us except those two find ourselves in a tight spot.

"That pillow, is it okay to keep throwing it strongly like that? It's already in tatters."

After Kushida's silently muttered remark, everyone's gazes were taken by the pillow.

There is no need to explain this to anyone, but pillows aren't tools to be used for throwing.

Leaving aside some light throwing, with a series of blazing fastballs and further being caught with no insignificant power, there is no way damage wouldn't accumulate.

"By the way, whose pillow is that?"

After Watanabe's remark, we quickly checked the futon laid on the ground. From the four futons, the pillow from the one on the edge that was given to me by Watanabe had disappeared.

"...Is that mine?"

The pillow that should have been on my futon wasn't there.

And now, Kitou seemed to be further putting the power of darkness into the pillow held in his hand.

I could tell the pillow was screaming.

"If you sleep on that pillow, you'll probably have nightmares."

No, in the first place, I'm afraid that there is no guarantee the pillow will stay in shape.

No matter who wins, I want it to be returned safely.

"Hmph!"

A pillow, with an unprecedented, intense killer intent put into it.

Because of Kitou's thick fingers strongly digging into it, it burst the moment it left his hand.

The buckwheat that was clogged in the broken cloth was scattered in the room.

Along with the sound of it scattering around, everyone fell into silence.

The pillow that was supposed to gently support my head, turned into an atrocious shape.

My pillow, I wished for it strongly, but it couldn't return to me safely...

I would like to express my condolences to the victims that were cruelly scattered on the battlefield.

"Boys are... they're such pure children, huh?"

As Kushida muttered so in a way only I could hear, the scattered buckwheat chaff also became silent.

The two did not seem to care, and an index finger reached out to a nearby untouched pillow, but Nishino then sternly raised her voice.

"Listen... We have things to do, so can't you finish this later? This is annoying."

Ignoring that warning, Ryuen wanted to continue, but Kitou seemed to be different.

He silently sat on the spot, and decided to pause for a while. His hot thoughts cooled down, and I felt the discontent around me.

"Can we say it's your loss, then? Kitou."

"If she says this is a bother, then I have no intention of continuing."

From the atmosphere he usually lets out, I could not imagine it, but he quickly pulled out.

Well, if this was going to happen, I wish they hadn't done this from the start. At least the victims from the pillow which have been cruelly scattered around would have remained safe.

"Well then... let's start talking when we're done cleaning up."

With the help of all the boys and girls except Ryuen, we successfully collected the remains of the pillow without spending too much time.

I'll have to get a new pillow from someone from the ryokan later.

Should I be honest, or should I lie?

The scattered buckwheat chaff, we put them in a clear plastic bag set in the trash can, and started our discussion.

"About the free conduct, we just have to return to the ryokan by the final dinner reception, 18:00, right?"

As expected, Kushida first started speaking for the group.

"Mhm. That's why it really feels like a day of freedom."

Amikura also immediately began talking.

"I think we can gather on a train or a bus and depart that way, but what should we do? Is there some place you want to go to, Nishino-san?"

"I guess I wanna ski. All I've done so far is practice, and I am in Hokkaidou, so."

"I agree with Nishino's opinion."

Despite going to the trouble of learning how to ski, it would be a waste to end it after half a day. Silently, Kitou also lightly raised his hand and showed agreement.

"There are quite a few people who want to ski, huh? Watanabe-kun, Yamamura-san, what about you?"

"I don't think I have any objections either. We're going downtown on the third day, so why not?"

"I'm fine anywhere."

Yamamura, who still can't ski well, doesn't seem to particularly dislike the idea either.

Maybe she is just trying to match her surroundings, or perhaps she wants to get better at skiing.

I don't really see much emotion in that area, though.

"Mako-chan?"

"Hmm... I'm not so good at skiing, so I wouldn't say I'm happy about it, but... If everyone wants to ski, then that's fine with me. It's a group, so."

Saying so, she shows her concession.

Kushida did not answer her own question, but looked at Ryuen sitting on the one man sofa.

"What about you, Ryuen-kun?"

"Whatever."

Without insisting on anything particular, he lightly relinquished his right to speak.

After Ryuen, the most troublesome member, made such a decision, an air of relief flowed through the group.

It would be better to think that Ryuen is also aiming to enjoy skiing, rather than having no interest in going anywhere.

Chapter - 3

School Trip, Day 2

Intro

The morning of the second day of the school trip.

After having breakfast and getting dressed, we spent time relaxing in the room until the departure time of the bus to the ski resort.

Watanabe and I were casually watching TV.

Beyond the screen, entertainers are reading out all the news from this morning and responding with honest comments.

After a while, it broke into the kitten's feature corner and the atmosphere changed dramatically.

Meanwhile, Ryuen in the same room is sitting on the one person sofa, as if it was his own sofa, and Kitou is looking at a stack of magazines that are available for free rental at the inn, one at a time.

It seems that they are all fashion magazines.

"He looks way too restless to be just reading a magazine... It looks like he's reading a murder manual."

I heard Watanabe say so. He probably whispered so that he couldn't be heard, but sharp eyes glanced at Watanabe in an instant. Perhaps scared by this, he hid in my shadow and blocked the gaze.

"He's definitely done that to some people, right? Right?"

My shoulders are being shaken, but I'd like to be allowed to concentrate on the cat feature on the TV.

"Hey, Kitou. You're not satisfied with yesterday's pillow throwing, right? Have a match against me today."

As if to bring a storm in on a peaceful morning, Ryuen said so and brought a suggestion to Kitou. It goes without saying that for me or Watanabe, it wasn't something to be welcomed.

"Fool. Are you jumping into certain death yourself? If you want to regret it, then I won't stop you."

"He-he, try to make me regret it, then."

"What kind of match do you want?"

"We're going to ski now, so it's obvious, isn't it?"

It seems that he wants a simple 'time attack' race about who finishes skiing first.

Kitou is probably not a novice either, but at least it's clear from yesterday that Ryuen's skills are high.

There is no need to go out of your way to go along with a strategy that is meant to drag you into someone else's playing field. However, as expected, Kitou quickly closed the magazine.

"You think you can win if it's skiing? I'll crush that idea of yours."

Seeming to accept it, he doesn't show any attitude of trying to escape.

"You shouldn't cause too many problems, you know? Hey, are you two listening?"

"I don't think he can hear that warning."

Watanabe's voice volume was so low that a child might say, "An ant is talking!".

I was sitting next to him and could only just barely make out what he was saying.

"I can imagine how pathetic you'll look crawling on the slope."

"Ridiculous."

They're both heating up as they interact with each other. As Kitou stood up, he rolled up the borrowed magazine and approached Ryuen with it in his hand, sticking up the tip of the magazine like a sword.

"When you lose, you'll be as quiet as a borrowed cat the whole trip."

As if unknowingly inspired by the cat feature on television, he taunted him.

"Huh? If you ask me, I've been quiet enough already."

With a slap, he swiftly swiped off the magazine.

"Can we just leave it at that? I want to watch the cat feature."

I said so and urged the two to keep their distance from each other.

"Wow, that's some big talk, Ayanokoji. Aren't you afraid that they'll target you?"

"I don't think so. There is no merit for those two to go after someone like me."

Unless I butt in too much, this will remain as Ryuen versus Kitou until the end.

"Anyway, they seem to have gone quiet, so I'll continue watching the-"

Just as I thought so, before I knew it, the cats had disappeared from the TV.

Apparently, it was not a very long special feature, and it was over in just a few minutes.

"What a shame, Ayanokoji. You liked cats, right?"

"No, not really."

"You don't like them!?"

I just wanted to see them, it isn't as if I hold any particular love for the animal called cat.

I would have felt the same way if this was a dog feature, or even a hippo feature.

The program was cheerful for a while, but then, the breaking news came in.

"We will continue with the news, then. Former Secretary General Naoe passed away at a hospital in Tokyo after a long period of medical treatment. Comments from Prime Minister Kijima from his office:"

With numerous flashes, a stern-looking man begins to speak.

"Try a horse by riding him, and judge a man by living with him. These are the words that Naoe Sensei told me, shortly after we met."

The Prime Minister began to talk about the deceased, and then, poof, the screen blacked out.

"It's time for the bus."

Kitou, holding the remote control with his index finger on the power button, called out to me.

"Let's go, Ayanokoji."

I am a little concerned about the two of them, but I'll still enjoy skiing.

Part 1

We went outside, but there was a little trouble waiting for us.

Apparently, the bus was caught in traffic, and would arrive around 10 minutes late.

There are a lot of students waiting for a bus to go to the ski resort, and if you look back, there are people flooding back into the entrance.

"It's cold, so it's hard to wait outside."

Watanabe looked up at the sky with melancholy, exhaling a white breath.

I regret that we got out a little earlier than the other students, but there's nothing to do about it now.

Even if we go back to our room, we can't relax with 5 minutes left. As group 6, we decided to wait near the building for the bus to come.

"Hey, we're out here, so why don't we make a snowman?"

In order to use this waiting time effectively, Amikura suggested so to the group.

"That sounds like fun. Nishino-san, Yamamura-san, won't you join us?"

"... well, okay?"

It was Nishino who I thought would refuse, but she replied lightly with an okay.

"Yamamura-san?"

"No, I... I don't want to."

As expected, she said no, although it was somewhat modest.

The three girls moved to an unobstructed position and started piling up the snow.

Apparently, they're not going to make one of a small size, but rather a big one.

"Hey, Ryuen-kun, why don't you come over here and make a snowman with us? I think it's fun!"

Knowing that he would never take her up on her proposal, Kushida, showing her good heart, invited Ryuen to join him.

The students around the school were also watching the developments with concern, perhaps because they couldn't imagine Ryuen working to build a snowman.

This statement is definitely yesterday's revenge. Showing that if you make a careless statement, you will be resolutely challenged.

"I thought it would be nice to keep a little restraint, but did I read things wrong?"

Ryuen muttered, as if talking to himself.

Certainly, if it was Kushida before her true nature was known to her classmates, she might have endured. She would have felt uncomfortable, but here he could not unravel the mystery.

Because she can't give them information that the rest of the classes doesn't know, such as the exchange in the Unanimous Special Exam.

Needless to say, Kushida's invitation was not likely to be accepted by Ryuen.

Without reacting to the snowman, he looked in another direction.

On the other hand, some people continued to gaze quietly at the snowman which was being made.

It was Yamamura who took a little distance from us before I noticed.

"Haa..."

While watching the production of Kushida's snowman, she was exhaling coldly.

"Haa..!"

Kushida and the others making the snowman are naturally wearing gloves.

When I looked around, other than Yamamura, there were no students outside with bare hands.

Of course. In this cold weather, unless there is a special reason, you can't stay with bare hands for long.

I remember Yamamura wearing gloves before taking the ski class yesterday.

Even if she can rent ski gloves, why didn't she take her gloves with her when going to a ski resort? If she's forgotten, she can just go back and get them, so maybe there's a reason.

She looks dizzy, staring outward as she exhales repeatedly.

Although I was concerned about Yamamura, more and more students were beginning to come outside while waiting for the bus.

"It's snow all around, huh?"

The familiar voice belongs to Sakayanagi Arisu.

Someone from group 4. It should be Hondou and Onodera elected from the Horikita Class.

As I remembered that, she kept standing there, as if waiting for an answer.

Sakayanagi can't ski, so she'll probably go to sightseeing spots.

Without really involving themselves with the members of group 6, Sakayanagi and the others had all gathered together.

Eventually, before the bus to the ski resort, the bus heading downtown arrived.

When the leading teacher instructed them to get in, the students began to embark one after the other.

Sakayanagi, walking along the unfamiliar snow trail with her cane. As I watched, I wondered if my prediction of the future had come true, and Sakayanagi slipped and fell lightly on her buttocks.

Fortunately, the snow cushion seems to have protected her from the impact and she is not in pain.

"Are you alright..?"



Shortly after, a C-Class member of the same 4th group rushes over. He hesitated for a moment, but then reached out.

"Thank you very much, Tokitou-kun."

While shyly thanking him, she grabbed the hand that she had been offered.

It is easy to forcefully pull up the smaller Sakayanagi, but Tokitou did so carefully and slowly.

Despite his stern face, he is a surprisingly sensitive and caring helper.

"Don't force yourself. You've got a bad leg, right..?"

"Sorry. But fortunately, the snow was soft and it didn't hurt. "

"That's not really the problem..."

Although Sakayanagi usually wields relentless strategies as the class leader, group members from other classes may feel that the impression is very different.

Sakayanagi, who stood up while grabbing her staff, thanked him again.

"Thank you."

"It was nothing... I'm just glad it wasn't anything big."

Embarrassed, he let his gaze away, unable to look directly at Sakayanagi.

"I thought you were a scary person, Tokitou-kun."

"Huh? Me? ...no, well..."

Sakayanagi stopped and started talking.

It's as if the exchange is a showcase of the changing nature of the relationship.

"Because you usually walk across the corridor with a scary look on your face."

"Hey, how do you even know that?"

Asked this question, Sakayanagi answered without pause and with a smile on her face.

"We're both second years. I know a lot about you, Tokitou-kun."

If they were an ordinary boy and girl in an ordinary high school, it would be a scene that would give rise to misunderstandings.

Behind that smile, however, there is always the possibility that Sakayanagi's wits and tricks are at play.

Even falling down may have been a calculated event.

The only students present who were thinking about such a thing were probably me and Ryuen, who was ostensibly looking at them with disinterest.

Sakayanagi and Tokitou lined up and proceeded to the bus to board it, with Sakayanagi getting on first.

Tokitou probably wanted to support her in case she fell behind.

Whether or not there is another side to this, it is clear that those who normally have no contact with each other are gradually beginning to close the distance between them.

After a delay, the buses to the ski resort also arrived, replacing the buses to the city center.

Part 2

When we got off the direct bus that took us to the ski slopes, the eight of us decided not to go into the ski resort immediately but to take a stroll nearby.

It was not planned, but since there were several souvenir shops around the area from the bus, it began with Amikura's offer after noticing them. It's not like the skis will run off after 20 or 30 minutes, so.

"Whoah ~ It's so cold in the morning here. The inside of the car was warm, so I can feel the extra temperature difference."

Saying so, Kushida rubbed her gloves together and shook her body.

"That's right. This cold at the end of November is very surprising. It also feels strange that there's snow."

"If you want to look around, just do it quickly. Though, I'm sure everything is still closed."

Having said that, Ryuen called out to the group that was stopping.

The time is still just after 9:15. The ski slopes open at 9:30, but the shops around them are still largely closed.

As for Ryuen, I guess he intends to just enjoy skiing for the day, and it looks like he will stay and wait for the slopes to open.

Among the few stores already open at this point in time is an unusual apparel store, and for some reason Kitou quickly approached it and started staring at the clothes inside.

A lot of flashy and unusual clothes are on display, but I guess he was wondering if there is anything he'd like.

Just as I thought so, he put back the clothes he had in his hand, and started searching for others.

"Still, your feet are huge, Kitou. It's like the footprints of a snowman."

Watanabe was impressed to see the footprints of the snow that lasted up to the apparel store, and compared them to his size.

Although Kitou is tall, even without taking this into account, it seems certain that the footprints are large.

"Let's all go."

The one who came up with the idea, Amikura, said so, and walked off in a hurry.

Kushida immediately took the invitation from Amikura, but it seems that Yamamura is going to refuse and stay here.

It seems that Watanabe and Nishino also decided to walk individually.

"Yamamura-san? You're not going?"

"... oh, I'll stay... Please don't worry about it."

Only me, Ryuen, and Yamamura remained.

I really wanted to look around with Amikura and the others, but I missed the wave because I didn't hear anything like "would you like to come with me?"

Now, what should I do? I could go around by myself like Watanabe and the others...

After Yamamura refrained from the invite, she intends to stay here and wait for her companions to return.

If I leave, she'll be left alone with Ryuen.

It would have been fine if these two got along, but they had almost never met each other before. I can't imagine them getting along with each other, so it would be cruel to leave.

Therefore, unless Yamamura or Ryuen begin to act alone, it would be correct to remain, although frustrating.

"..."

Yamamura shuddered as she looked at Amikura and the others, whose backs are getting smaller and smaller.

The cause, after all, is her hands hidden inside her coat. It is almost certain that she has come this far without gloves.

So, should I lend them to her?

However, if she refuses to accept, it will be a little awkward.

Kitou and the group 6 had already left, and the situation is quiet, with just the three of us.

Yamamura seemed to be trying to endure the cold as much as she could, but she still couldn't hide it.

"Hey, Yamamura, take out your hands."

"Huh..!?"

As I continued to wonder whether I should call out to her, Ryuen instructed Yamamura in a tight tone, who was standing there with her hands in the inside pockets of her coat.

Apparently, Ryuen noticed the coldness of Yamamura and the unnaturalness of her keeping her hands in her coat. I thought that her cold hands would come out, but Yamamura averted her gaze, and...

"No."

Although it was a quiet voice, she turned him down completely.

"Huh?"

"I don't want to take them out. Because it's cold."

She did not mention whether or not she is wearing gloves, but stated a reason. You can feel the cool breeze even through the gloves in Hokkaido.

So it is certain that if you put your hands inside your coat, they will be warmer.

I thought this was the end of it, but Ryuen stepped on the snow path and came over to Yamamura.

Then he grabbed her right arm and forced it out of her pocket.

"Ah~"

Confirmed that she was not wearing gloves, Yamamura rushed to hide her hands in her coat when Ryuen let go of her arm.

"That must be cold. What happened to your gloves?"

Ryuen confirmed that she is bare-handed, but Yamamura did not answer.

Turning her back, as if saying to leave her alone.

"You're not even good at this, and you want to hurt yourself by paralyzing your hands?"

Ryuen made a valid point.

As a beginner, Yamamura must not even be satisfied with her skiing yet.

In such a situation, if your hands are useless due to the cold, you will not be able to make progress. On the contrary, it only increases the risk of falling.

"If you get seriously injured and make a fuss, my skiing will be cancelled. Can you take that responsibility?"

Emphasising his own skiing, it sounded like a mixture of Ryuen-like egotism and clumsy kindness.

"No, that's..."

Yamamura seemed unable to talk back on an issue that was not merely a matter of emotion.

"So... Gloves?"

"...I forgot them."

"Ha, who would be so stupid?"

Under this cold weather, no one will forget their gloves. Laughing with his nose, Ryuen lowered his gaze to his own gloves.

No way, does he intend to lend his gloves to Yamamura?

"Yo, Ayanokoji. Give her your damn gloves."

"...Come on, me?"

He didn't just show such gentle development and threw the whole thing over to me.

"But I'm a novice skier too?"

"If you're injured, it's no problem."

I don't quite understand what the rationale is, but... Unfortunately, the store that sells gloves around here doesn't seem to be open.

In that case, I'll have to lend these to Yamamura.

There may be special gloves in the ski resort, but even 10 or 15 minutes of warmth would make some difference.

"No, it's okay. I'm fine, so."

Yamamura is already exhaling as she distanced herself by saying so.

"I'd suggest you stop. Cold causes vasoconstriction. Your body is shaking because your muscles are reacting to raise your body temperature. It might be dangerous to start skiing in that condition. Wouldn't it be most frustrating if things turn out like Ryuen said they would?"

"That's..."

I had forced the gloves I removed onto Yamamura.

"But... what about you, Ayanokoji-kun?"

"I'm fine. It's most important that you don't do anything to injure yourself while skiing."

They don't have a special resistance to cold, but as Ryuen says, if you control it with technique, it won't be a problem.

"...sorry about this..."

With gratitude, Yamamura put on the pair of large gloves, her hands trembling slightly.

Then, she put her hands inside her coat again.

They will remain cold for a while, but after a few minutes it will improve.

"Later, you'll need to buy a new pair of gloves of your size."

"Okay. Um, when we get to the ski resort, please let me pay for your gloves, Ayanokoji-kun."

"Pay?"

"I've already worn them, so it would be rude to return them now. They're dirty."

"I don't think they'd get dirty. No, you don't have to worry about falling down and dirtying them, just return them to me as they are."

"That isn't what I mean. When I put things on, they get dirty, so..."

Does she have a germophobic way of thinking? No, but Yamamura wore the gloves without resistance, albeit reservedly.

I don't understand her.

"I want you to let me pay for them, after all."

When it came to reimbursement for the gloves, I don't think she would blatantly choose the cheapest ones and return them.

It would be too high an expense for actions for which reimbursement is unnecessary.

"It'll just be a waste of private points. There is no need to do something like that."

"Won't you be disgusted by the gloves?"

Again, I don't understand what she is saying.

Why would the gloves end up becoming disgusting, just because Yamamura wore them? Even if this was not Yamamura, I would have felt the same way.

"It's okay. It would be worse to make a weird fuss about it and pay for it."

I expressed myself firmly to show that I would be uncomfortable if she paid.

"Then, let me at least give you a different kind of thanks."

I didn't think a thank you was necessary, but maybe I should do something to make the Yamamura feel better.

If she is going to be so stubborn, should I provide her with a path that is acceptable to her?

"Then, in exchange for a thank you, can I ask you a question?"

"...Yes?"

"Is there a reason that you weren't wearing gloves since the time we were waiting for the bus in the morning?"

"I just forgot."

I know that she didn't leave her hands bare on purpose.

"You had as much time as you needed to go back to get them. Did you forget that too?"

I took another step and asked what I was curious about.

"... because it wasn't that kind of atmosphere..."

"Atmosphere?"

"It felt like it would be hard to come back."

It is true that there were a lot of students in the lobby, but I doubt it would be that hard to come back.

