Horikita Suzune’s Choice – part 2

One by one, my classmates began to agree with Kushida’s expulsion, but only one stood up against it.

“Don’t go any further, Kushida-san. You won’t be able to turn things back if you do.”

“Hah? It’s only starting to get to the good part. Don’t interrupt me, Horikita-san.”

“I can’t let you continue. I won’t listen to any more of these unsightly stories.”

“Is the truth really that ugly?”

Perhaps taking it as a compliment, Kushida looked at Horikita with the liveliest face she had made all day.

“Indeed. At the very least I don’t think these revelations are beautiful. But it’s not only you who I find ugly, but also the people who are now accusing you of leaking their secrets and calling for your expulsion.”

The unexpected scolding and reprimanding made her classmates shout out in exasperation.

“Why us too? We didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You yourselves had voluntarily told Kushida-san the secrets you didn’t want anyone to know. Why would you do that?”

“T-that’s because we thought we could trust Kushida-san! And yet…..”

“That’s exactly right. Kushida-san was trusted more than anyone else on this class. Usually, it isn’t as easy to gain the trust of another. Even more so when it comes to entrusting them with a secret you yourself wouldn’t want others to know. Of course, the fact that Kushida-san had leaked those secrets is not praiseworthy. It’s understandable that you all would be surprised that she had a hidden side to herself. But we ourselves too, have another side to us all, am I wrong?”

A person who lives in honesty and without lies or falsehoods would be a very rare person.

“T-that may be true, but even so, the fact that she was the perpetrator who continued to vote in support. That’s inexcusable, is it not?”

“That’s certainly right. As for what she has done to get me or Ayanokouji-kun expelled, it was indeed an unbelievably selfish choice. Because of it, we have to make her bear the weight of her decision. But instead of settling that by letting her be expelled, we should have her make use of her skills to repay us back many times, over and over again.”

After all that was said, Horikita’s point would have been conveyed to our classmates.

“Are you saying that we shouldn’t expel Kushida-san?”

“That’s right. I’d like for us to remain Kushida-san in this class”

“Hah? Just when I wondered why you’d interrupt in the middle of our conversation. For you to just go ahead and say something so self-serving, are you being serious right now?”

The decision to not allow Kushida to be expelled. It was Kushida herself who was the first to object to this.

“Why the hell are you defending me? Are you really suggesting that everyone should vote for another person? Or are you just trying to keep me here in order to use me as some sort of punching bag? You’re quite sick in the head, you know that?”

“Sorry but, I’m not one to tell jokes. Unfortunately, I’m completely serious about this.”

“If you really are serious about this, I’ll change your mind. Let’s resume hell.”

“But the scene earlier didn’t seem all that much like 『hell』 to me.”

“……Heee~. Really now? Then what did it look like to you? Please enlighten me.”

“It was dumb, ridiculous, and just plain disgusting. It made you look like a mere fool.”

“Ha?”

“Certainly, you’re academically better than most people. But you’re fundamentally stupid, to the point of it being fatal. During middle school, your classmates had found out about your true nature, so you decided to reveal everyone’s secrets and ended up destroying your own class, no? You came to this school to make use of that remorse, but unfortunately you met me, someone who happens to have attended the same middle school as you. And then soon after you enrolled here, your hidden self got exposed to Ayanokouji-kun? Hilarious. And that wasn’t all, I wasn’t even interested in your past, but you couldn’t stand the fact that I was roaming around freely while holding onto your secret. After all, you thought that you would have the advantage because you struck a deal with Ayanokouji-kun, but it ended up being used against you instead. And this was the result of everything? You were so obsessed with getting either one of us expelled that you yourself have lost your footing.”

Horikita insulted her unsparingly and sighed.

The expression on Kushida’s face, which had been smiling and laughing with a sly grin up to this point, had now transformed into a furious one.

“You wouldn’t know how I feel, so don’t go running your damned mouth! I want to be number one, even if I were to be constantly engulfed in stress! I want the sensation of feeling superior over others! You were in my way when I wanted to achieve that, so I tried to get rid of you. What’s wrong with that!?”

