It was after school . All the students went off on their own fun after-school life as they talked about where to go . I looked at Kushida and signaled that I was starting the plan .

Horikita, the target, had started her usual routine of getting ready to go home .

“Hey, Horikita . Are you free right now?”

“I don’t have any time to spare . I have to go back to the dorms and prepare for tomorrow . ”

Prepare for tomorrow? I’m pretty sure she only has school to prepare for…

“I want you to go somewhere with me, though . ”

“… What are you trying to do?”

“Do you think I’m inviting you with a particular goal in mind?”

“If you invite out of the blue, it’s natural that I would doubt you . However, if there’s something concrete you need to talk about, I wouldn’t mind listening . ”

Of course, there’s no such thing .

“You know how there’s a cafe on campus? There are too many girls, so I don’t have the courage to go in myself . It feels like boys are being excluded . ”

“Certainly the proportion of girls is high, but can’t boys go in too?”

“Yea, but no boy goes in alone . They always go in with other girls . Only those kind of boys go to the cafe . ”

Horikita tried to recall information about Pallet as she pondered over it .

“That does sound correct . It’s unusual for Ayanokouji-kun to have a reasonable opinion . ”

“But I’m still interested in the place . So I thought I would to invite you to come with me . ”

“Naturally, since… you have no one else to invite, right?”

“That’s a rude way to put it, but yea . ”

“And if I refused?”

“Then that’s that . I have no choice but to give up . I can’t force you to give up your private time, after all . ”

“… Understood . What you said seems to be true . I can’t spend too much time, though . Is that fine?”

“Yea . I won’t be there long . ”

I added “probably” in my mind . If she knew that Kushida was involved, Horikita would probably reproach me .

Because I can talk to Kushida and was able to invite Horikita, I started to think that I probably could’ve become friends with Horikita by myself .

After all, whether it was the club for or the cafe, Horikita went with me, despite complaining all the time . It’s a miracle considering I find it hard to make friends .

After leaving together, we finally arrived at the cafe, Pallet, on the first floor of the school building .

Girls started gathering one by one to have fun after school .

“Looks very crowded . ”

“Is this your first time here after school too? Oh, right . You’re always alone . ”

“Was that meant to be sarcasm? Childish . ”

It was only a joke, but as usual, Horikita verbally insulted me .

After ordering, we got our drinks . I ordered pancakes .

“Do you like sweet foods?”

“I just wanted to eat pancakes . ”

I didn’t particularly like or dislike them, but I just made up a plausible reason .

“There aren’t any seats…”

“I guess we’ll have to wait a bit . Oh, nevermind, there are seats over there . ”

Having noticed two girls get up from their seats, I quickly secured the table . I let Horikita pass to the far side of the table . Putting my bag down on the ground, I sat down and looked around casually .

“Hey, I just realized . If someone looked at us from afar, we would look like a couple… not . ”

Horikita’s face was expressionless and frigid like always . Feeling nervous from the crowded surroundings, my stomach started to hurt .

I overheard the two girls next to us say “Let’s go” while holding drinks in their hands .

And immediately after, another person sat right down . It was Kushida .

“Ah, Horikita-san . What a coincidence! Ayanokouji-kun too!”

“… Yea . ”

Pretending that we met by chance, Kushida greeted us . Horikita looked at Kushida with narrowed eyes, then turned to me . Of course, this was something we had planned out earlier . We reserved two tables with four of Kushida’s friends, and then when Horikita and I arrived at Pallet, I signaled them to make spots for the two of us . After a while, the other two would leave so that Kushida could come by .

As a result, our meeting looked like a coincidence .

“Did Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san come with each other?”

“By chance, yea . Did you come alone?”

“Yea, today I——”

“I’m going home . ”

“O-oi, we just got here . ”

“You don’t need me because Kushida-san’s here, right?”

“No, you’re not a problem . Kushida and I are only classmates, after all . ”

“You and I are also only ‘classmates’ . In addition…”

She looked at me and Kushida with a cold look .

“I don’t like this . What are you planning?”

Looks like she saw through our plan .

“N-no, it’s only a coincidence!”

If it was possible, I didn’t want this outcome to happen .

The correct course of action would have been to make a small shrug and say, “What do you mean?”

“When we were sitting down, the two girls before us were from class D . And then, the two next to us were also from class D . Is that only a coincidence?”

“Wow, you noticed that—I didn’t notice at all . ”

“Also, we came straight over here as soon as it was after school .  No matter how quickly the other girls rushed over here, they might’ve been here maybe 1, 2 minutes at the most . It’s a bit too early to be returning home . Am I wrong?”

Horikita is a much more observant person than I thought .

Not only did she remember her classmate’s faces, she understood what was happening nearly instantly .