No, that's just how I feel, and I have to look at it differently from how Yamamura feels.

It was only a few minutes of interaction, but I could understand a little bit of the student called Yamamura.

After that, I was interested.

"Yamamura, who do you hang out with the most?"

What kind of students do these types of students make friends with?

Are they the same quiet kids or are they in a circle of popular people like Kushida who welcomes everyone?

Or are they the type of people who avoid others?

Yamamura, however, did not answer the question immediately.

Her expression didn't change much, but she narrowed her eyes slightly awkwardly.

"No one in particular. I spend most of my time alone. "

"By yourself? I don't think they'd leave anyone alone in A-Class."

"I have a faint presence, so... they don't even notice that I am by myself. It's an everyday occurrence, so I'm not particularly concerned about it."

It is true that there are those with a faint presence who are overshadowed by others. If asked which one I am, I would be classified as that type too.

In the case of me and Yamamura, however, we are likely to have completely different characters.

Thinking about it, if Kushida noticed that Yamamura was cold, there was no way she would ignore it.

Even Kushida, who is always concerned about the reactions of others, seems to have become desensitized to Yamamura's shadowy presence.

Well, if she in fact has such a faint presence, I don't think anyone would have paid much attention to her going back to her gloves.

The faintness of her presence.

If I analyze it objectively, I can see some of her true character too.

"Yamamura, do you like yourself?"

"I don't like myself at all. It's impossible. "

Yamamura answered honestly, maybe because of the weakness of having to borrow gloves.

When the thing you want to hide is yourself, that is one of the causes for you having a faint presence.

If you don't want to let people see you or to show yourself, you will inevitably act inconspicuously.

She hides behind someone in a conversation so they don't see her.

It's like wearing black clothes in the middle of the night and not knowing why you don't stand out.

Also, because she does not make unnecessary movements, there are fewer chances for her to be seen.

Her presence is as faint as possible.

Moreover, Yamamura seems to be twice as vigilant towards people.

In other words, she is afraid of the other party and has saved their assertiveness as long as possible.

The combination of these factors has resulted in the creation of a student called Yamamura who is not easily recognized because of her faint presence.

The problem is that even if the cause is known, it cannot be solved immediately.

Yamamura would only become more vigilant if I said something like this, which you would not usually say to someone you have nothing to do with.

Words coming from someone closer to you are easier to accept.

After all, our conversation ended here, and we went silent.

Then, about 10 minutes later, everyone came back just before the opening.

"So, how do we divide? We don't all have to ski together, right?"

Group conduct is required, but we don't have to match every detail with each other.

There is a mix of beginner and advanced skiers, and it's hard, or even rude for everyone to fit in with everyone.

The important thing is balance. Whether it can be judged as reasonable when the surroundings see it.

We'll probably have to think about splitting up the team, starting with the least skilled of the eight.

"Yamamura and I are set for the beginner course, but what should we do? Should we go together?"

First of all, there is a gentle course for beginners underneath the ski slope, so it is definitely necessary for the two of us to ski there.

Yamamura also immediately agreed to Watanabe's offer.

"I think it would be good for someone who can ski to follow along with Yamamura and Watanabe. I could do it, if you want."

"Ah, it's okay, Kushida-san. I'll do it at the beginners' place. "

"Huh? You sure?"

"You can ski without worrying about it. I know I can ski, but the advanced course is still a little scary for me."

Nishino was able to ski normally, but said that and offered to follow Yamamura.

"I'm not sure about the advanced course either...alright, let's do that."

Perhaps Amikura had intended to do so from the beginning, but as soon as Nishino answered, she told so to everyone around her.

Unexpectedly, we agreed to split into groups of four people each and ski in different courses.

"If you feel like skiing on a course above intermediate level, you can always say so. I'll be around to support you."

In case Nishino and Amikura were holding themselves back from saying anything, Kushida added so.

"Well, lunch is at noon. Let's all meet at the restaurant."

When the group began to move to the entrance of the ski slopes... I thought I heard the unfamiliar sound of horses' hooves, and then I saw Kouenji riding a horse galloping past us, kicking up snow. The students in the other class looked deeply surprised, and Kitou seemed to pull back a little.

For students who were not used to Kouenji, this was not an unreasonable reaction.

"Mr. Customer, that is not the course!"

Immediately after that, several staff who were fumbling from a distance screamed and chased after him.

"What was that..?"

"Amazing, huh..."

In a daze, Nishino and Yamamura stared at Kouenji, who became smaller like a bean grain.

"I wonder. It's a sight I've never seen before, but I'm not that surprised."

Kushida said so in a way that I could only hear her.

"As his classmate, I'm used to Kouenji's unusual behaviour, so..."

Strangely, I feel that it is not surprising at all for something like this to happen with Kouenji.

To be blunt, I'm just used to it.

Part 3

We split up to get dressed, got ready, and gathered at the rendezvous point.

I, Kushida, Ryuen and Kitou moved to the lift.

We decided to board the two-person lift with a combination of me and Ryuen, and then Kushida and Kitou.

Because we decided that there would be less trouble this way.

Just in case, I sent Kushida and Kitou first, and boarded after a few others.

In doing so, I also intended to avoid clashes on the lift.

"Can't you get along a little better with Kitou?"

"That's impossible. If Kitou was the one asking, then that would be a different story."

Staring at the snowy mountains, Ryuen replied so.

"There's no chance, huh? Well, it's no use in that case, but this is a good chance. Kitou seemed to have gained some trust from Sakayanagi as well. I thought you would have the idea to use this as an opportunity. Depending on the case, you could even make him an ally."

Ryuen sitting beside me thinks that this school trip is mainly about gathering information, but that's not a mistake.

In fact, it can be seen that Sakayanagi is doing similar things.

"Kitou doesn't look completely human, but it seems like he's very loyal, at least. Besides, Sakayanagi was on the alert when he formed a group with me. She must have been worried for what we'd talk about."

"That's quite realistic, huh."

I didn't have much contact with Kitou, and I still don't know anything about him.

However, despite the attitude of thoroughly disliking Ryuen, there is a strong sense of willingness to protect Class A together with Sakayanagi.

And I've never heard of any problematic behaviour from Kitou alone.

If I carelessly tried to negotiate to bring him into my side, he will think that I am asking him to reveal information.

"Besides, the talent I needed from the A-class was just Katsuragi. Both Kitou and Hashimoto were good soldiers, but not enough to add to my handpieces. It's out of proportion to the risk."

It seemed like that was the reason why he continued to be hostile without friendly contact with Kitou. Even after evaluating Kitou, he seemed to recognize Katsuragi in a different way. The lift arrived, and we landed on the advanced course.

Kitou, who had been waiting for us, called Ryuen to the starting point.

It seems that they won't do anything lukewarm like slowly enjoying the course first...

"Hey, give the signal."

Ryuen gave Kushida such an instruction and ordered her to start the countdown.

"Both of you, be careful skiing."

Kushida raised her hand and started counting down the start.

They open up a few meters between each other and prepare to slide out.

Who will be the winner?

"Start!"

The moment Kushida put her hand down, they both got off to a good start almost simultaneously.

"Let's go after them, too."

"Eh, are you sure? I'm not sure I can catch up, but..."

"Then come slowly after me."

After saying that, Kushida and I also started skiing a few seconds later.

Ryuen and Kitou were on the move as they battled their way back and forth.

They're skiing down at high speed in beautiful arcs to the right and left.

My technique, which was still incomplete yesterday, began to be elevated by getting a role model before my eyes.

A long advanced course will allow me to learn deeper and more closely.

Apart from that, the battle between Ryuen and Kitou was still the same.

I thought one of them would surpass the other soon, but it's pretty equal.

As far as I can see, there is no big difference in skill, and their desire to win is the same. Even after the middle of the course, it didn't look to be settling.

As the race was coming to an end, the distance between the two were gradually getting closer.

An unexpected accident?

I have a bad feeling about this.

If this situation continued, there was a risk of collision due to overlap in their positioning in the skiing course. No, this is not an accident or such for both sides.

They should consider this a dangerous sign of the opponent winning by tackling.

I copied their movements and learned from their technique as I accelerated.

"Die, Kitou!"

"Piss off, Ryuen!"

After hearing them, suddenly, I forced my body into the slight gap between them.

The two scattered in a panic due to the sudden entrance of a third party.

Both sides were staring at me, but I succeeded in forcing them to keep their distance.

I finished the advanced course, and Ryuen and Kitou stopped slightly behind me.

Ryuen, and Kitou who was in front of him, quickly turned around and approached me walking.

"Why did you get in the way?"

Kitou, in an angry tone of voice, came at me with such force that it seemed as if he was about to grab me.

"I decided it was dangerous. Things got too intense and you were trying to win by doing something improper."

"No matter in what form, a match is a match. Ryuen knew that too."

"It doesn't matter if the other person understands or not. I can't call that a skiing match."

After saying his grievances, Kitou glanced at Ryuen and skied away.

I could feel that they were not going to have one more match.

At that time, Kushida also skied down and arrived.

"The three of you were too fast, but Ayanokoji-kun, I didn't expect that..!"

While stepping on the snow, Ryuen approached me with an unhappy face.

"You don't look like a fucking beginner. Were you pretending?"

"Pretend? No, it's the first time I skied yesterday. "

But Ryuen didn't believe me, spitting in the air, he headed for the lift.

For the time being, it's good to have peace of mind.

Probably.

"I understand that he's angry, your skiing was amazing. You were like the protagonist of a manga that would do everything perfectly with talent, even if you didn't try. Ryuen said it too, but is it really the second day since you started?"

Unfortunately, I am not the hero of such a manga.

In the years I've lived, countless experiences have accumulated in my body.

Even if it is the first time skiing itself, sports in general are shallow and broadly connected by lines.

I just connected them together, connected the verbal and visual information, and tried sliding.

"Can't you believe it?"

"That's not it. But if I hadn't seen the move that got Amasawa, I might not have believed it."

At that time, even if for a moment, I showed Kushida the battle between White Room students.

Did that doubt and apprehension make my progress on these skis more truthful?

"Amazing."

I am once again praised, but I somehow can't accept it.

"That is not true."

"This again?"

She thinks I am just being humble, but I can't help that.

However, Ryuen's and Kushida's skiing was that of experts, and was truly a model for me to follow.

They may not have accumulated a vast amount of experience like I have.

In that sense, they have much more sense than I do.

"Let's go to the lift, too. I'm out of trouble, and I want to enjoy skiing."

"Yeah, that's right. It might be a hard time for those who can't ski, though."

I suppose that is true for any activity. It would be nice if everyone could enjoy it even if they were bad at it, but that's not the case.

Whether it's video games or sports, it's often not fun for those who aren't good at them.

Part 4

At noon, everyone from group 6 gathered at the restaurant attached to the ski resort.

Because it was in food court format, I ordered what I liked and returned to my seat.

I was handed a one-touch call marked number 3 and told to come get the food I ordered as soon as it rang when it was ready.

"What about you guys, Watanabe-kun?" Did you get better at skiing?"

Kushida asked about the four who went to the beginners' course, as they had been on the advanced course all along.

"I got pretty good at skiing. Not as good as Nishino or Amikura, though."

Watanabe's humble yet slightly growing self-confidence.

On the other hand, Yamamura, whose name is not mentioned, has a dark expression (as always) and lacks spirit.

"As for Yamamura...well, she's not there just yet."

Talking only to me, he reported that she wasn't getting any better.

The person in question didn't look like she wanted to be spoken to, so I didn't say anything.

Then the one-touch call rang, so I went to get my meal.

I took the hot soup curry on a tray to our table.

Then, the eight of us started our lunch together.

Ryuen, who had chosen a light hamburger, was the first to finish his meal and pushed the wrapper and tray to Watanabe.

Watanabe, with a bitter laugh, placed the empty tray on top of his own.

"Lend me a hand, Ayanokoji."

"Um...but I'm still eating?"

About a third of the soup curry is left. As time passes, the hotness will be ruined.

Watanabe took pity on me and sent me off without a word. As for Kitou...he never looked at me in the first place.

"Come with me for a bit,Ayanokoji."

"Um...but I'm still eating?"

"Make it quick."

"I'm gonna step out for a little."

"Mhm. We'll be waiting for you while we eat."

I left Kushida here, and I walked through the food court with Ryuen.

Then, he finally stopped around the edge of the food court and took out his phone.

Then he unlocked it with his fingertip and stared at the screen for a while.

"Of course. That Sakayanagi, it seems that she's using her men to gather information. "

Apparently, his classmate came up with a report confirming that.

"Just like you, right?"

I'm not asking directly, but I believe that Ryuen is giving the same instructions.

"I guess. This school trip is not for friendship. In order to crush the head, it is important to rip off the limbs first. Sakayanagi seems to know that very well, too."

Both Sakayanagi and Ryuen could not have a class fight as individuals.

How do you beat your opponent in a class team fight? Upgrading your allies' abilities is important, but so is reducing your foe's fighting strength. Sakayanagi's legs are particularly bad, and her usual range of movement is very narrow. It's mostly Kamuro or Hashimoto covering for this.

If these two were to be seen to have a weakness that would make them succumb to Ryuen, Sakayanagi would lose a valuable leg. Her ability to gather information will be reduced at once.

"Shall I ask you why you bothered to call me? You're not here to report a scouting battle, are you?"

"From here, I will instruct the guys in the class and start preparing for total resistance against Sakayanagi. Whether the final test is a written test, or whatever else, I will crush her by any means necessary."

"I heard something similar on the bus. That the battle has already begun."

"Yeah. But before I get started, there is something I need to double check with you. "

As Ryuen said so, my phone vibrated once.

When I told him to wait and checked the screen, I saw a short message from Kushida.

"Yamamura-san is on her way."

Is she wondering how I'm doing after being called out by Ryuen?

Yamamura is most likely moving under directions from Sakayanagi.

It is now possible that Yamamura is eavesdropping nearby, but I can't tell Ryuen. This is also a part of the battle between Sakayanagi and Ryuen.

If I did anything, it would be against Sakayanagi.

On the other hand, it seemed that someone else had contacted Ryuen and he was staring at the screen again.

Ryuen put his phone into his pocket without changing his expression and began to talk.

"You remember the 800,000,000 points I told you about a year ago, right?"

"I still don't think it's feasible."

"Right. After this, I'm sure the class will react in the same way too."

"Are you going to tell them?"

Ibuki should be the only one in the Ryuen class who knows about the strategy to accumulate 800,000,000 points.

Even Ibuki probably only learned of it by coincidence and didn't know the specifics.

"It would take a shit load of money. That's not the kind of money I can get when I keep it a secret, is it? There's only a year left, and it's almost a little too late to make a move."

Certainly, the cooperation of your classmates is essential if you are serious about improving the accuracy of your strategy.

Just as Ichinose gradually pooled the private points of everyone with trust, Ryuen was also aiming for the target amount together with his classmates.

"Do you want to confirm that I will cooperate for the 800,000,000 points?"

"I've been very considerate to your class until now, you know? The sports festival, the culture festival. And then, at the end of the term test, I helped your plan to fight with Sakayanagi. You have no complaints, right?"

Indeed, since that time last year when we discussed with Ryuen, the Horikita class has been able to move so freely that we almost forgot about Ryuen's presence.

If Ryuen had remained as militant as he was in year one, things wouldn't have gone so smoothly until now.

"You seem to get along great with Kushida too. Even though you were working so hard to expel her."

"Sorry. Sometimes, we have to change our policy."

Perhaps amused by the words, or caught by them, Ryuen laughed and clapped his hands many times.

"I can easily crush Kushida if I feel like it. You know that, right?"

Ryuen is one of the few students outside the class to know the true nature of Kushida.

The fact that he could have challenged her any time but did not choose to do so, must also be the result of the promise.

"So you want me to keep my promise?" You're even threatening me for it."

"I'm not forcing you or anything. Will you do it? Or not?"

It was a verbal promise at the time, but Ryuen had said he would show no mercy if I went against it.

"Before I reply, let me ask you, what happens after you defeat Sakayanagi?"

"After we defeat Class A at the end of the school year, it will certainly be a one-on-one battle between my class and your class, right? In my mind, it's all part of the story of me defeating you."

That is what he thinks after all. Looking at things thus far, there is no doubt.

"That's a little too convenient. At that time, you got off the stage once. And you should have only been laying the groundwork for Kaneda and Hiyori. But now, you're back on the stage. If you want me to make good on my promise, you should back off. If I am in Class A and you are in Class B, it is inevitable that you will give up the win, right?"

Only then can we create a situation where we can talk about my cooperation for the 800,000,000 points.

"You don't like it?"

"Of course. If Horikita and you, and both the classes really clash with each other, and you win and move up to A class, only my side will be the fools. Or, if the 800,000,000 points plan works well, can you promise that you'll take the students from the Horikita class into A Class?"

The smile disappeared from Ryuen's face, and his sharp sideways glance turned to me.

"That's impossible. The extra private points are of course ours."

It's money that lives on after graduation, and no one is going to spend it to save unrelated students.

"If you lose, we save you, and if you win, you will abandon us, huh..? It's completely unthinkable. Therefore, I cannot cooperate with the plan to save 800,000,000 points. But from now on, no matter what class you attack, you're free; I have no right to stop you."

"I guess you aren't such a naive bastard after all, Ayanokoji."

"This isn't only about me, so."

"I guess it can't be helped, then. That's why you can't stand up for what you said."

He backed down easier than I expected. It seemed like he knew he was going to be turned down.

"Do you still intend to accumulate 800,000,000 points, even after the negotiation breaks down?"

"I'm not going to change my strategy now. The main objective is to accumulate 800,000,000. Moreover, I'll beat both Sakayanagi and you. If I become an A Class without spending money, I can graduate with a lot of money. Right?"

Although it was already a dream, the plan has been replaced by complete imagination.

However, from here, Ryuen said that he would accumulate 800,000,000 points.

"So far, I've used money pulling in Katsuragi and employing the guys from year one, but it's time to begin my turn to collect. I will switch to a completely private points doctrine."

If he is that frantic to collect private points, then there will be risks involved.

Ryuen's odd thoughts and attitude here left a strange influence on my thoughts.

"Don't look at me like it's too strange for me to press for my plan without making any concessions."

"I'm right, though. I can't see the essence of this conversation."

"It's simple. It means that I already knew you'd break the contract. I can't crush you if I'm halfway connected to you. But, it's a different matter if you break your promise like this. Because now, we can fight properly."

In other words, he is choosing a revived obsession with victory over an alignment of interests. A similar thing was said on the bus, but the war was declared again. Still, I wasn't completely convinced.

There is some intention in the flow of this talk. But I won't get an answer if I pursue it here.

"It's okay to look ahead, but you should only think about our rematch after you beat Sakayanagi."

"Hah. I know that woman's got a sharp head. But, that's all there is to it."

Saying so, he is showing that he is absolutely confident for the end of year test.

Ryuen, you were defeated, but were able to come back. I will admit that your talent exceeded even my expectations. You certainly are continuing on the road to success.

Whether or not it can cross the barrier at the end, is a different matter. I wonder if this gap, not recognizing obstacles as obstacles, might eventually resonate in the arena of battle.

Of course, depending also on how Sakayanagi perceives Ryuen, the signs and hints will change.

"Go back first, Ayanokoji."

After saying so, Ryuen walked towards the toilet. From a seat somewhat far away, Hiyori, who was looking at us, noticed me and waved her hand.

It seems Hiyori's group came to ski too.

I lightly raised my hand at Hiyori and replied, and returned to the group table.

Yamamura has already returned and is silently touching her phone with an angry face.

"Where's Ryuen?"

"I think he'll come back after going to the toilet."

"...Are you okay? He didn't hit you or anything, right?"

Watanabe looked worried and checked the details of my body.

"Don't worry. We just chatted a little."

"I hope so, but..."

Yamamura, who had been slowly eating here finished her meal, and Nishino followed along with her, taking her tray.

"I'll... go put my tray away."

The two of them came from the same stall, so they seemed to be going back together.

"Ayanokoji, if he has you by the short hairs, don't hesitate to talk to me."

[TL Note 21 : 弱みを握る, Yowami wo nigiru; to grasp someone's weakness. Expression same as "to have someone by the short hairs".]

Kitou muttered so with a deep look in his eyes, perhaps thinking that Watanabe's way of asking was too naive. I wish he had said these words before I was called.

When Ryuen returned before long, Kitou took his gaze off of me.

"You ran away from me, and switched to intimidating people from other classes?"

"Huh? Heh, don't worry, Kitou. I'm going to make sure to bring you bastards and the A Class down too. I'll show you that, after all, Sakayanagi is just a passing point for me, and nothing else."

"You can't defeat the A Class, you bastard."

"We'll see."

Ryuen looked calm, or rather he was putting on a performance to look that way. He may be saying that he really believes he can win, but in truth there is nothing to back that up.

Of course, he might have information that I don't know, but, simply comparing abilities, Sakayanagi is superior.

"Don't say and wait till the end of the school year test, come at us any time."

"Kitou, you bastard... you don't have the authority to do that, do you? You're just the loyal dog, so it's your master who'll get in trouble if you make careless remarks, you know?"

After being called a dog, Kitou stood up with his large hands on the table.

"In the first place, I can defeat you alone by myself."

"Oh? So should we do it for a third time?"

The pillow throwing only hurt the pillows. And, because of me, it couldn't be settled by skiing.

"Come on you two, get along. It's already been rumored that our group is quite dangerous."