“Don’t know how you feel? Of course I wouldn’t know that! You’ve been so focused on listening and collecting other people’s worries that you yourself couldn’t find anyone to talk to, to make your feelings known.”

Kushida clasps her hands together. Her blood vessels seemed to stand out.

“Your personality is a problem, but that’s the same for me too. But you yourself are a much harder worker than I am.”

“Hilarious, stop telling such lies. You know, everything that comes out from your mouth constantly irritates me, you know that?”

“I’m not lying at all. All I’m saying is that truth that you so dearly love. I honestly admire and envy your effort and talent in befriending so many people, both men and women.”

Hearing this, my classmates, irritated by Kushida’s previous stunt, argued with her.

“We were being harassed by Kushida-san earlier and yet you think that’s something to be worthy of praise?”

“Being kind with lies. Rehearsing kindness. Do you think that’s cruel? That in itself is frivolous. Try to think yourselves on how difficult it is to be kind to everyone, every single day. Do you all have the talent to smile at just anyone, to reach out to just anyone and listen to just anyone’s worries?”

How much stress would she have had to cope with and how much would she have had to deal with all of her friends on a daily basis.

Many would want to be like Kushida, even while understanding that they can’t.

Listening to other people’s unimportant stories. That much is already too much for an ordinary person to continue.

She continued to do so with a gentle smile, while continuing to support many people from the shadows.

“Stop it. Just stop it already. I don’t want to hear any more bullshit coming out of your mouth.”

“Why? You’re good at looking into people’s minds, I’m sure you yourself should know that, am I wrong? I have no intentions of making fun of you, nor do I plan to insult you, it’s just that I truly

think highly of you.”

Horikita completely and logically gave a sound argument to the ones who tried to refute her words in a proactive manner.

“It would be a great loss to the class if we were to expel her despite having a talent like no one else.”

“Stop it!”

“That is why I can’t agree with us expelling Kushida-san. I’d like to bet on myself and do my best in order to take advantage of her strengths. No, I’ll definitely do it.”

“I told you to stop, didn’t I-!?”

“I’m sure you yourself wouldn’t know this but it was only when I knew everything that I developed a high evaluation of you.”

Thinking about it now, Kushida, for some reason had talked in detail about the past that she herself wanted to seal up so badly.

Perhaps it wasn’t an act of her trying to expel someone, but rather because deep down she wanted them to know everything and truly wanted to share it with them.

Kushida’s face was covered with large tears.

And then, like a child, she cried without connecting her words nor hiding her frustration.

So frustrating, so frustrating, so frustrating, so frustrating. Such words were repeated with hesitation.

But it was understandable. Everyone who knew of Kushida’s true nature would leave. She drifted away.

And yet, for some reason, Horikita who had been keeping her distance until now, closed the distance with Kushida.

There was no way that Kushida herself would have thought that such a thing would happen.

Horikita, whom she had hated so much, was the first person who could potentially understand her.

Whether or not she accepted this remains to be unseen, but it has definitely brought about a change in Kushida.

I had decided that it was impossible to make Kushida stop, so I had developed a strategy to eliminate her.

Horikita, on the other hand, decided to protect her, not eliminate her.

However, now that this has happened, it was inevitable that the next problem will erupt.

“Sorry for interrupting while you’re in the middle of a conversation, but the interval is about to end. What will you do?”

What to do, of course, was either to have someone nominate themselves, or to select a candidate, and that person would be the one we would have to vote on.

“We’re running out of time. Anyone who wants to choose Kushida-san, please switch it to me instead. I’ll continue what I was saying before afterwards.”

Since she couldn’t use her a one-time self-nomination candidacy anymore, she appealed to our classmates to select her.

“S-stop fucking around! You all want to expel me, right!? Just nominate me and vote me out already so we can get this over with!”

“I’m not messing with you at all. Like I’ve said before, you’re going to take responsibility as the chief perpetrator for causing this situation. And, I will not let you be expelled as the penalty. If that were to happen, you would be made fun of for the rest of your life. You would become our laughing stock forever.”