“Um…”

Feeling bewildered, Kushida looked at me for help .

Horikita noticed her look at me . The gig was up .

“Sorry Horikita . We arranged this . ”

“I thought so . The situation made me think something was suspicious . ”

“Horikita-san . Please be my friend!”

No longer trying to hide anything, Kushida asked her directly .

“I’ve already said it many times, but leave me alone . I have no intention of becoming a bother to the class . Is that not allowed?”

“… Always spending time by yourself will lead to a lonely and sad school life . I want to get along with everyone in the class . ”

“I’m not trying to deny your wishes . However, it’s wrong to involve other people against their will . I don’t feel sad from being alone . ”

“B-but…”

“Also, for argument’s sake, do you think I would be happy if you forced me to get along with you? Do you think any friendships or trust will come from a forced relationship?”

Horikita’s words aren’t wrong . It’s not that she doesn’t want to make friends, it’s that she feels they are unnecessary . Kushida thinks one way, but Horikita thinks another way .

“This time, it was my fault for not clearly telling you . So I will not blame you . However, if you try again, I will not forgive you next time . ”

She grabbed her untouched cafe latte and stood up .

“I want to get along with Horikita-san by any means . When I first saw you, it didn’t feel like it was our first time meeting—I think that Horikita-san felt the same way . ”

“This is a waste of time . You’re making me feel uncomfortable . ”

Horikita interrupted her while raising her voice . Kushida involuntarily gulped .

Even though I agreed to help Kushida, I had no intention of interfering . However——

“It’s not like I can’t understand Horikita’s way of thinking . I’ve also questioned whether or not friends are necessary on multiple occasions now . ”

“You’re saying that? You’ve wanted friends ever since the first day of school . ”

“I’m not denying that . However, I’m the same type of person you are . At least until I graduated middle school . I’ve never been able to make friends until I entered this school . I’ve never known anyone’s contact address, nor have I played with anyone after school . I was completely alone . ”

Kushida was surprised when I said those words .

“I think that’s why I started talking to you a lot . ”

“That’s new . However, even if we have something in common, everything that comes after is different . You didn’t make friends even if you wanted friends . I didn’t make friends because they’re unnecessary . To say we’re similar is incorrect . Am I wrong?”

“… Maybe . But telling Kushida that she’s uncomfortable is going too far . Are you really ok with that? Saying that you won’t get along with anyone now means that you’ll be alone for the next 3 years . That’s a lot of loneliness in the future . ”

“I’m fine because it’ll be my 9th year in a row . Ah, if you include kindergarten it’s even longer . ”

Did she just casually drop something heavy? Does she stay by herself all the time because she’s been alone for as long as she can remember?

“Can I go home now?

Horikita let out a deep sigh and looked straight into Kushida’s eyes .

“Kushida-san, if you won’t be convinced, I won’t say anything . Promise me . Since you’re not stupid, you know what I’m saying, right?”

Horikita left the store with a “Well then” . She left me and Kushida behind in the busy cafe .

“That was a failure . I tried to help but it was no use . She got too used to being alone . ”

Kushida, who couldn’t say anything, sat down with a thump . However, she immediately recovered with her usual smiling face .

“No, thank you Ayanokouji-kun . I wasn’t able to become friends with her, but… I got to learn something important . I’m satisfied with that . Sorry, Horikita-san might hate you because you helped me . ”

“Don’t worry about it . I also wanted Horikita to know about the benefits of having friends . ”

Because we were holding up four seats by the two of us, I moved over to Kushida’s table .

“Even so, I was surprised . When you said you didn’t have friends . Is that true? It didn’t seem that way at all . Why were you alone?”

“Hmm? Oh, that’s true . Sudou, Ike and co . are the first friends I made . I don’t know whether it was my fault or just the environment I grew up in . ”

“Are you happy that you made friends? Is it fun?”

“Yea . It’s annoying at times, but it’s also really fun . ”

Kushida’s eyes were sparkling as she nodded her head while saying “Un, un”

“Horikita has a thought and purpose to her way of thinking . There’s nothing we can do about it . ”

“Is that so? Is it impossible for her to make friends?”

“Why are you so desperate? Don’t you already have a lot of friends? There’s no reason to obsess over Horikita . ”

Even though she wasn’t able to get along with absolutely everyone in the class, it doesn’t mean she should desperately try to become friends with Horikita .

“I wanted to be friends with everybody… It’s not only class D, but with all the other classes too . However, if I can’t get along with one girl in the class, then I’ve already failed…”

“Just think of Horikita as being special . And then wait for a true coincidence to happen . ”

Not something forced, but a real coincidence .

When that happens, becoming friends may be possible .