Some of the normal customers in the vicinity were watching Ryuen and Kitou in a strange way. It is only a matter of time before the faculty hears about the flashy things that continue to happen.

"Anyway, aren't Nishino-san and Yamamura-san being too slow?"

[TL Note 22 : "Yamamura-san" added in. He doesn't say "Yamamura-san" here but the word used means "Nishino and the others" or "Nishino and the other person" but he wouldn't say it like that in english.]

"Now that you say it, yes."

It shouldn't take more than a minute to get the tray back, but there's no sign of them coming back.

Noticing that Nishino and Yamamura did not return, Kushida searches for them.

"Ah, there they are. But it looks like they're tangled with some boys I don't know."

In the crowded food court, Kushida pointed in the direction of Nishino and Yamamura, surrounded by five men of student-like age.

They all look stern.

"Hey, hey, that Nishino, is she in some trouble? Let's go help."

"We better not move with a lot of people. Things might get worse."

I had just issued such a warning, but they were already up from their seats.

The two, who would never listen to advice, went to Nishino and the others without even communicating their intent.

"Kushida, you guys wait here."

I gave instructions not to move to Kushida, Amikura, and Watanabe. I caught up with Ryuen and Kitou, who were heading to the scene with strong footsteps.

"You won't even apologize for bumping my shoulder? I'm saying this ramen juice got my clothes dirty!"

Apparently, it was not Nishino who started the quarrel, but Yamamura, who was thought to have hit a man.

"You didn't notice that Yamamura-san was walking here, so isn't it your fault?"

The men laughed teasingly and touched the tips of their own shoulders.

[TL Note 23 - They're making fun of her by touching their own shoulders, it says the tips on the original phrase but if that seemed strange in english it works with that part cut out too.]

"Oh, no, this woman is like a ghost, so I couldn't see her. Right?"

"...I'm really...sorry."

Yamamura apologized with a quiet voice. I'm sure this isn't her first or second apology.

But the men kept on standing and behaving as if they didn't hear.

"We're here on a school trip from Gifu, you know, let's hang out. I'll forgive you then."

While Nishino was standing in front of Yamamura to protect her, the man forcibly grabbed her arm.

"Huh? Are you kidding? Who would hang out with you guys?"

When she forcibly swung her arm, Nishino's palm lightly hit the man's cheek.

"Ouch!"

The expression of the men who were laughing vulgarly all the time suddenly changed. Shortly thereafter, one of the five men flew.

"What the hell, you bastard!"

"That's my line, dumbass. Do you have some business with my party?"



It was Ryuen who slammed a lavish kick into the man's back. Then, he immediately grabbed another man's chest and pulled him up.

"Don't chirp like a damn bird in front of a woman."

"What... I'll fucking kill you!"

"Come on, try it. Shall I give you a shot? You want a souvenir from the school trip, don't you?"

Saying so, he tapped his own left cheek with his index finger.

"Oh, then I won't refrain from hitting you!"

As he was told to, he swung his arm with force.

"Ah, that's..."

Don't think he'll actually let you hit him.

I can't give him that advice in time.

Seeing the vain movement of his opponent, Ryuen grabbed the man's shoulders and slammed an intense knee kick into his abdomen.

Some students from the other school are on the ground, fainted from fear.

"Looks like some interesting events happen even in a boring school trip like this."

Ryuen began to find joy in the situation that was meant to occur. To think that my first contact event in my life with another school, would turn out to be a disturbingly violent affair...

One of the men swung with a left and right punch with a strong grip.

There was no intention of a one on one fight, and the other side seemed to be trying to win with numbers.

Then, Kitou showed himself.

The other men were flustered by his expression and sense of intimidation, which were clearly not that of a high school student.

"He's... he's going to help us, huh?"

While grabbing Yamamura's shoulders and protecting her, Nishino walked over and muttered so.

"Yamamura is Kitou's classmate. When he noticed her in a pinch, it's only natural he won't just ignore her."

Fortunately, they seemed to understand that it wasn't a good idea to keep fighting in the food court, so Ryuen and the others all walked outdoors.

"Shouldn't we call an adult?"

"No one can stop them now. So, it's better to avoid strangers' eyes and just engage with each other."

We were outnumbered, but the guys from the other side didn't look like much.

If Ryuen and Kitou team up, it shouldn't take long to finish them off.

It took about 10 minutes for Ryuen and Kitou to return. While pulling the guys they beat up behind them.

Then Ryuen and Kitou made them sit down before Yamamura and Nishino, and made them beg for forgiveness.

It seems that Ryuen and Kitou thoroughly inflicted pain until their rebellious hearts broke...

This is a problem when seen in this way, but it may also be necessary for Yamamura and Nishino.

The men promised not to show themselves before the two again, and were set free.

"This group's definitely not boring, huh?"

I could only agree after hearing Kushida's words.

Part 5

Skiing as time permitted, we returned to the ryokan before 19:00. I still want to ski some more, but I think this should be just enough.

The second day is coming to an end, and the night is gradually passing by.

I was invited by Sudou at dinner, so we went to the public bath together.

After washing my body, I gave myself up to the hot spring.

"Kaah! So good!"

Sudou, who has been sweating every day in the basketball court, might be able to get some benefits from this. I repeatedly rinsed my face with hot water with both hands, and it blew away my fatigue.

"Yo."

After a while, Hashimoto of Class A entered the bath next to me.

When I raised my hand and replied, Sudou also followed along and raised his hand.

"Wow... I'm so tired today."

With a very tired look, he stretched his shoulders and sighed deeply.

"Did something happen?"

"Whether something happens or not, I'm always worried about the problem children in my group."

Inwardly, I have always been curious about Hashimoto's group.

"It's because of Kouenji."

"That's right. You're supposed to be together with everyone during free conduct, right? Normally, if he had any sense, we'd be discussing things together, but I'm being made to go with him wherever he wants to go."

It is obvious that Kouenji is not normally the type to obey, but it seems that it is still the same even in the environment of the group including all classes.

"It looks like you were at a ranch where you could experience horseback riding today, but was it Kouenji's wish?"

"Why do you..? Well, it's no wonder you saw that commotion."

Hashimoto, holding his head, dunked the lower half of his face into the bath.

"I just saw him rush through, but did Kouenji come back properly after that?"

He submerged for about ten seconds, then Hashimoto shrugged his shoulders and surfaced.

"After about an hour. We just had to wait in vain, because we didn't have the mental leeway to experience horseback riding."

Then, we talked about what they did for their free conduct.

As if this hell had continued since the start, Sudou put his hands together and muttered with sorrow.

"So, I had planned to have lunch at a famous place I saw on television, but that Kouenji guy had the nerve to say he wanted to go skiing. He went straight to the ski slopes before we could argue. After that, I couldn't enjoy myself any more. This is the end of our second day."

If he ignored Kouenji and went to that famous restaurant or whatever, then it would be a violation of the group's rules. What a sad, sad story.

"You're his classmate, so I was wondering if you knew of a way to deal with him."

The school trip is just over the tipping point, with only two days remaining. At the very least, the group will want to make their own choice for the fourth day of free conduct.

"He's out of hand, man. We can't do anything about him, can we?"

Sudou honestly spoke his thoughts.

He seems cold, but after a long time together, he's simply already given up.

"How about you, Ayanokoji?"

"It's not realistic to convince Kouenji. Honestly, there's nothing I can do about it."

"...it's a cruel reality."

"But, there may be one way."

"What is it? Tell me."

Glad to have any little hope, Hashimoto wants to know how to free himself from the current situation. There is one way to guarantee free conduct, if he is willing to tolerate the demerits.

When I finished telling him about it, Hashimoto nodded with conviction.

"Well, I guess that's the only thing left to do."

"You should discuss what to do with the group."

"I will, I'm seriously considering it."

As he thought about it, Hashimoto disappeared into the bath again.

Part 6

After enjoying the large bath for about an hour and putting on yukatas, Sudou and I each took a bottle of free mineral water from the refrigerated case in the changing room and poured it down our throats with our hands on our hips.

The cool water is sending shivers through my warmed up body.

"Alright, I'm ready to do this, Ayanokoji."

"It's about time, right?"

Because of the long bath, his face is a bit red.

Or maybe it's because he's nervous, imagining what's coming.

It's time to formally tell Horikita how he feels. Sudou drank up about half of the remaining water all at once.

"Puh! Time to go, then!"

As if going to a basketball match after this, he slapped his cheeks and fired himself up.

"So? What exactly are you going to do?"

The time is just past 9:30 pm.

I don't think she's sleeping yet, but I'm sure many students are currently spending time in their rooms with their friends.

I don't see her having fun or making noise, but I wouldn't be surprised if Horikita is keeping a warm eye on the others.

"In the meantime, that's right... I'll call her on my phone."

Holding his cell phone, he walked through the curtain, and exited the men's bath... then, he immediately started the phone call.

"...oh, right, it's me. Where are you now?"

The call was quickly answered, so he hurriedly asked so.

"In the lobby? Okay, just wait there for a second. Um, I'll be right there, so."

Sudou, who hung up the call, had roughly breathed and looked at me as he walked out.

"There's a corner in the lobby of the ryokan selling small souvenirs, right? She seems to be there."

"Don't confess right away, okay? There will be a lot of eyes in the lobby. Horikita will be troubled, too."

"I-I know."

Confession is a major event that must take into account not only the confessing side, but also the side being confessed to.

"But where should I confess..?"

"The corridor leading to the backyard, no one's coming there at this hour, right?"

There is a little wooden deck where you can enjoy the view from the backyard up the stairs leading to the elevated terrace.

However, we can't go out to the backyard after 9pm, so it shouldn't be crowded any more.

"Thanks, Ayanokoji, you're a good friend to have."

He gave me a thumbs up, saying "nice", and laughed.

It was a very nervous smile, though.

When Sudou arrived at the lobby in a restless manner, it seemed that Horikita had stopped to see the souvenirs and waited nearby.

Meanwhile, I stopped at a blind spot at a distance. In the lobby, one employee and several students seem to be looking at souvenirs and sitting in a chair and laughing, and it is again clear that it is not a suitable place for confessions.

Somehow, after making a few gestures, Sudou seemed to have succeeded in summoning her to the corridor leading to the backyard, and the two of them headed there side by side.

Normally, it would be best to stop going after them here, but it would be annoying if Sudou got mad at me. Making my footsteps as quiet as possible, I followed them in order to see his "impressive appearance".

[TL Note 24 : I put "impressive appearance" in quotes because it's a very exaggerated expression so I think he might say it sarcastically, which the quotes will imply it to be.]

Shortly thereafter, the signs of other people disappeared as expected, and they stopped in the middle of the empty hallway.

"What's the matter?"

Horikita looked back, wondering.

I wonder if she bathed in the same way as we were just a while ago. Her hair glowed glossy enough to be seen in the dim lighting.

"It's okay here."

Sudou, whose imposing demeanor is his main selling point, is perhaps too nervous to speak loudly in front of the girl he likes.

At night, ryokan only have modest and gentle BGM and quiet talking voices, so he wants to avoid unexpected loud noises, even if there is no one around.

It's just about right.

"I am... I..."

Horikita leaned with curiosity at Sudou's hesitant attitude.

I don't see any particularly irritating or hasty attitudes at the moment.

Perhaps, this is also an indication of the relationship of trust that Horikita and Sudou have built up.

When we first met, Horikita would have rushed him to tell him what's on his mind.

Then, my phone vibrated. Even though it's in silent mode, it may still be heard in this silence.

[TL Note 25 : マナーモード, literally "Manner Mode", means silent mode.]

Therefore, I immediately powered it off without even looking at the screen.

It doesn't seem like I was noticed. I'm safe, for now.

"Hey, Suzune. Am I...unusual?"

I thought he was going to make the confession right away, but Sudou asked that, as if trying to squeeze it out.

"I wonder how different I am from when I met you..."

"Are you still worried about the people around?"

"There is that, too."

He's talking while trying to build up the courage to confess to her.

At the same time, Sudou himself seems to have been aware of this.

"Right. Looking at it objectively, you've changed more than any one. Not in a bad way, but in a good way. I've been watching from the side for a long time, so I can be the one to guarantee that."

Those are Horikita's true feelings. No, not just Horikita's; I'm sure most people living in the school hold the same opinion.

"I, I see."

"But, don't be too proud. If I am to speak without hesitation, compared to your surroundings, you started out as a minus in the first place. Just because you gained a plus after that, don't think that you've become a better person than other people."

One's surroundings are misled and give high praise after the recoil from being a minus.

However, as Horikita said, the accumulated negative is not gone.

"That's right. No, you're definitely right."

Sudou was in low spirits after the harsh words, but he accepted them and firmly nodded.

"It's so embarrassing. All the stupid things that I've done."

Lateness, absences, written test results that were at the bottom of the class, verbal abuse and careless violence.

No matter how many times he looks back, the past will not change, and he will always be ashamed of the path he has taken.

"You seem to have a very humble heart, huh?"

Nodding, Horikita gently narrowed her eyes and smiled. I don't think she realizes this herself, but Horikita has also changed a lot. The magnitude of this change is not as great as Sudou's, of course.

"You don't hurt or embarrass others for no reason any more. It's okay."

Apparently, Horikita interpreted this as Sudou being unsure about his own growth and past, and asking her for advice.

I guess this was passed on to Sudou, who shook his head in a hurry.

"No, that ain't it, Suzune."

"No?"

"I...I...umm..."

As if recalling what he had declared to me, Sudou put out his right hand.

But the words didn't follow the motion, and only the stretched out hand kept in front of her.

"What? What's going o-"

Horikita, who couldn't understand, tried to question the meaning of his right hand. Then...

"I like you! Please date me!"

He was able to free himself from the embarrassment of suppressing his words, and was able to clearly say so.

He was too loud, but... all he can do now is to ignore that. In case anyone heard him, I can just stay here and protect him.

"Huh..?"

Horikita, who did not think even a little bit that she would be confessed to, is frozen in bewilderment.

"If you're going to date me, I want you to hold my right hand back!"

"Wait a bit... are, are you serious..?"

It was Horikita who was about to ask back, but she quickly retracted her words.

'This is some kind of joke, right?' She knew it was rude to say such a thing, as she could tell that Sudou's passion, motivation, and feelings were true.

Horikita closed her lips while staring at Sudou's right hand.

I expected an immediate response, but Horikita looked at his right hand and fell silent.

After that confession, the longer the silence continues, the more Sudou's heart rate will rise.

I'm sure it will be a painful time, not a pleasant one.

But, Horikita also deserves to be given some time to think. A confession does not consist of only one side's thoughts.

"Um..."

Eventually, things were sorted out in Horikita's mind, and she spoke slowly as if she had chosen a word to say.

"I've never thought I'd get a confession from someone."

Receiving Sudou's passionate feelings, how will Horikita respond?

Will she accept, or refuse?

Or will she defer it for later?

As the silence dragged on, Sudou's right arm began to tremble little by little.

Not because of his arm getting numb, but because of nerves and fear.

The frustration of not getting a response, whether it will be accepted or not.

Still believing that the hand he offered would be gripped back, Sudou kept his head down.

"Sudou-kun. Thank you for liking someone like me."

She expressed her gratitude. However, Horikita did not show a movement of gripping his right hand back.

"But, I'm sorry. I... I cannot answer your feelings."

That was the conclusion that Horikita came up with.

"Oh, I see... if it's okay... could you tell me the reason?"

Not able to raise his face, Sudou said so while keeping his right hand stiff.

"The reason... yes. It's not that I am dissatisfied with you or anything."

She started speaking, then stopped.

"To be honest, I've never been in love with anyone before. I still don't have that feeling, and I don't know what it's like. If I go out with you, after you told me that you like me, it's possible that I will like you with time, that's what I thought. But... I think I'm waiting for the moment when I might fall in love with someone out of instinct, without planning for it."

As if confirming her own feelings, Horikita said so to Sudou.

That is the reason for the refusal.

She wishes to keep waiting for her first love.

I'm sure it's a hidden sentiment that no one else has to hear about.

"I see... thanks. Thanks for telling me that."

Perhaps because he was so firmly informed, Sudou did not persist.

"Your courage and feelings. You've firmly conveyed them."

Saying so, Horikita hurriedly grabbed his right hand, which was almost losing its strength.

"I have truly received your feelings. Thank you for liking someone like me."



Sudou's trembling right hand tells the whole story.

Thinking that it was about time, I decided to turn back.

In order to wait for them to come back after calming down, I'll look around in the souvenir corner.

Part 7

Various Hokkaido souvenirs are displayed in the souvenir corner, which I hadn't stopped by yet.

"Speaking of which, Nanase said something about chocolate-coated potatoes, huh..."

I tried to find out what it was, but it seems that they are not sold at a ryokan so I could not find it.

So I'll have to look for it either during the sightseeing tour tomorrow, or during our free time on the last day.

I should check my phone to find a store that sells them.

"Oops..."

When I turned on my cell phone with that in mind, there were a large number of messages and past calls.

From Kei, of course.

"Where are you?"

"I couldn't see you at all today."

"Are you busy with something?"

"I miss you."

"I miss you!!!"

...and so on. When I opened the app, all the messages were marked as read in a few seconds. Right after, my phone rang.

"Uuuh!"

It would be appropriate to describe the sound as a cat's growl.

"Are you angry?"

"I'm not angry, but, you know..!"

I see, it is at least clear that she is extremely angry.

"Why can't you just be with me for a little while!?"

"Sorry. We're on a school trip, so there's a lot I have to do."

"That may be true too, but..!"

"I received information from Kushida about group 1, so I already know that you've been conducting yourself skilfully. That's why I wasn't worried about you."

"Hmmm? You're having a lot of fun with Kushida-san, huh!? She is cute, after all! Cheater!"

"We're in the same group, it can't be helped. Besides, you already know what kind of person Kushida is, don't you?"

"That has nothing to do with it. Her breasts are big too... you're... aah!"

"I get it, I get it. I have the time now, so let's meet somewhere."

"Really? Let's hang out, then!"

After the calculated act, she suddenly replied with a cheerful voice.

"Maybe that's not a good idea. Ryuen is in my room too."

"Ah... right."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm in the room, but I think the other 3 girls are still in the bath. I was with them until just now. But I came back first because I wanted to contact you."

Kei was always deeply concerned about the wounds on her body, but it looks like she's completely past it.

"I have the key to the room, so I'll go back to the room first. I'll call you after, so please wait."

"Yep!"

I've been waiting for Sudou at the souvenir corner for a little less than 5 minutes.

Since there was no sign of his return, I got curious and decided to check the corridor leading to the backyard.

Then, I saw Sudou standing alone in the same position as when he confessed.

I can't see Horikita, so she must have already left.

"Sudou?"

I felt bad since Kei was waiting for me, but I approached and called out to him.

"Ah, damn it!"

As far as I could tell, he looked frustrated.

"I knew it wouldn't work..!"

There was regret in Sudou's face as he looked back at me, but he also had a bright appearance.

"Sorry. I couldn't forget how Suzune's hand felt, so I've been standing here."

"I see."

"Did you watch? It was quite the failure."

"Even so, it was an honorable defeat."

I was shown a brave, manly confession.

"I had no intention of giving up even if she refused my confession. I thought that next year, I will show how I've become even bigger, and confess again. But that's no good. At the very least, I now know that I cannot reach her."

Sudou seemed to sense something that I could not when watching from a distance.

"It's not about giving up or not giving up. I still like her, but I feel like she's a lovely flower that I cannot reach."

He couldn't seem to put it together well, but he said so and laughed a little.

"What about Onodera?"

"How would I know? Even you don't know how she really feels, right?"

"That's right."

"Well, it'll turn out the way it should. Onodera is a good person, and our hobbies are the same. Now that my wicked thoughts about Suzune have disappeared, I feel like I can be with Onodera more fairly."

Whether or not it develops into love is a secondary matter.

"I'm telling you, I'm going to keep working really hard from now on too. It was for someone else until now, but from today on, I'll go all out for myself. My immediate objective is to surpass Hirata."

"That's quite the declaration, huh?"

If he crosses that wall, he will finally be dealing with only the top tier of the school year, such as Horikita and Keisei.

It seems that without being shaken or depressed, he can look to a higher goal.

Part 8

When I came back to the guest room by walking quickly, Horikita was standing in front of the room.

"What are you doing?"

"I was waiting for you."

"Me?"

I had a bad feeling about this, so I played dumb, but Horikita had a stiff expression.

"You're very mean, Ayanokoji-kun. You were watching, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You were at the souvenir corner earlier, right? Normally, I'd think you were just nearby by accident, but in your case, I wouldn't think of it as a coincidence."

What a high-handed way of thinking.

She is right, but still. If I have to take similar measures against Horikita in the future, I have to make sure that I am not discovered.

"I know, you're thinking that you should make sure you're not seen next time, right?"

"... Impressive."

I earnestly clapped, and praised her perceptive insight.

"Sudou asked me to do it. He said he wanted me to see him confess."

"Even so, don't you think it lacks consideration for the female side, me?"

"I don't."

"Sudou-kun still has a long way to go, I see. I'll take points off for him asking you to watch over him."

She was taken by surprise, but did not seem that angry.

"So? Did you come all the way here to complain to me, a spectator?"

"That's right."

She's speaking plainly without hesitation.

"Well, that's a joke. There's actually something I want to talk about. But you really look like you want to enter your room."

"That's not really true, but... If possible, can we do this tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I'm being pressed by *someone else*. She's upset because I haven't been with her at all for these two days."

[TL Note 26 - He uses the word to refer in a mocking/over dramatic manner here.]

"I see, Karuizawa-san, right?"