I’m sure there was some who couldn’t decide which one to select in the end, but that’s not what was important.

“Time is up. We will now begin the vote for Horikita, who had more than a majority of the votes for her selection.”

Even if Kushida were to be selected by the nomination system, it would be meaningless as long as Horikita opposed to her expulsion. A vote was created for Horikita’s expulsion, either in agreement or in opposition, but of course it wasn’t unanimous in agreement. The cheap provocation must have worked well enough for Kushida. Everyone completes their votes within 60 seconds.

20th vote results 1 in Agreement 37 in Opposition

“Now that we’re back into another interval, I’ll say once again. I am voicing my opposition to Kushida-san’s expulsion.”

Kushida was ranting and raving in unspoken words, but Horikita no longer paid any attention to her.

This hurt Kushida’s pride once again, and in turn, succeeded in silencing her.

After all, if she were to become the object of expulsion here again then she herself would have no way of opposing Horikita.

But this was unexpected. I had intended to make them yield no matter who it would be.

Bits and pieces of the insides of my head heated up.

It wasn’t just a mere statement, saying that she wanted to “protect Kushida.”

She herself had said that she was confident that she could make the most of her strengths beyond her own major weaknesses.

It seemed that Horikita has stepped onto a higher stage in her growth earlier than I had expected.

Of course, it wasn’t as if there was no material that could be used to argue with that from this point on.

Many would be willing to expel Kushida, who has currently been pushed to being the absolute evil in the class.

It’s not as if she can’t be pushed, but now that she’s raised her hand in opposition, it would be hard to assume that Horikita will just simply walk away. The slightest probability that she could be planning for us to run out of time in order to forcefully keep the number of expulsions to zero cannot be ruled out. But sorry, Horikita, that would certainly be unacceptable.

“But Horikita-san. With you defending Kushida-san, are you suggesting that we choose to run out the clock?”

Yosuke immediately asks her about the point that needed to be confirmed right now.

“I know that me protecting Kushida-san is not the end of the story. But I myself have come up with my own answers.”

Could it be───no, I suppose that’s the only answer you could’ve come up with, Horikita.

“We can’t afford to fail this special exam. In order to do that, an expulsion will be inevitable.”

What she was saying meant that she was not only ready to protect Kushida, but also ready to cut off someone else in exchange.

Even though I could feel Horikita’s steady growth, I took action before her words.

There was no need for Horikita to take on the cruel role of pronouncing someone to be 『cut off』here and now.

“Please hold on for a moment.”

I forcefully interrupted Horikita’s attempt to continue.

No matter how hard she tries to justify this, the judging process will be mentally taxing.

It’s certainly easy to say that it would just be another experience for her, but it is too much for the current Horikita.

Above all, if she were to make even a single mistake, we would end up running out of time.

There is no one but me who can create a unanimous decision to expel someone.

Wait, that’s not right. Her eyes that were looking at me. I understood from that.

It was obvious that the person that both Horikita and I had in mind was the same.

“Kushida, the only one person who continued to vote in support of the motion, deserved to be expelled. However, as Horikita says, she is indeed a capable student. Since this is the case, we’ll have no choice but to think of a different approach.”

“H-hold on a minute, Ayanokouji. Everyone voted in support of this because they themselves weren’t the perpetrator, no? And now you’re saying that we’re just going to change that and name

someone random to expel? No one will be convinced with that!”

“I’m sure that you’re not the only one who’s unhappy with this, we all are. But even so, we still have to make a decision. We have no choice but to choose the fairest route available.”

“Fairest……..there is no such method that exists.”

“The option of gaining class points by expelling someone. The expulsion part tends to have a negative image, but if certain conditions are met, it can turn into a positive one, as in the case of the perpetrator who voted in support of us having someone expelled. If the class points gained are worth more than the student that were to be expelled, then it makes sense to choose someone suitable. In other words, the only people who should be expelled should be ones who are not needed in the class at the moment. So, what is the criterion for this decision? It’s should be about one’s overall performance. Those who have academic ability, physical ability, or any ability that does not fall under those two categories. To put it simply, people who have the ability to lead, like Horikita, or the ability to organize groups, like Yousuke and Kei. Inevitably, they can be excluded. Of course, if you think I’m being patronizing, you’re free to argue with my statement.”

As the time was about to expire, my classmates fell silent, as if saying that they could not refute my statement.

“And this should not include things like future prospects. It is difficult to objectively determine who will actually grow and by how much, and those speculations can be mixed. To come to a final

conclusion, the OAA will be the impartial arbiter.”

It is the school’s quantification of the student’s ability, without caring for the student’s emotions.

As of September 1st, the lowest score in this class was 36 points overall.

Many would only check their own rankings and scores, and not many would actually know who is at the bottom each time.

“The one with the lowest OAA in this class is───Airi Sakura.”

I replied, not looking at Airi in particular, but looking around at the whole scene.

“…………Wha-? ….What are you saying? Stop messing around at a time like this.”

Haruka, enraged, stood up and glared at me.

“I’m just giving out an objective standpoint on things. It’s up to the class to decide whether or not you guys actually agree with me.”

I let go of my personal opinions and continued talking.

“Objective? So what if it’s objective? Who cares about the OAA rankings? Does that make it okay for us to just expel Airi? What’s more is why…….. why are you the one saying this, Kiyopon!?”

“Then who do you think should be expelled?”

“T-that’s───!”

“People who aren’t prepared to name names directly have no right nor entitlement to choose who to expel.”

“W-what about Ike-kun?! His isn’t all that different from Airi in terms of academic and physical ability, right?!”

It’s certainly true that on the OAA, he was once tied for last place with Airi.

But now, he’s managed to obtain one more point to his overall score , making it 37. He was only ahead of her by a single step.

“Then let’s simply ask the people here. All those opposed to Airi’s expulsion, raise your hands.”

The one who raised their hand immediately was Haruka. At about the same time, Akito and Keisei too, raised their hands.

Of course, it would be natural since they were all from the Ayanokouji group.

“Three, huh? Then the next is in line, what about the ones who are opposed to Ike’s expulsion?”

A number of boys, including Sudou, and girls, including Shinohara and Mori, who owes a debt of gratitude to Shinohara, raised their hands, and there were 11 people who clearly expressed their opposition to it.

“Why───”

“Building friendships is also a great skill. I have to say that I am inferior to Ike in that respect as well.”

“Could you say that while looking Airi in the eyes!?”

“Is this what you want?”

“!! Stop it!”

As I was about to look into Airi’s frightened eyes, Haruka stopped me.

“You could nominate Hondou, Okitani or any other student, but they will never get less than Airi’s three votes.”

“What is up with this…….stop messing around. Certainly, we ourselves don’t have much friends. But this is in no way fine for us to expel Airi for!”

If I had any other options, I would chosen it. But we’re past that point now.

“…….But, in all honesty…..losing 300 class points right now would be fatal.”

One of the members of the Ayanokouji group and one of Airi’s friends, Keisei, quietly let the words slip out.

“Yukimu, are you being serious right now? You’re agreeing with Airi’s expulsion…..!?”

“N-no! I haven’t decided whether or not I’m actually agreeing to this yet!”

“Yet? You mean you’re actually considering agreeing with this? Hah? Stop messing around!”

“No, like I said, I……….”

As if realizing everything, Haruka bit her lip and made a decision.

“Disgusting. Unbelievable, all of you. What is up with this, were we not friends at all?”

The cold voice was directed at me, and also at Keisei, whose true feelings have leaked out.

“And you all too. No one is even trying to defend her. That’s right, you guys don’t care whatever happens to Airi, who you yourselves don’t get along with, as long as you can save yourselves. You put Kyou-chan first just because she has use in her? You’re going to abandon a girl who’s been trying her best to keep up with the class, in order to not inconvenience anyone? Aah, I see, I see how it is, isn’t this just the best class ever.”

Keisei’s unintentional comment had proven to her that he was going to antagonize Haruka.

No one wanted to make eye contact, and in order to not get involved, they surrendered by not saying anything.