I suppose she was going to tell me to do it later, if it was something unimportant. Horikita, pondering.

"Tomorrow night, then. I'll forgive you if you can promise me that you'll meet me then."

"Alright, I promise."

Because I have no other choice here, I replied so.

I left the key with Kitou who was in the room and headed toward Kei.

We are already recognized by many as an official couple, but we can't meet everywhere like Ike and Shinohara.

We decided to meet up in the area with multiple private baths.

After that, I was scolded severely right after meeting with her, but I hugged and got Kei back in a good mood right away, and we spent some time relaxing together.

Chapter - 4

School Trip, Day 3

Intro

About 30 minutes after the bus left the ryokan at 9 am in the morning.

The bus stopped near Sapporo Station and arrived at the destination that will be the starting point today.

There is also a clock tower in Sapporo City, which is a famous spot for sightseeing.

We are moving as groups today too, but there is one different point compared to yesterday. A little test imposed by the school.

We will visit a total of 6 spots from 15 pre-determined destinations in any combination within a time limit (until 5 p.m.).

A group is considered to have toured one location when they reach the designated photo location for each spot and take a commemorative photo with the entire group. We will simply repeat this.

The system is designed so that groups that intentionally break up their members to collect points in an underhanded manner, or groups with students who fail to act in solidarity and act selfishly, cannot succeed.

The only condition for disqualification is failure to complete six or more spots within the time limit.

In that case, the free conduct on the fourth day of the school trip will be taken away, and a study session will be held in the ryokan until 4 pm.

Each spot also has its own set score, and any group that can obtain a total of 20 points or more at six spots will be rewarded with 30,000 private points.

However, since the size of the score does not affect disqualification, it is up to each group to judge whether or not they should aim for the reward.

Also, if the photo is not clear and the person cannot be identified, etc., it will not be counted.

Aside from the question of whether to aim for a reward, if they want to enjoy tomorrow's free conduct, students need to go around the spots earnestly and cooperatively.

In addition, although there is no limit on the number of times public transportation can be used, it is prohibited to travel by taxi.

It's also necessary to keep a record of how you got around the spots.

I'm sure students would have preferred to move freely on this third day too, but, for me, it is not a bad idea to walk around Hokkaido based on the conditions given by the school in this way either.

If we're only given free movement, we'll end our school trip with a limited tour of sightseeing spots and skiing.

I am genuinely looking forward to seeing around Hokkaido, even if I am being compelled to do so.

We were given a brochure when we got off the bus.

It seems that the school's own brochure describes the places to visit around here.

The Sapporo City Clock Tower, the Sapporo TV Tower, and the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art are all 1 point.

Nakajima Park and the Hokkaido Imperial Shrine are 2 points.

Sapporo Maruyama Zoo, the Hokkaido Museum, and the Sapporo Central Wholesale Market Outside Market are 3 points.

Moerenuma Park and Shiroikoibito Park are 4 points.

[TL Note 27 : Shiroikoibito Park - White Lovers Park]

Moiwa Mountain is 5 points.

Sunpiazza Aquarium is 6 points.

Jouzankei Hot Springs is 7 points.

Then, Lake Shikotsu and Lake Utonai are 8 points.

It's important to note that we're not finished when we get to the spot.

In the Maruyama Zoo in Sapporo City, a photograph with a polar bear or in the polar bear hall in the back is a prerequisite for completing a spotting tour.

"This is kind of surprising. I would expect it from this school, but..."

Kushida, who got off the bus, spoke out. For some reason, she was looking elsewhere.

"I'm over here."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I had no idea~"

It can't be, but no, she isn't even looking over here while saying that.

Perhaps she was keenly aware of how strange this was, and she turned her head around and smiled.

"It would really hurt to lose a whole day to a study session if we don't do this well. I guess the reason they let us have a whole day of free time yesterday without any restrictions had something to do with this spotting tour."

"That may be the case."

Now, the question is, what choice will our group 6 make?

The spot visit had been explained to us before the school trip, but we had just been told on the bus that it was a bit like a test, with free conduct at stake and private point rewards.

In other words, the group's policy has not been determined at this time.

Groups moving towards a private point reward may not be able to meet the time limit, and risks are inevitable.

While some groups seemed to stay on the spot and have discussions, most walked in the same direction.

"It looks like there are many groups headed to the Sapporo City Clock Tower after all, since it's just a stone's throw away from here."

There is also a strategy to aim for high-scoring lakes such as Shikotsu and Utonai, but the risk is high.

"It would be more efficient to have a discussion while walking."

As Kushida says, the first safe route would be to go from Sapporo Station to the clock tower, take pictures at the designated spot, and then head to the TV Tower after going to Oodoori Park.

In a short amount of time and with little money, we can tour two spots.

However, it is unclear at the moment whether it is ideal in the process of aiming for more than 20 points.

After that, all 8 members of our group 6 got off the bus.

"I just did a quick search on the map app, and even if we could use a taxi, it would take us a few hours to get around the 6 high-scoring locations."

The calculations made by Amikura must not have taken into account the time it takes to get to the location of the shooting.

Even if we make full use of public transportation, it is unlikely that we will be able to score high within time.

"Is anyone here familiar with Hokkaido?"

Watanabe asked the members of group 6, but there was no good response.

Like the other students, I have no knowledge of how to get around in Hokkaido or the most efficient means of getting around, so we have to do some research to figure out where to go and how to get around efficiently.

"Hmm~. Even if I want to make a route with the map app, I don't know what's where so the order gets all messed up."

It seemed that Amikura was fighting with the map app to get the right destination.

Since the spots are scattered east, west, south, north, from the current location, one would have to start by understanding their current location.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that public transportation will be available in the spots, and the list in the brochure does not necessarily indicate that the school has prepared reasonable spots.

"Even if we can receive private points, it's 30,000. Why don't we forget about the rewards and have some fun exploring around?"

Watanabe's suggestion is one of the right answers.

If we only focus on scoring 20 points within the time limit, our fun will be diminished.

We won't have time to relax and enjoy the local scenery.

"So, I think we shouldn't force ourselves too much."

"Me too, I think we should just go wherever we want. I want to go to the zoo."

Students who usually live in school don't have the opportunity to go to a zoo or an aquarium.

It is only natural that they do not want to waste this opportunity.

"Let's listen to everyone's wishes first, and build up from there."

Amikura proposed that we ignore the scores, and first ask everyone where they want to go.

Then, six of us, including me, agreed to ignore the scores and leisurely visit the minimum number of spots.

However, this needs to be discussed and decided by the whole group.

Ryuen and Kitou still had not agreed or told us their opinions.

"Kitou?"

Watanabe asked Kitou, who had remained silent until now.

"No disagreements here."

Because he responded favourably, Watanabe and the others were relieved for the time being.

That's seven people.

Ryuen, the last one, didn't reply.

"Ah...well..."

Watanabe hesitated to ask, so I decided to ask and confirm the answer.

"Everyone has agreed. Can I count your silence as consent?"

But it was Ryuen who had declared that he would accumulate 800,000,000 points.

I can see the answer myself.

"I'm going for the scores."

He gave us a simple response, that he will stand against the other 7.

Of course, it is up to the individual to think about this tour of the spots.

Some groups will prioritize the spots for private points.

However, additional discussions will inevitably occur when opinions break up in this way.

Watanabe was so frightened that I decided to ask Ryuen about it.

"Can I ask why?"

"It's obvious, right? I want the private points. I don't think of it as "just 30,000" points."

Each class can earn 60,000 points with two people in total.

It is only grains of dust compared to 800,000,000, but it is also a steady step.

"There's no reason not to pick up the money that's dropping in front of you. So just shut up and listen to me."

Although there is a risk of running out of time or not scoring enough points due to mismanagement, there are basically no disadvantages to this spot tour.

If you comply with the rules and achieve your goals, you will receive private points from the school.

In other words, there is only a positive element.

It is true that not getting what you could get is a loss.

But, of course, Kitou was not going to stay silent about Ryuen ignoring the other 7's opinions with his bullish attitude.

"You telling everyone to go along with what you want?"

"Yeah. Got a problem?"

"It's a disregard for democracy. In this case, I think it is a question to be decided by majority vote."

"Who gives a shit? When did this group become a democracy or whatever?"

"I'm not convinced that you're obsessed with a small sum of money in the first place. There's no way I can believe that."

"What the fuck do you think it is, then?"

I already lost count of how many times this has happened.

As Kitou and Ryuen collided, no one could speak out.

"You didn't like that the group agreed, so you spoke up in order to stir things up."

"I see, that may actually be true. It's not a bad thing to see your discontent expression."

If we let these two continue to talk, things will soon be heading in a dangerous direction.

"We need some private points to use public transport. If you subtract that, you won't end up with 30,000 private points per person, will you?"

I don't know the exact amount at this time, but we'll have to spend some money.

"Even then. Even if the reward drops to nearly 20,000, I'm not going to give up going for it."

I noticed that only our group was left around the bus.

"In the meantime, your precious time is being wasted. You know that, don't you, Kitou?"

Just agree and find the proper route. That's what Ryuen is pressuring us to do.

Of course, this comment, which seems to add fuel to the fire, is not going to make Kitou quiet.

"I refuse. If you're going to stick to your private points and ignore other opinions, I'm not going to help you around the spots. In other words, rather than gaining private points, it is tomorrow's deprivation of free time that is inevitable."

It seems that Kitou intends on fully striking back, and he assured Ryuen that he would not agree. So, he strongly protested again.

"Heh-heh, you're the one that'll be in the minority, Kitou. After all, over time, these people will have no choice but to obey me."

Does he intend to start a patience contest that will be of no benefit to any one?

The easiest way to move the unyielding Ryuen is to turn the rudder in the direction of collecting private points.

Even for the six of us, the 30,000 income is not a bad story, and has advantages too.

Besides, if we are guaranteed free time tomorrow, we can make up for the sightseeing we can't do today.

If the six members, excluding Kitou, lean toward Ryuen, that will be the majority opinion.

"Even if everyone is forced to obey you, I will not."

In that case, Kitou would be turned into a villain in a seven-to-one fashion.

"If you're saying that you'll destroy the group all by yourself, maybe that would be worth me giving up the money, huh?"

"I'd welcome that."

Kitou showed no signs of faltering, as if saying that he was used to being the villain.

"Hey, calm down, Kitou. If it's going to cost us our free time, then...!"

Watanabe, who had been timid up until now, had no choice but to interrupt them.

"Then you have to talk Ryuen out of it."

"Ugh..."

Watanabe is very troubled.

"That's right, Nishino. You're Ryuen's classmate, try to convince him."

"It's easy to talk to him, but that doesn't mean he'll change his mind, right? I won't do anything useless."

I'm sure Nishino, who has known him for a long time, will see the results ahead. She was already in the mood to give up because she knew there was nothing to do.

"...hey, listen for a second. What do you think I should do in this situation?"

Kushida pulled my arm and asked so at after going a little distance away.

"I thought following Ryuen's lead would be the best choice, but now Kitou is making trouble too. Yet, if we go with Kitou, then Ryuen won't move. They're always trying to get their own way."

Showing their bad sides, both of them were being called out.

"It's not like there is no solution."

"...is that so?"

"But, I wouldn't recommend it if I don't have to."

"Can you at least tell me?"

"What Ryuen wants are private points, so sightseeing is not necessary. Meanwhile, what the seven of us want is to go wherever we want and enjoy sightseeing. Kitou has a similar opinion, too."

"Mhm. It's a conflict, isn't it?"

"Then the seven of us can use our own money. Well, Kitou will oppose, so I guess it would be six of us in actuality. If we generate 5,000 private points per person and give them to Ryuen, he won't have any complaints, right?"

"Ah, I see, so there is such a solution..."

But, it's Ryuen. He might not be convinced just by us personally paying him 30,000. I kept listening to Kushida and talking about the risks.

When this group receives the reward, each class will receive 60,000 private points. In other words, he would demand to, at least collect 30,000 for Nishino from the same class too.

Even if Nishino declined, Ryuen would eventually demand it to put them into his own pocket.

That would cost 60,000 private points total for five people, with 12,000 private points per person.

There will also be a resistance to paying that much just to enjoy sightseeing.

"It's...definitely not cheap."

It's supposed to be a sightseeing tour where we would only win, but it's turning into a loss.

After that, I doubt we can earnestly enjoy the sightseeing.

Also, the majority's succumbing to the minority's imposing stance only creates a bad example as a group.

"And, worst of all, we have to think about the risk of him asking for more."

"Huh? That's so ridiculous...but he might..."

"That's what I'm talking about."

"I understand what you're trying to say, Ayanokoji-kun. That's why you don't recommend it."

"It's best to put it all together without any cheap tricks."

"It's not easy to have a peaceful conversation. Impossible, even, right?"

Indeed, it is hard to imagine Ryuen or Kitou breaking easily, and it is inevitable that we will be stranded.

"Yes. Why don't we just test their patience? We have to work hard to collect more than 20 points, right? If we wait here for 30 minutes, or an hour, it will be very difficult."

A strategy to let them use up the time they would need to score on the spots? However, this choice also contains various issues.

"Even if Ryuen decides that there is not enough time, there is no guarantee that we will enjoy sightseeing by visiting the spots quietly afterwards. In the end, it collapses. Tomorrow's free time will definitely be gone."

"Ah...right. It would be really obvious, too."

There are not many options available here. We have to be prepared to take a few risks and try to summarize the situation.

"I don't want to throw away my precious day either. We have to bear with some pain in order to move here."

"...What will you do?"

I drew one conclusion, but I noticed something important before that.

Even if it was to avoid being overheard by others, I've been close to Kushida for too long.

Clearly, the picture of only Kushida and I having a confidential conversation is blatantly highlighted.

"You... you're dating Karuizawa, right?"

Watanabe said so with a little squinting.

Amikura doesn't have a good face either.

"It's a strategy meeting. Isn't that right, Kushida?"

"Of course. I just came to an agreement with Ayanokoji-kun. Right?"

After saying so, Kushida suddenly separated from me.

Looking like trying to get away from a disgusting person, it wasn't a very pleasant reaction.

However, it seems that Watanabe and the others were convinced by this, so it must be the right move.

She recovered her mind and approached Kitou, who was constantly glancing at us, and Ryuen, who was looking at his phone unwittingly.

Then, I turned my back to the two and faced the five other members.

"There was something I wanted to check again with all the members except for Ryuen and Kitou. I would like to take a recount of what the opinions are at this stage. Whether to prioritize sightseeing, or private points. I would like you to raise your hand if there is someone who has changed their opinion to the latter. You don't have to pay attention to the atmosphere, just show me what you want."

Watanabe and the others looked at each other, but no one raised their hands.

Looking at the attitudes, it's clear that no one is lying.

In other words, no one agrees with the policy of aiming for high scores instead of sightseeing.

"So what? No matter what you say, I won't change my mind, Ayanokoji."

I know that you don't care, even if you don't have allies to help you.

"I'm sorry, but I want to talk to the other five now."

After looking back once, I immediately cut my gaze from Ryuen and continued talking to the five of them.

"Now that we're in this situation, I concluded that there was no way all eight of us could come together, and that it would be a waste of time to try to come to an agreement."

"So what are you going to do? Go along with Ryuen?"

As one of those who wants to go sightseeing, Nishino did not hide her discontent.

"No, that's not happening. Individual opinions should be respected to the greatest extent possible, but as a group, he is only one in eight. It must be that way. Kitou's opposition against Ryuen, that is also one in eight. Even without my input, the five people here have a say of five out of eight, more than half."

"I know that. But, the problem is that we can't come to an agreement, right? One out of eight or five out of eight, we all have to make the same choice to move forwards."

"That's right. However, it is undoubtedly the five people who have the right to decide what to do in this situation. If you cannot agree with Ryuen's methods and way of thinking, then you don't have to obey him. In other words, you can make him let go of his choice to earn private points. We can all drop the idea of visiting the spots right now and just do our own sightseeing at our leisure."

"...do you mean to throw away tomorrow's free conduct?"

"That's right. Even if you act as Ryuen has planned, I can't guarantee that tomorrow's free movement will get you where you want to go. If someone says that they won't leave the ryokan, at that point the group won't even be able to go outside. On the other hand, today's freedom is guaranteed."

"Only until 5 o'clock though, right?"

"That's not true. Until 5 pm, the group is going to go around the spots and think about free movement until tomorrow. We have a right to come back to the ryokan at any time we want until 9 pm. Moreover, you can act on your own free will. We can even split into groups of good friends. The school can't criticize us for that."

Abandoning Day 4 and turning Day 3 into complete freedom of movement that no one can imitate.

This is the absolute authority that only the five are allowed to exercise.

"It's not Ryuen or Kitou who will decide what to do, I want you to think well about that."

"...that's right."

Kushida looks into the eyes of the members without unnecessary conversation and is convinced that their opinions are united as one.

"Ryuen, we are not after all aiming to earn private points. Today we want to talk about where we want to go, and have an enjoyable day. If you can't obey, then we'll probably end up dispersing from here. What happens after that is exactly as Ayanokoji said. Maybe we can all get along for a day of study tomorrow."

Nishino laughed at the words, and Amikura, Watanabe, and Yamamura nodded to prepare themselves. Kitou slightly raised the corner of his lips in response.

"That's good advice. I'll go along with that, too."

Kitou, who was simply opposing Ryuen until now, went to the side of the five. With everyone having come to a conclusion, the ball is effectively passed to Ryuen for the first time.

In accordance with the opinions of Kushida and the others, he will either give up his private points, or rebel and disperse.

Either way, he won't get the private points he wants.

In fact, he will even have to be in the study session tomorrow.

"Now you've done it, huh, Ayanokoji."

He expressed his dissatisfaction in words, but did not appear to be truly dissatisfied.

I'm sure the people around me just see this as a show of strength, though.

"Well, I'd hate to come all the way here on a trip just to study. I'll go along with you."

I thought there might still be some resistance, but Ryuen backed down.

If he could get private points by dispersing, he would have done so without hesitation, but he avoided trouble when he knew that there was nothing to gain.

After that, we, group 6, followed the school's instructions and went on a fitting trip, visiting spots around the city centre and visiting the zoo that we wanted to go to.

As a result, the score collected was less than 20 points, but it was a meaningful and satisfying way to pass the time.

Part 1

Day 3, dinner.

The previous two days, breakfast and dinner were Japanese-style course meals, but from this evening and until breakfast the day after tomorrow, when we will return home, the menu will be changed to an all-you-can-eat buffet format.

Of course, this is my first experience with an all-you-can-eat.

As for the meals, just like up until yesterday, we could freely eat at any table we wanted without worrying about group movement.

Many students were already crowded together and walking around with their trays.

My girlfriend Kei is also together with the girls today, and I can hear her laughter even from afar.

Now that I'm on my own without any interruptions, I'm watching the other students around me and learning how this works.

It seems that the customers take a tray from the stack, freely combine the dishes in the tray, and pick up the dishes one after the other along a predetermined route.

First, I'll take a salad bowl and put in it lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles and such. You can choose from five different types of dressings, so I chose onion dressing.

"...This is interesting."

Unlike predetermined meals, making detailed choices on your own gives you a strong sense of individuality.

Without realizing, you end up making a nutritionally balanced meal.

On the other hand, the surrounding students varied in their patterns, with some taking the same kind of food as the members they're eating with, and others preparing many kinds at once in small quantities.

Then, as I lined up in the vegetable row, students began to gather behind me.

I thought there would not be many students here for an early dinner, but it is rather the opposite.

It seems that many of the students were aiming for the opening time.

Even though Japanese cuisine is the main thing,, there are also steaks, shumai, corn soup, and such.

"Yo, Ayanokoji. Are you actually going to eat alone?"

As I was trying to find a seat after putting everything in order, Ishizaki, who was empty handed, called out to me.

"I am."

"Eat with me, then. I just called Nishino too, since she was alone. It's lonely to eat by yourself, right?"

"No...well, that's right."

Since there is no real reason to refuse, I should go along with Ishizaki's kindness here.

Nishino raised her hand slightly as I followed Ishizaki to our seats.

Further, Albert seemed to be there too, and I felt him look at me through his sunglasses.

I sat down next to a tray with a large amount of food that seems to belong to Ishizaki.

"Well, I still have something I gotta go grab. You can start eating first."

So the reason that he was empty handed when he called out to me, is that he was going to get something.

Ishizaki returned to the place lined with food while singing a song.

"You're here because of Ishizaki's meddling too, huh?"

"I refused, but he was persistent."

"He's not the type to leave his friends alone."

"I guess. He was a lot more gloomy and sharp when he first enrolled in the school."

Certainly, he has very bright image these days, but it may not be the same as when he first enrolled.

I've had almost no contact with him, so it's only natural that he hasn't left an impression on me.

"He didn't seem to like Ryuen at first, so maybe it's that his rebellious spirit is strong."

Perhaps I didn't see it because he was being suppressed, but this must be Ishizaki as he is supposed to be.

Albert, however, who is eating alone in silence, is the one person that hasn't changed a bit.

He's skilfully using the chopsticks with his big hands.

"Alright! I brought crabs! So many crabs!"

When Ishizaki came back, he put a large plate on the tray, and there was only a large amount of crabs piled up there.

With the momentum of putting them on the table, the crab legs fell into the tray.



"...There's so much."

"If you're in Hokkaido, you eat crabs, right? I've always been after these guys, so I rushed to grab them."

"You're really vulgar, huh?"

Indeed, among the colourful menu, the crabs attracted many students.

I didn't want to be part of the herd, so I gave up trying to get one on the first lap.