“I’ve had enough. I’m not going to let Airi be expelled. If you all have to expel someone no matter what, then expel me. I’ll gladly accept my own expulsion.”

Similar to what Kushida had done earlier, although now it is someone else doing it, Haruka tries to protect Airi by bringing up her own expulsion voluntarily.

What Haruka had just said was all part of the calculation. In fact, that statement would only have the opposite effect on her

“W-Wait! Haruka-chan, I can’t let you be expelled either!”

“It’s okay, Airi. You have to stay in this school. I didn’t really like this class to begin with. But after I became friends with you and Kiyopon, Yukimu, and Miyachi, my days became more fun. Even though Yamauchi-kun was expelled I thought that such a thing would never happen again, and I thought that I could get along with everyone else too but……”

Staring at Chabashira, Haruka makes a formal announcement.

“I’m self-nominating for my own expulsion. It’s almost time anyways, right?”

As I read it, the declaration took precedence, and Haruka automatically stepped up to the decapitation table.

“Airi, you must vote in support of my expulsion you got it? No one else will complain with this, right? You all can protect yourselves anyways so it’s not like any of you have a reason to be against it.”

“Something like that……I can’t possibly agree to it!”

As Airi couldn’t vote in support of Haruka’s expulsion, she shouted.

“It’s okay, if it’s to protect you, I won’t have anything to regret over being expelled”

“But───!”

“That’s enough talk. We will now begin the voting.”

Based on Haruka’s strong will, a vote in agreement or opposition will be held for her expulsion. The result shown on the monitor was───

21st vote results 35 in Agreement 3 in Opposition

Almost everyone voted in support of the motion, but three had voted against it.

Those three must have been easy guesses to Haruka.

“Airi!”

Of course, it was obvious that one of the votes would be Airi.

“I couldn’t do it! Something like expelling Haruka-chan…..I just can’t do it!”

“But it’s to protect you! And Miyachi, Yukimu, you two stop too!”

Haruka was prepared to be expelled, but as it turned out some people didn’t want that.

“I don’t want you to be expelled……. I just couldn’t do it”

While showing a bitter and agonized expression, Akito answers her clearly while looking at Haruka in the eye.

“Then it’s fine to you if its Airi!?”

“I didn’t say that……But, if I had to choose between the two of you…..I…….”

“…..I-i’m sorry too!”

Suddenly, Keisei interrupts the two as he shouted. He stands up and bows his head.

“I…..voted in support of your expulsion….If this continued at it is, this class will never be able to…….reach class A”

“Hah? Then who’s the other vote? The one who would vote opposed to it in such a situation!”

“The one other vote was me”

“!! Kiyopon, what on earth are you doing…! There’s not reason for you to defend me, isn’t there!?”

“I’ve already told you. The new policy was to cut off the least capable student in this class. You wanted to be expelled and Kushida wanted to be nominated for expulsion, but no matter who comes forward, the policy will not change from here on. After coming this far, it’s unchangeable.”

If I were to take a step back here, a unanimous vote will never be established.

“Hasebe-san…..it is without a doubt, a fact that Sakura-san has the lowest OAA score in our class……..so cutting off ones who are not able to contribute much to the class is not all that bad of thing, isn’t it?”

Preparing for the risk of speaking out in this situation, Matsushita gave her opinion.

“Are you kidding me right now!? Think about what it would feel like if you were in my shoes. If one of your dearest friends were to be expelled, would you be able to smile and laugh as if nothing happened after? That would be impossible for me, absolutely impossible!”

“The one who should be expelled is Airi. There are no other choices.”

“No……no, this isn’t what should be happening! No matter who else agrees, only Kiyopon…..you alone have to be on Airi’s side, Kiyopon!”

I know that. It’s precisely because I know that I’m speaking up, Haruka.

“I’m not going to change my mind. Haruka, if you continue to not refute Airi’s expulsion, then this will be the end of the road for this class.”

“Then am I just suppose to let you do as you want? I’ll continue to oppose Airi’s expulsion until the very end!”

Only one. If only one person were continue to oppose it until the very end, no one would be expelled.

That law is absolute. The most efficient way to break that law would be───

“Thank you, Haruka-chan…….But that’s more than enough now”

“Ai…..ri…..?”

“If there was someone in the class who were to be categorised as unnecessary…..then it would probably be me……. Nothing Kiyotaka-kun said was wrong, Haruka-chan.”

“Airi!”

“He’s right about everything. If someone has to be expelled no matter what…..then I should be the one to disappear since I’m the one who’s constantly dragging the class down the most.”

───To directly have the person who’s become the target of expulsion to stop the ones opposed to it.

“I can’t! I will never vote for Airi’s expulsion! Absolutely! It doesn’t matter if this class never moves up to A class, we can still all graduate together, along with Airi!”

“Please don’t do this. Even if I were to be saved, I’m sure many would regret it. That I was the reason that you guys couldn’t reach A class, I’m sure you will regret this for a long, long time.”

“That’s fine! You didn’t do anything wrong! I’m just protecting you because I want to!”

“I appreciate it, really…….but there’s no way I can put such a heavy burden on Haruka-chan.”

“What is this….. what is up with this……It wasn’t supposed to be like this…!”

Preventing an individual’s expulsion is not necessarily always beneficial.

If this were to happen, voting in opposition to her expulsion would only make Airi suffer.

“A self-sacrifice sounds good. It’s soothing to the ears. From the standpoint of the class, I’m sure they’re deeply relieved to have someone like Haruka around in their lives. If that’s what it takes for the class to run without a hitch, it might be a good idea to make that choice. Right, Sudou, would you be able to willingly sacrifice yourself for the sake of the class?”

“N-no, I mean….. I…… um…..”

“Satou, what about you?”

“M-me? I, probably wont be able to, something like that…..”

“What about you, Onodera?”

“…..Probably, a no from me too…….’

“Even if I were to ask anyone else, the answer will be the same. Fundamentally, no one will sacrifice themselves.”

“In all honesty, I’m really fine with being expelled. In that sense, there shouldn’t be any problems, no?”

“If we do take the easy way out by using someone who’s willing to sacrifice themselves, once people learn of the easy way, they would only repeat the process of waiting for self-volunteers when put in a similar situation in the future. It would be too late then for us to try and use a fair way of judging”

“I don’t care…..I don’t care about such reason. I want to protect Airi! That’s all I want to do!”

“Even if it means that Airi could be expelled the very next day, despite you sacrificing yourself for her, Haruka?”

“Don’t you dare talk about some indefinite future as if it’s certain!”

“There is no definite future anywhere, that is precisely why we should choose what’s best.”

No matter how many words I put in front of her, it didn’t seem to reach her ears.

However, they had definitely reached Airi’s. That’s what was important.

“It’ll be fine. Don’t you worry, Airi. I will definitely continue to vote against your expulsion. No matter who else votes in support, I will───!”

“Everyone…… please─── vote for me……”

Airi said in a muffled voice, but in one that everyone could hear.

Haruka grabbed both of Airi’s arms and desperately resisted.

“I don’t want to. Absolutely not…… Just yesterday, we were having such good time and yet……! Even though, this morning was just like any other…… I met up with you and then came to school. We chatted and chatted on things like the cultural festival…..Even today, we were planning on asking Kiyopon to meet up after school so that we could surprise him with your new look! Having that all taken away from me is just…..!”

We had less than ten minutes left. That meant that this was practically the last vote. No matter who was going to be expelled, there was no one who could easily vote opposed to it. That was the weight of the final vote.

Shaking her head from side to side, Airi denies Haruka’s helping hands.

“I don’t want this, I don’t want this, I don’t want this, I don’t want this!”

She rejected, denied, and screamed like a child.

Each time, Airi expresses her gratitude to Haruka, but still tries to convince her to accept it.

The decision could no longer be changed.

Realizing everything, Haruka sat down on the spot as if collapsing.

“People without talent have no choice but to accept the reality and continue moving forward. We owe it to them to respond to their wishes. It’s easy for you to just vote in opposition in the next

vore. But even if you vote no, Airi herself will not be able to stay in this school. She would only suffer from the remorse she would feel for having involved her classmates. She would not be able to look forward. The only way for you to save your best friend, Airi, is for you yourself, Haruka, to vote in support of her expulsion and allow her to move on.”