"What do you mean vulgar? This is viking time, you know! I'll take all I want!"

Ishizaki's theory is that if you don't take it, you lose it.

"First of all, can you stop saying viking? It's really lame."

"Huh? What else should I call it?"

"It's buffet. Buffet!"

[TL Note 28 : Ishizaki calls the buffet "viking" in the above exchange. Since buffets were popularized in Sweden, he jokingly uses the word "viking" to reference this. The usage of the word "viking" to mean "buffet" also appears in Japanese dictionaries.]

"Buffet? No, isn't that way worse? What the hell's that?"

I think that they have different rules for what to call it, but what Nishino cares more about than that is the pile of crabs on the plate.

"...that doesn't matter. I was looking forward to the viking, so."

"...what about the other people? Crab is one of the main dishes."

"Huh? If I thought about other people, then they would take it from me. Besides, this is an all you can eat, so they must have plenty prepared for everyone."

Well, that does make sense too, in its own way.

As Ishizaki pointed out, the chef was leisurely replenishing the boiled crabs. Worst case, if he says that he can eat it all, then we have no right to stop him.

"Oh, no way."

Saying so, Nishino turned her gaze away from Ishizaki and scooped the chawanmushi and brought it to her mouth with a spoon.

[TL Note 29 : 茶碗蒸し Chawanmushi; savoury steamed egg custard with chicken, mushrooms, etc.]

As for Albert eating in silence next to us... His chosen line up included boiled eggplant, spinach with sesame paste, various kinds of sashimi, miso soup, rice, and such.

No matter how you look at it, it is all Japanese food.

"You like Japanese food, don't you?"

When I said that, Albert placed his chopsticks carefully side by side and, raised his thumb silently.

Then he returned to eating right away.

The way he eats is also very polite, more so than Ishizaki, who eats in a gulping manner.

"Oh, Ayanokoji. You're in a group with Ryuen, right? Are you handling it well?"

"I'm not doing anything special. The other group members are very supportive, so we're doing reasonably well together."

"You're talking like you don't know that there was a fight at the ski resort."

As one of the parties involved, Nishino reminded me of what happened.

"Did they have a fight with someone from another school? Shit, I wish I was there too!"

"It would have been even worse with you there. Why are men so hot blooded?"

That being said, Nishino looked pretty brave too.

In order to become a shield for Yamamura who got in trouble, Nishino talked back without fear.

"You're a hot-blooded woman too, aren't you?"

Ishizaki cackled as he stuffed his cheeks with crab.

"Shut up. Also, stop spitting out food scraps everywhere, it's dirty."

"You aren't bothering Ryuen-san either, right? Listen well to his orders, okay?"

"You can be as loyal as you want, but why should I have to follow him too?"

She's still playing catch, even while arguing with Ishizaki.

[TL Note 30 - The word in the original is literally "catch ball" as it is in english, written with japanese letters. Here it's referencing to the back and forth between them.]

I guess they are classmates who know each other thoroughly.

However, from what I can see, although Nishino doesn't speak much, she does not seem to cause any trouble, and she also has a kind-hearted side, showing concern for Yamamura.

"I've been wondering, Nishino, but aren't you afraid of Ryuen?"

"Well, when he gets serious, it feels really dangerous, but, you know... My idiot brother was a delinquent too, so maybe I have a little resistance."

So there is a similar type in her family.

Then I can see why she is so confident in talking back in fights.

"It was obvious he would struggle if he didn't take school seriously. Despite that, my stupid brother dropped out of high school, couldn't find a job, and had a really hard time."

As if it was unpleasant to remember, she sighed a few times as she spoke.

"What happened to him?"

"The local construction company picked him up and he works hard at the site every day. For a very low salary, though."

It is precisely because she has seen the reality, that she can only sigh when she thinks about Ryuen or Ishizaki's futures.

Doing whatever you want now will cause you trouble later.

This should be common sense through all of society, whether you're a delinquent or not.

The higher education you have, the better it is for you, except in the entertainment and creative industries, where talent is important, and in the sports industry, where physical ability is important.

The more you work hard and add on to your studies, the more likely you are to start from an easier position later.

"Despite how you look, you're pretty smart, huh?"

"You didn't need to say "despite how you look". Besides, anyone would look smart from your point of view."

"A-ha-ha! Maybe you're right!"

From Ishizaki's perspective, almost any student would be an honour student.

When I finished my meal and was about to leave the venue, a man, Katsuragi, came into my sight.

He is eating alone at a table in the corner, silently bringing food to his mouth by himself.

I was worried about his appearance, so I observed a little, and I saw a strange scene from there.

When Oda from the Ryuen class spotted Katsuragi and was about to call out to him, Matoba from A Class stopped Oda, said something, then Oda headed towards a different student while keeping eyes on Katsuragi.

It was as if her coming into contact with Katsuragi was obstructed on purpose.

This happened not just once, but continued on for a second and third time. Matoba is a member of group 2, like Katsuragi.

So he should have been at the table with Katsuragi, but he was doing the exact opposite.

Among A Class, there seems to be people doing some very shady things. I could have left it alone, but I decided to try to contact Katsuragi.

Then, as soon as he sensed that I was approaching, he approached me.

"I'm in a bit of a group event with Katsuragi right now. Could you leave him alone?"

I see. If he says that it is an issue of group 2 alone, then I have no choice but to pull back, even if we are classmates.

That's why Oda quickly understood and left too.

Is this the consensus of A Class, or is this an arbitrary act of Matoba alone?

I wondered if there was any intention to defeat the Ryuen Class behind it.

Either way, as a third party, this behaviour can't be seen as anything but malicious bullying.

A new visitor appeared near Matoba who was giving me a warning. Matoba turned his body around to stop them, but his thoughts quickly changed.

"Ugh..."

He gulped, and, as if he had never made an obstruction in the first place, turned his back.

"Hey, Katsuragi. You're eating with a very gloomy face, huh?"

It is not surprising that Matoba could not say anything, as the visitor was Ryuen.

He clicked his tongue and immediately ran away at the unexpected appearance of the big shot.

[TL Note 31 - The word used for Ryuen here is 大物 Oomono, meaning - important person; influential figure; big shot; big name; bigwig; heavyweight.]

Without even a glance at Matoba's back, he sat down in the seat in front of Katsuragi.

"I'm eating. You want something?"

"I wanted to get closer to see that wretched look on your face better."

"I don't know what you mean."

"He-he. That's what it's like to betray your class. It's too late for regrets now, Katsuragi."

"I don't regret anything. I don't know what to do with a leader that can't be restraint, but I'm ready to commit a double suicide with my current class."

Whether he was trying to hide his embarrassment or not, it was a roundabout way of saying it, but, it is clear that he has the resolve as a member of the Ryuen Class.

"I see."

Ryuen, sitting there, pulled out a chair and slid an empty glass in front of me.

"Bring me some water, Ayanokoji."

"...Me?"

"Dealing with you in public, I don't have to be afraid of you in the slightest. This is too easy."

"From the moment that the group was formed, I knew you were going to be rough with me, but... good grief."

"Don't worry, I'll go."

Unable to ignore this, Katsuragi offered so, but I gently stopped him.

"I'm thirsty, so it's fine."

I also caught a glimpse of Ryuen's concern for Katsuragi, who was eating alone.

So I'll agree for now.

Part 2

Ryuen and I remained until Katsuragi finished his meal, then we left the dining hall.

I can see Kushida sitting down in a chair near the entrance.

Kushida stood up after seeing us, and approached without hesitation.

"Ryuen-kun, can I talk to you for a second?"

Apparently, she was waiting for Ryuen to come out here.

With how quickly we ate, it was hard to think that Kushida, a girl, had finished her meal before us.

It seems safe to assume that she had something she wanted to talk to Ryuen about, and prepared so in advance.

Katsuragi read the air, and quickly went back to the room alone.

"Huh? What do you want?"

"Not here... I want to go somewhere else, if that's okay?"

Because of the eyes around, Kushida was in her usual public mode, but she seemed a bit strange.

"Sorry, but I ain't interested in you."

"A-ha-ha, that's not it, though. So, don't worry. I also feel the same way about you, so."

Kushida, while keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings, directed her sparkling killing intent toward Ryuen.

"Well, whatever, I'll listen to what you have to say. We can get rid of the troublemaker, right?"

As for the troublemaker, it is of course me.

Kushida also followed along and apologized, so I should pull back here. The two walked side by side towards an uncrowded direction.

If I leave them like this, things are going to fall in the wrong direction. I decided to hide myself, and follow the two of them. Exercising extreme caution, however.

I was right to be cautious, as Ryuen seemed to be keeping an eye behind him.

"So? What are you going to tell me now that you're alone with me?"

"It's about the relationship between me and you. Even when we were moving as a group, you sometimes said things that were unnecessary. I'd like you to stop doing that."

As far as I could see, Ryuen hinted at revealing Kushida's secret twice now.

It is only natural that she is not pleased about that.

"What do you want with me?"

"What do I want? I'm not going to do anything right now."

"...So, you mean you'll do something someday?"

From what I can hear, there is a slight lack of composure in Kushida's voice.

"You sold your soul to the devil because you wanted to get rid of Suzune, didn't you? Naturally, there is a risk involved with that. We can't just forget about the past now, you know?"

"Yes, that's right. I think that's true."

"Even so, your appearance has changed a lot, Kikyuu. The old you wouldn't have thought of pressing me here even if I had provoked you. Isn't that right?"

Ryuen sensed that something was strange. He shouldn't know anything about the unanimous special exam, but he does have a keen sense of smell, so I guess he can feel it.

"Perhaps someone came along who accepts your true nature?"

"You can speculate all you want, but that's not it."

"Heh-heh. Either way, for me, you're one of the necessary keys for my class strategy. When I have to deal with the Suzune class, I will use this weapon without mercy."

So far, he has intentionally not mentioned the case of Kushida.

It seems that he will leave it as one of the measures to effectively cause damage in more important situations in the future.

This is an obstacle for Kushida, who has recovered and decided to serve the class for herself.

It cannot be easily removed and she will continue to be made to suffer.

"What are you going to do? Will you get on your knees and beg me not to tell anyone? Or will you get rid of me and expel me? Both seem difficult."

"I..."

Kushida cannot be allowed to choose either of those options.

Even if a third option were to emerge, it is the same.

"Sorry, Ryuen, but you have to stand down on the Kushida matter."

I stopped hiding and decided to expose myself to the two of them.

"Tch. So you did follow us?"

"Ah, Ayanokoji-kun!"

"I already considered that you would be on guard."

"Whatever. So? What do you mean stand down on the case of Kikyuu?"

"It means it as it is. I know you intend to reveal Kushida's secret, but I'd appreciate it if you'd stop."

Upon receiving the warning, Ryuen laughed and clapped in amusement.

"Ha-ha-ha! What the hell Ayanokoji, you're involved in this shit too after all? And the fact that you say that, it means that she's no longer the cancer of the class like before."

Getting the answer that cleared his doubts, Ryuen pleasantly laughed.

"Right. Kushida is now taking a new step as Horikita's classmate. I'm not going to let you ruin that."

"I'm sorry, but things are going to get even more interesting. Let's take our interests out of the equation and get things going now, shall we?"

"No one will believe what you say, Ryuen-kun."

Kushida, not being able to stand it here, opposed Ryuen, but he won't stop with such words.

"How about it? You never know until you try with these things."

What is needed now is not a half-hearted verbal deterrent, but a complete containment of his movements.

"If you decide to expose her, no one can stop you."

Kushida could not hide her anxiety and humiliation, so I tapped her on the shoulder and told her not to worry.

"But if you do that, you won't be able to achieve your goal of fighting Sakayanagi in the final exams of the school year."

"Huh? Why is that?"

"I'll deal with it in a way you wouldn't want."

As if in response to my words, Ryuen's smile instantly turned suspicious.

Just like when he had fearlessly abducted Kei in the past, or even more so.

"Hah. Look at that, you haven't shown me that expression in quite a while."

I came between Ryuen and Kushida and moved closer to Ryuen.

"Now, even if I choose silence here, there's no guarantee that I won't expose her, right?"

Ryuen showed a strong appearance, but he finally raised his hands lightly.

"I don't want to talk about this. In the first place, I don't want to attack your class with Kikyou's story. No, I should say I'm not feeling like that any more."

"What do you mean?"

"If it wasn't for Ayanokoji's entanglement, this wouldn't have become a weapon."

"Huh..?"

"I'm sure you don't know, Kikyou, but this guy told me yesterday that he doesn't want to expel you from the school any more. So if I used this information, it wouldn't affect you, right, Ayanokoji?"

"Yeah. I've already thought about countermeasures."

"It makes no sense to hit you with a strategy that won't get through and then get reversed back at me. Right? I've already learned that I can't defeat you with half-measures."

Without being mean, I am sure that he will challenge Horikita's class in a way and with a plan that I can't even think of.

"I'm going to go back to my room now. Bye, Kushida, enjoy the rest of your school life."

Don't stop me any more. With that implication, Ryuen returned to the guest room.

He changed from calling her Kikyou to calling her Kushida.

Is that the flip side of the complete loss of interest from Ryuen? Only me and Kushida were left here, and silence came.

"Why... did you come to my rescue? It has no merit for you, does it?"

"There is a merit. You're an indispensable resource for the class. Even if I hadn't come here, Ryuen wouldn't have been willing to expose you, but I didn't know how you would act. You were wondering if you could do something to close his mouth first, right?"

"...Well, yes..."

"Ryuen is not an enemy you can reach. It would be troublesome if you were to blow yourself up in a battle that you didn't have to fight. That's why I decided to show myself."

"So you're saying that you could help me out, Ayanokoji-kun? Actually... I guess you already did, but..."

"At least at this stage, I don't think we should recognize Ryuen as a strong enemy."

"...Huh? What do you mean..?"

"Anyway, you don't have to cross the dangerous bridge any more. Just take care of yourself for now."

"Such pompous words. Do you need my strength for the class that much?"

"That's also true."

"Also?"

"I feel like I can work well with you now that we can talk frankly."

My ability to see into her secret side has increased the number of factors that make it easier to infer what she is thinking.

"Stop it. People who know my true nature can't really think that way."

I'm sure she's most acutely aware of the fact that she has a personality that's not well-liked.

"That's not true. I honestly have good feelings towards you."

"What...do you really mean that? I don't trust you, Ayanokoji-kun, so."

The usual Kushida would reply with a smile, but her expression was stiff.

"This is the truth. Some people in the world find your true nature more comfortable."

When I said something like that, Kushida looked at me, opened her mouth wide, and stopped moving.

Then she suddenly walked towards the wall.

"...what?"

Immediately after that, she spread her arms out, put her palms out, and then fully put her hands on the wall.

"It's okay, it's okay..."

She muttered so, and stopped moving.

「そんなの」

その直後両腕を広げ、
手のひらをバーの状態にしてから
思い切り壁に手をつく。

「大丈夫、大丈夫……」

ぶつぶつとそんなことを言い出し、
動きをびたりと止めた。



As I watched to see what was going on, Kushida, who had regained control of her breathing, looked back at me.

"I feel a little dizzy, but I'm okay now!"

Kushida raised her voice in an odd way, appealing to me not to worry.

"...Are you really okay?"

Kushida showed her usual front face, even though she did not appear to be in very good condition.

"Mhm. I'm good!"

"I... I see."

In Kushida's case, it's really hard to read her emotions.

"Somehow, I was saved by you, Ayanokoji-kun. ...thanks."

"I feel like you've been thanking me more these days."

"That might be so... Yeah, from now on, I'll leave Ryuen-kun alone."

"That would be good."

"Well, I'll go back to my room now. See you tomorrow, okay?"

"See you tomorrow."

Kushida walked down the hallway with a completely restored expression.

However, she stumbled on the way and fell down again, and one of her clogs magnificently flew off.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine! So! Okay!?"

She brushed me off with her hand, telling me not to approach her, then staggered to her feet and put her clog back on.

[TL Note 32 - Clog means a shoe with a thick wooden sole. Here it's her wooden slippers,]

Part 3

Since I had a meeting with Horikita, I waited in the hallway from the guest room with my back against the wall.

"I'm sorry, I'm a little late."

Although Horikita showed up while apologizing, there was no problem because she was not really late.

"You were fast, though."

"Do you intend on talking here?"

Students are constantly entering and leaving this room near the guest room.

It's one of the least suitable places to talk about things you don't want to hear.

"It's definitely not a good place to talk. Yes, that's right. I think we should go to the vending machine and have a drink. Wouldn't it be nice to talk while walking?"

That would be fine, I don't have any particular objection.

Standing-up conversations attract a lot of attention, but if you chat while walking, you don't have to worry about it.

"The vending machine in front of the bathhouse was selling fruit milk. It was delicious."

I was told that it was something to drink after going to the bath, and I really thought that was true.

"Thanks for the childish comment. But it's not something you drink in the middle of the night, is it?"

Is it a time issue? No, from a girl's point of view, that might be especially true.

"But the vending machine at the public bath would put us farther away from here, so let's go over there."

Horikita's steps are slow, and she moves in a way that prioritizes talking first.

"It's about that day at the culture festival. I've been meaning to ask you, but I never had the opportunity to do so. It's stuck with me for a long time, since I couldn't find the right timing until today."

"You must have been tired at that time, you seemed to have exposed your sleeping face unprotected."

"...want me to kick you?"

I immediately raised my white flag as I was shown her eager upper body stance.

"Forgive me."

"It's such a blunder. To show a boy my sleeping face. You've disgraced me."

"Is it really something to worry about that much?"

"Of course it is... just forget about that now. I want to ask about that day."

Horikita brushed her embarrassment away with her hand, and her face turned serious.

"What happened in the student council room that day, didn't you have something to do with it?"

The festival, that day, the student council room, there is only one event that these can lead to.

"Did you expel Yagami-kun?"

"Why do you think that?"

I'm not dodging the question, I was just interested in the reason why she came up with that answer.

"I don't know if you knew, but it's possible that Yagami-kun was trying to expel you. In fact, his behaviour in the student council room was enough to support that."

Horikita, in her own way, seems to have a few pieces that I don't know about.

Using these pieces, it's no surprise that what happened was seen by her.

"I didn't know about Yagami, but I guess that shouldn't come as a surprise. You knew first hand that Housen was trying to get me expelled, didn't you?"

"It's the 20,000,000 private points reward."

"Yagami was in on it, and he was waiting for an opportunity, right?"

"I thought about that, too. But, there are too many strange points. Above all, he wasn't trying to get close to you for money."

It seems that Horikita, who was present at that scene, knows more about it.

"All of the possible answers weigh on my mind. But that's not what I want to know the most."

"Then what do you want to know?"

"Your true identity. I can't think of you as an ordinary student like any other."

"That's a troubling question. If I am not normal, then what kind of student would I be?"

"...I don't know. It's not about being superior or not. I just can't imagine what kind of person you are. I don't understand."

What kind of person is Kiyokata Ayanokoji? Is that what she wants to know?

"There's nothing special to talk about. In fact, I don't have enough to actually talk about."

"Then, can you answer my questions if I ask? Your birthplace, graduated elementary school, junior high school. Have you been to any competitions in the past? Did you study on your own, or with a private tutor, or cram school?"

I bet they don't ask so many questions even on a blind date.

"I know what you're trying to say, but I don't feel like receiving so many troublesome questions."

Horikita's lips are knotted and she showed blatantly her dissatisfaction.

"That's why I'm going to disclose some information."

"...What kind of information?"

"For example, right. The fact that I was involved in the Yagami case, just as you had been suspecting."

"You're not joking, right? Because Yagami-kun was trying to expel you?"

"I didn't know for certain that it was Yagami. It is more correct to say that I set up a trap for the student who was trying to expel me, and Yagami got caught in it. Student Council President Nagumo, Ryuen and the others were also there... I set all of that up. I enclosed them, so that they could not make half-hearted excuses."

Until now, I didn't see any meaning in telling this to Horikita.

However, I can give her the data by indirectly showing what kind of person I am.

For when we eventually come into conflict, I will make sure to create a possibility to put this to good use.

"Incidentally, there is no connection between the student council president and Ryuen. I only talked to them both separately."

"That discomfort I felt that day... I think I get it now."

"By the way, we're almost at our destination."

We took the stairs up to the second floor where the large bathing area is located, and arrived at the resting area where the vending machine is.

Then, there were two female teachers who had monopolized two massage chairs. They were very relaxed, giving themselves over to the massage, and did not notice us.



Horikita and I looked at each other once. We could ignore them, but Horikita chose to speak up.

"It looks like you are very comfortable here, you two."

"...eh? Ah, it's Horikita-san~"

Hoshinomiya-sensei replied, raising only her wrist and flapping her hand.

"Isn't it about to be bed time for the students, and time for the teachers to be working?"

"How unfortunate~. It's like a half day for us today, so~. Right? Sae-chan."

"That's right."

Leaving herself to the rattling massage chair, Chabashira-sensei closed her eyes comfortably.

"That thing, does it feel that good?"

I was interested in using it, but I couldn't because of the eyes of students who frequently came and went because it was adjacent to the large bathroom.

"Massage becomes indispensable when you get older. We do a lot of hard work that you young people don't know about."

It seems that with physical decline comes the need for equipment to support it.

"Especially in Sae-chan's case, her shoulders are very stiff."

"You didn't need to say that."

For a moment, the teacher's sharp gazes interleaved with each other.

"Even so, Horikita-san, you've completely become a leader. Asking as the former B Class home room teacher, do you feel comfortable in B class?"