“I, I───”

Airi hugged Haruka from the front as she was collapsing.

“Thank you, Haruka-chan…….Thank you for all the help you’ve given me up until now. I wasn’t able to give anything back to you, but please listen to my last selfish request.”

“I can’t, Airi….. something like this…..”

“Please vote for my expulsion.”

Airi thanked her, as she gently stroked the hair of Haruka, and then shouted at Chabashira.

“I am nominating myself. Please vote in agreement for my expulsion.”

After making Haruka stand up and return back her seat, Airi returned to her seat as if to take everything in.

But even after the vote for her expulsion was declared, the voting time did not stop.

It continued past 60 seconds and then 70 seconds.

Us students are only given 90 seconds of voting time in total. In about 70 seconds, Haruka will also expelled.

Perhaps if her best friend Airi was going to disappear, she too, was planning to disappear along with her.

It would be understandable if the thought were to cross her mind.

If she were to make such a weak choice here and now, so be it. No one could blame her.

The class will be missing an extra person, but the unanimous vote will be approved without any problem. The 100-second mark had passed, and the time remaining was approaching 40 seconds.

She only continued to cry and showed no signs of reaching for her tablet.

“Haruka-chan───!”

It was a shout of anger from Airi like I had never heard before. The loudest voice that I’d ever heard her let out.

Haruka looked up in surprise as if she had been slapped on the back, and in front of her crying face, Airi nodded at her and smiled.

If she doesn’t make a decision and vote here now, it will be a denial of everything Airi was to her.

“───The voting is now over. I will now announce the results.”

22nd vote results 38 in Agreement 0 in Opposition

Chabashira, who had been watching the fierce exchange since the beginning, forgot to report the end of the exam and only stared at Airi and Haruka.

Airi, who was now expelled, stares straight ahead, as if she had accepted everything. On the other hand, Haruka, who couldn’t protect her, was struggling to hold back her sobs, but she couldn’t hide it from the speechless class.

“Ah, ahem….. ah, Chabashira-sensei. Please proceed with the announcement.”

The watcher, who had been silent and calm except for the minimum of cautions and warnings, seemed to have forgotten to prompt her about the signal to end the special exam.

“……The unanimous vote in support of the expulsion of Airi Sakura ends the last motion. The choice stands and 100 class points will be awarded. Just to be clear, there is a way to undo this expulsion, and that is if you currently have 20 million private points and use them to───”

As a matter of her duty, Chabashira tried to continue with her explanation, but then stopped mid-sentence.

“No further explanation will be necessary.”

Even if we were to gather up all the private points in our entire class, we would never reach 20 million points.

“The other three classes have already finished their special exams, but I will ask you to head back to the dorms right away today. As for Sakura, you will have to come with me to the staff room afterwards, so stay in the classroom.”

“Okay.”

Airi replied to Chabshira in a quiet voice, but without hesitation.

“That is all. Everyone please take your seats. Follow my instructions and leave the room.”

We were informed to do so, and all left our seats, though at different times.

Airi was instructed to stay where she was. And Haruka, who couldn’t even stand up, tried her best to get her trembling knees to do so, but it didn’t seem to work.

Her breathing also became more ragged, and she began to show symptoms similar to hyperventilation.

Akito, who could see it, ran over and helped her stand up with a side-hug.

Because nothing good was going to come from leaving her there.

I stepped out into the hallway and my phone was immediately returned to me.

And Keisei soon followed suit.

“…….Kiyotaka. I’m not going to say that what you did was wrong. It’s just that……I’m……I’m still not sure that I can say that what we did was right. No, there’s no point in thinking about it anymore….. Please forget about it.”

Even though he had thoughts that he wanted to let out, Keisei turned his back against me and started walking down the hallway.

There would be no point in waiting here for both Haruka and Akito.

Legitimacy is irrelevant. It was impossible for me not to feel anything for having led the way in cutting off an important member of the group. Kei approaches me. I noticed her upset behaviour, but still I stopped her with my eyes.