"Not really. What I am aiming for is A Class. This is just a crossing point now."

"I see what you're saying."

Ignoring the conversation, I picked up the remote control connected to Chabashira-sensei's massage machine.

There seem to be five levels of strength, and now it is working with level 3.

Of course, the stronger it is, the more effective it will be.

For some reason, I was curious about how the strength of the fifth level would feel, so I changed it.

"Nn, ah, nnh!"

As Chabashira-sensei jumped with surprise, the machine started making a strong grating sound.

I thought it would be about a 40% increase in functionality, but it may be more than that.

"A, Ayanokoji, wha-what are you doing, nnh! Turn, turn it back!"

She reached for the remote control in clear panic.

She pulled the cord by force, and the remote control fell from my hand.

"Ugh, uugh! Hyah, ha-ha, quickly, get it!"

"Please don't pull it then."

I picked up the remote control and went from five to three levels of strength.

"Hah, hah... hah, hah... what the hell are you doing!?"

"No, I was just curious. I wondered if the stronger it was, the better it would be."

"Of course not! It has the right strength for each person!"

She looked at me angrily, with a bright red face, the most devilish expression I have ever seen from her.

Apparently, it was more stimulating than I expected.

"What are you trying to do?"

The noisy exchange also attracted attention from Horikita.

"We interrupted you during your break. Let's go, Ayanokoji-kun"

"Are you two going to take a bath? You can't go in together."

Ignoring the foolish thing Hoshinomiya-sensei said, Horikita turned around.

"Wait, Horikita-san."

Hoshinomiya had been joking around until just before, but I noticed that her face had changed to a serious one.

"Indeed, I think your class has grown remarkably, Horikita-san. Class B must aim for Class A at the crossing point. I know it's obvious, but I still think that's lovely, and very admirable of you too."

It sounded like a compliment, but it had a different meaning.

"Chie, don't say too much."

"Isn't it fine? I'm just trying to say what I think."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but you're not free to say what you think."

"Please say it."

Horikita urged her to say so, as if she was curious about Hoshinomiya-sensei's previous words.

"I won't hesitate, then. You see, as a home room teacher with a class, I have always been thinking about something. Teachers from A class to D class compete in the same way. If I had to use an analogy, you could think of it as the teachers as millionaires playing cards with each other."

"Millionaires... huh?"

"You know the rules, don't you?"

"Yeah, well..."

"With the cards handed out, we fight for three years to determine the highest and lowest positions from 1 to 4, but millionaires will play with cards with numbers from 1 to 13, right? If we leave aside the local rules and special rules this time, then basically the big number card is stronger, and the small number card is weaker, right? If a student with only 3 numbers and a student with 6 numbers bump into each other, of course, the student with 6 wins.

Mashima's A Class has a certain amount of hands, and there are a lot of cards like 10 or 11. On the other hand, the more you go towards D Class, the more cards there are such as 3 or 4. Well, it's kind of the school tradition so far."

Having said that, Hoshinomiya-sensei took the remote control of the massage machine and raised the strength of rubbing by one level.

That's barely three levels, so I should remember again how strong the fifth level is.

"Of course, the students change every day. I think a child who was a 3 or a 4 could grow up to be a 12 or a 13, or in rare instances, the strongest number of 2.

That's why there are fluctuations in the classes, and sometimes the D class goes up to the B class. Well, it's extremely rare, though."

The Horikita class has come to an unprecedented place.

"But, it's important to fight on an equal footing. That any class is always fighting within the numbers 1 to 13. If there is injustice or cheating in a certain class, it would be no good, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But, you know..? Don't you think there's one card in your class that shouldn't be mixed in, Horikita-san?"

"A card that shouldn't be mixed in..?"

Hoshinomiya-sensei laughed, and turned her gaze to me.

"Yes, it's cheating. Sae-chan's class is the only one in possession of a joker."

Horikita also noticed the stare, which was as if pointing at a name.

"Chie. Enough already."

"I can have a couple complaints, right? Even if we are fighting with all our might, a single joker can turn the situation upside down. No, it is much worse than playing with millionaires and the like. Because, unlike a card that is gone from your hand after you use it once, you can use the joker again and again and again. There's no way I can win."

As a home room teacher, her words could be taken as a declaration of defeat for her own class.

"Regardless of the merits of your statement, what will you do if a student from the D class hears it?"

A statement acknowledging defeat. Shock is inevitable if students in the Ichinose class hear it.

"...That's right. Sorry, sorry. Maybe the alcohol is getting to me now because of the massage."

She said so, and turned it off.

"The joker came into your hands because of the luck of Sae-san and Horikita-san. If you reach A class with it, it's not cheating, is it?"

It was obvious to everyone here that it was sarcasm.

"That's enough already, Chie."

A voice close to intimidation that I've never heard up until now.

Then, Hoshinomiya-sensei's drunkenness cooled down for a moment, and she jumped up in a hurry.

"I'm going back to my room! Farewell!!!"

Slightly peeved, Hoshinomiya-sensei waved her hand and walked down the hallway with big steps.

"I'm sorry for all that. She said it herself, but it must have been the alcohol circulating because of the massage."

As if defending Hoshinomiya-sensei, Chabashira-sensei replied so while getting up from the massage machine.

"It's fine. I'll just ignore it as drunken non-sense."

Horikita replied with a single, harsh comment, and Chabashira-sensei coughed once, a little disturbed.

"You're pretty harsh, huh?"

"You seem a little concerned about what I said earlier, teacher."

"It's not like I don't have anything to think about, to be honest. It's too different from the class I took three years ago."

It is true that there are powerful cards in the Horikita class.

"I don't know if Ayanokoji-kun is a joker or not, but there is no denying that he is a powerful classmate. But, I don't want to hold back because of that."

Without even looking at me, Horikita spoke her mind towards Chabashira-sensei.

"I will fight with all my might using it, since it is a card that was dealt to your class, Chabashira-sensei. Because I'm aiming for A class."

"That's right. Of course, that is my intention."

However, I am sure that Chabashira-sensei herself thinks that she is not prepared enough.

The A class led by Sakayanagi is also packed with solid cards. You may win one game, but you never know what will happen if you play 10 or 20 games.

"Well... I'll go after Chie, then. If I leave her like that, she might drink too much until the morning."

She couldn't seem to abandon her friend and old classmate, so she followed her.

"That's it for today, Horikita."

"There's still so much I want to ask you, though? Joker-san."

"I've come all this way, so I want to take a bath again. Besides, there are more people here now."

Students trying to enjoy a bath before going to bed were beginning to show up.

"You'll tell me later. Can I think that way?"

I nodded and went straight through the curtain leading to the men's bath.

Part 4

It was close to 11 pm, so it was about time to turn off the lights.

Kitou stood up silently and headed down the hallway, grabbing several magazines he had borrowed.

"He's been reading magazines for a long time while he's in the room, huh?"

I guess he likes to read.

Unlike me and Hiyori, he doesn't seem to be the type to read books from the library.

A new magazine is held in the hands of Kitou who returned a few minutes later.

He must want to read it immediately when he wakes up in the morning.

The magazines Kitou reads strongly reflect his personal tastes, and most of them are what one would call fashion magazines.

"Will you let me read it a little bit?"

I thought he would just tell me to go get one myself, but Kitou silently put the magazine on the table. Does this mean that I can read it as I please?

I decided to read the magazine for a little more than 10 minutes before the lights went out.

It features fashionable clothes, accessories, and more.

Honestly, I don't understand much of the significance of the magazine's photos or the content of its articles.

However, I only knew that Kitou had strong feelings for the magazine.

Kitou's outfit, which may seem eccentric in its fashion, was a reflection of his own sense of style and thought.

It would have been expected if Ryuen, who often fights with Kitou, would have said that the topic was boring, but no such words of criticism were exchanged.

Soon it was lights out, and we darkened the room and went to bed.

For a while, I looked up at the ceiling quietly, and my sight gradually became accustomed to the darkness.

I don't think everyone is asleep yet, but I wonder what they are thinking.

Then, Watanabe started talking.

"We'll be in our third year of high school in half a year, right? Even as we compete for the A class, we still have to think about the future and think about going to school, getting a job, etc. I still can't imagine myself after high school. I don't want to do anything in particular either. What about you, Ayanokoji-kun?"

"University, I suppose. However, I haven't decided on a specific university yet."

I'll talk about the goals that would be the safest to let them know of.

"Kitou?"

Watanabe was not confident that he would get an answer, but he did not hesitate to ask.

"...I'm going to be a fashion designer"

"Huh!?"

Watanabe was doubly surprised as he did not expect to be answered and by the content of the answer.

"Surprised, right? I know that. I can't imagine it looking from the outside."

"No, no, well... that's hard to say, but yes..."

However, it is easy to understand when you think about Kitou's sense of personal clothing and the contents of the magazines he reads.

"Heh-heh, I think Watanabe would have been more convinced if Kitou said that he wanted to become a killer."

I was worried that Kitou might get angry again at Ryuen for his interruption, but no action was taken.

"Don't worry about it, Kitou. Ryuen always says things like that, so."

Watanabe tried to follow up, but Kitou really didn't look like he cared.

"I'm used to it. Most people are surprised and not convinced when I tell them my dreams. Even if I aim for that path, I don't think it will be accepted."

There should be no prejudice, but it does exist in this world.

For the tough looking Kitou, the hurdle to pursue some professions may be naturally high.

"But it doesn't matter if I graduate in A class. I can dive into the world without question. Once I dive in, all I have to do is silence those around me with my skills."

It seems that breaking through the first entrance would be the most difficult thing for Kitou to do.

"You're really thinking about the future, huh... No, it's great, you have a proper dream."

Watanabe was surprised, but he was inspired and praised Kitou who had firmer thinking than himself.

Children grow old whether they like it or not, and have to become a part of society.

It's the same for Watanabe, who doesn't have a goal, and Ryuen, who doesn't talk about it.

"Umm, I don't know why I asked, but... I don't know what to say now that I know."

Watanabe muttered in a bitter voice as he turned to the ceiling.

"We're all in different classes here, aren't we? So, normally, only one out of four students can graduate in A class. I'm assuming you have a dream you want to achieve, but if you take that seat, someone else can't... it's complicated."

Classmates can share their dreams with each other.

But you can't share your dreams with your rivals. That's how this school works.

Some laugh, others weep.

I wonder if spending an evening with other students of the same age would lead to this kind of conversation.

It was a night that reminded me of the time I spent talking with Keisei and the others at last year's training camp.

Chapter - 5

School Trip, Day 4

Intro

The morning of the fourth day of the school trip.

Tomorrow it will be time to go back to school.

Since this is the second time we are completely free, I want to make it a day with no regrets.

Yesterday's spot tour apparently resulted in 10 groups, or one-half of the total 20 groups, earning 20 or more points, all of whom earned 30,000 private points.

Meanwhile, the members of the 15th group, to which Mii-chan and Miyamoto belonged, were disqualified because of time, so it seems that they will be taking a study session at the ryokan today.

I felt a little sad, but I can't help them.

As soon as the study session is over, I hope that they will soak in the hot springs and enjoy their trip as much as possible.

Since it was now time for the large bath to be cleaned, I quickly finished changing my clothes.

Like yesterday, I thought about watching TV, but today, Kitou is facing the screen, having come here before me.

I don't know the details, but it seems to be a fashion feature that concerns Kitou.

"Hey, Ayanokoji. We're going to have a snowball fight outside."

"Snowball fight?"

Watanabe, who had also finished changing, showed me his phone.

It seems that people are now gathering to have snowball fights that anyone can join in on.

"That sounds interesting, let's go check it out."

"Ryuen, Kitou, what about you?"

Kitou was too absorbed with the TV to give a reply, and Ryuen quickly headed for his usual seat, making his answer clear.

"Let's go, then."

"Yeah."

In the room is left both water and oil, but I'll trust their consciences here.

When Watanabe and I went outside the ryokan, a large number of students had already gathered.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun, Watanabe-kun."

Yousuke, who was standing near the entrance and holding his cell phone, called out.

"That's a lot of people. Was everyone so interested in a snowball fight?"

"I don't think it's just that simple. It's a snowball match where you bet private points. I say bet, but the only qualification to participate is to pay 1,000 points. The winning team will receive the points from the losing team."

I see.

If you lose, you will lose less money, and if you win, you will get money to buy one or two additional souvenirs.

With how light hearted it is, it's no surprise that everyone is so excited.

"But, is it okay? Even though there is a lot of space, it is still on the premises of the ryokan."

"Mhm. I've asked, but they don't mind if it's an early hour. I think it's a big factor that it's only us students on a school trip staying here."

The rules remain the same, simple and clear; no catching, only evasion. Students who are hit by snowballs must leave the court.

However, the snowball has to be of a certain size; for example, if it is in powder form and the ball scatters in the air like a shotgun shell, it doesn't count even if it hits.

Both self-reported and referee judgements will be effective.

Well, not many would intentionally mislead others for the sake of a few private points.

"How many people are participating?"

"We should have about 30 people so far. Will you join too, Ayanokoji-kun?"

"No, I..."

I thought about refusing, but, a snowball fight, huh?

If I do not participate this time, I may never have the opportunity to experience it again.

"I want to try it out, but I don't have a team."

"It's okay. I'll assign you to the teams where we're short on numbers, if you'll wait a bit."

Yousuke seems to be taking care of all the troublesome things, for which I am very grateful.

In fact, that's why he may be remaining here by the entrance.

Taking care of things on his own can be a difficult task, but Yousuke may actually feel more secure if he can manage everything himself.

As I was waiting for about 10 minutes before the deadline, Horikita, who must have heard about the snowball fight in the ryokan, also showed up.

"I heard about this, but I didn't realize there were so many people here."

"Maybe you'll join us?"

"That's right... it is a school trip, after all. If you have a vacancy, I'll join you."

It seems she didn't plan on joining, but I think she was impressed by how popular the event ended up being.

"It's a match, then, Horikita."

Ibuki, who emerged from the crowd, challenged Horikita as if she was waiting.

"...You were here too, Ibuki-san? Really, you're always coming out from everywhere. But that's fine. It's just a game, but if you want, I can give it to you."

Not liking the answer, Ibuki clenched her fist.

"It may be a game, but a loss is a loss. Don't arrange excuses for later like a kid, okay?"

"I'll return that line to you exactly as it is."

Yousuke seemed to be taking a close look at the situation of the two, and when he looked at his mobile phone, he showed consideration for assigning them to different teams.

It wouldn't be exciting with them on the same team.

While I was stealing a glance, I spoke to Yousuke in his ear and asked for a little favour.

"Good morning, everyone."

Before us, Kushida appeared along with Yamamura, Nishino, and Amikura.

"As expected, Kushida. You invited Yamamura and the others too, huh?"

"Huh..? Well, yeah."

I thought she was going to turn to her usual smile, but Kushida replied in a distracted manner.

But she quickly turned back to her smile.

"Nishino-san and Yamamura-san said they would wait in the room until we leave, but that would be a waste, so."

"That's the right decision."

We have spent time as a group up to this point and our relationship is improving, albeit gradually.

It is more meaningful to spend time together, whether as participants or spectators.

"Would you like to join?"

Ibuki said so to Kushida.

"Hm? The snowball fight?"

"Right. Horikita and I decided to fight."

"Really? But I don't think I should. I'd be sad if I hit someone with a snowball. I would feel too bad to throw them."

"Huh?"

Ibuki made a sickened gesture, as if Kushida's attitude is truly sickening.

Seeing that, Horikita immediately slammed a chop into Ibuki's side.

"Ouch! What the hell!?"

"You're dealing with me, aren't you? If you think about extra things, you'll quickly lose."

"There's no way I'll lose. I'll make sure you cry!"

I see.

I had thought that the distance between Horikita and Kushida had changed recently, but it seems that Ibuki was also involved.

These crooked three, but strangely enough, I think blowing off steam like this may be good for them.

The number of participating students continued to increase and eventually became 42 people in 6 teams.

Four teams of seven gathered by themselves. Two teams of stragglers like me were formed.

It's not in the form of tournaments, etc., it's just one match.

Yousuke, perhaps thinking of how exciting it would be, designated Ibuki and Horikita specially as the third and final match.

The first match, a team of seven boys led by Ishizaki.

And a team of seven boys led by Sudou.

It is truly a clash of men.

At the start, powerful snowballs flew from left and right. After all, with a total of 14 snowballs, it is difficult for everyone to avoid them all.

In about 10 seconds of that, six people disappeared from both teams.

By the way, Ishizaki, who was excited, also left in those 10 seconds.

Meanwhile, Sudou seems to have put his frustration at being rejected by Horikita into his snowballs, kicking out the opposing team one after another.

However, Ishizaki's team included Albert, who is agile enough to avoid the snowballs, and he has been fighting hard, defeating two so far.

Yamamura watched the match quietly, so I tried to get a little closer.

"It's exciting, huh?"

She replied as she noticed my presence.

Her facial expression was the same as usual, but she seemed to be enjoying herself somehow.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Yamamura exhaled, breathing into her palm.



On her hand, she was not wearing the gloves that she was supposed to have bought again at the ski resort.

"Have you forgotten your gloves again?"

"That's right."

I tried to take off my gloves, but I was stopped by Yamamura.

"I'm sorry, I'm just kidding. I've brought them with me."

Then, she took a pair of gloves out of her pocket. She faintly smiled.

"So you make jokes too, Yamamura."

"...it isn't very fitting, huh?"

Instantly, the smile disappeared, and she regretted unnecessarily speaking.

"No, it's fine. I feel like we've made a little bond as a group."

This is a change that would have been unthinkable, at least from day one.

"I felt it, too. I was always in the shadows, so I was less likely to be noticed no matter what I did, but... Kushida-san, Nishino-san, Amikura-san. Everyone looked at me, and accepted me between them. It's thanks to the group."

Without the school trip, impressions of Yamamura would remain low until graduation.

It was a memorable school trip for Yamamura, and other girls.

There must be a lot of students in other groups who are similarly shortening distances.

When she finished putting the gloves on her hands, Yamamura pointed them at me and spread them out.

"It's not just the girls, but the boys also. This is different from what I always had in mind."

Unlike on the first day of the group, Yamamura's attitude also included softness.

Of course, it was a clear change, but it was a small percentage compared to other students.

"The school trip that I thought was too long at first will also end today, right?"

"That's right."

A school trip spent with members you don't like, that time must have seemed terribly long and slow. However, just by recognizing the others as simple members of the group, a change comes about that is hard to believe after such a short time.

"I'm sure you weren't the only one who changed, Yamamura. Kitou, Watanabe, Amikura, and Nishino also must have changed to a greater or lesser extent after this experience."

The group has been in constant trouble, but, in some ways, this has spiced things up.

"I think Kitou-kun's bad words toward Ryuen-kun are decreasing, little by little."

"Really?"

"Ever since we formed the group, he's been saying that he's going to kill him or send him to hell, though."

That in itself is a lot of trouble. Well, it's not so much that those two have become friends, but rather that they have just bumped into each other so much that they have become numb to each other.

However, Kitou's image changed a lot for me. Originally, I didn't think he was the type to talk at all, but when I interacted with him up close, he talked surprisingly well.

There may be a lot of problems with what he's saying, but...

In particular, students in the Sakayanagi and Ryuen classes are often wary of each other.

They have almost never had the opportunity to see the good parts of the other person before.

"Tokitou is also very attached to Sakayanagi."

"Speaking of which... it seems like they've been talking all this time in the group."

Even now, they are watching the snowball fight side by side, and they are talking happily about many things.

Suddenly, I looked at Yamamura from the side and saw that the joyful look she had just displayed had faded.

The closest words that can express that expression must be "I'm not amused."

Does she have a liking for Tokitou, or does she have something on her mind about Sakayanagi?

It's a sign that either one of them is true.

"Yamamura, what do you think about Sakayanagi?"

I asked the question not because I want to probe, but because I am genuinely curious about the relationship.

"What do you mean..?"

Yamamura, who had her attention somewhere else, was startled when she heard me calling out to her.

"I was wondering how you feel when you look at the competent leader of A class from the point of view of an ally."

"Well, I'm not really sure. I've never been close to anyone, let alone Sakayanagi-san. "

Saying that, she laughed at herself.

The faintness of her presence means that she has no friendly relationships.

In other words, is she simply feeling a longing, like envying Tokitou's casual conversation?

"Then why don't you take this as an opportunity? You may actually become friends."

"I don't have the courage to do that."

"What about Kitou, then? Isn't this group conduct making you two get closer?"

"Huh... that's, he's a boy, so..."

It was intended as a light joke, but Yamamura pulled back more than I expected.

"Sorry. I guess I got a bit ahead of myself."

Even if they do not think anything of each other, it is natural for someone to be sensitive when it's about a man and a woman.

"I don't mind. You said it for me, right? Thank you."

I looked at Yamamura, and looked over the students around us.

New encounters, new friendships.

Then, truth and lies; those who can see through, and those who can't.

A school trip in which the exchange of checks makes for a gut-wrenching experience.

Which class will be the winner in the future?

"I can't right now, but I'll give it some thought."

At the end, Yamamura added on and replied so.

"That's fine."

We stopped exchanging words here and turned our attention to the game.

Although Albert was showing his strong arm, he did not seem to have much accuracy in hitting his targets, and the winner was ultimately decided by Sudou's agility and precise attacks.

As expected of Sudou, who is a top-class performer in sports under any circumstances. Horikita also gave a generous round of applause to Sudou.

At a distance, Onodera also seemed to be supporting him in her own way.

Following on, is the second match.

Although the competition was mixed gender, there were no students with outstanding results like Sudou and Albert, and the matches were more like an extension of play than a serious competition.

It wasn't long before it was settled, but they both had a good time, and they ended up celebrating the good fight.

"It's about time, right? Good luck."

Finally, the third match. The battle between me and Ibuki, and the Horikita team begins.

"Let's do our best together, Yamamura"

"Huh..?"

When I called out to her, she gave me a dazed look.

"I asked Yousuke to let you enter as well."

"Huh, huh!? I-I can't do it. Let alone being able to fight myself, I'll only hold you back."

"Don't worry, I'll make up for the points if you lose."

"It's not that kind of problem..!"

"Just being there with the right number of people is enough of an asset. Let's go."

"But..."

As I walked out, Yamamura followed after me with a little hesitation.

She would gather a lot of eyes on her if it was noticed that she was alone, so she came along to avoid that.

"I'm, I'm warning you, you know?"

"It's okay. You saw the match earlier, it's just for fun."

"But... it's not like that for some people."

"I'll definitely win!"

Ibuki, who was burning with fighting spirit, picked up some snow, clenched it, and began image training for the sequence of actions up to throwing it.

[TL Note 33 : Image Training, sports term for training while imagining in your head.]

"You can just leave her alone."

I instructed Yamamura to move to the very back of the line.

The students in front of her would target her, so I'm trying to avoid that.

I'd rather have her focus on having fun for as long as possible than hitting someone with a snowball and knocking them down.

When the match started, like the previous two matches, the fighting students in the front gathered a lot of snowballs.

On the other hand, snowballs that miss or are aimed at the rear are also flying by, but if she is careful, she won't be hit.

"Whoa, whoa!"

Without time to gather and throw snowballs, Yamamura was desperately trying to avoid them.

However, one of the several snowballs came at an angle to hit around Yamamura's left hip.

"...ah!"

In order to help Yamamura, I forcefully pulled her right arm to let her avoid the snowball.

"S-sorry, you saved me!"

"The numbers are starting to dwindle and the fighting in the front is getting more fierce. Let's make some snowballs now."

"Oh, ah, umm... okay!"

We hastily made some snowballs, which turned out a lot bigger than expected.

They don't look like they would reach, but that in itself is fun so I won't say anything.

"Hey..!"

With a weak yell, a large snowball flew through the sky.

Then, it landed on our own side.

"Ah..."

"Don't worry. Now we should make one smaller and throw that."

"Y-Yes!"

Yamamura started collecting snow again in a hurry.

In the meantime, the game progressed faster and faster, and a few students were defeated.

Yamamura, hoping to make at least one person fall, completed her second snowball, but she was so focused on throwing that she was forced to exert herself and threw it almost directly downwards, with less distance than before.

"Ah, ugh..!"

Three of our team's front liners have been hit, and Yamamura has begun to gather the other team's gaze. I moved away from Yamamura to draw attention to myself, and moved forward.

I quickly gathered snow and threw a snowball at Nakanishi, who was trying to target us.

I threw a wild snowball, but it backfired.

Yamamura also forgot to evade and looked frantically at the snow under her feet, which caused her to get hit on the head.

"Ah..!"

With the snowball she was clutching gone from her hand too, Yamamura hurried out of the area with her hands up.

She was sad, but also frustrated, and it showed on her face.

That being said, I hope she was able to experience at least a little of the tension and fun of a snowball fight.

After that, as we repeatedly threw snowballs at each other, people were defeated one by one and it was just Horikita left on the opposite team.

On our team, it's me and Ibuki.

In light of these circumstances, this is certainly advantageous.

Ibuki stood behind me and put her arms together.

"Move."

"I know."

Without evading, I took the ball Horikita threw with my hands. Catching is obviously not allowed.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Ibuki is asking for a one-on-one. Our team leader is saying she'll win, so I think I should listen to her."

I had little time, but I actually enjoyed the snowball match, so I don't need any more.

Forcefully defeating Horikita would not be interesting.

Meanwhile, I am purely interested in the confrontation between Ibuki and Horikita, whose strengths should not differ greatly.

"I don't like it a bit, but it's fine. I can now just focus on Ibuki-san too."

"So, good luck, Ibuki. I'm betting my souvenir on you."

"Just shut up and get out of here. There's no way I'm going to lose to Horikita, is there?"

As the crowd watched on, the battle between Horikita and Ibuki was about to begin.

There is no rule of draw in this fight.

Even if the referee decides that you have hit at the same time, it means that you will continue to fight an extended battle.

It is only a snowball fight, but for both sides it is a battle they cannot lose.

"It's great to have a true one on one fight, isn't it?"

The snowball fight was held with gloves, but at this point Ibuki took off her gloves and clutched the snowball in her right hand.

It must be a strategy to throw away the cold resistance but increase the accuracy of the delivery.

Horikita was afraid of losing control of her fingertips due to the cold, so she looks like she will fight without removing her gloves.

With this, Ibuki has the advantage in case of a short term battle, while Horikita will have the advantage in a long term battle.

"Sorry, I was completely useless."

Yamamura muttered as she moved her shoulders up and down, perhaps still a little out of breath.

"It's fine. Did you have some fun, at least?"

"Yes... I wanted to hit someone if I could."

After saying so, Yamamura only slightly raised the corners of her mouth.

She won't be able to fight in the snowball match with the same people, but there will be other chances for her to fight in some kind of competition.

I hope she will save her regrets until then and take her revenge.

Back in the gallery, we turned our attention to the two women facing each other one-on-one.

"A serious match.. huh?"

"Yeah."

Ibuki wanted to settle the match in the short term, but Horikita saw through that and prioritized evasion over attack.

"No stopping!"

Ibuki began to be impatient as she gradually became frustrated and the coldness of her fingertips began to get worse.

As the battle began to drag on, Ibuki's eighth snowball aimed at Horikita grazed her near the cheek.



"Come on, give me the win!"

"I don't think so."

Ibuki's strong fast-ball struck Horikita again despite her tiredness.

As soon as she evaded it, she released a snowball, which she had been holding for a while, as if it were a counter. But, Ibuki is strong.

She was tired, but still alert, and looked for an opportunity even as she lost her posture.

"It looks like you're at your limits too, so how about we end it here?"

Horikita, on the other hand, does not seem to want to fight for any longer and seems to be shifting to an attacking stance.

In other words, both of them were ready to give it everything they had.

A long one-on-one fight.

The snowball from Horikita that was heading toward Ibuki was scattered in the air.

I guess it lost its momentum because of her soft grip.

Therefore, it hit Ibuki in the form of splashes of fragments.

Horikita, on the other hand, tried to avoid a snowball flying from Ibuki just in time, but was unable to avoid it completely and it grazed the fabric on her left arm.

It did hit, but she also avoided it at the same time.

It's a subtle judgement.

However, Yousuke, who did not welcome any further delay, made a judgement call.

"Horikita-san hit! Ibuki-san's victory!"

"Alright!"

With an intense triumphant pose, Ibuki smiled.

Horikita was trying to act calmly, as this was only a snowball match, but her regrets seemed to be oozing out.

"Come on, loser! Please give me the 1000 points right away!"

[TL Note 34 - This is the word used in jp: 負け犬 Makeinu, loser; failure; underdog; unsuccessful person; non-achiever; loser dog - It's literally "loser dog" but I suppose that phrase isn't really used in english like this, it will work with just "loser" too.]

Without paying attention to her hand trembling from the cold, Ibuki took out her cell phone and stuck it up to Horikita.

"It's very annoying... You don't have to talk like that, I'll hand them over."

"Come on, come on! Come on! Come on! Come on, come on, come on!"

Are they getting along or fighting? For a while, Ibuki continued to frolic and get carried away around Horikita.

Part 1

On this day, we enjoyed skiing one last time.

This time, all eight of us skied through a gentle course for beginners, rather than separating.

Ryuen seemed bored all the time, but I'm glad he didn't act selfishly by himself.

氷 風 雪 恋
榎田桔梗

あやのこうじ きよ たか
綾小路清隆

りゅう えん かける
龍園 翔

After that, I bought souvenirs for the first-year students in the remaining time.

On the fourth day of such a fun school trip, all we have left is tonight.

After I finished bathing in the large bathroom, I received a message from Sakayanagi.

I responded to her request to meet with her and headed to the lobby where we planned to meet.

It's only around 8:00 pm, but there are much fewer students around today.

On this last night, there should be a lot to talk about in the viking and in the room.

[TL Note 35 : He says "viking" here to mean buffet again like I mentioned before, you can use the word "buffet" for this instead too but it literally says "viking" in the original so I left it like that.]

Perhaps because they quickly realized this situation, I don't see many students in the lobby.

With a favorable situation in place, Sakayanagi sat quietly in her chair and waited.

"Did I make you wait?"

"Certainly not. Thank you for taking the time to come here. "

Even though there aren't many people around, the combination of me and Sakayanagi is a little conspicuous.

In that sense, I'd like to do this quickly, but...

"It was a short time, but did you enjoy your school trip?"

"That's right. I was taught many things that I had never experienced before. Above all, it was frankly a good experience to be able to interact with students from other classes. I think I know a little more about Yamamura and Kitou now."

I mentioned both names here, but Sakayanagi looks the same as usual.

"I see. I'm not particularly surprised, since you have a voracious appetite for absorbing knowledge."

"Do you get along with those two?"

I'll try to step in a little further by asking so.

"I don't have any classmates that I consider special. I see them all with equal eyes. It doesn't matter whether we get along, or whether we don't, you know."

Whether it was a lie or a truth, Sakayanagi replied vaguely.

Specializing someone can cause jealousy and other feelings among the other students.

As a leader, Sakayanagi may be seeing things equally without lying.

"Can I ask why you called me?"

"Are we done with the small talk now? Perhaps you're in a hurry? If Karuizawa Kei-san saw you here like this, she would be suspicious about us, right?"

She said so while laughing like a little devil.

"It's not good to be seen meeting with an A-class delegate one-on-one. Right?"

"He-he, it's a joke. I get it."

After smiling with restraint, Sakayanagi started speaking.

"I learned a lot during this school trip. Before we go back to school, I thought I would talk to you about the person who approached you at the sports festival, Ayanokoji-kun."

The time when we were talking in my room, absent from the sports festival along with Sakayanagi.

About the man who spoke out from the front door, is it..?

"I see. I am interested in that story."

"That's good. So you were also interested in the identity of that voice."

"I've been thinking about it a lot."

With what I sensed in Nanase also in mind, it's still unclear whether the caller is an enemy or not.

"So, I'll ask you, but what kind of person do you think he is? Is it possible that he comes from the same background as you, like Amasawa Ichika-san or Yagami Takuya-kun?"

"-No, I don't think so. If the other party only knew Sakayanagi, that could be possible, but he called my father "Ayanokoji-sensei". This is a big difference."

"What do you mean?"

"If he was a White Room student, he wouldn't have called him "Ayanokoji-sensei", so."

This is common to those who grew up in the White Room.

"But that's not an absolute proof, is it? If he is from a different generation than you, Ayanokoji-kun, then the policies may be different, right?"

"It's true, I can't be sure. It was just my own opinion that made me feel this way. One big reason is that the man called last year, when my father was visiting this school. So, one can assume that they are related. Further, you yourself said that it was someone close to the politics and business world, yes?"

It goes back to the fact that he went out of his way to call him sensei.

With a little surprise, Sakayanagi nodded with joy, her eyes closed.

"That is right. The advice and such may have been unnecessary. I already have eyes on the owner of that voice, his identity, but I haven't confirmed the truth yet. I was going to make that clear here today. That's why I called you."

I turned my attention to the cell phone that Sakayanagi had placed at her lap.

"But, before I make everything clear, I'm calling here someone who should know him. They said that they will be here soon."

"In other words, among the second years, there is a student who has a connection with that man?"

"It seems that no candidates come up in your head, but is that true?"

It's correct. I have no idea who she is referring to.

Of course, the owner of the voice is living his school life as a first year, so it would not be strange for someone from the second year to know him, but I don't think that's what this is.

There is no reason to call them here unless they at least know more about the situation on our side.

Is there a second year student, other than Sakayanagi, who knows about the White Room, and my father's identity?

"In the meantime, let's keep this conversation going."

"That sounds like a good idea."

Spending time in silence is not a clever way to spend school trips.

"How did you feel about the group divisions this time, Ayanokoji-kun?"

"The influence of the chart filled by individual students must have a great effect. As far as I could see, I felt that the adjustment was not just about one's own group, but also the students who gave extreme assessments."

"I agree. The students rated the best, and the students rated the worst. And an intermediate layer that doesn't belong to either. It will not apply to all groups, but I think there was definitely a bias. It must have been a combination that could easily affect the future."

"Following that, I want to ask you something."

"I'm glad to hear that. Ask me anything you want to know."

"What do you think about the final test?"

The groupings for this school trip will surely have an impact later on.

Sakayanagi closed her eyes happily and shook her head vertically with satisfaction two or three times.

"It's really fun to talk to you, Ayanokoji-kun. You always have the same idea. The final test is going to be tougher than last year."

One or two expulsions wouldn't be a surprise.

It looks like Sakayanagi is making such a prediction.

"You, with your protected points, will be safe, but the class points you lose anyway will remain the same. Aren't you worried that your large lead will be destroyed?"

"You think I'll lose in a direct confrontation with Ryuen-kun? Beating him is already the established policy."

Like Ryuen, Sakayanagi does not even imagine that she will be defeated.

"It is true that he makes interesting moves. He is almost like what they call a "giant killer", with the power to hunt down the big names in particular. But, that won't happen in a confrontation with me. Ayanokoji-kun, you can be sure that I'll be the one competing with your class next year."

Unwavering confidence.

There are cases of eventual draws, but that may be considered an exception.

I don't think that the school will create rules that make it easy for students to draw at the end of the school year.

That is what I saw from last year's fight with A class.

"Or do you think I'll lose?"

"Who knows?"

I can't say anything at the stage where I can't see the contents of the test. But if I tell her that, Sakayanagi will feel even more reluctant. Depending on the content, the implication would be that Sakayanagi may lose.

No matter who wins or loses...

"Ayanokoji-kun, for you, is there no hindrance whether I win or he wins?"

Because our thoughts are linked, Sakayanagi also understands my thoughts well.

"But, Ayanokoji-kun. The future may not always be the way you want it to be."

"What do you mean?"

Just as I asked back, Sakayanagi put her index finger over her mouth.

Apparently, the expected visitor had arrived.

"Sorry I'm late."

Perhaps not having being told that I would be here, Kanzaki stood besides me with some surprise.

But, I didn't expect him.

I've never had the impression of him having a special connection to the past in all the years we've been in contact.

"With this, all the necessary people are here, so let's start. Sorry, but could you come over here, Kanzaki-kun?"

"What the hell is this, Sakayanagi?"

Sakayanagi, with a smile, let Kanzaki, who doesn't understand, stand beside herself.

Crossing his arms with suspicion, Kanzaki still doesn't seem to have grasped the situation.

It was the same for me, so I wondered if this arrangement had some meaning.

"First of all, Ayanokoji-kun. What do you think of the combination of me and Kanzaki-kun?"



"What do I think?"

"Tell me your honest thoughts."

"I just feel uncomfortable. I've never seen you and Kanzaki together before."

When they are actually lined up like this, that is very clear.

"I'll bet. For the students of this school, Kanzaki-kun and I have no point of contact. We are not even on the same level as fellow leaders, and I doubt that any of you have seen us socialize in private. In fact, I have hardly spoken to Kanzaki-kun since I enrolled in this school."

In other words, she wants to say that they talked before enrolling in the school.

"How many years have I been talking to you like this?"

"I don't know. It must have been at least three or four years since I contacted you directly."

It seems that they don't even clearly remember the time.

"Can I ask you what kind of acquaintance you are?"

"It's a connection between parents. However, there is still no direct connection between the Sakayanagi and Kanzaki families. When you have parents who are well-known in their own right, you get invited to a lot of parties and things like that."

There is no doubt that Sakayanagi's father is the president of this school, and that they are a well-known family by virtue of knowing the White Room.

"Kanzaki-kun's father is the representative of a company called Kanzaki Engineering."

So the thing these two have in common, it's being in the same framework of business leaders.

That would explain why I have no suspicions about Kanzaki.

"What the hell are you talking about? What's the point of letting Ayanokoji hear about this? No, let me ask you why you called me before that."

"This actually has something to do with why I called you here."

"I don't know what that means."

"I was hoping you could tell me more about Ishigami-kun who is enrolled at our school."

With that, Kanzaki's expression became even more intense.

"About Ishigami, you say..?"

Ishigami? There are no names that come to mind among the second years, and the only student whose last name corresponds is a first year.

"...I see. You were interested in Ishigami too?"

"You can take it that way."

"But, why Ayanokoji? They have no point of contact, do they? I don't think that man would meaninglessly concern himself with other grades. If he did, it would only be when there is some kind of trouble. It's hard to imagine Ryuen, or even Ayanokoji wasting his time in such a way."

He's analyzing and describing the situation in his own way.

"Not now, but in the past."

"What..?"

"Still don't understand? You should also have deep feelings for the name Ayanokoji."

"Do you mean... no..."

As he noticed something, Kanzaki repeatedly looked at Sakayanagi and me.

"You're so late to notice. Of course, that is to be expected, too but..."

"...I see what it is."

It seems that Kanzaki understood Sakayanagi's words.

Then he looked up at the ceiling holding his head, and looked at me again.

"Ayanokoji, huh..? I can't believe you're that person's child."

There's only one thing I can gather from these words.

That Kanzaki must also have some idea of or acquaintance with the person named Ayanokoji.

And it is no longer necessary to guess that it is my father.

That man has a strong connection with the wealthy. It was inevitable.

"Do you still feel uncomfortable that I am with Ayanokoji-kun here?"

"Yeah. I thought you were simply interested in Ayanokoji's ability, but I guess that wasn't it. Since when did you know he was Ayanokoji-sensei child?"

"Of course, from the moment I saw him at this school. Unlike you, Kanzaki-kun, I've seen Ayanokoji-kun when he was little. Right?"

She won't mention White Room, but she replied as if we were childhood friends.

"So he's not just anybody. If he is that person's son... He must be superior."

Kanzaki turned his eyes to me, as if he was now understood.

"My father adored Ayanokoji-sensei, and I have met him in person several times at parties. I've only spoken to him once, though."

With even an indirect relation to Chairman Sakayanagi, it's no wonder that this kind of thing can happen.

Even so, he seems to have a lot of respect for that man.

Since I do not know his private life at all, I cannot imagine what kind of response he gave in front of Kanzaki, but I cannot deny that there is a gap in perception.

"My assessment of you has been changing again and again, but it's finally settled. If there is a child of Ayanokoji-sensei in Horikita's class, then I'm sure they will be formidable."

He seems to have a high opinion of my father, and has happily convinced himself.

"Now then. We were able to correct the misunderstanding, so let's move on. Ayanokoji-kun, you don't know about Ishigami-kun, right?"

"It's the first time I've heard of him."

It seems that the student named Ishigami is the one who contacted us.

"He is one of the young men who adore your father. You know Kanzaki-kun well, don't you?"

"...Yeah. He seems to be infatuated with Ayanokoji-sensei. I didn't have the courage to so easily talk with him, but Ishigami was different. I don't know for how long, but he's really been actively talking with him."

"Ishigami-kun is one year younger than us, and now he is living his student life as a first-year student."

A man who adores that man has entered this school, and for some reason, he has contacted me several times and even indirectly helped eliminate Yagami at the school festival.

The purpose of the man named Ishigami is still not clear.

"I'm sure you've had a chance to interact with first-year students, but when did you notice Ishigami first?"

"I noticed him right away when I saw the OAA. However, he is not the type to come out into the public, so I didn't have a chance to speak. He communicated with Class A through Takahashi-kun, and he seemed to be intentionally avoiding contact with me."

Sakayanagi herself didn't seem to want to force contact.

"Is he excellent?"

[TL Note 36 - 優劣 Yuuretsu (relative) merits; superiority or inferiority; quality, translated as "excellent" since I thought that would sound most natural.]

"I'm sure Kanzaki-kun, who is close to him, knows more about that than I do."

Kanzaki was entrusted with explaining the situation, but he did not look happy at all. Quite the opposite.

"We're not close. I just went to the same cram school as Ishigami. But to answer Ayanokoji's question honestly, he is undeniably a genius. He's got a lot of ideas that I couldn't think of, and I've seen them up close."

He didn't seem to like Ishigami, but he replied to admit the fact.

"That's right. Kanzaki-kun's point of view, although it is only an idea, I thought it might be helpful."

"But so what? Now all we have to do is just leave Ishigami alone."

"Can you imagine? He respects your father, Ayanokoji-kun. If so, it would not be surprising if he enrolled in this school to check his son's ability."

Keeping information about the White Room hidden, Sakayanagi successfully guides the conversation.

"Ishigami came here to confirm Ayanokoji's ability..? I can't say that it's impossible."

Comparing to the Ishigami that he knew, it seems like he is convinced to some extent.

"We're competing in year two. Even if your class is one step behind, Kanzaki-kun, it is still unclear what the outcome will be. In such a situation, don't you think it's unfair that Ishigami-kun would use unnecessary tricks to find out about Ayanokoji-kun ability from now on?"

"I can't say I don't understand what you mean. But, why are you supporting Ayanokoji? It doesn't matter what happens to the students in your rival class."

If left alone, Ishigami will hinder one of the students in her rival class. It is clear to everyone that this is inherently a plus for Sakayanagi.