For now, it would be better for Kei to stay away from me, as if she were in mourning.

There was no need for her to receive any unnecessary hate.

As I recall, Chabashira wanted to meet with me after the special exam was over.

When I looked at my phone, I saw that I had in fact received a message and saw that the meeting time would be at 6:00 PM.

I decided it was best to stay put for now then leave.

If I head straight for the entrance, I’ll run into Kensei and the my other classmates.

At any rate, since I had an appointment with Chabashira, I decided to wander around the school building, where there were fewer people.

“Ayanokouji-kun.”

I knew that I was being followed. And when there was no one around anymore, I was called out by somebody.

“What’s the matter? Is it about Kushida?”

“No. She wasn’t answering when I called out to her. So all I did was warn her to not do anything out of desperation right now.”

Kushida had a lot of friends around her, but when the exam was over, no one called out to her.

It was understandable that it would be hard to get close to her right after she had shown her true nature.

“I’m sorry.”

As her hair, which was a little longer than before, swayed, Horikita bowed her head deeply.

“In this special exam…. I……I wasn’t strong enough.”

“Not strong enough? You did the best you could, no? This time, it was a much tougher battle than last year’s in-class vote.”

“Even if the battle was tough, I still placed a big shackle on you……. and you had to take on all the responsibility that should’ve been mine to take.”

It was inevitable for another student to be expelled.

Which was exactly why Horikita wanted to show her own thoughts.

“I’m the one who told you to stay silent so it’s fine.”

“But still. Your precious group has been scarred beyond repair. I honestly…… don’t think you’ll be able to repair it in the future.”

“I’m fine with that. You never know, there may come a day where I would think that it’s more convenient this way.”

Certainly, if I had gotten Horikita in involved, the blame for causing the incident would be split between the two of us.

But such a situation was not what I wanted.

“Convenient….? What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing important.”

Of course, I don’t think I’ll be able to change my mind and convince myself of that any time soon, but I don’t want to drag this special exam with me to the next one.

“Look at the bright side. We’ve earned 100 precious class points in order to achieve our goal of moving up to Class A. These points are not to be scoffed at.”

“But still…..in exchange, we’ve lost Sakura-san.”

“The average of the class was also raised as a result. A perfect endpoint.”

“Stop it. There is no need for you to force yourself to put up such a tough act.”

“Force myself?”

I tried to deny it, but I decided to go along with her words.

“You’re right. Perhaps I’m just trying to push away these painful feelings.”

“Kiyotaka-kun!”

A familiar and gentle voice came from the end of the corridor.

Horikita, startled by the voice, turned around to see who it was, but only to be surprised who the voice belonged to.

“You’re…. Sakura, san…?”

Airi, who was terribly lacking in the stamina department, seemed to be out of breath as she walked towards us.

“….I’ll be on my way now…..”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

The moment she passed-by Airi, Horikita tried speaking to her but hesitated, and in the end wasn’t able to.

Perhaps she couldn’t think of anything to say to the one who was soon to be leaving.

“I really wanted to show this to Kiyotaka-kun no matter what……So, what do you think?”

Just before the last vote, Haruka had said something about Airi showing me a new look. Was this what she was talking about?

“You look really different, I almost mistook you as someone else for a moment there. No wonder Horikita didn’t recognize you.”

“I’m a little….. too late, to be brave though…… hehe.”

Airi, who had taken off her glasses and styled her hair stylishly, quietly laughs to herself.

“This is not something someone like me can say but…… please look after Haruka-chan.”

“I know.”

“Byebye───Kiyotaka-kun.”

Airi broke into the biggest smile I’ve ever seen her put on her face and turned away.

She started to walk, but at times her steps would slow down and sometimes she would even fully stop.

Even so, she stepped forward and did not look back.

From the empty hallway, I could slightly hear her voice.

The sound of sniffling and crying that she was desperately trying to supress.

Seeing such a scene reminded me of a scene I used to see a lot.

The defeated always look back and regret their misery after it’s too late.

Whether in the White Room or this school, it was the same.