"I just want to have fun. It is my role to bury Horikita-san's class, including him. Isn't it frustrating for someone to suddenly appear from the side and deprive you of purpose?"

After laughing, Sakayanagi expressed her gratitude to Kanzaki

"Thank you, Kanzaki-kun. From here on, Ayanokoji-kun and I will work out a plan to deal with Ishigami-kun."

It was gratitude, but... the implication that those who stand in the way should leave was also strongly included.

"I'm not going to get involved with Ishigami, so I'm grateful for that."

Kanzaki answered without hesitation and started walking.

"Let's talk again soon, Ayanokoji. I want you to tell me a lot about him."

He is eager to talk about my father, but unfortunately I know nothing about him.

For the time being, it would be safe to nod lightly here.

"Well, Ayanokoji-kun. Let's see if Ishigami-kun is really the right answer."

"How?"

"Of course, I'll ask him directly. That's the fastest, isn't it?"

Sakayanagi pulled out her cell phone and smoothly typed in the 11 digit number.

It seems that she had done her homework, and had already obtained Ishigami's phone number.

Sakayanagi made a call on the speaker, and soon after, the call began.

"I thought it was about time I got the call. Sakayanagi."

As soon as he answered the phone, Ishigami spoke in a tone as if he had foreseen it. This voice is unmistakably the person who called me last year and the person who contacted me at the sports festival.

"You're very quick to see things, aren't you?"

"If someone asked for my number except a year one student, I told them in advance to report it."

"Just what I would expect from you. I've heard rumors about you from inside and out."

He had eyes everywhere, and, like a spider, he had laid down his web; a web of information.

"Wouldn't it have been better if you had called out to me sooner?"

"I deliberately avoided contact. You don't have to get involved with me either, do you?"

"It doesn't work that way. I thought it was important to confirm whether or not you would stand in Ayanokoji-kun's way in the future."

"Then I'll ask you, but what are you going to do if I will?"

"I don't expect Ayanokoji-kun to be defeated by someone who is not me, but I don't like to be sidetracked. If you're going to intervene, I might have to stop you."

"You will stop me? You should ignore me instead of wasting your time like that. I chose this school on the recommendation of Ayanokoji-sensei. To be a normal student."

He came to this school with a similar idea.

"It is safe to assume that for now, there is no possibility of eliminating Ayanokoji from this school at this time."

"For now? It's a word that bothers me."

"In the unlikely event that Ayanokoji-sensei instructs me to remove him, I will do so. That's it."

His tone of voice, always calm, does not seem to be laden with lies.

"You've become quite loyal in a short time, huh?"

"Don't go any further, Sakayanagi. Even more so if you want to be by Ayanokoji's side."

The only sure thing is that he is warning her it will not end lightly.

"I'm not going to tell you to hide me. Sooner or later Ayanokoji will find out about my existence. So you advise him. What is the best option to protect this school life? No, if he's listening to the call right now, you don't have to."

There is no proof. But he is considering the possibility that I am eavesdropping.

"I'll let him know when I feel like it. I'd be happy to say hello to you at school sometime."

At this point, Sakayanagi decided enough was enough and ended the call from her side..

"It was him, after all. Well, he didn't seem like he wanted to hide it, anyway."

"That's what it looks like. If he came to this school to enjoy student life to the fullest, I have no intention of being involved with him in the future."

At least in my interactions with Ishigami that I have felt so far, I have never sensed any danger, and the same is true of my current phone call.

Now that there is a possibility that my father was not trying to expel me from the beginning, there is no need to panic.

"I see. If you choose to do so, then I will respect it, Ayanokoji-kun."

"I'm grateful. Thanks to you, I was able to confirm the existence of Ishigami."

"Now that we have some sense of direction, I wouldn't want to keep you here for too long. But do you mind if I continue with what I was talking about just now?"

"The future won't always be the way I want it to be, right?"

I was certainly curious about Sakayanagi's way of saying that.

"Ah, Ayanokoji-kun!"

Unfortunately, just as she was about to continue the same conversation, we were approached.

"Umm, did you see Honami-chan?"

Amikura, who was walking quickly down the corridor looking a little flustered, called out to me.

"No, I didn't see her. Did something happen to Ichinose?"

"Look, the school trip is already over, isn't it? So we decided to get together and chat until the lights went out, but we couldn't find Honami-chan."

A considerable number of people were searching, and while talking like this, a girl from D class hurriedly walked away next to Amikura.

"It looks like they've checked the bath and the room."

"I heard she looked a little depressed this evening... and I was a little worried."

After Amikura's worried voice, a girl from the same class came to talk to her.

"Mako-chan. I just had it checked, and it looks like Honami-chan's yukata is here, so she might be outside."

"Uh, outside? But it's almost 9 o'clock, right? Besides, the people in the group are at the ryokan, right?"

We are allowed to go out until 9 pm, but if we are going out alone, it will be a problem.

"I'll check out the public bath one more time!"

Not wanting to waste any more time standing and talking, Amikura asked first and started walking.

It's true that Ichinose's absence at this hour is a bit worrying.

"Let's talk about this again next time. Please search for Ichinose-san. For you, Ayanokoji-kun, Ichinose-san's presence is probably still indispensable."

"Sorry."

I said goodbye to Sakayanagi, and I left the lobby behind.

We are not allowed to act alone outside of a group, and Ichinose is not a student who breaks the school's designated rules for no good reason.

Even if there were troubles, her basic stance would not change.

I looked out the hallway of the ryokan and saw that the snow was pouring down.

If she is really out of the inn, there are only so many places she can go.

After returning to my room and putting on my personal clothes, I slipped out of the backyard of the ryokan and headed outside.

Beyond this point, there is a high plateau from which to view the illuminated landscape.

This is exactly where it gets locked down at 9pm, which is the curfew. With the backyard which is in the ryokan borders, it is not necessary to meet the requirements for group conduct.

Even if the ground is bright with lighting, it is dangerous because of the snow.

Many of the students climbed to the higher ground on their first or second day at the ryokan.

Therefore, few students are likely to go back to see it again under the cold, snowy weather. Not to mention it is the last day.

They'd want to spend a relaxing time at the inn.

Epilogue

The Light That Shines Ahead of the Darkness

It's close to 9pm, so there will be a very cold breeze outside.

Lights at each end of the stairs faintly illuminate the footing, but the snowy weather makes it difficult to say that it is sufficiently safe.

I climbed up the dozens of stairs, stepping on the snow to avoid falling.

I'm sure that no one would come here at a time like this.

In the darkness where I could not see my breath, I walked forward and arrived at a slightly open platform.

In the wood deck... I saw a short person's back.

Perhaps they were staring at the scenery, but the darkness made them seem rather somber.

Of course, there were no other people around.

They said they had seen her at meal time, but how long has she been at this location?

The wind was strong and she didn't seem to notice that I was approaching.

I stomped my feet on the ground as hard as I could to avoid surprising her.

I'm sure she can hear.

I decided to speak up when her body reacted.

"Can I come over?"

"Huh... ah, Ayanokoji-kun!"

"What a coincidence."

"Y-yes, right."

Ichinose let her gaze escape awkwardly into the night.

"Sorry, it's really not a coincidence. Amikura and the others were making a fuss that they couldn't see you. They wanted to talk to you until the lights went out, so I came here."

"Is, is that right? Wh-what happened? Is there trouble?"

"A bit. Let's just have a chat for now. If we do that, Amikura will be relieved too."

"Are you exchanging contacts with Mako-chan?"

"We're the same group on the school trip, so. We often communicate with each other. "

I added a message telling her not to worry, that I had found Ichinose, and that she would be back by 9 o'clock.

It immediately became read. When Amikura learned that I knew where she was, she sent two stamps of relief.

"It's been passed on. At any rate, this should quiet down the ruckus."

"I-I'm sorry."

"It's fine. This isn't breaking the curfew on the ryokan grounds. If you go back by 9 o'clock when you are allowed to enter the backyard, it's up to the individual."

"Yes... thanks."

She's not saying that she will go back in order not to worry them, so there must be something on her mind.

School trips are a fun time, but we have to share our time with a lot of students.

"Everyone wants to be alone sometimes. In that sense, I guess I'm in the way."

Ichinose didn't return anything to the words.

She just kept staring at the night scene.

"So cold."

"...Mhm. It's cold."

Even through the gloves, a piercing pain comes through when the wind blows.

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know... maybe, five minutes?"

She answered, but then corrected herself in a frustrated manner, as if she thought I would immediately see through.

"I'm sorry. It could be around 30 or 40 minutes."

"I bet. The footprints on the stairs had disappeared."

Until I came up, I had no proof that Ichinose was here. If it had been a few minutes, I would have clearly seen the footprints even in the dark.

Although the snow was slowly weakening, the wind was still strong.

"I'm sure it's obvious, but if you stay too long, you'll catch a cold."

"Right..."

She mumbled as if she was talking about something else, but did not seem to be following my advice.

And then, the snow almost stopped.

It's just temporary, I'm sure. Based on the forecast, it should start blowing hard soon.

"I'll ask something dumb. What are you thinking, staring at the night view alone?"

I have a general idea of what to expect, but I still won't know until I hear it from her.

I asked, but Ichinose didn't answer immediately.

Without looking over at me, she kept looking at the view.

"I think I want to be alone now..."

A light rejection.

She is saying that she isn't looking for someone to talk to, and is urging me to leave.

Or maybe she was just saying that she didn't want me to be the only one close by.

"I don't feel like leaving you alone here after all. The descent is particularly dangerous."

"Thank you for your concern. But Karuizawa-san would be sad to know that you're alone with me in this place. I definitely don't want that."

No one comes over here, so I don't think that's the problem.

It seems Ichinose cares about others even at times like this.

"It is true that if Kei sees this, she would misunderstand."

"Yep."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yep."

Ichinose, who answered in the same short way one more time, still did not avert her gaze from the scenery.

I quickly moved away and turned my back.

"I'll go back, then. Just, make sure you're back by 9 o'clock. The door's going to get locked."

"Thanks, I'll be careful."

When I took one step, the snow that had stopped suddenly began to fall again.

It came back even stronger than before. Looking back once, Ichinose's back had not changed since I found her here. It's grown so small and weak.

When was the last time I saw the lively Ichinose Honami from when she first entered the school?

It's not the school trip, but the accumulation of many things.

It is getting to the point where the water that has been accumulating in the cracked cup is about to overflow.

It's easy to walk away here.

But, this is a turning point.

Ichinose's emotions, which had been consumed, had come to a very dangerous place as far as I could see.

It's still good if it's just overflowing with water.

If the crack widens and the cup breaks, it may be impossible to put it back together.

That would be the demise of the Ichinose class.

The path to the A class would be closed.

This is not the moment for her class to fall. That would interfere with my plans.

"I'll wait here."

I said that, and decided to sit down on the stairs leading to the ryokan.

"...Why?"

"I wonder why."

"I have nothing to do with you, Ayanokoji-kun, do I? Why are you waiting?"

"Who knows."

I said so and evaded.

I shouldn't say anything else for now.

I know she wants to get rid of me, but without any compelling force, she had no choice but to give up.

If she really didn't want to be with me, it would be best to get out of here.

This continued for a few minutes.

For a while, we quietly passed the time without really doing anything.

"Maybe... we should chat?"

Either she couldn't bear the silence of being alone with me, or she had no choice but to break it off.

Ichinose muttered in a voice that I might have missed if I had been thinking.

"Actually, I've been wanting to ask you something."

It's better than being silent for the rest of the time. It can distract from the coldness of the snow that assaults my buttocks.

"Do you know the White Room?"

I wondered what kind of chatter would come out of this situation, but a few too many unexpected words came out, completely different from some of the assumptions that had been floating around in my mind.

Why did the word "white room" come out of Ichinose?

For a moment, the image of Sakayanagi appeared in my mind.

There have been some areas recently where leaders have been getting to know each other, such as cooperation between classes.

But I don't think she'd talk about it so easily. In which case...

She was threatened by Tsukishiro in the uninhabited island test.

I wouldn't be surprised if she remembered the word "white room" from there.

"I don't really know what you're talking about."

"Yeah... If you don't understand, don't worry about it. Maybe I was wrong."

When I said that, Ichinose's words stopped there, under the cold sky.

Then she exhaled a white breath.

I'm not sure if she completely believed my answer.

Just in case, I think I should press a little bit.

"Where did you hear that word?"

I added on so, to show her that I don't know the word at all.

If she doesn't answer honestly, then I can just stop pursuing it.

"I heard Shiba-sensei talking to someone who was the acting board chairman during the uninhabited island test. There were not many parts that I could hear clearly, but I could hear the word "white room", and him saying that they want to expel you. I was curious, so I did some searching and couldn't find anything, so I guess I heard wrong after all, huh?"

"I wonder. I can't think of any similar words myself, at least."

She's done the search herself, so it seems that she questions the consistency of her memory.

"But why were the teachers trying to expel you? Are you all right now?"

I guess she's always wanted to ask that too.

But with Kei, Ichinose seems to have pushed the question to the back of her mind.

"The matter is settled. I can't tell you the details, but there are no problems."

I'll separate from the White Room, and try to get her to think that there is some other secret. Because it is more troublesome in the future for the former situation to be leaked to the outside world.

"I see..."

"I can't tell you", that part may have caught her attention a little.

I can't tell anyone, or I can't tell Ichinose?

That would greatly change the way she receives it.

I could see her shock at the fact that she might be considered someone with whom I could not share my secrets.

Since there was no benefit to Ichinose in continuing with these topics, I'll start talking to her this time.

"I have a question for you. The Ichinose I know is not the kind of person who shivers with loneliness in a place like this. She is a student surrounded by friends, laughing and encouraging each other."

I said so, meaning to ask how long she will stay here.

"I'm having enough fun. I am enjoying it."

"When I saw your face just now, it didn't look like that. It didn't seem like the kind of face you should show on a school trip that's all about fun."

Even this kind of exchange should be necessary for Ichinose now.

To expose the parts of ourselves that we would normally like to keep to ourselves and that we cannot talk about to anyone.

That Ichinose, who continues to be under heavy pressure as a class leader, continues to endure.

"Are you really going to wait there?"

"That's right. I'll be with you when you come down."

"...I see. Well, at least come here, then. Your butt is going to get cold."

"I'm grateful for that invitation. My butt is already almost frozen."

I got up in a hurry, wiped the snow off my butt, and returned to Ichinose's side. Ichinose's sideways appearance was the same as before.

When I checked with my mobile phone earlier, it was about 8:40.

If I calculate the return time, we can stay here for 10 more minutes.

If she wants to stay silent until the time limit, that's fine too.

I decided to wait for Ichinose's reaction, intending to hang out until the end.

Snow dances every time the wind blows.

In the meantime, Ichinose opened her lips after a dozen seconds.

Her white breath flickered in the air.

"With my methods... I can't win against any class any more. That's what I was thinking."

Unintentional tears trickled down Ichinose's cheeks.

"Can't win? I thought you were just going to move forward without hesitation in your own way?"

"But because of that..."

Hesitating to speak, Ichinose spinned her words.

"That's, that's right. But... the results aren't coming. Our class is definitely getting further away from A class. That is obvious to everyone."

"So you're thinking about the reason for that?"

"If I could direct my classmates like Sakayanagi-san. If I could lead as strongly as Ryuen-kun. If I could cooperate with others like Horikita-san... I can't help but think about all that."

"That's pining for what you don't have. You can only be yourself; you can't be anyone else."

[TL Note 37 : 無い物ねだり Nai mono nedari; expression, literally "begging for something that isn't there"]

I know I don't have to tell her this. Still, there are times that she should hear it.

"Pining for something I don't have. Yep, that's right. I... want something I can't get right now."

"Even if you have to change yourself?"

"As long as I can win... that's fine."

Ichinose is looking for change.

Whether it is right or wrong is secondary to the fact that she is struggling to break through. Normally, this wouldn't be the place for me to reach out to her. But the confession I received from Ichinose on the uninhabited island led to several unexpected events for us as well, which is the main reason why she has been weakened up until now.



It's still more than three months until the promised time with Ichinose.

Will she really be able to get through this without any help until then?

No, this is not a situation where wishful thinking should be brought into the picture. Especially now, when Ichinose is losing heart.

The effect of the poisoning is manifesting itself more quickly than I expected.

Her love for me, and the presence of Karuizawa Kei.

The class is in a downward spiral and cannot find the opportunity to rise up.

Although Kanzaki and Himeno are making moves, the growth of their allies does not seem to be following along.

As a student council officer, There's no knowing what will happen in the future.

There is a hard road ahead.

[TL Note 38 : 前途多難 Zentotanan, expression; literally "future with many difficulties"]

Surrounded by enemies on all sides. She's in a maze.

"Frustrating... It's so frustrating..."

Her own powerlessness.

This strikes Ichinose as an intense sense of guilt.

"It's... so frustrating..."

If this was her problem alone, then she could just be depressed by herself.

But this isn't an option for Ichinose, who is leading the class.

The class' failure would be all her own fault.

This is what that kind of thinking leads to.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokoji-kun..."

Her trembling voice strongly conveyed her frustration.

"What is that an apology for?"

"A lot, a lot of things... Crying like this, I'm only causing trouble, but..."

Ichinose is supposed to be smarter and wiser.

That hidden potential has all but disappeared.

Her heart is fragile and weak.

A fatal weak point.

Neither Horikita, nor Ryuen, nor the leading Sakayanagi will stop for Ichinose.

It must be excruciating to struggle, suffer, and collapse in place.

If I gently tell her that she doesn't have to work any more, she will be relieved from this heavy responsibility.

However, at the same time, Ichinose would lose both of her legs.

It is too early.

Your time to collapse will be in the future.

I cannot let her stop until the final test, when the fates of the year two students will be clear. I won't let her break.

The one who will decide the time and place of when your life as a student here ends is me, not you.

I closed the distance between me and Ichinose and reached with my arm from her back as she cried miserably.

I then placed my hand on her right shoulder and pulled her towards myself.

"!? A-Ayanokoji-kun!"

"It's okay to cry in hard times. It's okay to look for help in painful times. Everyone has a weak part."

"...b-but..."

Ichinose bit her lips, which had started to turn pale blue, and swallowed her words. She tried to escape to the opposite direction, but she is weak.

"Isn't there something you want?"

"...No. What I wanted is already..."

"Is it no longer available?"

She's desperately trying to suppress the words overflowing from the depths of her throat, no, heart.

Even so, Ichinose nodded slightly, though she did not intend to affirm it.

"That kind of thing will work out with time. That's what I believe."

"But..."

"If you don't have the courage to take a step forward, I can help you."

When I wiped the tears on her cheeks with my fingertips, they were almost frozen. She doesn't have the strength to run away any more.

Instead, she completely relaxed, as if entrusting me with herself.

Staring at the distant, snowy landscape. On this day, under the cold sky, we huddled together and felt each other's warmth.

.

Afterword

Hey, I'm Kinugasa. Your friend!

Have you all been well? Yeah, it's been 4 months, huh?

There's something important I have to say to you all, so please listen carefully. ...Yes. I have one apology for you.

About the character Kyou Ishigami who has appeared in the year two arc several times as a first year student from A class.

The correct surname is "Ishigami", and certainly not "Ishigami".

[TL Note 39 : The name is different in Japanese with Different kanji mentioned; 石上 石神, both read the same in English. So, this correction is for Jp text.]

I apologize for the delay in reporting this information.

The exact cause is probably because I was tired! Can't do anything about that!

Every human being makes mistakes, so please forgive me with a warm look.

After reading this, the readers all laughed gently and forgave me, so this story is over.

[TL Note 40 : The tense here is correct, he (the author) typed it like this as a joke like he was narrating a story.]

Thank you, and please keep enjoying your time with both Ishigami-kun and Kinugasa-kun.

Now, this was a school trip, so I hope it didn't simply feel like the winter holiday arc from volume 7.5.

That said, maybe it was just a holiday story, but it could also be an important part of the future story.

I think the next issue will finally be volume 9 of the school term's end December story.

And after that, I plan to continue with the winter holiday story.

I think I've said before that the second year arc may be shorter than the first year arc, but it may actually end up being a bit longer.

Every human being makes mistakes, so please forgive me with a warm look.

And let me talk a little bit about the anime. How was the second season in the summer?
I hope that many people enjoyed our first animation in 5 years.

As for me, I am already looking forward to season 3, and working hard with my writing to help make it happen.

The year is already coming to a close soon, but I hope you all can keep supporting Jitsu from many sides.

[TL Note 41 : Jitsu, shortening of the novel's name. (part of the word "elite" in the English version of the title.)]

It's a bit early, but I hope to see you all again in good health in the afterword next year.

Thanks...

Thank you so much everyone for reading. I Hope it was a fun ride for you all ! It sure was for me. Anyways, this volume was great even without any special exams. All the insights into characters and future events has hyped me a lot for the next ones. Speaking of which... The Next Volume is Classroom of the Elite Volume 0! Which would be, for sure, one of the best. Ah... I can't wait for it! There's so little time left for it. It is supposed to be released on 23rd December, 2022. As for the Estimated time of translation, I would say it will remain the same. Since nothing much changes with this Volume. It will have around 300+ pages, which I believe would be finished in the same amount of time as Y2V8. I really Look forward to Volume 0 and for more updated information on it you can follow me [here](#). I will keep providing you with the best quality translation of Classroom of the Elite for as long as I can. Again, Thanks for the Support everyone!

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Hope to see you all again soon!

Have a great time Ahead~